

The Performativity of Zanele Muholi's *MaID*
in Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail, the Dark Lioness)

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I have come to question the ethics of how might Judith Butler understand Zanele Muholi's as performing their gender and indeed their very self in the on-going series *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness)*?

As a cis white gay man, I am going to attempt to explain one's personal journey of gender identity from the perspective of a non-binary lesbian theorist, Judith Butler, who has been at the forefront of queer identity since the 1980s. I have no right to analyze this outside of the conclusion that Muholi chooses to identify themselves as a non-binary human first and foremost and would take great discord in being broken down to the subject of a performer of simply gender in their works. Using the pronouns, "they" and "them", Muholi makes a statement about themselves that transcends gender conformity into a conversation about reclaiming ownership of their life story.¹ In order to break down the performative aspects of their works in *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail, the Dark Lioness)*, one would start off by introducing the reader to some key terminology before proceeding further. "**Cis/Cisgender**- A term to describe someone whose gender identity matches the sex and gender they were assigned at birth."¹ "**Non-Binary** – An Umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'."³ "**Intersectionality** – Emerging from the traditions of critical race theory...intersectionality rejects the notion of universal experience of womanhood in favour of a more holistic assessment of how one's race, class, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality, nationality and religion can impact one's experience of womanhood or gender."⁴

Gender, according to Butler, is described as "culturally constructed".⁵ In that meaning there is a determination that sex and gender are not the same, but that gender is reinforced by behavior and patterns through social determination and perception of sex.⁶ "In such a case,...culture becomes destiny."⁷ in the determination of one as either male or female. Muholi, though that lens plays with the notion of gender normalities as if they were secondary characteristic to create their own identity that does not subscribe to either male or female in their images.

¹ Sara Allen, "Zanele Muholi" (London: Tate Publishing, 2020), 19.

² Ibid. 11-16.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Judith Butler. "*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*". (New York: Routledge 1990), 6.

⁶ Ibid. 7-8.

⁷ Ibid.

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.⁸

Gender in and of itself is simply an act constructed by the majority rule (heteronormative)⁹ and the performance of it's discourse.¹⁰ Through subconscious and conscious influence, identity is revealed as a series of patterns that were either nurtured or not. Gender is fluid and always evolving and changing as time goes by based on repetition. In regards to homosexuality, the presence of heterosexuality plays discourse to the other. Sex, Sexuality and Gender remain separate of one another and should not be confused between them.¹¹ I believe how Judith Butler would approach understanding Muholi's work is through intersectional analysis at first. By digesting the information Muholi has provided to the world, one can understand that their gender has been formulated and solidified based on race, family heritage, personal experience/activism and with sexuality being only one facet that leads towards identity.

Born in Umlazi, South Africa in 1972, Muholi is a visual activist and photographer whose work documents LGBTQIA+ people and sheds light on social and political issues in South Africa.¹² Using a documentary style approach, Muholi chooses to photograph their "participants" within the comfort of their own homes and surroundings both from a place of safety to all but to also capture their comfortability that could be challenged in everyday Africa. "Their participants – are presented with compassion, dignity and courage in the face of ongoing discrimination. The series also includes images of intimacy, expanding the narrative beyond victimhood. Muholi reveals the pain, love and defiance that exist within the Black LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa."¹³ "Muholi's mission is to re-write a Black queer and trans visual history for South Africa for the world to know our resistance and ..."¹⁴

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sara Allen, "*Zanele Muholi*," (London: Tate Publishing, 2020), 13.

¹⁰ UKEssays. "Judith Butlers Book Gender Trouble". (November 2018). Accessed May 4, 20201. <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/judith-butlers-book-gender-trouble-english-literature-essay.php?vref=1>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Yves Jeffcoat, "REVIEWS: Zanele Muholi at the Spelman Museum of Fine Art in Atlanta." Burnaway. Accessed April 24, 2021. <https://burnaway.org/daily/zanele-muholi-selman/>.

