BEING A BORN FREE

the misunderstandings and missed opportunities facing young South Africans

Last WORD

Sitha Kentane

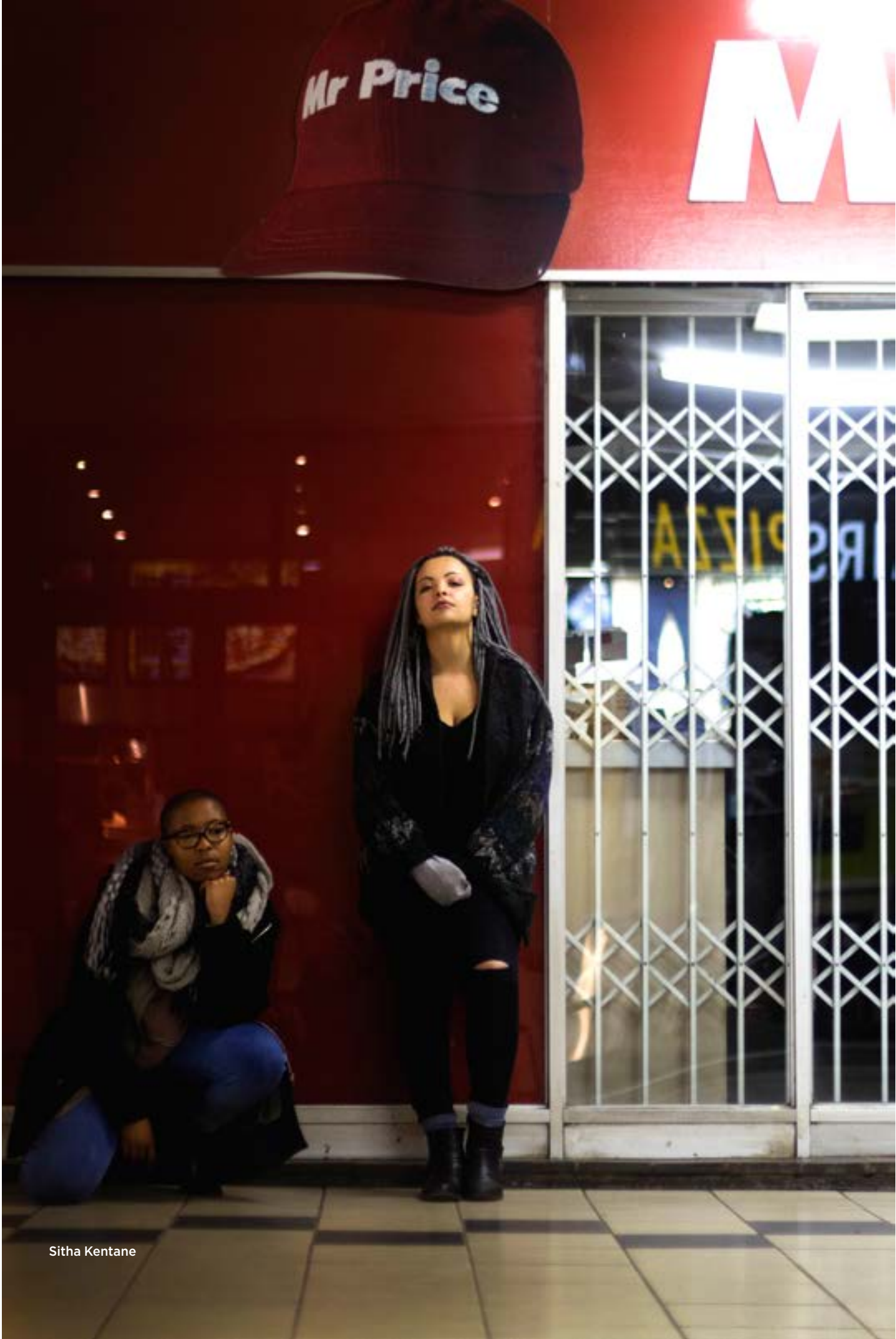
Young South Africans are often referred to as the Born Frees – a term which sometimes means people born after 1994, sometimes people born after 1990, or young people who came of age politically after 1994. I've come to really dislike the term Born Frees and particularly the way it is used by the media and the politicians.

By Vanessa Malila

By calling young people Born Frees, society is using apartheid as a reference point to identify a post-apartheid generation. This reference point (the transition to a 'free' society) unfortunately does not resonate with many of the young people that I've encountered in my research and many feel insulted by the implications of this term, which does not apply to them in any way. Should South African society really be using the transition from apartheid to define its young people and how does it relate to the lives of real young people in South Africa today? Are they really Born Free, free from what, free to do what, free individuals or free as a collective? I will look at some of the stereotypes being used in the mainstream media of Born Frees, and then look at the reaction to this term by some real young South Africans.

