Zanele Muholi (born 1972) is a South African photographer who uses they/them pronouns. Their self-portraits are a way to communicate their experiences as a Black South African. The Somnyama Ngonyama, translated as Hail the Dark Lioness, series is a response to the racism and sexism Muholi has faced as they travel the world as an internationally famous and acclaimed artist. Muholi uses their art to both respond to the inequality they have faced and to celebrate their heritage and ethnicity. Muholi edits the photographs in the Hail the Dark Lioness series, heightening the contrast to intensify the darkness of their skin tone and create sharp contrasts between the black and white areas of the photograph.

- How does this contrast affect the way you think about the photograph?
- How would the message change if the contrast was less noticeable?

Zanele Muholi [South African, born 1972], Misiwe IV, Bijlmer, Amsterdam, from the series Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness), 2017, gelatin silver print. Museum purchase, 2017, SN11594.1

ZANELE MUHOLI
Zanele Muholi has explained their work as “producing this photographic document to encourage people to be brave enough to occupy spaces, brave enough to create without fear of being vilified.”

As you examine this photograph, think about Muholi’s quote.

- What does it mean to “occupy space?”
- What might “being vilified” mean? What emotions might a person experience as a result of racism or sexism?
- How does Muholi show their bravery through their photographs?
- What other emotions or messages do you think this photograph conveys?
- What does it mean to be brave when creating art?
This photograph from the Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness) series is a close and intimate self-portrait. Muholi edits their photographs, making their skin appear darker through lighting and editing, thereby celebrating their heritage.

**DIRECTIONS**

1. Begin by analyzing Muholi’s self-portrait. Take 2 minutes and silently observe the details in the photograph. On a piece of paper, write down what message(s) you think Muholi is trying to send with their self-portrait. How does this image make you, as the viewer, think or feel? What adjectives would you use to describe the artist?

2. On a fresh sheet of paper, write down the messages you want to send to your viewer through a self-portrait. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself? What do you want the viewer to think about you?

3. Using a camera or camera phone, stage your self-portrait. Begin by deciding on the angle, making a rough sketch of the angle and cropping for your photograph. Muholi chose to shoot this photograph straight on, giving us a direct view of their face. You may choose to copy Muholi’s angle, or if it better suits the adjectives you wrote in step two, to take your photograph at an angle (sideways, from below, from above, from behind, etc.)

4. Once you decide on the angle of your shot, consider lighting, setting, clothing, and facial expression. With a closely cropped photograph, your facial expression will convey emotion to your viewers. Think about the message you want to send and make notes on your sketch to help you set up your self-portrait.

5. Take a self-portrait using your sketch and notes from steps 3 and 4. You can choose to take the photograph yourself (selfie) or direct a helper.

6. Using photo editing apps or software, crop and edit your photograph, playing with the lighting, color saturation, contrast, and cropping. How do these choices help convey your message from step 2?