Seeing Blackness Through Black Expressive Culture:
A Reading of Zanele Muholi’s Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness

This article examines visual and textual representation of blackness in contemporary black expressive culture. Its primary objective is to discern what blackness means and looks like when seen from the point of view of contemporary black expressive culture. To assess this, I first, briefly, analyze and interpret blackness. Second, I interrogate how contemporary black practitioners critique European ideas of blackness and mirror the complex multidimensionality of black subjecthood by conducting a formal analysis of two pieces of South African artist Zanele Muholi’s Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness series. Third, I explore the relationship between visual and textual imagery and their involvement in discourses on race. My intention is to reveal the role text and images play and have played in shaping the concept, perception and representation of blackness; the visual effect they have had on the black imagination; and the heavy responsibility placed on black writers and artists not only to correct these images but to create images for the collective more often than for themselves.

Keywords: blackness, black expressive culture, black self, multidimensional black subjecthood, Zanele Muholi

Introduction

Anti-black visual and textual rhetoric and is an example of the many mechanisms that colonial states used to rationalize anti-blackness. According to David Dabydeen, these were “ways to think and speak about the Black presence.”¹ Not only did these rhetorics shape European attitudes about blackness, they also forced black people like Sarah Baartman to participate in their own victimization.² This article examines how these rhetorics, set in motion centuries ago, continue to affect black people. More importantly, it shows how black expressive culture³ is developing an alternative visual and textual language through which blackness can be reconceptualized.

What is blackness?

From its inception, the conceptualization of blackness as signifier of a collective, racial category was instrumental in shaping the construct of race and blackness in both white and black imagination. By constructing racial difference based on color, being “black” meant the opposite of what was associated with being white. Although these racial markers were based on fictional scientific claims, as there is no such thing as a “black” or a “white” gene, the act of endowing bodies with qualities of color legitimized the notion that certain bodies are more meaningful than others. This comparative color line positioned whiteness as a racially superior identity and relegated bodies identified as black to the status of non-citizenship. Black studies theorist Christine Sharpe writes that this means being in a no-space that the state is not bound to respect.

In apartheid South Africa, being “black” meant being subjected to rules set by whites who arrogated themselves the right to decide on the lives of blacks. The state institutionalized race-based grouping by implementing laws of racial marking and segregation, such as the Pass Laws, the Separate Amenities Act, Bantu Education, and the Group Areas Act, intended to spatially separate black and white and enable the policing and surveillance of blacks. By denying blacks the right to equal citizenship, the state’s sustained racial myths in turn radicalized black subjects, spaces and experiences.

One of the myths entertained by the white South African state was the use of the word “black” to describe black people, implying that being black is to “look black,” thus having a darker skin tone. The problem with this definition is its exclusion of biracial and mixed-race people who do not appear black in the state’s usage of the term but identify as black. However, biracial and mixed-race people have not always had the right or desire to claim a black identity. Under apartheid, they were assigned to a separate, racially constructed identity called “colored.” Coloredness, writes Mohamed Adhikari, was exactly meant to differentiate a “person of mixed racial ancestry [from] one who is black.” Both the white government and colored community, he continues, emphasized the proximity of Coloreds to the white genealogy as justification of their racial superiority over Africans and, thus, to gain certain privileges over Africans. According to apartheid racial classification, “African” signified “black African” rather than an all-encompassing term referencing a shared

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4 Gilroy, The Black Atlantic, 46.
political and continental identity. These racial hierarchies still persist in post-
apartheid South Africa. Grant Farred observes that “[w]hereas ‘full blackness,’
or Africanness has translated into full citizenship of and belonging to the
postpartheid state, colouredness has retained its historic ambivalence.”

Rejecting the claim that blackness is a matter of pigmentation, political
activist and founder of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa,
Steve Biko, asserts that “being black” is the reflection of a “mental attitude.”
An essential component of this “attitude” is the commitment to fight against all
forces that seek to use blackness as marker of a “subservient being.” Like
numerous other black political movements that sought to liberate black people
regardless of geography, ethnicity or cultural identity, the Black Consciousness
Movement, founded in the mid-1960s, was deeply rooted in black solidarity.
The success of this movement, as that of the others, depended on blacks
recognizing that a collective black identity is the only viable strategy to defeat
white domination. Blackness thus became a political symbol of black kinship.
In his path-breaking book I Write What I Like, Biko describes this as one of the
critical objectives of his movement:

“This wants to ensure a singularity of purpose in the minds of black people and
to make possible total involvement of the masses in a struggle essentially
theirs.”

We can ascertain from Biko’s interpretation of black collective identity
that blackness is a combination of two things: a shared lived experience of
white oppression and a shared commitment to the dismantling of this
domination. Blacks who rejected these ideals were seen as sell-outs and
ostracized by the collective. But, are these binary positions sufficient
representation of blackness? Should a shared political interest be the only way
to imagine blackness? Is a collective identity always necessary? Biko’s ideas
on blackness and collective identity are still drawn on by black South Africans
in the post-apartheid present. However, conditions have changed since the
apartheid era. Michele Ruiters, for example, points out that since 1994
“identities are in the process of being reconstructed, particularly in opposition
to their apartheid-era incarnations, presenting themselves, among other things,
as not racist, not divisive and not isolated.”