¹³ Tate Modern. "Exhibition Guide – Zanele Muholi." Accessed May 5, 2024. <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/zanele-muholi/zanele-muholi>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail, the Dark Lioness)*, an on-going photography series started in 2012, Muholi switches the lens from being pointed at their African LGBTQIA+ participants and onto themselves so that their story too can be documented in face of the politics of race and representation.¹⁴ With a growing passion to become a part of the story of existence, they want you to know that they exist. As both skin laid-bare or covered, there is a performativity occurring in *Somnyama*. The series was first envisioned as a collection of 365 portraits taken around the globe as an experiment in documenting their life and reclaiming their image for themselves, but currently sits around roughly 200 images at the time of publishing. Based on growing up in Apartheid Africa, they have met a world that has viewed women, Africans and LGBTQIA+ members of the community different than those of European descent. This would go on to become a defining aspect to Muholi's gender identity.

In Fig.1.2, *Bester I, Mayotte*, I am drawn to the clothes pins & the story of their mother. When speaking of identity they refer to their mother as living the life as a maid and then when she finally did enter retirement; she passed away shortly thereafter.¹⁵ She spent her entire life in servitude to others and never got to enjoy it for herself. Was their mother gender defined through life as a maid in their eyes of Muholi? *Somnyama* opens with this image. It is important to them and sets the tone of the rest of the series as an homage to their mother in this piece. In her self-portraits of Bester there is a connection between her and them as being equal parts heritage and biological. There is anger in the image without saying a single word. Much like how I imagine service to be in silence, Muholi stares you down with her presence. They even commandeer the derogatory word maid and transform it into the acronym "MaID" meaning "My Identity": the theme of the entire series.¹⁶ There is defiance in the image of theatricality. The skin is purposely darkened to convey contrast and representational of the blackness of the role. At first glance, one might mistake the image as fashion photography before realizing the clothing is nothing more than an embellished doormat. Is this a statement of servitude or blind luck of props available? At 70 x 50.5cm, as seen in Fig 1.1, a statement is made nevertheless in size alone. Muholi is speaking of all service people through their mother.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tamar Garb, "Bester," in *Somnyama Ngonyama*. (Turkey: Aperture 2018), 17.

¹⁶ Zanele Muholi, "2012-2018 Zanele Muholi *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Accessed April 24, 2021. <https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440>.

That gaze in particular is a trademark to Muholi's portraiture work. When asked about it, this is what they had to say.

"It is about engaging directly with each other. Let us try and look at each other as a pair – this is why I request my participants look straight at the camera. You are looking at me and I'm looking back at you. Why? It is important for people to engage in that way, regardless of their gender expression or sexual orientation. It is a way that we avoid victimhood: the shame, the naming, and the insults that we always endure when people look at you. I think, in this way, it gives the participant the right to be and the right to look back. It is my form of transgressing"¹⁷

The Bester portraits come into play again with Fig. 2. This time they use steel wool to represent a headdress. Perhaps in her political activism she is weaponizing the same everyday items that were utilized by oppressors before. The same can be seen throughout the series with the use of rubber tires that were once used to beat Africans in the form of "necklacing".¹⁸ But instead of using it as a symbol of fear and repression, Muholi repurposes the tires as necklaces and headgear as seen in Fig. 4., *Basizeni XI, Cassilhaus, North Carolina*, Muholi does not shy away from history but acts to reclaim what has been taken away from them and their people. To ignore brutality is to become complacent in a history that never had to happen in the first place. Each location plays a part in their story. In this circumstance, the fact that it was photographed in North Carolina could be a signifier to American slavery as well. A depiction of the history of their people that began in Africa and crossed over the seas to become American History.

The *Somnyama* series focuses on the imagination and symbolic language drawn from their own personal experiences. We are who we want to be. When we want to be. However we want to be. But we can also change personas in theatricality. This is at the heart of what Judith Butler would look at in explaining Zanele Muholi's identity. In the case of the figures already addressed, the learned behavior of working womanhood in Africa is portrayed and then subverted at the same time to bring about Muholi's true identity as an activist. There is pride in these images as they become an example of what it means to be black and validates their existence in all its shades as significant. The maID is ever present.

¹⁷ Jess Cole, "Zanele Muholi on capturing the spirits of Black lesbian women and trans men". Dazed, December 4, 2020, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/50957/1/zanele-muholi-south-africa-lgbti-community-tate-modern>.

¹⁸ Allen, 14.

