Contesting the Legacy of South African Visual Culture: Black Queer Bodies in Zanele Muholi's Self-Archive, *Somnyama Ngonyama.*

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Abstract

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This thesis examines South African artist Zanele Muholi's self-portrait series *Somnyama Ngonyama* (*Hail the Dark Lioness*) (2012–ongoing) as an alternative archive that inserts Black Queer bodies into South Africa's visual culture. Through over four hundred black-and-white self-portraits, Muholi reclaims agency over the historical erasure and misrepresentation of Black Queer individuals in South African archives. Their work challenges colonial and apartheid-era visual legacies by engaging with ethnographic photography, identity documentation, and institutionalized archives that have historically dehumanized Black South Africans and excluded Queer narratives. Situating *Somnyama Ngonyama* within the framework of Black, Queer, and archival practices, this thesis argues that Muholi's work functions as a self-archive, challenging the rigid, exclusionary structures of South African records of Black Queer experiences. By foregrounding the body as an archive of personal and collective experiences, Muholi's series offers a sensorial and subjective mode of archiving that resists colonial and heteropatriarchal knowledge production. Ultimately, I argue that understood as a self-archive, *Somnyama Ngonyama* functions as an activist tool to insert the presence of Black Queer individuals in South Africa's visual landscape.

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Introduction

> It's one thing to have the constitution, it's something else to have documents that speak to that constitution. You can't say people have a right to exist without the visuals that are produced by us on us. A simple image of a Queer being in space. That's political - Zanele Muholi (they/them).[1]

This thesis asks how South African artist Zanele Muholi's series *Somnyama Ngonyama* creates a visual archive of the self that stands as a witness to Black Queer experiences whose stories have been invisibilized from South African visual culture. It argues that Muholi's images, in this series, form a Queer Black self-archive that stands as an activist tool and alternative mode of archiving to contest the colonial and apartheid legacy of visual culture in South Africa. Started in 2012 during an artistic residency, this series now features more than four hundred black and white self-portraits of the artist.[2] This thesis examines the series as a whole rather than as individual images because I consider the pictures to be in dialogue with each other and that cannot be scrutinized taken apart from one another.

In Muholi's exhibition catalogue, published in 2018, about their self-portrait series *Somnyama Ngonyama* (Hail the Dark Lioness) (2012-ongoing), curator Renée Mussai opened their interview with the following statement:

> The images in *Somnyama Ngonyama* offer a repertoire of resistance, both for yourself and for empowering others. Collectively, they represent an invitation to see yourself in a different light. You take on the image archive in the racial imaginary, addressing a range of personal experiences, social occurrences, cultural phenomena, past histories and contemporary politics through self-portraiture.[3]

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[1] Art 21, "Zanele Muholi in Johannesburg" - Season 9 – "Art in the Twenty-First Century," interview by Art 21, September 2018, posted on March 2023 by Art 21, Youtube, 14:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmFo4jYGFEo .
Throughout this thesis, I will refer to Zanele Muholi with their preferred pronouns, "they/ them," although they are sometimes referred to as "she" by other authors. In the case of the latter, I have retained the original text.

[2] To provide the reader with a sense of the immensity of the series, I have attached in the list of figures a grid adding visual evidence to the scope of the self-portraits on pages 71-72.

[3] Renée Mussai, *Zanele Muholi : Somnyama Ngonyama = Hail the Dark Lioness* (Firsted. New York, N.Y.:Aperture, 2018), 176. Several exhibition texts and snapshots at the Tate Modern London like *Zanele Muholi* (2024-2025) and *Zanele Muholi* (2020-2021) have also been sources of inspiration for this thesis, to which curator Renée Mussai has contributed through her curatorial texts. Indeed, Mussai and Muholi have worked together on several projects including Muholi's exhibition *Somnyama Ngonyama* curated by Mussai at Autograph, London, in 2021. Mussai is an independent curator, writer and scholar who specializes African and Afro-diasporic lens-based Black feminist and Queer practices.

Mussai's opening remark qualified Muholi's work as an archive that interlaces personal and collective memory with broader political concerns, to which the artist responded "Most of the work I have done over the years focuses exclusively on black LGBTQIA and gender-nonconforming individuals making sure we exist in the visual archive."[4] This exchange sets the tone for an understanding of *Somnyana Ngonyama* as an archive that reshapes how Black Queer identities are perceived in South Africa through the staging of their own body in front of the camera.

This thesis' objectives are threefold. 1) To contextualize Muholi's work within a post-apartheid context and the visual culture that stems from years of colonialism and apartheid. I look at the legacy of photography and its contribution to creating misrepresentative images of the Black population in South Africa for a colonial enterprise while erasing Queer presence from archival records altogether. 2) To decipher Muholi's formal strategies of appropriation of visual and textual codes inherent to South African visual culture that subvert and *queer* them in order to contend with the legacy of photography in the country. 3) To define *Somnyana Ngonyama* as a self-archive, a subjective Black Queer mode of archiving the self, contributing to research in archival studies in seeking to define alternative modes of archiving that stand against the colonial and heteropatriarchal premise of national archives. With these objectives, this thesis situates Muholi's work within an archival query to expand what archival content and materiality can be.

Muholi is a Johannesburg-based photographer who defines themself as a "visual activist."[5] For over two decades, their work has been shedding light on the lives of Queer

[4] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 176. Here, Muholi refers to the LGBTQIA community, which will also be referred to in this thesis as LGBTQIA+ and the Queer community comprised of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transexuals, Queer, Intersexuals, Asexuals, and more.

[5] The term "visual activist" is used to introduce the artist on the Stevenson Gallery website: "Zanele Muholi," Stevenson Gallery Website, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.stevenson.info/artist/zanele-muholi/biography#:~:text=Zanele%20Muholi%20%7C%20Biography%20%7C%20STEVENSON&text=Muholi%20is%20a%20visual%20activist,community%20outreach%20and

individuals in South Africa, in response to the ongoing discrimination and violence faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in the country.[6] Their first internationally-known series, *Faces and Phases* (2006-ongoing) documents and celebrates the lives of Black lesbians and non-binary people in Johannesburg. South African professor of visual arts and design, Leora Farber frames the series as

> Portraits of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) people, primarily—but not exclusively—in South Africa. The images are displayed in grids of varying proportions. Although they fit within the modes of documentary and ethnographic photography, the images are also closely aligned to the tradition of photographic portraiture.[7]

Spending a decade documenting the lives of others, Muholi turned the lens onto themself in 2012 with the beginning of their series of self-portraits. *Somnyama Ngonyama* beautifully frames Muholi under an immensity of different angles, posing as different personas, adorning frivolous and symbolic accessories that differ from one image to another.[8] The series was exhibited all over the world, it is currently showcased at the Museum of African Diaspora (MoAD) in San Francisco (California), at the James Cohan Gallery (New York), and recently at the Tate Modern (UK) and at the Zeitz MOCAA Museum of Contemporary Art in Cape Town (South Africa) in 2024.[9] As Muholi travels the world, their camera follows and they embark on a journey of self-portraiture across the globe, capturing their presence in distinct geographical and political contexts.

%20youth%20development. Muholi also refers to themself as a visual activist in several interviews including in Tamar Garb's interview with Muholi in *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography*: "I see myself as a visual activist. We're not going to be here forever, and I want to make sure that we leave a history that is tangible to people who come after us [...] visual material really helps people have an understanding that something exists. You can feel it, you can touch it: it's there." Tamar Garb and Martin Barnes, *Figures & Fictions : Contemporary South African Photography* (Göttingen, London: Germany : Steidl ; V & A Publishing, 2011), 287.

[6] Stevenson Gallery, "Zanele Muholi."

[7] Leora Farber, "Beyond the Ethnographic Turn: Refiguring the Archive in Selected Works by Zanele Muholi," *Critical Arts*, 31:2 (2017): 21.

[8] See the grid of images that provides an overview of the series on pages 71-72.

[9] Stevenson Gallery, "Zanele Muholi". When referring to Muholi's ongoing exhibitions, I refer to the time when this thesis was written, in 2024-2025.

Literature review

Muholi's work has been displayed internationally, and scholars like Farber, South African historian Hlonipha Mokoena, South African artist, activist, and researcher Tessa Lewin, South African visual artist Mbali Khoza, and South African visual historian Kylie Thomas speak to both *Faces and Phases* and *Somnyama Ngonyama* through different lenses.[10] I chose to rely on South African authors whose authoritative voices in the fields of history, Queer activism, and visual culture enable a unique apprehension of *Somnyama Ngonyama.* While Farber examines *Somnyama Ngonyama* as a "decolonial archive," one that reconfigures South Africa's colonial archive, Lewin ties Muholi's images to current contemporary South African Queer visual activist practices, and Thomas argues that *Faces and Phases* forms an "intimate archive," that compels for a Queer reading of cultural productions.[11] Simultaneously, Khoza and Mokoena both apprehend the series of self-portraits from an activist and political standpoint and assert that *Somnyama Ngonyama* interacts with iconographies of Blackness and womanhood.[12] However, these texts lack an intersectional look at *Somnyama Ngonyama* through the lens of Queer archival studies. Farber's formal analysis and interpretation of Muholi's images are tied to her own affective experience of the work as a white scholar which limits the perception of *Somnyama Ngonyama* to the author's positionality. Khoza and Mokoena's arraying of Muholi's references to performances of Blackness is useful to this

[10] Leora Farber, "Dark Play: The Ethnographic Archive As Site of Embodiment in Zanele Muholi's Somnyana Ngonyama Series," *Visual Anthropology Review* 36, no. 1 (2020): 40-63; Tessa Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," in *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*, ed. Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, and Umut Korkut (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 39–58; Kylie Thomas, "Zanele Muholi's Intimate Archive: Photography and Post-apartheid Lesbian Lives," *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 11:4 (2010): 421-436; Mbali Khoza, "Seeing Blackness through Black Expressive Culture: A Reading of Zanele Muholi's Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness," *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts* 8, no. 3 (2021): 261–86; and Hlonipha Mokoena, "Dark Magus," in *Zanele Muholi : Somnyama Ngonyama = Hail the Dark Lioness,* ed. Renée Mussai (Firsted. New York, N.Y.:Aperture, 2018), 148.

[11] Farber, "Dark Play," 44; Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 39–58; and Thomas, "Zanele Muholi's Intimate Archive,"421-436.

[12] Khoza, "Seeing Blackness," 261–86 and Mokoena, "Dark Magus," 148.

thesis, but it does not contextualize the artist's series within the context of Queer visuality. Additionally, authors like Thomas that touch upon *Faces and Phases* offer insight into Muholi's artistic practice and ongoing tendency to produce archival works without an in-depth analysis into *Somnyama Ngonyama.* In parts because this series is relatively recent and undergoes constant transformation as the number of self-portraits increases over the years, but also due to the narrow and partial excerpts written on *Somnyama Ngonyama,* there here has yet to be extensive art historical scholarship that considers their work as a self-archive that requires an alternative reading of archival practices through a Queer and sensorial lens. As such, this thesis explores the possibilities offered by Muholi's employment of self-portraiture in creating new forms of South African archives that enable this artist to conceive their own storytelling and touch upon personal and collective memory.

As with *Somnyama Ngonyama,* few have seen the entire four hundred works due to the ongoing and immense number of images that were produced by the artist. I had the chance to get a glimpse of parts of the series in a past exhibition in 2017 in South Africa at the Goodman Gallery, and in a group show at the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal in 2019. For my formal analysis, I rely on Muholi's exhibition catalogue in which the entire series up until 2018 is documented.[13] Information about the full series can also be drawn from other forms of exhibition-related materials including curatorial texts, press releases, galleries' websites, essays, and interviews dedicated to Muholi's most recent images. Drawing heavily from texts and interviews conducted by curator Mussai as well as visual artist Khoza enabled me to centralize Muholi's voice throughout this thesis.[14] By connecting *Somnyama Ngonyama* to an interdisciplinary framework intersecting sensorial, Queer, Black, feminist and archival studies,

[13] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*.

[14] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi* and Khoza, "Seeing Blackness." Centralizing Muholi's voice in that way is essential as I was not able to interview them myself. Having contacted both the Yancey Richardson gallery as well as the Stevenson gallery and curator Renée Mussai to get in touch with Muholi, these exchanges were inconclusive due to the limited amount of time this research is being undertaken under.

I locate my research within a broader trend of reimagining archives from a queer point of view.[15]

To explain what a national archive and a state record is within the South African context that this artwork seeks to subvert, I discuss the research of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, archivist Michelle Caswell, and archivist Jeanette Bastian who all question the authoritative power of institutional archives.[16] At the turn of the twentieth century, archives sparked an interest in artists and researchers like Derrida whose groundbreaking work in scrutinizing records of history as subjects to be studied and criticized paved the way for the emergence of the field of critical archival studies that Caswell and Bastian pertain to. Bastian grounds institutional archives within a violent racist history of classification for colonial purposes.[17] While she relates textual documentary records to Eurocentric views on classification and memory preservation for colonial expansion, Derrida coins the term "archive fever," that pertains to the authoritative power of records to define how history and culture is preserved and presented, concluding that archives are intertwined with power and authority, as holders of past knowledge and shapers of future narratives.[18] In that sense, Derrida considers the significance of archives in their meaning-making and brings to light ethical concerns regarding the inclusion or exclusion of certain narratives, histories, and voices:

> The documents, which are not always discursive writings, are only kept and classified under the title of archive by virtue of a privileged *topology*. They inhabit this uncommon place, this place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*.[19]

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[15] Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives : Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. of *Routledge Studies in Archives* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 12.
[16] Caswell, *Urgent Archives,* Jeannette A. Bastian, *Archiving Cultures : Heritage, Community and the Making of Records and Memory* (Abingdon Oxon: Routledge, 2023); and Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, *Archive Fever : A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
[17] Bastian, *Archiving Cultures*, 40-41.
[18] Bastian, *Archiving Cultures,* 40-41 and Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 19.
[19] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 3.

Such scholarship establishes the main premise of my thesis, that institutional records are typically static and rigid in their shaping of identity formations. As art historian Joan M. Schwartz states, archives are "the product of social practices which, through the containment of ordering of facts, offer the promise of knowledge and control."[20] This thesis extends these archival readings of cultural productions to the South African context through an overview of the history of photography and visuality in the country. In particular, South African historian Patricia Hayes, art historian Tamar Garb and South African curator Ingrid Masondo inform this thesis on the legacy of both ethnographic photography under English and Dutch colonialism and apartheid from 1948 to 1994. Though scholarship on the history of visuality and photography in South Africa is extensive, few authors weave together contemporary artworks with surveys of past archival images.[21] I rely on Garb's extensive literature and curatorial work on South African archives and its joint analysis with contemporary artists like Muholi.[22] Particularly, she argues that South African archives are fictive Eurocentric and colonial material productions that catalogued and classified Black South Africans to "produce a mythic image of an idealised natural world, peopled by groups of figures decorously posed."[23] She also postulates that present-day artistic practices gesture towards a reappraisal of archival

[20] Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 154. Both authors quote Joan M. Schwartz in her essay Joan Schwartz "'Records of Simple Truth and Precision': Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control," in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory : Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg (First paperback edition. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006).

[21] The literature on the history of photography and visuality that I have consulted comprises Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, *Photography's Other Histories (*Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2003); Christopher Morton and Elizabeth Edwards, *Photography, Anthropology, and History; Expanding the Frame*, (Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2009); A.D. Bensusan, *Silver Images: History of Photography in Africa, (*Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1996); and Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz, *Grey areas : representation, identity, and politics in contemporary South African ar*t, (Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill, 2000); amongst others.

