

Carving out new identities

- The subversion of mainstream identities through representations in South African music -



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Preamble

Music from the West through media such as television, radio, internet and magazines has an influence on South African society as well as the South African music industry. With the rapid development of entertainment media and the global internet network, popular music is now marketed on a global scale. Western musical techniques, styles, dance moves and trends are internalised and reproduced in South Africa in new or similar ways. The American and European music industries are financially highly successful and fitting into the popular cultural patterns they produce would help to achieve national and/or international acclaim by association. Especially pop, rap and kwaito artists in South Africa seem to emulate western pop and rap stars. Nevertheless, South African music takes on its own meaning that is fitting within the local context. South African musicians appropriate western music, altering it to suit local audiences and needs. New musical genres have been created that South Africans can identify with and that assist them in shaping new forms of national identities. In a country where political changes imply a renegotiation of social relations and a redefinition of national identities, music has a significant role to play. South African academic Angela Impey writes “All South African popular musics have been fashioned out of a creative blend of indigenous musical practices and western influences, and have been implicated in, and expressive of, broader socio-political transformations in national cultural identity.¹” This to me sums up the topic of this paper. I will be exploring three genres of South African music: Afro-pop, Kwaito, and Zef-Side. I will discuss how each of these genres works towards constructing South African identities, carving out new spaces of belonging in a relatively young democracy. In the process I will analyse representations in the works of various South African musicians within these musical genres.

Cultural production as the production of self

Over the past few decades, music has taken on new dimensions as developments in modern media allow popular entertainment to be marketed on a global scale. Popular music is produced and distributed by multinational corporations and they aim to make as much profit as possible on the global market. In this process, music has become more than the enjoyment of melodies and rhythms, but as a commodity now involves music videos, television shows (e.g. pop idols), sales of popular culture magazines and music paraphernalia associated with the construction of the musician as a pop star. As people

¹ Impey, A. “Resurrecting the flesh? Reflections on women in kwaito” in *Agenda* 49, 2001, pp 49

identify with their favourite musical genre or artist, popular music informs people's lifestyles and identities. Douglas Kellner explains that

Radio, television, film and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of "us" and "them".²

As such products of media culture, including music and all associated with the music industry, work to inform the formation of people's lifestyles and identities as well as the manner in which they interact with those around them. Through global media, besides being marketed as excellent musicians, popular music stars and groups such as Micheal Jackson, Britney Spears, Madonna or the Spice Girls have become the icons of fashion, style, beauty and sexuality for youth around the world. Kellner warns that in this era of globalization, we need to be mindful of what media culture perpetuates as it is generally produced and distributed in the interests of profit and corporate hegemony³. In other words, people's lives are informed through media culture internationally, while the music icons or lifestyles they aspire to are myths or media stories constructed in the interests of the marketplace. This global market is still controlled by the former imperial powers and Hardt & Negri appropriately refer to this as 'Empire'⁴. The global music industry is predominantly controlled by American and European capitalist white middle-class heterosexual men and it is therefore likely that lyrics, music video images, and music magazines will reflect their norms and values.

With 'norm' I here refer for instance to fictitious stereotypical (hegemonic) perceptions of masculinity and femininity which people want to perform in order to be accepted as normal within society. It is mainly in the interest of men to maintain such perceptions in order to retain their dominant position. Texts and images in the popular music industry re-establish and simulate these norms in an exaggerated manner. Men are presented as hyper-masculine and women as hyper-feminine (and hyper-sexualised). In a discussion I recently held with a group of South African genderstudies students on why women are presented in the music industry as hyper-sexualized, the consensus was simply that "sex sells – it's all about making money!". What is interesting to note is the representation of the male body versus that of the female body in the popular media. A question that arises is whether audiences identify with these bodies as potential role models they could aspire to or whether

² Kellner, D. "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture" in: Dines, G. and J. Humez eds. *Gender, Race and Class in Media* (Second ed). Sage, 2002, pp. 9

³ Ibid. pp13

⁴ Hardt & Negri. 2000. quoted by Haupt, A. pp 143

they are merely objectified. More often than not it seems that female bodies are showcased by males for males and male bodies are presented by males for males. Female audiences subsequently do not have a choice but to identify with and aspire to objectified versions of the female body. Gendered representations within the music industry then are asymmetrical. Simultaneously, other social power struggles intersect with this. The general social assumption here for instance is that all audiences are heterosexual and sexualised representations of women are intended for male pleasure. Furthermore black and white bodies are represented differently. Black women (and men) are generally portrayed as more sexual than white men and women.⁵ It becomes evident then that aside from the economic interests music corporations might have, other interests are also reflected through representations in the music industry. Social power relations are held in place that keep western middleclass white men in control.

Global media culture thus maintains a system of norms, values, practices and institutions which works in the interest of 'Empire'. Yet, although audiences worldwide are influenced by media images or texts and popular culture to adopt certain (capitalist) values, lifestyles and develop identities, this process is also negotiated by members of that audience. Subversive cultural elements can act as 'counter-hegemonic' forces. Sturken and Cartwright illustrate how hegemony is necessarily challenged on a daily basis as people choose to question dominant ideologies, "effecting social change in ways that may not favour the interests of the marketplace"⁶. They ascertain that although "Media images and popular culture interpellate us as viewers, defining within their mode of address, style of presentation, and subject matter the ideological subjects to whom they speak, yet we also negotiate that process ourselves"⁷. Counter-discursive actions can be taken, including against those discourses perpetuated by the capitalist global music industry. One can here consider Hebdige's concept of 'bricolage' which according to Sturken and Cartwright "can be seen as a deliberate tactic to appropriate commodities in the construction of youth style."⁸ In this sense subcultures can define themselves by distinguishing themselves from mainstream culture by reconstructing new styles. These newly created subcultures are a signal of defiance among youth against homogenous culture. The construction of a subversive new subculture unifies its members to resist the mainstream media industry and the (oppressive) values it perpetuates. Subversive musical genres such as hip hop appropriate elements of popular music, fragmenting them

⁵ I will discuss the hyper-sexualisation of black women further in my discussion of representations in South African kwaito music.