“Does the water turn brown when you wash? Yes, baby bitch, and does it turn red when your wash your hands?”¹⁹ *Somnyama* may be a book of self-portraits, but within those binds are the stories and artwork of others waiting for their story to be shared and told. One of the main focal points of *Somnyama* is a story of The Black Experience reclaimed from the oppressor and turned pain into beauty. It lives through Muholi’s work in this book and in others as a symbol of the need for representation of the disenfranchised. All are featured in Muholi’s works. The LGBTQIA+ community. The female community. But most of all The Black Community as a whole. Myself now speaking as a white gay man, there is strength in the images. Courage in every gaze forward. The skin darkened by choice rather than by the sun and nature. Their gender is based on their blackness, which runs deeper than the skin that bears its color.

There is reflection on the importance of these images to Muholi. Fig.4 gives you the rare look that is no longer staring you down. It is not the only time they do not look at the camera throughout the series, but it is noticeable that it is a forced head held high. Their gaze is reflective and focused off the screen somewhere. “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”²⁰ Muholi dedicated that picture to their late sister. The image itself perhaps a deeper connection to all the sisters lost.

Basizeni XI manifest, first and foremost, as a memorial, a portrait of mourning. It is a painfully stirring, soul-bearing image: the memory of your late sister made flesh, commemorative yet elusive and vanishing all the same. Born from a desire to create a moment of closeness, from afar of familial intimacy and identification. Yet to me, what makes this portrait so profoundly compelling is the duality of memorial/mourning vs defiance/resistance: its unruly visual courage. As you refuse my gaze, I too refuse to read Basizeni XI as a portrait of resignation, or an ode to suffering and separation.²¹

Muholi builds upon history in every image and rebels against it at the same time. The discourse between the two is ever present. There is no questioning the Black History that they bare all to see. Muholi even comments on this later in the book. “I needed to speak about all these things-about the trading, about migration, about the movements. About the mask as a body and also my body turned into the mask...I am one of them, but also at the same time, I am an outsider. I am inside and outside at the same time.” If gender is fluid and grows over time, there is a tidal wave of history that they present in every image.

¹⁹ Milisuthando Bongela, “Does the water turn brown when you wash? Yes, baby bitch, and does it turn red when your wash your hands?,” in *Somnyama Ngonyama*. (Turkey: Aperture 2018), 88.

²⁰ Renée Mussai, “On Basizeni XI: An Epistle in Fragments,” in *Somnyama Ngonyama*. (Turkey: Aperture 2018), 97.

²¹ Ibid.

²¹ Muholi, 117.

Butler writes,

“ ‘There is no gender identity.,’ ...behind the expression of gender...identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results. Gender is not a category of ontology, rather a subject enacts its identity through language, actions, dress and manner. It is not who you are but what you do.”²²

Muholi writes,

“In *Somnyama Ngonyama*, I have embarked on a discomfoting self-defining journey, rethinking the culture of the selfie, self-representation and self-expression... By exaggerating the darkness of my skin tone, I’m reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged other. My reality is that I do not mimic being black; it is my skin, and the experience of being black is deeply entrenched in me. Just like our ancestors, we live as black people 365 days a year, and we should speak without fear.”²³

Muholi’s words seem to go deeper into challenging Butler on having who you are skin-wise on the search for gender identity which is why I believe Butler’s views have evolved to include intersectionality into identity questions. Race and class definitely factor into one’s identity. It creates a dialect with the body that conforms over time to repeat the same patterns of what to wear, dress and manner.

In the title piece for the series, *Somnyama IV, Oslo (Fig. 3)*, we begin to see Muholi’s performance stripped down to the basics and reveal themselves to the viewer. No longer are they channeling family, but they are presenting themselves as a lioness. There is a juxtaposition to the image as Jackie Mondy points out in the accompanying text for the image. “...with a glorious mane that is just as black as her face. I find the image a bit confusing, as lionesses do not have manes – or do they?” She goes on to research that in some rare occasions, this too is a natural occurrence. With a single breast bared, the juxtaposition causes the viewer to immediately notice that there is claim to both heteronormative male and female symbology within the picture. Perhaps it is only half the picture that a single breast is shown. Variants of *Somnyama* exist without the presence of breast perhaps leading more into performative than identifying. IV is the stronger of the series and from the perspective of non-binary is more fitting at revealing Muholi’s “true” self than in other images. History is shattered with a blackness only present.

²² Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, ed. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. 120.

²³ Zanele Muholi, “2012-2018 Zanele Muholi *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Accessed April 24, 2021. <https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440>.

²³ Jackie Mondy, “Zanele Muholi’s *Somnyama Ngonyama*,” in *Somnyama Ngonyama*. (Turkey: Aperture 2018), 88.

They are writing their own history with this image that willfully stares at you in their trademark gaze of power ready to hunt.

Muholi's work shifts sometime around 2016 in the series. Everything is a self-portrait, but also a characterization of something deeper than just themselves. When faced with life-changing situations, one must rethink their identity and what they want to present to the world in whatever time they are allowed to do so. Things become more personal when things such as cancer come into your life. In Fig. 5, *Julile I, Johannesburg*, the lioness expresses vulnerability. The once powerful gaze becomes glossed over in uncertainty. Covering for protection, the pose itself expresses vulnerability not seen before. No longer is the story about heritage but it becomes the story of survival. The news of the world is overwhelming and the blown up plastics could be a metaphor for the cancer growing inside the once powerful voice.

When talking about identity being fluid, there comes a point in your life, such as with cancer that one must be selfish in their thinking. Once a representation of so many things, cancer forced Muholi to focus on the one thing they were performing against while showcasing it as well...themselves. As the series is on-going, there is the opportunity to see the fluidness of gender and identity from the lens of Muholi the entire way. Just like puberty, we are grown into who we are to become over time. To document that is both challenging and rewarding if done in a context of security. It takes great strength to channel that energy back into artwork.

Which leads me to my final figure to discuss from the series. Fig. 6, titled "Lulamile, Room 107 Days Inn Hotel, Burlington." Taken in 2017, it is here that I believe we get Muholi at their rawest and most personal. As each image laid out a passage for Muholi to find their own voice and identity, everything can be summed up in this one picture. It is not about male or female to them. It is not about their hair conforming one way or the other. It is about reclaiming their life and ownership of their story however they choose to tell it. It is like history has been stripped off and rewritten to tell something new that is both positive and affirming. This can be seen by the background being a bright light vs. the darkness of the lioness. There is no night present except in the color of the skin. The gaze is still ever present, but you can tell that as much as they are hiding any gender revealing parts that they are also revealing that none of that matters in the scheme of things.

I end with what Judith Butler would try to summarize from the points I have made based on my observations of Muholi's work. "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the true effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity"

²⁴ Butler. 136.



Fig 1. 1. Zanele Muholi, "*Bester I, Mayotte.*" 2015, Silver Gelatin Print, Biennale of Sydney
(<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/bester-i-mayotte-zanele-muholi/TgEe5ZlzmXAUTQ>)



Fig 1. 2. Zanele Muholi, "*Bester I, Mayotte.*" 2015, Silver Gelatin Print, 70 x 50.5 cm, artist website.

(<https://art21.org/gallery/zanele-muholi-artwork-survey-2010s/#30>).



Fig 2. Zanele Muholi, "*Bester V, Mayotte.*" 2015, Silver Gelatin Print, 60 x 51 cm, Stevenson Museum. (http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/somnyama/bester5_mayotte_2015.html).



Fig 3. Zanele Muholi, "*Somnyama IV, Oslo.*" 2015, Silver Gelatin Print, 994 x 830 mm, Tate Modern Museum. (tate.org.uk/art/artworks/muholi-somnyama-iv-oslo-p82045).



Fig 4. Zanele Muholi, "*Basizeni XI, Cassilhaus, North Carolina.*" 2016, Silver Gelatin Print, 80 x 60.9 cm, Nasher Museum of Art. (<https://emuseum.nasher.duke.edu/objects/21611/basizeni-xi-cassilhaus-north-carolina;jsessionid=83B882321162364CF3370832FB1A4AAB?ctx=d12ac967-a4b5-4faa-b5c1-45f0441dbb72&idx=0>).



Fig 5. Zanele Muholi, *Julile I, Johannesburg .*" 2016, Silver Gelatin Print, 65.8 x 100 cm, artist website. (<https://art21.org/gallery/zanele-muholi-artwork-survey-2010s/#46>).

