

## Odd futures

### *Thenjiwe Nkosi in conversation with Musa Nxumalo*

The idea was that I'd film my conversation with Musa Nxumalo, photographer and administrator at the Market Photo Workshop, against the living backdrop of Johannesburg – an apt portrait of a true city kid. And so it was that we found ourselves up on a sun-scorched rooftop, trying to find a comfortable way to begin. But it wasn't working. Aside from the fear of my illegally parked car being towed below us, we were also somehow *too much* in context. Swallowed by it. The blaring city eclipsing what looked like it could be a thoughtful and productive interaction between us.

Change of plan. We headed to my studio: a quiet white box at the edge of town, with large paintings of Johannesburg buildings nailed to the walls – an alternate, muted version of the city. In this sanctuary of sorts, the eye of the camera felt like an intruder. We decided to record only our voices. I hit 'record' on my phone and we started again.

#### Ultra Bastard

##### Thenjiwe: So, who or what is 'Ultra Bastard'?

Musa: Oh god. Okay, let me tell you where that comes from. There's this crew from Los Angeles, Odd Future<sup>2</sup>, I don't know if you've heard of them...

##### Kgositsile's grandson<sup>3</sup>?

Yes! That's Earl Sweatshirt. The front man – Tyler, the Creator – has this album titled *Bastard* (2009), and there's a track on it, called *Bastard*. And he talks a lot about his childhood there. So it actually comes from that. Because the first time I heard of Odd Future, and started checking them out on YouTube, I felt that they were relevant to me. They're pretty fresh and I felt that I related a lot to the stuff that they're doing and the things they talk about, and I thought I should give it a try.

'Ultra Bastard' – literally, I am a bastard, and 'Ultra Bastard' is the new body of work that I'm working on right now, where I'm talking about my personal story. I hope a lot of people can relate to it. Instead of going out and trying to find people to work with to explore this issue, I thought it's better to search within myself to keep consistency and follow the nature of my work, exploring issues that are of a greater relevance audience, to my contemporaries in particular.



Musa Nxumalo  
*Sihle Innocent khambule, Heilbron, 2010*  
courtesy of the artist

1  
Nxumalo has a new blog called *ultrabastard.tumblr.com/*. Found while Googling him.

2  
Odd Future or Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All (OFWGKTA) is a hip-hop collective from Los Angeles, active since 2007. Members are Tyler, the Creator (Tyler Okonma), Hodgy Beats (Gerard Damien Long), Earl Sweatshirt (Thebe Kgositsile), Domo Genesis, Mike G, Frank Ocean (Christopher Francis Ocean), Left Brain, Sys that Kyd and others.

3  
Keorapetse Kgositsile (born in 1938) is a South African poet and activist. Thebe Kgositsile is his grandson.

### **Why do you say you're a bastard?**

Because I have a biological father; I know him, but, you know, he's married to some other woman, and I was raised by my mother. It's as simple as that.

### **And 'Nostalgic Wolf'?**

'Nostalgic Wolf'? Whoa, fuck! (Quizzical look) 'Nostalgic Wolf' is the other person that lives in me. It's my alter ego. I used to be 'Alternative Kid', but I just got weary of it. So now it's 'Nostalgic Wolf' – yah!

### **I don't want to be part of a group**

#### **Thenjiwe: What was the idea behind 'Alternative Kid', and what made you go to 'Nostalgic Wolf'?**

Musa: I was 22/23 and I was so much into the alternative culture, alternative rock music, and exploring the lifestyle and everything, so 'Alternative Kid' was my aka. I think 'Nostalgic Wolf' came at a time when I got 'depressed' and disappointed. My career as an artist got to a point where I was stuck – you know, not producing work and moving residence. I used to stay with my aunt but then I had to move and go back to my mom's, and that evoked a lot of clashes within my father and mothers' family, which somewhat provoked a need to explore my family. So I think 'Nostalgic Wolf' came in that way. I'm not sure whether I was depressed, stressed or angry, but I was just in that phase where I wasn't producing work and not balanced emotionally – I was trying to settle down and find peace so I could work.

Frank Ocean from Odd Future had an album called *Nostalgia Ultra* (2008). I was just listening to that stuff a lot and the album carries a lot of nostalgia. 'Wolf' – a wolf is lonely. And 'nostalgic' from *Nostalgia Ultra* – and for its meaning.

#### **Are these names you go by every day? Or is it sort of only your online presence?**

It's my online presence. I've got lots of blogs. I use those names and I try to express in one way or the other whatever is going through my mind at that time. If I'm over that, I just leave that blog and start a new one.

