

# The Present in Pain: “Temporal Poiesis” in Mongane Wally Serote’s *to Every Birth Its Blood* (1981)

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## Summary

While the phenomenon of apartheid has been extensively explored in terms of topographic designs and spatial separateness, its multiple and complex “temporal geographies” still need to be explored and assessed. This article seeks to investigate Mongane Wally Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) from a temporal perspective – more specifically, how lived time is experienced by the subject under apartheid. Through a close textual analysis of the urban setting and of the characters’ rich and nuanced psyche as well as their physical and affective lives, this article shows how, at the basis of Serote’s novel, there lies an intricate, dynamic and multi-layered phenomenology of time. Serote’s model is one that sees different temporal dimensions at work simultaneously: external time, inner psychic time, and the temporal complication brought about by the apartheid regime (with its unpredictable, pervasive and terrorising methods). This complex temporal tapestry unfolds while being sustained and contained by Serote’s own temporal vision, which is always future-oriented; it is a vision of hope, of individual and communal renewal.

## Opsomming

Waar die topografiese ontwerpe en ruimtelike afsonderlikheid van die verskynsel van apartheid reeds omvattend verken is, moet sy veelvuldige en komplekse “temporele geografieë” nog ondersoek en beoordeel word. Hierdie artikel poog om Mongane Wally Serote se werk *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) vanuit ’n temporele perspektief te ondersoek – spesifiek om te ondersoek hoe die karakter “geleefde” tyd onder apartheid ervaar het. Deur middel van ’n nougesette tekstuele analise van die stedelike agtergrond en van die karakters se ryk, genuanseerde psige asook hulle fisiese en affektiewe lewens, toon hierdie artikel hoe daar ’n ingewikkelde, dinamiese fenomenologie van tyd met vele verskillende lae ten grondslag aan Serote se roman lê. Serote se model is een waarvolgens verskillende temporele dimensies gelyktydig aan die werk is: eksterne tyd, innerlike psigiese tyd, en die temporele komplikasie wat deur die apartheidsregime (met sy onvoorspelbare, aldeurdringende, skrikaan-jaende metodes) bewerkstellig is. Hierdie komplekse temporele tapisserie ontvou hom terwyl hy gehandhaaf en bevat word deur Serote se eie temporele visie, wat altyd toekomsgerig is – ’n visie van hoop, van individuele en kommunale vernuwing.

Our inner Chronos can be felt as benign or menacing,  
can trip dancingly from minute to minute or  
lie heavy on our hands;  
it can bring back the past in a flash, or  
shuttle from the present to a notional future, or meander  
in other, less easily charted directions.  
(Eva Hofman)

In this essay I would like to draw attention to one of the most neglected fields of research within apartheid studies: literary representations of *phenomenological time*; that is, not the linear and measurable beat of the clock – what we usually refer to as “external”, “objective” time – but the intricate, unforeseeable and volatile routes taken by what Eva Hofman above calls “our inner Chronos”, with its complicated rhythms, intervals and durations. Indeed, if the history of apartheid has been investigated far and wide from different perspectives and under various rubrics, it has been mainly done so through the lens of *space*. Understandably so as, by definition, colonialism and its derivative enterprises were founded on what Achille Mbembe has called specific forms of “spatial mythologies”, with race functioning as the most important “structuring factor of space” (Mbembe 2013b). It comes as no surprise therefore that, within South African Cultural Studies, the concept of “segregated space” has worked for decades as the strongest methodological tool for reading the (post-)apartheid situation (cf. Nuttall 2009).

We know that “time” and “space” are indissolubly intertwined, and yet, when it comes to the analysis of socio-cultural phenomena, these two categories are still treated as two separate, independent entities. It is almost as if to talk about time and space would require two different registers, two different languages. Clearly, space is visible, concrete, and material in a way in which time is not. In the words of Russell West-Pavlov, time is “intangible, invisible, colourless, odourless, soundless” (2013: 24). Indeed, people’s experiences through space, although always very complex, are more palpable and can be charted more easily than the invisible, unpredictable and aleatory paths of subjective, *lived* time. What is more, whereas we tend to think automatically of space as the most decisive and instrumental site where “real” history and serious politics unfold, time always comes across as rather auxiliary, as an unstrategic template, more often than not, as a mere “container” for historical or personal events. Within this context, the phenomenological tradition of philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, Sartre and Heidegger has certainly played a major role in clarifying the cardinal relationship that exists between time and subjectivity as well as in dismantling simple, linear models of time. Yet, if their work has shown us the complex ways in which past, present and future are synthetically and dialectically entangled with each other, it is also true that these models have remained profoundly abstract and quite removed

from *life* – from any *concrete* socio-political, economic and cultural context. Thus, even when postcolonial thinkers such as Achille Mbembe repeatedly remind us of the necessity to rely on them when considering the African experience, the truth is that, when confronted with cultural and social phenomena, we still lack a critical language capable of accounting for ordinary *experiences* of time, as well as the manifold forms and representations they take.