[22] Such literature includes: Tamar Garb and Martin Barnes, *Figures & Fictions : Contemporary South African Photography* (Göttingen, London: Germany : Steidl ; V & A Publishing, 2011); Tamar Garb and Walther Collection, *African Photography from the Walther Collection : Distance and Desire : Encounters with the African Archive* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2011); Tamar Garb and Hlonipha Mokoena, "Navigating the African Archive - a Conversation between Tamar Garb and Hlonipha Mokoena," *Critical Arts* 33, no. 6 (2019): 40–51.

[23] Garb, *Figures and Fictions,* 21.

images to interrogate their repercussions on contemporary identities, concluding that Muholi's work is set within an artistic tendency to re-evaluate state records.[24] I connect Garb's contemporary take on South African archives to Hayes' historical approach to ethnographic and apartheid images.[25] In her writings, Hayes excavates visual codes in ethnographic photography that contributed to reducing Black South Africans to homogenous and degrading identities as well as the legacy of photojournalism under apartheid that inform present-day visual culture.[26] While Hayes provides the historical context during which photography emerged in South Africa and developed throughout the nineteenth century, Masondo's formal analysis of identity-documents under apartheid provide insight into the weaponization of photography for the segregation and immobility of the Black population.[27] Masondo's essay figures in Hayes' book that retraces the history of visuality in South Africa in which the author advocates for a consideration of apartheid photographic-based identity documents as part of

[24] In all of her writings, Garb brings up images found in the Walther collection. The Walther collection was found by Arthur Walther, a German-American art collector who took an interest in African photography. He started collecting photographs and archives throughout the twentieth century and has now amassed hundreds of images. The Walther Collection is now an art institute with two locations in Germany and New York that invites artists and curators to critically reflect and understand historical and contemporary photography taken on the African continent. I first encountered this collection in *African Photography from the Walther Collection - Distance and Desire Encounters with the African Archive* through a discussion between Tamar Garb and Awam Amkpa about the exhibition *Distance and Desire Encounters with the African Archive.* This exhibition exemplifies the work that the art institute has been doing since its opening in 2010 with a show curated by Okwui Enwezor, *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity,* mainly shedding new light on the archives stemming from this collection as well as the stories that are missing from such records of history. Other exhibitions with the same endeavor have been curated by the Walther Collection such as *Beyond the Binary: Santu Mofokeng and David Goldblatt* (2023) and *Samuel Fosso: Affirmative Acts* (2022). I refer to the Walther Collection here to bring up examples of contemporary practices that contend and contest African archives, contextualizing Muholi's practice within an artistic tendency to re-write historical accounts found in national records.

[25] In my research, Hayes came up as one of the most quoted and well-known South African scholars who addresses history through a photographic lens. I consulted several of her books and articles including: Wolfram Hartmann, Jeremy Silvester, and Patricia Hayes, *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 1999); Patricia Hayes, "Empty Photographs - Ethnography and the Lacunae of African History," in *Ambivalent: Photography and visibility in African history*, ed. Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019): 56-76; and Patricia Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography," *Kronos*, no. 33 (2007): 139–62.

[26] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity."

[27] Ingrid Masondo, "Unstable forms- Photography, Race, and the Identity Document in South Africa," in *Ambivalent : Photography and Visibility in African History* ed. Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 78-83.

the genre of photography that contributed to racial cataloging and segregation on the same level as anthropological records.[28]

This brief cultural and political background is provided in Section I to contextualize Muholi's work within a post-apartheid society as they started documenting the life of Black LGBTQIA+ individuals in the early 2000s, contending with the legacy of visual culture in South Africa. Touching upon the heritage of apartheid, this thesis discusses the scholarships of South African historian Christopher Saunders, professor of Comparative Politics James L. Gibson and professor of Political Science Daniel L. Douek.[29] Their respective works provide historical weight to this thesis through their individual observations of the inner workings of the apartheid regime and the transition of the country into democracy and a post-apartheid era. Interlacing such historical context with the visual cultural analysis provided by Masondo, Hayes, and Garb of ethnographic archives, photography-based identity documents, and photojournalism under apartheid establishes the aesthetic foundation of photography in the work of Muholi as stated by Garb "these filters of figuration—ethnography, documentary, portraiture - continue to haunt contemporary practices."[30]

A central argument to this thesis is Muholi's appropriation and subversion of visual and textual codes inherent to the history of visuality presented above. A close look at Muholi's formal elements is provided by Mussai who directly addresses questions of subversion of photographic conventions, materiality, and props in the work of the artist.[31] Further visual analysis is embedded in this thesis through the writings of Khoza and M. Nelika Jayawardane in Muholi's exhibition catalogue *Somnyama Ngonyama* who both study these self-portraits

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[28] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 78-83.
[29] T.R.H. Davenport and Christopher Saunders, *South Africa: A Modern History (*5th ed. New York: St-Martin's Press, 2000); James L. Gibson, *Overcoming Apartheid : Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation*? (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004); and Daniel L. Douek, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Africa,* (London: Hurst and Company, 2020).
[30] Garb, *Figures and Fictions,* 12.
[31] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*.

through the prism of Blackness and iconographies of Black womanhood.[32] This thesis weaves together these visual elements with art historian Charmaine Nelson's book *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* connecting this research to Black studies.[33] It refers to Nelson's contribution in identifying the construction of Black womanhood in visual culture around tropes of domesticity that are aligned with the archives of Black women found in South African collections studied by Garb and Hayes, as mentioned previously.

Further situating this thesis within the field of Black studies, this research addresses Katherine McKittrick's analysis of Black cultural productions outside of institutions and disciplines.[34] I connect what writer McKittrick calls a "remixing" of the knowledge produced by institutions about Black life to Muholi's subversion of photographic conventions and symbolisms to playfully alter their meaning to insert stories that were invisibilized in the archives, including their own.[35] I relate the immaterial presence of Black Queer stories in the South African archives to professor of Postcolonial studies Jenny Sharpe's theorization of immaterial archives which she describes as an "inquiry about the nature of the archive: its silences, opacity, authority, form, and institutionalization."[36] In this book, Sharpe highlights the immaterial stories of Black individuals that never made it into the archive, which I associate to Muholi's insertion of Black Queer stories that were omitted from South African visual culture.[37]

As this thesis addresses the gap in institutional knowledge about Queer portraiture in South Africa, it aligns with Queer and feminist studies on the topics of self-portraiture and

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[32] Khoza, "Seeing Blackness," and M. Nelika Jayawardane "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," in *Zanele Muholi : Somnyama Ngonyama = Hail the Dark Lioness,* ed. Renée Mussai (Firsted. New York, N.Y.:Aperture, 2018), 170-75.
[33] Charmaine Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art. of Routledge Studies on African and Black Diaspora, 2* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).
[34] Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).
[35] McKittrick, *Dear Science,* 170.
[36] Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives : An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 6.
[37] Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives.*

visuality. Art historian Amelia Jones locates traditions of self-portraiture within feminist cultural productions as strategies of empowerment and agency.[38] Extended to the South African context, self-portraiture offers the opportunity to create images of resistance as framed by Lewin in her comparative analysis of Muholi's self-portraits with the Queer performance duo FAKA.[39] Lewin locates Muholi's work within what she calls "Queer visual activism" practices that incorporate positive images of Queerness in South Africa in opposition to the mediatic reports of crimes perpetrated against the LGBTQIA+ community.[40]

To understand the mediatic impact on the perception of Queerness in South Africa, I connect Lewin's research with South African professor of English, Andrew Van der Vlies' and South African professor of psychology Peace Kiguwa's texts.[41] While Kiguwa deciphers the impact of the media in perpetuating accounts of gender-based violence against the LGBTQIA+ community, Lewin provides the necessary historical context to grasp the history of visuality of Queerness in South Africa.[42] She gives an overview of Queer visuality as nonexistent during apartheid, preventing Queer South Africans of seeing themselves in visual culture until the implementation of democratic laws in the 1990s.[43] Van der Vlies provides accounts of the reception of Muholi's work in South Africa that corroborates Kiguwa's analysis of the impact of the media in creating dehumanizing representations of Queerness.[44] The absence of Queer representations in the archives is a key motivation for Muholi to document LGBTQIA+ lives that have yet to be depicted through a positive lens.

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[38] Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography As a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 947–78.
[39] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa."
[40] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 50.
[41] Andrew Van der Vlies, "Queer Knowledge and the Politics of the Gaze in Contemporary South African Photography: Zanele Muholi and Others," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 24, no.2 (2012): 140–56; Peace Kiguwa and Garth Stevens, "Troubling Apprehensions of Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: Fanon's Sociogeny As a Psychosocial Lens," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 22, no. 4 (2021): 256–65.
[42] Kiguwa, "Troubling Apprehensions," 257 and Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa."
[43] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa."
[44] Van der Vlies, "Queer Knowledge," 145.

Methodology

An important focus in this thesis is developing an understanding of Muholi's work as an alternative archive. In questioning the possibilities offered by alternative archives in inserting visual representations of Black Queer individuals in South Africa, this thesis looks at Muholi's work through an interdisciplinary lens at the intersection of art history, archival studies, Black studies and Queer studies. It is aligned with what archivist Michelle Caswell calls "imagining and enacting new ways of doing archives."[45] The author argues that archivists should engage in liberatory memory work to disrupt the heteronormative and colonial collection of records that constitute existing systems of knowledge.[46] I posit that Muholi's work aligns with Caswell's encouragement to trouble the field of archival studies through a restructuring of archival materiality and temporality of Eurocentric state archives.[47] I relate this discussion to professor of Art History and Cinema May Chew's invitation to alter official archives to incorporate the affective experiences of diasporic artists into what she calls "counter-archives."[48] I use these alternative archival methodologies to read Muholi's work as a self-archive that unnerves the hegemony of visual culture with regards to Black Queer identities in South Africa. First, I examine Muholi's work as a subjective archive by comparing scholarship around their work that qualifies it as autobiographical. Farber considers *Somnyama Ngonyama* as a recollection of personal experiences, while Mussai titles their interview with Muholi "self-archive," and curator and historian Christine Eyene characterizes it as "a visual diary."[49] These authors delve into Muholi's images through the prism of the subjective and the personal, denying the supposedly objective and neutral premise of an archive.

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[45] Caswell, *Urgent Archives,* 12.
[46] Caswell, *Urgent Archives,* 13.
[47] Caswell, *Urgent Archives,* 98.
[48] May Chew, "Diasporic Archives and Hauntological Accretions," *Frames Cinema Journal* 19 (2022): 133-57.
[49] Farber, "Dark Play," 42; Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 176; and Christine Eyene, "On Thembeka I*,"* in *Zanele Muholi : Somnyama Ngonyama = Hail the Dark Lioness,* ed. Renée Mussai (Firsted. New York, N.Y.:Aperture, 2018), 158.

Furthermore, this thesis ponders over Muholi's work through a Queer studies lens. I draw on archivist Alana Kumbier's queer reading of cultural productions as the basis for my methodology.[50] She urges for a *Queering* of archival productions that she defines as a disruptive practice devoted to inserting Queer presence in the archives.[51] Here, the word *Queering* is understood in this thesis as the political integration of LGBTQIA+ existence in the archives by the creation of alternative archival productions.[52] Thomas performs a similar reading of Muholi's work that she qualifies as a Queer archive through a *Queering* of Roland Barthes' punctum.[53] For the author, Queer archives exist for the Queer gaze that is longing to see the Queer self represented in visual culture as supported by Muholi:

> This series touches on beauty and relates to historical incidents, giving affirmation to those who doubt whenever they speak for themselves, whenever they look in the mirror, to say, "You are worthy. You count. Nobody has the right to undermine you - because of your being, because of your race, because of your gender expression, because of your sexuality, because of all that you are."[54]

Finally, as *Somnyama Ngonyama* focuses on the artist's corporeal experiences through the use of their own body to center invisible stories, the self-portraits require a sensorial approach. Muholi employs their body to convey different personas across time and space to re-attribute meaning and sensoriality for racism "denies or subordinates the sensuous materiality of lived bodies of color."[55] I read the series of self-portraits through what Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown call an "embodied epistemology," that contemplates on the body as a vehicle to the world.[56] Bodily sensations are sources of knowledge that re-attribute sensoriality to bodies that have been denied such experiences.[57] This sensorial methodology pertains to this

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[50] Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material : Queering the Archive* (Sacramento, California: Litwin Books, 2014).
[51] Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material,* 3.
[52] Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material,* 3.
[53] Thomas, "Zanele Muholi Intimate Archive," 364. Here Thomas refers to Muholi's work in general and particularly dissects their series *Faces and Phases.*
[54] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 176.
[55] Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown, *Race and the Senses: The Felt Politics of Racial Embodiment,* (London: Routledge, 2020), 10.
[56] Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*, 2.
[57] Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*, 2-3.

thesis' desire to expand what an archive can be through the study of Muholi's work. In line with these ideas, scholars Sharpe and professor of English Julietta Singh both encourage an inclusion of bodies, oral stories, and traces through the creation of sensorial and affective archives.[58] Hence, these theories of writing about and through the senses lie at the heart of this thesis.

My work aligns with the implication that the archive is a contested subject that needs to be studied as well as redefined which stems from dynamic processes of knowledge and artistic production. As I ponder over these subjective, Queer, and sensorial methodologies for reading alternative archival productions, I recognise my blind spots. As a Queer white woman raised in South Africa and currently living in Montreal, I position myself as having an insider/ outsider point of view to these research topics that I am mindful of when examining Muholi's work. I interact with multiple scholars who decipher Muholi's archive for its tactile, visceral, and subjective qualities and build my analysis off of their interpretation of the work (Mussai, Farber, Khoza, M. Tyali, Lewin). Moreover, I foreground Muholi's voice through the numerous interviews that I have read and watched about their artistic practice as well as the websites of the galleries that represent their work. Additionally, the majority of my visual analysis relies on Muholi's exhibition catalogue *Somnyama Ngonyama* that serves as my visual repertoire for the series of self-portraits. I center all these voices to decenter from my own as I cannot pretend to understand the way the artist navigates through life.

This specific research comes from my cultural background having grown up in Johannesburg and being influenced by the photographic culture that resides in the city. Growing up with the legacy of South African photojournalism surrounding me, this rich cultural baggage informs my questioning of the archives and the colonial and apartheid legacy that still transpire in the current media landscape. Indeed, I grew up in Johannesburg in a post-

[58] Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives* and Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You,* (Punctum Books, 2018).

apartheid era defined by a new political order understood as the "rainbow nation."[59] Built on the premise of multiracialism and Queer rights, the democratic values of this so-called "new nation" intended for a sentiment of belonging and coexistence through the process of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.[60] In many regards, scholars and South Africans are now equally critical of the "rainbow nation" postulate that professor of Queer and Postcolonial studies Brenna M. Munro discusses with professor of African Studies Grant Farred as the expectations for democracy being replaced by continuing inequity.[61] The ongoing legacy of apartheid in South African society and its shaping of perception of Black Queer identities cannot be overlooked as "sexuality, race, and stigma are once again at the center of postcolonial national self-definition."[62] I position myself in this line of thinking that dismantles the idealization of a post-apartheid society in South Africa and recognizes the ongoing systemic white supremacy that still prevails and impacts the Black Queer community that Muholi's work sheds light on: "The relationship of Muholi's work to the "rainbow nation" is complex [and] rebukes postapartheid South Africa for its failures."[63] I examine Muholi's work from my lens as a Queer person and an ally to Black liberation in South Africa, recognizing the work that still needs to be done for Black Queer rights and representation in the country.

Outline of Sections

This thesis is composed of three sections. Section I contextualizes Muholi's work within South Africa's past and current political and cultural context through an overview of the history of

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[59] Brenna M Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come : Queer Sexuality and the Struggle for Freedom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[60] M Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come,* 8-9.

[61] M Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come,* 33. Grant Farred specifically states: "the thrill is gone", it "has been replaced by a confrontation with continuing inequity," in "The Not-Yet Counterpartisan; The New Politics of Oppositionality," *South African Quarterly* 103, no. 4 (Fall 2024): 589-605.

