

SIPHO GONGXEKA'S *SKEEM' SAKA*: COMPOSING MASCULINITY
AND PROTEST IN CONTEMPORARY SOWETO

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'He left for the City of Gold with only the clothes on his back. His return from Joburg – dressed fresh in Versace, in a car considered the holy grail of BMWs in the township – was drenched in a glorious "I made it" glow.'

Sipho Mzobe, *Young Blood*¹

'At the same time uneasy with and celebratory of their ghetto origins, the rough-and-ready sections of kwaito artists regard themselves as quintessential hustlers (...).'

Peterson Bhekizizwe, 'Kwaito, 'dawgs' and the antinomies of hustling'²

A young man with dyed hair is depicted at the centre of a closely cropped photograph (2013/2014, figure 1). He sits and leans forward with his elbows presumably pressed on a table. He slightly raises his eyebrow and directs his gaze outside the photographic frame. Fragmented by an invisible window, natural light ripples across wrinkles on the man's forehead and hand, as well as on the different materials composing the picture; smoothness of the man's jacket, the grain of his skin, and the cold metallic aspect of his accessories. Nonchalantly holding a cigarette, the man's hand is adorned with a range of silvery rings, which mirror the retro features of his costume. The triangular shape of his collar gives a 'jazzy' and 'Latin' twist, reinforced by a handkerchief, decorated in green and white dots, placed in the sitter's left pocket. A vintage style golden brooch of what seems to be a bunch of flowers is pinned to his right side. Behind him, newspaper pages and magazines have been cut out and pinned to the wall, abstracting the photograph's original location and fragmenting the composition of the

image. Both literal and metaphorical backgrounds, mass media and the enclosed room shape this portrait against which the self-presentation of the young man is articulated.



Figure 1 Siphon Gongxeka, *Thato*, 2013/2014. Digital colour photograph. Tierney fellowship. © Courtesy of the artist.

The figure of the gangster and the kwaito singer, two characters nourished by mass media and collective imaginaries, have provided a foundation upon which to imagine and/or challenge conceptions of ‘black’ masculinity in contemporary South African youth culture. A socio-cultural creation, the South African gangster – or ‘tsotsi’ – has been interpreted as the symbol of urban violence. He is a historical consequence of the racial and class segregation that have shaped the country.³ Depicted in South African popular culture, the gangster figure appears invariably as a black heterosexual man rebelling against, while simultaneously reinforcing, his social and territorial margins. The kwaito singer celebrates a strong sense of belonging through youth, machismo and a self-reflecting narrative ideally shaped by material success. Emerging from Soweto in the late 90s, kwaito music is locally produced with cheap synthesisers, often broadcast in nightclubs and taxis,

and mixes lyrics in African languages, English and Afrikaans with rap, blues, reggae and house music.⁴ The figure of the gangster and the kwaito singer both shape their personas on a specific reading of townships and their global interferences. Designed by the Afrikaner Nationalist party to keep black communities restricted to the cities' periphery, 'townships' as urban spaces remain effective, tied up with memory, protests and cultural production, in the new democracy. The young man with dyed hair is part of the photographic series *Skeem' Saka*, a slang and township-based term meaning 'brotherhood', 'sisterhood' or 'friendship'. In the presentation of his series, young Soweto-born photographer Sipho Gongxeka (b. 1989) explicitly addresses the figure of the gangster as point of reference.⁵ Incorporating the kwaito singer as an additional critical framework for analysis of contemporary black masculinity in South Africa, this paper aims to test and question the visual and spatial implications of what are perceived as urban hustlers in the photographic series.

