

“BORN FREE”? NAMES, IDENTITY, AND IDENTITY- FORMATION

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The big issue and problem facing South Africa is that the youth don't realize that they have the power [Arnaldo “Swagger Don” Mandlate, age 20, Maboneng Precinct, Johannesburg, South Africa, July 2014]

Often designated as “born frees,” the generation of young South Africans born with no living memory of apartheid is often thought to possess an obvious and freely crafted identity. The very term suggests that young South Africans have been liberated from the weight of history, oppressive policy, and centuries of exploitation. This generation is supposedly empowered to build for themselves a new life and for their fellow citizens a new country. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. Although one might assume that the born free generation has distinctive views or opportunities, the generational tag is ill-suited; young South Africans do indeed hold distinctive attitudes, values, and beliefs, but not ones that map easily or uniformly by age. The born free label is in many ways more aspirational than real. This article speaks to issues of individual identity and the weight of institutional and geographic realities, and the manner in which both are shaped by apartheid's legacy. I argue that the born free generational name is a paradox: though the term suggests certainty and complete formation, young South Africans are a generation in the making, a generation that seeks to form and name multiple identities even as one homogenous identity seems to be thrust upon it.

One might expect that if the born free generation did in fact have distinctive attitudes, values, and beliefs about South Africa, this would become apparent in national survey data. Quantitatively, the most comprehensive study with a large number of subjects investigating

South Africans' sociopolitical views has been the *Afrobarometer survey*.¹ *Afrobarometer* began surveying South Africans in 2000 and has since coded five rounds of surveys, most recently in 2011, where they surveyed nearly 2400 participants. *Afrobarometer's* 115-question survey includes questions about daily life, political and civic engagement, and normative ideology. The *Afrobarometer* team has used this rich data set to analyse such issues as the rise of public concerns over growing corruption, comparing mass public perceptions in South Africa with the elite-based perceptions measured by Transparency International's Corruptions Perceptions Index.²

In an extensive investigation I recently completed, I looked for statistically significant differences in South Africans' attitudes, values, and beliefs as they relate to age.³ I found that born frees do not possess a distinctive take on South African identity. The born free generation mirrors the South African general population, with no statistically significant differences by age alone. The generation's demographic diversity seems to extend towards many competing views of identity. Racial identity, by contrast, still plays a large and statistically significant role in shaping attitudes, values, and beliefs. But at the aggregate level, at least, born free South Africans do not possess distinctive views on their generation's identity.⁴ The born free generation is as diverse as the South African rainbow; born free South Africans live vastly different lives, often stratified along lines of race and class. This generation's attitudes, values, and beliefs differ greatly depending on one's lived experience. Demographic and quantitative research highlight the

¹"Afrobarometer, Round 5, South Africa, 2011 (updated July 2015)" *AfroBarometer: An African-Led Series of National Public Attitude Surveys on Democracy and Governance in Africa* [online resource] Data guides and codes available at: <http://www.afrobarometer.org/countries/south-africa-0> (accessed 17 October 2015).

²Iris Wielders, "Perceptions and Realities of Corruption in South Africa" *Afrobarometer. Briefing papers no. 110* (January 2013) [online resource] <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/bp110-perceptions-and-realities-corruption-south-africa> 4, 6 (accessed 17 October 2015).

³Stefan Norgaard, "Rainbow Junction: South Africa's Born Free Generation and the Future of Democracy" *Stanford Digital Repository* (May 2015) [online resource] <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:vv235mx1028/StefanNorgaardFinalUrbanStudiesThesis.pdf> (accessed 17 October 2015).

urgent need to listen to vernacular voices and underscore the importance of localized ethnographic methodology.