[62] M Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come,* 219.

[63] M Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come,* 230. In this expert, Munro refers to the series *Faces and Phases* and other portraits of the Black Queer community made by Muholi. The aftermath of violence shown on the bodies attests to an ongoing violence against the Queer community in South Africa.

the photographic medium and visual culture. It emphasizes the instrumentalization of photography that both creates inaccurate representations of Black South Africans for classificatory and segregational purposes, while also erasing the presence of Queer individuals from the media altogether. This section provides the necessary context to understand Muholi's appropriation of colonial photographic conventions and iconographies of Black womanhood in visual culture elaborated on in Section II. Section II delves into the artist's formal strategies in subverting visual and textual codes from South African visual culture to playfully integrate their own Queer experience in the media landscape of the country. Finally, Section III expands on Muholi's re-arrangement of the meaning and symbolisms produced by South African archival images as a strategy to produce their own archive. This section defines *Somnyama Ngonyama* as a self-archive that pertains to broader alternative practices of archiving. Through a Queer and sensorial lens, this section understands Muholi's performance of multiple personas through their own body as expanding on what archival materiality can be to portray Black Queer bodies and identities.

Section I: Contextualizing *Somnyama Ngonyama* Within South Africa's Visual Culture

This section contextualizes Muholi's self-portraits as they relate to their intersectional identity as a Queer Black person within a post-apartheid context in South Africa, underlining its lasting impact on present-day visual culture in the country. It traces the instrumentalization of the photographic apparatus employed by Muholi to ethnographic photography and photograph-based identity passes under apartheid emphasizing on the violent history of the medium. I lay out these historical and cultural contexts to frame the role of archival images regarding the creation of degrading portrayals of the Black population in South Africa for a colonial enterprise while erasing Queer presence from archival records altogether. This section then argues that South African archives are filled with gaps and inaccuracies, justifying the need for Muholi to create their own archive.

Making Images In A Post-Apartheid Context

Muholi was born in Durban, South Africa, in 1972 and they started working as a photographer in the early 2000s.[64] They studied photography at the Market Photo workshop in Johannesburg, followed by an MFA in Documentary Media at Ryerson University, Toronto in 2009.[65] First documenting the lives of the LGBTQIA+ community all over South Africa with photographic series like their most-well known work *Faces and Phases* (2006-ongoing) or through documentaries such as *Difficult Love* (2010), Muholi first began to portray themself in 2012 through their series of self-portraits *Somnyama Ngonyama*.[66] Such images of Black Queer

[64] Stevenson Gallery, "Zanele Muholi." According to the artist's biography, their first solo exhibition, *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture*, took place at Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004.
[65] Stevenson Gallery, "Zanele Muholi."
[66] Other notable works by Muholi that touch upon the lives of the LGBTQIA+ community include *Beulahs* (2007-10), *Transfigures* (2010-11) as stated on the website of the Stevenson gallery, a Johannesburg-based gallery that represents Muholi. On the website of the Yancey gallery, a New-York based contemporary art gallery that represents Muholi internationally, their photos are described as an oath "to re-write a black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in SA and beyond." "Zanele Muholi," Yancey Richardson Gallery Website, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.yanceyrichardson.com/artists/zanele-muholi .

South Africans are significant in a post-apartheid context, during which cultural productions by Black Queer creators were heavily censored, prohibiting existing and accurate representations of Black Queer individuals in South Africa's visual culture.[67] In an interview with Art 21, Muholi corroborates that there are few images of Black Queer people in South Africa; and thus, their work contends with the legacy of a visual culture that never accounted for their identity.[68]

Hayes demonstrates that photography was introduced to South Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century through merchant and colonial expansion.[69] Indeed, Daguerreotypes made their way to Durban in 1846 which prompted the creation of photography studios all over the country.[70] Increasingly settler portraits and colonial scenes marked by power and subjugation shattered cultural traditions in favor of a homogenous Black identity.[71] Stemming from the British culture of documentation and archival practice, these photographs were related to the history of exploration, colonization, knowledge production, and captivity, destroying cultural specificities to assert domination.[72] The majority of images taken prior to the apartheid regime were shot by foreign ethnographers that were mandated to lead expeditions dedicated to the documentation and classification of Black South Africans in state records through the staging of stereotypical depictions of Native South Africans.[73] Garb reveals the complexity of studying archives in South Africa due to a lack of records under a colonial regime, letting in foreign ethnographer's desire to capture an "exotic" and "authentic" portrait of South Africans, forging the path to gaps in history and misrepresentation that fail to grasp the complexity of identities.[74]

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[67] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 43.
[68] Art 21, "Zanele Muholi in Johannesburg."
[69] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 139.
[70] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 139.
[71] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 141.
[72] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 141.
[73] Garb and Hlonipha, "Navigating the African Archive," 42-43.
[74] Garb and Hlonipha, "Navigating the African Archive," 42-43.

Following decades of colonialism, South Africa underwent an apartheid regime from 1948 to 1994 based on racial segregation, which is defined by Gibson as following:

> Apartheid - which may be translated as separateness - swept South Africa as a consequence of the electoral victory of the National Party in 1948. Of course, the introduction of apartheid to South Africa was not the first appearance of racism and racial subjugation in the country - from the moment the Dutch colonists landed in 1652, the Europeans sought to implement a system based on racial hierarchy - but apartheid was a codification of racism that the world had never seen before. Apartheid was manifest in a body of legislation defining racial groups and delineating many of the crucial aspects of people's lives.[75]

Adding to this historical context, Saunders and Davenport claim that the premise of apartheid was to deny Black South Africans citizenship and rights.[76] Such policies as defined in the Population Registration Act in 1950s translated into the physical immobility of the Black population to townships on the outskirts of big cities.[77] Filtering access to certain spaces to white populations was permitted by the creation of photograph-based IDs reserved to the Black population.[78]

As outlined previously, ethnographic photography and documentary-based archival practices contributed to reducing Black South African populations to a misrepresentative and demeaning collective identity that exists outside the scope of colonizers' white heteropatriarchal vision of futurity for the country. The medium is further instrumentalized to enforce white and straight spaces that excluded the presence and representation of Black Queer bodies under apartheid. In Muholi's exhibition catalogue, Jayawardane associates Muholi's images to *dompas*, photograph-based passbooks required for Black South Africans to move

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[75] Gibson, *Overcoming Apartheid,* 30.

[76] Davenport and Saunders, *South Africa: A Modern History*. Other relevant sources on apartheid and its history were written by Saunders and are listed here to provide the reader with more insight: Christopher Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past. Major Historians on Race and Class* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1988) and Christopher Saunders, "South African Historical Writing to the End of the Apartheid Era," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2018). For the limited space this thesis holds, I will not expand more on the history of apartheid and will rather focus on looking at photography and the legacy of visuality on present-day visual culture in South Africa.

[77] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 77-78.

[78] Jayawardane "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 170.

from townships to enter designated white areas.[79] The displacement of the Black population is then related to the production of ID passes that reinforced their surveillance and control, prohibiting bodily movement.[80] Jayawardane further states that "assisted by the photographic technologies that have historically aided and supported racist belief systems, apartheid intended to diminish the subjectivity of Black South Africans."[81] In discussion with historian James Hevia, Masondo cautions against the overlooking of the entanglement of race and class with vision "and how the state shapes visual cultures."[82] Masondo adds

> Recent scholarship on photographs in South Africa (and Africa generally) has focused on their meanings, alternative uses, and transformations as articulations of agency, resistance, self-fashioning, and more. Many, however, do not interrogate the ID photograph itself and its status.[83]

Alongside the same lines, this thesis corroborates a need to study the medium of photography and its utilization during apartheid for population surveillance and restriction that contributed to fixing Black identities in the frame and limiting their bodily movements to certain spaces. For Masondo, "the ID, also known as the pass or *bewysboek* (meaning reference book), was intended to be part of the body, regulating movement."[84] Erasing all forms of intersectionality and individuality in the process, Blackness as defined by apartheid, became a collective fixed

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[79] Jayawardane "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 170-71. In Muholi's exhibition catalogue, Mussai brings in a text written by scholar M. Neelika Jayawardane in which she defines the use of passbooks under apartheid "In the 1950s, South Africa's "pass" laws helped formalize apartheid policies, which forcibly removed the country's majority black population from its urban centers and viable farmland. Black people were only permitted to enter designated 'white' areas - including towns and cities - when it suited the industries on which white wealth, privilege, and leisure depended: to do dangerous work underground in gold and diamond mines, menial labor in institutions, and grueling farm and domestic work. Pass laws required that all black persons - male or female - over the age of sixteen had to carry what was known as a 'reference book' or a 'passbook' at all times. This was to be produced immediately upon demand from an administrator or police officer. Although these passes were mandatory for movement, in effect they made movement as restricted as possible. This is where the technologies of portrait photography - specifically those designated to produce an instant image - became linked to the ways in which population surveillance and restriction were legislated in South Africa. Passbooks always included a photograph, intended to aid police and apartheid administrators to identify individuals." M. Neelika Jayawardane is a professor of English and a Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of Race, Gender, and Class at the University of Johannesburg.

[80] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 170-71.

[81] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 170.

[82] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 79.

[83] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 79.

[84] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 82.

identity through the categorization of distinct racial groups stamped on individual passes.[85] Additionally, during this time, Black artists and students were taught service-based jobs and were denied access to galleries and museums, reserved to white populations.[86] Hence, visual culture made by Black artists did not always make its way to the archives and its absence reinforced the overt presence of culture made by and for white populations.

Further, the documentary-like aesthetic of Muholi's photographs is also informed by the rebellious photojournalism movement that took place in the 1950s in South Africa.[87] For Hayes, the legacy of photography is also shaped by the images produced by groups of Black photographers that appropriated the medium to create representations of the Black population that were not solely dehumanizing and victimizing in a cry for international aid.[88] These secret cohorts of photographers' work were featured in South African magazines like *Drum* and *In Toto*, and captured urban and vivid depictions of Black South Africans in townships.[89] Famous photographers like Peter Magubane who shot the Soweto student uprising in 1976 and Ernest Cole who published the photobook *House of Bondage* in 1967 contributed to shedding light on the realities of apartheid from a Black South African point of view.[90] However, both photographers had to leave South Africa due to the censorship surrounding politically charged images under apartheid.[91] Later on, photographers like Santu Mofokeng, created distinctive

[85] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 82-83.
[86] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 43.
[87] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 159.
[88] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 144.
[89] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 144. Curator Tumelo Mosaka has also written extensively about the history of documentary photography and photojournalism in his essay "South Africa in focus." He mentions magazines like *Drums* that was the first magazine dedicated to black culture in South Africa. The magazine shared photos by Black photographers like Alf Kumalo, Bob Gosani, and Peter Magubane, pioneer figures in South African photojournalism. Mosaka describes the magazine as offering "black people an opportunity to reflect on their daily existence not only as victims of apartheid but also as human beings with emotions and ambitions,"17. In Tosha Grantham, Isolde Brielmaier, Tumelo Mosaka, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Visual Arts Center of Richmond, and Birmingham Museum of Art (Birmingham, Ala), *Darkroom : Photography and New Media in South Africa*, *1950* (Richmond, Charlottesville: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts ; Distributed by the University of Virginia Press, 2009).
[90] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 144.
[91] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 144.

representations of the Black population through his archival project called *the Black Photo Album* made in the 1980s, regrouping family photos of Black South Africans from the end of the 19th century to the 1950s.[92] Both Mofokeng and Muholi studied under David Goldblatt, one of the major figures of photojournalism in South Africa and who Muholi mentions in the Art 21 interview as their mentor and someone who has had a major influence on their work.[93] Hence, I understand Mofokeng's work alongside Garb' caution against images that homogenize Black identities as paving the way for the production of images like Muholi's that recount personal stories:

> Where the ethnographic deals in types, groups, and collective characteristics, portraiture purports to portray the unique and distinctive features of named subjects whose social identities provide a backdrop for individual agency and assertion.[94]

Images Of Queer Resistance In South Africa

After the completion of their MFA in 2009, Muholi started gaining international prominence, and in 2013 their invitation to participate in international exhibitions multiplied.[95] Now represented both by the Stevenson gallery in Johannesburg and the Yancey Richardson gallery

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[92] Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity," 143.
[93] Art 21, "Zanele Muholi in Johannesburg."
[94] Garb, *Figures and Fictions*, 12.
[95] The Stevenson gallery compiles a list of Muholi's exhibitions and awards that include the following: ICP Spotlights (2022); Spectrum International Prize for Photography (2020); Lucie Award for Humanitarian Photography (2019); the Rees Visionary Award by Amref Health Africa (2019); a fellowship from the Royal Photographic Society, UK (2018); France's Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2017); the Mbokodo Award in the category of Visual Arts (2017); ICP Infinity Award for Documentary and Photojournalism (2016); Africa'Sout! Courage and Creativity Award (2016); Outstanding International Alumni Award from Ryerson University (2016); Fine Prize for an emerging artist at the 2013 Carnegie International; Prince Claus Award (2013); Index on Censorship - Freedom of Expression art award (2013); and the Casa Africa award for best female photographer, and Fondation Blachère award at Les Rencontres de Bamako biennial of African photography (2009). They participated in numerous international exhibitions including: Tate Modern, London, UK (2020-21) and other solo presentations have taken place at institutions including the National Gallery of Iceland (2022); Kunstforeningen Gl Strand, Denmark (2022); Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Spain (2022); Fotografihuset, Norway (2022); the Finnish Museum of Photography (2022); the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, USA (2022); Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden (2021); Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany (2021); Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany (2021); Cummer Museum, Florida, USA (2021); Norval Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa (2020); Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard University, USA (2020); Seattle Art Museum, USA (2019); Colby Museum, Maine, USA (2019); Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Georgia, USA (2018); New Art Exchange, Nottingham, UK (2018), just to state a few amongst their recent shows.

in New York, Muholi's work is travelling worldwide. While gaining international exposure, Muholi's work remains for South Africans and about South Africans.[96] Through their photographs, they tend to Black Queer representations due to the lack of accurate depictions of stories of Black Queer South Africans beyond dehumanizing numbers and accounts.[97] Documenting the personal stories of Black Queer South Africans is Muholi's life-long project, as they claim:

> The work that I produce is meant to be for every person. It could be a teacher, it could be a mother whose child is queer and want to have a reference point to show to their kids and say that you are not alone and it could be for the LGBTI people themselves to understand their worthiness. Then it becomes political, to say: "How do we politicize spaces with ourselves in a conscious way that tends to be ignored by those who are in positions of power?" [98]

As they dedicate their work to creating visual evidence of the lives of the LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa, this thesis understands Muholi's work at the intersection of activism and visual art. Indeed, Muholi calls themself a "visual activist" and founded:

> Inkanyiso (www.inkanyiso.org), a forum for queer and visual (activist) media and in 2002 co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women (FEW). They facilitate access to art spaces for youth practitioners through projects such as Ikhono LaseNatali and continue to provide photography workshops for young women and in the townships through PhotoXP.[99]

In addition to providing safe havens for the LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa, in an interview with the Tate Modern London, Muholi shares a desire to change the spaces that have always excluded Queer people from the artistic canon.[100]

When conducting research in trying to find Black Queer stories in archives and journals prior to the 1990s in South Africa, I was faced with almost nothing. Growing up in Johannesburg, I was able to have a certain access to Queer circles informed by my own

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[96] Art 21, "Zanele Muholi in Johannesburg".
[97] Van der Vlies, "Queer Knowledge," 141-43.
[98] Tate London, "Zanele Muholi - "In my world, every human is beautiful", Tate, 21 September 2020, Youtube, Accessed on February 2, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEgf1XmtWCo&t=1s .
[99] Stevenson Gallery, "Zanele Muholi."
[100] Tate London, "Zanele Muholi."

positionality. The way one accesses Queer stories is by word of mouth, oral knowledge, and storytelling. Doing this research from Canada poses problems in regard to accessing these stories that form immaterial records that are not present in the archives that are available from here. Lewin and Van der Vlies are relevant to this thesis' understanding of the absence and misrepresentation of Black Queer representations in South African media as they provide historical context regarding Queer rights and visuality in the country. Lewin outlines the history of Queer activism in the 1990s with the transformation of the South African constitution to incorporate protective laws from discrimination for the LGBTQIA+ community, followed by the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2006.[101] The promise of democracy offered by the end of apartheid stands in opposition to the censorship experienced by Queer writers and artists whose works were considered, according to Van der Vlies, as provocative.[102] However, both authors argue that Queer exhibitions and art that are on current display are still heavily criticized and censored to this day.[103] Despite the democratic laws that passed at the beginning of the twentieth century, Queer representation is still under scrutiny. Adding to the discussion on the transition into apartheid and a turn towards democracy, I bring in Douek who sustains claims in regard to the ongoing violences in South Africa in a post-apartheid context:

> South Africa's democratic transition astounded the world for its relatively bloody adoption of universal suffrage, multiparty democracy, and a comprehensive, progressive constitution. Post-transition elections have been regular, free, fair, and peaceful; South Africa has one of the most vibrant economies on the continent; a robust independent judiciary protects strong political and press freedoms; and the 1996-8 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) held the previous regime more accountable than similar processes elsewhere. However, the lack of transformation of the state security sector and the prevalence of urban violence stands in stark contrast to post-transition accomplishments and compromise the quality of South Africa's

[101] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 50.
[102] Van der Vlies, "Queer Knowledge," 140.
[103] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 58 and Van der Vlies, "Queer Knowledge," 141. Other sources on the democratic premise of the constitution and the ongoing struggle of the LGBTQI community in South Africa include: Brenna M. Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come : Queer Sexuality and the Struggle for Freedom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) and Sheila Croucher, "South Africa's Democratisation and the Politics of Gay Liberation," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 315–30.

