

Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood*: History and the Limits of Improvisation

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Summary

South African jazz carries a burden of optimism. It is consistently identified with an ebullient *élan vital* that resists the monomania of apartheid ideology. Mongane Serote's novel *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981) sounds a cautionary note in its exploration of the limits of modernist improvisation in the face of violent oppression. In exploring its representation of these limitations, this article addresses the critical debate regarding the disjuncture of its two parts that has inflected the novel's reception and reputation. More generally, it suggests ways in which representations of music might be read as either underscoring or as dissonant to the orders of narrative logic and modes of representation of the texts in which they occur.

Opsomming

Suid-Afrikaanse jazz gaan gebuk onder die las van optimisme. Dit word konsekwent identifiseer met 'n oorborrelende *élan vital* wat die monomania van die apartheids-ideologie teenstaan. Mongane Serote se roman *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981) rig 'n waarskuwing in sy ondersoek van die limiete van modernistiese improvisasie ten spyte van gewelddadige onderdrukking. Deur die voorstelling van hierdie beperkings te ondersoek, spreek hierdie artikel die kritiese debat aan rondom die splitsing van die twee dele wat die roman se ontvangs en reputasie inflekteer het. Meer in die algemeen suggereer dit wyses waarop musiek interpreteer kan word as óf onderstreping van, óf dissonant aan die voorskrifte van narratiewe logika en wyses van voorstelling van die tekste waarin dit voorkom.

1 Individuals and Political Imperatives

In a recent journal editorial John Thieme identifies the signal characteristic of apartheid fiction as the simultaneous recognition of the “impossibility” of individual experience and the acknowledgment that “an engagement with politics [was] an inescapable imperative for all South African writers” (Thieme 2003: 1). The most significant literary and cultural debates in the three decades preceding 1994 are organised along these two axes: stated somewhat reductively, a formalist concern with aesthetics and the existential role of literature is juxtaposed with a historicist imperative of class and race

solidarity.¹ Given the evidence of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Thieme notes a postapartheid shift away from “macro-political concerns during the apartheid years” to the “micro-political personal dilemmas” of our quotidian postcolonial context. “‘Politics’ remain as urgent as ever in contemporary South Africa [he argues] and yet the pendulum has swung away from the former, seemingly unavoidable, need to express dissent, either overtly or covertly, towards a literature in which representing individual experience has once again assumed considerable prominence” (Thieme 2003: 1).

Critical descriptions of this order, though, tend to undervalue apartheid literature’s explicit interrogation of the tension between individual expression and the historical and political contingencies of resistance. The very transition recognised by Thieme can, for instance, be identified in the projected utopian futures in various apartheid texts. This essay looks back at Mongane Serote’s novel, *To Every Birth its Blood*, in which individual alienation is so trenchantly juxtaposed with collective resistance. It reviews the interpretative and evaluative debate that raged for over a decade and then considers in some detail the novel’s use of jazz, which various critics have identified as central to both its political and its aesthetic complexity. The argument has two objectives. First, to question the simple juxtaposition of experimental literary modernism and social realism that is often assumed in interpretations of Serote’s novel specifically, and accounts of South African literary history more generally. The representation of music in literary texts, we will see, potentially (even commonly) presents a nonrealist heuristic order in which questions regarding meaning, ontology and politics are posed. On occasions, these questions, caught up as they are in the history and intertext of musical representation, underscore the dominant mode or narrative logic in the text in which they occur. At other times, though, they are dissonant, sounding off against the grain of their textual context in revealing ways. The second objective of the argument is to question the endlessly reiterated assumption that jazz music consistently (and adequately) expresses an irrepressibly defiant *élan vital* in the face of apartheid oppression.² No critic, to my knowledge, has explored at any length the *failure* of jazz in *To Every Birth its Blood*. This – in a novel which identifies jazz with both a high modernist aesthetic and a history of militant black self-representation – seems a significant oversight.

