Zanele Muholi's "Reading Room"

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, Stevenson Gallery (Cape Town) published 5,000 copies of a tabloid newspaper featuring the South African artist, Zanele Muholi's self-portraits. The magazine – lo-fi, lightweight, loose-leafed, portable and free – was accompanied by an essay by M Neelika Jayawardane (2016). I was immediately struck by the democratic nature of this venture, for here was a product not only relevant to those who attended Muholi's globally circulated exhibition – entitled *Somnyama Ngonyama*, and shown at the Stedelijk Museum, LUMA Arles, in the Netherlands, France, United Kingdom, United States, and elsewhere – but also of great relevance to those in schools, local communities and township libraries. This realisation has prompted me to share the magazine with my film, photography and journalism students at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and to ensure its distribution in schools in the Western Cape.

Central to Muholi's images and Jayawardane's text are matters of race, sexuality, and, all importantly, the need to redefine and re-imagine the black body. Against the reactionary return to black essentialism, the further aggravation of "black pain", and the concomitant racial divisiveness which this declamatory, spectacularised, and even nihilistic return to black self-determination has fostered, Muholi's project brokered a more reflective, immersive and exploratory approach.

Her ongoing body of work – in which she theatricalises and re-imagines her identity in photographs recorded daily – is a vital alternative to a programmatic and reductive identity politics. At every turn her photographs make one aware of the criticality and dailiness of self-fashioning.

That Muholi expressly devised a "Reading Room" – as a context through which to read race and as a parallel space for her travelling exhibition – reminds one of the artist's resolute and long-standing activism. She, in effect, is asking her readers/viewers to re-evaluate the assumptions and prejudices which inform understandings of race and its representation within the art world. Through her Reading Room, she is asking one to reconsider how one reads oneself and others.

This deeply intimate yet pedagogic venture serves as an inspired mirror for concerns with and around race and racism inside South African educational institutions. It challenges the commodification of blackness in visual culture, and, I argue, proffers a credible "emancipatory possibility". Muholi's Reading Room, in brief, is a striking

answer to, and fulfilment of, Stefan Collini's (2012:8) vision of what the purpose of an education or the role of a university should be – a world, a place, in which future scholars are not shaped by 'an instrumental necessity', but by an education 'intrinsic to their character'; a realm in which one can pursue 'the open-ended search for deeper understanding' which fosters 'autonomy'.

Keywords: Raced optic; image-repertoire; opacity; disruption; soliloquy.

> Her look is self-possessed rather than seductive. She's looking ahead but not at the camera. It is the look of someone who is thinking about herself, simultaneously outward and inward. Teju Cole (2016:129).

Soliloquy

In his essay 'Portrait of a Lady', Teju Cole (2016) describes the portrait of a woman by the Malian photographer, Seydou Keïta, entitled *Odalisque*. How often have audiences been drawn to such enigmatic secrecy, and yet felt a similar communion? Is it because photographs, more than any other medium, possess the surest trace of a truth, because they seem so real? Perhaps. In this particular case – Cole's reading of Keïta's photograph – if the woman resists critical scrutiny and evokes some encrypted truth, it is because the woman felt and seen signals a vital reconfiguration of blackness. In this regard, according to Cole, sex and colour are not objectified. By way of explaining the photograph's intuited yet strange power, Cole turns to what he deems its implicit decolonising project. Cole argues that the photographs taken by Keïta or his Malian compatriot, Malick Sidibé, as well as those taken by Mama Casset of Senegal and Joseph Moïse Agbodjelou of Benin, are not seen through an appropriative or excoriating colonial lens. Rather, their photographs are 'ripostes to the anthropological images of *natives* made by Europeans in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries', which proved decisive in the shaping of Europe's perceptions of Africans (Cole 2016:128-129). But 'something changed when Africans began to take photographs of one another', Cole (2016:129) proposes; '[y]ou can see it in the way they look at the camera, in the poses, the attitude'.

If photography is inextricably rooted in culture, history and what Giorgio Agamben (1998) terms the 'bio-political', then it seems that it is also impossible to disentangle it from a raced optic. In this regard, however, I am not wholly convinced, for one thereby assumes that the taker of the photograph is indisputably also its maker. Susan Sontag (1977), however, has questioned this seamless logic. In striking contrast to Cole's subjective and moral vision of Keïta's photograph, Sontag (1977:86) notes: 'That photographs are often praised for their candour, their honesty, indicates that most photographs, of course, are not candid'. For Sontag, therefore, photographs are not oracular ciphers; they do not, as is commonly claimed, return the meanings imputed to them.

