

Silence, Music, Revolution: Jazz as Narrative Agent in Mongane Wally Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*¹

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Summary

With *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Wally Mongane Serote has written one of the greatest jazz novels. Music is a character in the book that has voice and impacts the plot. It speaks not only to provide context or colour, but also participates in dialogue with the interior consciousness of the principal protagonist Tsietsi (Tsi) Molohe. Tsi develops from a state of alienation and impotence to a purposeful actor. And the protagonist grows from a single person to a national community. The music develops from jazz to soul, from impotence to sexual agency, from alienation to political action. The importance of music is explicated more prosaically in a subsequent novel, *Revelations*, in which the youths of the Soweto uprising become the adult actors in "the new South Africa". Democracy has brought not only the stresses of addressing historical injustice and the responsibilities of governance, but highlights a series of philosophical issues and cultural practices which are attendant to many uncertainties about the social reality in South Africa – questions that music can help answer.

Opsomming

Met *To Every Birth Its Blood* het Wally Mongane Serote een van die grootste jazz-romans geskryf. Musiek is 'n karakter in die boek met 'n stem en 'n uitwerking op die intrige. Dit praat nie net om konteks en kleur te verskaf nie, maar is ook deel van 'n dialoog met die interne bewustheid van die hoofprotagonis Tsietsi (Tsi) Molohe. Tsi ontwikkel van 'n toestand van vervreemding en magtelosheid na 'n doelgerigte rolspeler. En die protagonis groei van 'n enkele persoon na 'n nasionale gemeenskap. Die musiek ontwikkel van jazz na soul, van magtelosheid na seksuele mag, van vervreemding na politieke optrede. Die belangrikheid van musiek word meer prosaïes uitgebeeld in 'n daaropvolgende roman, *Revelations*, waarin die jeug van die Soweto-onluste die volwasse rolspelers word in "die nuwe Suid-Afrika". Demokrasie het nie net gelei tot druk om aan historiese ongeregtigheid aandag te gee en die verantwoordelikhede te aanvaar wat met regering gepaardgaan nie, maar beklemtoon ook 'n reeks filosofiese kwessies en kulturele praktyke wat dui op baie onsekerhede oor die sosiale realiteit in Suid-Afrika – vrae wat musiek kan help beantwoord.

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1. I would like to thank Priya Narismulu for bringing me to this project and for discussing Serote with me, and Michael Wessels and Anthea Garman for their insightful reviews of an earlier draft of this article

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The craze about jazz arises out of a conversion by the African artists of mere notes to meaningful music, expressive of real feelings. The Monkey Jive, Soul etc. are all aspects of a modern type African culture that expresses the same original feelings...when soul struck with its all-engulfing rhythm it immediately caught on and set hundreds of millions of black bodies in gyration throughout the world ... reading in soul the real meaning – the defiant message “say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud”.

— Steve Biko²

A Jazz Novel

To Every Birth Its Blood (EBB),³ poet Mongane Wally Serote’s first novel, conveys a panoramic view of the political scope and social meanings of the anti-apartheid movement in 1970s South Africa. It is also a deep exploration of the human cost of racialised oppression, capitalist subjugation, and settler colonialist cultural hegemony. Despite the hint of triumph at its denouement, the novel portrays psychological dysfunction, socioeconomic injustice, political oppression, physical loss and more. These conditions constitute the context and problematic, while the action of the story moves from interiority to overt and purposeful political action. The plot mushrooms from the vantage point of a single protagonist into a story that involves families, networks of friends and comrades, and finally the struggle of the people of South Africa dedicated to the freedom of their nation. The principal protagonist of *EBB* begins in an alcoholic retreat from his personal sufferings and indignities, including torture, caused by the apartheid government. By the end of the novel he acts meaningfully for his personal life and family, but also with a renewed effort against the sufferings of South Africans, and other African nations in the region, using a vision that links these struggles to the strivings of the oppressed throughout the world.

In *EBB* each protagonist, or set of protagonists, is marked by music, both narratively and as a simulacrum. The music that the novel explores with the greatest nuance is jazz. Jazz music is skillfully and imaginatively employed by Serote in such a way that it truly becomes one of the characters of the novel. In *EBB* other musics are also present, most notably freedom songs from the movement and soul music (as acknowledged in the epigraph). In a

2. Steve Biko, “Some African Cultural Concepts”. In: Biko (2004), p. 50.

3. Mongane Wally Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Johannesburg: Picador, 2004.

subsequent novel, *Revelations*⁴ Serote uses all of these musics as well as “traditional” and religious musics to explain the political and philosophical growth of Otsile, who was formerly known as Tshepo, one of the young revolutionaries of *EBB*. In *Revelations* we are told more prosaically what is the worth of all of this music. *Revelations* highlights music as being important to the characters in much the same ways as *EBB*, but not to the point of rendering the music itself as a character. *Revelations* can be seen as a sequel to *EBB*, not only because of the continuity of the plot of the families involved in both novels, but also because both narratives express the philosophical issues of its contemporaneous society. Whereas the protagonists in *EBB* plotted and acted to bring about a revolution, the characters in *Revelations* speak of their generation (the same generation, but twenty to twenty-five years later) building a government that will protect a “non sexist, non racist South Africa.” The reader encounters some characters who were the secondary protagonists in *EBB* now taking center stage as mature adults raising their own families in the “new South Africa.” The central protagonist, Otsile, like Tsi, the central protagonist in *EBB*, is an Alexandra native, and a photographer. But he is also an erstwhile revolutionary member of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), now living his life during the Mbheki presidency and after Mandela had achieved what Otsile calls the “Madiba shuffle”. Certainly, these are different circumstances, and as might be expected, music and its attendant social meanings have to respond accordingly. While this paper is primarily concerned with *EBB*, I will also draw comparisons between the use of music in the two novels.