In media and advertising we sometimes encounter Born Frees as a group of young, hip, upwardly-mobile, black African youth who have a strong consumer culture and are able to move within middle-class social circles. These are young people who were born without the burden of apartheid and continue to enjoy life without the structural and economic burdens of post-apartheid South Africa. These are young people who live in a world of cool clothes, cool friends and the opportunities to buy into a cool and hip lifestyle – these are the young people of Top Billing and the new reality show Rich Kids where Sandton youth Nape said, "Yeah sure, I could buy a R15 000 pair of Christian Louboutins, and I did."

Beyond economic freedom, there is the stereotype of political freedom. Our Born Frees are the first generation of South Africans that have lived all or most of their lives in a democratic country. As a result of having been born outside of the confines of racial segregation, they are expected to be racially integrated with others of their generation. The expectation which comes with the freedoms fought for by previous generations is that this young generation will take up the baton and engage in the same way that millions did more than 20 years ago during those memorable first democratic elections. The assumption is that young people will take advantage of the legal rights they have been afforded by being born after 1990 – such as the right to vote.



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2014 saw particular pressure placed on the Born Frees as many of them were able to now vote for the first time in national elections because they had come of age politically. The City Press for example led a story with the headline: "Elections: where are the born-frees?" (9 February 2014) in which it reported that "the IEC was running television and radio campaigns featuring musicians and other celebrities in a bid to appeal to young voters and was also running current affairs shows. Other campaigns to rope in the youth included visits to youth organisations, schools, universities and the use of social media to reach out to young voters." You might remember the I vote SA campaign where the likes of Toya Delazy, Khuli Chana, Lira, Pabi Moloi and Loyiso Bala to name a few, tell us why it is so cool to vote. Not to vote was to go against the grain of the hip and cool and the politically free. The mainstream media were particularly dismissive of Born Frees during key moments in the election process such as during registration weekends and voting days. The Born Frees were scolded for not taking up their right to vote and for not recognising their freedoms and the importance of the times in which they live, freely.

These are the more positive stereotypes; there are of course many negative stereotypes. Some politicians dismiss this generation as lazy, apathetic and ungrateful. In October 2014, President Jacob Zuma argued that South Africans are too dependent on the state due to its welfare system. He was quoted as saying: "Our people are waiting for government. Our people are not used to standing up and doing things" (News24 2014). The argument being made by many in society is that their failure to take advantage of the freedoms afforded by a transition to a democratic society is their own fault and they can no longer blame apartheid for their struggles because they were born in a democratic society.

We often read or see stories about 'Africa Rising', the continent on an upward economic momentum, creating opportunities for small businesses and go-getter entrepeneurs. In a recent report called "Born Free but still in chains" (2015), the IRR reports that "Unlike many of their parents, Born Frees were thus born into a recovering economy. Many Born Frees have also benefited from the rising living standards of the households to which they belong". And yet we hear constantly of high unemployment among the youth, and high proportions of NEETs (Not in Education Employment or Training). The images we often see are of young people who are not only jobless, but have become so despondent that they no longer even look for work. These are young people lining the streets of townships, idle, despondent and not willing to take up the opportunities afforded by a democratic and economically better off country. The narrative is one of young people happy to fall into a system of welfare and social grants, too lazy to uplift themselves and not willing to work hard enough to move beyond their structural economic limitations.

Another stereotype of the Born Frees is being "alienated from contemporary South African democratic political culture" (Malila et al. 2013: 13). Young people are not content and it shows up in involvement in social unrest, protest action and xenophobic attacks. The number of street protests, or what are often referred to as "service delivery protests", have increased 40% between 2009 and 2012 (Alexander 2012), with approximately 2.9 incidents a day during this period. The Institute of Race Relations reports that this figure has increased to more than five a day in 2015 and argues that "given that more than three million Born Frees are not in employment, education, or training, it is a reasonable assumption that they play a large part in many of these protests" (2015: 23). Indeed, many observers have argued that young people are at the centre of these 'service delivery protests' (Johnston and Bernstein 2007; Gower 2009; Wasserman and Garman 2014).