To capture those voices, I interviewed 62 South Africans over an eight-month period of time. I interviewed subjects around the country, but focused on Cape Town and the surrounding townships, Bloemfontein, and Johannesburg/Soweto. Captured in their own words, the born frees' views on names, identity formation, and memory provide an important counter-balance to the otherwise inconclusive *Afrobarometer* data. But that is not to say that this generation feels "born free." What best characterizes this generation is not a finished generational identity, but rather an ongoing and vexed process of identity formation. The "born free" moniker is one that has been thrust upon the generation rather than one that has emerged organically. For Vincent Maphai, the former Executive Director of Corporate Affairs at South African Breweries (SAB), "the notion of "born frees" is a commercial and commercialized term we use in the marketing departments ... At South African Breweries (SAB), we used this all the time as part of our key marketing demographic ... The "born free" concept is a muddy concept. It doesn't catch a reality, it *creates* a reality."⁵ Maphai finds it disingenuous to consider young South Africans as one homogenous group. The "born free" concept, according to Maphai, aims to court an upwardly mobile, Western-embracing cosmopolitan youth. This identity is created by private businesses not to

⁴My findings parallel two studies by University of Cape Town Professor Robert Mattes, who examined youth political culture as well as the prospects for generational change among the born frees. Mattes found that: "Across a range of different indicators, we find consistently that there are no, or relatively minor, age profiles to most dimensions of South African political culture" Robert Mattes and Samantha Richardson, "Are South Africa's Youth Really a 'Ticking Time Bomb?'" *Afrobarometer. Working Paper no. 152* (January 2015) [online resource] <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/are-south-africa%E2%80%99s-youth-really-%E2%80%98ticking-time-bomb%E2%80%99>. "Rather than re-drawing the country's main cleavages along lines of age and generation (as in post-war Germany), many of the key fault lines of apartheid (such as race, urban-rural residence, class and poverty) have been replicated within the new generation" Robert Mattes, "The "Born Frees": The Prospects for Generational Change in Post-Apartheid South Africa" *The Australian Journal of Political Science* 47, 1 (March 2012): 133-153.

⁵Vincent Maphai, Interview and conversation. Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States (21 January 2015).

enhance the born frees' identity, not to bestow meaning, but to commodify their interests and aspirations. While the "born free" concept may have some traction in the corporate boardroom, it remains an aspirational term all too seldom realized on the streets of South Africa.

Despite what the term may or may not connote, young people in South Africa are often uncontroversially referred to as "born frees." Indeed, the name "born free" may well have become fetishized, masking the very dynamic and contested identity formation that is at work.⁶ The monochromatic and perhaps inaccurate term "born free" prevents the public re-negotiation and construction of youth identity in South Africa. But that the name "born free" is inappropriate does not mean that the born free generation do not possess important and distinctive views at the hyper-local level. By using the term "born free," one neglects the constant and at times agonizing renegotiation of self and identity that young South Africans face. That re-negotiation is nowhere more apparent than in the names and re-naming of young South Africans.

Names and Self-Crafted Identity

The names, and by extension identities, of many of my interview subjects in Central Johannesburg and the Southern Suburbs were self-crafted, not by institutional forces but by born frees themselves. When I first asked Arnaldo his name, I was surprised by his response. A young man of age 20 from an immigrant Mozambican family, yet a longtime local resident of the Jeppestown neighbourhood, Arnaldo said: "You mean my government?" This response turned out to be quite common. A "government"—or full legal name—is something imposed by authority and is not self-crafted. During my interview,

⁶By contrast, we might look to France, where the masking of blackness as a taboo concept prevents the frank re-negotiation of identity. Louis-Georges Tin writes how France, an officially secular nation, does not ask about race or religion in its census, and as a consequence group differences in the socioeconomic and cultural realms often go unreported: "Who Is Afraid Of Blacks In France? The Black Question: The Name Taboo, the Number Taboo" *French Politics, Culture & Society* 26, 1 (Spring/Special Issue, 2008): 32-44.