In some ways it might be surprising that Serote would have written one of the world’s great jazz novels. But it is surprising only because the cultures of South Africa have been hidden from the world for so long. For this listener, the “best” of the South African jazz musicians are not only deserving of greater recognition, but are the only non-American musicians to display a widespread and profound understanding of the African-American feel and sound in jazz and its related musics.⁵ Despite the influence of settler colonialists and minority rule, and a particularly harsh national government, South Africans, with all of their nation’s fantastic diversity, maintain many continuing musical and ethnic traditions which cross pollinate one another, and which contribute mightily to the shape and content of the modernism of the black Atlantic. South Africa epitomises two

4. Mongane Wally Serote, *Revelations*, Auckland Park: Jacana, 2010.

5. This is not to undervalue the developments of jazz in other countries, most particularly Cuba and Brazil, but simply to point out that the rhythmic practice of swing, so important in African American jazz is similarly present in South African jazz, in contradistinction to the rhythmic feel of so-called Afro-Latin music genres and music from the Caribbean (though both regions have produced profound jazz traditions), which are quite different.

of the major arguments presented in Paul Gilroy's magisterial study: its jazz cultures highlight the degree to which the cultural inroads and dominance of the United States pushes its way into the popular culture, but simultaneously reveals the extent to which practices that we often think of as African American really belong to the black Atlantic.⁶ Aspects of the social histories of South Africa and the United States are eerily congruent in the racialised capitalism that obtains in both nations. It's not for nothing that, in addition to the National Socialist German Workers Party, the architects of apartheid looked to the United States and its "Jim Crow" laws as a model for creating their own legislation.⁷ Of course, there are many important historical differences between the two countries and I do not mean to conflate apartheid South Africa with the system of legal and extra-legal protections of racial segregation that obtained in the United States. Here, I am not so interested in the comparison between the governmental structures, however, but the ways in which these structures impacted the entrance of black populations into modernity. In particular, the transition from the legal battles and civil disobedience employed in the US Civil Rights movement of the 1940s-early 1960s to the guerrilla actions of black power rebellions of the 1960s and its attendant Black Arts Movement during the 1960s and 1970s was influenced by (and in turn also influenced) a similar transition from contestations in the courtroom and "non-violent" civil disobedience to the armed struggle that developed after the Sharpeville Massacre. The revolutionary movements for the freedom of black peoples on both sides of the Atlantic were accompanied by artistic innovations. These developments were most spectacular in poetry, music, and drama, but certainly also in sculpture, dance, literature, and other arts. In each country these artistic movements helped to shape their respective national cultures in tandem with the political actions that are usually better chronicled.

The national cultures of both countries are the results of a dialectical relationship between a resistant culture of an oppressed group and the formation of a settler colonialist culture. Centuries of settler colonialism, early proletarianisation, industrialisation, mass conversion to Christianity, are all things that African Americans and black South Africans have in common. Not only are the social and political histories similar in important ways, South Africans began playing jazz and other African American music forms as early as the nineteenth century. Long before the 1970s, the time period depicted in the novel and also the time period in which the novel was written, South Africans had developed their own styles within the genre. Throughout the twentieth century, jazz music and culture have been important signifiers for a type of urban, Afro- modernism for both

6. See Gilroy, 1993.

7. See Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961: Conflict and Compromise*.

countries.⁸ In *EBB* jazz music narrates a condition of alienation, but also provides some of the existential equipment for living in a fractured, colonised world. This urbane music apparently is sufficiently nuanced to be of use for citizens in a polyglot, fundamentally multi-cultural society such as that depicted in Alexandria (which, like music, is a character in *EBB*, a living entity that acts and reacts).

This essay in part builds upon Paul Gilroy's central thesis – that the cultures of the Black Atlantic are not national in character but in fact are widely rhizomatic (moving in several different and non-linear directions), antiphonal, and in dialogue with other cultures throughout the Diaspora. Thus, these cultural formations are open-ended and porous, even if internally differentiated. Their location outside of the nation-state, and their being created by post-slave and post-colonial populations informs an inherent critique of an Enlightenment notion of reason that was profoundly linked to racial terror. Jazz can be seen as a definitive counterculture to European “modernity” in both political and aesthetic forms. Gilroy also notes that music was perhaps the central repository of this counterculture, and its disregard by modern cultural theorists reveals an important lacuna in contemporary cultural theory. However, Ntongela Masilela, in his “The ‘Black Atlantic’ and African modernity in South Africa,” critiques Gilroy's almost complete disregard for Africa's contribution to the rich cultures of the Black Atlantic to be not only problematic but historically impoverished. This lacuna limits our understanding of the political and culture potency of this powerful counterculture, and the effect it has had on the modern world. When one looks at the profound relationship between black South African modernity and African American cultural formations, one begins to sense the magnitude and democratic potentialities of these cross-Atlantic cultural conversations. This dialogue and its attendant practices have deeply influenced the expressive cultures of the entire globe. And, in the case of South Africa and many other colonised nations, they have impacted the variegated liberation struggles against white supremacy and colonisation.⁹

Structure of *To Every Birth Its Blood*

The novel is written in two parts, and is developed like a jazz performance given by the narrator's patron muse, John Coltrane, spiralling wider and deeper as it develops. It begins with a first person narration given in the “voice” (much of it is his thoughts, in apposition to a silence rather than

8. See Ansell (2007, 2009), Ballantine (1999), Copland (2009).

9. See Ntongela Masilela 1996. I am indebted to Ben Barston for bringing this article to my attention and clarifying the limits of Gilroy's analysis of South Africa.

actual dialogue) of its principal protagonist, Tsietsi Molohe (Tsi), a ba-Sotho man married to a ba-Venda woman, Lily, and living in the Alexandra township annexed to the city of gold, Johannesburg. Music, especially African American and South African jazz, form the primary narrative device, showing us the consciousness and actions of Tsi when his alienation renders him effectively mute and impotent.

There is a war of music and silence between Tsi, and Lily. The things that cannot be articulated verbally, especially with Tsi's drunken dysfunction, are communicated through music. In part one the level of comfort or domestic ease in their home is represented by the choice of music being played in the home. In part two there is finally action and communication where before there was only music and silence, but it comes through a negotiation between jazz and more vernacular forms of music, most notably Soul. The sounds and concomitant actions that accompany the music are engaged by a younger generation, and as such mirrors the ubiquitous unresolved oedipal struggles depicted in the novel.

As the story shifts from the consciousness of Tsi in part one to the "Power" days and then to "the Movement" in part two, *EBB* switches Tsi's first person narration to an omniscient narrator as the plot now involves more protagonists, different generations. And the action occurs in more locales¹⁰ throughout South Africa, and eventually beyond the country's borders. The types of music used in the second part of the novel differ as well as the ways in which music signifies upon the actions of the characters, the meanings of their struggles.

Finally, at the climax of the novel, like a good jazz solo, the beginning theme, Tsi's narration of his actions and consciousness, reappears within the swirl of action that moves the story forward, enriched by the journey travelled. Tsi has been moved to action, first in the form of a speech given at the funeral of his nephew who was murdered by the police for being in the movement. Moving between first person and third person, the narrators coalesce the two stories into one multi-faceted tale. The movement from silence to music to revolution in *EBB* has taught and enabled Tsi to join the push for the birth of his nation, while it guides the reader from a probing consideration of the personal horrors attending apartheid to the implications of the geopolitical realities caused by South Africa, and fellow rogue, apartheid nations, Rhodesia and Israel.¹¹

10. Interestingly, the township of Alexandra is much more than simply a location, but also a character in *EBB*. It not only shapes the experiences of its inhabitants, but also breathes and acts, interprets the times and the happenings.