⁶ Cartwright, L. & Sturken, M. Chapter 2 "Viewers Make Meaning" in: *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp 54

⁷ Ibid. pp 56

⁸ Ibid. pp 65

and constructing new images and texts that challenge dominant oppressive discourses. They use the media resources available to them such as the internet and digital technology (the very tools of Empire) to question and challenge dominant power relations. Adam Haupt quotes Liane Loots who speaks of cultural practice as agency. He quotes Loots saying that cultural practice “can become a moment of self-definition and a political act that challenges how, for example, patriarchy and capitalism define us. Cultural production allows social subjects agency – a chance to speak and create new discourse.”⁹ Counter-discursive actions through (subversive) music production give agency and thus forge new senses of belonging and identity. This new sense of agency and belonging and the reconstruction of social relations and identities through cultural production is crucial in modern South Africa.

The South African context

The year 1994 was a major turning point for all South Africans. People of all skin colours were given the right to vote. A new democracy was born and Nelson Mandela was elected as the new president. This marked the end of a long history of colonial rule and oppression by white minority governments. Within this ‘New South Africa’, the emphasis was on building an inclusive new nation out of political differences. Mandela’s term for it was the “Rainbow Nation”, which resonates with South Africa’s colourful new flag. The 1996 South African Constitution affirms the state’s responsibility to ensure the socio-economic and political equality of all its citizens. Section 9 (3) of the constitution states:

The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.¹⁰

Nevertheless, despite equal rights for all, the socio-economic climate could not be changed overnight. Granting everyone the right to vote and equality before the law does not simultaneously erase old racial tensions. Apartheid had left a legacy of enormous social and economic deprivation, most of the country’s wealth still being in white hands. The new South African government faced the massive task to close this economic gap as well as uplifting the lives of the disadvantaged black population. However, less has been achieved than was hoped, the backlog being so enormous and financial resources limited. Furthermore, plans to attract foreign investment and the ability to compete on the international market have not

⁹ Loots, L. 2001, pp 10. quoted by Haupt, A. “Hip-Hop, Gender and Co-option in the Age of Empire” in *Stealing Empire: Pop, Intellectual Property and Hip-Hop Subversion*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008, pp. 166

¹⁰ Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996

been quite so successful¹¹. Economic and social imbalances certainly still exist in South Africa today and its population faces major issues of unemployment, violence, high crime rates and HIV/AIDS. A majority of the black population has still had to live without toilets, electricity or a decent roof over their heads.

Even so, a major psychological social shift is occurring with the birth of this “New South Africa”. The South African government now largely consists of black politicians and the black population now have democratic rights. Various social groups are having to redefine themselves and their relations to each other in a post-apartheid South Africa. Professor Melissa Steyn describes this in her work:

South Africans, willingly or unwillingly, successfully or unsuccessfully, are engaged in one of the most profound collective psychological adjustments happening in the contemporary world. Situated in an existentialist moment that combines unique intersections of thrownness and agency, they are selecting, editing and borrowing from the cultural resources available to them to reinterpret old selves in the light of new knowledge and possibilities, while yet retaining a sense of personal congruence.¹²

Steyn speaks of the need to reinterpret old selves by selecting, editing and borrowing from available cultural resources. This to me highlights the importance of culture as a means of interpreting the self and therefore the value culture holds in a country like South Africa. Music is such a cultural resource or media story which can be used to help redefine the self. This reaffirms Loots’ contention that cultural practice “can become a moment of self-definition”¹³. Adam Haupt, after discussing various examples of how female artists have positioned women as active agents through their music, refers to Loots, saying:

This kind of cultural practice thus becomes vital, in the face of Loots’s view that in South Africa ‘placing cultural debates onto the backburner while the more important (“real” or “hard”) issues command resources and national attention, has had the aversive effect of undervaluing the connectedness of culture and governance’.¹⁴

Haupt here stresses the national importance of music as a means of self-definition in South Africa. This contradicts the notion that music would merely be propagating a sense of identity

¹¹ Worden, N. “The ‘New South Africa’” in *The Making of Modern South Africa*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007, pp. 161

¹² Steyn, M

¹³ Loots, L. 2001 quoted by Haupt, A. “Hip-Hop, Gender and Co-option in the Age of Empire” in *Stealing Empire: Pop, Intellectual Property and Hip-Hop Subversion*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008, pp 166

¹⁴ Ibid. pp 173

that is produced and distributed in the interests of profit and corporate hegemony. Rather, it suggests that music can be used by South Africans to make sense of their own lives in their own local context, in post-apartheid South Africa.

Kwaito: forming young black urban identities

Kwaito is a musical genre which is often labelled by outsiders as South African hip hop, probably due to the singing in verse similar to rap and the similar dress style of artists to that of American gangster-rappers. This however is quite inaccurate, especially as the local South African hip hop scene plays an influential role in the production of youth culture in South Africa, and particularly in Cape Town. Kwaito is essentially a form of dance music which could be described as a mixture of South African “Bubblegum” disco music¹⁵, R&B, rap, and imported British and American house music. Impey and McCloy both state that Kwaito originated in the townships in the late 80’s.^{16 17} It is of course difficult to say exactly when it originated as it didn’t happen on a set date. A seminal figure in the history of kwaito music, producer Oscar “Warona” Mdlongwa, says that in the early 90’s: “We started remixing those international house tracks to give them a local feeling, we added a bit of piano, slowing the tempo down and putting in percussion and African melodies but maintaining the house groove”.¹⁸ Music from the global music industry has thus been appropriated and reinvented to produce a new local genre of music.