In effect, Sontag radically counters the pervasive view that photographs reveal the truth, be that truth oppressive or liberatory. Photographs, she argues, are not quite the portals to truth as is commonly assumed, for 'they do not simply render reality – realistically'; rather, through photographs 'it is reality which is scrutinised, and evaluated, for its fidelity to photographs' (Sontag 1977:87). This inversion, which mediates and qualifies any a priori truth, returns one to the ruthless partiality, indeed the impregnability of photographs. They are but the mute mirroring or triggers for feelings and thoughts. Their 'honesty', for Sontag (1977), resides in the fact that they can never be 'candid'.

Geoff Dyer shares Sontag's view. In *The ongoing moment*, he notes that, '[i]n photography there is no meantime. There was just that moment and now there's this moment and in between there is nothing. Photography, in a way, is the negation of chronology' (Dyer 2005:285). Yet there is still the persistent belief that photography contains and records a truth. But given that photographs are but a-chronological moments, in and out of time, why do people persist in supposing that they can explain the world? If they possess no hidden depth, no truth beyond their surface affect, then surely their value lies not in some oracular power but in the fact that they exist as fragments? In accounting for why he has written his book on photography – and Dyer (2005:258) emphatically reminds the reader that he does not possess a camera – he states that he wishes 'to find out what certain things look like when they've been photographed and how having been photographed changes them'. A photograph's value, therefore, resides in taking, and what that taking fails to tell of a time impossible to recover. Which is why Dyer (2005:258) argues that photographs are far more about other photographs, for 'often it turns out that when things have been photographed they look like other photographs, either ones that have already been taken or ones that are waiting to be taken'.

Now while the reader might dispute this view, I ask only that in moving forward, its potential veracity be held onto. For what Sontag and Dyer draw attention to is the unnerving realisation that photography as a mirror of reality may not in fact be the case. It is not that Sontag and Dyer suppose the imaging of the world to be a purely simulacral exercise – a photograph of a photograph. Rather, as Sontag (1977:112) notes, '[b]ecause each photograph is only a fragment, its moral and emotional weight depends on where it is inserted'. There is therefore no neutrality in the taking of a photograph; but then neither is it wholly subject to a photographer's social, cultural or political perspective. To state flatly that the colonial gaze is inescapably divisive and oppressive is therefore as debatable as stating that an African photographer taking photographs of other Africans is inherently enabling and empowering. What matters is where one thinks the "moral and emotional" weight has been "inserted". That this weight is never consciously applied makes one all the more suspicious of those who claim to know what it is they are imposing

or implying in the instant of taking a photograph. Indeed, as Sontag (1977:112) concludes, '[c]ontrary to what is suggested by the humanist claims made for photography, the camera's ability to transform reality into something beautiful derives from its relative weakness as a means of conveying truth'.

This view flies in the face of received opinion, typically expressed by Robert Frank (cited by Sontag 1977:122) as follows: 'There is one thing the photograph must contain, the humanity of the moment'. Whether or not one believes this to be the case on encountering a photograph is disputable, although, like Ansel Adams, I am certain that many will claim that 'a great photograph' must be 'a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety' (Frank cited by Sontag 1977:118). Whether one ascribes to this eureka moment, whether one has truly felt this frisson and oneness with an image, and without being churlish, I wish simply to ask, after Sontag, that such certainty be weighed against the realisation 'that a person is an aggregate of appearances, appearances which can be made to yield, by proper focusing, infinite layers of significance' (Sontag 1977:159). A photograph, therefore, is an isolated instant within an aggregation, as revealing as it is recessive. If a photograph's 'weakness' lies in its inability to tell the full and unsullied truth, it nevertheless has the power to suggest, infer, commute or dream 'infinite layers of significance'.

With this caveat in mind, let me return to Cole's interpretation of Keïta's *Odalisque*. The look of the woman in the picture is thoughtful, he supposes. It is 'the look of someone who is thinking about herself, simultaneously outward and inward' (Cole 2016:129). Given that Keïta's photograph cannot speak, it is therefore its suggestive power – a power commonly ascribed to Johannes Vermeer's women – which, surely, provokes Cole (2016:129) to declare, '[a] portrait of this kind is a visual soliloquy'. Cole's decision to give a mute vision voice, while compelling, is nevertheless little other than metaphoric. A dramatic form, the soliloquy, most famously celebrated in Hamlet's existential reckoning – to be, or not to be – is a question posed through a theatrical ploy to which the audience alone are privy. The audience are therefore the eavesdroppers, the silent auditors of a secret publically conveyed but understood to be mute. Understood thus, Cole's transposition of this set-up and sleight-of-hand to photography is canny, for on looking – a silent act – one is also listening. The error, however, lies in the commonplace belief that an image is more articulate than any written or spoken word, when, in truth, it is never the image which speaks, but the longing within the viewer to sound a silent world.