If European ideas of blackness erased black subjectivity, then the black
movement’s urgency to liberate the collective from the annihilation of black

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10 Steve Biko, I Write What I Like (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004), 52.
11 Biko, I Write, 33.
subjectivities has performed a second erasure. By erasure I refer to what poet
Mary Ruefle describes as “the creation of a new text by disappearing the old
text that surrounds it.”\textsuperscript{13} Though inherited from the West, blackness is still
perceived as a collective identity within black communities (which I here
understand as gendered, diverse and differentiated by class and ethnicity). This
has affected blackness in the following ways: first, it has delayed the process of
reconstructing blackness into a multidimensional identity; second, it has
invisibilized the black self; and, third, it has denied the black self the right to
redefine its own identity in relation to blackness. In her essay “Invisibility of
equates invisibility to a form of erasure: invisibility is to be “a) unable to be
seen and b) treated as if unable to be seen; ignored.”\textsuperscript{14} To illustrate how
collectivism performs erasure, I refer to a quote by bell hooks in which she
describes the relationship of the black collective identity with the “self.” It is
dependent for its very being on the lives and experiences of everyone, the
self not as signifier of one “I” but the coming together of many “I”s, the
self as embodying collective reality past and present, family and
community.\textsuperscript{15}

hooks shows that in relation to the black self, most often the pronoun “I”
does not signify an individual identity but a collective “we.” I am interested in
analyzing discourses that attach blackness to the collective we and the inability
of the black self to divorce itself from this collective. It is for this reason, I
argue, that discourses on black singularity have remained undeveloped and
limited to the fixity of “traditional affiliation.”\textsuperscript{16} In the following I suggest that
undoing blackness’s fixity depends on how “difference” is understood: not just
as black and white racial marker but as an indicator of the differences that exist
within black communities and amongst black selves, such as those based on
ethnicity, gender and geo-politics. I also make visible how the concept of
“blackness” is differentiated by each of these factors if we take their
intersectionalities into account. Within black feminist discourse, the term
“intersectionality” was developed in particular by Kimberle Crenshaw\textsuperscript{17} as a

\textsuperscript{14} Jesse L. Whitehead, “Invisibility of Blackness: Visual Responses of Kerry James Marshall,”
\textsuperscript{16} Michel Foucault defined traditional affiliation as cultural practices that determine the moral
standards of society. In his study they are the valorization of marriage and marital obligations,
favoring the family, regulating concubinage, and condemning adultery. Michel Foucault, The
Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3, transl. by Robert Hurley (New York:
\textsuperscript{17} Other scholars who have contributed to discourses of intersectionality include Patricia Hill
Collins, bell hooks and Audre Lorde.
A theoretical framework to address how black women are “multiply-burdened” by race and gender discrimination.\(^{18}\) Though this is not the study’s primary argument, I draw on intersectionality to examine the multidimensionality of blackness.

Apart from color being the first difference, the second is behavior. I am interested in how blacks’ encounter with whiteness has affected black people. For instance, in post-apartheid South Africa, blacks who have “white” or “model C” accents and “act white” as a result of being in contact with white educational and employment institutions are categorized as “coconuts.” To be a “coconut” is to be considered “black on the outside” but “white on the inside.”\(^{19}\) Coconuts’ proximity to whiteness is interpreted as a rejection of their black identity, and in turn has raised suspicions about their relationship with whites. Not only are they not “black enough” but they are also considered “agents of whiteness.”\(^{20}\)

If being a “coconut” is a product of an encounter with whiteness, whether through imposed assimilation or choice, then the term “coconut” makes visible a nostalgia for a pre-colonial blackness that has remained unaffected or untransformed by its interaction with other racial groups and, in doing so, preserved monolithic definitions of blackness. Most importantly, the division of blackness into two categories, Western whiteness and black collective ideas of blackness, has produced dualistic identities. Du Bois describes the experience of this double identity as a being a state of double consciousness. Living in this space of duality, he writes, is a sense of “always looking at oneself through the eyes of another.”\(^{21}\) British sociologist Paul Gilroy observes that the practice of separating individuals into ethnic and cultural groups, with race being the overarching link, is a repetition of another form of racism developed by the West during the Enlightenment in response to the arrival of blacks in the metropole.

The political objective of ethnic racism\(^{22}\) was to produce an ethnic absolutism and cultural racism that would maintain the purity of whiteness: an immutable identity, despite its encounter with blackness, and vice versa.\(^{23}\)


\(^{20}\) Chigumadzi, “Why I call Myself.”


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However, it was based on an inaccurate representation of the impact of transatlantic slavery and colonialism on black identity: blacks who entered the global North were stripped of their diverse cultural identities and forced to accept such conceptualized by the global North. This necessitated blacks living in the African diaspora to construct a new black identity. This situation was further complicated by the fact that the Middle Passage is likely to have been a system of cultural exchange, as Paul Gilroy suggests. He argues that the movement of blacks between continents and across borders produced multicultural identities that transformed both white and black identities. For instance, applying this analysis to a more recent period, the entry of blacks into British society in the 1950s challenged and transformed the concept of Englishness and England. The African diasporic experience, as illustrated by Gilroy, thus requires that we reexamine the relationship between blackness and black culture.