Over the past decades kwaito has evolved and a variety of kwaito styles have emerged ranging from guz, d’gong, and isgubhu to swaito¹⁹. Impey explains how “Mediated by a complex music industry, the mass media, and by state-of-the-art technology, and modelled on images derived from South African and African-American inner-city rap/hip hop styles, kwaito represents a dynamic reshaping of international style into local form”²⁰. Lyrics rapped to these new beats were in various local languages, including Zulu, Sesotho, Tswana and “Tsotsi-taal” or Iscamtho which are forms of township slang. International beats and melodies were thus appropriated, altered and then made truly South African by adding traditional sounds and local language. The producers of kwaito were the first in the country to launch their own black-owned record labels, which is significant as a token of black economic

¹⁵ “Bubblegum” disco music was very popular in the Johannesburg townships in the 80’s. Especially music by Bubblegum artists Brenda Fassie and Chicco Twala inspired early kwaito artists.

¹⁶ Impey, A. 2001. pp 44

¹⁷ McCloy, M. “Kwaito, Its History and Where its at Now.” In *Rage: South African Street Culture Online* <www.rage.co.za/kwaito.html>

¹⁸ Cited in McCloy.

¹⁹ Ibid. pp 46

²⁰ Ibid. pp 44

empowerment in post-apartheid South Africa. However, I make a note here that as soon as the commercial success of kwaito caught the eye of major international record labels, they made sure to join the ride and now distribute kwaito albums too. Simon Stephens remarks that kwaito,

As a musical hybrid...is mediated in the same ways as Western and international popular music to fulfil a commercial demand that has resulted from changes in channels of media and communications technology, synchronous with the changing socio-political environment.²¹

And yet despite the re-appropriation of this new musical genre by the mainstream music industry, kwaito symbolizes black South African urban youth culture in the “New South Africa”, the hopes and dreams of a people after their liberation. Kwaito as such is not merely a term used to name the music but also represents a style and black youth identity. Using local “black languages” could also be read as ‘resistance vernacular’ to white South African cultural domination as well as western cultural imperialism. Through such multilingual practices, a new semiotic space is constructed which provides its producers and audience a certain agency, and in this case a unified black identity.

While this sense of unified black identity strengthens the new position of young black South Africans in the shift to democracy, new racial boundaries are simultaneously constructed. Skin colour thus still plays an important role in post-apartheid South Africa in identity formation through music. However, though kwaito seems to be a black musical genre produced by black people for black people, I have found that many white youth also listen to kwaito. All the same, they enjoy it as a black musical genre. Perhaps it could be seen as a means for white youth to connect with black peers on the dance floor. Even if most white young South Africans hardly speak any of the black local languages, they can enjoy kwaito’s musical rhythms and melodies on the dance floor with their black peers. In this sense it also seems to be a means for white South African youth to find a common ground with black South Africans. The opportunity for white South Africans to openly appreciate “black culture” under new legislations could be understood as a first step towards a multicultural nation. This topic however would need further exploration.

Although I speak of a unified black identity through kwaito music, it is important to note here that there is of course no singular black unified identity. South Africa counts many different ‘black ethnic tribes’ and has eleven official languages of which nine languages are

²¹ Stephens, S. “Kwaito” in *Senses of Culture: South African Cultural Studies*. Sarah Nutall, Cheryl-Ann Michael (Eds). Oxford University Press: Cape Town. 2000, pp 257

traditionally languages spoken by black people. At the same time, the end of apartheid has resulted in a rising 'intra-racial' class divide with income inequality among South Africa's black population being incredibly high. Generally speaking, there has hardly been any decrease in the gap between the rich and poor since the end of apartheid, but there is now also a black upper class. Furthermore, kwaito is known to be very misogynist, demeaning women by objectifying them as sexualized items for male consumption. Kwaito thus has very different implications for the female half of the population.

While there are some noteworthy female kwaito artists, most of this music is produced by men. Through their cool 'bad-boy attitudes', physical dance moves (similar to break-dancing), displays of riches, flashy jewellery or outfits that show off of their muscular torso's, male kwaito artists demonstrate their male status, power, wealth, virility and strength. The women are hyper-feminized, the pretty sexy background to the male main act, showing off their cleavage and 'booty'. As in American gangster rap, there seems to be an obsession particularly with the behinds of black women. Patricia Hill Collins notes on this that:

"Ironically, whereas European men expressed fascination with the buttocks of the Hottentot Venus as a site of Black female sexuality that became central to the construction of White racism itself, contemporary Black popular culture seemingly celebrates these same signs uncritically²²."

Thus whereas black female bodies were previously objectified as a racial motive, this objectification is nowadays distinctively gendered. Hill Collins ascertains that a version of manhood is now constructed on the backdrop of the nameless (naked) black female body. While racial identity formation played a prominent role in colonial times, of defining black (and white) identities by oppressing black populations, male identity formation presently plays a dominant role at the cost of women.