11. One astute reviewer of an earlier version of this paper saw my designation of the United States, Israel, et al. as "apartheid" nations as an example of my being polemical rather than employing the nuanced language necessary for

In this I am reminded that Serote in both of these novels, *EBB* and *Revelations*, is writing in a jazz like manner on a more fundamental level than plot and narrative strategies. These novels represent contemporaneous events and are therefore not just aesthetic statements with political importance; they are also direct political acts through the domain of literature with attendant meditations (especially in *Revelations*) on history, religion, metaphysics, philosophy, language, etc. that are immediately resonant with the current struggles of the peoples of South Africa and beyond. He takes these themes and subjects, these “harmonic changes” to continue the analogy, and uses his skill and insight into consciousness, interiority and subjectivity as a poet, his experiences as a member of MK, as a cultural warrior, and renders an aesthetically rendered response. The sensitive reader can engage with all of these elements as we watch Serote’s characters consider deeply and wrestle (more or less heroically) with all of this. The result is jazz like in its currency and performative properties as well as the carefully wrought structural details.

Part One

Part one begins as an interior dialogue of a tsotsi-cum-journalist/actor who is disaffected and alienated within his marriage, his family life with his parents and siblings, and especially his professional life, rife as it is with the contingencies of the apartheid state. He is able to withstand all of this through large doses of drink, and the power of jazz. Tsi tells his story in the first part using the music of Dollar Brand (now known as Abdullah Ibrahim), Eric Dolphy, Nina Simone, Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, and especially John Coltrane *and* his quartet. Here jazz is figured as a sign for the dialogue that he is unable to have with his wife, Lily. The structural

Scholarly discussion. Out of sympathy for his point of view and in recognition of its importance, I would like to point out at this juncture that my designation is not meant to elide the specificities of each nation’s cultures and laws, their histories and their customs. Even if I were to limit my observations to South Africa, for example, the majority of the history of race-based discrimination occurred before the formal adoption of apartheid. Rather, I am grouping them together as nations who for periods of their history (and in at least one case, currently) defined their citizenry in racial terms. The reviewer perhaps rightly concluded that implicitly I sympathise with the point of view of the narrator and also those who are defined as second-class citizens or even as non-citizens by virtue of their “race”. These nations are viewed as rogue and as having the essential characteristics of apartheid because of their racial practices *and* their legal justifications for them, and not necessarily because of the specific legal structures and other arcane aspects of formal apartheid.

placement of music in the plot and the technical descriptions of the dialogue represented by the music as heard by Tsi narrates a story of alienation, silence, and impotence. At this point the searching of jazz never enables Tsi to act; rather, it accompanies his unrest and frustrations, and more destructively, his oppression.

In the very beginning of the novel, Tsi and Lily have arrived at home, and Tsi wants to say, “Baby, most things about this earth want you to run, want to make you weary, want to make you faint.” (3) Instead he says, “Honey, why don’t you play Nina Simone?” And so it is Nina who sings, “Streets full of people, all alone.” And the pattern is set. For the next ten chapters this couple will find it impossible to speak to one another, or rather Tsi finds it impossible to speak to his wife save through the medium of music.

There is a hint of a difference between the things relayed by American musicians and those by South African musicians. In this initial scene there is a music change. It would seem that South African musicians represent a greater connection to the domestic (I suppose in both senses of the word) scene than do their African American counterparts. Tsi and Lily are unable to kiss one another, unable to talk about why. It is not a loss of love, for the narrator uses the author’s poetic ability to describe just how precious and deep their love actually is. But their attempts at intimacy are signified on and rendered through the medium South African jazz rather than with words and touches.

The first rounds of musical metaphors involve Coltrane and other African American jazz artists providing adult music with an anguished voice of alienation, which accompany the loving but strained relationship between Tsi and his wife Lily. These are counterpoised by momentary respites from the feeling of “lostness” and domestic disconnect, usually represented through South African jazz artists. In one such scene the couple are literally counting their pennies to buy beer for Tsi, who has become an underemployed alcoholic. He is also involved in township theatre and hence in danger of being arrested and tortured as his activist brother, Fix, presumably is. He wants to know if his wife is right that she will be ok if the worst comes.

“Are you sure?”

“I am,” she said.”

“Are you sure?”

“What do you want me to say?” she asked. I sensed anger in her voice.

“I am not assured.”

“I will never be able to reassure you.” How true, I thought. But still, something was not in line; God, something was missing. I put on a record. The guitar started screaming, the humming voice, like the ocean, vast, troubled in its calm, came in: “Be on my side I will be on your side, Baby.” I

thought wow, Buddy Miles, what is going to happen now, what are we going to do? "I shot my Baby."

(p. 5)

After the initial scene in which Nina Simone articulated their alienation, then the music of Buddy Miles chases Tsi out to get more beer. He returns home hearing South African musician, Miriam Makeba. Tsi flips the record and as he listens to Hugh (Masekela) and Miriam his domestic tranquility is bothered by a certain incompleteness, mirrored by the interplay in the duet between "Bra Hugh's" trumpet and "Ausi Miriam's" voice (perhaps also echoed in the on-again off-again love affair between the two artists?).

Lily was in her house mood. She was peeling potatoes. A pot was dancing on the stove. The room was hot. Miriam Makeba's voice had filled the room. Everything in the house made me fall in love ... I have always tried to talk to my Baby with music. So, I thought, Ausi Miriam has her way about this ... And Miriam's voice and Hugh's trumpet took over the house. I could smell curry ... My Baby never looked at me ... Hugh's trumpet and Miriam's voice held each other as if they were fire and wind, ready to drown everything around them. I wondered where Hugh was, where Miriam was ...