If, as Mieke Bal argues, concepts “travel between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographical dispersed academic spaces,” then blackness as a concept can take on multiple identities. Michelle Wright, in Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology, describes this kind of blackness as “phenomenological blackness,” a blackness “imagined through individual perceptions in various ways depending on the context.” For her, the first step towards reinventing blackness is to get rid of the notion that all blacks think, behave and act exactly alike at all times. Instead, she proposes that blackness should be seen as a singular experience influenced by factors such as time, geography and culture. The second step is to correct the historical practice of narrating blackness through the monolithic point of view of the black man by centering narratives of diversely gendered bodies that have been erased historically. Emancipating blackness means recognizing the differences that exist within the black community. It means recognizing that blackness does not transcend geography, ethnicity and cultural identity but is in fact defined and diversified by these very differences. The third step is to liberate the black self from the constraints of a collective black identity, in order to give the self the freedom to “fashion a new sense of self” outside of the collective. Michel Foucault describes this act of self-actualization as the “cultivation of the self,” which means “taking care of oneself.” In this context, taking care of the self is interpreted as the right to govern one’s own identity. I want to make a link between Foucault’s concept of cultivating the self and Wright’s phenomenological blackness. I am

26 Michelle Wright, Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.
27 Wright, Physics of Blackness, 13.
29 Foucault, The Care of the Self, 43.
interested in how Foucault and Wright’s theories on singularity can provide an
alternative lens through which black identity can be reimagined.

This introduction contextualizes blackness. It questions its origin and
argues why the definition of blackness created in the West cannot be accepted
as reflecting reality as it is only a narrow representation of black society. I
propose that this definition can be unfixed by imagining blackness through the
various black selves that exist within the black community. This will be
followed by a brief discussion of how visual culture operates when seen
through black expressive culture. I will then explore how visual and textual
representations of blackness seen through the black self can free blackness
from this monolithic definition. In my analysis of two photographs from artist
Zanele Muholi’s series Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness, I show
how black practitioners are challenging racial stereotypes associated with
blackness and raising consciousness about the effect of these stereotypes on
black life. I will concluded the article with a discussion on the dialogues
between text and visual representation.

Blackness Seen through Black Expressive Culture

As pointed out in the introduction, the emancipation of blackness remains
unfinished. However, by contesting weak definitions of blackness from the
eighteenth and nineteenth century, we can begin to make space for new
definitions. But first we must abandon the theoretical frameworks used to fix
this blackness and replace them with new ones, such as Wright’s
phenomenological blackness. In this section I explore what happens when
“race as medium” is employed by black creative practitioners. If the former is
clouded by racism, what informs the latter?

In his essay “A Mental Tyranny is Keeping Black Writers from
Greatness,” in which he draws a comparison between the expectations placed
upon white and black expressive culture, Ben Okri makes the following
observation:

The black and African writer is expected to write about certain things, and
if they don’t they are seen as irrelevant. This gives their literature weight,
but dooms it with monotony. Who wants to constantly read a literature of
suffering, of heaviness? Those living through it certainly don’t; the success
of much lighter fare among the reading public in Africa proves this point.
Maybe it is those in the west, whose lives are untouched by such suffering,
who find occasional spice and flirtation with such a literature. But this
tyranny of subject may well lead to distortion and limitation.³⁰

³⁰ Ben Okri, “A Mental Tyranny is Keeping Black Writers from Greatness,” Guardian
dec/27/mental-tyranny-black-writers.
Okri’s assertion is a reminder that, regardless of post-colonial and
decolonial discourses, advocacy is required for black creative practitioners to
rid themselves of colonial prejudices and to take charge of visual and textual
representations of black societies, to avoid receiving “information, even about
themselves, second hand.” Black creative practitioners have been unable to
distance themselves from Western audiences’ desire for visual and textual
narratives in which blackness is a signifier of a universal collective identity
without a history (past) or future. Achille Mbembe posits that, in the colonial
world, African societies and people of African origin were seen as stationary
and “resistant to change.”31 This perpetuates the myth that no progress has
been made because of, and beyond, white hegemonies that began with
slavery.32 In other words, while black creative practitioners may no longer be
tasked with reiterating racial stereotypes affiliated with blackness, such as a
uniform “black” phenotype, they are encouraged to create images fixed on
the resilience of black societies, thereby fixing blackness to yet another
singular narrative.

Njabulo Ndebele’s 1994 investigation of South African literature and
culture makes a compelling argument about how black creative practitioners
can avoid reproducing images that reduce blackness to a “single, simple,
formation.”33 For him, this can be achieved by imagining black society beyond
the white gaze. Contemporary visual representation of blackness, he posits,
must move away from “abstraction” and reflect “concrete situations.”34 He
insists that this can be accomplished by “rediscovering the ordinary.” The
ordinary for him implies a thoughtful analysis of black people’s everyday lived
experiences, their “inner dialogues with the self” as well as social public
dialogues. By doing so, he argues, black expressive culture will start
developing “much more complex and richer” visual variations of blackness.35
He thus calls for blacknesses that are not only differentiated by time and
geography but also by generation, gender, race, culture, and ethnicity.
Art historian Nicole Fleetwood argues that, given the historicity of blackness,
black creative practitioners need to be mindful of the “affective power”36 of
visual representations of blackness as they can determine how blackness is
valued and consumed by black and non-black audiences. She urges black
practitioners to change and challenge visual discourses on blackness. This
would, in turn, push audiences to re-evaluate their own preconceptions about
blackness. Although the weight placed on black expressive culture to “alter
[the] history and system of racial inequality” can be burdensome, Fleetwood

