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South Africa’s dreams of a black queer feminist liberation

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South Africa's Dreams of a Black Queer Feminist Liberation

By Ayanda Noluthando Mazibuko

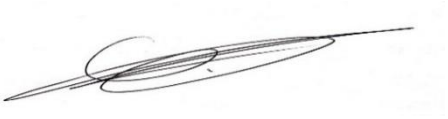
Supervised by Shireen Ally

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PLAGIARISM DECLARATION:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this dissertation from the work or works of other people has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: 

Date: ……16/04/2020……

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To Gogo, Fikile, Mgezi, Ntombikayise, Cleo and Sbali, you are my constants, you are my day ones and you are one of the greatest blessings in my life. I will always call you home.

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- Lehlohonolo Ndlovu
- Simeme Mthembu
- Seneme Mthembu
- Michelle Ndlozi
- Monthathi Masebe
- Buhle Mlingwana
- Kwanda Gaqa
- Samu Nkosi
- Thobeka Nxumalo
- Palesa Kekana
- Kutlwano Khali
- Ziyanda Nqavashe
- Ndjaka Mtsetwene
- Zanele Hlongwane

You are enough and glorious beyond measure.

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Prolusion

'But the true feminist deals out of a lesbian consciousness whether or not she ever sleeps with women.' – Audre Lorde

'For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.'– James Baldwin in Sonny's Blues (1957)

The process of 'coming out' to myself (which escalated in 2017) unearthed an obsession with everything or anything black, queer and feminist. Prior to 2015, I was not entirely sure of the brand of feminism I fit into but knew I belonged to a long, complex spectrum of black feminism. It is vital to note that my brand of black feminism is constantly in flux as I continue to learn and unlearn. During this process of coming out to self, I became completely enamoured with the people, voices and things that not only looked like me but felt like me. To be more precise, I became fascinated by the authors, books, poems, movies, songs, artwork, photographs, and films that even made the slightest attempt to represent my being. For instance, films such as *Moonlight* (2016), books such as *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (Duiker, 2001) and poems such as *Water* (Putuma, 2017) heavily shaped my way of thinking about and seeing the world. I began to find myself within the likes of such texts. Perhaps, I yearned to 'find myself' for the greater part of my life that I forced to see representation of myself in such texts, even if it was skewed.

My name is Ayanda Mazibuko. I came to this project with a body, with a set of desires and ambitions to intellectually, politically and artistically understand the work being done to articulate a black queer feminist project in South Africa. My desires and ambitions have not completely changed but have rather grown into specifically comprehending the cultural productions and aesthetic texts produced by Beverly Palesa Ditsie (commonly referred to as Bev Ditsie), Koleka Putuma and Zanele Muholi. All these three artists' bodies of work can be examined as autobiographical accounts which are of

a contemporary nature but embedded in them are indispensable historical elements. Thus, I believe they should be given the fair amount of attention they deserve. Initially, I started this project wanting to review how a black radical queer feminism manifests as a distinct genealogy of feminist thought which has arguably received relatively little attention from social scientists in the South African context. However, I swiftly realised that I needed to rethink the above-mentioned notion as being unique, because it is not. Essential to this research report is building onto the current debates and literature pertaining to Queer African Studies/black queer feminism as well as working within existing scholarship.

I have chosen to study a film directed by Ditsie (and Nicky Newman[1]) (*Simon & I*), a collection of poetry written by Putuma (*Collective Amnesia*) and an exhibition of visual art created by Muholi (*Somnyama Ngonyama*) because all these artist's work construct arguments centred around black queer feminist poetics. By feminist here, I mean to imply an ideology that uses gender, sexuality and women's or queer people's experiences in one way or another. The intention is to challenge predominant hierarchies and beliefs pertaining to sex, gender, class, and race. I use it as a political tool and lens to comprehend the ideations of black queerness as constructed by various artists or cultural commentators. Elsewhere, queer is a dynamic term that has multiple senses. In this project I will focus on and adopt three senses of the term. Firstly, queer can be used or perceived as an identity. Particularly, queer refers to an umbrella term for gender and sexual minorities who are not cisgender or heterosexual or who identify with non-normative gender identities (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer identities). Secondly, queer can be perceived as a 'revolutionary form of reclamation' (Cheng, 2011:5). Lastly, with regards to removing boundaries, queer theory disrupts and confronts the orthodox ideas that gender and sexuality are notions that can be relegated to fixed binary categories such as 'heterosexual' vs. 'homosexual' or 'male' vs. 'female' (Cheng, 2011:6). Intrinsically, queer operates as a deconstruction of gender and sexuality boundaries.

[1] Nicky Newman is a South African documentary filmmaker and photographer who worked alongside Ditsie to direct *Simon & I*.

My use of the term 'poetics' is drawn from a discussion where Fred Moten makes a distinction between politics and poetics. Moten says that politics is about social movements, collective action, and formal collective political resistance. Whereas 'to think about poetics is to think at the level of a practice' (Moten, 2016:34). Therefore, poetics is a social practice that is appropriately not political as it works to gather and defend sociality rather to make a demand for inclusion. Said otherwise, it is one thing to say: 'I want to be included' (this is politics) (Moten, 2016:36). It is another thing to say: 'I want to fight your capacity to exclude me' (this is poetics) (Moten, 2016:36). Moten is concerned about thinking through some things about sociality which cannot be separated from thinking about a poetics as opposed to politics (Moten, 2016:34). This is what he calls the work of Black Study. Black Study are those vernacular social practices of defending black life, that for him is a social poetics. I think that people such as Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma are engaged in these social practices which are social poetics. For Moten, poetics is also a social practice where we can see if 'we can cultivate what we share' (Moten, 2016:36). Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma share something which they all defend. The aesthetic texts of Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma are not social movements or political resistance movements that are trying to get something they do not have. These texts are trying to defend black queer life or black queer feminism. As Moten says, 'To say that we have something to defend means that we have something to study' (Moten, 2016:35). In this case, I am studying black queer feminism in the South African context and through the texts of Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma.

My first encounter with Ditsie's film was in 2018 at the *Queer Feminist Film Festival* held in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Upon watching a fraction of *Simon & I* that day, an explosion of questions raced through my mind, namely: What claims does *Simon & I* make for the intersection of blackness and queerness throughout the 1990s in South Africa? What is the significance of Simon Nkoli in the past and currently? Lastly, how do Ditsie and Nkoli (as anti-apartheid activists, gay rights activists and 'queer elders' in the present day) prosper in advocating for human rights and queer rights during the height of this country's complicated transition? Even though Ditsie and myself stem from different generations, I find great importance in studying her work as she has arguably played a pivotal role in laying the foundations for a black queer feminist poetics that we bear witness to today. One can also infer historical lessons from Ditsie's and Nkoli's political and social justice activism work that can be applied now.

The connection I hold to Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* deepened subsequent to its release. The collection's release came at a critical time (post movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall) where I was only intent on engaging in relevant material that would either affirm my black queer existence or disrupt everything that I had perceived to be true. *Collective Amnesia* fulfilled the first requirement. *Collective Amnesia* finds itself aligning to Barbara Boswell's essay, '"*Conjuring up her wholeness": Post-Transitional Black South African Women's Poetry and its Restorative Ethic*', which considers the various ways in which black women's poetry has developed from apartheid and transitionary styles of writing to encompass four wide groups: re-memorying history, the body, diasporic identity and gender justice (Boswell, 2016:8).

On the cover, she is barefooted, fully clothed in black and her face is veiled in a black isiXhosa cloth. She is sitting on naked wooden flooring against a grey and white backdrop. Even more alarming is the white life-size baby doll that this barefooted black woman is firmly clutching onto. Upon seeing *Collective Amnesia (2017),* the reader is immediately faced with this dramatic, daring and polarising black-and-white imagery. The white baby doll could possibly symbolise the black woman's white bosses' child which is representative of a devastating and violent history of black domestic workers raising white families' children whilst being estranged from their own (Madondo, 2017). The cover imagery on *Collective Amnesia* arguably pays homage to one of Mary Sibande's[2] most pivotal art pieces, *Sophie* (2008). I say this because both visuals have striking parallels pertaining to domestic labour in South Africa which carries significant histories and whose face is that of the black woman. *Sophie* is 'a sculptural alter ego' summoned to life from silicone casts of Sibande's body and fiberglass (Dodd, 2010:467). Furthermore, *Sophie* (whose eyes are closed as if she is in a trance or praying; and hands stretched out) is a domestic worker who 'evades' the reality of servitude by daydreaming of liberating herself. *Sophie* essentially dreams of emancipation and it is only in *her* subconscious that her royal blue dress becomes something befitting of billowing Victorian magnificence (Dodd, 2010:468).

[2] Mary Sibande is a Johannesburg based artist who uses mediums such as sculptures, photography, design, and paintings to explore the formation of identity and portray the human form in a postcolonial South African context. It is interesting to note that Sibande was raised into a decent of domestic workers that goes back three generations. This reality has influenced much of her work.

It would be an injustice to write about the influence that black queer feminist aesthetic texts have on cultural productions in South Africa without delving into the work of Muholi. With an ambivalent confidence, I decided to study Muholi's visual art and photography, due to the extensive literature written about her body of work as well as her dominant influence on the contemporary black queer art activism scene. Before meaningfully interacting with Muholi's visual art, I had watched a deeply intimate documentary directed by Muholi and Peter Golsmid called *Difficult Love* (2010). *Difficult Love* is exceptionally striking because it served as my first channel to understanding Muholi as an emerging black queer artist. The documentary showcases her highly personal take on the trials confronting black lesbians in South Africa. Moreover, the poignant documentary introduces the audience to a snippet of the people and stories that have shifted Muholi to generate images that reject heterosexism; and images that emulate the various identities that women can embody. I am fascinated by Muholi's metamorphosis from documenting the lives of LGBTQIA+[3] people in exhibitions such as *Faces and Phases* to theorising the significance of self-expression and body performance in their more recent work.

My investment in this research stems from the fact that in this project, I focus on black queer and feminist aesthetic texts as valid scholarly and intellectual material that can be theorised. Studying Ditsie, Putuma and Muholi has ignited an intense curiosity for how differing art practices can be used as powerful intellectual and political tools to develop claims for new ways of thinking about the intersections of blackness, queerness, feminism and possibly even radicalism.

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A Black Queer Feminist Poetics: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

> '*I love queer…It's more convenient that saying "gays" which has to be qualified, or "lesbians and gay men". It's an extremely useful polemic term because it is who we say we are, which is, "Fuck You".*' – Spike Pittsberg, quoted in Cherry Smith's 'What Is This Thing Called Queer'

Black queerness is a political and revolutionary identity filled with an immense, layered history. Especially, in post-apartheid South Africa, being black and queer is a complicated form of identity that has a very specific socio-historic context (Matebeni, 2011). What does it mean to be black, queer and feminist in a country where violence, death, despair, confusion, disillusionment, and a distorted sense of hope is embedded in its DNA? How does this kind of poetics enact itself? Moreover, what are the continuities and discontinuities that mark a black queer feminist poetics? It is worth noting that mainstream feminist thought, and practices do not always account for the dynamic intersection of black, queer, class, and sexual feminist politics, especially as an aesthetic practice in South Africa. It is important to unpack such an idea because at its core it confronts the injustices and erasure committed against those who identify as black *and* queer. This is especially so in a post-apartheid apartheid context whose oppressive racist legacy persists in the present (More, 2017:2). And, a country whose high rates of homophobic crime and rape (inflicted disproportionately against the black LGBTQIA+[4] community in poor townships), indicates that South Africa's vigorous legislation does not translate into structural changes in social attitudes and realities (Mendos, 2019:93).

It can be contended that there is no essential or 'gay identity' in South Africa but that historically, the dominantly represented 'gay experience' has been that of the white, middle-class urban man (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995:3). Thus, a part of me is intent on engaging on how queerness thrives and evolves in black communities and cultures. I am also interested in understanding the subcultures that exist on the broad spectrum of

[4] LGBTQIA+ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and Asexual.

black queerness such as black queer youth from townships; lesbian sangomas[5]; and coloured 'moffie'[6] drag queens residing in and around Cape Town; as well as black queers organising themselves in spaces like 'The Bold' in Sebokeng or 'Big Mike's' in Soweto (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995:3). Overarchingly, the consolidation of black queer identities and experiences in South Africa can constitute what this research report is going explore as black queer feminist poetics. A black queer feminist poetics is a contested and unsettled notion.

In that sense, art is crucial. Arguably, it is through art practices and cultural production that we can trace the evolution of a black queer feminist poetics in South Africa. In this research, I am concerned with understanding how distinct cultural productions, aesthetic texts or artistic practices have constituted a black queer feminist poetics. I am interested in how artistic practices, as they challenge heterosexism, articulate a black queer feminist activism. I am also devoted to unpacking how certain art practices or cultural productions articulate black queer feminist theory. Central to this is my understanding of how black queer feminism erupts and is established as its own, unique form of poetics. The ideas, affects and visuals of black queer feminism are thus of essence to this project. Considering the rationale for this research, the main question I intend on exploring is: How do the film making of Beverly Ditsie, poetry of Koleka Putuma and the visual art of Zanele Muholi theorise a black queer feminist poetics in and for South Africa today?

***

My point of departure with regards to conceptualising a black queer feminist poetics begins from the African American perspective. This is not to delegitimise or marginalise black queer feminisms in Africa that do not circuit through the African American archive, it is to recognise the interconnections of Africa and its diasporas. The context of black queer feminism in the United States offers an important lens on black queer feminism in South Africa. For instance, black queer feminism as an autonomous social movement and political project came to prominence politically, intellectually and

[5] In Southern Africa the term 'sangoma' refers to a traditional healer or diviner.
[6] The term 'moffie' is a South African slang word that is often used as derogatory oppressive term against queer people. However, many members of the queer/LGBTQIA+ community have reclaimed the word and, some use it as a form of self-reference.

aesthetically in the 1960s and 1970s, in response to increasing frustration with the Civil Rights movement and the predominantly white feminist movement at the time. Drawing from Black Projects of Freedom, the root cause of the frustration experienced by black women stemmed from the reality that the multi-layered oppressions of gender went unrecognised and were an after-thought to the black struggle (Kelley, 2002:137). The oppressions of gender were regarded as the secondary remainder of racial capitalism that would eventually fade away (Kelley, 2002:137). The core of the issue that was being addressed by black queer feminists who emerged during the 1960s and 1970s was that the relative invisibility of black women and black queers was a matter of omission as opposed to it being a matter of intentional exclusion (Kelley, 2002:136). Black queer feminists essentially contested the notion that liberation for black people as an entire group will result in the liberation of black women and black queers.

The Combahee River Collective were pioneers at eloquently articulating the crux of black queer feminism. The insurgent Combahee River Collective believed that the 'personal is political' and positioned black queer feminism as a political project actively dedicated to challenging against racial, sexual, class as well as heterosexual oppression in which they believed that the 'synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives' (The Combahee River Collective, 2014:271). Furthermore, the collective pointed out that the freedom of all oppressed people required the dismantling of imperialism, patriarchy as well as the existing political-economic systems of capitalism (The Combahee River Collective, 2014:274). For Audre Lorde (a black lesbian feminist poet and scholar) black queer feminism combats the ideal of 'heterosexism' which as defined by Lorde is a belief in the intrinsic superiority of one way of loving over all the others and therefore the right to domination (Lorde, 1985:3). When Lorde claims that she is a black feminist, she fundamentally argues that she realises that her power and central oppressions are because of her blackness as well as her identifying as a lesbian woman (Lorde, 1985:4).

However, I am fully cognisant of the danger of negating critical African queer knowledge or black feminist knowledge written by African scholars in choosing to also engage African American histories and ideas. Therefore, it is vital to primarily focus on a nuanced African scholarship for the remainder of the research report. It is also important to highlight that this research report does not aim to essentialise African feminism

scholarship, queer scholarship, or black radical scholarship as homogenous concepts. In trying to understand the eruption of black queer feminism in contemporary South Africa, it may be meaningful to consider the various debates pertaining to black feminism and queer feminism in Africa. There is a scholarship that has been attempting to work at the problem of black feminism that intersects sometimes with an awareness of queer politics whether it is writing about it explicitly or implicitly.

In 1981 Filomina Chioma Steady (a Sierra Leonean anthropologist) declared that black women, especially those from Africa were the original or authentic feminists (Decker & Baderoon, 2018:219). Steady contended in her definitive anthology, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, that 'true feminism' emerged from 'an actual experience of oppression, a lack of the socially prescribed means of ensuring one's wellbeing, and a true lack of access to resources for survival' (Steady, 1981:36). According to Steady, feminism was merely a response to subjugation, a response that led to the growth of more self-reliance and more resourcefulness for survival. In a lecture assembled by the Association of Black Women Historians, Steady articulated the logical arena that would dictate intellectual discourse about African feminism in the future. Steady claimed that African feminism merges racial, class, cultural and sexual elements of oppression to construct an inclusive kind of feminism in which women are perceived primarily and firstly as human as opposed to sexual beings (Steady, 1996). African feminism can be explained as the doctrine which contains freedom from oppression founded on the social, political, economic, and cultural manifestations of racial, class and sexual biases (Steady, 1996). Further, African feminism is a result of conflicts and chronic kinds of human suffering (Steady, 1996). Concisely, African feminism is humanistic feminism. Additionally, it can be argued that African feminist thought is synonymous with African feminist activism by virtue of it being born from struggle, but perhaps this kind of African feminist thought has limitations with regards to truly connecting to a queer consciousness.

African feminism does the major work of focusing women's intellectual production in African epistemologies as well as archives (Decker & Baderoon, 2018:225). Thus, it is crucial to know how to conserve the history of African feminist thought both in terms of activist undertakings and intellectual production. Not only can African feminism be a vibrant school of thought, but it can also have tense relations with subjects such as transnational solidarity, sexuality, and national policies. Furthermore, African feminism

manifests in different ways. For example, in the captivating paper, "*We Fit in the Society by Force": Sex work and Feminism in Africa*[7], Ntokozo Yingwana robustly discusses African sex worker activism (Decker & Baderoom, 2018:226). The work is derived from fascinating research done with sex worker advocacy groups. Yingwana uses body maps to examine what it means to be a feminist and a sex worker (Decker & Baderoom, 2018:226). The research's methodology created the space for participants to confront the practices of saviour discourses and exclusion that they experienced from various feminist organisations. Within this research, the participants were able to theorize their own relationship to other kinds of feminisms. The participants also had the agency to define a type of feminism in which sex workers' encounters of sexuality, gender and labour were pivotal and engaged (Decker & Baderoom, 2018:226).