It is this pervasive tendency to find speech where there is none, infer certain meaning amidst "infinite layers of significance", which has made the act of viewing a photographed image sacred and precious. No doubt there is something beautiful and heartening in

this ventriloquistic exercise, an exercise which must suppose some hidden depth, some rune of meaning, some emboldening balm. It is a viewpoint I do not care to demystify but one whose mystification I seek to understand. That Cole continues, in his essay (2016), to weave the images of Muholi into this African sanctum – the benign world in which great African photographers take pictures of fellow Africans – has prompted my own reflection.

Writing of Muholi's best known suite of photographs, *Faces and Phases* (2006-), Cole (2016:132) notes that 'like her African forebears' – Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé, Mama Casset and Joseph Moïse Agbodjelou – Muholi 'shows people as they wish to be seen'. Once again the subjunctive kicks into gear, for Cole (2016:132) imputes desire where desire can only ever be supposed:

> To look at their faces, in portrait after portrait, is to become newly aware of the power of portraiture in a gifted artist's hands. Muholi doesn't grant her sitters independence – they are independent – but she makes their independence visible. "Faces and Phases" is a complete world.

It is of course the right of the writer to make the claims that he or she chooses. That said, it must also be stated that what Cole provides is but a subjective claim. Readers of the work and fellow interpreters can therefore agree or disagree. And there is no doubt that a well-taken photograph, one shaped "in a gifted artist's hands", possesses an irresistible force. The photograph shot by Don McCullin of a gypsy watching as the police destroy his home and evict his family – reproduced as the cover image to the Penguin edition of Sontag's *On photography* (1977) – remains with me. I do not think, however, that its power resides in its controversial context. It is the man I see before me, unblinking, at odds with fate, voided, which, for me at least, possesses the greater purchase. That this electrifying power of photography has dizzyingly accelerated in an image-saturated universe reveals the degree to which photography has been embraced as the most sacred of arts. 'Having a photograph of Shakespeare would be like having a nail from the True Cross', Sontag (1977:154) chimes, and as I reread this unnerving sentence I nevertheless wonder if this should be the case. For as Sontag (1977:110) more cynically states elsewhere,

> Whatever the moral claims on behalf of photography, its main effect is to convert the world into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for aesthetic appreciation.

Here one finds oneself returning to a variant of the anthropological gaze, the gaze of one who, wittingly or unwittingly, immorally commodifies the complexity of a world shaped

by images. The colonial gaze, although it may no longer be called such, remains, as one finds oneself compelled to subtract, divorce, objectify or reduce all that thrusts itself into one's view. It is not surprising, therefore, that given a current saturated culture wired to ill-informed "alternative" or "post-truths", that it is enticing to cling avidly to the more enabling views posed by Teju Cole, Robert Frank or Ansel Adams. What concerns Sontag (1977:51), however, is that despite the numbing effect of an image driven world, that, '[p]hotography has the unappealing reputation of being the most realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts' – a righteously and dangerously instrumental affliction.

A disrupting darkness

I contend that in the South African context this instrumental treatment of the photographic image has become abusive. Largely perceived as representative embodiments of a collective vision – namely the struggle for liberation – since the 1970s, the corpus of South African photography has predominantly been read through a political or ideological prism, its richly variable aesthetic rendered subject to the demands of a prescriptive liberatory narrative. In his critical study, *Rediscovery of the ordinary,* Njabulo Ndebele (1994) justly challenges what he perceives as the inflated and spectacular tendencies in South Africa's resistance arts – tendencies which Achille Mbembe in a 2017 seminar, entitled "Thinking South Africa", crisply dubbed a yen for 'hyperbolic excess'. It is therefore a photograph's overweening surfeit of meaning, its spectacularised or hyperbolically categorical imperative, that has determined its value. At the epicentre of this value has been the trials and tribulations of the pained black body. Perforce, the black body has been understood as a voided and indistinct category that must be named, enshrined, abetted and redeemed. However, human suffering, in this case black suffering, cannot, indeed must not, be reduced to a supplementary and excessive advertorial. It cannot or should not be framed, remade and galvanised solely through the spectacle of pain, for to do so is to re-actively enshrine the very problem one seeks to overcome. Which is why Ndebele counters the "spectacular" with what he calls the "ordinary".