#### **So, when you feel you've gone outside the bounds of a certain identity, you can form a new identity...**

Yah, I can form a new identity. I just try and explore whatever I'm thinking about at that point. Actually, it's less about the identity or the online name, but an ability to create a platform for myself to express deep and mostly personal feelings and thoughts under these names instead of 'Musa Nxumalo'. See,

I'm building myself as a professional artist and taking interest in entrepreneurship and sometimes I get pissed off and log on Facebook and curse, then remove it the next day. That kind of behaviour, I believe, is risky when you are a professional, and that's what the majority of people do these days – express their feelings on social networks. So the core purpose for these names, really, is to try and protect myself and my name 'cause I don't know where I might end up tomorrow professionally.

#### **A lot of these names are about being a loner, alienated in some way. Do you see yourself apart? Or do you see yourself as part of any group? If I think about myself, for a long time I identified with the idea of belonging to some sort of nebulous group of mixed-race kids. Not coloured kids, but kids with one African parent and one white parent.**

I'm not sure if I'm part of a group. Even when I did *Alternative Kids*<sup>4</sup> I would say that I'm not trying to be, or I don't want to be part of a particular group. Because I know I'm not consistent; my mind changes now and then, so I'm just exploring what goes on in my head at a particular time. And then, if I'm used to it, I try something else. It feels as though I am in search, but I don't know of what.

#### **So, tell me how the music relates to this movement. I read that you started this movement...**

(Chuckles) I didn't start the movement. What happened with *Alternative Kids* is that I had a bunch of friends who played in a rock band, Organised Distortion, and I hung around them a lot. At that time, there was a bunch of black kids...

#### **Afro-punk...**

Yah, the Afro-punk scene, Blk Jks, even R Kelly and Ludacris and Kid Rock who did *Party Like a Rock Star* together... I hung around Organised Distortion a lot, and they used to play a lot of gigs in Soweto.

#### **What year was this?**

This is 2006, 2007, major in 2008. We'd go to all these metal gigs in the clubs, and I photographed that a lot. There's this other band called Rebirth from Pimville who were doing the very same thing. They used to do gigs in Soweto. And I found out that there were a whole lot of people who were doing the same shit, but in Soweto – so I documented that. I think I had the camera at the right time to be able to photograph these things, which didn't seem like they had a lot of blog publicity, or magazine publicity. I had the access... and I declared

4  
Series of photographs  
made in 2008; see [http://  
www.musanxumalo.com/](http://www.musanxumalo.com/).

that it's something I associate with very closely, which could be the reason why they say I started the movement. But I wouldn't say I started a movement.

### Notion of Family

#### Thenjiwe: Tell me about your new project.

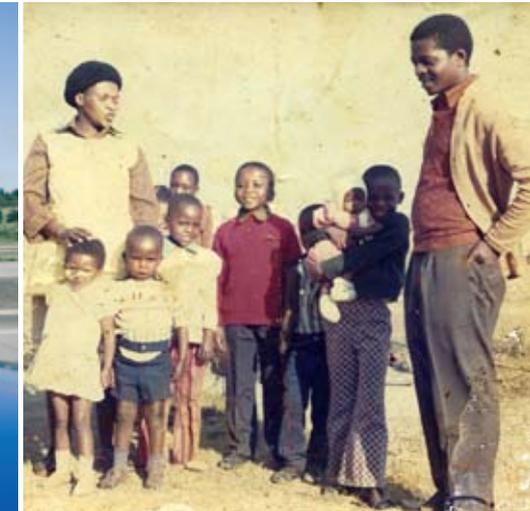
Musa: The new project is called *Notion of Family/Bastard*. I'm working with my aunt, my mother and the family album, trying to put bits of my family together and trying to understand my search for something... belonging I guess.

You know Santu Mafokeng's *Black Photo Album* – the collection of old photographs<sup>5</sup>. I'm working on something similar to that with my family album. It's quite amazing, the things that I'm finding out now when I take these photographs and really take time to look at them. And talking to my mom, to my aunt about their child and teenage days, and asking details, like, where was my grandfather born? How did he come here? All this is not political at first sight. They're not talking about apartheid; they talk a lot about experiences or characteristics that define them.

All these things, these alter egos, moving from one culture to another – I think I'm a bit tired of that. I could continue to be 'confused' for as long as I can and complain about my father and my family and whatnot. I need to put a stop and move forward. And I think this project is about that; getting somewhere. This project is about putting all these pieces together – understanding who I am and what I am about, then starting a new path, making a step out. I want to put together a book, so I can look at all of these projects that I am doing and say, 'This is me'. And then I can move into something else – like maybe go corporate (smiles), or study something else. So that's my purpose with photographing right now.