> democracy. Moreover, state institutions have had persistently low effectiveness and legitimacy since the transition. [104]

I converse with Douek to provide an overview of current discourses on the failures of the democratic premise of the constitution and its idealization right after the end of apartheid, which ties to ongoing issues of violence against the Black Queer community in South Africa.[105] Indeed, Munro connects Muholi's work to a disbelief in the constitution to protect Black and Queer rights: "the queer postcolonial politics of these artists questions the terms of 'rainbow' modernity and imagines them anew."[106] Muholi also speaks to the failures of the constitution in protecting the LGTBQIA+ individuals in their interview with Mussai in that it "protects only on paper."[107] Violence against Black Queer women in South Africa still prevails as Kiguwa explains.[108] For Kiguwa, the gender-based violence that currently occurs in South Africa is tied to a discourse of racialization of Black South Africans as "others" that reproduces the social logic of violence deriving from years of oppression.[109] Despite the outlawing of discrimination against the Queer community in South Africa at the turn of the century, Black Queer experiences and stories are still tied to acts of violence which are hyper visualized by the strategies employed in mediatic representations of Queerness.[110]

Van der Vlies examines the reception of Muholi's work in Johannesburg and the controversy that images of Black Queer stories still initiate. Indeed, just in 2009, the South

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[104] Douek, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Africa,* 4-5.
[105] Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come,* 198.
[106] Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come,* 199.
[107] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 195.
[108] Kiguwa, "Troubling Apprehensions," 258.
[109] Kiguwa, "Troubling Apprehensions," 257.
[110] I am bringing up the crimes perpetrated against the Queer community in South Africa to provide the socio-cultural background in which Muholi is producing these works. This series of self-portraits is made in response to the dehumanizing crimes—rape perpetuated by straight men in order to "cure" the "unnatural" sexual orientation of queer women—and the vocabulary that is used to report it in the news in South Africa. In "Art, Media and Gender Based Activism: A Critical Reflection on the University of South Africa (Unisa) Colloquium on Zanele Muholi," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 28, no. 4 (102) (2014), Siyasanga M. Tyali describes at length the role of the media and visuality in normalizing such crimes and homophobia. Using terms like "curative" or "corrective" rape contributes to stigmatizing Queer women and non-gender conforming individuals in the country. I won't use these terms within my thesis because I refuse to use a vocabulary that justifies and explains these unspeakable crimes.

African minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, deemed Muholi's series *Faces and Phases* "pornographic" due to its staging of love stories between Black Queer women.[111] Additionally, in their exhibition catalogue, Muholi mentions a newspaper article dating back to 2017 that documents a fire that took place in the Western Cape region and that occurred, according to the article, because of gay marriage.[112] Touching upon the ways the media shape discourses around hate crimes—numbers, nameless bodies, dehumanizing representations of women and Queer South Africans—Van der Vlies then questions how to make a Black Queer experience visible without objectifying it and subjecting it to unwanted gazes.[113] I bring up these scholars and this historical context as well as their expertise in analyzing the power of media in shaping how Queerness is perceived to contemplate on the current state of the reception of works like Muholi's.

In my research, I became exhausted with encountering accounts of horror related to hate crimes in the newspapers, without finding stories about love and care. Muholi's series *Faces and Phases* (2009-ongoing) is the first of its kind. Muholi describes *Faces and Phases* as following:

> At present South Africa has no anti-hate-crime legislation. Rampant hate crimes make us invisible. Coming out exposes us to the harshness of patriarchal compliance. We are also at risk when we challenge the norms of compulsory heterosexuality. In the face of all the challenges our community encounters daily, I embarked on a journey of visual activism to ensure that there is black queer visibility. It is important to mark, map, and preserve our mo(ve)ments through visual histories for reference and posterity so that future generations will note that we were here. In the series *Faces and Phases* I present our existence and resistance through positive imagery of black queers (especially lesbians) in South African society and beyond.[114]

Following this series of portraits taken in Johannesburg, Muholi began working on *Somnyama Ngonyama* that finally offers Black Queer individuals an opportunity to see themselves through

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[111] Van der Vlies,"Queer Knowledge," 141.
[112] Mussai, *Somnyama Ngonyama,* 195.
[113] Van der Vlies,"Queer Knowledge," 145.
[114] Stevenson Gallery, "Zanele Muholi Faces and Phases," Stevenson Gallery website, archives. Access on February 20, 2025. https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/facesphases.htm

the repetition of multiple images that resist accounts of violence in the media. Muholi says “We hardly find images that speak of love and joy of the LGBTQI individuals” which sparked the creation of a series in which Muholi can take control over their own representation. [115]

This section has provided an overview of the history of visuality and archival records in South Africa, demonstrating the need for an alternative archive that speaks to experiences that were distorted or invisibilized from visual culture. This is especially important in this specific socio-political context due to the construction of national institutions based on spatial segregation resulting in the erasure of Black Queer experiences from the archives.

[115] Art 21, “Zanele Muholi in "Johannesburg".

Section II: Filling In The Gaps Of South African Records

This section delves into the visual and textual components of *Somnyama Ngonyama,* specifically Muholi's appropriation of colonial photographic conventions. Examining the artist's subversion of said conventions through a play on props and materiality, this section looks at the formal strategies employed by Muholi to expose the fabricated nature of South African archives. It argues that a re-configuration of the knowledge produced by institutional archives challenges the legacy of visuality discussed in section I and makes space for alternative archives such as Muholi's that will be addressed in Section III.

Piecing The Self Within A Fragmented Archive: Appropriating Photographic Conventions

Hayes touches upon the photographic conventions that shaped ethnographic images in nineteenth century South Africa.[116] The historian describes images like the ones taken in 1917 by ethnographer René Dickman as "static" and symmetrical, carefully curated by asking the sitters to adopt exaggerated pauses.[117] Garb also dissects similar photographic conventions in photographs of Bantu and Zulu people from the Walther Collection, qualifying these images as artificially constructed.[118] All of these highly-manufactured documentary images are characterized as "empty" by Hayes who exposes the bias of archivists in capturing images of individuals devoid of meaning and personal information.[119] Alongside scholars like Mussai and Jayawardene, I posit that Muholi's images and the documentary-like aesthetic they employ recall such images as they appropriate said photographic conventions to expose their fabricated construct.

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[116] Hayes, "Empty Photographs."
[117] Hayes, "Empty Photographs," 64-65.
[118] Garb, *Figure and Fictions,* 21.
[119] Hayes, "Empty Photographs," 60-61.

Bester I (fig. 1) opens the series of self-portraits contained in the exhibition catalogue *Somnyama Ngonyama - Hail the Dark lioness.* Directly facing and gazing at the viewer, Muholi is wrapped in a knitted blanket, held together by a clothespin that also makes up the artist's earrings and hairstyle. More than a dozen white laundry pins function as hair clips that tie together Muholi's hair. Their color matches Muholi's makeup that accentuates their eye and lip contours. Shot in black and white, in a documentary-style aesthetic, like all of Muholi's pictures, *Bester I'*s contrast between the pale makeup and the post-production darkening of the skin hints at visual codes stemming from ethnographic photography. Explaining their editing process, Muholi states:

> My skin is the same as it is in real life. It is not artificially darkened. I'm only enhancing the contrast in post production. I'm speaking of contrast in a literal sense. What does it mean "to contrast?" That confusion, that mix, that fix. That's what I am trying to say, with the heightening of contrasts. Contrast is when two opposing forces clash. Contrast is about *difference*.[120]

The close-up frame employed by the artist and the overuse of light whether natural or artificial instantly brings our attention to the dichotomy of hues that recall images of the past.

In the exhibition catalogue of *Distance and Desire,* Garb brings up archival South African images made by ethnographers that stand out for their documentary aesthetics and black and white grain.[121] When observing these images, one realizes that faces and bodies are often depicted through mugshot portraits with three quarter or frontal poses usually adopted by sitters getting their likeness recorded.[122] Such images can be found in records like the Walther Collection that was first mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. These types of collections were common in South Africa as other scholars like Keith Dietrich and Andrew Bank have also discussed the collections of anthropological images of Gustav Theodor Fritsch. He was a

[120] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 192.
[121] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther Collection*.
[122] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther Collection*.

German anthropologist and anatomist who traveled lengthy in South Africa to document the likeness of Native South Africans throughout the nineteenth century.[123]

Garb dissects the "three graces" of European high-art standards established in the genre of ethnographic photography.[124] These include showing off the front, back, or side views of the sitters "to frame the erotic spectacle of brown bodies arranged in front of the camera."[125] The second and third graces involve depicting sitters with fabrics, jewelry, and other props forming "the recurring ingredients of exotic costume and staple accoutrements—feathers, shields, clothes, animal skins, and beads—arrayed on or alongside semi-naked bodies" to convey a South African identity that connotes "earlier stages of civilisation and imbued with a sexuality and subjectivity that is ineluctably different from that of the colonising Westerner."[126] Garb and Mokoena provide an example of Irish photographer Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin who photographed South Africans during the nineteenth century.[127] The series of images taken by Duggan-Cronin, *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa,* features in the Walther Collection and displays Bantu people with

> Props and accessories and he had his own traveling costume box that he would take with him on his travels when he was looking for "authentic" subjects to photograph. During a time of rapid modernisation and urbanisation, Duggan-Cronin feared that a truly African way of life was disappearing, but at the same time he manufactured his notion of pure, timeless Africanness through the objects that he used to compose his shots and the costumes that he used to guarantee the "authenticity" of his figures: skins, sticks, beads, clay pots and baskets abound in his images, his figural groups often composed against vast vistas of open landscape, occasionally dotted with huts and traditional structures.[128]

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[123] Keith Dietrich and Andrew Bank, *An Eloquent Picture Gallery : The South African Portrait Photographs of Gustav Theodor Fritsch*, *1863-1865* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2008). Such collection of archival images by white ethnographers was quite frequent throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For the sake of this thesis, I cannot contend with all of them and will focus on the Walther Collection whose work with more contemporary photographers and their revisiting of archival images all over the African continent are more relevant to this topic. Interestingly enough, Renée Mussai, the curator who has worked with Muholi on their exhibition catalogs and several exhibitions was appointed Artistic Director and Chief Curator of the Walther collection in 2023.

[124] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther Collection,* 33.

[125] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther Collection*, 33.

[126] Garb, *Figures and Fictions,* 14-17.

[127] Garb and Hlonipha, "Navigating the African Archive," 43-45.

[128] Garb and Hlonipha, "Navigating the African Archive," 43.

In *Bester I*, Muholi's pose, the grain of the photograph, the emphasis of contrasts, the make-up, and the accessories remind the viewer of this heavy-loaded ethnographic aesthetic found in South African archives. Jayawardane executes a similar formal analysis in Muholi's exhibition catalogue:

> Muholi heightens the contrast in each of her prints, emphasizing the glossy darkness on her skin as much as the gelatin-silver technology will permit [...] in playing with mock props and skin shades in order to emphasize a sort of performative blackness, Muholi gamely references stereotypical notions that continue to be imposed on black and African bodies.[129]

Khoza further argues that Muholi personalizes each image with costumes and accessories that recall specific signifiers of Blackness emphasized by a play on light and pauses to incite the viewer to question whether what they are seeing is real or not.[130]

Not only does Muholi's work play with the stereotypes found in ethnographic images, but they also interact with the very medium that has contributed to racial segregation under apartheid. According to Jayawardane, the emphasis on contrasts perpetuated by the artist recalls the Polaroid ID-2 camera used to create photograph-based identity passes.[131] Masondo brings up two London-based artists, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin whose work subverts the identity-passes formal conventions.[132] Both artists argue that ID-2 cameras and their integration of a flash boost was used to darken skin color, contributing to shaping exaggerated representations of Black South Africans.[133] Jayawardane's parallel between the flash trigger and Muholi's work contextualizes Muholi's choice of lighting and editing:

> The *Somnyama Ngonyama* series is also, I would argue, a performative conversation with apartheid's racist machinery. Assisted by the photographic technologies that have historically aided and supported racist belief systems, apartheid intended to diminish the subjectivity of black South Africans [...] Muholi's self-portraiture is a way to

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[129] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 170.
[130] Khoza,"Seeing Blackness," 274.
[131] Jayawardane "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 171.
[132] Masondo, "Unstable Forms," 86. Broomberg was cited in an interview with journalist David Smith, "Racism of Early Colour Photography Explored in Art Exhibition," *Guardian,* January 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/25/racism-colour-photography-exhibition#:~:text=Can%20the%20camera%20be%20racist,photograph%20and%20police%20black%20people.
[133] Masondo, "Unstable Forms," 86.