(p. 5)

Ironically, we know where Masekela and Makeba were – they were in exile. And this is carried throughout the book; the South African jazz musicians referenced in the book are all in exile. This despite the fact that there was a flourishing of jazz culture in South Africa at the time. Perhaps it is significant that Serote completed the book while in exile himself. For instance, nowhere in the book is the music of the iconic Winston Mankunku Ngozi, even though Serote's first book of poetry, *Yakhal 'inkomo*, first published in 1972, refers to Ngozi's masterpiece of the same name (also the title of Ngozi's first recording) recorded four years earlier. In a more elaborate version of the inscription included in his volume Serote writes of Mankunku in a manner very much like his representation of Trane in *EBB*:

I heard Mankunku blow his tenor saxophone, his face was swollen as he blew, his face was wet with sweat as he blew Yakhal 'inkomo ... he became one with his horn, he squeezed it and the cry came out and went to his heart ... Yakhal 'inkomo ... the bastard! He was crying, fearing, raging, he was merciless with us, he wounded us with his horn. He just wet deep, right down to the floor of despair, and reached the rim of fear and hatred. He just spread and spread out and aout and out in meditation, with his horn, Mankunku, Nogiz, that guy from the shores of South Africa¹²

12. Wally Serote, "A Look at the Line", in *Bolt*, (1973, pp. 4-8), quoted in Titlestad.

I find this elision curious, conjecturing that perhaps the personal experiences of Serote informs this decision; perhaps the “Bellow of the Bull” owes more to the post-Sharpeville political ethos than to the action of the post-Soweto years. Or maybe it is simply that the juxtaposition of American and South African musos works better narratively for the purposes of the novel. I favour the former explanation, which may be confirmed by Serote’s sequel novel, *Revelations*. As the book’s central character, Otsile (known in the movement and in *EBB* as Tshupo), considers the cause of the failure of his first marriage to his revolutionary comrade, Nomazwi, he considers the shaping of culture and political action as formative and decisive. He muses: “She was the product of June 16, 1976. I wasn’t, I was the product of March 21st, 1961. I wasn’t *Siyanyomfa*, I was *Mayibuye iAfrika*.” (58). The different circumstances of the Soweto uprising and the Sharpeville uprising brought about different musics, different sensibilities.

This dyad of musical signifiers (between African American and South African jazz musos) is not limited in *EBB* to marital relations, but is employed in all intimate bonds. Slightly later, the domestic scene is not between husband and wife but between Tsi and his brother, Ndo, who comes to warn Tsi that he should stop before he is killed, as they believe their brother Fix was. Fix is a political prisoner on Robben Island, had been tortured as Tsi will be eventually. Ndo comes in singing along with the Coltrane record that Tsi put on in his wife’s absence. Ndo has a message for his younger brother. After being distracted from Coltrane’s music by the songs being sung in the street we shift again from an African American to a South African artist: “Play Dollar Brand” Ndo said. “If Fix knew as much as he wanted us to believe, why did he not know that that is where he would end? The security police have a wide, efficient information network, did he know this?” (18)

This gesture toward domestic healing is not sentimentally portrayed, however; it leaves the actors still searching, incomplete, and the gesture is ultimately imperfect. Ndo leaves angrily, having smashed a cup of coffee meant to sober him. Ndo, suffering from both patriarchy and alcoholism, is so sick as to beat his wife, Pule. Tsi reminisces about the beautiful aspects of his brother and sister-in-law. As he switches from contemplating the horror of their marriage he remembers them all listening to Dollar Brand. It is with this music, referenced several times during the reverie, that the tenderness and love of their marriage is remembered (20-21).

Like a good jazz solo, the second round of musical narrations intensifies the conflicts set up in the first chorus of the theme.¹³ At home cleaning, Tsi

13. Here the “theme” refers to the melody of the song, and “chorus” refers to the repetition of the song form with improvisation rather than merely restating the melody. Each soloist through his or her improvisation delves more deeply and in more personal ways into the implications or possibilities of the harmonic changes of the song.

listens to Nina Simone. Her music is now not just placing him as impotent within his home, but violently pushes him out to the street:

Suddenly, Nina Simone's voice became a hammer, pounding and pounding on my head, shoulders, pounding and pounding me to pulp. I dared not listen to it, I dared not lie down to rest. The walls of the room began to stalk me, to crowd me. I knew that I must try to get some rest, but there was no way I could come round to doing it.

(p. 22)

As in the first chorus, Tsi experiences the streets, unlike the stasis in his home, as a place where life and death happens, "funeral processions", "lovers, hand in hand," children, elders enjoying one another's company. Serote makes this contrast complete and symmetrical; the streets have their own music: "Music. Drums. A trumpet in the distance. A song, sung by a group of men and women of the church." (22) Meanwhile, the alienation of the domestic sphere is intensified with increasingly longer narrations of musical thought. After another night of drinking and delaying his return home, Tsi goes home and as ever is greeted there by the music:

... as I walked back to the house from where I could now hear Miles Davis's trumpet climbing, high, climbing high, high, cutting through distances, flying high, flying high, as, what is it we do not know? ... Despair? Fear? Crying? Laughing? Maybe we know too much of everything ... And maybe that is why, that is why we have never lived? So What? ... Coltrane coming in with his battle, perpetual battle that must have at last killed him, at times going through walls, through barbed wire, sightless, uncaring, carrying his mission out, to see to search, at times as if a dam had burst, and the angry water was rushing through everything, leaving nothing behind. So what?

(p. 22)

This is a literary portrayal of the Miles Davis classic "So What". This song was uniquely influential in creating modal jazz, a style that revolutionised jazz music in the 1960s. But it was Coltrane who took modal music, with its musical revolt against some of the strictures of European functional harmony, to shape most of his mature style. And it was Coltrane who blew so furiously that some began to wonder if his monomaniacal pursuit of truth and goodness through music did not bring him to his demise. In Miles Davis' band he stood out, being far more avant-garde than the rest of the band. At this point Coltrane became a leader in his own right, went on to become "Trane", the bearer of truth and courage in the music. More than any other jazz musician of his generation, Coltrane signified revolution, the search for something truer, higher and grander in life through music.

The musical journeys of Miles and Trane begin to signify death in general and also the figurative death of Tsi's father. It is in this song, particularly the live versions, that clearly shows that Coltrane must needs leave his mentor

and teacher, Miles Davis, to find his own way. Later we find Coltrane in the midst of this heroic battle. This time the music is from Coltrane as Trane, as the leader of a revolutionary jazz quartet, as the patron saint of black nationalism and the black arts movement in the United States, as well as in the imagination of many of the Black Consciousness artists and activists in South Africa. In the first climax of Coltrane's solo (John Coltrane routinely reached two climaxes in his epic improvisations during his mature stages), the narrator tells us for an entire page (50) that Coltrane is "beating". Serote worries the line like a great blues singer, or like Coltrane in one of his trance-like flights. While Nina Simone was "pounding" till Tsi was driven out of his home, Coltrane is now "beating" and "beating", "digging" and "digging". He is said to be like a child searching, like a builder of civilisation, an interrogator pointing out the futility of the future, the descent into madness of would-be heroes like Kippie Moeketsi, the South African genius who played alto saxophone like the American genius Charles Parker. The two alto saxophonists are alike not only in their musical prowess, but also in the romanticised legends about the excesses of their comparatively brief lives, their substance and alcohol abuse, and the degree to which their place within their respective cultures were thwarted by a crushing racial oppression.¹⁴ Hence, music represents both the strength and searching qualities of these monumental musicians, but its heroism is tempered with the frustrations of racial oppression.