Literature then, if it really has the power to render social phenomenology, to show us “the qualities of a life-world” (Felski 2008: 89), “how worlds create selves, but also how selves perceive and react to worlds made up of other selves” (91), can help us forge a new critical language capable of charting important “apartheid timescapes” which, so far, rather than being unwritten, have remained unread. After re-reading significant apartheid novels such as J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (1974) and the novel here in question by Mongane Wally Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981), I was struck by the intense phenomenological quality of these texts, by the precise and rich reflections the main characters provide about their embodied experiences *of* and *through* time. I was also struck by how temporal experiences can differ across various class, race and gender positions. In all three novels, time is not an abstract, solipsistic, private concern of the self, but an astonishingly concrete, physical experience; it is intricately bound up both with the private and the political. In these novels, inner, *lived* time has to do with the psychic economy of the self, flows of feelings and affects, experiences of pain and pleasure, the precarious negotiation between past, present and future as well as with psychic wounding and horizons of hope. It is related to questions of bodiliness, modes of feeling at home or at risk in the world, “deep inter-subjectivity”,<sup>1</sup> ways of being imbedded in a specific setting or landscape.

Magda, for instance, the female protagonist of J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*,<sup>2</sup> laments that, on the remote and isolated farm of the Karroo

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1. In *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski explains that George Butte coins the term “inter-subjectivity” to denote the “capturing of the intricate maze of perceptions, the changing patterns of opacities and transparencies, through which persons perceive and are perceived by others” (2008: 91).
  2. This novel has been mainly read as a narrative concerned with questions of language and textuality, its experimental numbered sections as mere metafictional and self-reflexive markers aimed at reminding readers of the text’s fictional mediation; recently, other critics have started to acknowledge the novel’s seminal contribution to philosophical discussions of phenomenological time; in particular, see Lindiwe and Teresa Dovey’s illuminating essay “Coetzee on Film” in which they explain how the text also attempts to convey post-traumatic, painful perceptions of time, similar to those portrayed in movies such as Chris Marker’s *La Jeté* (1962) and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Petit Soldat*. (1960), two movies which, by using particular montage and

semi-desert where she leads a withdrawn and uneventful existence, she feels caught in what she calls a “desolate eternal present” (115): “I lie here involved in cycles of time, *outside the true time of the world*” (36) [emphasis added], she complains. The farm is described as an “island out of space, out of time” (123) where the white masters are “devoured by boredom”, “pull the wings off flies” and “kick their heels waiting for the wool to grow” (19). Spending most of her days in her room reading and writing – when she is not fighting migraines, sleeping or weeping – Magda’s “economics of existence”, consists of “migraines and siestas”, with “its ennui” and “its speculative languors” (19); “my theme”, she says “is the endless drift of the currents of sleep and waking, not the storms of human conflict” (39). Time, thus, on the farm feels static, frozen, dead; Magda’s life does not seem to follow a before and an after, a past and a future: the torpor, dullness, sloth and somnolence of the farm engender a “temporal lethargy” which becomes itself a site and source of psychic pain.<sup>3</sup> Read through the lens of time, writing functions in the novel as a practice through which Magda is able to create and reclaim time for herself, to inscribe herself into a different type of temporality; even if, at times, she complains that hers is a “dull” and “stupid” (5) story, through the writing process time turns alive: it becomes a palpable, magical *texture* she can shape and mould, accelerate or slow down, a medium with which she can experiment but also experience moments of thrill and exhilaration, ecstasy and genuine playfulness. Coetzee’s novel, then, presents a complex timescape, an intricate temporal web in which *lived* time is imbued with questions of history and geography, as well as of psychology and politics.

In Bessie Head’s autobiographical novel *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth’s “inner Chronos” takes labyrinthine, deeply anguishing and almost acrobatic routes – acrobatic routes which have to do with what Susanna Zinato calls an “epic confrontation with abjection” and a “daily hand-to-hand confrontation with death” (2013: 59-60). Head’s novel counts as one of the most poignant and vivid representations of the effects of discrimination, rejection

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editing techniques, avoid the classical “link of actions in a continuous and causal way” thus making “a radical intervention in viewers’ experience of time” (66).

3. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee recalls how “time in South Africa has been extraordinarily static for most of [his] life” (1992: 209). This time-experience reminds him of the “viscous, sluggish chronicity” described by Auerbach when writing about Flaubert’s generation. Coetzee explains that Afrikaner nationalism “involved a radically discontinuous intervention into time” – not only into space – as apartheid “set about stopping or even turning back the clock”, trying to institute “a sluggish no-time in which an already anachronistic order of patriarchal clans and tribal despotisms would be frozen in place” (1992: 209).