32 Mbembe, On the Postcolony, 8.
33 Njabulo Ndebele, South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 51.
34 Ndebele describes abstraction as a type of imagery that “devalues or ignore the interiority”
35 Ndebele, South African Literature and Culture, 42, 52.
36 Fleetwood defines affective power as the power to affect how blackness is seen in the black
and white imagination. Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 6.
and art critic Michele Wallace believe that black practitioners must be held accountable for inadequacies and the failure to think critically and analytically about their visualization of black existence. In answer to the question, “how can black creativity become critical of itself?,” they argue that we, first, need do away with seeing black as being a problem in the visual field and, second, need to break away from seeing black creative production solely in terms of an ability to produce “negative/positive images” of blackness. Instead, we need to allow the expression of “various perspectives.”\(^{37}\) Third, we need acknowledge the variation of black creative practitioners by centering the contribution of marginalized communities, such as black women and queer practitioners. 

Seeing through race, in this regard, is not only to be critical of anti-black visual cultural representations but to decolonize black expressive cultures’ perception of blackness. In the words of Franz Fanon, decolonization is truly the creation of a new (hu)man. A crucial part of this process is liberating ourselves from the narratives that the colonizers fabricated about the colonized.\(^{38}\) In my view, seeing blackness through the black self rather than the black collectivity is one of many strategies that black practitioners can utilize to create space for new, impermanent and more flexible and diverse versions of blackness.

**Seeing through Race**

In this examination of black expressive culture’s visual and textual representation of blackness, I am interested in how these images have influenced and continue to influence, the reception, perception and consumption of blackness. Critical in this is whether and how they explore “phenomenological blackness.” Before I can address these issues adequately, I need to sketch blackness’s fraught relation with visuality. With this I aim to show how visual representations of blackness were mobilized to determine “what is racialised as black: subjects, matter, space experience.”\(^{39}\) The term “visual” refers to visual apparatuses such as television, film, paintings, photographic images and literature, intended to replicate “everyday life” human experience.\(^{40}\) My investigation reflects on the questions posed by African and African American literary scholar Wahneema Lubiano who — in her critique of visual culture’s “inauthentic” representations of black life, race relations, gender and class as “real” — urges us to consider “what happens when these ‘representations’ are accepted as ‘real. ’What happens to the construct of ‘Blackness ’in the public discourse?’”\(^{41}\)

The function of modern visual culture, as theorized by Nicholas Mirzoeff, is to “picture or visualise existence.” Mirzoeff’s definition is geared towards the shift in European modernist creative practice from creating images that seek to replace the world towards a focus on the “visual and its effects,” a shift that occurred in particular in response to the invention of the camera. It is worth noting that, historically, visual culture is a “discourse of the West about the West,” whose ideologies of visual representation, when exported to the global South through colonization, imposed a universal concept of visual cultural practice, while delegating global South artistic practice to the status of primitivism. This practice of visualizing existence through various visual apparatuses as “real” or, as Lubiano puts it, as “the real thing” still remains a core component of visual cultural practice.

What is the “reality” of race as such and in what way does it affect how race is manifested in visual culture? What is perceived as “race,” notes W. T. J. Mitchell, is not objective reality but an encounter of fantasy and reality. To illustrate how the two can be made to work together, Mitchell cites Jacques Lacan’s triad of psychological and semiotic registers — the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real — as lens through which to critically analyze race representation. Yet Mitchell adds a fourth term: “Reality.” Race, he argues, is reality constructed out of the Symbolic and the Imaginary. This corroborates visual culture’s involvement in the production, circulation and sustenance of racial myths. Derived from the Greek term mythos, a myth is a story or narrative created from a set of beliefs, historical events or ideas, which is then passed down from one generation to next. However, because myths, unlike science, are untestable, questions can be raised about their validity. Mitchell attributes the conflation of myths with reality and their longevity to the fact that myths are “built with bodies of myths as well as myths about bodies” which are then “constituted as reality that cannot be erased by fiat.” For this reason, he continues, they remain powerful stories that have endured over many generations because they are subject to endless reinterpretation and reenactment for new historical situations. The repetition of racial myths about blackness, inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as “real” through visual cultural representations, has ensured that these ideas continue to permeate representations of contemporary black existence.