Another way of reviewing African feminist activism is through assessing the violence inflicted on women during war. Charmaine Pereira's essay, *Beyond the Spectacular: Contextualizing Gender Relations in the Wake of the Boko Haram Insurgency*, analyses the ways in which girls and women are made invisible or visible, through different displays of violence (Pereira, 2018). Pereira asserts that although the kinds of gender and sexual violence that have taken place during the insurgency are appalling and therefore evidently distinguishable; it is also true that continuities with regards to sexual and gender violence prior to the insurgency (during the 'peaceful' period) have been normalised (Pereira, 2018).

In numerous parts of the African continent black feminist performance and poetry have gained prominence as an activist and artistic expression (Decker & Baderoom, 2018:229). *Feminisms in African Hip Hop*, a paper by Msia Kibona Clark, offers itself to this expanding cultural phenomenon. The paper critiques the complications that exist in how African women hip hop artists navigate space within the genre's hyper-masculine environment through an African feminist lens (Clark, 2018:383). African women hip hop artists have established these spaces to formulate their unique narratives pertaining to sexuality and gender; these spaces are also created to confront existing narratives (Clark, 2018:383). Clark's research (which surveyed more than three hundred songs created by

[7] This paper was presented at the Decolonizing Feminisms conference at Wits University in August 2016.

women hip hop artists) essentially explores how the hip hop women artists attempt to combat gender norms, misogynoir, patriarchy and the politics of respectability that may not associate with African feminist ideologies (Clark, 2018:383). Ultimately, the study disclosed divergent articulations of feminist identities and politics, the voicing of sexuality that encompasses nonconformity and agency, and implicit or explicit oppositions to patriarchy.

Homing My Mother / How Women in My Family Married Women by Neo Sinoxolo Musangi (a black nonbinary feminist), is one of the more compelling narratives that I have interacted with that profoundly shapes the way I think about a black queer feminist poetics. Musangi's essay is fundamentally an exercise on how one could decide to reach the point of blackness, queerness and feminism through narration, in Africa. This essay criticises current archival work's inability to thoroughly participate with what it may possibly mean 'to be both African and queer, in the *here* and *now*' (Musangi, 2018:401). Additionally, this essay situates older black women at the centre of the agenda and illustrates how their intellectual contributions have resulted in the survival of black theory as well as logic of care (Musangi, 2018:401). Musangi privileges the *how* as opposed to the *why* or *what* of family life by assessing a lineage of women starting with her grandmothers and by way of her mother (Musangi, 2018:403). A central question that she poses is, 'witawa ata? or 'how are you called?' (Musangi, 2018:403). Musangi proclaims that part of how she is called (in the world, in life, by society) is concerned with self-identifying as a feminist and the choosing to begin from a place of *selfing* (Musangi, 2018:402). Further, Musangi uses the arguments of Christina Sharpe and Sylvia Wynter to push forward that we should 'become undisciplined' (Sharpe, 2016:13) and that it is urgent for us to abstain from partaking in the reproduction of our 'narratively condemned status' (Wynter, 1994). Danai Mupotsa similarly asks the galvanising question of, 'when will African womxn get to study interiorities without displaying self-indulgence and privilege?' (Mupotsa, 2010:3).

Pertaining to the nature of black queer feminism, Zethu Matebeni is a key figure in articulating this kind of feminism as an intellectual and political project in South Africa. Matebeni significantly positions queerness as an exceptionally extensive term that does not automatically revolve around sexual orientation but also one that revolves around anti-heteronormativity, and one that signifies a way of being and a way of thinking.

Concerning the conceptualisation of a black queer feminism in South Africa, Matebeni asserts that queerness begins in a moment of intersectionality (Davids & Matebeni, 2017:163). According to Matebeni and in the context of South Africa, there is a point of departure between gayness and queerness. Matebeni contends that although the notions of gayness and queerness may appear to be one and the same thing, inherently they are not the same – with the notion of queerness there is a divergence (Davids & Matebeni, 2017:162).

The version of gayness that can be comprehended today can be traced from a historical account of South African gay and lesbian politics. The popular version of gayness as told in contemporary South African history begins with the Legal Reform Movement[8] of 1968 which was in response to the arrest of mostly white gay men in Forest Town, Johannesburg. Lesbian and transgender identifying people were also involved in the grassroots strategizing of the Legal Reform Movement but were erased from the mainstream narrative.

The notion of queerness can be understood through the story and lived experiences of Simon Nkoli. In the 1980s Nkoli was arrested by the apartheid regime and was charged with treason. Consequently, Nkoli pleaded for an intervention from the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA), an organisation that he was a member of, on the premise that he is a political prisoner who is gay (Davids & Matebeni, 2017:162). The response form GASA and the predominantly white gay community signifies the point of departure between gayness and queerness. GASA responded by saying they could not help him because, 'we are an apolitical organisation, as gay white people'[9]. 'White gayness' at the time decided to remove themselves from the multitude of struggles that Nkoli was fighting as a black, gay man who was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and one who was actively involved in the struggle against dehumanising apartheid. As Nkoli moved on to form GLOW and forged the first Pride March in Africa, a rising queer politic that was more inclusive of women of colour, trans people and working-class people materialised. Nkoli's daring proclamation of being a black, gay, working-class, HIV-positive, and anti-apartheid activist and

[8] For a synopsis of this history, view the archival collection at GALA (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action) www.gala.co.za

[9] Refer to 'Till the Time of Trial: The Prison Letters of Simon Nkoli' http://www.gala.co.za/resources/docs/Letters_of_Simon_Nkoli.pdf

challenging white gay people arguably marked a moment of insurgence for an intersectional black radical queer politics in South Africa. However, it can be contended that the story of Nkoli has disappeared; his version of black radical queer politics has been silenced over the past two decades.

Elsewhere, it is fascinating to explore how aesthetic practices can be read in a theoretical or political manner. For instance, feminist and black performance-based artists can make use of poetry, photography, dance, visual art, music, and storytelling to formulate a critical race consciousness (Denzin, 2000:257). These artistic representations and texts can be viewed as 'sites of resistance' (Denzin, 2000:259). They can also be perceived as locations where identities, interpretations and politics are negotiated, in which the artistic representations confront all forms of cultural representation (Denzin, 2000:259). Moreover, this kind of aesthetic is enlightened by consecutive waves of the women, lesbian, gay and bisexual movements; as well as the Native American and Asian movements who 'use their art as a weapon for political activism' (Harris, 1998:1384; Nero, 1998:1973).

In *The Black Arts Movement*[10], Larry Neal (an African American theatre scholar) asserted that political praxis, ethics, epistemology and aesthetics are intrinsically connected (Neal, 1998:1451). Additionally, Neal claimed that all acts of representation, whether be it in research or the imaginative, is a political as well as ethical (or moral) statement (Neal, 1998:1451). It is meaningful that the junction between artistic practices, activism and politics is constantly shifting and is never stagnant. Accordingly, bell hooks remarks (in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990)) that a radical aesthetic (which speaks to dismantling injustices regarding race, gender, class and sexual orientation) recognises that people are continuously shifting positions and that people's needs also change (hooks, 1990:11). Thus, the changes in positions ought to correlate with changes in critical thinking (hooks, 1990:11).

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This research report uses a qualitative methodology that is rooted in the critical analysis of aesthetic texts; specifically, a film directed by Ditsie, poetry by Putuma and

[10] The Black Arts Movement (an African American led art movement) of the 1960s and 1970s stressed the ideals of a need for the changing of the Western cultural aesthetic, pro-black cultural institutions, self-determination, and racial pride.

visual art by Muholi. This methodology aspires to examine texts of the above-mentioned artists to investigate the contours of a black queer feminist poetics in South Africa. I initially intended on examining a 'black radical queer feminism', however, I opted against using the term 'radical' due to the ambiguity that it caused. The use of the word 'radical' caused a conundrum. My initial use of the term radical was inspired by the idea that 'to be black and queer is radical, in and of itself'. Meaning that, the reclamation of 'black queerness' presented the intention to transform society and call for structural change or revolutionary reform that would result in a black queer liberation. However, my use of the word 'radical' conflicted with what many scholars associated with a Black Radical Tradition unearthed by Cedric J Robinson. In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), Robinson shows that attempts to comprehend black people's history of resistance only through the lens of Marxist theory are false and incomplete (Robinson, 1983), and details the contributions of black and African histories to the making of the radical tradition. In hindsight, I believe that my initial conception of the word 'radical' may have been oversimplified and so needs to be developed outside of this research report.

I decided to study the aesthetic texts produced by Ditsie, Putuma and Muholi because all three individuals are essentially doing the work of creating that black queer feminist poetics that this research report is interested in. All three artists labour towards articulating a black queer feminist poetics that situates itself at the cultural intersections of art, intellect, pop culture and cultures of race, class and sexuality. For example, for over a decade, Muholi (a self-described visual activist) has been making use of powerful photographic imagery to capture the journey of black queer beings and feminism not only in South Africa but across the globe. At its core, this research report explores three examples of a black queer feminism that are probably enacting it in different ways. How do all three artists challenge the politics of blackness, sexuality, and queer thinking in the photographic, poetic and film archive?

Throughout the duration of the research process, the main autobiographical documentary film, and poetic texts namely, *Simon & I* (2002) and *Collective Amnesia* (2017), have remained the same. I initially examined Ditsie's film work which is exceptionally interesting because one can gain a rich historical perspective on a black queer feminist poetics by analysing her work. *Simon & I* largely showcases Ditsie's lonely

but stimulating journey to discovering self-love as well as self-acceptance and finding a queer community which she can call home. I analysed *Simon & I* (which uses both archival material and interviews) to understand the plight of Ditsie navigating space in South Africa as a black self-identifying lesbian and LGBTQIA+ activist throughout the 1990s (pre-democracy, at the cusp of democracy and post democracy). Ditsie is deeply committed to her community and fighting the struggle. In analysing this documentary film, I also wanted to understand the significance of the late Nkoli as an anti-apartheid, gay rights, and HIV/AIDS activist. I also wanted to comprehend the role both him and Ditsie played towards contributing towards what is known today as a black queer feminist poetics. This film text relies on visual imagery and spoken narrative to tell specific stories that promote specific ideologies pertaining to black queer feminism. Thus, I aimed to look at how a black queer feminist being is represented or made to be visible; navigates or moves in space and society; and how it articulates itself or uses its voice. Moreover, I wanted to understand the essence of a black queer feminist being in *Simon & I* through critically assessing the film's plot, setting, dialogue, metaphors, symbols, characters, and archetypes.

The examination of how a black queer feminist being is narrated and expressed is of essence in *Collective Amnesia*. Of importance in Putuma's text was also to study the notion of memory as a tool to theorize black queer feminism. This project required me to acknowledge that Putuma's critically acclaimed body of work is substantially occupied with the intersections of memory and history, and how these two concepts complicate and inform one another (Haith, 2018:45). I particularly assessed the three movements depicted in *Collective Amnesia*, namely, 'Inherited Memory', 'Buried Memory' and 'Post-Memory'. These three movements consolidate memory as a summation of complicated historical practices under the hands of colonial Christianity and apartheid (Phalafala, 2017:251). These movements also comprehensively unpack notions such as unresolved inherited traumas, the transition from silence to expression, the use of the black woman's body as a site of national trauma and healing as a means of birthing a fresh sense of self-hood (Phalafala, 2017). Furthermore, *Collective Amnesia* explores the broken black family, its continuity and lineage; and the ideas surrounding black queer joy versus despair.

Lastly, I studied Muholi's body of art. In contrast to Ditsie and Putuma, and pertaining to Muholi, the primary visual art texts that this research intended on accessing have slightly changed throughout the course of the research process. This research report originally aimed to engage with photographic images from several of Muholi's exhibitions, namely *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture* (launched in 2004 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery); *Faces and Phases* (an ongoing affirming project and series which was launched in 2006 at Stevenson Gallery); and *Somnyama Ngonyama*, which means 'Hail, the Dark Lioness' (exhibited from 2012 to 2016 at Stevenson Gallery). *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture* serves as the foundation of Muholi's visual activism and the depiction of the ideals pertaining to representation, visibility, and invisibility. *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture* asks the pertinent question, 'what do we see when we look at ourselves?' (Matebeni, 2013:405). It also addresses the idea that lesbian practices are foreign to African cultures as well as presents a radical shift from stereotypical accounts of black women's sexualities. Muholi's ongoing portrait series *Faces and Phases* documents black lesbian as well as transgender people from South Africa and outside of the country (Muholi, 2012:113). When describing the series, Muholi once stated that the term 'Faces' reveal the person and the term 'Phases' represents the shift from one stage of gender or sexuality expression and experience to another (Stevenson Gallery, 2016).

I came to the conclusion though that critically analysing all three exhibitions, given the time constraint, was overly ambitious so therefore chose to only study *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Moreover, I studied the evocative self-portrait collection, *Somnyama Ngonyama* because it is arguably the most theoretically advanced, sophisticated, and nuanced work from Muholi. In *Somnyama Ngonyama*, Muholi creates artwork which is expressive of self-presentation through portraiture (Stevenson Gallery, 2015). Every photograph captured in *Somnyama Ngonyama* narrates a specific event in South Africa's political history (e.g. the Marikana massacre) and explores various characters as well as archetypes. Muholi's use of black face and the exaggerated darkness of her skin tone in the images serves as a central point which compels the viewer to 'question their desire to gaze at the images of my (Muholi) black figure'. Further, Muholi's insurgent statements of resistance, identity and race directly respond to historical and contemporary subjugations.

Muholi's images have primarily been sourced from the hardcover book version of *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2018) and Stevenson Gallery's online archive. The hardcover book version of the exhibition encompasses twenty-four written contributions by authors, poets, scholars, curators, art historians etc. I have attempted to analyse *Somnyama Ngonyama* by observing, reading, and writing on the composition, texture, size and other material attributes of the art pieces. Moreover, I have examined what propositions in these images with regards to bodies, visibility, intimacy, and performance is Muholi theorising here as a black queer feminist being. I considered how a black queer feminist being is imaged, given content and what they do from Muholi's perspective. Although, I wish I had more time to work on Muholi's section, I am appreciative of the access to the broad scholarship written on them.

Fundamentally, this research report is intent on discerning what a black queer feminism looks like, how it can be conceptualised and how the visual artwork, poetry, and film work of Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie is a contribution to it. Is the notion of a black queer feminism the same across all three artists? I read and analysed these aesthetic texts to examine how these artistic practices make a claim for or develop a black queer feminism in South Africa. I have also thoroughly read these texts to observe the differences and commonalities in terms of what would constitute a black queer feminist poetics. A crucial component of what I have looked at in this project is: what is similar about the work that Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie are doing that makes this notion identifiable by the label 'black queer feminism' as opposed to anything else? Additionally, I have examined whether Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie advocate for queer affirming thinking and if it is related to a black project of freedom. I have also examined the differences between the three texts that would help me map out a black queer feminism that manifests in divergent ways. For instance, in what way is someone like Muholi (who is visually inclined) committed to a black queer feminism as a project of self and how one inhabits the self in comparison to Putuma or Ditsie. Therefore, I have chosen to study the aesthetic texts of Muholi, Putuma, and Ditsie to identify the contours and constitutive ideas of a black queer feminist poetics in four rubrics: 1. *The Body Performance*; 2. *Memory-Trauma*; 3. *Dignity*; and 4. *Pride as a Catalyst for Joy: An Un/imaginable Utopia*?.

The Body Performance

'*We must be visible if we are going to be liberated*.' – Simon Nkoli, from Simon & I (2002)

'*One is most visible when most subjected. For those made visible by virtue of coercion and compulsion, visibility assures power's stranglehold on the body.*' – Saidiya Hartman, in Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer (1992)

Bodies remember. They are recorders of past narratives. Bodies express emotion. And bodies talk. Of curiosity to me is, what are the things that influence the various ways in which we come to exist as, experience and know specific bodies? Furthermore, how do Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie theorise the racialised, classed, gendered, and sexed body? Additionally, what are the various socio-political, spiritual, and cultural meanings of the body and its historicity? Provided that African queer archives and histories are not only at risk to erasure, misrepresentation and obscurity but are also vulnerable to regulation, policing, and commodification; I find it crucial to explore the textured nature of black queer in/visibility. More specifically, I find it important to assess the ways in which queer lives are dangled between and are moulded by visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility. This part of the project raises the question of black queer visibility in South Africa through the evaluation of body performance. In this part of the project I also question the abnormality of the body and its performance; the politics of the gaze; the suffering of the body; and the general poetics of the black queer feminist body as theorised by Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie. Further, it is significant for me to establish the relationship between black queer feminist in/visibility or body performance and socio-political power. When reading *Simon & I*, I realise that activism is a prevalent form of body performance for South African black queer beings. In fact, the likes of Ditsie and Nkoli pioneered a black queer activism underpinned by a radical body performance. In *Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa*, Ashley Currier reminds us of the merit of public visibility for queer activists to fight for political and social empowerment, and democratic inclusion (Currier, 2012). Nonetheless, according to Matebeni, numerous black

LGBTQIA+ activists are distrusting of local and international media industries which create and exploit images of black sexualised queer bodies (Matebeni, 2014:190). The aesthetic texts of Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma illustrate how racialised and policed queer beings have influenced LGBTQIA+ politics in this country. Representation and visibility for blacks and queers in South Africa remain contested. For poor to working class and precarious black middle-class black queer activists, 'the matrix of invisibility was a structure of violent public erasure' (Imma, 2017:3). Jacqueline Marx reflects on how the idea of visibility is a key component of disciplinary power because it is a tool for the policing of behaviour (Marx, 2014:31). Elsewhere, Gqola describes how hyper-visibility is the main prism in which queer beings are seen, contained, and violated (Gqola, 2006:83-84). In divergent ways, Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie create cultural productions that speak to precarious visibilities that they all assemble strategically and struggle against (Imma, 2017:1).