and racism on the human psyche. Elizabeth, fruit of an illicit and illegal inter-racial liaison between a white woman and an unknown black man, is stigmatised and classified by her society as “Coloured” and lives as an immigrant in Serowe, a small village in Botswana. In this novel, it is difficult to define what the present means or is for Elizabeth; Head describes a tortured mind besieged and invaded by traumatic memories, what Annie Gagiano calls an “insistently self-presenting suffering” (2008b: 174); the demonic hallucinations and aggressive voices – which feel like real incarnations to Elizabeth – have a persecutory and compulsive character; they are forces which keep catapulting her back in the past, preventing her from living in the present; in the novel we often see Elizabeth losing her time sense, lying in bed for days exhausted, both physically and psychically. The breakdown described by Head is, therefore, both of a mental and of a *temporal* order. Gardening in the novel exerts a similar function as writing does in *In the Heart of the Country*; it is gardening which towards the end of the novel makes the passage possible “from the epic of abjection to the poetry of ordinariness” (Zinato 2013). The novel ends with Elizabeth “placing one soft hand over her land” (206), a “gesture of belonging” which, as Annie Gagiano suggests, speaks of a humble homecoming, “an achieved dedication” (187), but also a renewed *temporal entrée* into a more humane and ordinary present, where the past does not necessarily keep the present hostage or needs to be compulsively re-enacted but can tentatively be recollected and freed, for “to belong”, writes Gagiano, means “to be future-oriented” (2008b: 187).

Set in the township of Alexandra in the late 1970s, as South Africa was clearly moving beyond peaceful protest and increasingly embracing the idea of revolutionary action, Mongane Wally Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) has been primarily read by critics through the lens of space. So far, Kelwyn Sole seems to be the only critic to have recognised the importance played by time in this novel, not merely as a leitmotif or as a plot regulator but as a conceptual and philosophical underlying concern of the text. In his article “‘This Time Set Again’: The Temporal and Political Conceptions of Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood*”, Sole argues that at the heart of Serote’s novel lies a “temporal transfiguration” (1991: 64): he rightly observes that, while in the first part of the novel, time is experienced by the main characters as circular and repetitive, it is only in the second strand of the narrative, when the characters decide to join The Movement and to become militantly active, that time is eventually entered, set free, consciously reclaimed and experienced as linear, historical, political time. I would like to push Sole’s argument further and show how at the basis of Serote’s novel lies an elaborate, dynamic, and multi-layered *phenomenology of time*, one that simultaneously sees at work different temporal dimensions: external time (the township’s own rhythms and pulses), inner psychic time, (a knot of simultaneous temporalities in tension with one another) and the temporal

disruption brought about by the apartheid regime (with its unpredictable, pervasive and terrorising methods).

If roads, streets, and squares are the sites where marching and *toi-toi* took place, bombs were set off, young activists were arrested, beaten and shot, we all too often forget how, during the struggle, questions of *lived time* were as seminal as questions of *space*. Mbembe reminds us that “the category of the future was very central to the struggle for liberation if only in the sense that those who were involved in it had constantly to project themselves towards a time that would be different from what they were going through, what they were experiencing” (Mbembe 2013a). In other words, as the struggle was visibly unfolding “outside”, in order for those dramatic events to happen in the first place, another type of prior and literally *heroic* work had to be done on a psychic level, work which primarily involved questions of subjective, inner time – indeed *life-time*. The projection towards the more hopeful and different future Mbembe speaks about had to be kept alive and high while inhabiting the *present* meant living in a more or less *constant* state of anxiety, fear and paranoia, coping with the disappearance of fellow comrades, friends or relatives, as well as with potential arrest, torture and death. Without this inner, courageous battle with and through time, what we refer to as “the struggle” could never have materialised in the first place. Being an activist, therefore, meant being able to project oneself into a notional future while *simultaneously* inhabiting what I call a “present in pain”: a present that instead of feeling spacious, safe or uninterrupted, bears the quality of the temporary and the traumatic.

Besides fear, anxiety, paranoia – feelings which can be considered “temporal constrictors” – we see the present of Serote’s characters being suddenly interrupted by potential death, detention, and torture. It is a present which can unfold in quite unexpected and acrobatic trajectories: it can either feel buoyant with courage and audacity, light with adrenaline and thrill or feel heavy with hopelessness and fatigue. What we infer from Serote’s text, then, is that under such physical and psychic duress, in order for the projection into the future to take place, the present had to be *created* and *re-created* in the first place. This is why we often see characters engaging in a series of practices aimed at what I call “temporal *poiesis*”: walking, listening to the blues and jazz, reading and writing; pleasures like sexual intercourse, eating or cooking often function in the text as “temporal dilators”, as practices through which one can *re-create* the present, otherwise constantly at threat of being excised and “confined” by the police of the apartheid system. Thus, as my analysis will show, in Serote’s novel, the main characters’ “inner Chronos” becomes itself a living, dialectical site of destruction, heroic resilience *and* creation at the same time.

This essay is divided into two parts: in the first part I address methodological and theoretical issues; in the second part, I turn to Serote’s text. The focus will be on the first part of the narrative which, being written in the first

person, lends itself particularly well to such a phenomenological reading of time.