News reports show young people who take to the streets to protest against a lack of service delivery, violently opposing the government which brought them freedom. It is perhaps ironic that these Born Frees are using the same

actions against the current government that previous generations used against the repressive apartheid government. Nelson Mandela, in his address to the 1993 Cosatu Congress, said, "If the ANC does to you what the Apartheid government did to you, then you must do to the ANC what you did to the Apartheid government." So it is that the Born Frees are using struggle politics through protest to speak out against the democratic government. These stereotypes, though, go further. These are not images of young people who are simply disgruntled and have turned to organised protest to get a hearing; these are violent, unruly protests which have little real objective, and often result in the burning of resources meant to uplift communities such as schools, and libraries.

But what does it mean to really be a young person in South Africa today?
What is the reality of being a Born Free? Despite growing up in a democratic country, the economic status of young people has not changed significantly from those of their parents, leading to disillusionment with political engagement. In its report, the IRR noted:

"Unemployment therefore appears to be the single characteristic that African Born Frees have most in common. The same applies to coloured Born Frees. Unemployment may also be the single most important characteristic setting African and coloured Born Frees apart from whites and Indians/Asians. Rising unemployment may also help to explain why income inequality among Africans and coloured people has risen since 1996, while it has narrowed among whites and Indians/Asians" (2015: 10-11).

The inequalities within the country go far beyond economics however, with social, political, educational, cultural and wider institutional inequalities continuing as the norm across the broader South African society. Despite some movement to improve service provision and delivery of basic needs such as water, sanitation and housing to all South Africans, "the efforts to change the lives of South Africans for the better are running up against formidable hindrances. Some are legacies of history, some stem from specific policy choices, others emanate from malfunctioning systems or spring from misjudgements, shoddy management or sheer bad luck" (Marais 2010: 1).

The aim of my research is to move away from the stereotypes, to engage with young people as individuals, each with their own story, their own history and their own challenges. I choose to label them as youngizens because it means that they are identified outside of the confines of this context and history. This does not mean that I dismiss history; I am just trying to find a term which allows them to take ownership of their own identities, rather than to impose an identity on them based on when they were born in relation to a period in history. My research participants are all black African, all aged between 18 and 35, and all live in the Eastern Cape. They were asked to keep a diary for a period of eight days during which they were tasked with recording any media they consumed, conversations they had, and interactions that emerged during that time. They were also sent a series of questions during those eight days via BBM and WhatsApp which were targeted at specific topics such as voting, political participation, engagement with particular media, and interaction with family and friends. There is an equal mix of male and female participants, as well as a mixture of participants who live in rural and urban areas. For the purpose of this article the responses below relate directly to their attitudes towards being called a Born Free.

Sibusiso is a young black woman who grew up and still lives in Grahamstown. She grew up in a township and attended township schools. She is, however, fortunate enough to have received a scholarship to attend Rhodes University, one of the most expensive, and prestigious universities in South Africa. She has an interest in politics, but is disillusioned with the reality of living in a place

where she thinks little has changed since the end of apartheid.

This is what she told me when I asked her if she was a Born Free:

"Born Frees are people that were born with freedom, things become easier than back in the days. I am not a Born Free if that is the case. Because first thing ja I went to township schools… there are schools like my school, my previous high school, where there we no teachers, where there were no resources, because I did physical science and the teacher was always just giving the solutions in the text book, teachers would be like just check the solutions… I wouldn't say that I was a Born Free like having to struggle like up to Grade 12, having to come to Rhodes begging for students to help us… and having to live in a township area, the RDP houses, the toilets are not flushing, but the project is still going on, but it is still going on this year. We haven't been flushing, so I wouldn't say I'm a Born Free, I would say I was a Born Free if I went to school where there are resources like at home we have flushing toilets… but now I am not a Born Free."

Sihle is a young black woman who lives in Peddie in the Eastern Cape. She lives with her parents, and at the time of the interview was looking forward to moving to Grahamstown so she could attend a vocational college and continue her studies. Her attitude towards the notion of the Born Frees is similar to that of Sibusiso. She argues that while the media sometimes portray young people in a positive way, that it also made her realise that while some people are "on the right track", that others faced more challenging situations:

"It is a bit of a confusion, because [the media] talk about Born Frees in a really good way. There was for example a show on e.tv, it was all about the Born Frees from different countries. They took about eight or nine kids and then they checked on their lives. I think they were still teenagers, but then I think it was after some years, they went back and checked on their lives again. It brought a lot of things on my mind because it was asking them about the pregnancies and so on, and for some kids they were really on the right track, going to school, studying, focusing on their lives, but they also bring up the teenage pregnancy thing."