Produced between 2013 and 2014 under the umbrella of the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg and the Tierney Fellowship, a scholarship designed to connect a young student with an established artist, Gongxeka's project *Skeem' Saka* is the result of a year-long collaboration with Pieter Hugo. Founded in 1989 by David Goldblatt, the Market Photo Workshop was designed to provide practical skills and visual literacy to emerging South African photographers excluded from previously designated 'white' arts schools and training institutions.⁶ Its successive generations of students, including Jodi Bieber, Zanele Muholi, Nontsikelelo Veleko, Sabelo Mlangeni and Musa Nxumalo, have photographically reflected on socio-political barriers and transformations in the country since the date of its creation. In keeping with the political remit of the Market Photo Workshop to challenge mainstream representations of a community, *Skeem' Saka* questions the formal implications of what has become known as 'ghettology'.⁷ This series of portraits offers a remapping of young, black and urban male identities through self-presentation, performance and interpretation of mass media characters. What I explore here is how Sipho Gongxeka negotiates historical and rebellious 'heroes' in order to engage with the present moment, complicating an essentialist definition of selfhood, as well as the now widespread usage of the notion of a 'born free' generation.

The so-called 'born free' generation is first and foremost an abstraction

most often used to cast doubts on what the ANC's newly enfranchised elites termed the 'rainbow nation': an equal and 'non-racialist' society.⁸ Promoted by the Anglophone press, the definition of 'born free' took shape during the 2014 elections. The same year *Skeem' Saka* was produced, young people stressed their loss of political loyalty towards the ANC and became the visible markers of an alternative way of thinking about their country. Standing against historically 'white' institutions and narratives, part of the generation born after 1994 mixes temporal references to build an anti-conformist political narrative. The terminology 'born free' should be taken cautiously as it tends to over-generalise young people's political affiliations. Nevertheless, the expectations inherent in an assertion of freedom shape the contemporary challenges and oppositions. Siphso Gongxeka does not explicitly address the 'born free' debate. However, I will demonstrate how protest as an identity marker and a generational framework is symbolically articulated within his series.

In their book *Johannesburg, The Elusive Metropolis* (2008), Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe mobilise the notion of the 'composite' to emphasise the fluid and metropolitan character of contemporary Johannesburg, in order to take stock of its visual representations, while addressing the specific history of the space of the city.⁹ With memory at its core, the 'composite' acts as a conceptual tool to seize visual and textual material beyond its geographical or historical limits. The composite is used to consider simultaneously the underground, understood as the historical violence of the segregation of space and the city's memory, its surface. This encompasses what is displayed in the present, as well as the edges, Johannesburg's 'worldliness' and global connections.¹⁰ The ambition of *Johannesburg, The Elusive Metropolis* is to move away from an essentialist analysis of the African city embedded in binary, timeless and contradictory categorisations in order to understand Johannesburg in its 'compositional process'.¹¹

Thinking about the 'composite' to analyse masculinity in *Skeem' Saka* is an effective methodology to relate this photographic series to South African youth culture and the 'born free' debate, as it allows simultaneous engagement with its multiple fields of representation, its temporal and spatial layering. Critical literature concerned with contemporary South African youth culture has tended to apprehend identity formation using fixed and timeless categories, often articulated in binary and oppositional

terms.¹² Class, skin colour and gender have all been markers contributing to an essentialisation and differentiation of identities in the 'postcolonial' era.¹³ Interconnected, the figurations of the gangster and the black man have historically fostered various stereotypical associations in this country, ranging from the urban hero to criminal machismo, as well as everyday racism.¹⁴ The reactivation and celebration of the gangster in the series *Skeem' Saka* opens up the question of the formation of young and black South African male subjectivities, as well as meanings surrounding authenticity, homosociality and social mobility in a township space known for its limits. I will argue that the figuration of the gangster, a rather old-fashioned trope with a particular South African pedigree, is not independent of a social and political moment shaping contemporary narratives.

A shared performance

Skeem' Saka is a photographic series mainly focused on Soweto-based South African men, with only five portraits of women out of a total of twenty-seven photographs. The gangster is the cinematic character addressed by each portrait, oscillating between the visual tropes of fashion and documentary photography while revealing the performance of a certain type of masculinity enacted in Soweto. While the series started as an independent body of work during Gongxeka's Foundation and Intermediate course in 2011, and later in his Advanced Programme in Photography in 2012, the emphasis on 'gangsterism' was at that time in keeping with a mainstream media preoccupation.¹⁵ The protagonists were photographed in a series of predictably dangerous or 'deviant' actions: hiding, smoking, drinking alcohol, sometimes depicted covered in blood.¹⁶ Early in his discussions with Pieter Hugo, Gongxeka decided to focus on the theme of gangsterism, but to tone down or interrogate its visual rhetoric.¹⁷