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> *'The body requires but has no soul. The soul requires but doesn't want a body.'* – Fred Moten, from an address given at The Museum of Modern Art (2015)

Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama* has attracted a veritable cottage industry of commentary, from those as sophisticated but as far removed from Muholi's inhabitation of black queerness (Gevisser, 2018)[11], to those arguably directly addressed by Muholi's insistence on black queerness (Willis, 2019)[12], and a dizzying array of commentary in between. I am interested in these commentaries and interpretations but in taking on this project, I wanted to explore Muholi's black queer feminist aesthetic unmediated by others' interpretations, as a way of also documenting how I, as a black feminist queer, encounters the work of Muholi without having that overburdened and overdetermined by other critics' voices. While it might be said that some of my own ways of working out

[11] Refer to Mark Gevisser's profile on 'Zanele Muholi: Dark Lioness
https://www.1843magazine.com/culture/zanele-muholi-dark-lioness
[12] Refer to 'Zanele Muholi Forever Changed the Image of Black Queer South Africans'
https://www.out.com/art/2019/4/23/zanele-muholi-forever-changed-image-black-queer-south-africans

Muholi's theorisation of body performance as central to a black feminist queer poetics are not my insights alone, they are very much a result of my own encounter with the work.

Muholi's enthralling body of work is preoccupied with the 'politics of the gaze'; the visibility as well as representation of sexual and gender minorities; the creation of archives and the formulation of innovative ideas about community; and the tension between the biopolitics[13] of the black body and the body politic (Van der Vlies, 2012:422). In the South African sphere of artistic representation, Muholi is a central character who has used aesthetic practices as a means of being a political and social activist. The visual artist illustrates the 'ambiguity of queer body politics' (Schuhmann, 2014:95) and primarily depicts the complexity and multifaceted nature of lesbian and transgender lives. This is whilst furthering the agenda of articulating a black queer feminism in a dominantly white, patriarchal, cis gendered, heterosexual, and middle/upper class art world environment. As an art activist Muholi controversially disputes normative gender performances and through their queer art practices attempts to combat patriarchal hetero-normativities (Schuhmann, 2014:97). Subsequently, Muholi's photographic images have been positioned in the centre of a national debate about freedom of expression, homophobia[14], and the queer experience (Thomas, 2010:422). Of significance here is to understand, what Muholi as a black queer feminist subject is theorising in these images with regards to body performance? Moreover, what kind of black queer feminist poetics is *Somnyama Ngonyama* articulating?

It can be asserted that photography performs a crucial role in expressing black people's intricate relationship to some sense of national belonging and cultural identity (Campt, 2012:5). At its core *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a visual autobiography which engages with a body politics of expression. *Somnyama Ngonyama* is an autobiography because Muholi is both the participant and image maker. This series which confronts the politics of pigment and race in the photographic archive is arguably entrenched in body performance. In addition, the series negotiates varying and contrasting lighting such as in *Zodwa II*. Shadows as well as varying historical and insightful backdrops create a

[13] Biopolitics refers to the intersection between politics and human biology.
[14] The term 'homophobia' is used in a general way to mean the irrational and violent hatred of all forms of gender or sexual diversity, including homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and queerphobia.

captivating autobiography. Every image photographed in the series is a commentary on events in South Africa's political history, namely: the emergence of the mining industry (which spurred on South Africa's racial capitalism); fame or infamy of the Black Madonna and the Marikana massacre. Each portrait also poses crucial questions about the politics of in/visibility; social in/justice; and beauty. The series references avant-garde fashion photography and black and white portraiture with Muholi dressed in different outfits as they inhabit or perform various personas. Muholi basically enacts body performance by manipulating highly stylised fashion which is performative and uses the dramatic expressive language of theatre, including re-styling unconventional materials as props and accessories. Further, Muholi's highly stylised imagery concerns itself with erased representations in the black photographic archive. In effect, Muholi redesigns the photographic archive pertaining to the category of self-portraiture. The series begs a curiosity: how does Muholi even begin to define a sense of self alongside the rigid constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality?

Photographic images are proof of being, existence, of presence and of an attempt at completeness. The blatant erasure of blackness and queerness from the historical records has motivated Muholi to project publicly, without shame (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:172). *Somnyama Ngonyama* concentrates on symbolic visual language and imagination derived from Muholi's own experience. The artwork is a reflection of their own being. In this series, Muholi embarks on a discomforting journey of re-defining self; rethinking the ethos of self-expression; the selfie and self-representation. Muholi validates, affirms, and actually *sees* themself. So, in a reversal of the colonial gaze, the power or authority that photography (particularly *Somnyama Ngonyama*) has gifted Muholi is the power of *self-definition*! There is humour but also excessive authority in the ideas that the artist distinguishes the presence of a lioness within themself. As much as Muholi would have liked for people to see themselves in the series, they required it to be their own portraitures. Self-portraits initiate a conversation with their own encounters of being a black queer who has faced violence due to those parts of their identity (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:171). The visual artist tries to construct images without hypersexualising their body to send a message across that they have authority, autonomy, and a voice over their anatomy. But even the hyper-sexualisation of Muholi's body would not negate the self-control over their voice, authority, and autonomy. Overarchingly, the series can also be read as a visual document where our own unique narratives are

brought forward and where one can define themselves. Muholi essentially uses statements of self-presentation through portraiture to theorise a black queer feminist poetics in and for South Africa today.

Muholi glares at the camera with a penetrating gaze. The focal point of this series pertains to Muholi facing themself as well as the viewer and the camera, directly. In a majority of the centred self-portraitures in *Somnyama Ngonyama*, Muholi's gaze speaks to the action of seeing and looking. What exactly is it about Muholi's gaze that forces us to pay attention? In portraits such as *Ntozakhe II* (see figure 1), *Nolwazi II* and *Bhekani*[15] there exists an active gaze that penetrates, questions, seeks for engagement and looks for answers. *Somnyama Ngonyama*'s visual imagery dares the viewer to endure Muholi's gaze and intentionally acknowledge their presence. The gaze that Muholi portrays throughout the collection is indicative of the explicitness in the message they attempt to deliver. Muholi's transfixed gaze is mostly insistent and evocative. Even when the gaze is not centred, it remains direct and pierced. bell hooks refers to the gaze as the 'oppositional gaze' (hooks, 1992). The oppositional gaze is a performance of political revolt to reclaim black people's right to their own gaze (hook, 1992). In the end, there is no escaping the gaze.

Pertaining to the enactment of body performance, Muholi focuses on senses such as *hands touching* and *eyes penetrating*. However, in the collection of monochromatic visual imagery, the focus of *the eye* is of special interest. Here, the notion of the eye takes on two folds – the viewers eye (what we see) versus Muholi's eye (what they, the artist sees). Muholi mostly looks directly in the viewer's eyes. With reference to portraits such as Sizile (see figure 2), *Thuleleni* and *Khwezi*[16], Muholi's bright white eyes are piercing and startling. Although their eyes, which tell a million stories are quite unsettling at first glance, I come to appreciate that Muholi's eyes are actually valiant. Contrastingly, viewing *Sizile II*[17] has a melancholic feel to it -it is the first time where Muholi is not present or engaged and seemingly stares into the distance. In this image, Muholi's eyes are lowered and are not as bright as other portraits. It is vital to note that Muholi's use of what looks like blackface and the exaggerated darkness of skin complexion operates as a pivotal

[15] To see *Nolwazi II* and *Bhekani* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works
[16] To see *Thuleleni* and *Khwezi* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works
[17] To see *Sizile II* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works

point which induces the viewer to interrogate their craving to gaze at a black body. Throughout the series, Muholi reclaims their blackness which I believe is constantly acted by the privileged other. Muholi's reality is that they *are* black, and they do not have to mimic being black. Their exaggerated dark skin highlights colourism but it is not a prop. Muholi merely enhances the contrast of the images to voice what is already there/what already exists. Reading this series reminds me of the highly nuanced histories of black skin in film.

Somnyama Ngonyama embraces a personal approach that Muholi has taken as a visual activist to challenge the politics of queerness, pigment, and race. Generally, *Somnyama Ngonyama's* images speaks to some *body* who has been erased. A *body* that registers joy or a *body* that struggles. Muholi uses their camera as a protest tool, to rise above silencing and confront politics of erasure. The visual activism performed by Muholi is focused on the continuous process of 'self-making and remaking' (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:48). As a visual activist, Muholi goes against the current and refashions themself in a mesmerising light. One of their major practices that Muholi employs as a visual activist is to review black resistance. It is vital to remember that this series began as a response to subtle and overt occurrences of racism they have experienced across the globe. I believe it is fair to assert that *Somnyama Ngonyama's* is Muholi's reaction to continuous, staunch racism, heterosexism, queerphobia and the greater politics of exclusion. Muholi confidently contests the apartheid and historically racist imaging engine. In doing so, the visual activist successfully defies white ideations of blackness and white supremist discourse. Further, the series is resistant to policing Muholi's expressions of blackness. Elsewhere, as part of their digital feminist activism Muholi uses hashtags (that speak to in/visibility) on Instagram such: #ArchivingSelf #Self-recognition #BeingSeen #ThisIsMe.

Muholi dismantles any ideas of performing prevalent power dynamics in *Somnyama Ngonyama* – they are the author/expert and the subject. In some of the portraits, Muholi uses theatrics to stage the exceptionally stereotyped adaptations of blackness where viewers have placed them as well as black women historically and, in the present, (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:170). With regards to a feminist poetics, Muholi's portraits channels those fearless women at the vanguard of liberation politics: mothers, daughters, sisters, social reformers, domestic labourers, and revolutionaries. Muholi's

primary agenda is to blacken, to open, to queer and to inhibit spaces. Throughout the series, I contemplate and develop my own intuitions of autonomy, power, and agency.

> 'There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture…it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed' – Susan Sontag (in Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:137).

In *Somnyama Ngonyama*, Muholi maps their experiences and journeys 'on the planes of her own body, through an interminable interaction with her varied surroundings' (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:48). I am curious to know of the knowledge that Muholi possesses in their body (which they are enormously unashamed of). The series of intimate photographs pushes one to survey the multi-layered ideas of shame and the body. More so, the fragility, vulnerability and precarious materiality of the body ought to be studied in relation to what a black queer feminist poetics might consist of. Muholi's body can be read as black, gendered, androgynous, lesbian, and classed. It can also be observed as being objectified. It is quite intriguing to try and grasp what reclamation Muholi undergoes to perform self-objectification. Muholi is not shy of reminding us that their body ultimately belongs to themself. Furthermore, upon reflection I realise that Muholi has constructed their highest self who is not produced by any societal constructions or alongside the construction of manhood. They are in the process of reimagining their body - its narratives, its struggles, its politics, its pleasures, its movement, its ambitions, and its possibilities.

Every image in the series has a life of its own which sublimely denotes Muholi's visual autonomy. According to this series of self-portraits, the body or self is something that is worked on and positioned. For instance, in many of the images, Muholi's body or self is statuesque, poised, and erect. These compositions confront both Muholi and us as the viewers to cope with the innumerable ways in which one can be faced with and face our own subjectivity (by which I mean coming to a self-conscious recognition of one's self as a self). It is also absorbing to see how some images such as, *Thembeka I* (Muholi is

draped in a lacy white cloth), *Thembeka II* (Muholi draped in a dark cloth)[18] and *Vukani I* (Muholi poses on the bed, bare breasted, with a white sheet wrapped around their lower body) (see figure 3) navigate between impulsiveness and tranquillity. Somewhere else, *Somnyama Ngonyama* attempts to challenge and reinterpret the various historical and present notions of 'black beauty'. I am still trying to discern how successful the series is at defining and deconstructing the politics of black beauty. However, I do admit that Muholi conceptualises images that contest the black woman or queer body as being perishable, expendable, and continuously labouring. Muholi's self-portraits arguably make the viewer uncomfortable because the artwork constantly shifts between objectification and subverting dominant beauty ideals.

I yearn to explore the objects, make-up, and props (alongside its effects) that further aestheticize black personhood. Throughout the course of *Somnyama Ngonyama*, Muholi playfully deploys peculiar unconventional materials. It is worthwhile mentioning that Muholi has an intense and fiery awareness of self. They create materials and used objects that express their moods. All the materials used in the portraits have their own primary functions. Furthermore, they rummage through hardware shops, kitchen cupboards and beauty aisles to form their looks. Significantly, Muholi's 'majestic' headdresses and accompanying accessories are their most striking tools. There is something militant, revolutionary, and radical about Muholi's elaborate headwraps and headdresses. Indeed, the headdresses which are fashioned from unconventional materials and ready-made objects serve as crowns. They use unconventional materials and ready-made objects to make their crowns, such as a stool, a white backpack, a *waskom* (washbasin), feathers, marker pens (colloquially referred to as koki pens), dishwashing metal scouring pads and an assemblage of pegs. The headdresses are of a regal nature; perhaps Muholi adorns the headdresses as way of showing that they are in the process of channelling a greater self-status and 'reclaiming' their kingdom. Every object and prop are placed deliberately; nothing has been placed in the frame without intention. For instance, the fence in *Thulile II*[19] could possibly symbolise politics of inclusion versus exclusion. Another example of body performance is seen in the landscape portrait *Julile I*[20] which explores the ways in

[18] To see *Thembeka I* and *Thembeka II* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works
[19] To see *Thulile II* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works
[20] To see *Julile I* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works

which women's bodies are represented in the media, hence, the newspapers that are stacked on the shelves in the background.

Quite interestingly, when I think and read through the performative and theatrical *Somnyama Ngonyama*, I instinctively think of the ways in which one can reimagine or conceptualise a transcendent, bold, and surreal queer Afrofuturist universe. Looking at Muholi is like looking at a book of my dreams. Images like *ZaBo II, Bukhosi II, Bakhambile*[21] and *Vile* (see figure 4) reveal to me that this series conveys something out of this world, something of the spiritual world, something mystical – a cosmic dimension. Maybe that is why they resemble an oracle. Perhaps we can only interact with such ideas in our dreams – in a transcendental space. Reflecting on images such as *Ndivile II* and *Somnyama I*[22], Muholi embodies what looks like extra-terrestrial beings. Muholi is brilliant at subversion; they defy authority, powerful systems, and rigid institutions. The photographs in this series can thus be read in multiple frequencies which heighten the visceral experience of the art. With regards to enacting body performance, I yearn to comprehend the several characters and archetypes that Muholi undertakes. For example, what is Muholi performing when they undertake the 'warrior like' persona in *Fisani* and *Thando I*?[23] Before our eyes, Muholi transfigures into their mother, a domestic worker, an oracle, a miner, a black princess who resembles Rapunzel and even transfigures into nature itself. As Yrsa Daley Ward says, *Somnyama Ngonyama* is 'fiction and it is not' (Daley-Ward, 2018). If *Somnyama Ngonyama* were to be realised through the gaze of queer Afrofuturism, we would thoroughly need to reconstruct imagery that speaks to the queer acknowledgement of the black body and the desiring of the queer flesh. In conceptualising a queer Afrofuturism world through the lens of *Somnyama Ngonyama*, I am intent on grasping the crossover between life and death. *Bhekisisa*[24], a landscape portrait taken on rocky terrains coveys the idea of the crossover between life and death by 'discussing' bodies lost at sea. This body of work is resolute and full of wonder and deserves to be studied as such.

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[21] To see *ZaBo II, Bukhosi II, Bakhambile* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works
[22] To see *Ndivile II* and *Somnyama I* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works
[23] To see *Fisani* and *Thando I* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works
[24] To see *Bhekisisa* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works

'*You want black womxn's bodies on the line.*

Not the frontline.' – Koleka Putuma, in Collective Amnesia (2017)

The black queer body is a frightening spectacle for many. Putuma speaks about *the body* as a national site of trauma and a form of resistance. According to the poet, it is as if her black body was made for suffering by virtue of her reality that the black experience is rooted in the trauma of Christian colonial violence. To a certain extent, Putuma also unpacks how trauma not only lives but thrives in the bodies of black women with very little optimism of escaping. Body performance (as I am exploring here) enacts a reaction to these experiences, constituting a common and salient theme in black queer feminist work. Said or thought otherwise, rarely is the black queer body an autonomous self-determining entity. My initial thought on this subject is that even when the black queer body self-determines it is because the body is surely reacting to something. Ultimately, I am also committed to trying to understand how the black queer body which is highly politicized is constructed as a site of trauma. What is the relationship between the body and troubling narratives, lingering traumas and daunting memories that never fade away? 'In the Kitchen' denotes the physical or bodily manifestation of trauma and how those feelings are bottled, in order to remain functional:

Fixed gaze and clenched breath,

stapling your thoughts together.

Rehearsing how to say,

I'm fine (Putuma, 2017:64)

In my reading of *Collective Amnesia*, Putuma's perception of the body partly wallows in nihilistic beliefs and is inherently pessimistic. She sees the black queer body as an ideology that colonial architects have designed to be devoid of being, objectified, suppressed and one that lacks critical thinking. Essentially, the 'black body' symbolises

the human body that was and still is violently treated (Moore, 2009:178). Hence, the human body is already 'figurative' and thus already a 'trope of trauma' (Stringer, 2005:42). It is important to discern that Putuma symbolises the black queer body or woman's body as both a configuration of pain (i.e. national site of trauma) and pleasure.

Differently put, Putuma also affirms and reimagines her black queer body by experiencing bodily pleasure through having women lovers. Putuma exclaims that, 'my mouth has been inside the Koran' which refers to the romantic relationship she had with a Muslim woman. This is an overt contradiction to the life she comes from – a strict, Christian, and extremely heteronormative lifestyle. It is quite mesmerising to read Putuma's reinvention of how she overcomes sexual restraint that black women generally succumb to. She ultimately claims sex as a positive act versus sex being repugnant. For what seems like a fleeting moment, Putuma conceptualises body performance as being a site of pleasure, wonderment and self-indulgence as opposed to being one of trauma. Moore contends that to completely 'embody the body is to live into its totality as a spiritual/sexual-erotic temple' (Moore, 2009:180). It is imperative for knowledge creators and authors who fit in the domain of black queer feminism to restore and reimagine the black queer body to negate the idea of the body as being unworthy of pleasure. Nevertheless, Putuma places the black queer woman body at different historicized settings where she predominantly memorialises the black queer woman body through grief. Moreover, on the spectrum of sightings of the body, I am convinced that *Collective Amnesia* leans nearer towards the black queer body being a site of woundedness, pain and trauma versus it being a site of pleasure or sensation.