In seeking a more prosaic optic that could harness the attenuated gradations of struggle and disaffection, Ndebele believes that one can capture a more human portrait of life in an embattled yet still engendering world. This romance with the ordinary has remained with me as a more productive optic through which to interpret South African life. That Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the dark* (1993), echoes Ndebele's yearning has further emboldened my own venture on behalf of a more enriching language with which to read South African photography. As she reminds all readers and writers – and here I include photographers – we 'are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes' (Morrison 1993:91). Morrison, here, is referring to

a 'darkness' which America's white literary imagination has failed to countenance in its bid to construct a hermetically sealed and inured blackness. The black body, she argues, has always hovered at the unthinkable limit of an exclusionary white optic. My further point, however, is that it is not only its delimitation within a white optic that is concerning, it is also the framing of blackness by black creatives that must be reckoned with.

Justly sceptical of a post-racial vision, Morrison (1993:46) argues that, '[t]he world does not become raceless or will not become unracialised by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act'. Therefore, if one is to challenge prescriptive readings of blackness one must be careful, in so doing, to suppose some utopian ground beyond an ongoing and cruelly aggravated raced debate. For if as Morrison (1993) notes, 'racelessness' remains a racial act, it is because she well understands that to think outside of colour, in the name of a universally inclusive human project, is delusory. Philip Roth (2000) concurs when he reminds that race is an inescapable 'human stain'. It is not surprising therefore that the repeated and obsessive return to the matter of race, while demeaning, crippling, compulsive and killing, will not miraculously disappear. A "disrupting darkness" can be discerned here, and, as I argue, this darkness is strikingly in evidence in the self-portraits taken by Muholi.

Morrison (1993:xi) also notes that polarised constructions of "whiteness" or "blackness" are afflicted ways of seeing, which must always be qualified, for 'the kind of work' she has 'always wanted to do' requires that she 'learn how to manoeuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined '. It is this proviso that needs to be held onto, for it will prove crucial as I move forward in my reflection on the photographs by Muholi, for hers is a body of work that has all too often been mistakenly imperilled by such a sinister, lazy or predictable critical language. Known as a "visual activist" committed to righting the wrongs inflicted upon those deemed other – black, queer – Muholi's image-repertoire, as a consequence, has largely been defined through a racially and sexually determined optic. In countering this optic, while recognising that there is no immune position outside of it, I aim to provide a more searching predication.

Muholi's photography, I venture, is as reflexively critical of a reductive raced and sexed optic as it is a quest for a greater understanding of its folly. If her photographs are disruptive it is because they refuse objectivity as adroitly as they refuse subjectivity. The disruption at a photograph's core, a disruption echoed in the moment of seeing – of insight – begs an interpretive language that refuses the ease of the prejudicial or lazily authoritative, for what Muholi seeks is an expression that could free one from the "chains" of received beliefs or attitudes. Her women are not *quite* representative or iconic, despite the photographer's claim that they are. Of *Faces and Phases*, Muholi (2010) declares

that the 'lesbians, women and transmen' she has photographed are 'queer icons'. This view has been widely endorsed. However, as I understand these images, they are not so much iconic assertions as they are probable improbabilities. They neither aggressively challenge indifference, nor do they assert difference. Instead it is their quest for normativity, against the odds, which gives them their disruptive force. Therefore, contra Cole, I would argue that while the women's worlds Muholi constructs are "independent", they are not, however, "complete". Rather, while seemingly intact, *in situ*, resolved, with eyes that challenge presumption, agreement or acquiescence, her women also insinuate an inescapable fragility. The strength of these photographs, therefore, lies in the discordance which amplifies their relative strangeness and estrangement, for the viewer is left in no doubt that what they are seeing is a series of women compromised not from within, but from without by values, tastes, beliefs, which have failed to absorb and embrace their world. This discordance or disruption allows Muholi room to challenge, manoeuvre and free her subjects. It is as though the photographer has protectively framed and engendered a loving difference in a world of relative indifference. At once all-too-real yet utopian, Muholi's images of black lesbian women – women who cannot be explained away through their sexuality – reflect a limit or threshold. They capture precisely what Morrison deems most necessary when thinking or writing or imaging blackness – the ability to "free up the language" of seeing. They also echo Dyer's realisation that the putative meaning of photographs, what "things looks like", come to be known in the instant of the taking. That certain photographs from Muholi's *Faces and Phases* series also echo McCullin's lone gypsy reinforces the communion between photographs – as photographs.

If, in my view, Cole fails to read Muholi's photographs effectively, he nevertheless provides the gift of two remarkable essays, entitled "Black body" and "A true picture of black skin" respectively (Cole 2016). What intrigues Cole (2016:144), in his reading of the photographs of Roy DeCarava, is 'the loveliness of its dark areas'. Echoing Ndebele's attraction to the prosaic and ordinary, Cole (2016:144) relishes 'just how much could be seen in the shadowed parts of a photograph … how much could be imagined into those shadows'. Here Cole's tone is not deterministic, for with DeCarava he recognises the greater value in a resistance to 'being too explicit in the work, a reticence that expresses itself in his choice of subjects as well as the way he presented them' (Cole 2016:145). DeCarava's is 'a visual grammar of decorous mystery' which centres principally upon the photographer's treatment of black skin (Cole 2016:145).