The construction of masculine identity at the expense of female identity comes to the fore in a relatively recent research project for UNICEF, in which Rob Pattman discovers that youth in South Africa construct their identities as opposite to the identity of the other sex. He notes of their perceptions of the other sex that "These are not simple descriptions of the gendered Other, but are highly pejorative and convey powerful messages about ways in which boys and girls should act or perform."²³ Pattman finds that South African "Boys are not naturally

²² Hill Collins, P. 2004. pp129

²³ Pattman, R. 'Researching and working with boys and young men in southern Africa in the context of HIV/AIDS: A radical approach' in T. Shefer, K. Ratele, A. Strebel, N. Shabalala & R. Buikema (Eds.), *From*

'tough' but have to work hard (...) at constructing themselves as this, through demonstrations of misogyny and homophobia."²⁴ Hence, cultural products such as kwaito can aid in manufacturing 'tough' black masculine identities by emphasising certain supposedly masculine traits, strengthened by depicting women as polar opposites. Women appear to collude in this construction. Sexist representations in kwaito suggest that in post-apartheid South Africa, there exists a profoundly un-interrogated gender hegemony.²⁵ This uninterrogated gender hegemony reflected in kwaito culture does not seem surprising in a country that despite a very liberal constitution is still very patriarchal.

Nevertheless, despite the obvious misogynist attitudes in kwaito culture, I would argue that the gendered dynamics of kwaito are more complex and also open to a different kind of interpretation. Successful black female kwaito artists can act as role models for young black women in post-apartheid South Africa. Tumi Masemola of the "Gang of Instrumentals" and Lebo Mathosa of "Boom Shaka"

immediately jump to my mind as examples of kwaito artists who have demonstrated to be talented performers and great business women. Both Masemola and Mathosa have asserted their sexual bravado on stage and on television, but this (which is clearly not their only talent), has merely highlighted their self-confidence, a control over their



own bodies. This is perhaps similar to the manner in which Madonna is argued by various feminists to have agency in representing herself as overtly sexualised. Angela Impey argues that how "by acting out the very symbols of their sexual objectification, [kwaito] has provided a medium through which a new set of young black women artists have been able to construct a commanding presence in the music industry"²⁶ She concludes in her reflections on women in kwaito that: "As in Madonna's 'Bad Girl' antics in the 90's, the highly publicized/visualised assertions of their sexuality can be similarly interpreted as the articulation of a whole new set of liberatory images by women in kwaito a decade later."²⁷ Female artists can thus use their sexuality to their own advantage and inspire their female audiences in a positive manner. The sexualisation of women then plays an ambiguous role in kwaito culture.

boys to men. Social constructions of masculinity in contemporary society. Cape town: University of Cape Town Press. 2007. pp 38

²⁴ Ibid. pp 44

²⁵ Impey, A. 2001. pp 47

²⁶ Impey, A. 2001. pp 44

²⁷ Ibid. pp 49

While dance moves to kwaito music vary, including performances and steps similar to American line-dancing and break-dancing, others are very sensual and emulate sexual motions to the repetitive rhythm of the songs. Such 'erotic' moves are generally performed by women on the dance floor and they are occasionally joined by men. The flexible sensuous rhythmic moves you demonstrate on the dance floor seem to expose how very "good" your moves are in bed. The dancing becomes quite intimate, often between women, as the dance partners interlock their legs, moving up and down while gyrating their hips. This hardly seems to have real implications away from the dance floor however. I get a sense that these exhibitionist sexualized motions are as much about flirting on the dance floor as about demonstrating a feeling of being in control, of having the power to impress and having fun by letting go and getting in touch with a sensual self.

In this sense, such intimate sensual dancing can be perceived as a form of sexual liberation for many black women. This reminds me of Caroline Cooper's reading of the value of erotic dancing in dancehalls for African Jamaican working-class women. She describes the "transgressive projection of the body [...] by women as something positive – a way of African women asserting the beauty of their bodies in a culture where black women's bodies are not valued."²⁸ Of course Cooper is speaking of a very different context. Yet, black women in South Africa certainly seem to lack agency when it comes to controlling their bodies and sexualities. Generally, black South African cultures are traditionally polygamous and women have little or no say in the often promiscuous sexual lives of their male partners or their own sexual lives. Traditional practices such as arranged marriages and virginity testing, a practice which has recently regained popularity in Zulu culture, exemplify the continued effort to control the female body in contemporary South Africa.²⁹ The renewed popularity of such customs reveals that reductive cultural discourses are still held in place in the interests of patriarchal tribalistic ideologies. They are promoted by traditional leaders, usually unelected male senior members of black cultural or linguistic groups who were put in place by the apartheid government and who are paradoxically still recognised by the South African state. And so, in light of Cooper's statement, although women are objectified by men in kwaito culture, the hyper-sexualisation of their bodies also provides female audiences and stage performers an opportunity to enjoy their own sexuality.

²⁸ Cooper, C. "Lady Saw cuts loose. Female fertility Rituals in the Dancehall" in *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at large*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 102.

²⁹ See Walker, L. Reid, C & Cornell, M. "Sexual customs and practices" in *Waiting to Happen: HIV/AIDS in South Africa*. Cape Town: Double Storey. 2004. pp 47-49 and Reuters, Johannesburg. "Virginity tests on comeback trail in South Africa" in *Jenda: A journal of Culture and African Women studies*. 1,1. 2001. available at < www.jendajournal.com/vol1.1/virginity.html>

Aside from gender dynamics, new class dynamics are also at play in post-apartheid South Africa. Although kwaito is associated with street culture, its origin being from the poverty-stricken ghetto's, it also appeals to the emerging black elite and middle class³⁰. This is perhaps in part due to the genre's commodification. The musical content however plays a major role in its audience attraction.