The sexual violence that *Collective Amnesia* speaks of as well as the rapes and murders targeted at lesbians in South African is an example of the body performing as a site of trauma. For Putuma, the black body, the black queer body, the black woman's body is a body that is void of autonomy. In the well-known poem (which has now been turned into a play) 'No Easter Sunday for Queers', Putuma declares that her body is constantly at the mercy of men (Putuma, 2017:27). And when it is not at the mercy of men, her body belongs in hell, according to judgmental Christians who reside in the northern suburbs of Cape Town (Putuma, 2017:27). The northern suburbs represent Putuma's 'old', stifled, and policed life where religion is aggressively imposed. Elsewhere, in the southern suburbs, Putuma's body belongs in hell, according to homophobic patriarchs (Putuma,

2017:27). The southern suburbs signify a new sense of self for Putuma or the opportunity of rebirth. A stark illustration of the body enacting as a national site of trauma is seen in the poem, 'Memoirs of a Slave and Queer Person' which encapsulates the abuse or sexual violence inflicted on women and the war on women's bodies:

> I don't want to die with my
>
> hands up
>
> or
>
> legs open (Putuma, 2017:75).

There is a complication when discussing the performance of the body and reflections of black queerness. Darnell Moore forces us to ponder: 'is it not dangerous to speak existentially about the body -or bodies- as if there exists an accepted model of embodiment that can be easily characterized? Furthermore, is it not counterproductive to talk about blackness as if it is a common phraseology used by all to connote an essentialized category of racialized cultural difference?' (Moore, 2009:177). In *Theorizing the "Black Body" as a Site of Trauma: Implications for Theologies of Embodiment*, Moore also questions how we can ahistorically discuss a 'black body' as an exclusive subject, while not accounting for the vast ways that black bodies enchant, emote, arouse and speak (Moore, 2009:177). Perhaps it is worthwhile to think about 'realistic' possibilities of healing from the body as a site of trauma. Visibility and healing, for Putuma, looks like the redemption of women's bodies that have rescued her from hiding (Putuma, 2017:29). Saidiya Hartman asserts, 'the (counter)investment in the body as a site of need, desire, and pleasure and the constancy of unmet needs, repressed desires, and the shortcomings of pleasure are articulated in the very endeavour to heal the flesh and redress the pained body' (Hartman, 1997:75). Indeed, as iterated by Hartman, healing is established in the necessity to counter-invest in the body, 'as the site of possibility' (Hartman, 1997:51).

In effect, the black queer and/or black woman's body lives in the collective memory which connects individual bodies with broader social narratives (Cole, 2004:88). For instance, trauma that is rooted in colonial apartheid informs, is captured in, and manipulates the collective memory. The black queer body and/or black woman's body

becomes a site of national trauma situated in the space between longing to forget and wanting to remember (Moore, 2009:185). It is important to note that memory of violation and violence 'begets a will to forget, to the innards of that violation' (Alexander, 2005:277). I am worried that Putuma primarily reads the body through a lens of woundedness and as a site of trauma. Surely, our black queer bodies can be characterised beyond the boundaries of pain and exceed into avenues that reimagine the black queer body as intrepid, authoritative, confident, and optimistic. Or possibly exceed into avenues that reimagine the black queer woman's body as fully belonging to oneself. Perhaps we ought to concentrate on the conceptions of the black queer body pre-colonisation to comprehend that we are more significant than our traumas? However, to envision the black queer body prior to colonialism is to call on what no longer exists.

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Throughout the duration of *Simon & I,* Ditsie narrates a personal queer coming of age under the fierce wisdom, knowledge and guidance of anti-apartheid, gay rights and HIV/AIDS activist and arguably the 'most famous black gay in South Africa' (Imma, 2017:1), Nkoli. Body performance or body politics as conveyed by *Simon & I* can be read as activist work and more literally as 'bodies protesting on the line'. In this compelling and intense autobiography of Ditsie's life, the film takes an activist approach in articulating or theorising a black queer feminism in and for South Africa today. Fundamentally, the film advocates for queer rights as human rights. The film also portrays the struggle of being a black queer in the 1990s and captures the labour endured (by queer activists) to ensure that no person would experience discrimination or violence because of their sexuality or gender identity. *Simon & I* illustrates the emergence of a vibrant queer movement (in the late 1980s and early 1990s) that is representative of blackness, strife, celebration and youth. This kind of movement (that was pro-queer and pro-black) had never happened in South Africa before the likes of Ditsie and Nkoli. Moreover, the film explores what it means for black queers existing in a multi-racial country to be entering the gates of 'freedom' after living through centuries of repressive colonial rule and subsequently apartheid. I have been pondering on the words uttered by Nkoli at a rally, 'I am black, I am gay. I cannot separate the two into secondary or primary struggles' (*Simon & I*, 2002). These words layer the foundation for this film. Perhaps these

words denote how we can possibly even begin to conceptualise a black queer feminism – as the merging of the black condition and the queer condition.

Simon & I clearly demonstrates that Ditsie and Nkoli were actively articulating a black queer politics and poetics. Ditsie and Nkoli also not only started to map ideas on the table and develop a language for what a black queer feminist politics could be, they were irrefutably the dynamic duo who represented black queers in the attempt to challenge overt erasure, white supremist norms and institutions. With regards to the subject of in/visibility politics, Ditsie arguably became an activist to be recognised and respected as a black lesbian woman who ought to possess the same rights as white people, heterosexual people, and men. It can be contended that she also became an activist to advocate for the emancipation of other black queer people during an era marked by volatility, change and prospects for a hopeful future.

As for Nkoli, he engaged in a body politics, visibilising his queer body to politicise AIDS treatment for gay men, the first Pride march in 1990, and the movement for the inclusion of legal protection against homophobic violence in the constitution (Imma, 2017:1). Further, Nkoli formulated his own strategies of visibility as political tools of resistance. However, Nkoli's politics of recognition can be read as precarious because of colonial apartheid. In addition, the repressive regime which was also reinforced by heteronormative puritanism destabilised Nkoli's counter-hegemonic activism (Imma, 2017:3). Nkoli heightened his visibility as a black gay man in 1983 when he publicly came out in a popular black newspaper, *City Press*. Elsewhere, in the same year and in *Exit's*[25] May 1983 issue, Nkoli's photograph appeared as the first visual archive of a black gay man in the newspaper (Imma, 2017:5). Even though Nkoli was placed in a seemingly highly visible position in *Exit*, he was silenced and struggled to be seen within the queer community (specifically during his years in prison). It is problematic that Nkoli's voice and viewpoints (that were published in *Exit*) were constantly orchestrated by white journalists, friends, and patrons. In an unpublished interview with Mark Gevisser, Nkoli reckoned that, '*Exit* was using us to blacken up their image. Every time there was a function…a picture would be taken with the few darkies prominently displayed and would be sent overseas' (Imma, 2017:8). Nkoli's assertion speaks to his mindfulness of

[25] *Exit* is a LGBTQIA+ newspaper founded in 1982 by GASA.

GASA's political manipulation and exploitation of black visibility. Nkoli's frustration with GASA's conservatism and exploitative nature eventually led to the formation of South Africa's first black gay organisation in May 1984 called The Saturday Group.

Another enactment of body performance is demonstrated in the film with regards to how Ditsie experienced her struggles over gender as the struggles over the viscerality of her body. When Ditsie was eleven years old, she received the opportunity to play the character of a boy on a local television programme – she was excited at this prospect and felt comfortable. Ditsie had a strong sense of gender non-conformity in how she perceived herself during her youth. As a teenager, Ditsie's sister likened her to English singer, Boy George and expressed that Ditsie is gay. Being likened to gayness made Ditsie happy. However, the happiness eroded as Ditsie perceived herself as a girl during puberty and when men began expressing their romantic interests towards her. Thus, feelings of loneliness and displacement characterised this period in Ditsie's life. As a result, Ditsie's black feminism is distilled as her defiance of cis and heteronormative gender norms. Moreover, the lyrics to one of Ditsie's songs helps us grasp how she reflects on body performance in relation to others: 'funny how a little change can cause such debate about the way I dress or present myself as I find my own space'(*Simon & I*, 2002).

***

I have read all three artists to show that body performance is a constitutive idea of a black queer feminist poetics. By reading Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie it may then be said a black queer feminist poetics in South Africa begins from the body, how it is gazed upon, as a collection of memories and trauma, as a spectacle as well as a spectator to the brutal oppressions of history. In looking at Muholi's imaginative refiguration of the black queer body, the revaluation of that body in the protest culture and activism demonstrated by Ditsie, and in the embodied traumas incubated by Putuma, a black queer feminist poetics is activated by and enacted in body performance. Through the texts of Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma, this section denotes how the black queer feminist body is not corporeal only, but also spiritual, and navigates time and space. Here, the three artists break away from policed conceptions of the black queer body and the feminist intention is to defy the misunderstandings and scandals imposed on such a body. In doing so, the body performances enacted are rejections and reconstructions of how the body behaves,

bends, prostates and contorts. The racialised, classed, sexed, and gendered body is dissenting, acting as sites of pleasure, remembering, pain, activism, and radical transformation. A black feminist queer poetics, then, both assembles a set of propositions about the body (theorises the body), and experiments with an aesthetics of the body (performance) as a politics of freedom.

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Memory – Trauma

In this part of the project, I am concerned with understanding a significant contour of a black queer feminist poetics (as read in *Simon & I*, *Somnyama Ngonyama* and *Collective Amnesia*) which is the idea of linking trauma and memory. 'Memory and forgetting' as iterated by Ditsie is seemingly deeply tied not only to a black queer feminist poetics but also to the general precarious black condition. In trying to understand the relationship between memory and trauma for Ditsie, I must constantly remind myself that the crux of Ditsie's fight was for inclusion and advocacy of 'gay rights as human rights' (*Simon & I*, 2002). The link between memory and trauma for Ditsie is non-conceptual, empirical, and tangible. For instance, Ditsie recalls and traces trauma back to her childhood where she encountered homophobic violence from her immediate family, neighbours, and the broader black community. In the film Ditsie expresses that ever since she announced her queerness to her family she felt 'dirty and guilty' for a long time (*Simon & I*, 2002). It is in fact quite bizarre that Ditsie's mother's and grandmother's ignorance conflated being queer with being intersex or what they referred to as hermaphrodite[26]. Overarchingly, for Ditsie (who moves between emotions such as anger, vulnerability, fearlessness and fear) trauma is not necessarily rooted in the black queer experience, or if it is, she just does not make it explicit. Whereas, for Putuma trauma (which is likely to be unresolved and intergenerational) *is* the basis of the black queer experience. Putuma sees herself as a product of trauma. For the poet, trauma is the black experience produced by colonial violence and shaped by white domination, white supremist beliefs and Christian respectability. For Muholi, recovering memory and trauma refers to the connections they make to pivotal figures in their life such as their mother, Bester Muholi (a domestic worker during apartheid), through their self-portraits; recreating historical events; and altering or reclaiming past narratives. In their documentary film, *Difficult Love*, Muholi cries on the shoulder of their mother's former employer confiding that, 'I wish I was more celebrated by my mother…I still need her in my life…I am breaking' (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:17). Muholi also evokes memory through the act of imagination.

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[26] A stigmatizing, scientifically specious and misleading term in reference to people.

One of the connections that Muholi holds to memory is portrayed in the way that the artist is intent on recreating South African events that have been underpinned by historical suffering. According to Muholi, every environment has its own history, however, when people look at the imagery in *Somnyama Ngonyama*, they do not inevitably connect a particular with the current events or the imagery (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018). Furthermore, *Somnyama Ngonyama's* self-portraiture provides a dialogue with history and contests how photography was instrumental to the formation of a black identity that was ridiculed and remained static. Through cultural orientations and religious references, Muholi's collection of imagery and archive of the self teaches us about our history and inspires us to rethink what history entails. *Somnyama Ngonyama* exhibits how Muholi personifies memory and time through the self-portraits. Differently put, Muholi simultaneously captures moments in time and summons us into a perception of memory where past, present, and future become intertwines. Moreover, through the constructs of memory and time Muholi illustrates the validation that blackness is significant and majestic. Profoundly, Muholi has created 'a visual archive that lives on beyond us' (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:190).

Muholi memorialises her late sister, Basizeni Muholi (1956-2016) and late mother, Bester Muholi in the portraits *Basizeni XI*[27] and *Bester V* (see figure 5). *Basizeni XI* is a memorial, an image of mourning, and an ode to separation and grief. This soul-baring self-portrait was captured in 2016, only days prior to her passing. In contrast to majority of the images in the series, there is no sense of being seen or seeing – there is no penetrating gaze. *Basizeni XI* is seemingly haunted by various ghosts. The portrait dedicated to Muholi's late sister is gripping because it presents a duality of resistance and defiance versus mourning and memorial. It can be avowed that both *Basizeni XI* and *Bester V* were born from the yearning to generate a moment of intimacy (from afar), of identification and familial closeness. In *Bester V,* Muholi reimagines and remembers their mother, who laboured as a domestic worker by adorning a headdress made of steel wool/*skuurpot* (as colloquially referred to in South Africa). The *skuurpot's* on Muholi's headdress represent the labour that Bester underwent as a domestic worker who spent most of her life cleaning white women's homes and caring for their children whilst neglecting her own. Muholi proclaims that the portraits inspired by Bester are about the trauma and abuse

[27] To see *Basizeni XI* please refer to http://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works

that domestic workers (who are black women) encounter at the hands of their employers (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:186). Memorialising Bester through self-portraiture, for Muholi, is about the staging of beauty, making a declaration of reclamation and posthumously releasing their mother from a set position of servitude.

Another way of thinking of the ideas of memory and amnesia is to associate them to the notion of caring. *Somnyama Ngonyama* arguably illustrates how Muholi invokes memory or remembering through self-representation as way of caring and denoting reverence not only to themselves but to the long lineage of black women and black queers who ought to be imagined as regal. Avishai Margalit explains to us that even though 'there is an ethics of memory, there is very little morality of memory' (Musangi, 2018:411). Margalit contends that ethics is characterised by the solid social relations we have with the people closest and dearest to us. Whereas morality is defined by the weak social connections with those who we are not connected to in any special way. Essentially, both a morality and an ethic of this kind would necessitate some sort of shared memory which is the cement that maintains solid social relations together and without which caring is impossible (Margalit, 2002:27). Fundamentally, memory is partially constitutive of the idea of care (Margalit, 2002:28).

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Ditsie's film is arguably all about memory – the brilliant archiving of memory and history to understand the struggle for queer rights as human rights. *Simon & I* importantly prompts the powerful shift from *silence to expression* by the use of vigorous storytelling and vividly recalling the past. Recalling the past, for Ditsie, does not solely amount to pain and trauma. For instance, in the film Ditsie remembers and performs a song she wrote at twelve years old called 'Captured by Love'. I should pause to note how I find it exceptionally intriguing that Ditsie also effectively narrates stories through music, throughout the film. 'Captured by Love' resembles a time when Ditsie was a happy child, however that 'happiness' was short lived as she felt as if something was grossly wrong about her. Ditsie probably comprehended her disorientation as a child by what was articulated by her mother, that, 'God started making me (Ditsie) before lunch and when he came back, he had forgotten whether he was making a boy or a girl' (*Simon & I*, 2002). Majority of the film deals with tangible and graphic trauma that Ditsie can actively trace and remember. The film manages to encapsulate the violence associated with being black

and queer, especially when living in a township like Orlando West, Soweto. Ditsie narrates how at the peak of her queer activism, a large group of men showed up at her grandmother's house in Soweto, wanting to barge into the house and 'teach her' (Ditsie) a lesson for identifying as a lesbian woman. It can be contended that those men wanted to rape Ditsie as a means of 'correcting' her sexuality (also referred to as corrective or curative rape).

Another 'tangible' trauma that I ought to wrap my head around from the film is the scene from the experimental reality television show that Ditsie participated in, called *Live - Wire Communities* which almost resembled *Big Brother*[28]. In this scene, Ditsie participates in a social experiment (just after the transition to democracy) in which she lives in a house with several people of various races for six months. The show was designed to demonstrate how young black and white South Africans could co-exist after apartheid (*Simon & I*, 2002). This scene was semi-sufficient at giving the audience a glance of a South African black queer woman living in a cis, white supremist, violent heteronormative world. Furthermore, this scene was good at portraying the intersection of homophobia and racism – Ditsie was a black queer being in a house arguably full of racist homophobes. I do wish Ditsie dove deeper into the idea of black visibility versus queer visibility when narrating this scene. Overall, this was an uncomfortable scene to watch because of the assertive aggression that was conveyed by the bigot who said that he used to beat up gay people and was disturbed by Ditsie's presence. Another bigot on the show used an ableist slur to describe queerness, he basically contended that being queer is a mental illness. It was an inspiring moment to watch Ditsie defend herself but also exceptionally nerve-wracking and terrifying to see her in such an unsafe environment. What I found particularly uncomfortable and strange though was how Ditsie and one of the bigots were friends by the end of the show. I have many questions pertaining to this, namely: What sprung this friendship? How genuine was the friendship? How did the homophobic bigot transform his views on queerness within 6 months? Essentially, I am trying to understand why Ditsie would labour for a friendship with a homophobic bigot who traumatised her?

[28] Big Brother is a popular reality and competition series which follows a diverse group of people who live together in a home under persistent surveillance.

On 23 September, 1984 Nkoli was arrested by the apartheid government for treason (where he faced the death penalty) alongside twenty-one other anti-apartheid activists and political leaders who were linked to the United Democratic Front (UDF) - they were known as the Delmas 22 (GALA, 2007:4). The Delmas treason which span over the course of four years, involved the likes of 'popular' politicians, Mosiuoa 'Terror' Lekota, Gcina Malindi and Popo Molefe. The news of Nkoli's imprisonment and activism rapidly spread across the international community. In Western countries such as Sweden, Britain, Holland, Canada and the United States activists mobilized in defence of Nkoli. For example, the activism in support of Nkoli spearheaded the formation of the *Simon Nkoli Anti-Apartheid Committee,* based in Toronto (Imma, 2017:6). Nkoli's treason case essentially energised and gave rise to a global queer rights anti-apartheid movement. At the time (in the 1980s during 'heightened' apartheid in which former apartheid dictator, P.W. Botha declared a nationwide state of emergency in 1986) it was quite 'remarkable' to have the International Gay and Lesbian Association (IGLA)[29] confront GASA's disappointing apolitical position and rejection to support Nkoli publicly (Imma, 2017:6).