The series compiles digital colour photographs displaying a range of portraits shot against a variety of backgrounds, forms and textiles, indoors or in the streets (2013/2014, figures 2-7). A high brick wall with security spikes, (figure 2), the back of a house (figure 3), a closed garage door (figure 4) or burglar bars (figure 5), not only frame the photographed subjects in geometrically arranged compositions but also tend to locate them away from urban activity and social encounters. Despite their highly diverse characters today – combining residential areas with informal settlements – South



Figure 2 Sipho Gongxeka, *Mayaya*, 2013/2014. Digital colour photograph. Tierney fellowship. © Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3 Sipho Gongxeka, *Sash*, 2013/2014. Digital colour photograph. Tierney fellowship. © Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4 Sipho Gongxeka, *Bororo*, 2013/2014. Digital colour photograph. Tierney fellowship. © Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5 Sipho Gongxeka, *Mayaya*, 2013/2014. Digital colour photograph. Tierney fellowship. © Courtesy of the artist.

African literature and cinema stereotype the representation of townships into a readymade model and an apparent rough and ‘tickly texture’.¹⁸ Uncovered surfaces made of plaster, iron or brick are juxtaposed in *Skeem’ Saka*, reducing Soweto to bare materials. In keeping with a cinematic reading, the township space depicted in the series forms and visually interconnects the subjects, yet simultaneously isolates them.

Writing on *Skeem’ Saka*, art critic Adam Haupt starts with the following question: ‘[D]oes art reflect or construct reality?’¹⁹ Like Pieter Hugo’s engagement with cinema and photography, as exemplified in his series *Nollywood* (2008–09), *Skeem’ Saka* engages with the photographic construction of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’.²⁰ Shot in enclosed rooms or behind windows, the photographed subjects appear to enact roles, for example in the act of smoking (figures 5 and 6). Tilting the head upwards with unfazed eyes and adopting a careless, perhaps even provocative attitude while the smoke rises into the air, the men’s behaviour is reminiscent of stereotypical male characters extracted from American mafia films.²¹ In one photograph, a television remote control lies on a bed next to the subject’s removed T-shirt (figure 6). The presence of the camera acts as a substitute for the TV screen, undermining the audience for whom the men’s smoking gesture is designed. In *Fictions of the Pose* (2000), an exemplary investigation on the genre of portraiture, Harry Berger Jr. argues that within the actual construction of a portrait resides a lie: ‘portraits can be viewed as imitations or likeness, not of individuals only, but also of their acts of posing (...) [their] primary object or referent is not the likeness of a person but the likeness of an act.’²² In *Skeem’ Saka*, the individualities of specific portraits are embedded in the act of their representation, while performances appear naturalised in the ‘pose’.²³

Captured still and frontally oriented towards the camera, the protagonists’ gazes meet the photographer’s. One mirror is thoughtfully positioned within an open wardrobe, creating a confusing reflection of the photographer/photographed subject and fragmenting their representation (figure 7). The image is a sort of digital ‘montage’, as the frontal reflection seen in the mirror is practically impossible considering the placement and angle of the protagonist’s body in the room. Two portraits, one in profile and one frontal, are mounted together to create a maze of gazes. In this photograph, the mirror is not a reflection of the photographed subject, but a photo-portrait

directed towards the photographer himself. The mirror and the photograph become the medium of a shared performance, while questioning the location of selfhood in portrait making.²⁴

Skeem' Saka was displayed without captions at the Market Photo Gallery in 2014, thus associating the represented protagonists not with their nicknames – as is the case on Siphongongxeka's website – but with the series' title stressing the notion of a 'brotherhood', a language and a particular geography.²⁵ Following Pieter Hugo's photographic representations of 'types', Gongxeka nevertheless departs from the position of external observer.²⁶ The series' subjects – mostly young men from the township of Soweto, in their mid-twenties and speaking a vernacular street language – capture part of the photographer's own identity through an emphasis on familial grouping. Before focusing solely on a community, *Skeem' Saka* incorporated self-portraits.²⁷ The difficulty of staging his own image while re-enacting a gangster figure led Siphongongxeka to turn the camera on his friends, allowing both self-presentation and image composition processes to be easily choreographed.²⁸ *Skeem' Saka* witnesses an intersubjective encounter taking place between the photographer and his models, but also between this community of friends and a historically constructed figuration of masculinity.²⁹