Kwaito is mostly very apolitical in content and promotes consumerist capitalist attitudes. This is reflected in the associated dress style of kwaito culture, which is very much based on images of African-American gangster rap artists, often featuring ostentatious gold jewellery, baggy pants, power suits, running shoes and flashy sunglasses. This is similar to the appearance of Cape 'consciousness' hip-hoppers, but unlike Cape hip hop, kwaito does not propagate political messages to comment on socio-economic marginalisation of the black population. As Impey puts it:

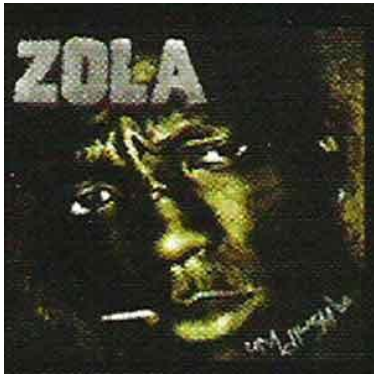
[kwaito] appropriated defiance as a fashion statement...Groups such as Boom Shaka appeared to unleash amongst young black consumers and explosive desire to disengage from the long years of oppression and political protest of the apartheid era. No longer restrained by the need to comment on racial injustice and political freedom, it expressed a new set of dreams.³¹

Kwaito then tries to move on from the painful days of oppression and protest and focuses on having fun, partying and enjoying material success. Lyrics in kwaito are catchy phrases that are repeated over and over throughout the song and work well on the dance floor. Their content is usually quite playful, speaking of hedonistic, apolitical subjects such as football, partying, or 'scoring girls'. Nevertheless socio-economic themes also come to the fore, highlighting hardships of life in the ghetto's, overcoming feelings of shame and degradation, trying to find ways to defy a life of crime and gangsterism. It is understandable then that kwaito appeals to the working class and majority of the poor black youth surviving dismal living conditions in the ghetto-areas. Furthermore, although the poorer black youth resent South Africa's now growing black middle-and-upper-class for enjoying bourgeois lifestyles while abandoning their (still) poor counterparts, "they also see the possibility, however

³⁰ Many white youth also listen to kwaito, but enjoy it as a black musical genre. Perhaps it could be seen as a means for white youth to connect with black peers on the dancefloor. Because kwaito is generally apolitical, it is not threatening.

³¹ Impey, A. 2001. pp 45

remote, of working their way into the privileged circle³². The black 'nouveau-riche' audiences meanwhile can identify with the aspirations of wealth and success represented by the genre.



These different appeals to kwaito by both poor and rich audiences is as complex as the socio-economic dynamics in contemporary South Africa. Kwaito artist Bonginkosi Dlamini, better known as Zola after the neighbourhood in Soweto (a Johannesburg township) where he grew up, has won several South African music awards, has hosted his own TV show and sings most of the songs on the soundtrack of the South African Oscar winning film "Tsotsi" (2006). "Ghetto Scandalous", is one of Zola's songs which features on this soundtrack. The lyrics are about how people used to look down on him in the past as a thug from the ghetto's and who now perceive him differently because he appears to have talent and is famous: "You used to think I was ugly, now you saw me on TV [and now you believe] I am sexy". He sings of being raised as a poor nobody in the ghetto's, and having climbed the ladder to success through kwaito. Zola sings of himself as a rich and successful artist (who'll prove anyone an amateur) whom everyone is to envy: "The good and the bad turns to the broke and the rich, so which one do you choose, to be me or the bitch?" The American saying "Who's your daddy now?" is fitting here. Despite a lot of kwaito music's reference to life in the ghetto's, the emphasis often seems to be on overcoming that life, on material gains and status, involving the self-praise of the kwaito rapper.

These capitalist themes are a big break from a long tradition of liberation struggle songs about white oppression and politics. Gavin Steingo makes the valid point that despite most kwaito then seeming very 'apolitical', "in another sense it is overtly political: kwaito represents a radically new politics which negates politics. So-called apolitical kwaito, then is music that represents the refusal of politics"³³. 'Post-political' or 'anti-political' might then be more apt descriptions of kwaito. The post-apartheid youth have "a new set of dreams", leaving behind them the days of struggle and political protest, embracing consumerist lifestyles and the pursuit of entertainment. Kwaito in that case becomes political through the very act of rejecting politics.

³² Steingo, G. "South African Music after Apartheid: *Kwaito*, the 'Party Politic', and the Appropriation of Gold as a Sign of Success" in *Popular Music and Society*. Vol. 28, No. 3 July 2005, pp 334

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 342

While the disinterest of youth in politics is perhaps a great concern for current political leaders who were involved in the liberation struggle, the youth might not be ready for political engagement. By aspiring to material culture and music icons rather than political leadership, a memory of an oppressed and underprivileged life might slowly fade. A new sense of identity needs to be constructed and the common language of consumer culture erases the painful past. In an interview on National Public Radio in Washington DC, Zola reacts to a caller who wants to know how he perceives kwaito's political identity: "We got rid of that whole apartheid mentality a long time ago [...] For one, we are trying to find out who we are and where we fit in in the role of this democratic South Africa as young people. There's no more fighting."³⁴ Black South African youth are still trying to get used to having a democracy and are using kwaito to redefine themselves, setting the new trends for the new generation that was "born free".