The theme of silence is more ominously figured in the novel. Tsi's collapse into dysfunction came after he and his photographer colleague, Boykie, witnessed a man being murdered by the police. Realising their inability to help the man, they ignore his screams and remain silent. Tsi is thereafter cursed to an unbearable, impossible silence that bars him from facing himself, and from achieving intimacy with either his wife or his lover, Tshidi. Tsi's inability to speak and to make love are linked to the impotence of not being able to help his fellow man, or as he sees it, not able to help oneself, not being able to face one's family or loved ones with his self respect intact. Music provides the way for him to soar above it all, especially this music that allows moments of triumph over alienation.

The most sustained involvement with jazz comes in an extraordinary passage with the music of John Coltrane. Serote's literary rendering of the jazz act is among the finest that this reader has encountered, and certainly ranks with the best of the African American writers who used jazz as a

14. See, for example, "'I Was Not Yet Myself': Representations of Kippie 'Charlie Parker' Moeketsi". In: Titlestad, M. (pp. 156-164), Russell, *Bird Lives! The high life and hard times of Charlie "Yardbird" Parker*.

structural element for their poetry and fiction.¹⁵ Because this section reflects the density and prolixity of Coltrane's improvisations, I will quote it at length:

... 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 ... Coltrane starting from the beginning, as if a newlyborn baby, trying, finding, searching a future, searching the past that we all know so little about. Coltrane, beating searching, slowly down, stalking, digging all the energy, using it, digging, digging, finding out, and beginning from the beginning. Shit. Coltrane, whose son was he? ... I want to know about you ... My father, who are you? ... My mother says that you fought with everything that you had ... But I must say everytime I look at you I see a terrible, a brutal defeat. I want to know about you. Who are you? Your face is filled with defeat you refuse to accept. Your eyes, silence. Silence. Your gait, the way you talk, everything is filled with fear, defeat. What will I tell your grandchildren? That you cried when you were dying? In our time there was Coltrane. What will I say? I see Kippie move, with ease, ready to get insane, we look and say nothing. Shall I tell them that? That when Fix was gone we waited, we waited for him to come back

(pp. 50-51)

In this litany, which continues for several pages, Tsi as narrator mentions his father's retreat into silence (replicated in his own life), the bulldozing of Sophiatown (where Serote himself was born), the defeat of "a people" (later in the novel he locates the first murdered Khoikhoi as the beginning of this war). In a manner that evokes the ways in which a mature Coltrane solo could be like an inspired homily by a Holy Ghost preacher, his litany is punctuated with the refrain "I want to know about you". One gets the feeling that this is a Coltranesque solo, and after the music finishes this suspicion is verified:

Suddenly, I heard the saxophone pitch down, go down, slow, drag as if to pull everything out of my guts, my chest, my head. I must have jumped from

15. For example, one thinks of the short stories by Ann Petry ("The Drum Solo") and James Baldwin ("Sonny's Blues"), Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, and Amiri Baraka's poem, "AM/TRAK". Virtually the entire pantheon of canonical African American writers make reference African American music as a muse, an artistic model, or as grist for the mill. Among the major black literary figures Amiri Baraka is the most thoroughgoing in his investigation of the music. Perhaps his story that is most analogous to Serote's use of Coltrane here would be Baraka's short story, "The Screamers," in which saxophonist Lynn Hope plays his audience into such a frenzy they go outside and raise hell in the streets.

the bed, for I was now sitting up, when the voice came from the player – John Coltrane, Jimmy Garrison, McCoy Tyner, Roy Haynes ... The sun rays on the walls seemed to shake, surprised by the silence the voice created when it took over from the music. There was a strange silence in the house now, as if something was going to snap.

(pp. 53-54)

This song is none other than Coltrane's authoritative version of Billy Eckstine's "I Want to Talk About You". The 1963 recording of the performance at the Newport Jazz Festival, uncharacteristically includes the announcement of the musicians' names after their performance. Another clue is that it is Roy Haynes, rather than Coltrane's regular drummer, Elvin Jones, who played on this iconic recording. The use of this particular song sends the informed reader in multiple directions. The recording is noteworthy for the lengthy unaccompanied cadenza that Coltrane takes at the end of the song. The cadenza is longer and is laden with more information than the rest of the song. On the other hand, calling out the names of the entire quartet goes against the convention of identifying music by the single name of the bandleader. The historical importance of this heroic solo notwithstanding, for in Coltrane's band (even more than usual even for jazz bands) it was the entire band that made the magic possible. Coltrane's cadenza stands in for Tsi's silent soliloquy, the silence being amplified by the cessation of the music and the reverberating, tortured silence represented in the novel by the domestic space.

Tsi's existential anguish reaches a feverish pitch, and thereafter the use of music in the text is changed. He and his friend are arrested and tortured, first for seeing the beating of another man by the police, and then on another occasion just for being vulnerable to the police as black men, or what black Americans refer to as DWB (driving while black). He is unable to explain to his wife or his parents that he was detained for a week in jail. His colleagues know, however, and this unnerves Tsi. His friend resigns from the newspaper, and Tsi suffers from feelings of humiliation while remaining at the work place. This begins the most profound of all the silences in the novel. Tsi is no longer able to even use jazz to convey his feelings and thoughts. He is at the end of his career as a journalist, unable to bear his colleagues pitying him and seeing him as a victim. He feels shame and imagines his mostly white co-workers interrogating him:

"What happened? Why? What did you do? Oh, we are sorry!!" eyes and eyes did not let me leg go and sail with Coltrane, or Miriam or Dolphy; they held on and wanted me to go through that other journey again.

(p. 102)

This music had allowed Tsi to soar above his circumstances, and to live in a realm in which he could be free, but no more. Initially, it is the actions of

others, the apartheid regime and its minions, the apparent inability to mount an effective resistance that has blocked the efficacy of the music. Eventually, however, it is the need for a new music that reveals itself to Tsi. Having left his job as journalist, and also having left the theatrical group that he was a part of, Tsi is becoming aware of the similarities between the silence in his father, and in his own mute condition. He is beginning to think of how generations influence and reproduce one another. He is also coping with his world as an adult and thereby gaining insight into his parents and their adult struggles.

The novel continues in this fashion chronicling with music the contrast between the life and noise in the streets and the death and silence at home. Tsi is all but defeated, spiralling downwards after his torture at the hands of the police. His impotence against white society is mirrored once again in his lack of sexual desire for his wife, Lily, and his inability to commit to, or even to have sex with his lover, Tshidi. And then a major shift occurs. Just as his frustration with jazz and its ensuing silence seems complete, soul music hits the scene.