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Theoretically, I draw on phenomenology and psychoanalysis – the two most useful disciplines for such a discussion of time. The first posits time as a foundational category of subjectivity. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, time and subjectivity communicate intimately from within (cf. 2002: 476): “To analyse time is not to follow out the consequences of a pre-established conception of subjectivity, it is to gain access to its concrete structure” (477), it means “to shed light on the nature of consciousness” (2002: 218). The corollary of such a premise is that, rather than being a given “datum of consciousness” (2002: 481), something ready-made or a process which we can simply observe and analyse as atemporal spectators from outside, time is always subjective and embodied, constantly involved in a process of self-production” (2002: 482). Time “arises”, says Merleau-Ponty, out of our *relation to the world*, to people and to things. Particularly pertinent to my reading, then, is the idea of time as “living matter in flux”, which moulds and changes shape depending on our feelings, our psychic dispositions, our memories, our way of relating to the world, something which through a series of practices and activities we can also re-shape and even *create* for ourselves.

The second discipline I draw upon is psychoanalysis. According to André Green, there is not one single work by Freud which is not in some way or another concerned with experiences of time. In his book *Time and Psychoanalysis*, he explains that, according to Freud, we are all “heterochronic” (2002: 9) creatures. Following Freud’s distinction of the “Id”, “the Ego” and the “Super-Ego”, we can argue that these psychic instances already work with their own different temporalities. While our Super-ego is the only psychic instance which is not only aware of time but which also tries to control, measure and supervise it, our unconscious (the Id) has no sense of past, present and future, no sense of death. Given that we can hardly be conscious of our unconscious material, our inner “timescape” is by definition always a *conflicted* and complex one. Psychic phenomena such as fixation, regression, repression, or *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action) as a result of shock and trauma, show how subjectivity does not follow simple, linear models of time but intricate and simultaneous temporalities.

Thus, our inner sense of time – its duration and pace – is directly connected to the realm of affect as well as to intrapsychic relations between the ego and its internal objects. Particularly relevant for my analysis of Tsi Molope – the focaliser of the first part of the narrative – is the ailment of melancholia. Julia Kristeva explains that melancholia arises out of an intolerable object loss which the ego finds impossible to mourn (cf. 1989: 9-10); it manifests itself through strong physical symptoms such as motor

retardation, tiredness, debilitation; emotionally it translates into apathy, depression, alienation, and a perennial state of sadness, weeping and despair. Kristeva explains that sadness is the most “fundamental mood of melancholia”; for the melancholic sadness turns into a “substitute object”, more often than not “the sole object” the melancholic remains attached to, “tame[d] and cherishe[d] for lack of another” (1989: 12). Kristeva describes the temporal experience of melancholia as a very painful one. She explains that the melancholic lives within a “skewed time sense”:

[Time] does not pass by, the before/after notion does not rule it, does not direct it from a past toward a goal. Massive, weighty, doubtless traumatic because laden with too much sorrow or too much joy, a *moment* blocks the horizon of depressive temporality or rather removes any horizon, any perspective.

(p. 60)

But, our inner sense of time is ultimately and inexorably also inseparable from space, from the geographical and topographical specificities of our surroundings, but also from the larger historical, cultural and socio-political context in which we live. The context in Serote’s novel is the apartheid system in a very particular and delicate phase of its history, the late 1970s, around the time of the Soweto uprising, as the regime started to increase its already controlling and repressive measures to fight the black resistance movement. As Serote himself explains in an interview with Jane Wilkinson, “[b]eing black mean[t] at one level being threatened all the time” (quoted in Gagiano 2008: 118). Relevant for my discussion of the novel are the two “ugly feelings” of anxiety and paranoia and, particularly, how they work in temporal terms. In her book *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai explains that anxiety has an “anticipatory character”, it is an “expectant emotion”, “an affective response to an anticipated or projected event” (210) marked by a “temporal dynamics of deferral” (210) while paranoia – which also belongs to the species of fear – is “based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing [persecuting] system” (299).

## The Present in Pain

*Une idée ‘Fix’: I wander. I wonder. I wait.*

Annie Gagiano rightly maintains that Tsi “comes to the reader as someone irreparably *damaged* by apartheid” (119); she reads “his dislocated wanderings” as “the novel’s main metaphor for what [apartheid] does to black South Africans: making them psychically homeless in the land of their birth” (119). She aptly calls him a “melancholic drifter” (120). The very opening



of the novel already provides a subtle rendering of Tsi's melancholic state and of the temporal dislocation this ailment entails:

So, when she and I walked into the house after we had been in the street so long, I knew that another time was coming when we would have to be in the street again. That moment, as she went about the house opening the windows, taking off her shoes, unbuttoning her blouse, looking calm and more friendly, I wanted to weep. I did not know how I was going to tell her, "Baby, most things about this earth want you to run, want to make you weary, want you to faint."