Documenting and attempting to encapsulate the magnitude of apartheid traumas and its effects on black queer people in an almost fifty-four-minute-long film is quite an unimaginable ask. Having said that, Ditsie does an impeccable job at screening how the cruel apartheid system traumatised a relationship between two lovers, Nkoli and Roy Shepherd. The hundreds of pages of prison letters shared between Nkoli and Roy are archives that allow us to revisit intimate memories and narratives that occurred during a violent and volatile time. Nkoli's letters to Roy reveal how he navigates between his life as a gay political prisoner and his deep personal requirements. The first smuggled letter written to Roy occurred seven months after Nkoli was detained on the 23rd of April 1985:

23.04-85

Dear Roy

I am trying to get at least contact with you. But I can't really.

I wish I can tell you how well I am, to know about your health. Good gracious Roy, I am not sure of my spelling. My language is so bad. But

[29] A global queer/LGBTQIA+ federation based in Sweden.

anyhow, I'll be glad to hear of you. I'll be very happy to know that you haven't gave up praying for us (detainees).

Roy, because of thinking of you everytime, I'll try to face life – though sometime I think otherwise. I completed seven months today, thank God. Here I am, with Johny trying to bring me back to the normal world. I appreciate him so much that I'm becoming fond of him – pity he's not gay, isn't it?

"Don't think that committing suicide will help you Simon" Johny reminded me. "You're too young. The world is yours."

"I promise" I said.

I do really promise Roy. I shall live. I can face life. Maybe for you – and for myself too. God will decide what will happened to me. I am praying that I should be charged or released soon. It won't be too long anymore I hope.

Let me talk (write) about John Mokoena. He never gets food parcels. Please buy him something, cigarettes. I am sharing my food parcel with him. Report him to DPSC [Detainee Parents Support Committee]. Please. He's been detained from October.

It will be stupid that the SPs [security police] should find out that I smuggled this letter to you, so be cautious about it. Don't tell everybody. I'm so nervous now when I am writing.

We are now deprived of exercise – we stay in our cells 24 hrs.

Well, I am happy to be with other people. Yesterday I was moved to a cell next to Johny. I'm so happy to have met him. He's straight – but accepts me as a friend. Today we have been talking about movies …

Roy I can't write the long letter – especially when I don't know whether you will receive it or not. How can I know that you received it? Will you send me – eh let me think – pair trouser and a jersey, it's getting cold. Poor Johny hasn't got warm clothes.

Sorry Roy – I have to pen off here. Give everybody my regards.

I am missing all of my friends.

Good bye

loving yours

Simon

NB if you send me those clothes, I'll know that you're fine (GALA, 2007).

'I'm not afraid to say I'm going to die of HIV and AIDS…when there is life, use it' (*Simon & I*, 2002). While in prison, Nkoli was diagnosed as HIV-positive. And, during the late 1980s, he 'came out' as someone living with HIV. Nkoli lived without any form of antiretroviral treatment for many years as he could not freely access medication due to finances until a foreign doctor sponsored his treatment. The HIV/AIDS activist, leader of the Township AIDS project and leader of The Positive African Men's project died at 41 years old on the eve of World AIDS Day, on the 30th of November 1998 (GALA, 2007:11). At the time of Nkoli's death, Nkoli and Ditsie had won the constitutional battle (i.e. queer rights being legally recognised in the new, democratic constitution) but the fight was not over – an even greater enemy was confronting South Africa in the form of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. In 1998 and according to Nkoli, twenty-five GLOW members had passed away within the past decade due to AIDS related illnesses and complications (*Simon & I*, 2002).

It is a tragedy that the HIV/AIDS activist (Nkoli) who endured the virus was in such proximity to premature death. In this regard, being black and queer can be equated to death. In fact, the black death, trauma and precarity that Sharpe speaks of *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* can be likened to the trauma, death and precarity discussed in *Simon & I*, *Collective Amnesia* and *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Sharpe importantly highlights the general awareness of precarity; as well as the afterlives of slavery which can be likened to the afterlives of colonial apartheid in the cases of Ditsie's, Putuma's and Muholi's bodies of work (Sharpe, 2016:5). The precarities of the afterlives of colonial apartheid (for the black condition) includes poverty, premature death, black criminalisation, restricted access to education and healthcare, and disproportionate life chances (Hartman, 2007:6). The manner in which Sharpe is cognisant of how the precarities of the afterlives of slavery has shaped her being, relations to others and the how she exists in the world is perhaps a similar way in which especially Putuma and Muholi reconcile with the afterlives of colonial apartheid. Furthermore, just as Sharpe

declares that 'transatlantic slavery was and is the disaster' (Sharpe, 2016:5); for Putuma and possibly for Muholi, colonial apartheid engineered by Christian, patriarchal, queerphobic and white domination was and is the disaster that taints us. Ultimately, 'the disaster of a Black subjection was and *is* planned; terror is disaster and "terror has a history" (Youngquist, 2011:7) and it is deeply atemporal' (Sharpe, 2016:5). Drastically different from the universal outcome of all human beings' lives, black death is continuously outlining black peoples' ability to live; even more intensely for what relates to black, poor, and queer people.

It may be imperative to note that *Simon & I* forms a part of the category of New Queer Cinema to understand why Ditsie would create such a film. New Queer Cinema refers to the movement of queer-themed independent filmmaking which is situated within broader narratives of theory-making and activism (Rich, 2013). Beyond the politics of representation and the creation of black queer archives, I believe that Ditsie made this film to grieve Nkoli and to grieve an end of an era. She was grieving the chapter and components of her life (i.e. Nkoli, Pride March and the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW)) that arguably shaped the essence of her being. Grief is not a linear process, so a part of me wants to believe that Ditsie created this immortal project (*Simon & I*) to constantly remind herself and make sense of her existence or journey as a black lesbian activist, navigating the South African present. Exhuming memories with and about Nkoli simultaneously causes pain and a strange sense of comfort for Ditsie. However, fundamentally, Ditsie's memory of Nkoli is awakened as a ground for reflecting on black queer solidarity, black queer resilience and possibly black queer consciousness.

As an activist in her 20s Ditsie was highly ambitious and optimistic. I would imagine that some of those sentiments have changed since then. Although, South Africa's LGBTQIA+ movement has achieved great outcomes such as the legalisation of queer marriages. I would also imagine that Ditsie is extremely saddened by how much has remained the same. I would imagine that Ditsie is dismayed by the blatant homophobic violence that continues to harm the black queer community. Furthermore, I would imagine that Ditsie is disappointed in the fact that the government chooses to window dress when it comes to issues of sexuality and gender identity and has adopted neo-apartheid constitutionalism. Neo-apartheid constitutionalism refers to how the democratic constitution was not genuinely designed to secure the protection and

development of the greater black population (which is inclusive of black queers). In '*Social justice in a time of neo-apartheid constitutionalism: critiquing the anti-black economy of recognition, incorporation and distribution'*, Tshepo Madlingozi makes a persuasive evaluation, explaining how neo-apartheid constitutionalism socially excludes and racially discriminates against black people and how it preserves an anti-black economy (Madlingozi, 2017:125). Further, Madlingozi insists that South Africa's socio-political institutional arrangement functions in such a way that it plays the instrumental role of reinforcing colonial distributions of power and capabilities in society. This is because there was a victory of supposed human rights over socio-economic freedom. Yet again, I beg to ask the question – human rights for who exactly?

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Putuma's critically acclaimed body of work is substantially occupied with the intersections of memory and history, and how these two concepts complicate and inform one another (Haith, 2018:45). Throughout *Collective Amnesia* black queer feminism is primarily theorised and argued for through memory. The poet adopts remembering and forgetting as a survival mechanism and escapism. Furthermore, Putuma explores the union between memory and history as storytelling. Putuma also presents memory and history as a set of varying narratives. The notion of memory is deconstructed into three fragments, namely: *Inherited Memory*; *Buried Memory*; and *Post-memory*. People usually tend to believe the stories that have been told by those with power and resources i.e.) stories that have been published and archived. Thus, Putuma's unorthodox collection of poetry is significant because it is intent on constantly reminding the reader to be cognisant of narratives that have been othered. Said otherwise, the collection of poetry reminds the reader to realise the importance of other past and present narratives that exist but do not possess enough power to be archived. Furthermore, *Collective Amnesia* forces readers to question whose narratives were silenced or obliterated to propel those existing, authoritative narratives to the forefront. But Putuma does not only use her creative voice to critique silencing and erasure, but also imagines 'new worlds and new ways of being in them' (Boswell, 2016:9). Elsewhere, Achille Mbembe asserts that when we listen to emerging narratives by contemporary post-post-apartheid poets (Mbembe includes Putuma in this grouping), they are the 'voices of self, of affirmative self-making

in full flow, talking back sharply, and with verve, against earlier histories of denigration and dehumanization' (de Kock, 2016:51).

A crucial question that I interrogate with regards to memory is: how does Putuma use memory in theorising a black queer feminism in and for South Africa today? Firstly, it is imperative to note that the notion of 'memory' in *Collective Amnesia* 'is subject to revision' (Haith, 2018:41) and like many things in the world, memory cannot be interpreted as objective truth[30]. It is also important to discern the quandary of whose memory, and precisely whose amnesia the collection refers to. Overall, *Inherited Memory* unpacks the intergenerational, unresolved, unreliable, and traumatic memory that has been forcefully passed down. This section is cynical but also hopeful. *Buried Memory* generally invokes a feeling of pure despair but attempts not to wallow in the hopelessness. However, this morbid section does undeniably showcase a continuous cycle of depression and impossibility; ultimately leading up to the poem titled, 'Suicide' (which appears as a footnote):

> Not everyone can afford to breathe for a living (Putuma, 2017:73)

It is possible that Putuma speaks of a memory that is buried because she does not have the capacity to remember; it may be too distressing to invoke memory. For all we know, in this section Putuma intentionally insists on suppressing some of the things that she does not want to be located. This is because when you name something – you bring it to life; you resurrect it and you exhume it. Lastly, *Post-memory* encapsulates South Africa's current state of reality which is inclusive of: a false sense of democracy; the façade of black solidarity; and the subjugation of black queers, black women, and other black minorities. These three movements fuse memory as a synopsis of complex historical practices under the hands of apartheid and colonial Christianity.

The poetry in *Inherited Memory*, *Buried Memory* and *Post-memory* which some have described as 'survival poetry' (Mnthali, 2017) is illustrative of how memory can manipulate and be manipulated. Thus, Putuma's collection of poetry indeed indicates the

[30] A proposition is deemed to have objective truth when its truth conditions are satisfied without bias provoked by a conscious subject who has opinions, feelings and/or ideas.

unreliability of memory. Although *Collective Amnesia* portrays memory as being unreliable, Putuma depends on this 'unreliable memory' to make sense of the past, present and future. Toni Morrison's notion of re-memorying which is found in *Beloved* can be applied to *Collective Amnesia*. Morrison essentially argues that re-memorying is an insurgent act of imaginatively reproducing subjugated historical memory (Morrison, 1987). Moreover, Morrison argues that re-memorying in and of itself is an explanation on the disjunctures between domineering narratives of history and memory (Boswell, 2016:13).

In relation to *Collective Amnesia*, the act of re-memorying is significant because it challenges what Pumla Gqola calls 'un-remembering' (Gqola, 2010:8) or deliberate forgetting which entails political and conscious acts of rejecting subjects from history's formation. It is for this reason that re-memorying requires one to deeply introspect, look inwards and begin to question the consciousness. Perhaps for Putuma, memory or remembrance becomes a portal for generating a sense of hope for those dehumanised by colonial apartheid. For instance, in 'Black Joy', she 're-memories' her childhood. 'Black Joy' is a poem that demonstrates how Putuma attempts to push through the darkness or black pessimistic life by channeling positivity and trying to capture small pockets of joy that relate to black living:

…

Isn't it funny?

That when they ask about black childhood,

all they are interested in is our pain,

as if the joy-parts were accidental

I write love poems, too,

but

you only want to see my mouth torn open in protest,

as if my mouth were a wound

with pus and gangrene

for joy. (Putuma, 2017:12)

Although Putuma attempts to capture the small pockets of joy relating to black living, she remains exceptionally critical of the poverty porn[31] that others have inflicted on the concept of 'black joy'. People have turned what she has known to be real black joy growing up into a mockery. Elsewhere, Putuma reiterates the concept of black joy in 'Hand-Me-Downs'. 'Hand-Me-Downs' denotes the commonalities between black households and how they survive passing time. Here, Putuma re-memories black joy as an abstraction that is governed by limitations and poverty:

> In January,
>
> birthdays are celebrated
>
> with a bucket of KFC, a simple cake and Coca-Cola.
>
> (Putuma, 2017:14).

And to some degree, 'Hand-Me-Downs' equates black joy to a sense of feeling fresh or newness. In many black communities, newness is a measure of dignity. Nonetheless, it is vital to think of what the notion of newness convincingly means for the black condition in a heteronormative white supremist world. Putuma asserts that:

> *New* marked us, shaped our behavior and postures.
>
> *New* created an illusion that some had more than what they flashed. (Putuma, 2017:15)

However, '*new* was (also) and adjective for anxiety' (Putuma, 2017:16). Thus, the notion of newness reveals a contradiction within itself that proves that black joy cannot

[31] Poverty porn can be described as any type of media or person who exploits the poor's living condition by not challenging the problems behind dehumanising poverty but instead by presenting poverty or consuming poverty as a kind of entertainment. Poverty porn is highly toxic because it is deceptive and often creates a racist binary between the white viewer (who is perceived as the saviour) and the black or brown subject (who is perceived as the victim).

always be likened to the idea of newness. There is a sense of delusion with regards to black joy and newness under the black condition. This is because *new* does not always mean *brand new;* the idea of newness is precarious due to debt and black tax[32]; the yearning for *new* has fostered nasty habits (rooted in exploitative capitalistic ways); and the idea of newness has often been matched against whiteness or white norms. At its core, *Collective Amnesia* is a series of Putuma re-memorying history to validate her and other's existence as black people who have suffered under the hands of Christian and colonial apartheid. It is also to affirm the existence of black women who come from a traumatised lineage that have endured pain under brutal patriarchy and misogynoir[33]. Further, it is to proclaim the existence of black queers who have suffered under rampant homophobia in this land. By re-memorying history, Putuma embarks on the imaginative work of recalling historical injustices, while reshaping current gendered, queer, and feminist discourses through developing ideas and definitions of what holds as intellectual and political.

***

I would like to believe that our collective memory and forgetting determines the nature of our current and future beings. Upon reading Ditsie's, Muholi's and Putuma's work, I realise that constructing a black queer feminist poetics in and for South Africa today seemingly requires an extensive exhumation of history, recalling and remembering. Hence, memory and trauma are integral ideas of a black queer feminist poetics. Yet the act of forgetting, feeding off memory and the state of our collective amnesia clouds the possibilities of an insurgent black queer feminist dream. Moreover, *Somnyama Ngonyama*, *Simon & I* and *Collective Amnesia* retrace history and memory to pay homage (especially for Muholi), to confront traumas head on and possibly to begin the work of healing or releasing old wounds. The way in which Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie retrieve, retain and reclaim history directly impacts how they traverse their traumas. On the other hand, I see there exists a catch-22 in which the effects of the traumas that the artists narrate about, influences memory and how history is retrieved and reclaimed. Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma remind that a black queer feminism is premised somewhat on

[32] Black tax is the income/financial assistance that black professionals or black middle class give to their families (who become their unofficial dependants). The expense of black tax entails one to distribute their disposable income not only among their nuclear, immediate family but to their extended relatives too. Moreover, it affects the ability for numerous black professionals to save and accumulate generational wealth.
[33] Misogynoir is term coined by Moya Bailey (an African American black queer feminist and scholar) and refers to misogyny aimed towards black women.

narrating memory and trauma until the past stops tearing their presents and futures apart.

***

Dignity

> '*Please remember, especially in these times of group-think and the right on chorus, that no person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended.'* – Alice Walker from, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983)

What is the context of living in a world that is so uninhabitable and undignified for black people, for queers and for black women? In this section, I read Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma to review the relationship between the creative articulations of black queer life and dignity as a notion that has not always offered itself to the black experience. I read these artists in this way to begin the work of presenting dignity as a formative idea and contour of black queer feminist poetics. To differing extents and pertaining to Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma, dignity speaks to a poetics of displacement and humanising black queerness. In this regard, I mean to say that dignity is explored on a spectrum from one point of departure/arrival which is 'displacement' to another point of departure/arrival which is 'humanising black queerness'. It is of interest to try and fathom how these three aesthetic cultural producers see or may not view themselves as worthy, honoured, or esteemed. And furthermore, how does the way in which Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma dignify themselves, translate into their artistic works and for a black queer feminist poetics? For Ditsie, dignity is equated to the attainment of constitutional human rights; for Muholi it is the recognition of self, which is why they undertake a regal persona; lastly, for Putuma, dignity is resisting repressive ideological norms and going against the grain of respectability politics. The incompleteness of the South African black queer feminist archive (due to the suppression of black creative expression during colonial apartheid) results in the undignified reality of being black, queer and woman. Thus, there is a need for one to always confront the supplementing of the historical record. The black queer feminist archive is not just incomplete but also continues to be subjugated. Historically speaking, dignity has become a commodified concept in which those in power (the masters) hold out and steal it (the dignity) from the disenfranchised (the slaves). Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma use their aesthetic works to reclaim a fresh sense of black queer

dignity that has been obliterated by what Frantz Fanon refers to the radical dehumanisation of the Other (black, non-European, colonial slave etc.) (Fanon, 1961). How can the ones who are not called black, queer or woman make a claim upon these groups' dignity and consent to that calling which withholds and projects? In the context of South Africa, the othering of the black queer community can be traced to the economic and political accumulation of blackness within the economic and political logics of settler colonialism (which was founded on slavery and forced labour) which is definitive of the modern world. In some way that I have not thoroughly thought through yet or coherently conceived, I believe that the aesthetic texts of Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma manage the aggression, invasion and dehumanisation that white settlers have imposed in South Africa. This is the white settler who unsurprisingly passes phobic judgements prior to any encounter on the environment they invade. In reading *Somnyama Ngonyama*, *Simon & I* and *Collective Amnesia*, I am also invested in thinking about a particular type of dignity and self-respecting performance in public.