2 Serote: Humanist and/or Revolutionary?

Published in 1981, Mongane Serote’s *To Every Birth its Blood* gave rise to one of apartheid South Africa’s most compelling critical debates. The debate has, since the publication of Dorian Barbour’s “Mongane Serote: Humanist and Revolutionary” (Barbour 1984: 171-181) hinged on the disjunction between

the first and second parts of the novel. Barbour argues that the first section, which dwells on the alienation and suffering of Tsietsi (Tsi) Molohe, “sensitively records the anguish of an individual brutalized by a harsh world” (p. 174), while the second (from which Molohe is all but absent) “presents the engagement of a growing number of people in an organized struggle to overthrow the system” (p. 174). Clearly influenced by the persuasive Marxist logic that inflected resistance politics at the time, Barbour goes as far as to suggest that this disjuncture “graphically [presents] the impotence of the isolated individual” (p. 174). For Michael Green (1997: 251), Barbour’s reading turns on Serote’s rejection of modernism in favour of a materialist commitment to a “future history” of South Africa. The novel, Green argues, “takes us from the confused (and often confusing) past and present of a single protagonist (which is almost classically modernist in its representation of personal breakdown) and integrates this into at least an awareness of a material thrust into a near future of communal and coherent political action” (Green 1997: 251). The individual’s experience of alienation gives way, in the face of relentless violence, to an ideology based in solidarity; an “orchestrated pattern of communal narrative in Part II” (p. 251) succeeds Molohe’s existentially disorientated testimony comprising the first part. We might even go as far as identifying in this transition a growing awareness of the limitations of testimonial auto/biography as a challenge to the authority of the apartheid state. This discursive mode, so essential to anti-apartheid politics during the 1950s and in the exile narratives of the 1960s, seemed at once marked by an indelible stain of liberal history and a woefully inadequate imaginative response to the increasing violence of the 1970s.

Nick Visser (1987: 68) questions Barbour’s (seemingly New Critical) “assumption of the work’s unity”, arguing, in effect, that inappropriate “aesthetic” criteria obscure and falsify the text’s meaning by “overlooking the unusual circumstances of the actual composition of the novel” (Visser 1987: 174). Tracing the chronology of the novel’s composition, Visser demonstrates that it “was begun between just under eighteen months at the maximum and slightly over six months at the minimum, *before June 16 had happened*” (pp. 68-69). He concludes that the novel, “*in the very process of its composition*, was opened to the unfolding of history, to the unfolding of momentous events *as they occurred*” (p. 69). The disjunction between the two parts of the novel, is read as both a symptom and a staging of this “irruption” of history. Visser’s critique, his version of the impact of the (historical) world on the work, signally inscribes what Louise Bethlehem has recently described as “an elaborate rhetoric of urgency that strains to effect a secular closure between the word and the world precisely to safeguard the ethical claims of South African literary culture” (Bethlehem: 2001: 368). The rupture that separates the two parts of the narrative signifies this urgency by marking the limits of representa-

tion, the failure of the symbolic, in the face of both the individual trauma of Tsi Molope (something we will consider later in more detail) and the inexorable progress of history. The *meaning* of the text, in Visser's Althusserian interpretation, rests in its urgent rejection of literary modernism (and the scaffolding ideology on which it depends) and its orientation to a future historical moment. In other words, he reads through the form of the text to its underlying historical context in a critical turn that simultaneously dismisses formalist evaluative criteria as irrelevant (most obviously the demand for the "organic" unity of the text) and insists that South African literature be read as an effect of political emergency.

Annie Gagiano responds to Visser's critique of Barbour. She seeks, without simply inscribing the formalist assumption of a necessary aesthetic unity, "the bondedness [of the two parts] which is not merely the accidental result of the novel being a set of pages between two covers" (Gagiano 1989: 84). She finds this "bondedness" in the idea that the "impression made by this novel *is* especially that of the fragmentation of black South African experience (psychological, social and political)" (p. 84), that the constitutive ruptures in *To Every Birth its Blood* gesture towards an overarching political consciousness or what we might describe as a fragmented ontology of the oppressed. Gagiano's humanist reading, then, asserts that the form of the novel is mimetic in representing the being-in-the-world of South African subalterneity; its shattered surface captures the very fragmentation of the experience it reflects.

In one of the most accomplished readings of the text, Kelwyn Sole addresses Visser's comments from another perspective. He challenges critics' assumption that the work is, "when all is said and done, a work of realism [that] tries to mime contemporary events in South Africa" (Sole 1991: 56). Rather than seeking an external historical (Visser) or ontological (Gagiano) referent, he traces the ways in which the text manifests "a double logic" in which linear history collides with Serote's poetic motifs that proliferate contradictory meanings as the action progresses.