Zef-side: Defining white lower-class identities

As the heading of this section of my paper suggests, I will now be exploring constructions of white identity through musical production. Recently white South African rap and hip hop artists 'Die Antwoord' and 'Jack Parow' have become nationally and internationally renowned for their subversive music. Together they have collaborated and created a new subculture called 'Zef' or 'Zef-side'. Zef as a new genre could be defined as a new form of white hip hop. White hip hop might sound like a slight contradiction in terms for some. Hip hop is traditionally known as a black genre of music, a counter-culture defying systems of white oppression and global capitalist interests. 'Conscious' hip hop is about renegotiating social identities and positioning, threatening hegemony and giving agency to those who are marginalised. This 'fight against the system' (or 'Empire') enjoys success as people critical and angry about their marginalised positions and identities in society support this work. There are numerous hip hop groups in South Africa which have managed to gain popularity through their 'conscious' lyrics and representation, especially within the coloured communities in Cape Town. Hip Hop artists such as Prophets of the City (POC) and Brasse vannie Kaap (BVK) played a major role in contesting their black/ 'coloured' identities in South Africa during the 1980's and 1990's. By attempting to create a unified 'black' identity through their music, they try to move beyond an oppressive racist discourse. In a recent Cape Times article praising an initiative in the Cape hip hop scene, Andre Adolf Manuel writes:

³⁴ Dlamini, B. "The Voice of South African kwaito: Zola" on NPR Radio, World Music Feature 'Talk of the Nation'. Washington DC, 7th March 2006 on <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyID=5249664>

Local hip hop has its origins in Cape Town and the city's hip hop movement has pretty much stayed true to the principles of the genre. But don't confuse this movement with culture vultures like Die Antwoord and Jack Parow, who use novelty, shock tactics and comedy to wow. I'm talking about the real, grassroots hip hop that few get to see and enjoy.³⁵

Clearly not everyone can appreciate this new white musical genre, here portrayed as inauthentic. These white "culture vultures" have appropriated or stolen a social tool that is traditionally used to contribute to black self-definition and agency. There were similar outcries when Eminem and Vanilla Ice proliferated themselves in the media as "the first" white American gangster-rap artists. While neither Jack Parow or members of Die Antwoord have explicitly emphasized their identities as being white rappers, their white identities are clearly perceived as problematic for the production of hip hop music. Where then does white hip hop or zef fit in? Where does the need come from to produce a "white form of hip hop"?

Although white South Africans have been perceived as a single homogenous group of oppressors, it is important to note the gradations of whiteness in the minds of its citizens. In South Africa a tension exists between the English-speaking white population and the Afrikaans-speaking white population. White Afrikaners are also referred to as 'Boers', meaning 'farmers', farming being how the livelihoods of the original Dutch/Afrikaner settlers. Their ancestors were initially brought to the Cape to produce crops for the Dutch East India Company (VOC) whose ships would dock in Cape Town harbour on their way to and from East India in the 1600's. The English-speaking population, of British origin, have constructed themselves as the more civilized (urban) whites and have always looked down on the Afrikaners. 'Boer' is currently still often used as a derogatory term. The Afrikaners have, needless to say, always resented this. This tension of course was stimulated through a long history of conflict over land which amalgamated in the 'Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

Under the apartheid regime however, the dominant white population of South Africa was outnumbered, yet clever tactics were used to unite its white citizens in the common goal of retaining power. One of the many new segregation laws passed in the 1950's, the Population Registration Act states that :

Every person whose name is included in the register shall be classified by the Director as a white person, coloured person or a native, as the case may be, and every coloured person

³⁵ Manuel, A. "The real deal at the Turtle" in *Cape Times*, 'Best of Ekapa Jam', Monday, 13th June 2011

and every native whose name is included shall be classified by the Director according to the ethnic or other group to which he belongs.³⁶

Through this act, Afrikaners and English-speakers are reconciled as white citizens. What is poignant in this statement is that it infers that they do not have ethnic roots like the natives or coloured people. They are simply white and thus constructed as a human norm. As Richard Dyer remarks: “There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human”³⁷. This of course is precisely what the apartheid government wanted.

The new “Rainbow Nation” as Mandela called it, also had very real implications for the social constructions of South African white identities. Melissa Steyn notes:

With the collapse of the old legalized white regime, and the concomitant reshuffling of power, whiteness in South Africa is fragmented. Different narratives of what it means to be white are vying for legitimation in the hearts and minds of white South Africans. In this respect, whiteness in South Africa clearly demonstrates a post modern aspect, an aspect that may become more apparent in other contexts as the white center loses its grips there too.³⁸

There is a fragmentation of South African white identities as the social position of the white population has shifted. There is undoubtedly a strong need to redefine white identity, or rather a plurality of white identities. The changing social dynamics are certainly very complex and exposing them in this paper is unfeasible. Nonetheless it is essential to realise that white South Africans have found themselves in quite a difficult social position in this process of transformation. In the global mindset, Africans are black and white people are expatriates. Unlike in other African colonies however, the white population have lived in South Africa for many generations and are South African passport holders. They did not have a country in Europe to return to after the power-handover. As such, for many white South Africans, the end of the apartheid regime spelled a lot of uncertainty, in political, social and economic terms. Political views among white South Africans remain very mixed. While many have embraced the notion of a multicultural nation, others, especially in rural areas maintain racially segregated lifestyles and racist attitudes. Meanwhile, in the New South Africa, a black upper-class has emerged and the poorer white population seems to have grown. There has always been a South African lower class, especially with the decline of the ‘gold boom’ period of the seventies and early eighties. Although the living conditions of the poorer white

³⁶ Union of South Africa. Population Registration Act, No 30 of 1950, pp 279

³⁷ Dyer, R. “The matter of Whiteness” in *White*. London and New York. Routledge, 1997. pp 2

³⁸ Steyn, M. 2001. XXXI

population in South Africa can in no way be compared to those of the black populations in the townships, class differences within the white community are noteworthy.