Figure 6 Siphongongxeka, *Chino-China*, 2013/2014. Digital colour photograph. Tierney fellowship. © Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7 Siphongxeka, *Sash*, 2013/2014. Digital colour photograph. Tierney fellowship. © Courtesy of the artist.

Rebellious figures: the gangster and the kwaito singer

Although gangster protagonists can take many forms in cinema, adopt different languages and have different facial features, the audience always knows what a gangster looks like.³⁰ As a general trend, the gangster is fearless and nonchalant, owns the city space and delimits its territories. Killer, hijacker, drug dealer, womaniser and often women abuser, the gangster is invariably represented as an isolated heteronormative male figure whose subversive acts indefinitely direct the movie's climax.³¹ In popular cinema, the gangster is a subject of dual impulses, fear and admiration. Simultaneously created by the city's excesses and failings and yet himself a creator of the city's rules, this protagonist constantly plays with and reflects upon the subterranean implications of a governmental system of surveillance and protection.³²

As Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall wrote in *Johannesburg, The Elusive Metropolis* (2008): 'the racial state in South Africa was built on the fear of the black man with a gun'.³³ Throughout South African political history, the representation of gangs was part of rebellious movements and subculture,

while young black men from the townships were given social status according to their violent actions against the apartheid state.³⁴ Connotations associated with 'youth' and 'teens' became part of this iconic genealogy, driven from magazines and the 'toy toy' war dance to the struggle arena.³⁵ The gangster stood as an example of informal and alternative access to wealth, representing an 'immediate model of success', independence and leadership.³⁶ The changes in South African society accompanied a shift in the gangster status and a 'struggle version of masculinity'.³⁷ The resistance and 'reclamation' associated with young gangsters shifted from a political to a criminal framework, producing them as urban antiheroes in the new democracy.³⁸

The 'black gangster' in South Africa is shaped by cinematic expectations and township realities, both fields of representation interlacing with and inflecting one another. Recent analyses of the South African gangster have demonstrated how different representations of this figure in South African films mirror the socio-political climate of the time.³⁹ Killed at the end of *Mapantsula* (1987), very much an apartheid-era film, the gangster becomes a figure of redemption and forgiveness in *Tsotsi* (2005), in the years of the new government.⁴⁰ As Lesley Marx noted, 'gangster protagonists don't die after 1994'.⁴¹ Moving from a tragic fall, to a state of redemption, the gangster is finally used to cast a shadow on the rainbow nation's utopia through play and self-irony.⁴²

In the film *Hijack Stories* (2000), Sox, a young South African actor, goes to Soweto to meet Zama, a 'real gangster', and learn how to mimic his behaviour for a car hijacker role (2000, figure 8). The hall of mirrors is endless, Zama confessing that he uses the example set by American movies, such as characters played by Sylvester Stallone, in order to shape his own gangster profile. The introspective pose displayed by some of *Skeem' Saka's* photographed subjects seems like a re-enactment of Zama's composure (figures 1, 5 and 6). Their careless and nonchalant look, especially when smoking, also recalls iconic characters from American mafia films such as *Scarface*.⁴³ Tony Montana's Italian suit might well have shaped the costume of the photographed subject analysed originally (figure 1). In a South African context, this fashion style could have different connotations, for instance of the 'swagger' or the 'rudeboy' taking pride in their fashionable appearance and could be associated with a seductive, charismatic and urban power.⁴⁴



Figure 8 Rapulana Seiphemo playing Zama in *Hijack Stories*, directed by Oliver Schmitz, 2000. YouTube screenshot.

Taken together, the self-composure and self-fashioning shaped by cross-continental trends are what makes the gangster a rebellious figure and what *Skeem*' Saka protagonists' attitudes appear to refer to.