It is very difficult to see, for instance, how at various points in a single literary work the motif of the "journey" can be used to characterise a variety of actions which include the sexual act, the trek towards liberation, the journey of the individual through life, the journey into political exile, the experience of being tortured and the music of Dollar Brand, and still maintain its overall coherence (*Birth* 3, 23, 69, 112, 149, 346, 357, 367). When this can be seen to happen with a series of symbols and motifs, the metaphorical and quasi-poetic language they are expressed in starts to form intrusive patterns of its own, pulling the novel into several possible readings simultaneously. Rather than adding to the meaning, such protean, contradictory patterns act as a hindrance to any sense of final symbolic pertinence, in terms of the denouement of the novel on a realistic level. (Sole 1991: 57)

The text, in this view, is not only divided into two disjunctive parts, but comprises two “systems of narrative logic ... – the realistic and the metaphoric” (Sole 1991: 58) and these “collapse into each other at every point” (p. 58). It is, it follows, pointless, given the novel’s “recourse to [these] concurrent and mutually interfering modes of fictional portrayal” (p. 77), to force it towards hermeneutic clarity, to a coherent and cogent vision of “social harmony and the satisfaction of individual desire” (p. 77). “The revolution ... that smooths over political and social contestation and cures the divided self, is still very far away” (p. 77) and *To Every Birth its Blood*, therefore, needs to be read as fashioned from the episteme of the interregnum. The novel constructs a utopian political time in counterpoint to a history of privation steeped in blood, but the very discourse of this juxtaposition inevitably drags along a rhetorical detritus of historical understanding of alienation, individuality, and hope. No matter how clear we set out to be in the oppositions we construct, our language endlessly betrays us.

Michael Green (1997: 251-252) acknowledges this disjunction between the novel’s historical realism and its proliferation of figural meaning, but sees the text’s *organising* trope as its orientation toward a utopian future. In his view, the discontinuity in the work arises not from the nation’s distance from its liberation (as Sole proposes), but rather “turns upon an incompletely worked out sense of the relationship between history as (pre)determined process and history as the product of human agency” (Green 1997: 251-252). Even in the second part of the novel, Green argues, Serote combines a commitment to individual human agency expressed in richly humanist terms with “the democratisation of narrative perspective and its accompanying recuperation of the individual self within a communal subject” (p. 252). It follows that Barbour, Gagiano and Visser simplify the matter in assuming that the activities of “the Movement” described in the second part of the novel are ideologically cogent and wholly different from the agonised exploration of political agency that comprises the first-person narrative of Tsi Molope. The contradiction between the versions of history expressed in the two modes of representation is present at each stage of the text’s progress, and is not simply embodied by the rupture between its two parts.

It is interesting in the light of this elaborate debate, and given our preoccupation with jazz improvisation in this argument, to consider Johan Jacobs’s attempt to organise the novel’s coherence, or at least explain the relation of its parts and narrative modes, using the “framework of the black jazz performance metaphor” (Jacobs 1989: 13). Jacobs’s “The Blues: An Afro-American Matrix for Black South African Writing” (1989: 3-17) is, to date, the most sustained critical exploration of jazz discourse and a jazz aesthetic in South African literature.³ It does, despite its significant contribution, have notable limitations

arising from its reduction of the complexity of jazz performance to a limited number of attributes. It is not uncommon in comparisons of musical and other cultural practices to reduce the former to a set of named characteristics (in the case of jazz, for instance, the solo, improvisation, contrapuntalism or call-and-response, the blues mode, dissonance and so on) and then to apply these in the analogical analysis of wholly disparate activities. Jacobs's analysis proceeds along these lines. In particular, he reifies call-and-response and the relationship between solos and the group's performance by hypothesising the existence of a "black aesthetic" of dialogic communalism. His argument is strangely reminiscent of the blunt Afrocentric evocations of "African cultural practice" that underpin influential works in diasporic history such as Ben Sidran's *Black Talk* ([1971]1991) and Samuel A. Floyd's evangelical *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (1995).