43 The focus on the visual comprised artists experimenting with a “wide range of complex ideas and modes of representation ranging from over-arching beliefs in progress to theories of the rise of abstract paint or the modern novel.” Mirzoeff, “What is Visual Culture,” 4.
46 Drawing on Lacan, Mitchell defines the Symbolic as the “realm of law, language and negation or prohibition,” the Imaginary the “domain of images, fantasy, and visual experience,” whereas the Real is “the unrepresentable territory of trauma.” Mitchell, Seeing through Race, 16.
47 Mitchell, Seeing through Race, 16.
48 Mitchell, Seeing through Race, 20, 22.
Before I discuss what these images look like, I want to address the notion of “representation” and the processes involved in doing the work of representation. Representation, as theorized by Stuart Hall, exists in two shapes. The first is concerned with how to “re-present” things, meaning, mediums, or linguistic codes used to present a “thing.” The second is the meaning that a “thing” procures from this re-presentation and is an indicator of how we feel and think about it. But these thoughts and feelings need to be contextualized as they do not exist in a vacuum. We must consider what informs them, thus whether they are shaped by myths, cultural or religious beliefs or prejudices, and why seeing through this lens can produce what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the “second sight.” He equates seeing through the “second sight” to seeing through a veil, screen or any apparatus purposefully designed to distort our perception.

In the essay “Black Women are Standing in a Crooked Room,” political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry compares mass media reproduction of racial stereotypes and caricatures associated with black American women to standing in a “crooked room.” Developed post-World War II by cognitive psychologists when researching an individual’s ability to locate themselves in space, the crooked room was designed to assess whether participants would able to differentiate between a distorted and an upright room. Participants were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and asked to align themselves vertically. The purpose of the study was to assess what they perceived to be the “up right” and whether they could successfully align themselves to the room. Black women, Harris-Perry argues, are like these participants, located in a crooked room in which they are forced to see themselves through the eyes of others and subjected to how others see them. Those who retaliate against these images struggle to figure out which way is up. What Harris-Perry’s argument points to in the context of visual culture is that the vision of its practitioners is impaired by racial myths that determine, or contort, how blackness is seen and not seen. Ultimately, the myths determine how we see, what we see, and what we do not see. To quote art historian Iris Rogoff, the racial myths determine “whose fantasies of what are fed by which visual images.”

Mitchell characterizes visual practice influenced by racial rhetoric as the “visual language of race.” He sees it as a consequence of seeing through race. It is therefore essential that we review the relationship between representation and race: race, he cautions, is “not merely a content to be mediated, an object

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49 Linguistic codes mean the use of signs and images to stand for or represent things.
51 With “caricature,” Harris-Perry refers to the stereotypes of the mama, jezebel, the angry black woman and the sapphire. Melissa Harris-Perry, “Black Women are Standing in a Crooked Room,” Jezebel (January 19, 2012). Retrieved from https://jezebel.com/black-women-are-standing-in-a-crooked-room-5873870
52 Harris-Perry, “Black Women are Standing.”
to be represented visually or verbally, or a thing to be depicted in a likeness or image, but the trace itself, a medium and an iconic form — not simply to be seen, but itself a framework of seeing through or (as Wittgenstein would put it) seeing as.\textsuperscript{54} When we reconceptualize race as a medium, says Mitchell, we are capacitated to consider how the concept of race\textsuperscript{55} was used as an excuse, alibi or explanation for racism.\textsuperscript{56}

What happens when race as medium is employed by black creative practitioners? If the former is clouded by racism, what will inform the latter? I would argue that black creative practitioners are drawing on Wright’s phenomenological blackness as a lens through which to see and image blackness. My analysis of a selected case study will show how they are achieving this. It also shows why seeing blackness through phenomenological blackness, rather than the collectivity, has allowed them to image blackness from “various perspectives.”

Race as a Medium in Zanele Muholi’s Somnyama Nogonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness

As theorized by Hall, representation involves the use of language to construct meaning. Hall’s use of the word “language” is not limited to written text; it can signify images, sound, electronically produced images, musical notes and even objects. In other words, it is any medium that can stand for or represent a concept, idea or feeling.\textsuperscript{57} In the same vein, my use of the term “black expressive culture” is not limited to, and does not seek to privilege, visual images over other modes of representation; rather it is a formal analysis of the visual\textsuperscript{58} and textual. This section now turns to explore how each of these mediums separately or jointly contributed to discourses on blackness and how blackness is seen, or not seen. It also assesses whether there are any distinct differences or similarities between the two, and whether they complement or supplement each other. I end the section with an analysis of Zanele Muholi’s artworks.

In his essay “What is Visual Culture?,” Mirzoeff reminds us that, historically, nineteenth-century Western civilization privileged the spoken word and textual over the visual representation. For creative practitioners, the emergence of the “visual” provided alternative modes to picture the world, other than in linguistic terms. But what is the difference between the “word-as-

\textsuperscript{54} Mitchell, Seeing through Race, 13.
\textsuperscript{55} Citing Kwane Anthony Appiah, Mitchell reminds us that “the truth is that there are no races.” Mitchell, Seeing through Race, 14.
\textsuperscript{56} Mitchell, Seeing through Race, 19.
\textsuperscript{57} Hall, “Introduction,” 1.
\textsuperscript{58} With “visual” I refer to paintings, photographs, drawings, sculptures, video installations and performance art.
text” and the “world-as-a-picture”? According to Mitchell’s “picture theory,”
the difference lies in the

realisation that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practice of
observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as
various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interoperation etc. …)
and that “visual experience” or “visual literacy” might not be fully
explicable in the mode of textuality.59

In other words, the ability to “read” and interpret visual images does not
necessarily mean one is equipped to “read” the written text. For Mitchell,
reading the written requires a different form of linguistic literacy, one that is
attuned to how text conjures up sight.60