Arnaldo explained that he prefers to go by “Swagger Don.”⁷ My friend Chesta Al-Gawdly (whose government is Lindokuhle Mbatha) refuses to use his government.⁸ The majority of my interviewees preferred to use names crafted by themselves, often quite recently, to names given to them by parents or other institutions in society. When I asked why, I often received an explanation about how being “born free” in today’s South Africa has to do with independence and self-sufficiency. For example, Jabu Fakude told me that being born free gave him the freedom to choose his identity and craft his own goals:

[The born frees]—they all think [government and politics] is useless. For born frees, it’s all about the individual and your own initiatives, you know? We need young, up-and-coming entrepreneurs here, not people falling into the system. Born frees—we determine ourselves ... Being independent means that you don’t need to rely on government, and you don’t need to care about politics.⁹

The act of self-naming has become a touchstone that can help explain cynicism and distrust of government even as young South Africans embrace new freedoms brought on by change in governance post-apartheid. Names are superimposed by authority figures and by government, but are then re-contextualised by each individual. But not all born frees long for meritocratic self-sufficiency as Jabu does. Masixole, a resident of the Cape Town Khayelitsha township’s Site C neighbourhood hopes for judicious government interventions aimed at providing employment and job training opportunities to young South Africans. Masixole says:

There are no jobs, and even Jacob Zuma agrees that this is the problem. They must provide the jobs for us. Or at least

⁷Arnaldo Leonardo “Swagger Don” Mandlate, Interview and conversation, Mulbarton, Gauteng, South Africa (21 July 2014).

⁸Lindokuhle “Chesta Al-Gawdly” Mbatha, Interview and conversation, Kensington, Johannesburg, South Africa (21 July 2014).

⁹Jabu Fakude, Interview and conversation, Troyeville, Johannesburg, South Africa (22 July 2014).

they must provide something, training or programs. There is this saying “wake up,” in Xhosa, where they expect you to wake up and get a job. You can’t just wake up and get a job anymore. The ANC asks you to “wake up ...”¹⁰

Masixole is frustrated because the ANC is asking South Africans to find employment opportunities on their own, even when jobs and employment positions are clearly not available for many young people in Site C. He is asking for his current identity to be supported by government. Young people like Maximole recognize the limited efficacy of personal renaming; they desire comprehensive institutional reforms creating economic mobilization as the best hope for a better life. Yet for others like Jabu, the born frees’ hopes are embodied in the bold renaming of their own identities, at times ignoring their “governments” and charting a course forward on their own.

In crafting their own names, the born frees are doing far more than naming themselves. They are naming their relationship to civic institutions and to their own future. Most notably, the names of Chesta Al-Gawdly and Swagger Don are not tame or common; they reflect born free South African desires and dreams, which are ambitious and multi-cultural. Far from an individual action, naming is a politically charged process.¹¹ The born free generation is seeking to find an identity that is unencumbered from governmental bureaucracy and legal formality. For in some cases, indigenous South Africans were explicitly forced to adopt Western names. My interview subject Morris Martin, whom locals in the Kliptown township in Soweto affectionately call “Oompapi” or “Uncle,” was named under apartheid, a forced govern-

¹⁰Masixole Ndyebi, Interview and conversation, Site C, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa (8 March 2014).

¹¹South African youth are not alone in their desire to fashion new identities through names. Indeed, African American names, enslaved and post-slavery, possessed a good deal of onomastic inventiveness. As an article in Salon notes: “The story of distinctive black names in the U.S. is far richer, more varied and interesting than the celebrity’s mere pathological dread of appearing normal. From the beginning, many black Americans had distinctive names.” This process continued in the 1960s and 70s, as re-naming was seen as emancipatory: David Zax, “What’s Up with Black Names Anyway?” *Salon* (25 August 2008) [online resource] http://www.salon.com/2008/08/25/creative_black_names/ (accessed 17 October 2015).

ment action over which individuals had no agency. Today, born frees re-name themselves informally and by choice, seeking the very agency that had been withheld for so many years.