The gangster figure in contemporary South African novels is conceived through juxtapositions. Clothes and accessories are part of the visual markers shaping the attitude of his body and its movements in space. Nyaope, a street drug allegedly consumed by young people in the townships, participates in framing gangster protagonists in slow motion.⁴⁵ In *After Tears* by Niq Mhologon (2007), Bafana, the main character, encounters a gang. The dangerous leader of the group is described as follows: 'The guy was wearing baggy jeans and an oversized T-shirt. He walked towards me, his thick chains shining on his chest, with the lumbering gait of tsotsis and gangster rappers.'⁴⁶ In this context, cultural references are interconnected and used to illustrate the gangster's moves in an urban setting. The gangster's body is massive, imposing, and adorned with cumbersome accessories. In *Young Blood* by Sifiso Mzobe (2010), the main character Siphso describes a gangster named 'Gold Teeth' in the following terms:

Gold, gold and more gold. Hoops for both earrings, for each alternate tooth, a large chain around the neck and thick bracelets for both wrists. He was about my age and dressed in a Versace shirt. Trousers, belt with oversize buckle and shoes were all Hugo Boss. In his hand he clasped a clump of crushed weed.⁴⁷

In the novels of Niq Mhologon and Sifiso Mzobe, the gangster's accumulation of accessories roughly signifies wealth and power while confirming on-going criminal actions. Monumental, his body is larger than life and casts a shadow over his direct surroundings. In *Skeem' Saka*, on the contrary, protagonists' clothes are thin and light (figures 2-4). Except for the man with dyed hair (figure 1), the young men in the series wear little jewellery. Their bodies suggest heaviness through relaxed posture and constructed stature, which is emphasised when smoking, yet they do not eclipse space. Mirroring their intimate visual backgrounds, some men are undressed (figures 5 and 6); others cross their arms at their chests (figure 3). Contradicting the depiction of the gangster figure in cinema or literature, *Skeem' Saka* presents the gangster in a symbiotic way through sober, constrained and suggestive associations.

Analysing South African township-based fiction, Megan Jones ironically points out that the 'cachet' of the gangster novel has become considered as 'the text of urban blackness' in the post-apartheid landscape.⁴⁸ In this respect, Soweto is considered to be the exemplary township, within which the gangster figure, inevitably depicted as possessing a 'black' machismo, is negotiated.⁴⁹ Drawing her analysis on the novels *Young Blood* by Sifiso Mzobe (2010) and *African Cookboy* by David Dinwoodie-Irving (2010), Jones traces how the lonely figure of the 'black man' was captured through a combination of violent crime and urban empowerment stereotypically associated with the South African gangster by an external audience. In a similar way to his figuration in cinema, the gangster in South African novels embodies social mobility and symbolic aspirations. Within the context of the township space, however, the car, and more especially the BMW, is what directs the gangster trajectory and the narrative speed, its accelerating or decelerating a tool to create suspense and tension.⁵⁰

In township-based narratives in literature and film, the gangster acts as a figure to test the limits and possibilities offered to young men who are trapped within a township space, celebrated on the one hand for its 'identity production' and marked on the other 'by race and lack of resources'.⁵¹

Considering the notion of authenticity embodied by the gangster in South African fiction, Siphso Gongxeka's reading of this figure can be problematic in that it might be seen as reducing Soweto-based young men to racialised and stereotypical backgrounds. As analysed by Jones in relation to South African literature, the gangster embodies mobility by forging a conception of masculinity conceived against the limits of a domestic setting.⁵² Despite cross-continental references, such as the dyed hair or the 'jazzy' costume, the male characters who comprise the series *Skeem' Saka* are depicted individually in front of or within a house engaged for the limits of its material and symbolic explorations. Windows and doors are closed, walls and spins are high, the house is locked and the protagonists confined. In visually trapping its models outside urban spaces, *Skeem' Saka*, I argue, challenges the socio-historical perception of masculinity associated with gangsters in South Africa.