As Eminem has legitimized his rapping as a white man because he too grew up under dire circumstances in the ghetto's, so Zef could similarly be justified for representing the lower white working classes of South Africa. 'Jack Parow' is a stage name for Zander Tyler, a white Afrikaans rapper who grew up in Cape Town's suburban working-class neighbourhood called Parow. It is from this personal standpoint, his identity as someone who was white, but on the lower echelons of the social ladder that he raps. The word 'Zef' comes from Afrikaans slang used to describe working-class white South Africans and roughly translates to 'common' in



English. Parow describes Zef as "It's kind of like Posh, but the opposite of Posh"³⁹ It is a style which incorporates outdated cultural and style elements from the eighties and could perhaps be compared to a South African version of caricaturing American 'trailer trash'. Parow wears enormous golden chains around his neck and a signature leopard-print or golden cap on his head that extends at least seventy centimeters from his forehead. He drives around in a pimped up car with big furry dice dangling from the rear-

view mirror. His choice in unfashionable cheap clothing and grandiose attributes - obvious kitsch simulations of wealth – poke fun at the supposed lack of taste of the lower classes. Both Jack Parow and Die Antwoord play with white class identities and popularise 'white trash' in contrast to white snobbishness. Through songs such as "Rich Bitch" and "Cooler as Ekke" (Translated "Cooler than me") they are critical of the values placed on people according to their material consumption and behaviour and popularise the lower class.

Most of the lower-working-class white population consists of Afrikaners. And it is significant that Parow (exclusively) and Die Antwoord (often) sing their raps in Afrikaans. In "Cooler as Ekke", very culturally specific references are made to commodities and brand names throughout the song. South Africans understand the localised associations and implications attached to these references and the humour implied by them, giving them a sense of recognition and cohesion. It is like listening to in-jokes about South African culture that international audiences would not understand. For example, one verse of the song goes:

Jy's ou nuus, ek kom met rou beats
Jy lê en wag, ek gaan soek iets
Jy's ice tea, ek's witblits
Jy's lichte bier, ek's spirits

[You're old news, I come with raw beats]
[You lie and wait, I go and find something]
[You are ice tea, I am "Witblits"]
[You are light beer, I am spirits]

³⁹ <http://www.zoopy.com/video/3byh/celebrity-co-op-jack-parow> Retrieved on 4 March 2011

Jy's die ou met die new fresh look
Ek's die ou met die Pep Stores broek

[You are the guy with the new fresh look]
[I am the guy with the Pep Store pants]

Ice tea for instance is perceived in South Africa as a drink that upper-class people drink and a light beer is generally interpreted as a drink for snobs who can not handle stronger alcoholic beverages. 'Witblits' on the other hand is known as a type of spirits locally brewed by lower-class Afrikaners: a cheap way to get very drunk. The person with the new fresh look is able to afford more expensive clothing, while Pep is very low-priced department store where South Africa's poor citizens shop. Parow thus constructs his identity by aligning himself with elements of South African consumer culture, highlighting class difference within the white community while redefining his position as trash as something popular and stylish.

Die Antwoord takes this a step further by involving more axes of identity. By cleverly using the strategies of the commercial music industry, they fight it from within. They gained celebrity internationally by posting their first two music videos on YouTube. They exploit the media of digital technology and internet and take media stereotypes to a new extreme. In one of their first hits, "Enter the Ninja", rapper Waddell Jones presents his fictitious (male) alter ego: the Ninja - who is rough, tough and not to be messed with. In this particular video, Yolandi Visser, (his female co-rapper) presents herself as a supposedly vulnerable little blonde girl who needs his protection. Her chorus sounds "I am your butterfly, I need your protection, Be my samurai."

In other music video's and performances she is often wearing tight flashy golden pants and skimpy white belly tops – an outfit normally considered typical sexy glamorous attire. Meanwhile her rugged strange haircut, use of foul language, aggressive and confident



performances betray that she is all but submissive and fragile. In "Evil Boy" she plays a stereotypical manipulative woman who sexually seduces men to steal their money. Although she enacts a gender stereotype, she does this in such an exaggerated manner that it becomes satirical. As she looks into a mirror she seductively takes off her top. Automatically audiences have to stare at her big round breasts, but these unexpectedly have big eyes instead of nipples and stare right back at us. Her breasts, are thus given agency in a voyeurist world. Music video's by Die Antwoord are full of dollar signs, large penises, breasts and atrocities, selling themselves with sex, money and horror – marketing tools normally employed by the commercial global music industry. In Evil Boy, the "Ninja" is even seen

singing into a big phallus sewn from his pants, in lieu of a microphone, representing the misogyny involved in capitalist music production. Die Antwoord are very conscious in their representations of gender and sexuality and play with representations in the media by exaggerating them. One blogger, fionnmathew comments on this: “ninja (and Max Normal⁴⁰) employ the misogynistic vocabulary of hip hop, but because we know they're in character, it's commentary. yo-landi embraces the sexist female pop star stereotypes with such knowing extravagance that she obliterates them.”⁴¹

Thus, Die Antwoord goes beyond constructing a white lower class identity through their music and cleverly comments on various mainstream white identity constructions. However, unlike lyrics in (black) consciousness hip hop, Parow and Die Antwoord do not explicitly name the constructions of their identities as white. Whiteness then, although being overtly represented in their music, somehow remains unnamed and therefore invisible. Perhaps the use of racial discourse in white hip hop then is perceived to be too confrontational. Nevertheless, it is a first step to representing a lower class white identity within South African popular culture and music industry. I end this section with a comment by Melissa Steyn: “If colonial narratives provided the social identity of whiteness, post-colonial narratives must help to redefine and complicate identities interpellated by discourses of whiteness, by bringing them into dialogue with “other” identities”⁴².