Jacobs describes the two parts of *To Every Birth its Blood* in the following terms:

The very structure of *To Every Birth its Blood*, divided as it is into a first part which consists of the first-person narration of Tsi Molope of his own story of defeat and despair in Alexandra, and a second part, narrated in the third person, in which the consciousness shifts from the individual to the collective as it documents the growth of "The Movement", is cast in the mould of blues and jazz – more specifically, as assimilated into black South African urban culture. Only in his music, it seems, can the black South African fully tell his story.

(Jacobs 1989: 14)

"The black South African", according to Jacobs, "compose[s] narratives of self by testing the expressive codes of [his] culture" (p. 13). In Serote's novel, this heuristic exploration takes the form of "call and response between the two sections of the narrative" (p. 14). While Jacobs suggests that dialogical heurism is the basis of improvisation (a term he conflates with composition), his identification of interlocutors (the two parts of the novel) fixes its analytical potential to a narrowly defined formalist economy. Serote presents his soloist Tsi as a cultural broker in performance not only with the other characters in the novel, but alternately defining himself against the ensemble and submerging himself in the stream of history, improvising in solo flights in a construct which takes its form from contemporary black music and all that has influenced it in South Africa.

Asserting that the relationship between Molope and "the Movement" is analogous to that between the soloist and the group hypostasises a range of roles and practices in ways that essentialise both jazz practice and the systems of narrative logic described by Sole and Green. Jacobs's somewhat sketchy version of jazz practice reiterates uncomplicated, even stereotyped, versions

of improvisation; takes no account of the metamusical ruminations on the role of the soloist entailed in, among others, post-bop jazz; assumes that call-and-response is the only, or at least the primary, mode of improvisational dialogue; and, reduces jazz performance to a range of *metaphorical* subject positions, which undervalues the capacity of performers to interrogate and redefine creative practices during performances. Despite his suggestions to the contrary, then, Jacobs pins jazz practice beneath a set of nouns rather than engaging with the history of its verbs. Even though he offers a dynamic way of imagining the relationship between the alienated individual's creativity and the collective, he overlooks the ways in which jazz performance potentially supplements the analysis of nonrealist modes of signification.

Perhaps the most significant oversight in Jacobs's analysis of *To Every Birth its Blood* is, that he does not take account of Moloche's explicit and critical engagement with the potential *and* limits of improvisation. If anything, Moloche's increasing despondency and eventual disillusionment with jazz suggests something important about the relationship between violent oppression and creativity, as well as that between the modernist exploration of (existential) meaning and historicist versions of solidarity and collective action. The remainder of this article explores these relations by tracing the narrative's trajectory from reverberating jazz improvisation to silence in the first part of the novel, and then to soul music in the second. This allows us to sound out the debate set out above. We will see, first, that Moloche's progression from sound to silence can be read as a gradual muting of literary modernism in the interests of elaborating a pathway to a future history which, though far off, presents at least some consolation for the inevitable agonies of the passage. Second, it will become apparent that, contrary to the most common representations of jazz, Moloche experiences not only the liberating potential of improvised music, but its fundamental limitations in the face of relentless brutality.

3 "... the silence is there"

The first part of *To Every Birth its Blood* includes countless references to, and at least three sustained meditations on, jazz performances. The first of the three describes Moloche and Ausi-Pule listening to a Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim) recording.

Dollar would stalk the house, bombard it, rise high and high, go low and low, in that journey which Dollar takes, sometimes as an ant moving, moving, on and on, climbing on thin grass as if it were a huge fallen tree trunk, moving, moving back and forwards as if seeking something which he himself does not know, moving

on and on, at times like a tiger, agile, beautiful, ferocious, stalking, knowing, planning and ready for the final attack. Yes, Dollar would dominate the silence

....

(Serote 1981: 23-24)

As we can see, Molohe interpolates chains of metaphorical signification into the music. It is as if the “movement” of the music (its lines of development, changes in tempo, key, rhythm, tonality and so on) provides a template for discourse that only masquerades as *representation*. In other words, by organising silence, the music signals the possibility of *description* or *inscription* (in the sense of organising or mapping inchoate silence). This is an important but often neglected aspect of the representation of music in prose or poetry. We tend to accept as a truism the assertion that music cannot be represented in words, that it is ineffable. In practice, though, the seeming representation of music is often, as here, something else. For Molohe, musicians’ acoustic engagements with silence suggest the *possibility* of semantic and figural interjection. More than merely a site for writing, jazz presents at once the acoustic expansion of the musicians’ being in the world and moves the (writer) narrator to signifying. It is as if one mode of improvisational engagement – the acoustic – suggests the possibility of another: the narrator’s ability to order the world discursively and to represent the self within it. The example of music, in other words, holds out the promise of human agency, of making meaning, even in an otherwise overwhelming state of alienation. It wards off the danger of a melancholic resignation to the impossibility of signifying.