Considering the fictional and historical connotations of the gangster, drawn in particular by its criminal actions and social mobility, the protagonists of *Skeem' Saka* appear as sites of a passive and constrained resilience. One car is featured in the series (2013/2014, figure 9). The protagonist, sitting in the driving seat, is captured through an open door that is not visible in the frame. The car is stationary. The dashboard looks low-priced. Yet, the angular shapes of the driver's seat are reminiscent of an old BMW model. Positioned on the bias, the hat is used for both its practical and decorative faculties. As exemplified by this image, *Skeem's Saka* protagonists follow the gangster's shape, attitude, clothing and tacit mobility, yet are all rendered immobile. Constrained within the limits of a township space which allowed, once, freedom and self-affirmation, gangsterism as enacted by *Skeem' Saka's* protagonists is only partial. The young men's poses and surroundings reflect the impossibility and incoherence of the construction of the gangster figure in a contemporary landscape. The gangster, as depicted in *Skeem' Saka*, is 'a man-made fairy tale'.⁵³

In their theory of political identity, Jamie Fruch and Nicholas Onuf explain that the relationship between 'identity and action in the material world' can be an indicator of political change.⁵⁴ Fashion, music and language have become identity markers in a highly 'composite' South African youth culture, particularly in Johannesburg.⁵⁵ Following the entry of the country into a global market economy and a consumer centred culture, self-referencing among South Africa's youth population has become increasingly multi-



Figure 9 Siphongxeka, Mos', 2013/2014. Digital colour photograph. Tierney fellowship. © Courtesy of the artist.

faceted and porous.⁵⁶ In *Skeem' Saka*, the protagonists' clothes may look new or used, yet are all carefully arranged and differentiated (figures 1-4). Shifting from the stereotypical gangster as depicted in fiction and popular imagination, the photographed subjects are seen disarmed and individualised, yet empowered and interconnected by a self-conscious celebration of the gangster 'style'. In keeping with Siphongxeka's keen interest in fashion, as exemplified by his other photography series such as *Good Looking* (2012), *All Black Everything and Gold* (2013), *Boy in White* (2013), *The Cool Nation* (2013), *EERIE, featuring my Gang* (2013), *The Most Stylish* (2015) or *The Cool Society* (2015), *Skeem' Saka* showcases the tragic anti-hero as a fashionable and glamorous icon, suggesting a different aspiration (figure 1). While young South African men have become stereotypically linked with crime in the new democracy, fashion stands as an alternative rebellion, and mass media taste is equally a new tool for belonging and self-definition.⁵⁷

Within the contemporary South African music industry, cross-continental and local amalgams comprise the singularity of each music style, while addressing specific sub-groups.⁵⁸ The fashion style and poses displayed in

Skeem' Saka were designed with kwaito music as a background, with Gongxeka playing famous tunes during the image-making process.⁵⁹ Following on from the hit *Kaffir*, kwaito has been used as the soundtrack of gangster movies to accompany and punctuate protagonists' moves on screen.⁶⁰ Differentiated through its location of emergent and historical references, the success of kwaito music also depends on its ability to incorporate contemporary narratives elaborated outside its geographical limits. Peterson Bhekizizwe based his analysis of kwaito music on these various criteria of legitimacy.⁶¹ Kwaito artists, like reggae, rap and hip-hop communities, intrinsically relate 'anti-establishment' positioning with their own 'street credibility'.⁶² As the background of hip-hop or kwaito music, the township space read as a 'ghetto' is what produces and nurtures the archetypal criminal figure.⁶³

Created largely by male musicians for a predominantly male audience, the discourse promoted by kwaito singers is self-referencing and self-promotional.⁶⁴ Addressing everyday experiences, 'ghetto life' is explored through the prism of youth and machismo in a homosocial discourse, the concerns of which are listed by Bhekizizwe as follows: 'the lack of respect from fellow youths, the need to reassert one self, celebrations of sexual exploits and material goods or anxieties about the lack of thereof.'⁶⁵ The urban landscape as depicted by kwaito music is surrounded by obstacles, drawn by men for men, which are the very sources of the identity formed and performed by the kwaito singer. As in the music videos 'Tsege Tsege' by Big Nuz (2015) and 'Soweto Baby' by DJ Maphorisa (2015), the kwaito singer impersonates 'mafia-type personas' while being surrounded by cars, swimming pools and women (2015, figure 10).⁶⁶ The success of the kwaito singer is not unlike that of the gangster figure, performed through a material consumption informed by international hip-hop aesthetics. Similar to the gangster figure in fiction, the credibility of a kwaito singer depends on his ability to reproduce and maintain a linear reading of 'ghettology'.⁶⁷ Promoting social aspiration, consumption and wealth through mobility, kwaito music, therefore, oscillates between what Bhekizizwe defines as 'entrapment' and 'flight'.⁶⁸