'All technology arises out of specific social circumstances', observes Cole (2016:146), before putting forward the forceful reminder that photographic technology 'is neither value-free nor ethnically neutral'. As recently as 2009, 'the face-recognition technology on HP webcams had difficulty recognising black faces', Cole (2016:146). notes, once again reinforcing an age-old reality 'that the process of calibration had favoured lighter

skin'. Given this technological conspiracy – a technology connected to a raced optic which predates the birth of photography – Cole's (2016:147) exploration of the absent-presence of black skin draws him towards the work of DeCarava who, 'instead of trying to brighten blackness … went against expectation and darkened it further'. Searching for the underlying logic of this decision, Cole (2016:147) concludes that for DeCarava, '[w]hat is dark is neither blank nor empty. It is in fact full of wise light, which, with patient seeing, can open our eyes into glories'. While I do not care for Cole's transfiguring prose, I nevertheless concur that what matters in the reading of blackness is its richly variegated complexity. It is this very complexity that comes into play when presented with Muholi's self-portraits. The key difference, however, is that Muholi has chosen to further and artificially blacken her body, as if she has emerged from a primal swamp or a vat of petroleum. I return to these images in my conclusion. For now, what compels me is Cole's reading of DeCarava's decision to allow his subjects to recede even further from an easy objectification. As he notes,

> The viewer's eye might at first protest, seeking more conventional contrasts, wanting more obvious lighting … But, gradually, there comes an acceptance of the photograph and its subtle implications: that there's more there than we might think at first glance, but also that, when we are looking at others, we might come to the understanding that they don't have to give themselves up to us. They are allowed to stay in the shadows if they wish (Cole 2016:147-148).

Here one is once again caught up in Sontag's (1977:159) perception of personhood as 'an aggregate of appearances … which can be made to yield, by proper focusing, infinite layers of significance'. Revelation, therefore, can also reside in the recessive. And if one splices these views with those of Frantz Fanon, for whom the black body needs to be redeemed from a zone of indistinction, one could also reasonably argue that redemption need not suppose a heightened clarification – the transubstantiation of object into subject – but that it can be achieved as compellingly through the enabling morphing of a punitive abstraction, because for blackness to possess its consciousness and its being need not suppose a newly minted visibility but the furtherance of its nocturnal complexity and "opacity". This last descriptor Cole derives from the philosopher of creolisation, Édouard Glissant (2016:148), who defines 'opacity' as 'a right to not have to be understood on other's terms, a right to be misunderstood if need be'. Within the South African photographic optic, it is precisely this recessiveness, this mystery, which needs to be embraced more urgently, because without it, blackness remains either glibly objectified or inchoately thrust upon the limit of the unknown.

Cole then turns to the cinematography of Bradford Young, best known for his films, *Mother of George* (2013) and *Selma* (2014), the story of the life and struggle of Martin Luther

King. 'Under Young's lens', Cole (2016:149) notes that the protagonists 'become darker yet and serve as the brooding centres of these overwhelmingly beautiful films. Black skin, full of unexpected gradations of blue, purple, or ochre, sets a tone for the narrative [for] moments of inwardness [which] open up a different space of encounter'. Here once again one is presented with a panoply of textures and tones, moods and inferences, yearnings and claims. If I find Cole's interpretation of the language of blackness especially compelling in the context of South Africa, it is because it offers a more searching hermeneutic, one which Muholi has taken up most forcefully and dramatically in her suite of self-portraits. For therein Muholi has finally challenged a limit which has long dogged South African photography. She has returned what JM Coetzee (1990:76) terms 'an air of looming mystery': 'No one has done that for South Africa: made it into a land of mystery. Too late now. Fixed in the mind as a place of flat, hard light, without shadows, without depth'. Coetzee's *Age of iron* was published in 1990. While his point still holds, still obdurately persists, it must, however, also be re-appraised in the light of photographs by Muholi.