> dialogue with that history and challenge the ways in which photography - and the ID-2 camera in particular—were instrumental to the creation in South Africa of a black identity that was fixed, flat, and stultified.[134]

Further, I bring to light Masondo's article for her consideration of photograph-based identity passes as part of the genre of photography and portraiture and its instrumentalization for the racist engineering of apartheid.[135] The author incorporates archives of said passes and discerns their framing to shoulder-length level, shot with harsh lighting, in black and white on colorful ID cards.[136] A similar aesthetic can be found in the work of Muholi as light often emphasizes the glossy texture of their skin and clothing. All the subjects depicted in the IDs showcased by Masondo look back at the camera as we commonly do in ID pictures, a phenomenon that is repeated by Muholi as they look back at us in *Bester I*, and in most of their self-portraits. Although in Muholi's case, one might read this assertive gaze as agentive, in the case of the subjects pictured in *dompas*, their agency is questionable due to their posing for administrative documents that would restrict their movement within South Africa.[137]

Muholi's appropriation of the photographic conventions that stem from the legacy of both ethnographic and photography-based identity passes attest to their constant return to archival images produced in South Africa. Kiguwa justifies this recursiveness of the archive as a way to grapple with the production of identities shaped by the constant repetition of racist photographs of Black South Africans.[138] Contending with such images enables an understanding of how current perceptions around Black Queer women are informed by the visual legacy of archival images.[139] I situate Kiguwa's discourse within the broader field of archival studies by bringing in Derrida, Blouin, and Jeannette who inform this thesis'

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[134] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 170.
[135] Masondo, "Unstable Forms," 80-84.
[136] Masondo, "Unstable Forms," 84-88. Masondo analyzes every angle of said passes from their textual capacities to the lighting of the photographs, and their creation as administrative documents used by the Black population to navigate certain areas of cities in South Africa.
[137] Masondo, "Unstable Forms," 82.
[138] Kiguwa, "Troubling Apprehensions," 258.
[139] Kiguwa, "Troubling Apprehensions," 260.

understanding of national archives as instruments for colonial enterprises. Derrida asks whether archives are the best apparatus for the preservation of memory due to the alteration of records throughout time passing from archivists' hands to others.[140] Building on Derrida's argument, Blouin goes on by characterizing archives as products of sets of rigid rules that do not contend with the subjective aspect of visual records.[141] He then defines that archives are "complex social, political, and cultural construction, the product of culturally determined policies and procedures."[142] Adding to this conversation, Bastian justifies the imperative to leave a trace in records with the need to understand society.[143] The author then associates the impulse to preserve and collect in a written and textural way to the colonial history of Western expansion.[144] Through maps, laws, photographic surveillance devices, and written records, archival practices as defined in national archivist manuals are rigid, static, and exclusionary.[145]

These scholars set the stage for a conceptualization of visual archives in South Africa as rigid social products of a colonial and racist enterprise that shapes the identities of Black Queer individuals in the country. Muholi's appropriation of these visual conventions translates into what they call "an unflinchingly personal approach I have taken as a visual activist to confronting the politics of race and pigment in the photographic archive."[146]

Subverting Meaning: Playing With Materialities And Props

Beyond appropriating photographic visual codes, Muholi subverts the meaning and symbolisms associated with props and materialities found in South African archives. Subverting ethnographic South African visual imagery then offers opportunities to create new

[140] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 15-20.
[141] Blouin, *Processing the Past*, 155.
[142] Blouin, *Processing the Past*, 155.
[143] Bastian, *Archiving Cultures,* 32-33.
[144] Bastian, *Archiving Cultures,* 35.
[145] Bastian, *Archiving Cultures,* 40.
[146] Stevenson Gallery, "Zanele Muholi."

meaning. Garb states that "whether 'artfully' posed in the studio or made to assume 'natural' and unselfconscious positions outdoors, the lexicon of eroticized and exoticized figures that populate the African archive provides a rich store-house of images, ripe for appropriation, pastiche, and parody."[147]

In all of their self-portraits, Muholi depicts themself using props, like the clothespin in *Bester I*, to mock the staged characteristics of ethnographic photographs. Indeed, the clothespins clearly replace headwraps, earrings, and attires that would have been used to adorn the sitter with accessories that Jayawardane calls "the African kitsch."[148] In referring to this term, Jayawardane points to accessories used as ornaments on sitters in ethnography photographs that were decontextualized from their cultural settings but meant to connote a Native South African identity.[149] In doing so, Muholi exposes these adornments as fakes and mocks their integration in photographs of the nineteenth century. Garb's archival excavation work mainly examines images of Zulu men that would be captured half-naked, wearing props like spears and hair combs.[150] She further claims that "emblematic of a vanishing culture and fading authenticity, he represents the stripped-down essence of his people, untainted by Western influence."[151] Describing the portrait of Chief of the Bechuanaland Batlhokwa made in 1919, Garb analyzes the staged peculiarities of such photographs through the sitter's three-quarter pause that isolates him against a plain background, bare-chested, gazing away.[152] Similar archives exist for Black South African women too who were either depicted as maids or mothers. Garb and Mokoena put forth the stereotype of the Zulu mother who was often portrayed half naked, with jewelry, and holding a child wrapped around their backs.[153] For

[147] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 34.
[148] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call,"173.
[149] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call,"173.
[150] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 32-33.
[151] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 31.
[152] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 31.
[153] Garb and Hlonipha, "Navigating the African Archive," 48.

Garb, the images found in the Walther collection exemplify the documentation of what anthropologists considered Native South African lifestyle, customs, and appearances.[154] The use of staged accessories are recalled by Muholi's subversion of clothespins instead of wearing actual earrings and clothes. Indeed, Garb brings up Muholi's work as an example of contemporary artists who trouble archival imagery through a playful mise en scène of costumes and decors.[155] Such analysis enables me to frame Muholi's work as subverting visual cultural codes that refer to art historical and ethnographic representations of Black women in the archives.

To situate such iconography in the broader scholarship of Black feminist studies, I draw on Nelson's accounts of representations of Black women in portraiture.[156] The author highlights the art historical tropes enacted in these portraits and their contribution to the construction of womanhood around whiteness, participating in the exclusion and misrepresentation of Black women whose identities were shaped around notions of submissiveness, excessiveness, and immorality.[157] Nelson breaks down the codes in visual culture to depict Black women as often painted as servants with bowls of fruits in domestic interiors or as promiscuous wearing clothing, earrings, and headwraps meant to connote "otherness."[158]Although Nelson's book focuses on Canadian images, her analysis of the visual construction of Black womanhood in art history is useful within the South African context because such scholarship identifies the visual codes that shape racist and inaccurate depictions of Black womanhood similar to the images of Zulu women found in the Walther Collection.

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[154] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 30-33.
[155] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 34-35. Other contemporary artists are mentioned as producing similar works like Samuel Fosso and Zwelethu Mthethwa, who also play with stereotypes found in South African archival images while transgressing gender norms.
[156] Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject.*
[157] Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject*, 17-29.
[158] Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject,* 22-23.

Muholi's choice of adornments replacing their hair and jewelry in *Bester I* as well as the use of rubber and drapes in other images in the *Bester* series (figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4) directly integrate connotations of domesticity and womanhood. In *Bester V* (fig. 2), Muholi poses naked, adorned only with silver ornaments that are arranged to resemble a tiara or a turban. In *Bester IV* (fig. 3), Muholi also portrays themself nude with make-up pencils entangled in their braids, positioning themself on a natural background as their body blends with tree branches. Bester was Muholi's mother's last name who worked as a maid for a white family her whole life.[159] Other self-portraits in the series play on the word maid and refer to Muholi's maternal figure like *MaID in Harlem* (fig. 4) which also incorporates objects and fabrics that recall motherhood and womanhood more broadly. The artist also discusses the portrait *Sebenzile* (fig. 5) as such:

> Materials used in *Sebenzile* represent household items related to cleaning and waste: the round black shape is made from a plastic garbage bag; with reams of toilet tissue creating two white stripes in the middle; the halo over my head and around my neck and chest are disposed tubes from an old washing machine. I use white tape as hair buns.[160]

As mentioned previously by Garb and Nelson, tropes of domesticity and motherhood in the depiction of Black women are common in art history. South African scholar Irene Bronner discusses Muholi's constant reference to maids in another series of work produced in 2008 called *Massa and Minah* (fig. 6).[161] Bronner describes Muholi's staging of conventions of portraits of South African domestic workers by photographing themself in several performative tableaux, playing a maid who fantasizes about her white employer (fig.6).[162] In this series, Muholi employs and subverts iconographies of womanhood and domesticity through the prism of a Queer love story. For Bronner, a *Queering* of such sceneries enables the artist to address

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[159] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 186.
[160] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 180.
[161] Irene Bronner, "Queering Portraits of 'Maids' and 'Madams' in Zanele Muholi's 'Massa' and Mina(h)," *De Arte* 51, no. 2 (2016): 16-17.
[162] Bronner, "Queering Portraits of 'Maids,'" 16.

the traumatic legacies of South African visual culture and their contribution to normalizing the violence exerted on Black women and Queer bodies.[163] Garb introduces the portrait *Miss Divine* (fig. 7) in which Muholi's sitter is naked to the waist and pauses with a Zulu beaded necklace against a natural decor in the bush.[164] In this work, Muholi bends gender conventions and pictures the sitter in drag, further appropriating props used to connote South African identities in archival images to *Queer* them.[165]

Iconographies of womanhood, Queerness, domesticity are recurrent in Muholi's work because they connote personal stories that relate to their own identity. Additionally, Muholi's interlacing and subversion of such visual codes exposes the fabricated premise of archives based on exclusionary and racist systems of knowledge and classification.[166] Muholi's pose and the props they use in the different images that compose the *Bester* photographs recall and mock early photography's tendency to capture South Africans as frozen in the past and decontextualized from their accurate cultural and historical backgrounds.[167] The domestic props replacing actual cultural accessories hint at the artificial aspect of these photographs and their inaccuracy in representing Black South African women in the archives. Beyond appropriating references from the South African records, Muholi carefully and playfully alters their meaning by subverting their signification and symbolisms to integrate their own experience as a Queer person.

[163] Bronner,"Queering Portraits of "Maids," 19.
[164] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 34-35.
[165] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 34-35.
[166] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther collection*, 34-35.
[167] Garb and Hlonipha, "Navigating the African Archive," 45.

Remixing Textuality: Naming Those Who Have Been Silenced

This work of altering meaning and reconstructing it to include one's voice in the archives aligns with McKittrick's methodology of remixing knowledge. In *Dear Science and Other Stories,* McKittrick states that

> Remixing and mashing-up reconfigure text on the page, within the story, and in extant of the story. Imperfectly, this story is an experiment in unmapping the diaspora and recognizing black methodologies as reworking and re-creating what they think we are—and where we are, spatially—through the study, praxis, and reinvention of black life.[168]

McKittrick argues in favor of remixing, re-organizing, and re-grooving from familiar material and knowledge into modes of living that exist outside of records.[169] Although McKittrick's book, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, examines groove and rhythm rooted in music, her methodology of contesting knowledge that is produced by academic institutions can be extended to other cultural productions that shape categories and identities. She refers to institutions that produce knowledge that impact what we know about Black life as disciplines.[170] Throughout her book, McKittrick understands Black life as being mapped by colonial geographies and records of histories. Indeed, McKittrick studies strategies of mapping that are not visible in records: "mapping the creative works of authors, musicians, and poets [...] multiple and overlapping (past and present) liberation praxes that are not legible on cartographic maps, but, instead, notice black ways of being."[171] This work of "remixing" or "remapping" what exists in current disciplines opens up the possibilities of imagining cultural productions that incorporate invisibilized stories and identities. Writing along a similar geographical glossary, Jayawardane relates to Muholi's work as one that "maps" the lives of

[168] McKittrick, *Dear Science,* 170.
[169] McKittrick, *Dear Science,* 170.
[170] McKittrick, *Dear Science,* 39.
[171] McKittrick, *Dear Science,* 181-182.

Queer people in South Africa.[172] In deconstructing and reconstructing archival imagery, Muholi offers a comment on the knowledge production that shapes history as we know it in South Africa to make space for identities that have been invisibilized: "Most of the work I have done over the years focuses exclusively on black LGBTQIA and gender non-conforming individuals making sure we exist in the visual archive."[173]

Somnyama Ngonyama then stands to fill in the gaps of an incomplete archive by bringing to the surface stories that were never captured on camera. In *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora,* Sharpe addresses the absence of documentary evidence concerning the lives of Black people who were immaterial to the archiving process.[174] Her book about immaterial archives interests me for its analysis of the silence and the affect that is not readable in archives, but that is still there, fragmented, opaque, and immaterial.[175] She considers these stories as immaterial archives that were never materialized in visual culture.[176] Under that scope, not only can Muholi's documentation of themself be understood as an archive, but it also brings up immaterial and silenced histories through the subversion of photographic and textual codes that made up the inclusion or exclusion of particular bodies in visual history. Indeed, Jayawardene quotes Muholi and their mention of their mother through the *Bester* images and the "lack of photographic evidence of her maternal and paternal grandparents was a 'deliberate' erasure by the state, which emphasized the feelings of "longing, of incompleteness."[177] They further provide accounts of their mother's life who dedicated years working as a domestic worker, a labor that was immaterial to visual documentation: "I thought of a number of domestic workers whose beauty had never been celebrated, whose life stories were never contextualized."[178] All

[172] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 171.
[173] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 176.
[174] Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 3-6.
[175] Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives,* 6.
[176] Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 3-6.
[177] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 172.
[178] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 186.

the *Somnyama Ngonyama* images are filled with clues and hint at erased collective and personal stories that were never featured in national archives.

Shedding light on these stories through naming is an essential part of Muholi's strategy in filling in the gaps of an archive that anonymized Black Queer women. Ethnographic images as well as ID passes emphasized on textual inscription without inscribing full names, going as far as referring to photographed subjects as types rather than individuals. Such invisibilization is addressed by Muholi as follows: "The subjects were silent. Their bodies were doubly brutalized by refusing to name them."[179] With respect to naming, I bring back Garb and her examination of the portraits titled *Zulu Mothers* whose anonymity contributed to creating generic types through textual inscriptions accompanying ethnographic images:

> The model's anonymity and the photograph's generic title suggest that the young woman served as a racial type, a fact which is born out by the inscription on the verso, declaring her "a very good specimen of the people".[180]

Naming through a colonial language in South Africa, English or Afrikaans, is further weaponized for the erasure and classification of the Black population under apartheid. IDs carried during apartheid were issued on the basis of the incorporation of a person's name, sex, date of birth, identity number, nationality, place of issue, and racial classification.[181] However, Masondo identifies that in the majority of IDs she was able to get a hold of, full names were rarely written down, but ethnic inscriptions were prominent.[182] For the government, the ID number was the most valuable element of identification on these passbooks that "regulated far more than rights and access; they extended as well to relations, to mobility, and to corporeality itself."[183] Again, numbers surpass names.

To bring up immaterial stories, Muholi chooses a grammar that is familiar to them:

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[179] Mussai, Zanele Muholi, 188.
[180] Garb, *African Photography from the Walther Collection,* 28.
[181] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 81.
[182] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 81.
[183] Masondo, "Unstable forms," 83.

> So if a person is without a name, what are we trying to do? This person has given you rights to their body, to their being. Inasmuch as I am doing "me" in Somnyama, each portrait in the series has a name. And by naming each, I am re-respecting some of those unnamed human beings, who all had native names. Those Bantu or Zulu names are difficult for others to pronounce, including the title of the project itself: *Somnyama Ngonyama.* Why *Somnyama Ngonyam*a? This is another way of taking ownership. IsiZulu is one of the eleven official languages in South Africa, and my mother tongue.[184]

With the titles of their photographs being written in Zulu, Muholi uses a grammar that is not colonially connoted to frame themself. It enables them to name agentively in response to the anonymous and generic colonial grammar used to describe women captured in images like the ones found in the Walther Collection.[185] It is also a strategy to re-inscribe meaning and the affective experiences of people who have been objectified in the archives, while also naming the Queer people that were denied representations as Jayawardene states: "To that end, Muholi notes that her goal has been to create an archive of visual, oral, and textual materials that include black lesbians."[186]

In this section, I have discussed Muholi's strategies of deconstructing colonial photographic archives by exposing their constructions through subverting imagery and textuality, which opens up possibilities for alternative constructions of identities and agencies. Muholi's archive then resists the colonial and heteropatriarchal premise of archives by incorporating and subverting certain codes pertaining to the genre of photography. Such strategies expose the fragments that shape the country's archives and allow the suggestion of a new archive that focuses on Black Queer bodies that will be discussed in Section III.

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[184] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 189.
[185] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 188-89.
[186] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 171.

Section III: *Somnyama Ngonyama*, A Queer and Subjective Alternative Archive

While Section II articulated the formal and textual strategies employed by Muholi to contend with the legacy of visual culture in South Africa outlined in Section I, Section III considers Muholi's reconfiguration of archival meaning as the creation of their own archive. This section then argues that Muholi builds a self-archive that falls in the realm of Queer alternative modes of archiving the self, expanding on what an archive can be.