**My father always says: To know where you're going, you must know where you come from. This is an important idea, especially in African culture. Do you feel that you have to go back home in order to know who you are?**

I think so. [...] Last year we were in Addis Ababa and I was speaking to Bisi Silva about my work. I started talking about travelling, and I mentioned that my grandfather and my grandmother met in Soweto, and my parents were born in Soweto. Usually in December, in the township particularly, people have a tradition of 'going back home' – they move from the townships back to their homelands for festive season (Christmas etc). I don't have that. A lot of my friends also don't have that connection to a homeland. I don't know where my grandparents come from. I have never been there. They met in Zola



and they moved to Emdeni in Soweto. At home we don't have a culture where we travel – maybe go and visit great-grandparents. I don't know them; I only have one picture of them. When I started asking about them, there were really bizarre stories of how my grandfather moved from his home to Soweto – about my grandmother as well. I intend to quote my personal history from that point – how they moved from where they lived... and all the way up to here, and then visit those places and maybe photograph and see what I can find, then put it together and move forward...

**This project is about creating a sense of belonging for you?**

Belonging. I've always struggled with the idea of belonging. For me, you know, when I say 'family' there's a family from my mother's side, which is the one that I am much more connected to emotionally. I moved to stay with my father's family for six or seven years. They are supposed to be 'family' too, but, in my head, they're not because whenever I am with them I don't get the feeling of belonging I should be getting. I've spent a lot of time with friends, and there's a sense of family with them because they're accommodating and there's a

Musa Nxumalo  
*Thato Woody Khumalo*,  
N3. 2009 courtesy of  
the artist

5

Santu Mafokeng, *Black Photo Album/Look At Me, 1890–1950* 'is a series of digitally reworked 19th century, colonial portraits of Black South African families. 'These are images that urban black working and middle-class families had commissioned, requested or tacitly sanctioned. They have been left behind by dead relatives, where they sometimes hang on obscure parlour walls in the townships. In some families they are coveted as treasures, displacing totems in discursive narratives about identity, lineage and personality. (...) When we look at them we believe them, for they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves. We see these images in the terms determined by the subjects themselves, for they have made them their own' (Santu Mafokeng, website of the David Krut Projects, <http://www.davidkrut.com/pastExMafokeng.html>, last accessed 31 October 2011).



**Musa Nxumalo**  
*Notion of family: In Search Of... Route to my  
homelands with family portrait, grandparents,  
uncles and aunts*  
courtesy of the artist

great sense of belonging with them. I would say my work is about creating a sense of belonging; it's not just this new project.

**What does belonging mean to you?**

I think it's about knowing yourself. If I am able to tell you where I come from and where I'm heading in a simple sentence or two, I think that's good. If you ask me about who I am and about belonging – Jesus, I struggle with that. If you ask me about family – I really struggle with a common notion of family too. I need to work that out – I feel that with this project. If I finish it, I will be able to feel confident about myself, who and where I want to be – that's what belonging is about to me.

**When I was younger, I used to feel like a sense of belonging was something that only other people could afford me. And now I feel the opposite: that belonging is something that you can only afford yourself. For me, at least, it's been an important distinction, and I think this idea of trying to find belonging can be really tricky – especially if you put it into the hands of others. Do you think belonging can ever be dangerous?**

Yes it can! Looking at what I'm doing with this project; it's draining emotionally. I think, in that sense, it can be really dangerous. As I keep bringing stuff into question with this project, I start hearing personal family stories... and sometimes it's stuff I'm not prepared to hear and it shuts me down, but it has to be dealt with. I'm thinking of the typical scenario of an adopted kid who stays with whatever family for most of their childhood, only to find out that they don't belong with that family. Depending on how they got there and how they react to that reality, they can be hectically damaged emotionally. In that sense, yes; belonging can be dangerous.

**You have spoken about putting the pieces of your past together so you can move on. Do you have a sense of where you're going after this project is done?**

You know, when I'm just hanging around with friends, I talk

about wanting to have a family – a nuclear family. I want to have a wife, two kids and a home – in fact some kind of material wealth. Even if I have to keep working to accomplish that, it doesn't matter really,

**Dogs?**

Dogs – yes, haha! So that's where I'm heading, whether or not I continue doing art (smiles), I just have to get myself there. And everything else we'll sort out as we go.

**(Laughs) I like that... Are you more interested in the past or the future?**

In the future. I think that's why I'm so amped up about working on my past so that I can close it off and move forward. And you?

**I think probably I'm more interested in the past. Because ultimately I think I'm most interested in the present and I'm really curious about how we got to where we are.**

I don't know why I keep using the term 'depression'. I feel, dealing with the past, keeping my mind in the past, it's really upsetting. It's not a cool space to be in. So that's why I'm always looking at what's coming instead of what's been.

**The past is painful.**

It sucks.

**What about the future then?**

I get excited about the future because of the things I plan to do and achieve, but that nuclear family is my ultimate.