Zanele Muholi’s Babhekile II and HeVi, from the series Somnyama
Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness (2016), serve as perfect examples for their
use of image and text. Muholi is a South African artist and queer visual
activist. She is well known for her use of portrait photography to commemorate
and celebrate the lives of Southern African “black lesbian, bisexual and
transgender humans.”61 In the series, she reprises portraiture to tackle what she
describes as the “perpetual violence on black bodies in the mainstream media
and the politics of exclusion.”62 By inserting herself into her work, Muholi is
able to assume multiple identities: author, subject and object. Her self-portraits
are personalized by a selection of props, each intended to represent her
personal experience with racial profiling and black life across spacetimes.
These props also act as visible cultural signifiers of blackness or black
ethnicities. What they signify is pointed to by Muholi’s strategically crafted
titles.

Central to this body of work is the notion of blackness. Muholi examines
the “cultural borders”63 established through skin, particularly “black” or dark.
She does so by darkening her skin color. This gesture, she explains, is an
attempt to “reclaim” blackness, an identity she feels is “continuously
performed by the privileged other.”64 The tradition of blackening the skin to
signify blackness can be traced back to white American minstrel shows
originating in the mid-1800s.65 These shows were predominantly owned and

59 T. J. W. Mitchell, Picture Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16,
emphas in original.
60 Mitchell, Picture Theory, 6.
61 Financial Times, “Zanele Muholi: ‘I’m a Visual Activist’.” Financial Times (January 5,
2018). Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/896c582e-f013-11e7-ac08-07c3086a2625
62 Financial Times, “Zanele Muholi.”
63 Cali Coetzee, Written Under the Skin: Blood and Intergenerational Memory in South Africa
https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440
65 Henry Sampson, Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows
staged by white performers who darkened their skin with black cork to portray what white America at the time perceived to be “real” caricatures of “black plantation life in the South.”⁶⁶ In his book Black Manhattan, civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson observes,

minstrelsy was, on the whole, a caricature of Negro life, and it fixed a stage tradition which has not yet been entirely broken. It fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide grinning, loud laughing, shuffling, banjo playing, singing, dancing sort of being.⁶⁷

Covered in blackface and with exaggerated bright red lips, performers dressed in “baggy clothes and floppy shoes to achieve a comic effect and to maximize the contrast” between themselves and the “well-dressed ‘straight’ characters in the show.”⁶⁸ Psychologist Chanbani Manganyi identified as “one of the legacies of [the] colonialism of Africa … the development of [a] dichotomy relating to the body, namely, the ‘bad’ and ‘good’ body.” Dividing the body into two racially defined categories enabled the colonial state to project the white man’s body as the “standard, the norm of beauty, of accomplishments” and the black body as “inferior and unwholesome.”⁶⁹ Within the context of American society, the characterization of African Americans, using practices such as blackface, as a visual extension of the state’s anti-black rhetoric, founded during slavery and legitimized by the Jim Crow segregation laws, is yet an example of how these narratives infiltrated every space of American society. The popularity of blackface, as the only and authentic representation of African-American life, is a reflection of what happens when, as mentioned earlier by Wahnema Lubiano, anti-black narratives depicted through various visual apparatuses are accepted as the “real thing.”

While Muholi’s blackening of her skin can, at first glance, be interpreted as the reproduction of these anti-black tropes, it does the contrary. It draws our attention to how skin was and still is the primary medium through which the body is racialized. The use by black creative practitioners of the medium of the blackface is not new. Henry Sampson observes that “many white and black performers used burnt-cork makeup during the early 1900s.”⁷⁰ However, their use is unlike that by Muholi whose images consist of various props intended to reflect the multi-dimensional black identities that exist within black communities. African-American actor George Walker claims that black performers who participated in minstrels shows were expected to mimic anti-black stereotypes staged by their white counterparts:

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⁶⁶ Sampson, Blacks in Blackface, 13.
⁶⁸ Sampson, Blacks in Blackface, vii.
⁷⁰ Sampson, Blacks in Blackface, 1371.
All that was expected of a colored performer was singing and dancing and a little story-telling, but as for acting, no one credited a black person with the ability to act. Blackfaced white comedians used to make themselves look as ridiculous as they could when portraying a “darky” character. In their make-up they always had tremendously big red lips, and their costumes were frightfully exaggerated. The one fatal result of this to the colored performers was that they imitated the white performers in their make-up as “darks.” Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself.  

**Figure 1.** Zanele Mhohli, Babhekile II, Oslo, 2015, Silver gelatin print, Image 50 x 37.7cm

In *Babhekile II* (see Figure 1), which loosely translated from isiZulu means “they are watching,” Mhohli explores blackness’s historical relationship with surveillance. In the photograph, she looks over her shoulder as if to suggest that she is looking at herself in a mirror. However, the title and her gaze suggest otherwise. They indicate that Mhohli is being watched and is aware of it. It is not clear who is watching her. But if the work is seen through

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race, Muholi’s pose and gaze illustrate the effect that constant surveillance can have on an individual’s behavior.