(p. 3)

Tsi is clearly in an emotionally heightened, vulnerable state. Whereas Lily seems to have "arrived" home – both physically and psychically – he is mentally still in the street. The fact that he has just come from the street and that he already *anticipates* the moment he will be in the street again shows Tsi being "sandwiched" between what has just been and what is about to happen: the present feels uncomfortably tight and weighty. This is further suggested by Tsi's thought only silently directed at Lily: "Baby, most things about this earth want you to run, want to make you weary, want you to faint". Against this tightness and heavy images of exhaustion, Serote juxtaposes Lily engaging in very ordinary, domestic – only apparently – insignificant acts, which read through Tsi's gaze, however, tell us a great deal about his own perception of the present rather than revealing Lily's domestic habits. "Opening the windows", "unbuttoning her blouse", "taking off her shoes" are all verbs consciously chosen by Serote which suggest a deep contrast to Tsi's wandering (both mental and physical), his tense state of anxiety and anticipation of negative events. These are read by Tsi as mini-gestures of release and homely comfort; her "calm" and "more friendly look" speak of a moment of untroubled lightheartedness which mirror back to Tsi his own sense of sorrowful weariness. This is an example of Serote's graceful art of conveying painful perceptions of time through a delicate web made of flitting looks and gestures.

It would be too space-consuming to quote the paragraphs which follow this first scene in full, yet they are worth mentioning as they are quite revealing in terms of the volatile and unpredictable routes Tsi's "inner Chronos" can take. For a short interval, we see Tsi – like Lily – taking off his shoes, his socks and unbuttoning his shirt while Lily starts playing Nina Simone; for a moment the reader perceives Tsi's present becoming more spacious as if stretching. However, as Lily addresses his political work at the theatre, Tsi is forced to think about its consequences and a possible arrest by the apartheid police. Immediately, we see him re-plunging into anxiety and sadness. These are two contradictory temporalities since anxiety, as I've explained above, has a more anticipatory character while melancholia tends to erase time. Mixed together they make a very exhausting and painful conflict to bear:

And Miriam [Makeba’s] voice and Hugh’s trumpet took over the house. I could smell curry. The room was hot. My Baby never looked at me. Something about the record, the house, everything, maybe also the beer, made me sad now. I started to long for things I did not know. [...] *I wondered* where Hugh was, where Miriam was, when would they come back. [...] *I began to put my shoes on.*

(pp. 5-6) [emphasis added]

This is a key passage as we realise how Tsi’s melancholic returns are clearly related to absences, rather than losses, absences of people which suddenly turn into uncomfortable, powerful presences; the moment he “wonders” where Miriam and Hugh are, he puts his shoes on: he starts to “wander”; thus Tsi’s wanderings are simultaneously a “wondering”, an unbearable “unknowing”. What is significant about this passage is that Tsi’s mind becomes so disturbed by these intrusive thoughts that he impulsively feels compelled to interrupt the intimate evening with Lily, abruptly deciding to leave the house. Soon afterwards we see him wandering through the streets of Alexandra again; the chapter concludes with Tsi ending up drunk and falling asleep in a shebeen.

When read through the lens of time, then, the first chapter is important: it is evident how Tsi’s “anxious sorrow” makes him simultaneously weary, listless but also restless – always somewhere and “somewhen” else. Significant is also Tsi’s consumption of beer: when asked by Lily whether he prefers tea or beer, he opts for the latter, not because he is thirsty but because beer makes “things easier”. “I was riding on the wings of the beer now” (5), “I think the glasses of beer that I had been taking, were taking me away now, on their wings. I felt light unaware of my footsteps” (33); yet, if on the one hand through the alcohol consumption Tsi manages to enter a lighter, less massive, temporal mood, his “fly” is also and always a flight, a form of emotional, spatio-temporal escapism which ultimately makes him fall – fall asleep, fall *out of time*.<sup>4</sup>

In the third chapter we see Tsi walking home with Anka from the Takalane Black Theatre. We perceive Tsi’s present suddenly and painfully being interrupted by a past traumatic memory, the cold Monday on which – the reader infers – his brother Fix was caught by the security branch and confined under the Terrorism Act:

Today is a Monday. It was a Monday night. [...] I felt as if I was going to choke, any minute. My mind could not focus on one thing, it *wandered about, like a moth, like a fly, briefly stopping on one point and taking off at*

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4. See, for instance the passage on p. 41, “I was flying flying. Tomorrow I will come back to earth. [...] I saw the many many brown bottles on the table, almost dancing, as if mocking me: you flew, flew, flew, when are you going to fall? Fly, fly, fly, when are you going to fall?” (41).

another. It was as if all the houses, squatting like that in those different yards, were closing in on me, were right next to my nose, eyes, lips, face. The smell of the dirty water in the streets – the water, full of shit and all imaginable rubbish – felt as though it had become my saliva; [...] I knew, as we were walking, that he understood what I was thinking about. He and I had talked about Fix and where he was.