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Othering and overt racism experienced in Italy during a residency in 2012 inspired the series' first portrait (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:177). Elsewhere, in a conversation with Renée Mussai, Muholi explained the reason why such an intimate collection such as *Somnyama Ngonyama* exists: In December 2017, the renowned image of Hector Pieterson during the June 16, 1976 Soweto uprisings (captured by Sam Nzima) which also happens to be one of the most iconic photographs in South African history, was re-presented by Selborne College in East London. The initial image portrays 13-year-old, Pieterson's lifeless body being carried by fellow student, Mbuyisa Makhubo, alongside Pieterson's sister, Antoinette Sithole. In the recreated image, the faces of Makhubo and Sithole have been replaced with dog heads; and the head of Pieterson has been removed. According to Muholi, if a historic photograph can be transformed into a distasteful caricature, then what have we learned in over twenty years of democracy with concern to the ethics of image production (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:178)?

Seemingly, recognition, respect, and relevance (notions which all speak to a sense of dignity) are recurring themes in the series. Conceivable by the way that the Umlazi born artist has baptised majority of the self-portraits with Zulu names, illustrating the

significance of naming. As a matter of fact, Muholi states that 'I think in Zulu when I shoot' (Muholi, Mussai & Azuah, 2018:189). Muholi's body of work arguably navigates between 'structures of recognition' which determine the conceptualisations of queer subjectivities.[34] Certainly, it is within the realm of interruption – a zone between invisibility and recognition – that Muholi's most influential images are located. Furthermore, Muholi's work toys with transgressive and disruptive attitudes in the sense that they invoke avantgarde/eccentric tropes of queer and feminist representations. When assessing the various regal personas that Muholi refashions, I think of Lorde's notion of 'outsiders within', that tells us that we inhabit several positionalities and are constituted by diverse identities within a particular context (Lorde, 1984). Through the self-portraitures in *Somnyama Ngonyama*, Muholi also possibly envisions a portal that brings to life a world where no black queer person will be subject to dehumanisation – this statement is of interest to me as I continue to write this section.

Somnyama Ngonyama counters previous projects by posing as a project of reclaiming a sense of self a radical reimagining of an alternative possibility of self. The dynamic visual activist who previously worked as a factory labourer and then as a hairstylist, initially undertook photography as a documentary practice. For almost two decades Muholi has been resolute in using photography to defend LGBTQIA+ rights which are constantly under assault in South Africa. In their past work such as *Only Half the Picture*, the survivors of hate crimes articulate how people rape to 'correct' and punish lesbians/queer women in South Africa. 'Curative rapes, as they are called, are perpetrated against us in order to make us into 'real' and 'true' African women appropriately feminine, mothers, men's property'' (Muholi, 2009:19). Muholi's previous collection asks us to think otherwise about how we might grasp subjectivity and sexuality. And this is not limited to discerning what lesbians are or may be. Additionally, the collection discloses to us that to be lesbian does not equate to performing desire in a way that transforms a core prerequisite being that is 'woman' (Thomas, 2010:430). An examination of Muholi's artwork so far divulges the intensity of their devotion to constructing a visual archive of black queer experience. Archives carry substantial weight. What is comprised in the

[34] See Parveen Adams' *Emptiness of the Image*. I embrace the term 'structures of recognition' from Parveen Adams, a psychoanalytic theorist. The phrase refers to socially constructed means of viewing by which one becomes distinguishable as a subject. And, the term refers to the psychic dimension of the functions of the gaze.

archive forever moulds what we think we were and consequently what we may become (Pollock, 2007:13). Muholi's artistic archive fits into the narrative of how the dearth of women's histories in world archives has cast the idea of the human on the prototype of a privileged masculinity. Indeed, Muholi's visual archives become a location of struggle for legitimacy (Thomas, 2010:431). Muholi is interested in an entry into the archive that will ensure visibility away from any spaces that 'allow' for erasure. Pivotal here is the query of what the archive demands for itself. In other words, what are the requirements of admission into the archive of legibility, or how can one enter Muholi's archive legitimately?

The historical references in *Somnyama Ngonyama* are not accidental. Undeniably, the series portrays a performative conversation with apartheid's racist machinery which intended to diminish the subjectivity and humanity of all black people. Muholi's imagery is complexly directed towards the extensive history of colonial photography of black bodies and faces, and the attempts of black intellectuals and artist to project counter-images. Through the performance of reclaiming self-respect, *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a testimony to the complicated nature of black queer experience in post-apartheid apartheid South Africa and simultaneously demands for political recognition (Thomas, 2010:434-435). Therefore, the series is crucial for self-representation and self-recognition that validates a sense of dignity for black queers and black women. For instance, *Bona* (a self-portrait exhibited in Charlottesville, Virginia, 2015) shows Muholi looking at a reflection of herself through a mirror. Here, they use the mirror as a vessel to truly see themself; the vanity displayed in *Bona* drives the conversation pertaining to what self-expression can signify for dignity.

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'I'm not political ammunition, I want human rights' (*Simon & I*, 2002); these are the commanding words of Nkoli which speak to the ideals of freedom, autonomy and dignity. For Nkoli, who was born in 1957 in Soweto and raised in Sebokeng, activism became a way of life and a means of trying to change the world, or rather, his immediate world. The basis of Ditsie's and Nkoli's activist work occurred at a crucial time in South Africa when the system of apartheid 'ended', and the democratic transition began. It was during this period that the country's leaders attempted to strategize and envision what an 'inclusive' South Africa would look like. Black queer people were significantly erased from

discussions on the future of a democratic South Africa; black queer people were not seen nor heard. Ditsie has thought-provoking ideas of how she perceives queerness. For Ditsie, queerness is related to the conceptualisation of: what does it mean to be truly free and to be Bev? Moreover, what did it mean to attain dignity and freedom in the 1990s? Ditsie and Nkoli were constitutional campaigners who fought for constitutional recognition (i.e. they fought for queer dignity to be appreciated in the highest law of the land)[35]. This was radical at the time, even though today we would recognise the limits to, and co-options of, a liberal politics of rights and recognition. As a result, black queer feminists are not merely trying to attain rights. It can be contended that black queer feminists are currently concerned with the prospects of escaping intergenerational trauma, moving forward towards healing and (re)discovering joy.

Sentiments of *recognition (the act of been seen)* and *dignity* are constantly referred to in the film (whether implicitly or explicitly). Surprisingly, I do not recall the exact moments where Nkoli or Ditsie speak on the notions of recognition or dignity. However, I find that these two notions (dignity and recognition) become predominant themes in the film's storyline. South African queer activists sought the recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights in the democratic constitution. Black queers sought recognition in social and political black spaces, and queers sought for the government to recognise the need to legally and socially protect the queer community against homophobic violence. With regards to the notion of dignity, the black queer community simply fought to be humanised; or to be viewed as worthy of respect and to be able to navigate society without being concerned for their well-being and safety. Evidently in *Simon & I*, to acknowledge and revere the black condition and the gay condition is of utmost importance in fighting the oppressive regime of apartheid and post-apartheid apartheid. Nkoli declares that, 'In South Africa I am oppressed because I am a black man, and I am oppressed because I am gay. So, when I fight for my freedom, I must fight against both oppressions' (*Simon & I*, 2002). The gay rights, anti-apartheid and HIV/AIDS activist gave precedence to the attainment of freedom to the extent that he advocated for freedom now and education later. Thus, the rigorous activist work of Ditsie and Nkoli can be considered as a project of freedom. This project was possibly conceived without any real long-

[35] The Equality Clause [9(3)] in the South African Bill of Rights and Constitution bars any form of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

standing plan, vision or ambition beyond the attainment of queer constitutional rights. But, nonetheless, it remains a significant project of freedom.

Ditsie and Nkoli's insurgent queer social movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s teaches us lessons of our present condition and how we possibly ought to shape the future. *Simon & I* ought to be a narrative about justice. However, there is a fine line between achieving justice versus achieving transformation in what ends up looking like diversity. In Nkoli and Ditsie's attempt to achieve justice through global neo-liberal political engines such as the UN, were they in fact duped into achieving diversity targets? In the words of Angela Davis, 'I have a hard time accepting diversity as a synonym for justice. Diversity is a corporate strategy' and 'diversity without structural transformation simply brings those who were previously excluded into a system as racist, misogynist, as it was before' (Eckert, 2015).

I am interested in Ditsie's articulation of a black queer feminism as underpinned by dignity and whether the politics she engaged in can save us. Ditsie (who 'came out' to family and friends in 1978) captured various political opportunities afforded to her to galvanise the queer women's human rights movement. One of the opportunities came in the form of delivering a political message on adopting resolutions to recognise sexual diversity, acknowledging women's sexual autonomy and tackling LGBTQIA+ issues/rights at the 1995 4th United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women (a major international platform) held in Beijing. Ditsie's main argument was that, when a woman's sexual autonomy is disregarded, women are stripped of their dignity and not recognised as completely self-determining human beings. Moreover, the conference raised relevant questions (at the time) pertaining to if all women were included within the domain of human rights application, or were some women excluded due to belonging to an unrecognised or shunned minority? (Day, 1996:1). Although the conference raised relevant questions, many homophobic delegations positioned homosexuality as an abomination. Furthermore, bigoted governments such as Cote d'Ivoire, Libya, Sudan, Nigeria, Uganda, Senegal, Ghana, and Benin were given the platform to dehumanise women and queer folk. In fact, bigoted governments that hid under the banner of conservativism revealed that they would reject human rights to women who did not obey to culturally or religiously 'accepted' sexual and reproductive behaviour (Day 1996:1). The conference also revealed that the opposition to queer women's rights is not only

engrossed in disturbing bigotry but is also robust, organised and determined. It is an indignity to black queer feminists that women's sexual autonomy was even a topic of debate or coercion.

Ditsie's global lobbying for a more inclusive and insightful queer feminism did not succeed because the pro-queer constitutional and queer women's rights that she advocated for were just not enough to secure the 'liberation' of queer folk today. This I say because of structural homophobic violence that continues to persist and display itself as anti-queer hate crimes such as lesbian murders or lesbian 'corrective' rapes. By engaging with a political institution such as the UN, Ditsie was subconsciously performing an inauthentic politics because of the institution's neoliberalism. At its core, the UN is arguably a neoliberal machine that is driven by exploitative capitalism and structural adjustments which results in inequality, poverty, and wealth disparity. This is an attack on human dignity. The act of Ditsie performing her political beliefs on the UN's stage did not result in redemption for herself or the cause she was fighting for. Ultimately, what I infer from *Simon & I* is that politics and human rights activism may not redeem us due to its arguably performative and pretentious nature, but the reclamation of black queer dignity may begin to do the work. Instead of turning to politics and the world for saving, perhaps, we (black queer feminists) are the ones we have always been looking for and need to turn to ourselves for saving. Maybe a starting point for black queer feminists is that we need to look inwards for nourishment and continue expanding the expression of who we are.

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Putuma's poetry lies within an African diasporan sensibility which realises the weight and spiritual power of utterance. In fact, thoughts, and words in and of themselves are actions - I am curious to comprehend what spiritual sensibility underpins this sentiment. Of importance is to assess the power of language and how it reinforces self-respect and dignity. Generally, speech and written words should be highly regarded because of the degree to which they influence behaviour and institutions. When thinking about the power of utterances and spiritual sensibilities, the Dogon people of Mali come to mind. In fact, the Dogon community probably provides one of the most intricate and striking examples of the power of words. I also reflect on *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture* (1961), where Janheinz Jahn describes the impact of language in terms of

the well-known Dogon cultural concept of 'Nummo'[36] (Jahn, 1961). The Dogon people are an ethnic community residing in Mali with a population of between 400 000 and 800 000 people (Shoup, 2011:86). Moreover, the Dogon are popularly known for their architecture, mask dances, wooden sculptures and religious traditions.

Philip Peek's essay, *The Power of Words in Verbal Arts* discusses the way in which the complex density of Dogon thought is dedicated to 'the Word' and its intertwined symbols and metaphors (Peek, 1981:25). According to Dogon belief, all stages of creation are connected to particular words. Further, the Dogon's daily life and world view is articulated in metaphors aligning to speech which is a crucial feature of human social engagement (Peek, 1981:26). Nummo is a life force or source which is associated with water, fire and the earth (Jahn, 1961). As a life force, Nummo acts as a unity of spiritual and physical fluidity, infiltrating everything, giving life to everything, and causing everything (Jahn, 1961). If we assume that humans have power over the world, then it is humans that command the life force. Nummo says that through the word that humans receive; they share it with other people and that self-fulfils the meaning of life (Jahn, 1961). Profoundly, to state all the activities of human beings in nature relies on the productive power of *the word*. As the Dogon comprehend it, 'to utter a name is to bring into existence a form and a habitation – the best form and the most suitable habitation to receive the life-force of the being invoked' (Finnegan, 1969:539). Some of the most precise examples of the independent existence of words stem from the Dogon (Peek, 1981:28).

Through her poetry, Putuma embodies a politics of resistance. In *Collective Amnesia*, Putuma uses the power of poetic expression, language, and words as a means of resistance and harnessing dignity that has rarely been given to black queer women. The power of words is not simply an abstract notion. Putuma's words have great meaning and force – she does not construct the words idly and one cannot receive them frivolously. Furthermore, this collection of poetry questions the harmful inauthenticity of equating one's self-worth or self-respect to stringent Christian values. Putuma has a complicated relationship with the Christian religion, God, and the church, which has both sustained and suffocated her. It is worthwhile to unpack Putuma's layered relationship with Christianity and how it has impeded on her humanity because religion, essentially,

[36] The Nummo are ancestral spirits praised by the Dogon.

delineates the meaning and rubrics for ways to be human in time and place (Chidester, 2005). David Chidester defines religion as the:

> Discourses and practices that negotiate what it is to be human both in relation to the superhuman and in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman. Since being a person also requires being in a place, religion entails discourses and practices for created sacred space, as a zone of inclusion but also as a boundary for excluding others. Accordingly, religion…is the activity of being human in relation to superhuman transcendence and sacred inclusion, which inevitably involves dehumanisation and exclusion (Chidester, 2005:viii).

Collective Amnesia denotes the rejection of black queer lives within the black church. Here, I argue that Christianity performed in the black church has dehumanised a black queer existence. Please bear in mind that I do not intend to imply that the black church is monolithic, any more than black people are monolithic – I am completely cognisant that there are variations. For instance, it would be unfair of me not to mention the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC)[37] lead by the late Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso (a gay man) who preached about a God who loves all human beings regardless of their gender identities or sexual orientation (Reid, 2011). But, when I talk or think about the black church, I am primarily thinking about the hostile traditional black church that is focused with a fundamentalist and literalist reading of the bible. I am thinking about those who are invested in deeming queerness as inherently sinful. I am talking about the kind of church that Putuma grew up in and birthed her but also continuously dismissed and demeaned her personhood.

Danez Smith (a black queer, non-binary poet, and writer) describes the black church as an emotionally tumultuous and psychologically damaging space (Melton, 2016). This is in the sense that, the church requires black queer people to remain fractured as a way of existing within the church space which is nurturing in some ways and oppressive in others. It is imperative to ask how black queer beings work to navigate this space. Black queer beings are either working to keep their sexuality hidden to move within the church

[37] The Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) is a Johannesburg based church grounded in Pentecostal worship. The church was founded in 1994 for gay and lesbian Africans in search of a spiritual home.

space or find ways of divorcing themselves from sexuality in order to exist in that space (Melton, 2016). It is also crucial to grasp how religious rhetoric can dictate the ways in which black queer individuals rotate between moments of sexual expression and sexual repression (Roach, 1996). 'Growing Up Black & Christian' reveals the severe Christian indoctrination that Putuma chose to unlearn. The poem expresses how, 'The first man you are taught to revere is a white man' and 'the gospel is how whiteness breaks into our homes and brings us to our knees' (Putuma, 2017:23). These are sentiments that Putuma struggles to reconcile with her current being. Possibly because she gazes at Christianity as something that has largely pacified black thinking and black self-determination, which are critical elements that humanise people. Perhaps, what Riggins Earl call the anthropological problem of Christianity for black people is what Putuma attempts to convey in *Collective Amnesia* (Earl, 2004). The anthropological problem of Christianity for black people refers to a black body attempting to obtain a whitened soul, made possible through Jesus' blood (Earl, 2004). The language of perceiving sin as blackness and working within prevailing discourses of sexism, racism and homophobia operate in ways that institutionalise the exploitation of black bodies while exoticising them.

With clear intention, Putuma strategically re-appropriates biblical narratives in order to comment on contemporary moments in which she exists. For instance, 'Promise Land' denotes how even though Putuma has rejected Christianity in her 'new life' (which is represented by her life in the southern suburbs), she continues to use Christianity (which supposedly once sustained her) and Christian metaphors as some sort of a guiding compass:

> I was taught how to rebuke the devil.
> Taught how to say amen even if I did not agree.
> Taught how to clasp my hands together and summon heaven.
> Taught how to turn stone into bread.
> How to rise like Lazarus.
>
> Tonight,
> I will ascend like Jesus,

walk on water like Peter,

just to prove the weight of my faith (Putuma, 2017:49).

Elsewhere, in 'No Easter Sunday for Queers' Putuma directly addresses her father who is a pastor and carries shame over his daughter's sexual identity. This poem adequately encapsulates the existential crisis that Putuma holds with Christian convictions. It is as if her existence and humanity amount to nothing under the Christian creed. Fundamentally, the same Christian religion that sustained her whilst growing up will not claim her as a queer woman. According to Putuma, this reality is even worse in death because Christianity considers her an abomination. The poet ultimately asks, why there is no Easter Sunday dedicated in remembrance of queer bodies when lesbians are crucified like Christ (Putuma, 2017:30):

Daddy,

- If I were crucified
- And dumped in a tomb for three days
- And rose again as a headline
- Would you preach about me?