The prop included in the image suggests a specific type of surveillance. Covering her hair, sits a small travel bag. The title reminds us that this is no ordinary bag. It is symbolic, a metaphorical representation of black experience with racialized spaces. To be more specific, it interrogates the consequences of travelling while black. During apartheid, spatial divisions were enforced by the Pass Laws enacted in 1952 by which black South Africans at all times had to carry a passbook or “dompas” (literally a “dumb pass”), restricting and surveilling their movements. It contained a “person’s name, fingerprints, photograph, personal details of employment, permission from the government to be in a particular part of the country, qualifications to work or seek work in the area, and an employer’s reports on worker performance and behaviour.”

In the United States, Victor Hugo Green published The Negro Motorist Green-Book in 1936 in response to segregation laws forbidding African Americans from occupying spaces designated as white. It served as a travel guide for African Americans who were not familiar with the black-owned hotels and businesses in the states they travelled to. In the introduction, Green writes that the book intends to give the Motorist and Tourist a guide not only for the Hotels and Tourist Homes in all of the large cities, but [also for] other classifications [taverns, restaurants beauty shops, barber shop, petrol stations] that will be found useful wherever he may be.” Black minstrel performers’ encounter with Americans spatial racial prejudices is described by Sampson:

In many cities, hotel accommodations were not available so the performers had to find room and board in the private homes of the local black citizens.

Not only did Green’s guide help black performers find these alternative spaces, but it provided them safe spaces that were free from racial prejudice. In her essay “Why People of Color Need Spaces without White People,” Kelsey Blackwell explains why these spaces are necessary:

People of color need their own spaces. Black people need their own spaces. We need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space we occupy. We need spaces where we can be our authentic selves without white people’s judgment and insecurity muzzling that expression. We need spaces where we can simply be — where we can get

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71 Sampson, Blacks in Blackface, 31.
off the treadmill of making white people comfortable and finally realize just how tired we are.\textsuperscript{26}

Although South Africa and America have both done away with segregational laws, their long-lasting effects are still visible. In South Africa, apartheid architecture continues to separate rich whites from predominantly poor black population. The segregation that remains in America’s present-day society is illustrated in the 2019 documentary \textit{Traveling While Black}, directed by Roger Ross Williams. It draws links between the Jim Crow laws and police brutality. In \textit{Between the World and Me}, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes a letter to his black son about white America’s racism. Reflecting on the deaths from policy brutality of Eric Garner, Renisha McBride and Tamir Rice, he writes:

And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction.\textsuperscript{27} Similar to Coates, Muholi’s \textit{Babhekile II} is a visual reminder of how racial profiling operates and, even more importantly, continues to permeate contemporary black life, and by doing so hindering black social mobility.

\textbf{Figure 2.} Zanele Muholi, \textit{HeVi}, Oslo, 2016, Silver gelatin print, image and paper size: 100 x 75.5cm

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\end{center}

Source: Stevenson Gallery.


\textsuperscript{27} Ta-Nehisi Coates, \textit{Between the World and Me} (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019), 9.
Muholi’s HeVi (see Figure 2), which is slang for “heavy,” supports Patricia Hill Collins assertion that anti-blackness is intersectional, or a form of “intersectional paradigms.” For Collins, “oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type”; rather, oppressions “work together in producing injustice.” In HeVi, Muholi wears an Afro wig. Similar to black skin, black hair was and still is subjected to anti-black prejudice that privileges straightened black hair over “untidy” hair. Black hair also became a signifier used by some to identify blacks whose skin did not “look” sufficiently black to allow an easy racial identification. In cases where the fairness of the skin did not allow a clear racial classification of an individual, the apartheid government devised the “pencil test” to separate colored and black bodies from white ones. The pencil test, writes Amanda Uren,

decreed that if an individual could hold a pencil in their hair when they shook their head, they could not be classified as White.

The primary objective of the test was to address a significant fear within white communities: the infiltration by non-white bodies of white society by “passing as white.” In recent years there has been a resurgence of a natural hair movement, supported by tutorials on YouTube on natural hair and scholarship on the dangers of chemical relaxers, encouraging black women to embrace their natural hair and stop straightening it. The movement gained in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s through activism by groups such as the Black Panther Party and the civil rights and black consciousness movements. The Afro became a symbol of political resistance. In an interview on natural hair in 1968, Kathleen Cleaver of the Black Panther Party explained:

The reason for it, you might say, is a new awareness among black people that their own natural appearance, their physical appearance, is beautiful. It is pleasing to them … For so many, many years we were told only white people were beautiful. Only straight hair, light eyes, light skin was beautiful, and so black women would try everything they could to straighten their hair and lighten their skin to look as much like white women … But this has changed because black people are aware, … and

79 Straightened black hair, also called “good hair” in the U.S., mimicked European straight hair. Its proximity to Western hair is seen by some blacks as prettier or better.
white people are aware of it too because [they] now want natural wigs …
They want wigs like this [points to her natural hair].\textsuperscript{82}

In 2016, black girls at the Pretoria High School for Girls led a protest
against their teachers who described black hair as “untidy.” An unarmed pupil
told Panyaza Lesufi, the Member of the Executive Council in Gauteng for
education, that “I have a natural Afro, but a teacher told me I need to comb my
hair because it looks like a bird’s nest.”\textsuperscript{83} Muholi’s HeVi is a recognition of
how black hair too is burdened by anti-blackness.