(pp. 27-28) [emphases added]

This is clearly a traumatic moment which puts Tsi's mental and temporal system out of joint. The powerful image of his mind starting to wander "like a moth" captures the deep damage this event has left on his psyche. The experience of having a family member arrested by the apartheid police is a complex experience which involves a range of painful emotions. On the one hand, there is the excruciating and disempowering feeling of not knowing; on the other hand, there is anger and guilt but also the understandable feelings of anxiety and paranoia, the nagging thought that one could also get confined any time. In this sense, Fix's disappearance must count as one of the major sources of Tsi's psychic pain and temporal interruption. It is not a coincidence that Serote has chosen to call Tsi's brother Fix. He literally turns into an *idée fixe*, an obsession which is directly related to Tsi's wanderings – both psychic and physical:

Where will I go from here? My mind could not focus on anything. Fix. I wondered where Boykie was now. It was terrible, so terrible to realize that I could count beyond my fingers, my fingers on both hands, my toes on both feet. I could count names of people, and every time punctuate by saying, "I wonder where they are now!" [...] What is it? Fix. Pule. Boykie. I really wondered where they were. Somehow I had no choice but to twine my life with theirs. I would never be able to forget them. They were written with fire, engraved on my mind.

(p. 44)

Fix's disappearance is not a loss Tsi can mourn but an absence which traumatically suspends time and throws him in a perennial state of waiting: "Should we tell them that? That when Fix was gone we waited, we waited for him to come back? That you waited? That I waited" (50-51). In this section the aim has been to show how Tsi's present is dramatically interrupted by his melancholic "wonderings", also to give a sense of the unpredictable trajectories his inner sense of time can take because of his emotional vulnerability. There are many other examples of temporal interruptions, when Tsi is attacked by the apartheid police, it is as if everything "would have come to a standstill"; after he and Boykie are stopped again by the police they remark: "the drama of our time was this time set again" (70) or also when the policemen are banging on his door and he lies sweating in fear next to Lily. These are all shocks which make a sense of continuity in time impossible. To be added are also other attacks of paranoia and anxiety

or severe moments of weariness like when Tsi has just gone to see Tshidi: "I fear this feeling. It knocks me down. It puts the lights out of me, I do, I fear this strange feeling. I do not know, God, I do not know *how many times* it has grabbed me. Suddenly, not knowing where to go." (39) [emphasis added].

### Melancholia and the Loss of Time

In Serote's novel, besides being related to the disappearance of friends and relatives at the hands of the apartheid regime, melancholia also has to do with the loss of time itself: the very concrete loss of *life-time* as well as with the loss of a future horizon, within which life can be lived in its full potential.

Walking, trying to erase time through drinking, falling asleep, Tsi's difficulty focusing on concrete tasks, his investing psychic energy in waiting for his brother Fix, are all symptoms pointing to temporal dispersion. Indeed, Tsi often complains about losing his temporal sense. The opening of chapter four, for instance, provides such an example: "I must have tried to clean the house. Maybe also to make fire [...] I stood there half lost, hardly able to order anything from within me, so I could move and do something" (55). In another scene, when Lily comes home after Tsi has been able to pay his permit, he wonders "what [he] did after that?" (55). In an earlier passage, when Tsi visits his mother and she asks what he has been doing recently that the police came to enquire "about Fix's brothers", Tsi answers: "Mama, truly I do not know what I have been doing" (24). In another significant passage Tsi reflects that it is as if "[he] spent [his] life in [his] bed, lying, listening" (44). All these examples make clear the "skewed sense" of time Kristeva associates with melancholia, the fact that time ceases to flow and to be ruled by a before and an after.

On another level, Serote explores Tsi's recurrent feeling of being futureless: "I wondered what my father would say if once I dared to ask him what future he had built for us. I wonder what he would say, Fix's future? Ndo's future? My future?" (49). This lack of futurity is clearly exacerbated by the kind of time that the township of Alexandra seems to enforce on its inhabitants. From the hill where the cemetery is situated, Alexandra looks "like a graveyard" (12). The time that the township seems to emanate, therefore, is the time of death. Tsi is conscious of the history of this township, that it was never meant to be "home" for its black inhabitants. He calls it, in fact, "a makeshift place of abode" (27). Its existence is deeply entangled with the economic interests of white people in the Golden City of Johannesburg; black people were only meant to be "put in their place" there. Tsi is aware of this painful entanglement which also manifests itself in temporal terms; more precisely, these two places seem to suffer under what

we could call “temporal schizophrenia”. When the “Saturdays and Sundays of Alexandra roar, groan and rumble, like a troubled stomach”, the same days in Johannesburg “are as silent as the stomach of a dead person”; while the weekdays of Alexandra “are those of a place which has been erased”, in Johannesburg they are “like a time when thousands of people arrive in a place at the end of their pilgrimage – nothing is still, the streets buzz” (25). While in the Golden City time moves and brings with itself change and progress, “Alex” is “dirty and deadly” (25):

But what is this shit, this thing called Alexandra? Seven streets. Twenty-two avenues. Houses. Tin houses. Brick houses. Torn Streets. Smell. Dongas. Dirty water in the street. Dark city. The devil’s kitchen. Township. Alex. What is this mess? Our home. Our country. Our world. Alexandra. Permits. Passes. Police. Security police. Permit police. CID. South African police. Pass police. Murder and Robbery squad. [...] Broken bottles. Bricks. Shit. Water. Children. Cars. Bicycles. Scooters. Mothers. Fathers. Old People. Donkeys. Horses. Cats. Dogs. Cattle. Sheep. Chickens. Cadillacs. Jaguars. Fifteen-roomed houses. One-roomed houses. What the hell is Alexandra?