Defining A Subjective And Affective Self-Archive

Several scholars have approached Muholi's self-portraits through an autobiographical lens which Farber aligns with a rise of autobiographical works in South Africa in the 1990s as a mechanism to cope with the political transition of the country into democracy and what it meant in regard to selfhood and identity.[187] Indeed, she claims that

> As a site of intervention, it can be argued that the body still offers significant potential for engagement with tensions and ambiguities regarding identity-formation in personal and socio-political contexts, and for the postcolonial/ post-apartheid speaking subjects' negotiation of a sense of self/ agency within a context of structured hierarchies of power.[188]

To contextualize Muholi's work within a broader aesthetic of self-portraiture in South Africa, I usher in South African artist Tracey Rose whose work is brought up in this section for its iconographical resemblance to Muholi's portraits.[189] Like Muholi, Rose turns to their body as a subject to convey personal and political concerns as expressed by Farber: "This has opened up a very necessary and important space for artists to position themselves as speaking subjects,

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[187] Farber, "The Address of the Other," 304-09.
[188] Farber, "The Address of the Other," 309.
[189] Farber, "The Address of the Other," 307. On the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Cape Town) website, Rose's work is described as follows: "Rose is best-known for her revolutionary performative practice which often translates to and is accompanied by photography, video, installation, and digital prints. Often described as absurd, anarchic, slapdash and carnivalesque, Rose's work explores themes around post-coloniality, gender and sexuality, race and repatriation." In "Tracey Rose," Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, accessed February 2, 2025, https://zeitzmocaa.museum/artists/tracey-rose/.

and to express their own subjectivities or narrative voices."[190] The socio-cultural context provided by Farber enables me to position Rose's work alongside Muholi's as they both employ the body to reassert agency over representations of Black women through self-representation in South Africa. This pertains to a broader tendency of self-portraiture investigated in feminist studies. For scholars like Jones, self-portraiture opens doors for feminist and Queer artists to regain agency over their own body and its perception in the public eye.[191] I bring up Jones to support Farber's contextualization of Muholi's images within a broader artistic tendency to address issues pertaining to personal and collective memory through corporeality at the turn of the century in South Africa. Further contextualizing Muholi's work as a subjective and personal account of the self, Jayawardene declares:

> Muholi decided to take on the most difficult journey of all: an introspective record of her own person that would allow her to know her own faces, so she would not feel so empty—nor so full, perhaps, of others' erroneous projections. Self-portraiture offers Muholi the opportunity to bleed herself of centuries of poison, as well as nourish herself with laughter, while defining herself on her own terms.[192]

Muholi themself attests to a need to look inwards after spending years documenting the life of others: "When we document and photograph other people, we tend to forget about ourselves. I wanted to find an artistic expression to deal with the painful experiences that I was going through by drawing back to historical moments [...] I needed to remember me."[193] Alongside the same lines, South African activist Unoma Azuah qualifies *Somnyama Ngonyama* as "an insightful autobiography," while curator and Eyene relates to it as "a visual diary," and finally, Mussai coins their series of interviews with Muholi as "an archive of the self."[194] Evidently, this series of work unites the artist's personal and affective experiences, while also qualifying

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[190] Farber, "The Address of the Other," 308.
[191] Jones, "The Eternal Return," 958.
[192] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 172.
[193] Tate London, "Zanele Muholi."
[194] Christine Eyene, "On Thembeka I," 158, Unoma Azuah, "Self-Gaze: Zanele Muholi," in *Zanele Muholi : Somnyama Ngonyama = Hail the Dark Lioness,* ed. Renée Mussai (Firsted. New York, N.Y.:Aperture, 2018), 137 and Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 176.

as a form of archive. Farber refers to *Somnyama Ngonyama* as part of a process of creating a new archive.[195] Indeed, they have been documenting their likeness under every angle for the past decade and refers to these images as archives with the goal to "to *Queer*, to *blacken*, to *open*, and to *occupy* space."[196]

Hence, I call *Somnyama Ngonyama* a self-archive that requires a Queer and subjective mode of reading archival productions and that stands against the objective and neutral premise of records, which Faber reads as following:

> For the South African artist Zanele Muholi, the archive is not a benign, transparent record whose meaning is stable, definitive, and static, but rather is a contested subject and medium- a site of embodiment aligned with dynamic, fluid processes of knowledge production, systems, and formations.[197]

Along similar lines, Derrida considers archives as inherently subjective for he asks whether textual archives are the best apparatus for the preservation of the psychic, of memory.[198] The author points to the selection process that archivists undergo to preserve and choose which archives will be digitized, reproduced, and recorded.[199] This process involves subjectivity and produces new meaning. Beyond choosing how and why to take images of certain bodies, "the archivization produces as much as it records the event."[200] Derrida then prompts us to think about the alteration of records through acts of repetition and re-archiving that undeniably challenge the objective characteristics of archives.[201]

In the past decades, archivists and artists have sought to reconsider records and work towards alternative archives.[202] Caswell argues that new archives are created by artists and within what she calls community-based archival practices to emphasize on the affective

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[195] Farber, "Dark Play," 42.
[196] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 196
[197] Farber, "Dark Play," 43.
[198] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 15.
[199] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 19.
[200] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17.
[201] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 20.
[202] Caswell, *Urgent Archives,* 12.

experiences of minorities.[203] For the archivist, identity-based memory documents alter white and heteronormative temporalities that insist on futurity and fixity in favor of linear progress narratives towards post-racial white futures.[204] Alternative archive making like Muholi's offers the potential to interrupt these cycles of oppression by creating fluid and subjective records. Adding to this analysis of alternative archives, this section looks at the work of Chew and her hauntological approach to archives.[205] It is defined as an approach that densifies authoritative institutional records by exploring alternative ways of archiving that incorporate the affect that lies in diasporic knowledge and trauma.[206] Chew invites diasporic archivists to engage with official archives through creative experimentation and subversion that she defines as following: "Far from static, these archives are constantly in-transit, gathering and reverberating histories as they move across spatial and temporal registers."[207] A hauntological methodology engages with the affective that is held in power structures and "that are often not seen, but that are felt."[208] Although Chew's hauntological conceptualization of counter-archives pertains to works made by diasporic artists, I relate this idea to Farber's interpretation of Muholi's strategy of working through their own body to challenge the permeability of South African records. Indeed, Farber quotes Garb to make their point:

> As a disputed and shifting field of objects, ideas and propositions, the archive is constantly being remade and rethought, not only by the discovery of history-laden images and materials, but also by the development of alternative forms of interpretation that reshape the old and find new meanings where outmoded or exhausted models once stood.[209]

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[203] Caswell, *Urgent Archives,* 93.
[204] Caswell, *Urgent Archives,* 95.
[205] Chew, "Diasporic Archives and Hauntological Accretions," 133.
[206] Chew, "Diasporic Archives and Hauntological Accretions," 133.
[207] Chew, "Diasporic Archives and Hauntological Accretions," 133.
[208] Chew,"Diasporic Archives and Hauntological Accretions," 139.
[209] Farber, "Beyond the Ethnographic Turn," 16. Here Farber quotes: Tamara Garb, *Distance and Desire. Encounters with the African Archive* (New York: Steidl, 2013).

I bring these ideas to my thesis to conceptualize Muholi's work as a self-archive that is subjective and that necessitates being read outside the static scope of institutional archival practices because its rigidity never accounted for Black Queer stories at all.

Queering South African Archives

Through defining *Somnyama Ngonyama* as an alternative archive, I situate Muholi's archive of the self within the scholarship of Queer studies and Queer archives. Kumbier refers to Queer archives as disruptive practices that emphasize Queer presence through reiterations of the self.[210] Thus, according to Kumbier, an alternative archive occurs "in response to the absence or erasure of LGBTQ subjects and experiences from the dominant historical record, queer studies scholars have sought to create a historical record of their own."[211] Muholi then employs their own body to create a Queer record that "establishes new space—historical, psychological, and physical—that worked to promote the value of lesbian and gay self-representation and to diminish the power of scientific, religious, legal, and academic professions to pathologize and oppress."[212] Throughout more than four hundred self-portraits, Muholi creates multifaceted representations of Blackness and Queerness, attesting to the liberative potential of self-representation in disturbing the cultural borders established on the surface of the skin.

Khoza gestures towards an understanding of Muholi's work as a visual strategy employed to assume multiple identities and to enact multifaceted and versatile representations of Blackness.[213] As Muholi's work has continued to grow in the past decade, so has the number of personas they embody. Khoza then considers *Somnyama Ngonyama* a body of work that is not static and that evolves throughout the years.[214] In response to the disregarded Black Queer

[210] Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material,* 3.
[211] Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material,* 14.
[212] Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material*, 25.
[213] Khoza, "Seeing Blackness," 281.
[214] Khoza, "Seeing Blackness," 281.

stories and voices in relation to care, love, and possibilities, Muholi stages themself as multiple personas that provide endless opportunities to embody Queerness and Blackness in different ways. In the exhibition catalogue, *Somnyama Ngonyama,* Muholi frames themself with reference to different careers, family members, and famous historical people. The *Bester* series, as stated in Section II, refers to their mother and to domestic workers which enables the artist to embody motherhood through the display of materials and clothing hinting at domesticity. They depict themself wearing beaded drapes, necklaces and *isicholos* (women's hats) which are all traditional Zulu clothes associated with marriage and motherhood. In other images, Muholi is personified as a warrior which Mapula Lehong describes as "a warrior powerful even though they think she is frail."[215] *Zodwa* (fig. 8) frames Muholi bear-chested, wearing a war costume made out of shells. In other images, Muholi stages themself in reference to their self-documented predecessors by incorporating formal elements found in other artworks. *Bhekisisa* (fig. 9) is a clear tribute to Ana Mendieta's work as Muholi portrays themself laying on the ground, blending within the large-frame rocky landscape that surrounds them. Meanwhile, *Ntozabantu VI* (fig. 10) represents the artist as a Disney princess, wearing a plastic crown over a long blond wig that revisits the formal characteristics of royalty. Further images show Muholi as a mine worker as an allusion to the extractive South African history in relation to local resources and the exploitation of mine workers. In *Thulani II* (fig. 11), they are wearing a helmet and protective glasses, similar to the minors' work attire.[216]

Through such a play on attires and costumes, Muholi's work inserts Queer presence in geographical and historical contexts that are defined by the absence of representation of Black Queer people. Discussing the *Bester* series and *Zodwa*, both subverting the iconography of Zulu mothers and warriors as outlined in Section II, Jayawardene describes the work as: "These

[215] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 47.
[216] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 185.

are photographs that chronicle the significance of Muholi making a space for herself in different locations and during a historical moment that would deny her one."[217] Curating distinct personas in these different temporalities allows Muholi to make space for themself in different historical moments they could not have been able to enter otherwise. Indeed, Muholi provides insight regarding *Thulani II* and its historical reference to the 2012 Marikana massacre during which striking miners were killed by the police in South Africa.[218] They ask: "it's also about LGBTQIA representation: how are we, as LGBTQIA and gender-nonconforming individuals, affected by Markina? How many miners might have identified as gay? How many queer lives were lost in the mines?"[219] Through the performance of these different aspects of Muholi's persona, the artist inserts Queer presence in South African visual culture.

Multiple scholars have qualified *Somnyama Ngonyama* as performative in their deployment of multiple characters, including Jayawardene who describes the portraits as "performative, theatrical-snapshots of herself as she embodies many personas, rather than simple narratives claiming to document an 'authentic' Zanele Muholi."[220] Furthering this idea, Farber prompts us to think about the possibilities offered by performance: "Muholi moves beyond the level of representation to imbue the performative body with a creative agency that has the potential to create new understandings of what the archive might be, and how it might be received."[221] Finally, Muholi themself qualifies their work through the lens of performance:

> Experimenting with different characters and archetypes, I have portrayed myself in highly stylised fashion using the performative and expressive language of theatre. The black face and its details become the focal point, forcing the viewer to question their desire to gaze at images of my black figure.[222]

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[217] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 172.
[218] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 185.
[219] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 185-86.
[220] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 170.
[221] Farber, "Dark Play," 44.
[222] Stevenson Gallery, "Zanele Muholi."

Scholars like Lewin have examined self-portraits through the lens of performance studies and define Queer visual activism as a slow, in-depth exploratory process that produces images of empowerment.[223] She makes a parallel between Muholi's work and the performances created by the South African duo FAKA.[224] Composed of Desire Marea and Fela Gucci, FAKA is a Queer music and performance duo. Interweaving kwaito rhythms, performance, and archival documentary work, the duo re-imagines a fictional space for Black Queer individuals to celebrate their existence.[225] Lewin compares such work with Muholi's images for the repeated staging of visuality is considered a performative act. In the South African context, visibility challenges the essence of national institutions. As Lewin puts it: "For FAKA, being visible is being activist and they exploit commodification to augment their visibility. They use self-actualization through fashion and consumerism to remake normative reality and carefully crafted spectacles to create contemporary indigenous queer rituals."[226]

Addressing the challenges around Queer visuality through a refusal of violence, FAKA penetrates South African galleries and other cultural institutions by staging Black Queer love and life.[227] Indeed, Lewin affirms that:

> Much queer visual activist work in South Africa has concentrated on the documentation of hate crimes and either supporting or challenging the criminal justice system in an attempt to better support the victims of hate crimes. FAKA's artistic production on the surface is the antithesis of this kind of work. It is much more concerned with celebrating life, and fabulousness, than documenting death.[228]

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[223] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 44.
[224] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 40-41.
[225] Alexis Thibault, "FAKA, the Queer duo ruling over South Africa," *Numéro Art*, published September 2, 2020, accessed February 2, 2025, https://numero.com/en/culture/faka-the-queer-duo-ruling-over-south-africa-2/. This newspaper issue features the duo's biography and their prominence in the South African music and visual arts scene. More details about their work and the origins of kwaito music is provided here: "Or rather its heir, gqom (meaning 'to hit' in Zulu), a musical genre of the 2010s that's more minimalist than South African house. Made-up with red lipstick and glittering eyes, Desire Marea and Fela Gucci condense the suffocating and sensual ambiance of gay nightclubs into their sonorous collages. Between psychedelic performances and love songs, they engage in a languorous mass and organise their own parties in Johannesburg, entitled 'Cunty Power.'"
[226] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 49.
[227] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 50. Faka means "to penetrate," literally to insert yourself where you are not wanted, in spaces you are excluded from.
[228] Lewin, "Queer Visual Activism in South Africa," 50.