Even as individual young South Africans have sought to rename themselves, a generational identity has been imposed on them. Young South Africans are now expected to have opportunities, to have agency and success in the new democracy, and often to provide for their family or extended family. Despite their lived experience, they are expected to be free. Mbavhalelo Sundani, or “Babs,” the student leader for Academic Affairs for the Student Representative Council (SRC) at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, understands that change has taken place in South Africa post-apartheid, but after personally experiencing multiple acts of racism in Bloemfontein, he is not so sure that “the new South Africa” even exists:

The system, it’s actually the thing that’s making me feel [free], if that makes sense. I feel like I’m “plugged in.” I feel supported, like I am doing the right thing and in the system. But really, it’s a mirage. You get tripped. You fall. Many don’t make it nearly as far as me, even. You hear “It’s a new South Africa”—but not really. You feel, yes these same old things and systems exist. So are you free?¹²

Phiwe Mathe, the University of the Free State’s Student Body President, took his frustrations even further. When asked whether he, as a born free, felt free in today’s South Africa, he contested the entire notion of a born free generation. Given the intensely racialised nature of life in Bloemfontein, and the asymmetries black students face in the supposedly “rainbow nation,” his words resonated powerfully with me:

I contest the entire notion of “born free.” It might not be the law, but we still live and feel the effects of apartheid all the time, we do. We’re trapped. Some people are born into

¹²Mbavhalelo “Babs” Sundani, Interview and conversation, Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa (25 August 2014).

very poor families. There isn't a way out, they can't. So please, call us the "Mandela Generation": the generation of change, whatever. But I don't agree with the "born free" concept at all: As long as there are people like the poor kids I was just mentioning ... we're not at all free. It's all a big experiment, this democracy, and we're the first generation to carry democracy forward. But we are a generation of Mandela. Of change, reconciliation, and genesis, but not at all of freedom.¹³

In contesting the very designation of a born free generation, Phiwe underscores that identities carry not only new opportunities but a good deal of baggage. Received identities clash with new aspirations. And hopes and dreams vie with real structural barriers. Some of these structures are as physical as the enduring geography that stratifies and separates wealthy and poor South Africans. History has placed a burden on this South African generation. It is an unfair burden, perhaps, but also an important opportunity to recreate South Africa if it is to escape the far larger burdens of apartheid's legacy.

Identity is not only named, but situated. Apartheid had a geographic dimension that was real and pervasive, and it stubbornly persists, contextualising and constraining whatever individual ambitions young South Africans born post-apartheid may have. Even as individuals renegotiate their own personal names, South Africa collectively renegotiates its own history in the re-naming of public spaces: landmarks, streets, public spaces, and indeed entire cities. New street names do not change South Africa's enduring residential segregation. In a similar fashion, naming the generation of young South Africans as the "born frees" does little to change the lived experience of young South Africans. The naming and re-naming of identity, whether on an individual or geographic level, speaks to the tension between fixity and social velocity. Commenting on the role of loss and nostalgia, anthropologist Thomas Hansen, working in the Indian townships South of Durban,

¹³Phiwe Mathe, Interview and conversation, Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa (25 August 2014).

said that a profound melancholia is often experienced by long-time residents who fondly remember “the stability and intimacy of community life during apartheid.”¹⁴ That stability and intimacy is lost as these neighbourhoods, and indeed all of South Africa, experience a “social velocity” that disrupts the fixity of the apartheid era. Under apartheid, names and identities were fixed, often in the most unfortunate ways. One literally “knew one’s place.” Post-apartheid transitions have been marked by rapid change and “unpredictability, difference, and the incessant movement of anonymous bodies and signs.”¹⁵ These names, and the changes they undergo, are indicators of both nostalgia and unmet desire, both for individuals themselves and the identities they seek to create.

Thus, behind the supposedly “fixed” identity of the born free generation lies a fluid identity under negotiation and construction. Just as personal names reflect that fluidity, social sites of memory are far more fluid and contentious than one might think. As Hansen notes, fluid identity can be a terrifying prospect, perhaps most especially for the young South Africans who are at once given the name “born free” and yet find that this name does not reflect their lived experience.