Playing in the dark

While Muholi is best known for her portraits of others, as depicted in *Faces and Phases,* it is the suite of photographs entitled *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2016) (Figures 1-3) which, in my view, has pitched the most profound challenge to the received construction and representation of blackness in South Africa. If *Faces and Phases* "articulates a collective pain" and stages a "face-to-face confrontation" between the photographer and her subject, the image and its viewer, *Somnyama Ngonyama* more enigmatically skews the received socio-political axis of engagement. Through what appear to be self-consciously pleasurable re-enactments, Muholi announces a new state of play or, after Morrison, a new way of "playing in the dark". While an intractable seriousness, commonly associated with Muholi's photographs, remains in evidence, it is no longer *quite* as withering or exacting. Unlike her earlier works, which are earnest in their desire to be understood and recognised, the works in her *Somnyama Ngonyam*a series generate an exultation comparable to that which Cole experiences when confronted with DeCarava's photographs or Young's cinematography. The key to these works – if a photograph can truly be said to possess a key – resides in their paradoxically forthright yet recessive appearance. The images seem to hover between abstraction and declaration. Exercises in dress-up, it is not, however, only the wry and quirky pleasure which Muholi takes in accessorising her body that gives the photographs their immediate traction but the creature, the person who, in the midst of this dress-up, gazes implacably. Is she simply looking at the camera? Is she looking at an imagined on-looker? Or, like Keïta's *Odalisque*, does she inhabit 'the look of someone who is thinking about herself, simultaneously outward and inward (Cole 2016:129)?

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Zanele Muholi, *MalD in Harlem, African Market*, 116 St, 2015. Archival Pigment ink on Baryta Fibre paper. Image size: 50 x 40cm. Paper size: 60 x 50cm. Courtesy of Stevenson Gallery.

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Zanele Muholi, *Musa*, London, 2015. Silver gelatin print. Image size: 25 x 20.1cm. Paper size: 35 x 30.1cm. Courtesy of Stevenson Gallery.