…

Daddy,

- Would you even preach at all? (Putuma, 2017:32-33)

The relationship between the black church and black queers illustrates the tension of living in a world 'but not being of it and never fully embraced by it' (Crawley, 2008:211). Further, in the black church, black queer individuals are gawked upon as sins, much 'less comfortable than horror', and condemned for their denied existence, aesthetic excesses and are vainly laughed at (Moten, 2003:65). Throughout Collective Amnesia, Putuma narrates the nihilistic relationship that she has to the church where black queer bodies have been imagined as ungodly and unholy. Upon reading Putuma's text, I come to the awareness that the black church is preoccupied with constraining the freedom and life of black queer people at the expense of justice-seeking and truthful dialogue. Through the eyes of the black church, black queer beings are subjected to humiliation, chastisement and are upheld to public inspection. What I struggle to comprehend is why many black queer people continue to go to church and cite it as a place of salvation or

liberty when in actuality, they are treated as the disgrace of the church. However, I can almost understand how Putuma tries to find her deliverance at bars in Long Street, in the lyrics of Beyoncé and Rihanna's tunes or in an urban Cape Town queer club like Zero21 (Putuma, 2017:28). Putuma experiences a catharsis in which the nightlife and the club become a twisted sanctuary for her. What does this insinuate about the emancipatory praxis of the nightlife and club? A catharsis refers to a cleansing, releasing, or purging which usually occurs in response to the past as a means of trying to resolve past traumas (Crawley, 2008:217). Moreover, a catharsis can mimic terror; the term infers something has gone wrong and needs to be confronted and rectified. Seeing as the queerphobic rhetoric of the black church results in low self-esteem, low self-respect and self-hatred; it is of value to attempt to ascertain how black queer beings survive with their reality of abjection and quotidian 'unholy' existence (Crawley, 2008:203).

Significantly, Putuma confronts the black queer woman's historical negation of dignity by refusing to subscribe to respectability politics. This refusal arguably enables a radical and progressive political expression. 'Respectability politics' is a term coined by 19th century historian and professor, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her 1993 book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Higginbotham was concerned with the revival of the Black Baptist Church and how it transformed into a place of self-help for black folk, particularly for black women who used the church as a site of resistance against dehumanisation especially in the form of racism (Higginbotham, 1993). Pertaining to black American history, respectability politics was originally used in the context of black women and their attempts to remove themselves from the disrespected and stereotypical characteristics (i.e. violence, intellectual inferiority, immorality, laziness etc.) of their communities (Paisley, 2003:213). Differently said, respectability politics is overwhelmingly characterised as what occurs when oppressed or marginalised groups are told (by themselves or the oppressor) that to face better treatment from privileged and powerful people, the oppressed must 'behave' better. It can be asserted that the politics of respectability continue to manipulate the behaviour of marginalised black people presently who attain rights and status by complying to hegemonic norms of what it entails to be respectable (Patton, 2014). But what does it even mean for *Collective Amnesia* (a creative articulation of South African black queer life) to lack 'respectability'? I suspect Putuma tries to gauge if fighting the war against respectability politics will lead to a physical, sexual or psychological

freedom that one would be proud of claiming. Perhaps for Putuma, the refusal of respectability politics stems from the following idea: the effort to control and constrain black women's sexuality and bodies is where oppression comes from. Therefore, acts of self-expression that revise the very terms of dignity are a resistance to respectability politics.

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As I simultaneously reflect on Muholi's, Ditsie's and Putuma's texts and gather my thoughts on this section, I am confronted with the terrifying reality that a black queer feminist poetics may be stuck in an impossible infinity loop of attempting to reconstruct and regain the black queer feminist dignity that the slave, colonial and apartheid machinery has stripped. Of importance is whether black queer feminists are operating in bad faith by not doing 'more' to resist racist, queerphobic and sexist dehumanisation. According to Mabogo More (a South African philosopher who works in the area of Black Existentialism) bad faith describes the occurrence in which black people, underneath the constriction of racist apartheid, embrace self-deception, adopt false values and forsake their inborn freedom, therefore acting inauthentically (More, 2017). Bad faith is connected to a distorted sense of self-identity which subsequently results in alienation. For example, pertaining to the black oppressed condition, numerous black people accept that to remain oppressed may be their destiny in life. Perhaps, black people say to themselves that they have no option other than to stay in the 'oppressed condition' as they cannot escape it. Though, one can argue that being unable to escape the oppressed condition is not true, because we are all inherently free. Moreover, one can contend that we are freer than we believe we are – in the sense that we could possibly reinvent ourselves. Is looking towards the artistic, poetic, and filmic archive a way to do the work of reigniting as well as reinventing a black queer dignity and resisting dehumanisation placing an unfair burden on artists such as Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma? Or perhaps is it these artists' duty to pioneer the ideas of self-respect and dignity due to the social capital they hold. Furthermore, escaping ridicule and dehumanisation requires high self-esteem. But it is worth questioning, whether, even with a sense of self-esteem, can we fully escape the ridicule? Black queer feminist poetics as culturally produced by the likes of Muholi, Ditsie and Putuma may be the most promising answer to escape and confront the indignity and humiliation faced by black queers because they do the powerful work of representing, honouring and humanising black queer feminist beings. Moreover, it is

interesting to note that by seeking self-worth and dignity, a strong sense of pride is realised. The dignity that I speak of here feeds on how we see ourselves as black queer feminists. Pride (a feeling which usually manifests physically) is realised in the sense that this dignity I speak of has the potential to nourish our self-image.

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Pride as a Catalyst for Joy: An Un/imaginable Utopia?

When I think of black queer pride and joy manifested through aesthetic texts my mind immediately races to a scene in *Paris is Burning* where Brooke and Carmen Xtravaganza (participants of the ballroom scene and members of the House of Xtravaganza) are having blissful fun at the beach. Brooke, who is a transwoman, expresses how she has had nose reconstruction surgery, cheekbones lifted, a chin implant and breast implants but most importantly she has had gender reassignment surgery. Moreover, Brooke happily expresses that she is as free as the wind that is blowing on the beach. As the scene concludes, both Brooke and Carmen sing, 'I am what I am, I am my own special creation' (*Paris is Burning*, 1990). The iconic 1990 documentary film showcases the Latinx and African American drag ball scene in New York City during the late 1980s. The film encapsulates the DIY (do-it-yourself) realm of competition and pageantry between queers, drag queens, voguers, and transgender woman of Harlem. Ball culture is depicted as aspirational, as house mothers[38] such as Pepper LaBeija, Willi Ninja and Venus Xtravanganza refashion mainstream glamour in their unique way. The ballroom space served as a blissful haven for those who were devastatingly exposed to homophobia, transphobia, poverty, and violence. It is also expressed in the film that, 'if everyone went to balls and did less drugs, it'd be a fun world, wouldn't it?' (*Paris is Burning*, 1990). One participant in the film alludes that in the ball scene one erases all their mistakes, flaws, and giveaways to make their illusion perfect. Another expresses the slight duality pertaining their ability to be themselves and still blend in, is realness in that space. The general attitude is that – in a ballroom you can be anything you want to be. Even if it is temporary, a sense of pride and joy is realised in the ballroom space. Moreover, a sense of freedom is brought to fruition. When I speak about freedom, I am talking about the freedom to be, the freedom to do and the freedom to design who we really want to be or are meant to be in this physical world. I am also particularly talking about the creative, cultural, political, and spiritual freedom in which black queer feminists can live 'liveable' lives.

[38] A house mother (in the ballroom culture) refers to the matriarch of the house (chosen family), usually a 'legend' in the ballroom scene. A house mother usually provides safety and undertakes a mentoring duty for the members of the house.

In this part of the research report, I begin to show (through the work of Putuma, Muholi and Ditsie) that the relationship between pride, joy and freedom is a core idea of a black queer feminist poetics. It is meaningful to explore the imaginings of freedom through the lens of Muholi's, Ditsie's and Putuma's texts as their work provides thinking for a black queer feminist liberation. Here, I contend that to attain a black queer feminist freedom, one needs to claim pride within self which could ignite a joy which is required to feel liberated. From the scenes in *Paris is Burning* and the aesthetic texts of Ditsie, Muholi and Putuma, I can deduce that the black queer feminist being is both real and imagined. Therefore, the pride and more so the joy experienced by black queer feminist beings is also real and imagined. Ditsie, Muholi and Putuma all theorise the concept of pride in a thought-provoking way. Black queer pride which serves as a catalyst to black queer joy as seen in Ditsie's, Muholi's and Putuma's work originates from a point of resistance and cannot exist without struggle. There seems to exist an opposing and complementary dichotomy with regards to fighting repression and how that exhumes feelings of pride and subsequently joy which are key ingredients for the fulfilment of black queer freedom. Perhaps pride and joy that is rooted in pain and struggle will only lead us to a deceptive sense of freedom. Moving out of shadows of suppression and away from margins of inferiority arguably equates to joy for Ditsie. Examining the fruits of her activist labour lends Ditsie a sense of happiness and fulfilment (even if it is temporary). I delve into Ditsie's engagement with pride, joy, and freedom later in the section.

In reading *Collective Amnesia*, I assert that Putuma undergoes a personal journey of embracing pride as she abandons her rigid old life but she does not perceive joy as attainable due to her depressed reality that the black queer experience is rooted in white Christian colonial violence. In attempting to understand the value of pride being a catalyst for joy, Putuma struggles to navigate between the concepts of black queer feminist despair and black queer feminist joy. For instance, with regards to black queer despair, the poem, 'Twenty-one Ways of Leaving' illustrates how Putuma has extended herself to love in destructive behaviours, which has arguably left her in a constant state of nervousness. She says: "20. Not every poem ends with you/ 21. I do not find tragedy romantic at all," and ends the poem with "*I love you.*/ But/ I'd rather be alive" (Putuma, 2017:44-45).

In contrast, the poem, 'Coming Home' narrates Putuma falling in love and exploring sexually with another woman. Putuma discovers herself spiritually and mentally and finally comes home to herself: "I didn't know coming could be an act of survival too" (Putuma, 2017:38)

Pertaining to *Somnyama Ngonyama*, I believe the visual activist is not necessarily concerned with the attainment of joy (however it may look) but is more fixated with fulfilling a self-defined metamorphosis that can possibly lead to joy and as a consequent, freedom. A significant portion of Muholi's work, which is exceptionally bold (as seen by the use of their bright eyes, darkened skin and in the way they embrace a regal persona), encourages the claiming of pride pertaining to who we are as black women. Muholi's metamorphosis (which can be read on multiple levels) is intertwined with African vernacular culture and invites spirituality and magic. Furthermore, Muholi's metamorphosis portrays how a major part of achieving human freedom is reliant on reforming or transforming the mind. This metamorphosis is underpinned by the idea that it is possible to imagine emancipated futures for those whose pasts have been intentionally erased and whose energies have as an aftermath been engrossed with tracing their legitimate histories. Whilst undergoing the metamorphosis, Muholi studies the narratives and lived experiences of black people in the present and past and reanalyses the narratives to construct fresh truths outside the superior cultural narrative. Muholi essentially labours to reclaim forgotten perspectives or forgotten identities that have been neglected and subverted. The artist also labours to align the African diaspora with its past chronicles and knowledge of racialised beings – such an act (alongside other acts of labour conducted by Muholi) ought to result in a liberation of sort.

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The year is 1999, music is blaring, and the streets of Johannesburg are packed, buzzing, and filled with euphoric electricity – it is the 10th Pride celebration. This parade served as a massive tribute to Nkoli, in which people celebrated and unveiled a new street name, *The Simon Nkoli Corner*, named after the activist and situated in Hillbrow. At the parade we see over twenty thousand queer folk and allies, clothed in colourful and eccentric garments, walk, sing, and dance through the vibrant city in jubilation. Ditsie

documents the event with her video camera and celebrates Pride with her girlfriend. She even displays loving public affection by making out with her girlfriend at the back of a parade van. This was a radical and defiant act of queer politics, even in 1999 and even in a country like South Africa which was constitutionally and supposedly meant to be pro-black and pro-queer. The parade encounters queerphobic Christians who spew hate speech and describe queer folk as wicked. But even the insufferable anti-gay Christians are unable to dampen the lively spirits of the day. In fact, the film shows how queers assert themselves and their existence at the parade by declaring that they are not going to go anywhere (*Simon & I*, 2002). Although chaos erupts with the arrival of the Christian bigots and other cynics such as the South Africa's conservative media who at the time referred to Pride as an outrageous procession, there is an overwhelming sense of pride (i.e. self-regard and honour) which translates into joy (i.e. fulfilment and pleasure).

However, the successful 1990 Lesbian and Gay Pride March organised by GLOW and led by Ditsie and Nkoli was the first time that South Africa could ever 'realistically' imagine, dream or hope for the prospects of a long-lasting multi-racial and multi-cultural queer liberation and queer joy. The combination of Ditsie and Nkoli's wit, charm and wisdom inspired this movement. Here, Pride was a political protest and a celebration of queer existence. At the march, Ditsie passionately exclaimed, 'we are proud of who we are, and we want to show the world that we are proud' (*Simon & I*, 2002). GLOW (which had members of various races) was not overtly pioneering for the freedom of black queers or a black liberation. Thus, black members from GLOW ran the risk of blackness becoming something that they would be alienated from. Nevertheless, for Ditsie, the struggle for freedom has always been about deliberately prioritising the black and queer condition.

Over the years since the inception of Pride March, seeds of doubt have been sowed that impede on the stride for the realisation of authentic pride and joy for black queers. In a nostalgic open letter addressed to her queer family, Ditsie shares her resentment and desolation towards the debates, denials and recriminations pertaining to Pride. The Pride that seventeen-year-old Ditsie birthed alongside the likes of Paul Mokgethi, Lesley Mtambo and Phybia Dlamini had a vision of freedom and ensured inclusivity (by making the event free) as well as accessibility (by providing transport in Johannesburg CBD). However, that changed during the mid-1990s, when the Pride committee which

encompassed mainly of white men proposed that Pride March should be changed to Pride Parade (Ditsie, 2019). Paul Stobbs (the committee chair at the time), reasoned that queer people had attained freedom and there was therefore no need to continue protesting. The nature of Pride shifting from a vigorous political movement born from a collective of intersectional struggles to a depoliticised, elite, racist, suburban, profit driven, whitewashed and frivolous event makes me question the kind of pride that is currently being realised for black queers and what that means of the attainment of real black queer joy.

Overall, the term 'pride' has experienced semantic drifts. In a traditional sense, the connotations linked to pride are pessimistic and not something to be proud of. Pride can be associated with self-conceit, arrogance, a superiority complex and even has a biblical reference to one of the seven deadly sins. However, the modern queer rights movement[39] has espoused a positive connotation of pride which alludes to a product of praise and a satisfied feeling of belonging. But pride has deeper roots in black power politics, especially in the politics and philosophy of Black Consciousness. The concept of pride has been central to black militant politics. 'Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud' is a familiar anthem[40]. This anthem inspired a generation. Black pride became an important politics as a response to the civil rights movement's respectability politics, dominant white ideologies, and white racism. There was an urge for black people to stand up for themselves, be self-reliant and recognise the beauty in blackness (charged by the 'black is beautiful' movement). Articulating black confidence and wilfulness became necessary for black freedom and liberation. 'We're here, we're queer, we're everywhere' and 'proud to be gay' (*Simon & I*, 2002) may not be as familiar as James Brown's anthem. Nonetheless, these chants root themselves in queer pride and convey a similar militancy and assurance that black pride has. There is an insistence that queerness is something to celebrate and is not an obstacle to overcome. There is also an insistence that for a queer liberation to occur, queer confidence, collective power and insurgency are necessary. Seemingly, there exists a link between pride in queer politics and pride in black power and consciousness. Pride becomes something that is used to defend black and/or queer life. And so, in this

[39] The modern queer rights movement/gay liberation movement emerged from the 1969 Stonewall uprising/riots which were a series of impulsive protest demonstrations by the LGBT community against a police raid that started in the morning of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn (in Manhattan, New York City).
[40] 'Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud' is a popular Black Power anthem of the 1960s which was written and recorded by funk musician, James Brown in 1968.

concept – pride - lies a moment of intersection between black and queer movements' politics of freedom. At this intersection, the black queer being perceives pride in a unique way. But pride is also a tangled emotion which needs the development of a sense of self and others (Sullivan, 2007). More precisely, pride can be categorised both as a social emotion rotating around one's relationship with others and a self-conscious emotion rotating around the self (Osch, Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2018:404).

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Concluding Thoughts

Although my thoughts on how Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie theorise a black queer feminist poetics in and for South Africa today are constantly evolving and are a work in progress, I can positively say that studying the artists' aesthetic texts (*Somnyama Ngonyama*, *Collective Amnesia* and *Simon & I*) through the rubrics of *Body Performance*, *Memory-Trauma*, *Dignity* and *Pride as a Catalyst for Joy: An Un/imaginable Utopia?* helps me outline the contours of this country's black queer feminist imagination. This paper does not take a different spin on identity politics nor is it merely a project about artistic representations of black queer feminist politics – it as a queer text, in and of itself. This project comprehends queer not just as another term for LGBTQIA+ but as subversive practices and theories. In hindsight or in totality, my intention with this project was not to call on a black queer feminist intervention (this may be premature and too much to ask for) but I am simply attempting to understand the work of the artists who are giving content to black queer feminism and its practice. Seeing as the place of black women and black queers are susceptible to fade in black radical visions of freedom (Kelley, 2002:136), this project then becomes essential in deliberately conceptualising a poetics centred on black queer feminists which archives, recovers memory and restores self-esteem. History has revealed that the conception of the black community is not gender neutral and that freedom for black people does not mean freedom for all black people (especially for black women or for black queers). Hence, the emergence of artistic works such as *Somnyama Ngonyama*, *Collective Amnesia* and *Simon & I* serves to challenge a wide range of hegemonic and white, patriarchal cis-heterosexual norms.

I remain tentative because it is exhausting labour to constantly imagine and think of ways of attaining authentic freedom for black queer feminist beings. Moreover, I am anxiously faced with the question of, 'where do we go from here?'. The artistic texts produced by Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie may not call on an insurgent black queer feminist intervention or structurally change the world right now. But these artistic texts undoubtedly influence a black queer feminist thought and consciousness. Furthermore, these texts force us to reimagine, look beyond our pain and possibly strive towards healing. It is vital to question what exactly healing looks like – does it look like confrontation, or transcending by walking away from the chaos? At this stage, I do not possess all the answers, however, I am invested in exploring further. These texts

fundamentally begin to think through the work of black queer feminist conceptions of liberation. Upon examining *Somnyama Ngonyama*, *Collective Amnesia* and *Simon & I*, I begin to wonder whether attempts at creative conscientisation and politics will redeem us. I also wonder what it means to demand a black queer feminism from people (Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie) who are 'damaged' and have experienced trauma. Perhaps the revolutionary desires that I see in their work are doomed from the onset. I lean towards the answer that using intimate self-portraits to undergo a metamorphosis, recovering memory, and watching political desires and activism come to fruition may make us cognisant of the necessity to deal through our intergenerational wounds but will not save us.