... I began to become aware that between the melody, harmony and rhythm of the music that now and then filled my house, from Hugh, Dollar, Nina, Letta, Miriam, Kippie, Cyril Magubane, Coltrane, Miles...between their melody, harmony and rhythm, when the pants are down, the silence is there. This is not an easy find. It is heavy. I could no longer listen to the music that had taught me so much!

(p. 111)

Not an easy find indeed, Tsi's crisis is at the breaking point; he is not only mute in his "real" life but now also in his imagination. Something new must enter the circle or figurative death is no longer appeased. Fortunately, the younger generation has taken matters into their own hands. They come on the scene with a loud sound, not only breaking the silence, but also ending the inability to act. Their actions come with a new explosion in music as well.

Out there in the streets something with a loud bang, called soul, screamed and popped and dragged our children along. It overspilled out of house windows and doors, it leaped over stadium walls...The children responding to this soul music, discovered their cocks and cunts and buttocks and thighs and stomachs and navels ... The children, with unkempt hair, and the girls in hot pants crowded the streets

(p. 111)

The music and the dances that accompany it are sexualised in this passage, contrasting this movement with the impotence experienced in the first part of the novel. Significantly, the music cannot be contained indoors. It spills out of homes, bars and stadiums. Thus in action and place a new music fuels

the plot. Political action begins as the young people and their soul music take to the streets. While Tsi (and the adult world) is waiting in fear of Vorster and his guns and army (112) these youths are transforming black from a pejorative to a label of pride, are using their “real names”¹⁶ and proclaiming their power.

Part Two

The second section of the novel makes a transition from the paralysed *consciousness* of a representative man – one who is a polyglot township dweller (part tsotsi, part artist, part intelligentsia, part worker, racially oppressed, constricted to poverty, etc.) – to the organised *action* of the young people in the underground freedom movement during the decades immediately preceding the fall of apartheid. The movement, like the music and the lives of the shifting protagonists, is somewhat amorphous, its operations resembling the motion of a river. It moves powerfully, subtly, and through the medium of tributaries, never in a straight line, but always inexorably forward. The concluding chapter begins, “The movement, like the sea, is deep, is vast, is reflective. It can be calm. It can be rough and tough. Like the wind, it moves and moves and moves.” (291) The pain and suffering, not to mention the death and tragically shortened lives, threaten to drown this generation, but there is always hope and courage as an antidote. Importantly, there is no normative lesson in the personal lives of the protagonists, who all show their emotional and experiential scars in various ways. Similarly, the music, while accompanying and informing the action, provides no easy answers. But it is present and active.

The second section of the novel moves from being like a Coltranesque solo to an ensemble section, rather like the interplay between the rhythm section of Jimmy Garrison, McCoy Tyner, and especially Elvin Jones that propelled Trane to such heights. It is not the heroism of Tsi or any other single person, but the concerted action of hundreds, even thousands, that moves this

16. A real name here refers to African names as opposed to English names. In addition to showing pride in one’s culture, traditional names are meaningful in a direct way in the vernacular idiom, not in distant etymology as is usually the case in English names. Dikeledi changed her name from Rose when she began to write her politically vibrant column. While I am reading this text as an important contribution to the Black Atlantic, Serote’s novel functions quite powerfully as a specifically South African novel. Linguistically, *EBB* does not provide privileged access for its purely Anglophone readers. For example, the greeting “Sawubona, baba” is not translated as “Hello, sir” as it usually is, but as “I see you, daddy.” Similarly, a phrase in Afrikaans was not translated at all into English. With eleven official languages, many South Africans move easily between several languages.

section of the plot forward. No longer is there a primary protagonist, as Tsi disappears from the novel until the end. Members of the community, sometimes straining the limits of that word,¹⁷ all appear and disappear, moving stealthily and mysteriously like the underground itself, their connections to one another not fully revealed until the story's denouement.

Despite the novel's positioning of American jazz as articulating alienation vis-à-vis South African jazz's apparent potential for hopeful resolution, *EBB* ultimately sees African American culture as a resource for the anti-apartheid struggle. The narrator, like the author, is musically savvy, and while it has a strong Pan-African ethos it is not uncritical especially of African American pop culture. Soul music, with its sexual vitality and political agency, is distinguished from what Tsi later thinks of as "bullshit music in pop accent", referring to American or British music (284).

While drinking, a shebeen queen tells Tsi "Lucky killed Moipane," informing him of a political assassination. She says this over the sounds of the soul jazz group, the Crusaders' "Pass the Plate." She also relays that there is a strike going on in Durban. The heretofore-aimless life-and-death drama of the young is beginning to take shape and gather meaning, to gain political focus and agency. The Crusaders' hit song is well chosen to represent the switch from jazz to soul, from silence to action. After all, before the Crusaders became popular stars in the soul jazz world they had enjoyed a national reputation playing a more classical style of jazz as the Jazz Crusaders, and even before that as the Modern Jazz Sextet while they were still a local band in Houston, Texas. The career and music of the Crusaders (who play a genre of jazz that is quite influential in South Africa, influencing saxophone stalwart, Ezra Ngcukana, and others) in some ways mirrors the plot of *EBB*. That is, they went from a more cerebral style of music to the more vernacular, pop-oriented, "soul jazz." They also began making that stylistic change during the 1970s, the setting of the novel and the time in which it was written.

Mr Ramona, a teacher in a township high school who turns into a political activist and community leader almost unbeknownst to his family, is captured along with twenty-five other defendants. This is an affair that affects the entire community. It was front-page news in the Johannesburg papers and elsewhere. "Crowds and crowds of black faces, of white faces" came each day to witness the trial. Each day a song burst forth as the defendants entered the courtroom. These people are not mere spectators, but are bearing witness to their struggle, whereas in the first part of the novel such witnessing, done by individuals rather than by a movement, was squashed by the terror of the police squads. Here we see "the men and women,

17. *EBB* is a protest novel in addition to the other themes treated in the work. As such, it relates its tales and the importance of telling this story to the plight of the oppressed outside of South Africa as well.

singing, fist clenched and raised high”. Even though the defendants are sentenced to fifteen years, and Mr. Ramona is not a young man, his dignity and eloquence was a source of pride for his community. Not silent as was Tsi’s father, Mr Ramona is an elder whose words had power and were discussed and revered. Eventually, Tsi will also speak powerful words, and crowds from here till the end of the plot will sing freedom and movement songs in defiance to the police thugs and reactionary forces that try to kill the movement.