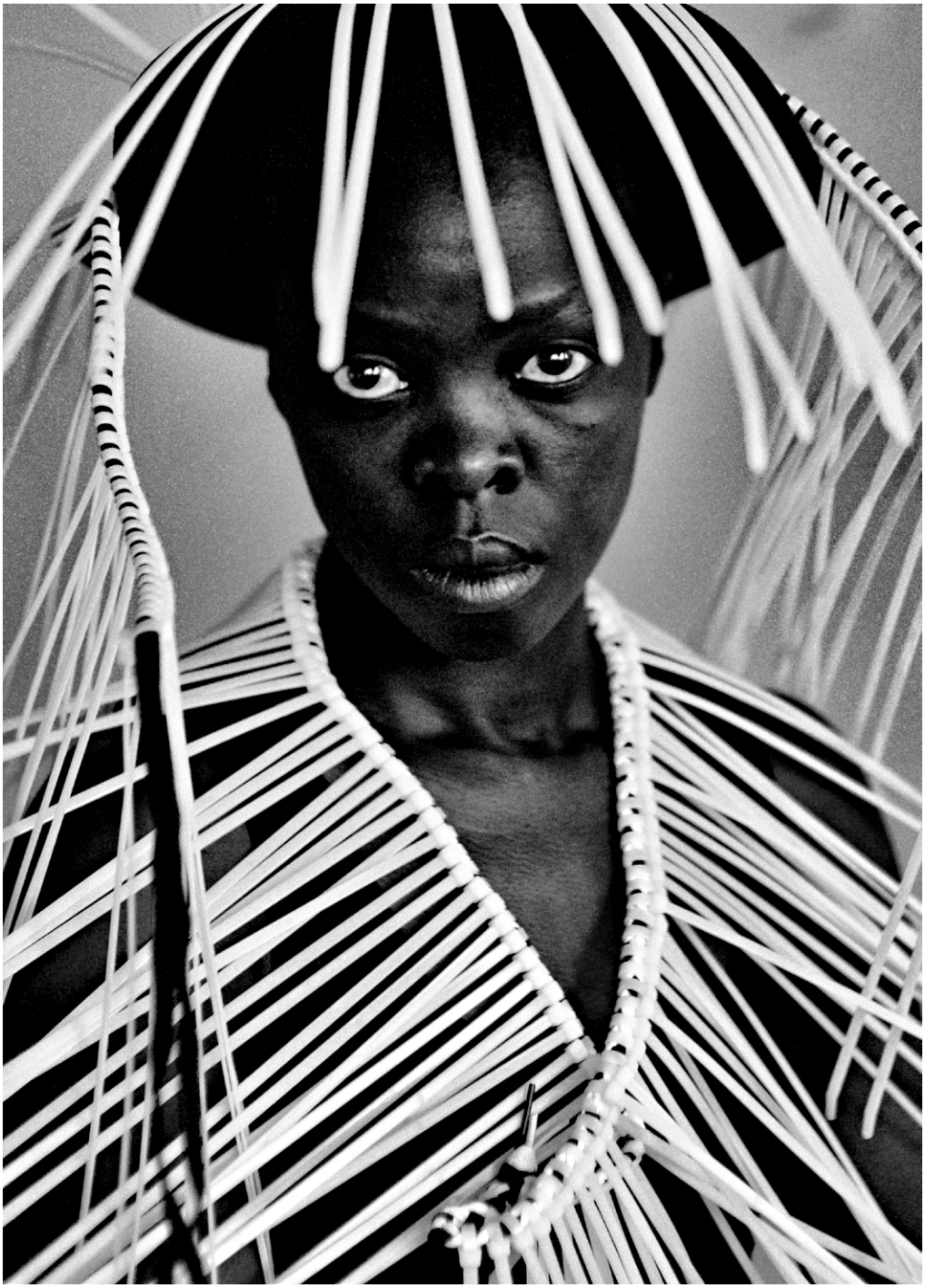

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Zanele Muholi, *Bhekezakhe, Parktown*, 2016. Silver gelatin print. Image size: 50 x 35.9cm. Paper size: 60 x 45.9 cm. Courtesy of Stevenson Gallery.

Unlike Cole, I am not quite certain. If these photographs can also be interpreted as a "visual soliloquy" it is not because they speak directly to me, their audience, but because, in their very muteness, they express a vital silence and a fight against the noise – the 'hard light, without shadows, without depth' – that has all too typically afflicted South African photography. For in this series of self-portraits there is lightness at the heart of blackness, a refusal, through self-objectification, of being objectified in turn. Here blackness is neither named nor framed, despite the fact that these images are clearly rigged.

In her essay on this photographic series, M Neelika Jayawardane (2016:3) notes that Muholi 'harkens to an inner voice, calling her to be unashamedly present to herself'. Does this mean that Muholi has transmuted her historical, cultural, racial and sexual burden? If so, then how has she shifted from shame to shamelessness? Because for my part, I can see no operable spectre of shame in these images. Such a reading is only possible if one chooses to interpret the images as reactive counterpoints to an *a priori* pathology. I, however, see these photographs as having radically traduced shame; no afflicting shadow lingers in these images in which blackness, applied like any other accessory – black on black – further deflects the photographs from a pathological engine room of meaning. And if, after Jayawardane, these are not narratives which claim to be recording an "authentic" Zanele Muholi, it is because it is the very ground upon which authenticity subsists that Muholi has thoroughly disrupted. These are not images which suppose a pre-existing community; they are not designed to entrench any prior rapport, no matter how vexed. Rather, after Glissant, these are exercises in "opacity" which assume 'a right not to have to be understood on other's terms, a right to be misunderstood if need be' (Cole 2016:148). It is this right, historically, culturally and perceptually denied the black body, which Muholi has for the first time embraced.

> Muholi heightens the contrast in each of her photographs, emphasising as high a glossy contrast to her skin as the silver gelatin technology will permit. The result is a sheer blackness, an impenetrable wall of skin that neither the person inhabiting that skin, nor the persons looking at her, can escape having to encounter (Jayawardane 2016:7).

Here Jayawardane's interpretation, echoing Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness* (2007 [1899]), errs on the side of impenetrability. Exchanging the categorical for the enigmatic, the nominal for the adjectival, Muholi dispossesses both herself and her viewer of the mistaken presumption of knowledge. For if blackness cannot be known, it is because it must refuse the abusive and reductive framework which has heretofore shaped it. By making her skin sheer, impenetrable, Muholi also reminds her viewer that she is not reducible to that skin. By compounding black-on-black, she also arrives at a fathomless and inescapable density. To what end? Are these images, after Jayawardane, simply

Conradian exercises in impenetrability? Or, does Muholi also present the viewer with a play, a soliloquy, whose purpose is to confound that seeming impenetrability? For to assume that Muholi has alienated herself from her own body is also to suppose, in a Brechtian act, that she has reflectively distanced herself from herself, and by extension her audience, the better to foreground a heightened consciousness of her being, its history and its future. Blackness, as I understand it here, is a performative and polemical act designed to restore its immanence, and not its ill-perceived affect.