Visibility and versatility then become a performative activist protest aesthetic that contributes to creating Black Queer representations in South Africa through the staging of the self. In *Somnyama Ngonyama* I understand performance as having a double meaning: as the costumes and theatricality used by Muholi that make up an artistic performance, but mostly as the act of performing the body in front of a camera to embody different personas and selves. This is informed by Mussai's reading of the work: "to me, they are all you. I don't see them as characters, but as a family of different selves."[229]

Through all these different figures, Muholi playfully inserts Queer Black bodies in temporal spaces that are defined by straightness and whiteness in South Africa. Their work is a display of collective and personal memories mirrored to the Queer viewer.[230] Assertively looking back at the viewer in their self-portraits, Muholi asks for "a confrontation. It's about confronting the viewer. It's a questioning gaze. Not purely looking, but asking questions, asking for engagement."[231] Muholi is looking at us, while also being looked at by the viewer, which Thomas relates to Barthes' well-known theories of the studium and the punctum.[232] The author discusses *Faces and Phases* and more broadly Muholi's *oeuvre* with reference to the studium that is construed as what cannot reach the viewer, and the punctum that corresponds to an encounter that is not usual and that moves the viewer.[233] For Thomas, such reading of the punctum can be understood as a mode of Queer reading of cultural productions that disturb the heteropatriarchal hegemony that limits and structures our gaze.[234] Further than this, an entirely Queer and subjective archive that stages the body dismantles the colonial and patriarchal

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[229] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 193.
[230] To aid the reader, I reinsert a relevant quote by Muholi, seen on page 17."The work that I produce is meant to be for every person [...] it could be a mother whose child is queer and wants to have a reference point to show to their kids and say that you are not alone and it could be for the LGBTI people themselves to understand their worthiness. Then it becomes political, to say: 'How do we politicize spaces with ourselves in a conscious way that tends to be ignored by those who are in power?'"
[231] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 193.
[232] Thomas, "Zanele Muholi Intimate Archive."
[233] Thomas, "Zanele Muholi Intimate Archive," 364.
[234] Thomas, "Zanele Muholi Intimate Archive," 364.

premise of national archives as they "provide an entry point into an intimate archive—one that is embodied, one that is formed through love."[235]

The Body-Archive

While the first two subsections delved into a Queer and subjective reading of Muholi's self-archive, this final subsection expands on corporeality as a central focus of *Somnyana Ngonyama* through a sensorial lens. Section I and II provided accounts of archival records as devoid of affective stories of Black Queer individuals and their personal experiences that have been denied sensoriality and corporeality. Alongside Kumbier's qualifying of Queer bodies as archives of personal and collective experiences, this section considers the duality of the actual documentation of Muholi's body, traces, emotions, while also delving into the ways the body itself works as an archive.[236]

In *Race and the Senses: The Felt Politics of Racial Embodiment,* Sekimoto and Brown cultivate what they call an "embodied epistemology."[237] Such methodology of feeling in the body as the basis for analysis guides my writing and is essential to grasping Muholi's work through a sensorial lens. Sekimoto and Brown's book establishes that objectified individuals are presumed not to feel.[238] As examined previously in this thesis, Queer Black bodies in South Africa are described in the media through dehumanizing numbers and accounts. Both authors relate that inflicting violence by projecting numbness is "depriving individuals of their sensorial authority and ownership of their own perceptual experience."[239] Race is then embodied as it sensitizes and augments or diminishes visceral bodily sensations.[240] As the body

[235] Thomas, "Zanele Muholi Intimate Archive," 364.
[236] Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material,* 1-2.
[237] Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*, 2.
[238] Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*, 14.
[239] Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*, 14.
[240] Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*, 17.

is the vehicle to the world, meaning is inscribed on the surface of the skin.[241] Whiteness and straightness are defined by the authors as an embodied sensitive subjectivity that assumes itself as the normative experience for the human sensorial experience; thus, forming marginalized sensory otherness.[242] Denying sensoriality to Queer Black bodies then contributes to their exclusion from national archives, which cannot account for these sensorial experiences. I delve into these methodologies that conceptualize the body as a sensorial vehicle to the world; and thus, an amassment of sensorial experiences and traces because—in the words of Sylvia Wynter— "knowing is feeling is knowing."[243] We know through our bodies that actively feel and move through the world as social and cultural products. Hence, a feeling body becomes an archive of emotions, experiences, traumas, all incised within the skin.

This justifies the need to approach works like Muholi's through a sensorial methodology. The first two subsections examined Muholi's employment of their body to convey personal and collective stories of Queer experiences. This section contrasts Sekimoto and Brown's sensorial methodology to Farber's analysis of *body politics* in South Africa.[244] While Farber's designation of contemporary South African art as autobiographical sets the stage to conceptualize Muholi's work as subjective, their interpretation of South African artists deploying their bodies to regain agency over their own sensorial experiences is also important to consider. Farber asserts:

> Even after featuring so prominently in the "body politics" debates of the 1990s, the body (and sensory perception) is still a significant feature of South African art practice, both as a figurative and metaphorical site of representation and intervention [...]

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[241] Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*, 10.
[242] Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*, 31.
[243] McKittrick, *Dear Science,* 60. In the chapter "Consciousness (Feeling Like, Feeling Like This)," McKittrick examines Sylvia Wynter's essay "Towards the Sociogenic Principle" in which she researches "Frantz Fanon's principle, race, and neurobiology shows how black consciousness can be understood in relation to liberation and cultural labor." In this essay, Wynter considers how "the scientifically racist story of humanity shapes how we feel not just psychically, but physiologically too." She understands racism as being known but also felt in the body and points towards the necessity to consider feeling as the basis that shapes racist systems of knowing and disciplines. Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle," in Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gomez-Moriana, *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
[244] Farber, "The address of the Other," 309.

> Further, given that South Africa has historically been a site wherein "bodies" were used to delineate the body politic along hierarchically arranged racial lines, it is unsurprising that in current South African practices, the body as an individual, collective, political, ethical and communicative site is still foregrounded.[245]

Under that scope, the body, too, functions as a site for the creation and alteration of meaning that aligns with Muholi's practice.

I parallel Farber's interpretation of *body politics* to Sharpe's examination of archives as both visual and tactile objects.[246] To this end, bodies also constitute archives as they retain traces, memories, histories.[247] Both the archive of the body itself, and the documentation of one's corporeality challenge the fixed materiality of written records that is, according to Sharpe, filled with loss, opacity, authority, and that is inherently incomplete.[248] Hence, recording the life of Queer Black subjects constitutes collecting fragments of lives and pieces of time which is what Muholi's archive of their different persona is performing. Produced over ten years, the images are a witness to the artist's aging and multiple life experiences as a Black Queer person in Johannesburg and abroad. In the *Somnyama Ngonyama* exhibition catalogue, Jayawardene recollects what sparked the creation of the self-portraits that Muholi started creating during a residency in Italy.[249] As they were walking in the streets of Italy, they experienced racism which made them think about the ways their body moves through space in different countries as a Queer Black person.[250] Several other images also originate from personal experiences and unravel some of Muholi's life experiences. For instance, the portrait *Julile* (fig. 12) was shot in response to the artist's questioning of the ways women's bodies are portrayed in the media.[251] It was captured several days after the artist underwent a major surgery and in response to their own anxiety about their body and its display in the public

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[245] Farber, "The address of the Other," 309.
[246] Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 6.
[247] Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 6.
[248] Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 4-6.
[249] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 177-78.
[250] Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness' Call," 177-78.
[251] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 190.

eye.[252] Perceptions of the body, whether personal or collective, are then also central to the stories put on display by Muholi in *Somnyana Ngonyama.*

In the words of Muholi, *Somnyama Ngonyama* "references a particular case or figure in history, or an experience - personal, sociopolitical, cultural. It speaks to some *body* whose story has been erased. Some body who struggles, or registers joy. This is why each portrait in the series has a name."[253] I paused on the word register when reading this part of Mussai's interview. The body registers pain, trauma, joy, all lodged in the epidermis. In *No Archive Will Restore You,* Singh seeks to define what an archive of the self entails through a study of the body-archive.[254] Singh attempts to give an account of fragments and pieces of her life that encompass her personal archive.[255] She describes the traces on her body that tell stories, personal and collective, in a way that memory inscribes itself into the body, underneath the skin.[256] The book describes a sensorial archive: an archive that lives and feels. Singh positions the body as a repository of an infinity of traces and experiences that form what I call a self-archive.[257] Alongside similar lines, Muholi archives their own body, while their body is also an archive of themself as a product of historical processes and personal experiences. Muholi's archive lies in visual traces—their hair, frowns, wrinkles, tattoos, scars—but also the ones that are engraved below the surface of their skin.

Muholi states that their work creates visual evidence for their existence: "I have decided and made the choice to expose myself because I felt that nobody could do it *for me*. In order for me to remember me, and also to be remembered."[258] Hence, performing the body in front of the photographic apparatus forms a subjective Queer archive that exists in parallel and

[252] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 190.
[253] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 195-96.
[254] Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 29.
[255] Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 30.
[256] Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 30.
[257] Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 30-31.
[258] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi,* 184.

opposition to national archival records. Muholi's self-portraits create a shared space of sensoriality as a response to the Black Queer viewer's need to see themself represented in the archives.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have examined the formal strategies employed by Muholi in their series of self-portraits *Somnyama Ngonyama* to create a self-archive that functions as an activist tool to insert Black Queer bodies in South African visual culture. Working from the premise that national records are static and rigid and cannot account for the personal and sensorial experience of Queer Black bodies, this thesis has discussed the ways Muholi's self-archive aligns with alternative modes of archiving and fluid processes of creating knowledge.

Through tracing a history of visuality in South Africa and the instrumentalization of photography as a weapon to classify and segregate Black individuals while omitting to represent Queer South Africans, I was able to attest to a national archive that misrepresents and dismisses marginalized voices and stories. Laying out a visual analysis of Muholi's work, I deciphered their appropriation of visual and textual codes stemming from such ethnographic and archival photographs and their re-enactment in front of the camera through a subversive play. Re-mixing historical and personal narratives enables a re-arrangement of archival knowledge. By exposing the fabricated nature of such records, Muholi's work inserts the Queer Black self in South Africa's visual culture:

> To combat bias and erasure. To keep the dialogue going and create opportunities for others less fortunate or privileged. To open access to spaces historically denied to us- to black, queer, trans, female-bodied, and gender-nonconforming individuals, especially. That is my main agenda going forward: to *queer*, to *blacken*, to *open*, and to *occupy* space.[259]

Centralizing their own bodily experience through a performance of multiple personas on camera, Muholi's work amounts to a repository of personal and collective stories. Apprehending *Somnyama Ngonyama* through a Queer archival lens permits its characterization as a self-archive that is subjective and sensorial, standing against the rigidity and fixity of state records.

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[259] Mussai, *Zanele Muholi*, 196.

In the past year, Muholi has created and showcased new iterations of *Somnyama Ngonyama* that further broaden our understanding of self-archives. Muholi's most recent works that were exhibited at the Tate Modern in 2024 incorporated new pieces portraying themself using different mediums. For the first time in their practice, they produced bronze bust and full-length sculptures, as well as beaded pieces. Seeing that these works were just created in the last year and have not been written about yet from a scholarly standpoint, I was not able to fully delve into these new materialities to archive the self. Nonetheless, these sculptural and beaded pieces are worth mentioning as they expand Muholi's series *Somnyama Ngonyama* to three dimensional mediums. On their Instagram account, Muholi shared their intention of employing bronze to produce these new sculptures due to the longevity of the material, further emphasizing on the need to make space for Black Queer representations. *Bambatha I* is an example of such sculptures and is referred to as "a Queer avatar" of the artist.[260] Their full-length bronze depiction is coiled with a golden snake that prohibits visual access to their body from neck to feet. While some sculptural elements recall the photographed portraits—the overuse of black, the assertive gaze looking back, the play between visible and invisible—these new works appear more raw. Deprived of frivolous accessories, visual clues are harder to read. Some sculptures are golden, others are beaded, and in all of these new works, materiality is prevalent. Indeed, the malleability of the mediums used enable the casting of a textured skin that shows scars, cellulitis, wrinkles. Purposefully selecting mediums that can be molded to accurately represent their body, Muholi's work expands to three dimensionality; further challenging what an archive can be. These recent works align themself within the series *Somnyama Ngonyama* while also pushing the boundaries of a two-dimensional record. With these pieces, Muholi creates self-archives *en relief*, completely defeating the flat-surfaced

[260] "Zanele Muholi, 'Bambatha I', 2023," Frieze London & Frieze Masters, 13 September 2024, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.frieze.com/article/frieze-sculpture-2024-zanele-muholi-bambatha-I .

materiality of national archival records that suppress and dictate Queer Black identities in South Africa.

Figures

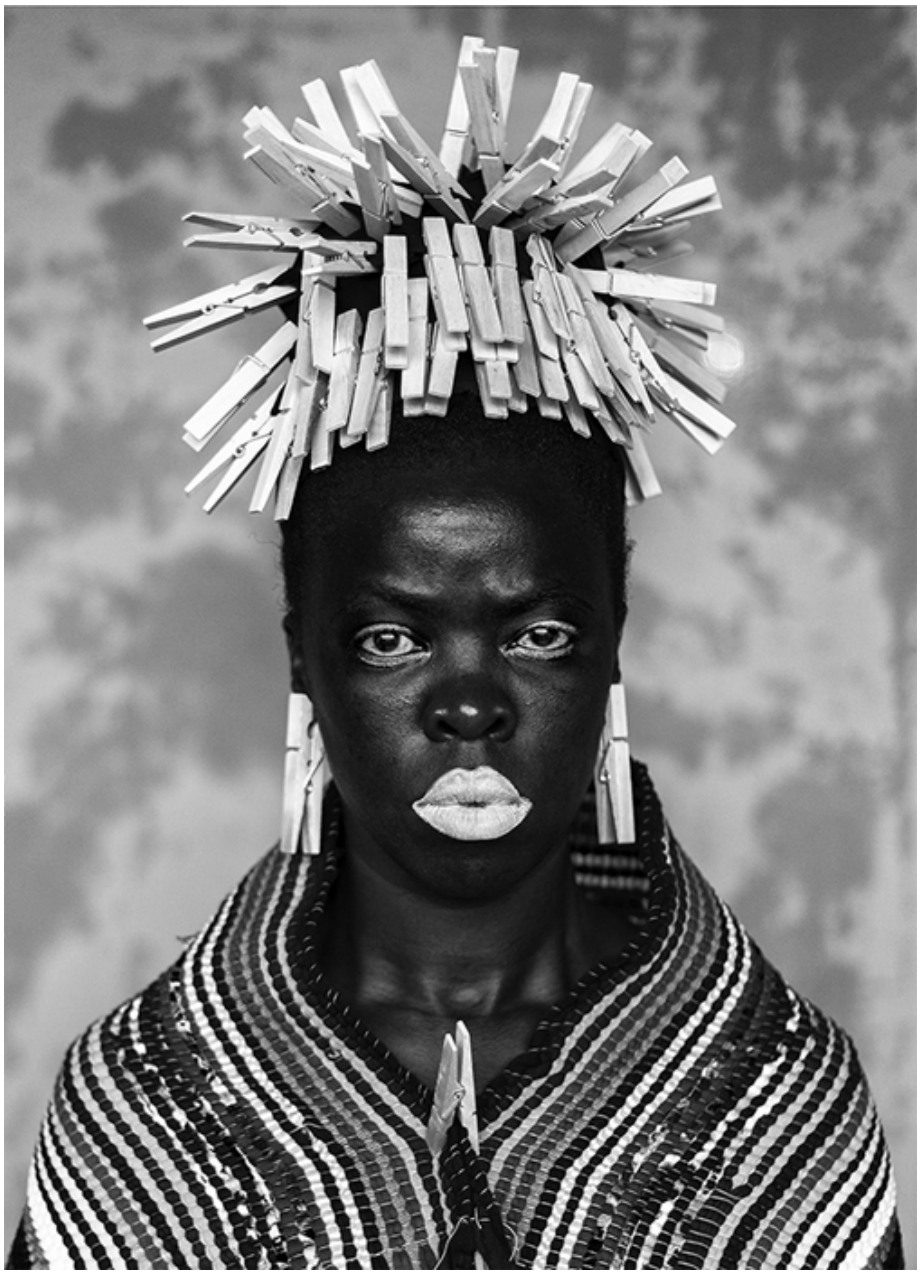


Figure 1: Zanele Muholi, *Bester I,* Mayotte, 2015. Silver gelatin print. Image size: 70 x 50.5cm. Paper size: 80 x 60.5cm. Edition of 8 + 2 AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa), Accessed February 2, 2025, http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/somnyama/bester1_mayotte_2015.html

Figure 2: Zanele Muholi, *Bester IV,* Mayotte, 2015. Silver gelatin print. Image and paper size: 80 x 57.8cm. Edition of 8 + 2 AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/155