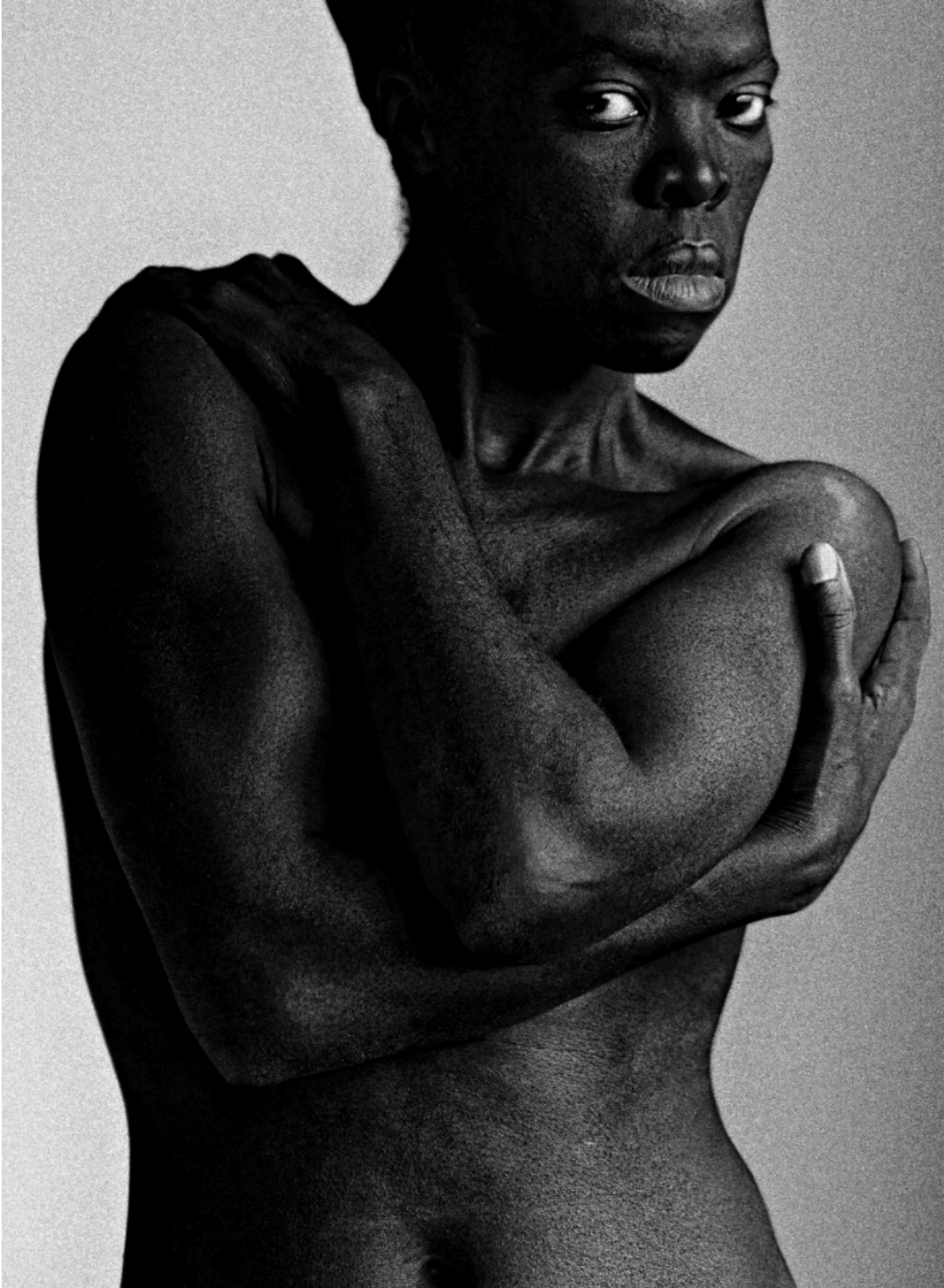


Fig 6. Zanele Muholi, "*Lulamile, Room 107 Days Inn Hotel, Burlington.*" 2017, Silver Gelatin Print, 40 x 29.3 cm, Stevenson Museum. (<https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/81>).

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