\textbf{The Complex Relation between Text and Visual Representation}

Images, according to Mitchell, are signifiers, and what they signify can be
determined by a formal analysis of their content. Captions, however, operate
differently, as they represent a “mental image conjured by a verbal signifier.”\textsuperscript{84}
Muholi’s work is an example of this complex relationship between image and
text. Since images are “prior to [the] word in the model of language,” it is
likely that viewers of Muholi’s images will first attempt to interpret the images
before trying to decipher the word-image relationship.\textsuperscript{85} What differentiates
words from the image is the way in which they signify an object or thing: in
Muholi’s case, the words point to issues pertaining to blackness and
surveillance. However, Mitchell insists that the relationship does not end there
but that there is a “third element”: language’s representation of the spoken
word and the ideas held in the mind. This means that when we “read” Muholi’s
work, we are “reading” the image as a picture, a mental/metaphorical idea and
as a spoken word. What distinguishes each of these elements is their function:
each is dependent on the way in which it makes meaning.\textsuperscript{86}

Both Mitchell and Mirzoeff agree that the image can never erase or replace
textual representation or claim to be an equivalent of it. When the two do
intersect, visual experiences make reading and understanding linguistic
discourse more “comprehensive, quicker and more effective.”\textsuperscript{87} The paradox of
visual cultural analysis, however, is that it relies on language for meaning, but
that “language is a limited and incomplete means of description and cannot

\textsuperscript{82} Educational Video Group, “Kathleen Cleaver: Interview on Natural Hair,” (Greenwood, IN: Educational Video Group, 1968), 2 mins. Retrieved from \url{https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C2787219}


\textsuperscript{84} Mitchell, \textit{Seeing through Race}, 7.

\textsuperscript{85} Mitchell, \textit{Seeing through Race}, 7.

\textsuperscript{86} Mitchell, \textit{Seeing through Race}, 8.

\textsuperscript{87} Mirzoeff, “What is Visual Culture,” 7.
fully explain or replace the work of art.”88 Furthermore, because artworks are
not fixed to singular meaning, they remain ambiguous. Meaning, argues Hall,
can “only be shared through our common access to language.”89 When
readers/viewers do not share a common language, a sign or symbol inserted or
represented in an artwork can take on multiple meanings and might be
interpreted differently from one context to another. Mirzoeff thus posits that
the “visual image is not stable but changes its relationship to external reality.”90
This ambiguity is reflected in Muholi’s photographs: visual images
representing the “intersectional paradigms” of race, a byproduct of anti-black
stereotypes that have come to be accepted as “real.” By doing so Muholi
interrogates visual culture’s concept of “reality” or what it deems to be “real.”
In addition, the words “babhekile” and “hevi” compel us to consider how
words, like images, are unstable. These words, for instance, like most words,
have multiple meanings depending on their context. Mitchell claims the
difference between the visual and the verbal has two facets:

one grounded in the senses (seeing versus hearing), the other in the nature
of signs and meaning (words as arbitrary, conventional symbols, as distinct
from images as representations by virtue of likeness or similitude).91

Muholi’s works is a reminder of how and why images are created and
understood differently to text. The reason is that images were historically and
continue to be reliant on visual objects whereas textual representations are
dependent on a careful selection of words to construct an image, or narrative.
Importantly, because a text does not provide a visible image (visual objects we
can see), the reader is required to see images through another form of sight:
through the imagination. This is why, in Mitchell’s opinion, textual
representations are superior to visual: the “images we see while listening to the
radio92 are better, more vivid, dynamic, and vital.”93

I, however, am not interested in whether the one is superior to the other.
What I am interested in is the separate and joint contribution of both mediums
to the articulation of phenomenological blackness. I am also interested in how
Muholi practices what Mirzoeff theorizes as postmodernist visual and textual
practice to destabilize and rewrite modernist94 ideologies, in order to visualize

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91 Mitchell, Seeing through Race, 4.
92 For Mitchell, sound or audio is another form of textual representation.
93 Mitchell, Seeing through Race, 6.
94 Okwui Enwezor reminds us that modernism cannot be divorced from its historical ideas of
Europeanness that justified global imperialism. Okwui Enwezor, “Reframing the Black
Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation,” in Reading the
Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace, ed. by Olu Oguibe and Okwui
the “genealogy, definition and function of postmodern everyday life.” To ensure class, gender, sexual and racialised identities are correctly represented, Mirzoeff describes this new method of representation as a “visualisation of things that are not in themselves visual.” For the European modernist creative practitioner, the visualisation of existence meant prioritizing the “visual and its effects.” These “effects” can be described as artists’ experimentation with a “wide-range of complex ideas and modes of representation ranging from over-arching beliefs in progress to theories of the rise of abstract painting or the modern novel” in an attempt to distance itself from “imitating objects.”

Muholi’s work is an accurate visual representation of visual culture’s original function, and how postmodernist artists are experimenting with other forms of representation. What we can ascertain from Muholi’s work is how complex the interrelationships between images and text are. Yet they also complement and extend each other. More importantly, her work illustrates how both medium’s production of “cathartic, coded and advanced” representations of black existence can help deepen our understanding of blackness.

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