Shepherd is a black man who is a student at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). I asked Shepherd about being a Born Free on two occasions. The first was through the daily diary questions via WhatsApp, and his response made it clear that his attitude towards the term was wholly negative. He wrote the following in his response:

"A Born Free… How does one have the guts to

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call someone something that is not there, so I don't relate to the term a Born Free because it's a myth, it's only imaginary… to begin with, what is free about us? Is being able to go and vote freedom? The ability to take a taxi to Summerstrand only to walk around the Boardwalk not even having the money to have lunch? What's free about this situation??? What is free about cultural distortion, degrading of black people and their values, I feel nothing about this concept because it does not exist."

His attitude towards the term and the idea had not changed later when we conducted our interview:

"Most of us don't want to be called Born Frees, and then we are now told we are Born Free, before we even know about Born Frees. What do you call a Born Free? What conditions must be followed to be recognised as a Born Free? So to me this thing of Born Free, I don't think it is going to exist in our country, for the next 50 to 100 years."

Sboniso is a young black man who grew up in KwaZulu-Natal, but now lives in the Port Elizabeth CBD while he attends NMMU to study. He has worked hard to elevate himself from a poor township upbringing to obtain a bursary. Part of his attitude towards the idea of being a Born Free is strongly linked to his struggle to move out of a poor township structure.

"I do not believe or see myself as a Born Free. What I see now in this country is that we are being oppressed by a system that only favours those that are rich… there can never be a black child in this country who is a Born Free… I am not a Born Free as I grew up in a township while there is another child who was growing up in a suburb. I had to be on top of the class with the marks for me to get a bursary and go to university… so this term of being a Born Free to me is a word that is used to mock us, the poor, which the majority are black."

Edumisa is a young black woman who is a student at Rhodes University, but grew up in Mdtansane, East London. She has a strong connection to her family, particularly her grandmother who she grew up with. As a young woman growing up in a township she felt increasing levels of pressure to vote for the ANC and stay loyal to the ruling party. While she felt some pride at being born into a free society, and recognised the sacrifices that previous generations had made, she contested some of the stereotypes of Born Frees:

"The media portrays Born Frees as rebellious people, people who live for the moment, people who don't care about the politics, people who don't care about the country as a whole. And I feel that is just some kind of stereotyping… they say we don't appreciate what has been done for us… they automatically think that we are the lost generation, because we are not like our grandfathers and our forefathers who were told that Mandela did this and that's it, no one else did anything. We want to question more, we have questions on everything and that is what they don't want from us."

Sindi is a young black mother who lives in a township in Grahamstown, attended township schools and is trying very hard to better her own situation. She is involved in a number of civic organisations, volunteers and does community work in order to hopefully get full time employment and contribute to her community. Making a change is important to her because, as Sindi notes, she wants to leave a "legacy" through changing her community. Her identity as a youngizen is closely connected to change,:

"Born Free to me means… I was actually born a year before, but I am still a Born Free. I am because like I am free and it is all about you to make a change and take charge, so I also consider myself as a Born Free who like to take charge of the country and make a change, even if it is a small change because I want to leave a legacy one day when I am not around and I would leave a mark and everyone would remember me, this is what Sindi has done… know I can't change the world, but I am willing to try and do it."

Thando is a young black man who lives in Port Elizabeth and studies at NMMU. He is very interested in politics, strongly critical of politicians, and disappointed by political processes he's been involved in. This has led him and some friends to form a civic movement called the African Consciousness Movement. When asked about whether he related to the term Born Frees, he told me:

"I don't like the term Born Free, because there is no African child Born Free in this country, only white kids can be given such a title. I do not relate to it because democracy was paid for by African blood. I do not see myself as a Born Free… I see it as a negative, false thesis that shows better change in this country, whereas all of us knows that life hasn't changed for the better."

What my engagement with young people has led me to conclude is that most do not identify with the notion of Born Frees; they are very much inhibited by their structural limitations and as a result have little agency as individuals. However, this does not mean that they sit idly by and expect a handout from the government. They are extremely critical of the government, but also realise the structural limitations in which they operate – including a system of patronage in the townships.

We need to take cognisance of the fact that young people are not born free – the challenges they face in a post-apartheid country are structurally very similar to those of their parents. They face structural challenges which limit their agency, limit their ability to be economically, politically, socially and culturally free. Youngizens will use different means to engage with their political identities, but they do not engage with the state in formal politics because they feel let down by the state and burdened by the continued inequalities within society.

We need to think differently about **who** young people are, rather than **what** they are and engage with them as individuals rather than as a collective object which doesn't fit into our preconceived ideas. The media particularly need to create spaces to listen to young people, to stop engaging with them on a superficial level and really engage with individuals, particularly those that are marginalised because they are poor, black and young.

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Vanessa Malila is the postdoctoral research fellow in the Mellon Media and Citizenship Project based at the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University. v.malila@ru.ac.za