Constructed by an essentialist discourse by musicians and marketing agencies drawing on the 'authenticity' of the township space, the kwaito singer is an immobile and forever trapped character. His legitimacy depends on the obstacles figured by his localisation.⁶⁹ The anti-social identities



Figure 10 Music video *Tsege Tsege* featuring Big Nuz, 2015. Youtube screenshot.

embraced by the kwaito singer are therefore shaped by and confined within this spatial and symbolic limitation. The codes used to move out are the ones that trap him in. While *Skeem' Saka* depicts an alternative gangster figuration with an emphasis on fashion, the township background against which the protagonists' poses are staged and enacted is subjected to a 'monolithic' reading (figures 2-4).⁷⁰ In other words, while the subjects of the series function as the screens whereupon fiction is projected, composed and possibly contradicted, the township space tends to be apprehended as a static and self-explanatory framework. *Skeem' Saka's* protagonists, like the kwaito singers Bhekizizwe writes about, 'seem more endangered than dangerous'.⁷¹ Within the scope of kwaito music and *Skeem' Saka*, rebellion is intrinsically related to its simulation (figures 1 and 10).

In *Skeem' Saka*, retro stylisation comes into play with cross-continental accessories in a 'compositional remixing' directed towards self-parody and introspection (figure 1).⁷² Sipho Gongxeka engages the fragmented and composite character of South African youth culture, while questioning how history and mass media references shape self-construction and its definition. Challenging a criminal representation of masculinity in Soweto through the scope of domesticity, the series nevertheless witnesses a paradoxical fascination for its promise of consumption and glamour, as well as its homosocial

narrative. Addressing young South African agency in the post-apartheid era, Colin Bundy stresses that 'in thinking historically about the present; there is an inescapable tension between what is imposed and what remains possible'.⁷³ The rebellion embodied by the figure of the gangster enacts a supposedly alternative reference in response to socio-political disillusion. Opening up the formation of subjectivities to performance through a multi-media package of cinema, novel, fashion and music, *Skeem' Saka* reflects on the specific character of youth culture in Johannesburg and the 'born free' discussion.

Conclusion. 'Born free' in protest

The idea of being 'born free' has been challenged by visual manifestations. Through collective actions and strikes, part of this young generation demonstrated their political and historical awareness by calling into question memory, nation and (de)colonised identity. Followed by a fight against the rise in education fees, the student movement #RhodesMustFall succeeded in removing the Cecil Rhodes statue from the University of Cape Town in 2015.⁷⁴ Interestingly, the form of protest – its emphasis on the young uniting against an older, complacent generation, a younger anti-colonial stake and right to representation, as well as its public manifestations – recalls in many ways the South African youth movements of the 1970s and late 1980s. Iconic figures such as Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon have been mobilised afresh as part of the current debate: animating violent encounters, academic and public discussions, their faces or quotes were written on protesters' banners and T-shirts, juxtaposing politics with youth consumption of 'vintage style'.⁷⁵

Within the #RhodesMustFall debate, parts of South African history and mass culture are selected, challenged or celebrated for their ability to define a contemporary subject position. Biko and Fanon are figures of protest, solidarity and reunion who, like the gangster trope in the series *Skeem' Saka*, bridge past and present debates on South African nation building and attest to a contemporary and shared identity crisis among young people. Patriarchal incarnations of an empowered political engagement without concession, distanced from the pacifist path followed by Nelson Mandela in his later years, Biko and Fanon are the 'muscular' figures mobilised against the corruption drowning the current political system.⁷⁶ These civil rights icons are reconsidered in order to question the future; they stress tensions between

the banners of race and class categorisations, whose meanings surround political dilemmas.