The Uncertain Born Free Future

The term “born free generation” is less a fixed and realized concept than a generative and aspirational impulse. South African youth are not alone in experiencing the uncertainty of their own identity and place. The concept of “post-blackness,” as described by Temple University Professor Paul Taylor, mirrors the complexities that the born frees face. Whether in post-soul culture, post-civil rights politics, or

¹⁴Thomas Blom Hansen, “Sounds of Freedom: Music, Taxis, and Racial Imagination in Urban South Africa” *Public Culture* 18, 1 (Winter 2006): 185 [online resource] <http://public-culture.org/articles/view/18/1/sounds-of-freedom-music-taxis-and-racial-imaginat> (accessed 17 October 2015); and Thomas Blom Hansen, “Movement, Sound and Body in the Post-Apartheid City” in *Melancholia of Freedom: Social Life in an Indian Township in South Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012; Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013), 176-199.

¹⁵Hansen, “Sounds of Freedom,” 185.

post-black identity and aesthetics, Taylor uses the term post-blackness to “specify [African Americans’] simultaneous debt to and distance from their favored historical dynamic.”¹⁶ This dynamic in South Africa might be the nation’s first democratic elections in 1994 and the promise of freedom that came with it. Taylor differentiates “post-black” from “old” black, where identities were largely fixed by socio-political constraints of the day and the struggle to challenge those constraints.¹⁷ “Post-black” suggests a renegotiation of received identity. But this renegotiation, argues Taylor, is positive and generative: “post-black” can be the new black ... it need not jettison the content of the “old” black. Post-blackness is blackness emancipated from its historical burdens and empowered by self-knowledge.”¹⁸ In South Africa, the born free generation is often, by implication, seen as distinct from the older struggle generation. We are well-advised, following Taylor, to see the born free term as a renegotiation of what the struggle itself entails, and what marginalised communities can do to realize their future. That renegotiation is complex, uncertain, and incomplete. But in that renegotiation South Africa’s future will be charted.

“Born free” attitudes, values, and beliefs are uncertain, as is this generation’s future, but that uncertainty can be beautiful and beneficial. Speaking at the 2014 University of Cape Town (UCT) graduation, William Kentridge, artist and Johannesburg public intellectual, said:

The democracy party of 20 years ago is long finished, but everybody is left with a hangover and foul temper: the feeling of ‘I am nothing and should be everything’. Race and class divisions are with us as strongly as ever. A happy ending is by no means assured. There is a daily, low-grade civil war at every stop street. The incidences of racial, verbal and physical abuse alert us to the rages that still burn inside. They are shameful to all of us ... The easy lesson of SA is

¹⁶Paul C. Taylor, “Post-Black, Old Black” *African American Review* 41, 4 (Winter 2007): 625.

¹⁷Taylor, “Post-Black, Old Black”, 640.

¹⁸Taylor, “Post-Black, Old Black”, 640.

that our strength comes from vulnerability rather than power. Relish the state of fragmentation we are in. Find the pleasure and beauty of unexpected connections. Keep a sharp eye for the day's event, but a keener feeling for the longer unfolding. Be kind: understand that everyone is involved in their own titanic struggle. Seize the contradictions, listen to the periphery.¹⁹

If the born free generation's role in forging the future of South Africa is uncertain, the first step is for the generation to embrace its multiple, often contradictory, identities. The attitudes, values and beliefs of the born frees need not be homogenous; valuing difference can inform the current moment of South African democracy and lead to the production of civic debates on the nation's future. When born frees gain full knowledge of this moment, and its salience, productive change can follow.

¹⁹William Kentridge, “Seize the Contradictions, Listen to the Periphery” Address delivered on receiving an Honorary Doctorate in Literature at the University of Cape Town Graduation Ceremony, 19 December 2014. *UCT Daily News* [online resource] <http://www.uct.ac.za/dailynews/?id=8942> (accessed 18 October 2015).