Body performance illustrates how the invisibility of black women and black queers from the archives and visions of freedom is more a matter of a lack of conception than intentional exclusion. Furthermore, reading *Somnyama Ngonyama* against the rubric of body performance reminds me of how South African feminist work from theorists such as Pumla Gqola, Desiree Lewis and artist/curator, Gabi Ngcobo has accentuated how Muholi's photographic images render visible the multifaceted nature of queer lives.[41]This part of the paper gives grounds to question the unfair nature of how black bodies, women's bodies and queer bodies are expected to perform or labour as opposed to just being. With regards to Muholi's work in *Somnyama Ngonyama* and body performance, what I find particularly fascinating is the connection that Muholi holds to the mystical and cosmic spiritual world. Muholi effectively recreates visual imagery that talks to the desiring of the queer flesh and the queer appreciation of the black body. It must be noted that although Muholi finds purpose and pleasure from their visual activism, the same activism is also one that drains them. To some degree Muholi is haunted by their photographic imagery and by their own faces. Elsewhere, in Putuma discussing the body as a form of resistance and national site of trauma we gauge that the body flounders in deeply pessimistic beliefs. In fact, Putuma inherently believes that the black queer body is an ideology that architects of colonialism have devised to be lacking being, suppressed, objectified and one that is devoid of critical thinking. Ditsie, on the other hand reviews body performance against her activist work in which she advocated for queer rights as human rights. This review is imperative as Ditsie and Nkoli were deliberately beginning

[41] See Gqola, "'Through Zanele Muholi's Eyes"; Lewis, 'Against the Grain'; and Ngcobo, 'Introduction'.

to map ideas and cultivate a language for what a black queer feminist could look like. Overall, I come to reason that black queer feminists have to alter their gaze pertaining to the body to fathom that the manner in which we view and interpret what we see and how we name it is at present in an overwhelmingly racialised and gendered process.

In the memory-trauma rubric Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie remember historical suffering and re-envision history through the creation of queer epistemologies. Of importance to this section is to understand how the artists interpret the connection between recalling memory and navigating through trauma to possibly envision the prospects of healing. In the early 1990s, a black queer feminism (as articulated by Ditsie) was not predominantly concerned with trauma and the prospects of healing. Whereas, Putuma is especially concerned with unpacking trauma on multiple wavelengths and is ambiguous in how she approaches the topic of healing. Lastly, from studying *Somnyama Ngonyama*, I contend that Muholi's work could be an embodiment of healing due to their metamorphosis and self-defining journey. Reading *Somnyama Ngonyama*, *Collective Amnesia* and *Simon & I*, through the prism of memory and trauma makes me ponder on a term devised by Saidiya Hartman known as 'non-history' (Hartman, 2007). The horrendous phenomenon of 'non-history' discusses the holes and blank historical gaps left in collective and individual narratives as proved by the brutal act of slavery across the Americas (Hartman, 2007). Hartman's term can certainly be likened to the South African context and the tragic experiences that our people have gone through due to colonial violence and apartheid.

Throughout the course of the dignity rubric and through their aesthetic texts Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie mirror what a black queer feminist human *is* and what a black queer feminist human *is not*. Ditsie and Nkoli battle for respect and honour against the ideas that being black and being queer is un-African and deplorable. Ideas held so strongly by most African states and echoed by presidents such as former president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe who was once greeted by a human rights protest upon his arrival in South Africa, bellowed to an enthusiastic crowd, 'let them be gaaaay in the United States, in Europe and elsewhere. They shall be sad people here.' (*Simon & I*, 2002). Furthermore, Mugabe hatefully expressed that he could never 'accept homosexuality as a right, as is being argued by the association of sodomists and sexual perverts' (*Simon & I*, 2002). For Muholi, the notion of dignity comes to light when conceptualising queer

subjectivities and structures of recognition for black queers and black women. *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a stark reminder that representation may carry substantial weight within the mainstream as our (black queer feminists) livelihoods depend on it. Lastly, Putuma's thinking which lies in the fields of African diasporan sensibility clashes with her past in the black church which equally nurtured and suffocated the poet but mostly dehumanised parts of Putuma. Unfortunately, in a capitalist anti-black queer feminist society such as South Africa, the exchange of dignity can be incredibly transactional and performative.

From the inception of this project, I have been unequivocal about exploring the possibilities, dreams, or imaginings of a liberation for black queer feminists through the eyes of Muholi, Putuma and Ditsie. To expand my knowledge on the imaginings of a black queer feminist liberation or imaginable utopia, it is of value to conceptualise the attainment of freedom beyond the ideas of pride and joy. However, I am confident that navigating through pride and joy is a virtuous starting point to envision freedom that manifests creatively, spiritually, culturally, and politically.

Perhaps, one day, I will gather my thoughts in a more sophisticated manner to incorporate the notion of 'radicalism' because a black queer feminist liberation movement without the comprehension of a class struggle is futile and a class movement that does not consider sexuality and gender is also futile. At the centre of this project is the idea that even though we usually associate contemporary black queer feminist thought with academia, some of the most insurgent, ambitious, and transcendental thinkers are products of social and creative movements. The movement of South African creatives theorising or articulating a black queer feminism is intrinsically redefining the source of theory. The source of theory is redefined in the sense that the definition of who comprises a theorist is developed and the authority speaking on behalf of black women and black queers then becomes inclusive of singers, visual artists, poets, rappers and indigenous storytellers. I come to think of various South African creatives who could possibly theorise black queer feminism in their unique manner. Namely, the performance art duo FAKA[42] who create Ancestral Gqom-Gospel and Techno sounds; Brenda Fassie –

[42] See https://www.vogue.com/article/south-africa-global-100-style-profile-fela-gucci-desire-marea-faka-johannesburg-cape-town-glow-trans-activist-music-drag-dope-saint-jude-rapper for more information on FAKA's performance art, photography and sound.

the queen of African pop (affectionately known as the Black Madonna and MaBrrr); Maneo Mohale, a black queer feminist poet and author of *Everything Is A Deathly Flower* (2019), and Boom Shaka, the rebellious, pioneering Kwaito music band who rose to fame in the mid-1990s and consisted of Lebo Mathosa, Thembi Seete, Junior Sokhela and Theo Nhlengethwa. South Africa's dreams of a black queer feminist liberation as theorised by Ditsie, Putuma and Muholi ultimately precariously dangle between inspiration and desolation; uncertainty and an unwavering sacrifice to the black queer feminist movement; and lastly this desired liberation dangles between the possibilities of healing and attaining deceptive freedoms.

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Figure 1: Interpretation of *Ntozakhe II,* Zanele Muholi (Parktown), 2016

By Lesego Bantsheng (2020)

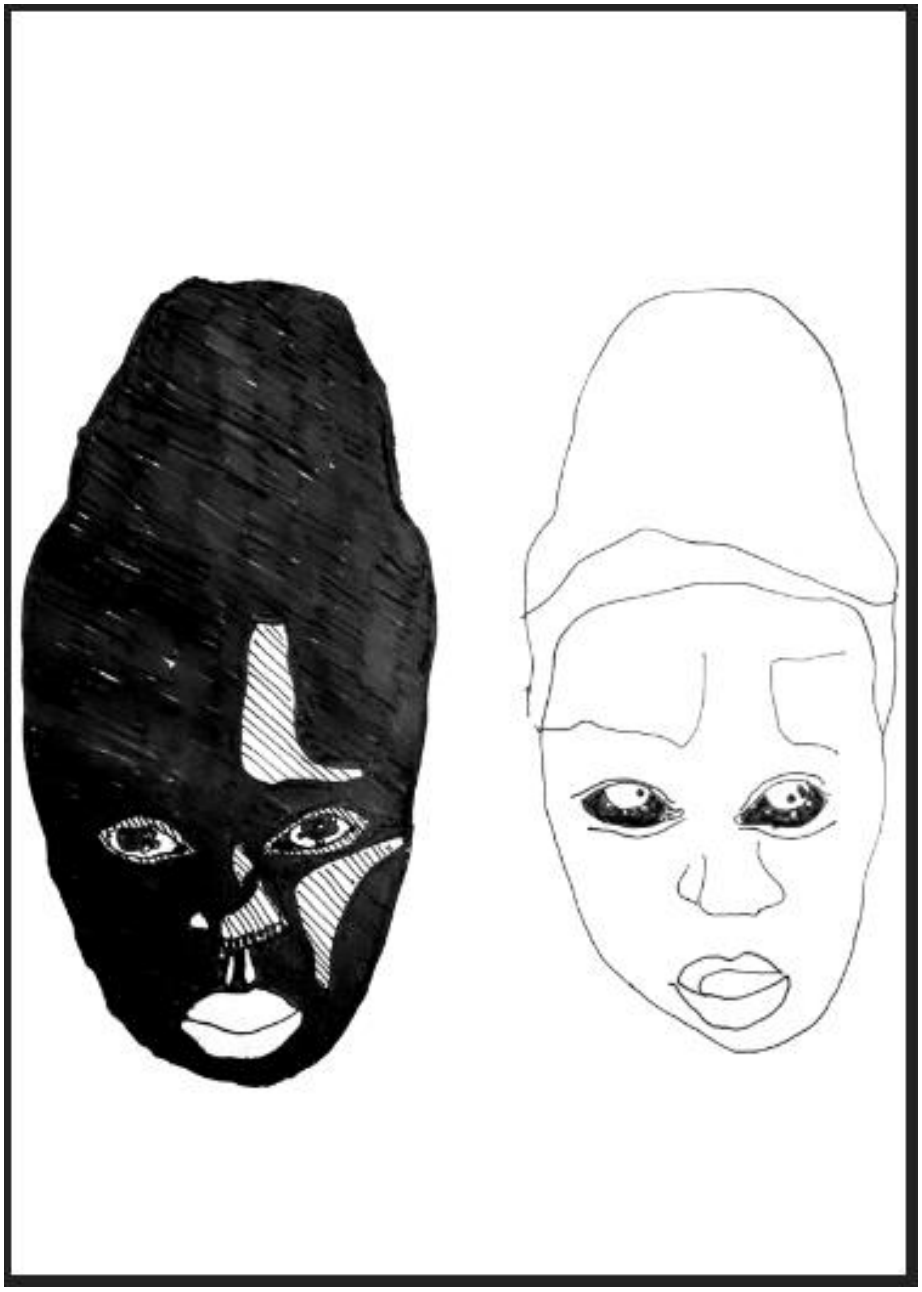


Figure 2: Interpretation of *Sizile,* Zanele Muholi (Umlazi), 2016

By Lesego Bantsheng (2020)

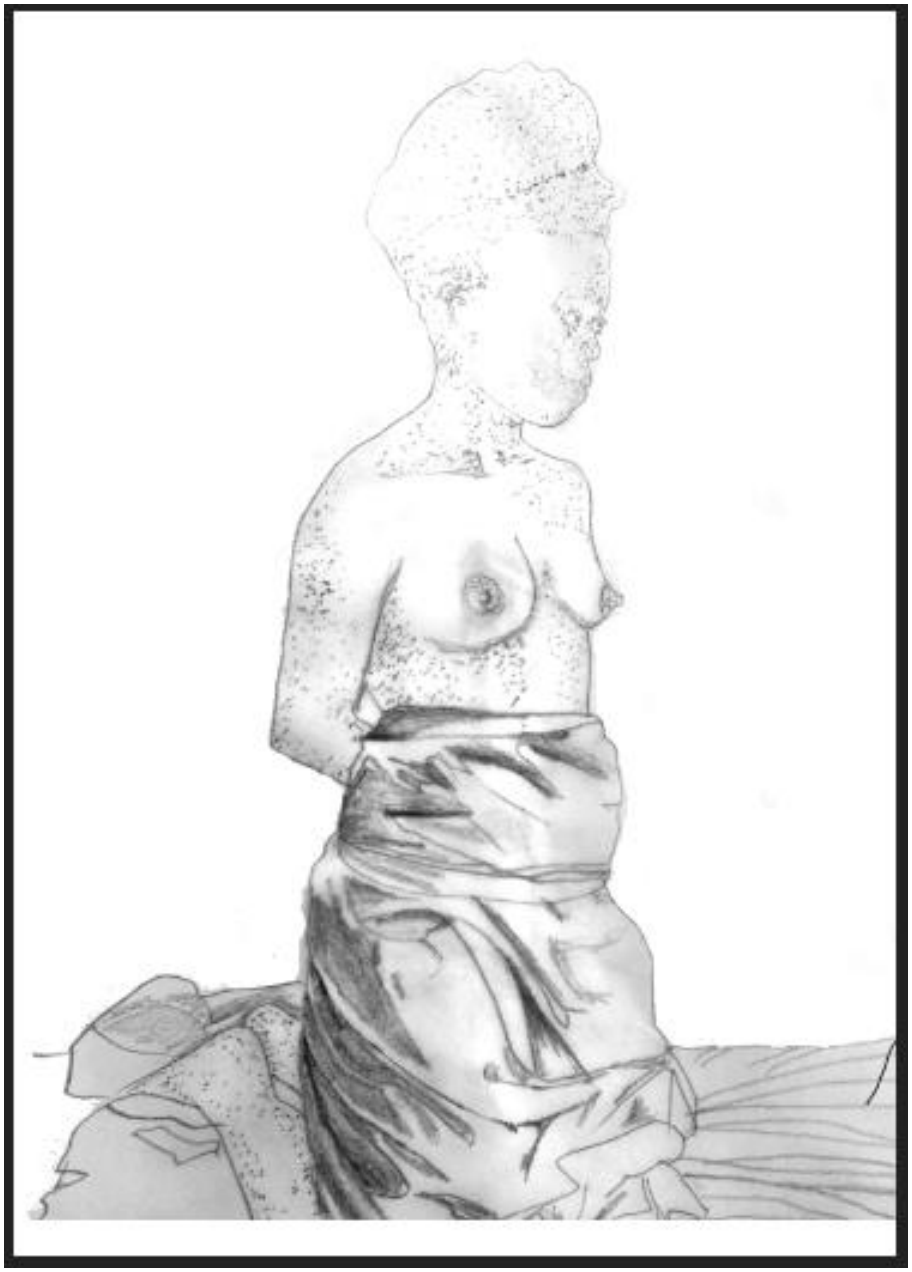


Figure 3: Interpretation of *Vukani I*, Zanele Muholi (Paris), 2014

By Lesego Bantsheng (2020)

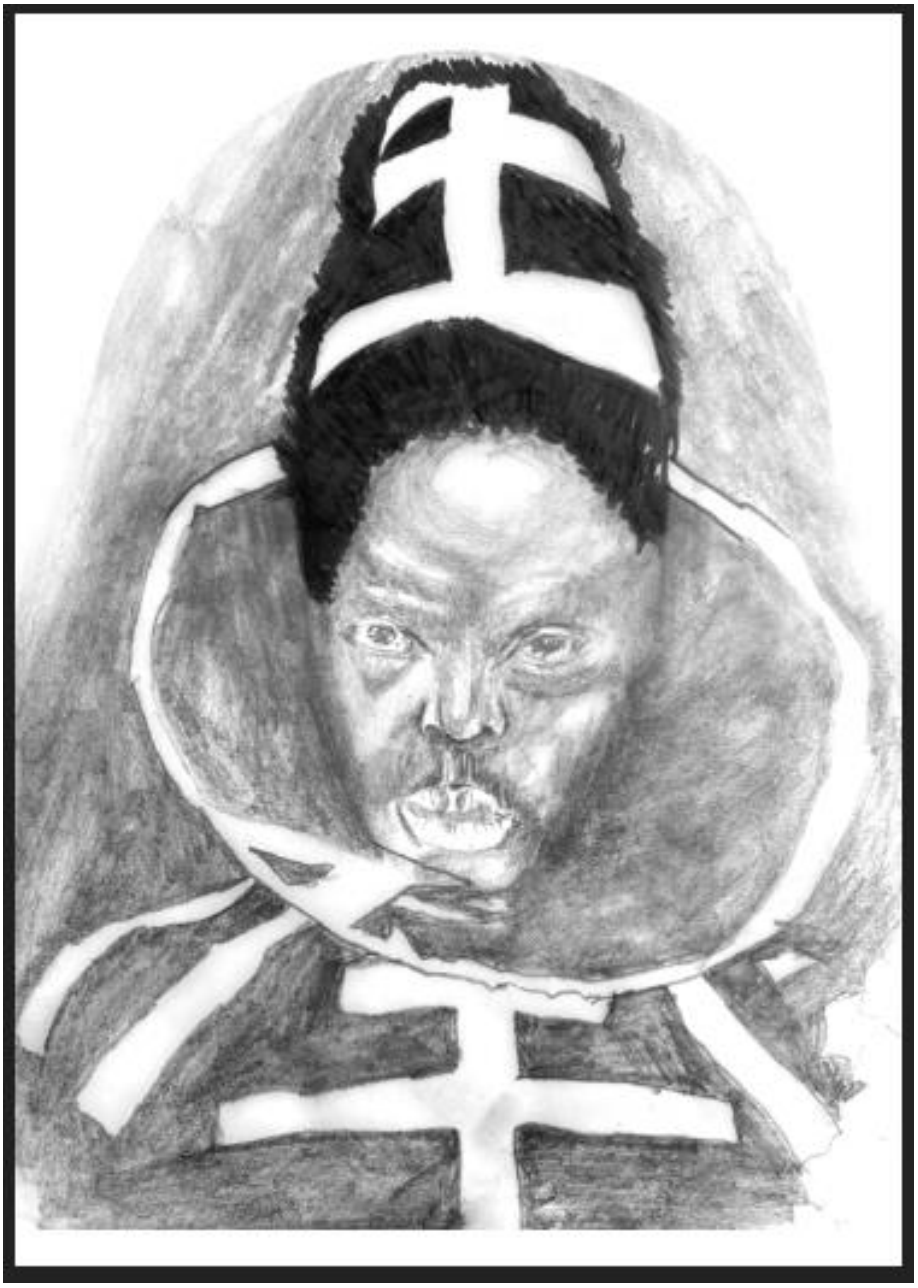


Figure 4: Interpretation of *Vile,* Zanele Muholi (Gothenburg), 2015

By Lesego Bantsheng (2020)



Figure 5: Interpretation of *Bester V,* Zanele Muholi (Mayotte), 2015

By Lesego Bantsheng (2020)

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