(p. 46)

The syntax of this passage speaks volumes about the temporal experience in Alexandra, conveyed through this parenthetical series of words, rather than a list conjuring up the idea of *a waste dump*. Numerous are the passages where seeing in Alexandra becomes a source of pain, of nausea, even repulsion, the kind of reaction one usually has when confronted with a corpse or filth. Besides the time of death, then, Alexandra seems to exude an atmosphere of what we could call “abject time”, neither anti-time nor the absence of time, but simply the idea of black people’s future as waste.

## Temporal Poiesis

“History begins at ground level, with footsteps” (2000: 105), writes Michel de Certeau in his famous essay “Walking in the City”. Legs, gaits, thighs, feet and footsteps. The attentive reader cannot miss Tsi’s numerous observations of and comments on how he and other people look, feel on their legs, how they walk, and with which rhythm. These are more than metaphors or narrative tropes. Whereas Michel de Certeau, conceives walking mainly as a “spatial practice” (2000: 103) and, significantly, as a creative one, through which walkers tactically and actively can inscribe their own trajectories and routes into the city and thus appropriate and transform space to their own ends, in Serote’s narrative, legs, gaits, walking have also to do with how one embodies time, how one relates to the past, the present and the future; they can speak of political defeats, of power, of pain, of submission, but also of resilience, anger and hope. Serote seems to suggest

that people are not alive as long as they can breathe; people are alive as long as they can walk. Being able to walk means disposing of *life-time* but, of course, within the historical and political context of the novel is set, being able to walk also means being able to fight, to protest, to march – if necessary, to run. Legs seem to be the real “lungs” of the struggle. In the second chapter, when Tsi goes to the graveyard listening to the stubborn silence of the cemetery, he ponders that “[i]t stuck in the air, looming over the heaps of soil and those who could still” – not breathe – but “walk” (10) [emphasis added].

There is Zola’s old gait, whose slow “struggling footsteps” speak of tiredness and yet they also say a lot “about strength, or the will to go on and on, no matter how hard things were” (16). There is the defeated gait of Tsi’s parents, a generation who believes they have built a future for their children and, in reality, has delegated the sacrificial work of freedom to their daughters and sons. Looking at his father, Tsi observes: “Your gait, the way you talk, everything is filled with fear, defeat” (50). Similarly, turning his gaze to his mother he thinks: “She talked a lot. Sometimes talked to herself. She too had a heavy step, as if her body was too big for her legs” (52). Then there is the narcissistic, omnipotent “fuck you type of gait” (48) of the apartheid policemen, who never seem to have to reckon with their own death; the same policemen who one day “shot a girl in the leg and [as a result] lost it” (27); there is the painful, drunk gait of Moipone, who gets killed by Lucky at aunt’s Miriam shebeen. But, thankfully, there are also the firm, “steady” (3) gaits of women like Lily and Ausi-Pule with their “confident” and “strong” (57) movements; these are women who “walk upright” (20), who know that tomorrow they have to pay permit, who care about their children and their men, who do not escape from the heavy tasks the present demands without losing the sense of a larger perspective and future. Clearly, Serote modulates into the idea of walking an array of issues which range from the temporal, the emotional, the private to the ethical and the political.

Tsi’s wanderings in the novel clearly remind us of Michel de Certeau’s *Wandermänner* “whose bodies follow the cursives and strokes of an urban “text” they write without reading” (2000: 102). I want to link my notion of “temporal poiesis” with de Certeau’s idea of walking as an empowering and productive practice but one which does not entail only a spatial dimension but a temporal one as well. As Michael Titlestad suggests, “asserting trajectories” is a way of articulating also “a sense of temporal progression” (2004: 9). The motions of walking – even if they can be slower or quicker – *consist of* and at the same time *produce* a steady rhythm, a sense of regularity; like our heartbeat, walking works almost like clockwork. This becomes clear in the case of Tsi, whose gait is never only weary or about to faint: Tsi wanders but *at the same time* – we are told – he walks *on*. Tsi never says “I walk” or “I walked” but always “I walked *on*”. It is through

walking that Tsi discharges negative effects of anxiety and paranoia and that time is re-entered again, experienced as less heavy and more spacious. It is precisely through this idea of walking that Serote shows us how we always inhabit multiple temporalities. Tsi's melancholia, in fact, is not a constant, irreversible state. If, on the one hand, his present is fragmented, interrupted by attacks of anxiety and paranoia, by traumatic memories and his thoughts about Fix, on the other hand, walking *on* points to temporal resilience and agency.