The body of characters involved in the movement act as a body, only some of the people in their lives knowing of their activities, and others suspecting and giving silent consent. Now one person emerges as the focal point of the story, and then another. What we are presented with is a story line that is like a mosaic. Like a musical offering that relies upon the efforts of a band (the groove) rather than the heroics of a leader or great improviser. Later, Mandla, whose name means power, and who is a lieutenant in the resistance movement, emerges as the principal participant. He has accepted the assignment to assassinate Mpando, a notorious black policemen who killed many people, including children, for daring to protest their oppression. Mpando represented a class of black policemen who matched the zeal of the Afrikaner police chiefs who set the agenda for the repressive forces. This is a story that we know well, and one is reminded of Ice Cube’s line “black cop showing out for the white one”, in NWA’s groundbreaking “Fuck the Police.”¹⁸ Mpando’s execution is not merely retribution. It is a warning and a message, as each township has its Mpando.

The shebeen and its music is the locus of action. Mpando and three other officers enter Joyce’s shebeen while Miriam Makeba’s “Lelizwe lino Moya” is playing. Mandla catches Mpando urinating in the back and blows his brains out and “mixed [them] with the shit and urine”. The last line of the chapter, after Mpando’s partner, Ndlovu, vomits gazing upon the corpse is: “The powerful speakers filled the night with Gladys Knight’s ‘Midnight Train’” (214).¹⁹

Among the new freedom fighters that this action calls forth is Dikeledi, a journalist who writes a column, “Window on the Township”. She reported

18. NWA (Niggas With Attitude), “Fuck the Police”, in *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless, Priority, EMI, 1988.

19 The closest that I have come thus far as a translation for Makeba’s song is “My Heart” from Kiswahili. I have not yet made a firm decision about the choice of these two songs as the soundtrack for the political execution. Christian Stiftinger, in his thesis “Music and Trauma in the Contemporary South African Novel” avers that these songs “represent black pride and victory” (p. 71). I am unsure about how “Midnight Train” satisfies this, but certainly these two artists, especially Makeba, do in fact represent black pride and victory.

on the Ramona trial, and was brought in for questioning in the infamous quarters with the window through which political prisoners mysteriously jumped out to their deaths after sustaining substantial injuries. It was the same room in which Tsi was brought in and tortured for witnessing an act of police brutality. Like Tsi, Dikeledi is a brave witness, and doesn't flinch at the threats given by the police. She out-manoeuvres them verbally, making them angry but not provoking them to torture. Tsi was unable to answer; his friend and co-sufferer, Boykie, mouthed off, but without anything more than bravura to fight with. Here the doubling takes a turn, however, because Dikeledi (who has changed her name from Rose – Dikeledi means tears) has a mass movement to succour her. Tsi falls deep into depression and impotence as a result of his encounters with the police, whereas she stays on course with her work and positive involvement in movement. As a member of the underground she is later walking with a new recruit to safety as an explosion set off by the movement operators takes place. She has left her white employer, and would be (married) lover, David, who also aids members in the movement. The explosion, as part of the street scene, is the sonic and logical progression of the move towards musical and political agency that the 'noise' of soul music heralded earlier in the novel.

Importantly, it is not just the freedom fighters per se who are caught up in this, but also the community at large whose support may be oblique, but nevertheless substantial. In the face of revolutionary violence "[t]hey shook a bit as this massive power moved towards them, otherwise they went on watching as if not watching, showing their children what was going on in all sorts of ways" (228). The movement has created a wider community, or rather has united it again in a way that heals intergenerational relationships that earlier were depicted as being at an impasse. The movement has also spawned new music and new dances. At a funeral for a fallen warrior, a young girl in school uniform starts the mourners to sing, as the sun bursts through a cloudy sky:

Go well, go well, young fighter
We will always remember you, Willy
Go well, go well, young fighter
We will always remember you.

(p. 245)

The novel continues in an action-reaction plot structure. That is, with each act of violence or harassment by the police there is a song and action countered by the revolutionaries. For instance, the police come to the funeral to fuck with people and to ferret out the members of the movement. They stop people and harass them, asking whose car is this? Where are you coming from? Why did you go to the funeral? Why were you not at the funeral? Smiling at Dikeledi, one cop jokingly asks, "Hey, where are the petrol bombs?" The crowd sings another song:

Vorster, Vorster is a dog.
Vorster you own guns, we own history
Vorster, Vorster is a dog.

(p. 246)

Mandla goes to rendezvous with Tuki after being stopped by the police. When in their new disguise as drivers of a dry cleaners' van they are about to be stopped again, they open fire, bursting the windows and then tossing grenades (248).

The crowd sings,
This is a heavy load
This is a heavy load,
It needs strong men and women
This is a heavy load.

(p. 247)

One of these strong men is Oupa, Tsi's nephew. A young, dedicated, and virtuous activist, Oupa represents the best qualities of the youth. He is captured in the aftermath of the explosions and is tortured mercilessly before being tossed out the window that Tsi and Dikeledi were threatened with. Oupa goes to his death without giving up his comrades, and with his head held high. Tsi is the spokesperson for the family at Oupa's funeral and has to come to grips with what it means for the "son" to die for the many. He has broken his silence, and for the political agency contained in his speech he is driven into exile.

Oupa was just one among many, many children who were dead. I felt ashamed that the madness had had to hit so close to home for me ... I knew that this country had to be saved by us, its people. Oupa had told me so with a clarity which had sobered my drunken escapism.

(p. 279)

Tsi finally experiences the music as inspiring rather than frustrating. He unites the music with the bodies of men and women coming together and with their community in action, dancing with the music, dancing to their freedom: "The music kept pounding, pounding, leaving nothing unknown, revealing so many things which we did not know about each other; and all of us danced, hard, with all our strength, with our hands, feet, eyes, ears, with our stomachs and buttocks; we danced and danced crushing the might of the night beneath our feet." (283) While Nina's "pounding" pushed him out of his home, the new music's pounding restores agency, enabling them to "crush" (given the eroticisation of power in the novel I assume the double entendre is intended). Nina Simone is one artist whose agency survives the progression into the Soul section of the novel. She, like the Crusaders whose

music is part of the scene in which Mpondo is executed, is a genre-bending artist. Trained at the prestigious Juilliard Conservatory, but as an African American not readily able to realize a career in “classical” music, Simone became a prominent artist playing and singing her own idiosyncratic blends of jazz and soul. With protest songs like “Mississippi Goddamn” and celebratory portraits such as “Four Women” her artistry is a distinguished part of the African American protests against the United States racist regime. Indeed, her music pounds and pounds, but it also exalts. Like the reference in Biko’s words contained in the epigraph and echoed in Serote’s text, James Brown’s, “Say it Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)” is the anthem that accompanies the dancing bodies, revelling in self love and breaking the hegemony of racial oppression.