If Jayawardane (2016:16) is correct in her reminder that prior to this series of works Muholi was haunted by the struggle to correct the misprision of blackness – queer blackness in particular – and that this struggle had, as a consequence, created in the artist a 'distance from love', a distance from vulnerability, a distance even from those who 'seek to give one unconditional love', does it follow that the artist, when confronted by 'the coalface of … dangerous work', should find herself incapable of finding 'a place where one can be luxurious and free with one's emotional self'? I am not so certain. While a struggle to right a wrong can be soul destroying, while it can threaten to evacuate all ability to hold fast to love, it does not follow that this is inevitably the case. This was Ndebele's point when he sought to free the South African imagination from its compulsive and perversely sacrificial relation to struggle and its virtual relation to redemption. Somewhere within this lacuna or intransigent maw, Ndebele (1994) commits himself to joining the broken components of South African psychic wiring. We [South Africans] need not be so incommensurably divided, he argues. Similarly, Morrison (1992:x) has also challenged this disconnect: 'Neither blackness nor *people of colour* stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread', she declares.

> I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissing othering of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticising blackness rather than demonising it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it (Morrison 1992:x-xi).

What matters all the more, therefore, is how blackness is inflected. Like Morrison (1993:xi), Muholi resists "metaphorical shortcuts", choosing through photography to generate a writing that would free her from a "sinister", "lazy" or predictable employment of "racially informed and determined chains". If this is evident in her capture of black lesbian life – a life intractably cast through portraiture – it is all the more evident in what I regard as her greatest work to date – *Somnyama Ngonyama*. In this series of self-portraits more so than in any other body of work, Muholi has freed up the photographic language of blackness. Having learnt to play in the dark and, after the black American photographer,

Roy DeCarava, produce a darkness more 'intensified … more self-contained, and at the same time more dramatic' (Teju Cole 2016:149), Muholi has finally arrived at that radical moment – blackness as innovation and pleasure, freed from a grotesque history of hurt. After Dyer (2005:258), I would further add that the best images which comprise *Somnyama Ngonyama* are not echoes of images which have already been taken, but the harbingers of photographs 'that are waiting to be taken'.

Reading Room

I first encountered Muholi's self-portraits in a tabloid newspaper format. Five thousand copies were printed to accompany exhibitions in South Africa, France, the United States, South Korea, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and Japan. What immediately struck me was its lo-fi light-weight loose-leafed portability. This was a publication with wings, designed for a multitude, and not only for the likes of those who visited the Stedelijk Museum, LUMA Arles, the Kyotographie photo festival or Autograph ABP in London. Here was a product that could reach the libraries in the townships, schools, community centres and colleges, coffee shops, streets, everywhere where South Africans gathered. In this ink-stained sheaf I found a vision more profound than any other which Muholi had ever realised.

Muholi wanted the look and feel of a newspaper which would be made available in a "Reading Room" alongside her exhibited works, Sophie Perryer, co-director of the Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, informed me in 2017. In keeping with her activism, however, Muholi had also found the means to shapeshift the commodification of blackness and morally challenge and confound an art world enraptured by glut and gloss, provenance and authenticity. Here blackness was not a fetish to be bartered or championed but a phenomenological riddle – blackness as immanence. Against the grotesque obsessive-compulsive reversion to the black body in pain, an "excessive" body, anarchic, trapped in a "routine dread", Muholi provides what I consider to be the most allusively significant image-repertoire in South Africa's iconography of blackness.

I cannot overstate the global and local importance of these images. For in a country under siege, once again caught in a state of emergency, in which a divisive and stunted raced consciousness runs rampant, its secondary and tertiary educational systems held to ransom, its polity charged with "infrastructural racism", all the more do we, as South Africans, need thinkers and artists who can help us to temper hate and engender a greater humanity. The battle to restore the squandered Rights of the Freedom Charter is just one. Whether in the near future this is a truly realisable cause is however uncertain.

Nevertheless, as South Africans, we urgently need to reconfigure the education best suited to a nation psychically and morally in tatters. After all, what are universities or educational institutions for? Stefan Collini (2012:8) arrives at a chastening answer: 'The forming of future scholars and scientists is not just an instrumental necessity for universities, but intrinsic to their character. Educating someone to pursue the open-ended search for deeper understanding has to be a kind of preparation for autonomy'.

It is, finally, this "open-ended search" for autonomy which Muholi's self-portraits embody. Reflective, exploratory, her images compel one to rethink the scourge of race and racism, a scourge which has sickened sight and blunted art, marred education and issued forth a chillingly brutal instrumentality.

In asking for a Reading Room, Muholi also asks that her viewers/readers reflect upon what it is they read when reading about race, gender, sexuality, self-loathing or the loathing of others. Hate crime is witheringly ubiquitous, "anarchy" and "dread" viral. And yet, against the odds, through *Somnyama Ngonyama* – isiZulu for "Hail the Dark Lioness" – Muholi announces a greater, more loving, more restorative calling – outward and inward.

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Ashraf Jamal's forthcoming edited volume, entitled *In the world: Essays on contemporary South African art*, published by SKIRA, is due in 2017. This article is adapted from a chapter in that collection.