Figure 3: Zanele Muholi, *MaID in Harlem,* African Market, 116 St, 2015. Archival Pigment ink on Baryta fibre paper. Image size: 50 x 40cm. Paper size: 60 x 50cm. Edition of 8 + 2 AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/somnyama/maid_harlem_2015.html

Figure 4: Zanele Muholi, *Bester V* Mayotte, 2015. Silver gelatin print. Image size: 50 x 41cm. Paper size: 60 x 51cm. Edition of 8 + 2 AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/156

Figure 5: Zanele Muholi, *Sebenzile*, Parktown, 2016. Silver gelatin print. Image and paper size: 70 x 61cm. Edition of 8 + 2AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/36

Figure 6: Zanele Muholi, *Massa and Minah II*, 2008. C print. 40x60cm. Edition 5+ 2Ap. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitionsbs/muholi/massa1.htm

Figure 7: Zanele Muholi, *Miss D'vine I*, 2007. Lambda print. Image size: 76.5 x 76.5cm. Paper size: 86.5 x 86.5cm. Edition of 5 + 2AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/dvine1.htm

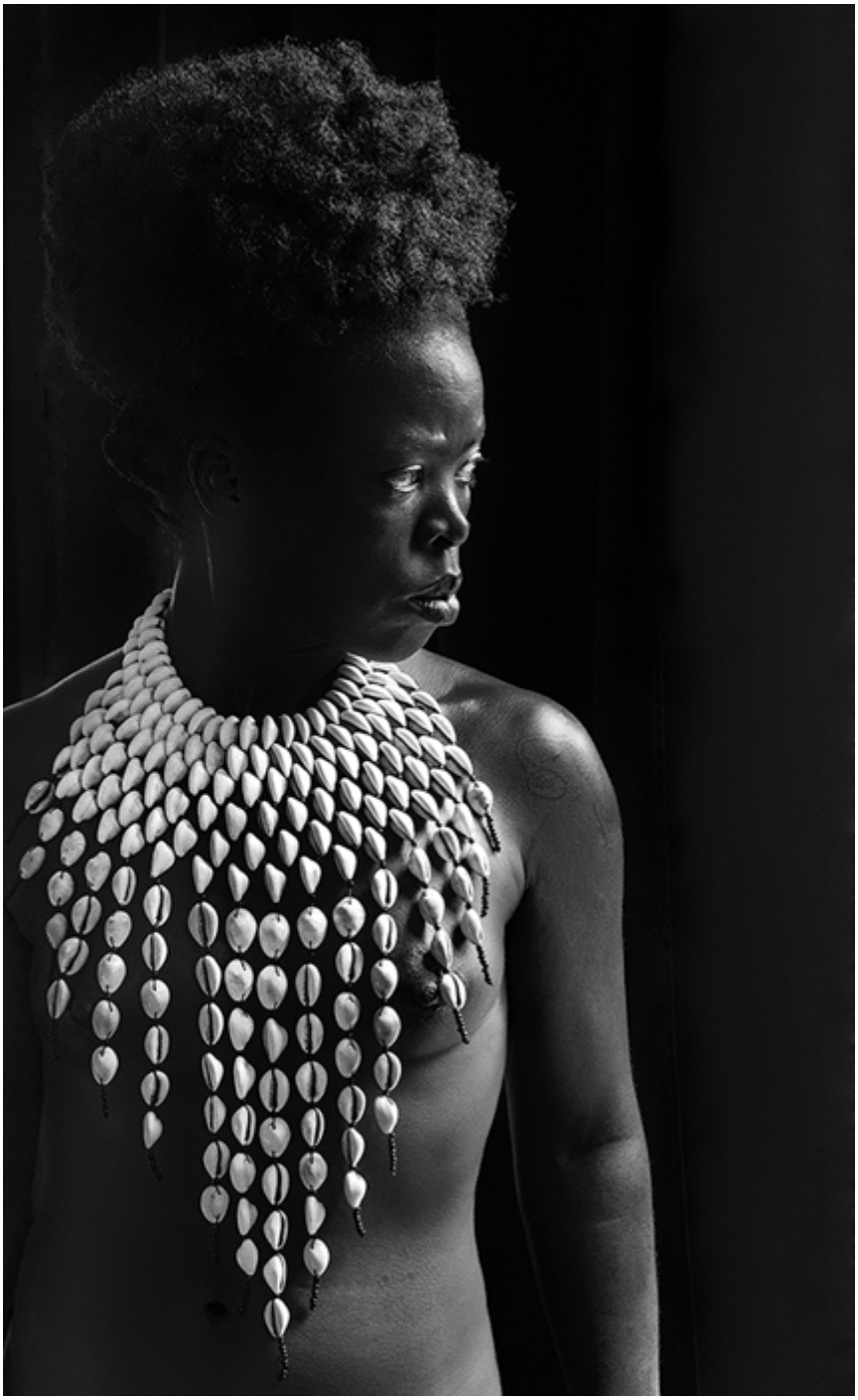


Figure 8: Zanele Muholi, *Zodwa*, Paris, 2014. Silver gelatin print. Image size: 80 x 48.8cm Paper size: 90 x 58.8cm. Edition of 8 + 2 AP Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/somnyama/zodwa_paris_2014.html

Figure 9: Zanele Muholi, *Bhekisisa*, Sakouli beach, Mayotte, 2016. Silver gelatin print. Image and paper size: 52 x 100cm. Edition of 8 + 2AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/25

Figure 10: Zanele Muholi, *Ntozabantu VI*, Parktown, 2016. Silver gelatin print. Image and paper size: 80 x 53.5cm. Edition of 8 + 2AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/97

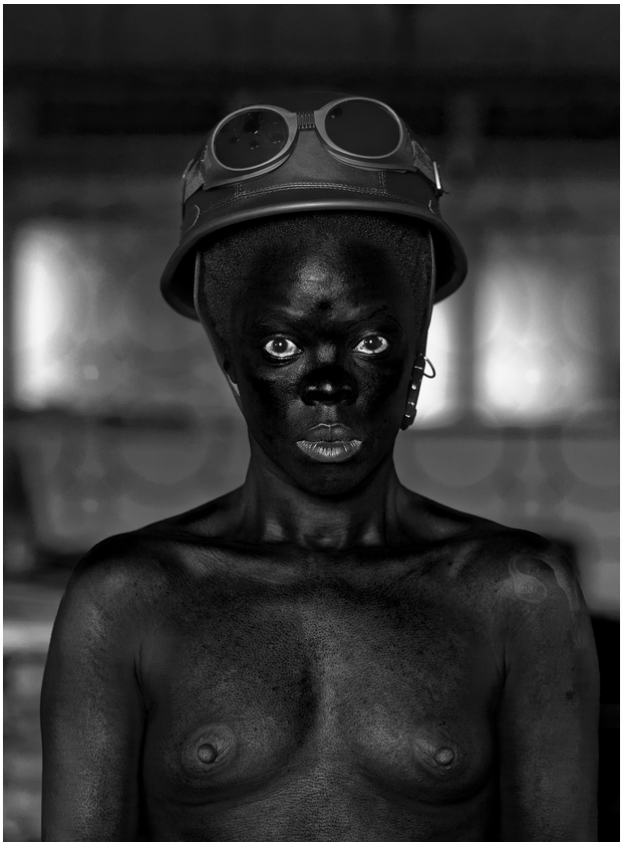


Figure 11: Zanele Muholi, *Thulani II*, Parktown, 2015. Silver gelatin print. Image and paper size: 50 x 36.2cm. Edition of 8 + 2AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/146

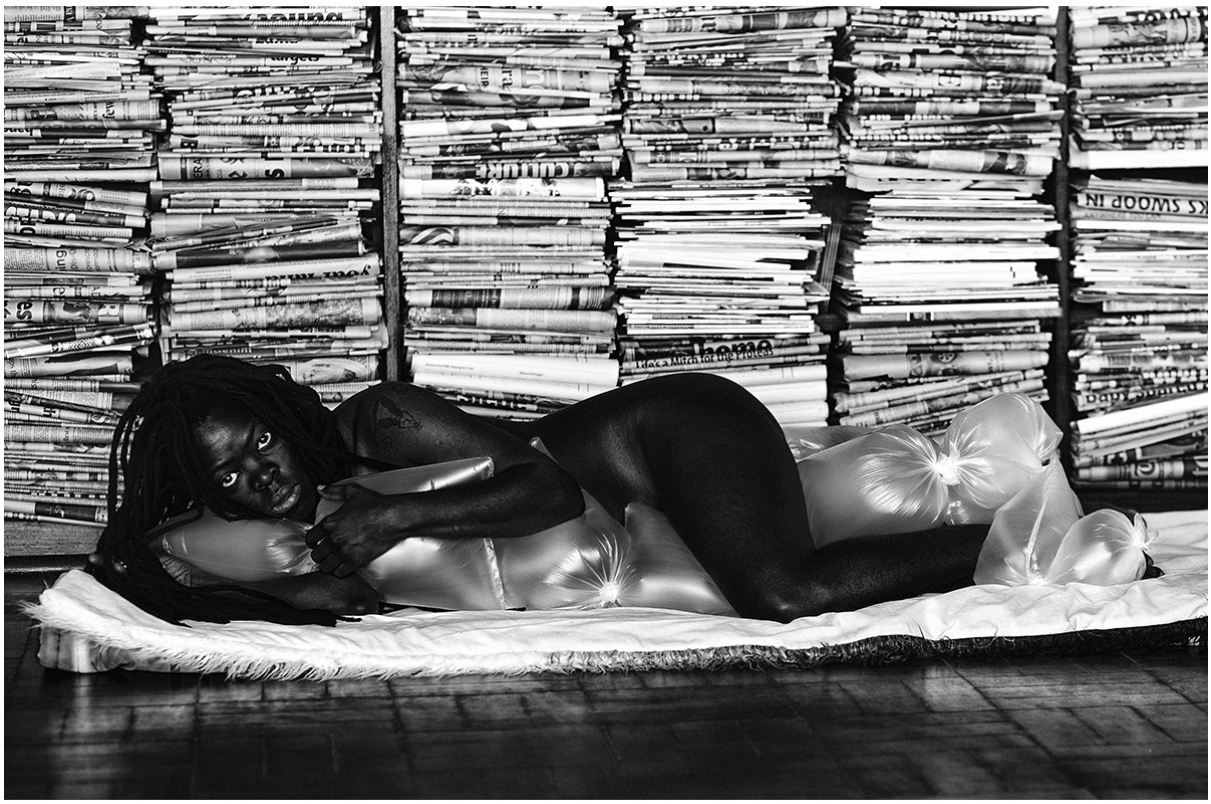
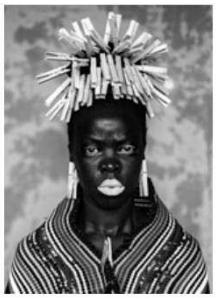


Figure 12: Zanele Muholi, *Julile I,* Parktown, Johannesburg, 2016. Silver gelatin print. Image and paper size: 65.8 x 100cm. Edition of 8 + 2AP. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/27


Bester I, Mayotte, 2015


Somandla, Parktown, 2014


Thulani II, Parktown, 2015


Babhekile II, Oslo, 2015


Thembeka I, New York Upstate, 2015


Ntomb'zane, Mayotte, 2015


Somnyama I, Paris, 2014


Inkanyiso I, Paris, 2014


Ntombi II, Paris, 2014


Mfana, London, 2014


Ntombi I, Paris, 2014


Bester IV, Mayotte, 2015


Zodwa, Paris, 2014


Somnyama III, Paris, 2014


Musa, London, 2015


Thembeka II, London, 2014


Hlengiwe, Paris, 2014


Thembitshe, Parktown, 2014


Bona, Charlottesville, 2015

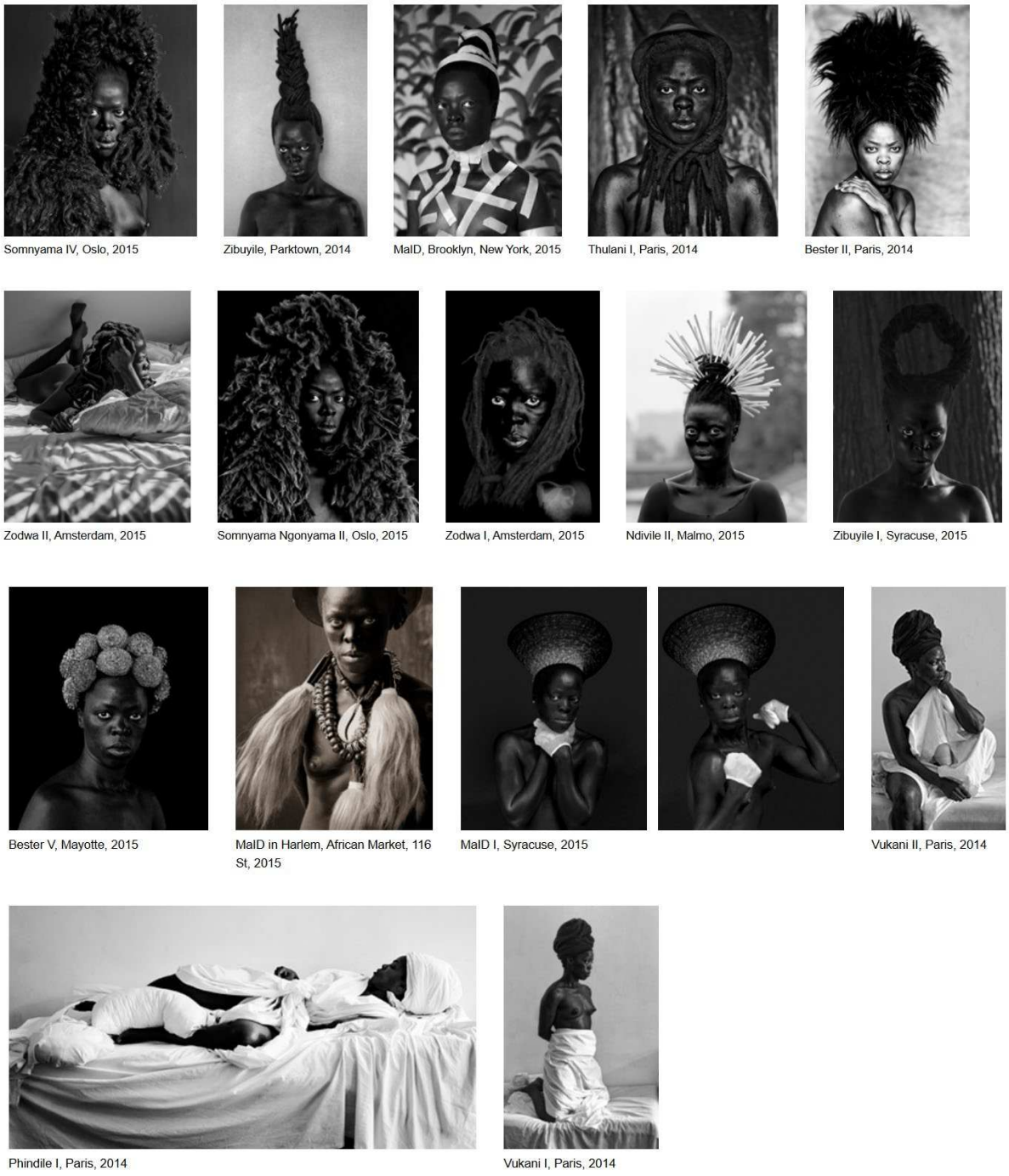


Figure 13: Grid view of thirty-six images of the series : Zanele Muholi, *Somnyama Ngonyama.* Silver Gelatin Print. © Copyright 2025, STEVENSON. Image source: Stevenson Gallery, (Johannesburg, South Africa). Accessed February 14, 2025, https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/index2015.html#bravebeauties

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