Writing about the imminent removal of the Rhodes statue, Hlonipha Mokoena suggests that being born after or close to the end of apartheid within a country still marked by it may result in 'revolutionary' nostalgia.⁷⁷ The perception of changes in the new democracy varies across generations. While the previous generation witnessed tangible progress, young people are uncertain of what remains possible in a country where the legacy of struggle, instead of its direct experience, is what they can rely on.⁷⁸ Locally grounded while remaining immersed in cultural and political references relevant to the global market sphere, the debate around South African identity and nation as seen in youth culture is porous and multiple in its forms and contents, yet overall marked by rebellion and protest. Looking back to look forward, figures from the past or abroad animate the overriding 'born free' discussion and reveal potential alternative schemes of reference through which identities are being reconsidered, shaped, and celebrated in relation to their local space of emergence.⁷⁹ Born in 1989, Siphon Gongxeka is one of the so-called 'born free' generation of photographers and reflects on this debate in these terms:

Born free is quite huge but I think that we are a generation that questions things, and in most cases we become rebellious. (...) We want to know why we live like this, we want to know why we dress like this, why we behave like this, we want to know where that comes from.⁸⁰

In the 'born free' debate and as demonstrated by the series *Skeem' Saka*, the production of subjectivities oscillates between 'belonging' and 'resilience'.

The performing and reading of the gangster trope in Siphon Gongxeka's series attests to a new generational dimension where the politics of representation quests after a shared identity. The definition of portraiture thereby shifts, relating not only to the sameness of a person or the verisimilitude of a persona, but to a shared set of cultural values and a community with which the photographer identifies. The cinematic in *Skeem' Saka* acts as a symbolic tool used to question social frontiers and spatial imaginaries, and highlight the 'social incoherence' of identity production.⁸¹ Within the scope of the 'born free' moment, the township is conceived as a space of 'lack' and production, a

presumably authentic backdrop against which to investigate and celebrate the making of contemporary mutual subjectivities.⁸² While rebellion is crafted within and against material limitations, the composite character of South African youth culture is articulated in reaction to a socio-political immobility. The gangster in *Skeem' Saka* is more than an iconic and cinematic emblem; he is the embodiment of counter-culture and disobedience, both re-activated by a generational awakening.

Notes

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- 3 About the South African gangster, see Jane Stadler, 'Tsotsis, Coconuts and Wiggers: Black Masculinity and Contemporary South African Media' in Adrian Hadland (ed.) *Power, Politics and Identity in South African Media: Selected Seminar Papers*, Cape Town, 2008, pp. 343-357; Jordache Ellapen Abner, 'The Cinematic Township: Cinematic Representations of the *Township Space* and Who Can Claim the Rights to Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Cinema' in *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, June 2007, pp. 113-138.
- 4 Bhekizizwe, op. cit. and Nthato Mokgata (Spoek Mathambo) and Lebo Rasethaba (dir.), *Future Sounds of Mzansi*, 2014.
- 5 A short contextual description of the series *Skeem' Saka* can be found on the Market Photo Workshop's website, <http://marketphotoworkshop.co.za/2014/07/24/skeem-saka-a-solo-exhibition-by-tierney-fellow-siphon-gongxeka/> (accessed 2 December 2016).

- 6 About the Market Photo Workshop, see Brenton Maart and T.J. Lemon, *Sharp: The Market Photography Workshop*, Johannesburg, 2002; 'The Market Photo Workshop – Johannesburg' in *Camera Austria International*, no. 100, 2007, n.p; Sean O'Toole, 'School Days' in *Aperture*, no. 227, 2017, pp. 46–53.
- 7 I have borrowed the term 'ghettology' from Peterson Bhekizizwe, op. cit.
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- 16 The term 'deviant' comes from Jordache Ellapen Abner, op. cit., p. 126.
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- 26 About spectatorship in Pieter Hugo's work, see T. J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*, Berlin, 2013, p. 126.
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