Perhaps here is the time for a brief consideration of the jazz chosen in the first part. The continuity between part one and part two is made possible in part because of the artists chosen. The (mostly) jazz musicians from part one are Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), Buddy Miles, Lee Morgan, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, et al. They are *not* Dave Brubeck, Benny Goodman, Elvis Presley, or any of the then reigning great white hopes of American vernacular music. Rather, Serote chose musicians whose artistry rebelled against the artistic limitations or orthodoxy, and by implication (though often explicitly) with the political limitations that obtained in a racist, capitalist state.²⁰

The triumph of revolutionary action is bittersweet, and does not end in a happy ending, a fact hinted at in *EBB* and made explicit in *Revelations*. Likewise, the music, while accompanying and informing the action, provides no easy answers, only companionship and communion. What the plot does offer, however, is an active life cycle and newfound agency. If the natural order of things is reversed – the young (rather than the old) dying and leading, so that all may live, instead of the old sacrificing their lives for the youth, then the novel makes a gesture towards the possibility of at least a degree of healing for everyone, including the domestic frustration of the first section’s protagonist.

As in jazz, this novel is not sentimental and refrains from a happy ending *per se*; rather, it employs a blues-like ending with its unresolved cyclical nature and its tragic-comic, honest look at life. Oupa dies, but Tsi awakens from his drunken stupor and his inability to act even as the nation has its bloody birth. By the end of the novel we know that the birth of the new South Africa is inevitable. It will come with the movement as midwife, succoured through exilic conditions. This achievement comes with the pain and blood of all human births. Estranged couples and wrecked ambitions

20. For a discussion of the ways in which the aesthetics of music are important to the politics of the social histories in which art is created and presented, see Washington, 2004.

dance arm in arm with courageous martyrs and wizened elders, sometimes mirrored in the precocious prescience of the young. In exile, Tsi realises he must return to his wife, Lily, and to his beloved, newborn country. Serote ends the novel with the words: “She knows I am coming back. I must get back. The road seems long. I must get back. ‘Push, push, push’” (299).

Postscript

If *EBB* is a meditation on the political struggles in South Africa during the 1970s, *Revelations*, set during the Mbeki presidency in the South African democracy, is an exploration of the epistemological and ontological questions that involve “liberated” South Africans as Africans. The shift in social and political setting finds the uMkhonto weSizwe members who were the heroes of *EBB* now adults negotiating the problems of their families and making sense of how things are developing post revolution. The central protagonist, Otsile, like the protagonist of *EBB* (and also much like the author), is a highly sensitive and intellectual/artistic man from Alexandra. The death of Bra Shope, a world-class visual artist who is a mentor and a father figure for Otsile deepens the spiritual and philosophical crises that are at the heart of this novel. Otsile and his wife, Theresa, are enjoying the fruits of democracy, but are desperately searching for answers to deeper questions that the revolution has not addressed adequately for them. Barely out of childhood when they were recruited for the revolution, as adults their peers are learning to deal with marriages, also with failed marriages and their aftermath, the psychic dissonance of transitioning from being armed revolutionaries to functioning in civilian life, questions about their spiritual lives and how it impacts their humanity. Most of all, they are confronted with the lives of their children and how best to execute their responsibilities towards them. How to teach them? What to teach them? How will the traditions of their various cultures, with all of their spiritual and quotidian wisdom, speak to and shape this new generation? How does one enrich political freedom with spiritual depth and meaning?

The complexity of South African cultural heritage is at the heart of these matters. For example, the ancestors have decreed that Otsile must pay lobola for his wife, Theresa, who has answered the ancestors’ call to become an *ngaka*, a traditional priest. It is complicated by the fact that he had already paid lobola for his ex-wife. His parents feel that this is possibly a travesty as it involves the joining of the ancestors of the various families involved. In thinking about the religious aspects of this dilemma Otsile muses:

The Bible was the word of prophets who had a written culture. The word of the ancestors was an oral culture. Deep inside I didn’t believe in the cruelty of the ancestors or of God. That was why I didn’t belong to the church. But I belonged to my people, some of whom belonged to the church, others to the

ancestors only, and some to both the church and the ancestors. I belonged to all of that.

(p. 89)

In facing the questions about the current relevancy of traditional institutions to a modernised African population that the narrator tells us has had six generations of urbanisation (!), Serote's protagonist adopts what musicologist Sazi Dlamini has called "triple consciousness",²¹ That is, South African musicians have their national identities as South Africans as well as their (post-colonial) racialised identities with all that that implies and necessitates. In addition, they possess ethnic heritages that have withstood the ravages of slavery and colonialism, and which have bequeathed specific data and practices that continue to help navigate them through the travails of human existence. In a touching scene in which Ostile is trying to connect with the children of his family (Theresa is also divorced and has a child from a previous marriage) he tries to explain to them the significance of being African, and attempts to define it in a way. Since the author uncharacteristically lays bare his concerns in a prosaic manner, albeit through the voice of one of his characters, I will allow Serote the final words in this chapter:

"If you listen carefully to South African musicians," I began, "you'll find a tapestry of the traditions and customs of African people. We need to listen, and make up our minds about how relevant their words are to our lives."

Mantwa glanced up. "You mean musicians like Jonas Gwangwa, Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela and Caiphus Semanya?"

"Yes", I said, "and many others in the *mbaqanga* genre. But traditional songs and gospel music also reflect who we are."

"So music's not just entertainment?" Seabe asked.

"It's also for educating," I said.

"Why are you telling us this?"

"Because the world we're living in requires that we know who we are," I said. "It's not enough to say you're an African. You need to know what that means. I'm suggesting that part of the answer to that question lies in our music ...".

(p. 116)

Revelations, being more philosophical in nature than *EBB*, essentially raises questions rather than answer them. It ponders how this new nation will grow not by tackling the macro questions that the country faces, but by looking inside the personal psyche of its principal characters. *EBB* as discussed above does explore interiority quite magnificently, but ultimately that novel

21. Sazi Stephen Dlamini, *The South African Blue Notes: Bebop, Mbaqanga, Apartheid and the Exiling of a Musical Imagination*, dissertation University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2009, p. 21.

is teleological, moving as it does from silence to music to revolution. *Revelations* in fact reveals rather than prophesies, and its revelations are personal. That is, Serote takes stock of how the spiritual life of South African citizens will grow under the newfound democratic era. The novel does not necessarily provide us with the poetic treatment of the music that *EBB* does, but it does draw attention to the music by providing instances of its use and by the rather prosaic descriptions like the one just cited. It would seem that the author is telling us that as South Africa develops as a multi-ethnic, multi-racial democracy, and especially as a non-sexist, non-racist democracy, the nation's music can provide answers both to ontological and epistemological questions along the way.

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