Another activity which involves rhythm and which in the book is clearly associated with resilience is music. There is not one single chapter in the first part of the novel where one or more singers don't feature throughout the narrative. For questions of space I will draw attention to only one passage<sup>5</sup> where music does not merely serve as a sort of soundtrack to the novel or as an element of realism, but prevents Tsi, on the one hand, from losing his time sense, and on the other, enables him to re-animate time, a sense of future horizon. It is in the third chapter after the morning Tsi gets up horror-struck as he hears the police banging on his door. Emotionally it is a very complex chapter. Tsi has been shuttling between moments of fear, intimidation (at the offices where he has paid his permit), and misery as he watches himself around in Alexandra and feels hopeless about his future. Once home, he puts on a record by John Coltrane:

Everything in glimpses. Yet somehow it seems it is important to know where you come from, what happened; it seems important to link you to the present, so you can order the future, which is supposedly built for you. Fuck Coltrane. He was beating. Beating like the old woman of old, beating corn. Beating grass. Building a future. I want to know about you. Coltrane, beating, beating. Kneeling. Coiling. Curling. Searching, digging, digging, and giving in, I want to know about you. Starting from scratch, as if he had had no journey whatsoever in his life; [...].

(p. 50)

Clearly, Tsi is not listening to Coltrane passively. In the language we perceive an active engagement with the jazzy style of the musician. In the rhythm of the syntax, in the images of "beating corn", "beating grass",

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5. Other interesting passages in the same context are when Ndo comes to see Tsi to tell him that the police went to their parents' house to inquire about Fix's brothers. This news can only trigger anxiety and paranoia. Interspersed in the dialogue between Fix and Ndo are Max Roach's words "Members don't get weary" (23). Another significant passage is when Tsi re-visits the moments when at Ndo's and Ausi-Pule's place they would play Dollar Brand. The words "that journey which Dollar takes, sometimes as an ant moving, moving, on and on, [...] at times like a tiger, agile, beautiful, ferocious, stalking, knowing, planning and ready for the final attack" (21) reflects the different rhythms of the struggle, both individual and communal.

“digging” there is a similar principle at work I have been suggesting about walking. Re-reading this passage, particularly, against the previous pages, where Tsi seemed to have lost the sense of any meaningful future perspective, it feels as if through Coltrane he would be able to re-animate and “re-surrect” a temporal dimension, to re-create the horizon which once again has been excised by the apartheid system. As Michael Titlestad puts it, Coltrane “frequently embodies black innovation, resilience and survival as well as the simultaneous creative amplification of oppression’s quotidian and the visionary search for a political ‘beyond’” (2004: 199).

Put within the context of the struggle, the idea of “temporal poiesis” Serote suggests in the novel is crucial. Through the figure of Tsi Molohe he has managed to look at the struggle *from within*. Many critics have read Tsi as a rather unsuccessful, “passive” activist. Yet, another possible reading begins to emerge when reading him through the lens of time, namely, that Serote has tried to detail the painful and heroic conflicts activists had to cope with on a daily basis. On another level, Serote seems to suggest that these are not only Tsi’s inner conflicts. It’s the third-person perspective in the second part of the novel which makes us take the activism of the other characters almost for granted. In reality, no one is born an activist: most of the time these were already damaged and deeply traumatised people. Yet, despite the damage, despite the weariness, the fear, the anxiety, the paranoia, they were almost re-inventing themselves as activists on a daily basis. Equally, the different future for which they were ready to sacrifice their lives was never a constant horizon; rather, it had to be resiliently restored and re-created time and again.

## Conclusion

As I hope to have shown above, it is imperative to revisit the apartheid archive through the lens of *time*. Time is not only an existentialist concern, an abstract idea to be explored by philosophers, or an empty canvas on which we might record important historical dates and events. Equally, time cannot be reduced to a set of abstract models. Embodied, lived time is a complex *experience* we should gradually learn to read and name. If, as critics, we allow ourselves to read time differently – in fact to imagine it – rather than resorting to the usual narratological dissections of plots, fabulas and syuzhets, there is a whole archive awaiting to be re-opened, and explored. Re-reading the self, the polis and culture through the lens of phenomenological time allows us to complicate and to speak differently about a range of psychic experiences of pain which are so often simplified, glossed over and rendered static by monolithic concepts such as “trauma”, “healing”, “resistance”, “resilience”, “the struggle”. Serote compellingly shows how these are all *processes* – not substances – entailing complex



routings of subjectivity, with different rhythms and shapes. Reading the social through the lens of time also allows us to re-evaluate inter-subjective relationships, the relations of people to things and objects, as well as the meaning of certain ordinary practices.

Eva Hofman writes that temporal continuity is “one of the prerequisites of a genuine human identity”; she observes further that “an extreme fragmentation or destructing of time can become a torment, a nightmare in which we cannot make even minimal sense of our own experience” (2011: 76-77). It is clear from Serote’s novel how, for black South Africans, living the present has never been a simple matter. He compellingly shows how subjective time itself has been a site of trauma, deep fragmentation and painful disruptions. In the light of recent discussions about the *temporari-ness* of the present which defines the experience of many black South Africans still today, the re-construction and vision of a viable future in South Africa, must necessarily take into account current and past modes of inhabiting the present and, most urgently, possible ways of healing the forgotten but still bleeding wounds of many South Africans’ “inner Chronos”.

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