Afro-pop: building bridges

Music, as a form of cultural production informs cultural identities. As I have demonstrated, kwaito plays an important role in helping black urban youths to redefine themselves as post-struggle citizens. Zef plays a similar role in pointing out differences among white South Africans and addressing a classic high-low culture debate by attempting to shift the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable by so-called middle-to-upper-class whites. Evidently, these musical genres construct new senses of identity along colour lines. Despite apartheid being over, the social divides that exist in South Africa still influence cultural production. Racial segregation laws of the apartheid era affect the economic position of South Africans today. However, it is not necessarily true that all South African music is currently produced along ethnic parameters. To the contrary, there is much collaboration between white and black musicians of various backgrounds. Elements of jazz, blues, folk,

⁴⁰ ‘Max Normal’ is the name of Waddel Jones’ previous ‘conscious’ hip hop band, which is also about questioning social identities and norms.

⁴¹ Fionnmathew on <boingboing.net/2010/10/06/die-antwoord-evil-bo.html>

⁴² Steyn, M. 2001, pp XXVIII

rock and traditional African songs are fused to create new blends of music. 'Afro pop' could be used as an umbrella term for such blends of genres and has recently regained popularity in South Africa. The Afro pop genre attempts to bridge the gap between the various cultural groups in South Africa. Because it contains musical elements all can relate to, a common ground is found between listeners from all walks of life. The universal enjoyment of music becomes a joining element and thus also has an important role to play in the social readjustments of post-apartheid South Africa.

Freshlyground has acquired fame both nationally and internationally and this band is currently probably performing more overseas than in South Africa. According to the band description on the Freshlyground website, Time Magazine has called the musicians of Freshlyground a "Benetton-esque lineup crossing cultural and age boundaries with ease"⁴³. The musicians come from various backgrounds, having grown up in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Zambia and Mozambique. While on world tour they attract many South Africans living abroad to their concerts. The South African melodies incorporated in the music, as well as the use of local languages instills these spectators with a sense of nostalgia of their country. In this sense, the sound of Freshlyground is South African enough in style to evoke nation-building sentiments.



Similarly, although not as well-known, Hot Water plays easy-listening tunes infused with traditionally South African sounding melodies, as well as the use of traditional instruments. These include traditional drums, as well as a guitar made from a castor oil can, as it was customarily made in the townships by the underprivileged black population. Donovan Copley is the lead vocalist and guitarist and co-ordinates the band. On his website it says: Donovan Copley has a talent "for bringing together a dynamic group of musicians from very diverse backgrounds with an ever-fresh musical result that leaves audiences feeling inspired and proud to be South African"^{44 45}. Hot Water certainly strives to appeal to a diversity of South African listeners. Most of the lyrics are in English, for one because this is Copley's mother tongue. However, it is also one of the most widely understood languages in South Africa. Snippets of other local languages such as Xhosa and Zulu have deliberately been included

⁴³ Freshlyground official website: <www.freshlyground.com> (consulted on 13-06-2011)

⁴⁴ Hot Water official website: <www.hotwater.co.za/bio> (consulted on 13-06-2011)

⁴⁵ This echoes with the government nation-building campaign called "Proudly South African", the logo of which is used to inspire locally produced products.

to give Hot Water's music a multicultural South African national identity. In one project, Hot Water travelled to one of Cape Town's townships to play music in the homes of people there, as a cultural exchange, but also to find a mutual connection through the enjoyment of music with those people living in poverty. This is reiterated on the band's website with the following description of their music: "Simply put: the music brings people together – across ages, across cultures, across races, across gender, across borders. Hot Water creates a space where people from any background have the opportunity to dance on common ground."⁴⁶ This sums up the very important role Afro pop plays in South African identity construction as a common human national identity. Of course, this is also a very idealistic vision. A danger exists in ignoring very real power relations that are at play in the process. Nevertheless, perhaps South Africa very much needs such cultural productions that erase racial borders between its inhabitants in order to heal pains of the past. The coming together of audiences from different backgrounds to listen to afro pop concerts creates a space for them to start interacting and leaving their differences behind. Through the shared recognition and appreciation of South African styles and sounds, a common identity is found.

In conclusion

South Africa underwent a major political change less than two decades ago. Seventeen years later, cultural productions reflect that South Africa's inhabitants are seemingly still in search of newly found democratic identities. While identity constructions through musical genres such as kwaito and zef demonstrate the prevailing importance of ethnic identities in contemporary South Africa, an urge also seems to exist to move beyond racial boundaries. This is evident from collaborations in Afro pop, which try to appeal to audiences from as many backgrounds as possible. Simultaneously other axes of identity are being challenged. Female kwaito artists are finding agency within a heavily male dominated music industry. Zef side helps to question and blur white class divisions and definitions of 'who is hot and who is not'. By subverting the mainstream norms and values found in popular culture, new identities are negotiated and formulated. I have discussed very specific examples of musical counter-cultures and highlighted their subversive elements employed for alternative identity constructions. It is important to bear in mind here that much South African music also uncritically maintains traditional hegemonic norms and values. My thought is that for many the political transformation South Africa has gone through might already be enough change to cope with. Altering other familiar social axes of identity could be threatening, especially for

⁴⁶ Hot Water official website: <www.hotwater.co.za/bio> (consulted on 13-06-2011)

the older generations. It is in their interest to ensure social power dynamics are preserved wherever possible. There is therefore still an audience for more traditional forms of cultural production. It will still take a lot of time for South Africans to break away from the cultural group identifications that were endorsed by apartheid law. For the time being much headway has already been made, especially by youth in urban areas of the country, by approaching the cultural world constructed around us with a questioning attitude.

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