To say that music potentially patterns consciousness is a claim of just this order. Molohe seems constantly to organise his apprehension of the world and imagine its possibilities through listening to the way that music can overcome the nothingness of silence. It will become apparent that he represents improvising musicians as assembling, reorganising and unravelling trajectories of expressive meaning from historically constituted possibilities. Similarly, his own representations of their music, despite being inflected with a sense of hesitancy, contingency and provisionality, nevertheless affirm the human subject’s capacity to manipulate meaning, to act out and act up out of authority’s earshot. To reiterate, Molohe’s jazz musicians stand for and facilitate a version of individual creativity in which a terrain of possible meaning is seized and organised into trajectories of signification. In representing his complex acts of listening, Molohe calls us to witness his own creative intervention projected onto the music of others. His is, in other words, a process of *productive consumption* that, because it is so at odds with hegemony’s prescription and regulation of meaning in his oppressive context, presents a triumph of the subaltern imagination.

This argument might become clearer if we turn to the second of Molope's extended descriptions of jazz performance, here of Miles Davis's "So What". The track appears on *King of Blue* (Columbia: 1959) and features John Coltrane (tenor), Cannonball Adderley (alto), Bill Evans/Wynton Kelly (piano), Paul Chambers (bass) and Jimmy Cobb (drums).

I felt light, unaware of my footsteps 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, ah, what is it we do not know? To make ships and planes? We have built all that. To put rocks on rocks until they stretch to the sky? We have built that. What is it that we do not know? Despair? Fear? Crying? Laughing? Maybe we know too much of everything. Maybe. And maybe that is why, that is why we have never lived? So what? Miles Davis. Kinds of blue? The drums kept watch, a careful watch. Bass, there, behind, lonely, there as if all the time waiting to take action. Coltrane coming in with his battle, perpetual battle that must have killed him, at times going through walls, through barbed wire, sightless, uncaring, carrying his mission out, to seek to search, at times as if a dam had burst, and the angry water was rushing through everything, leaving nothing behind. So what?

(Serote 1981: 38-39)

The narrator uses the momentum of Davis and Coltrane's improvisations to develop pathways of figuration. The ascending trumpet line, for instance, initiates a sequence of association: an upward acoustic trajectory propels the narrator's imagination up the markers of aspiration, if only to culminate in a resigned bewilderment at the inadequacy of our reach and the exploitative system within which we construct our hopes and aspirations. As the music changes (with the entry of Coltrane), the order of meaning shifts from a lofty transcendence to the ground-level insurgency of the combatant. An impossible (and arguably tainted) metaphysical yearning gives way to tactical incursion and resistance. Neither journey leads to any resolution ("so what?"), but we are left with a persuasive sense of heurism, of contriving meaning "out on a limb" over, what is potentially, a chasm of nothingness. The desire and facility to signify is, even at its very least, a marker of a resilient epistemology, of a willingness to "venture from home", in the description of Deleuze and Guattari, "on the thread of a tune" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 312). For, "to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it" (p. 312); it is a process that sounds out selfhood and its context as indistinguishably and inseparably linked.

The third of Molope's ruminations implies an even greater ontological reach. The stakes are raised: Coltrane is represented on a quest for self-discovery and self-definition. His is an archaeological performance that reaches across the Atlantic to an archive of legacy (or cultural memory) shared by the narrator.

If I tried to bring it out, lots of it would be fiction. Lots. Hopes. Disappointments. Everything in glimpses. Yet somehow it seems 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 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; Coltrane, starting from the beginning, as if a newly-born baby, trying, finding, searching a future, searching the past that we all know so little about. Coltrane, beating, searching, slowing down, stalking, digging all the energy, using it, digging, digging, finding out, and beginning from the beginning. Shit. Coltrane, whose son was he? Kneeling and searching repeatedly, with the same energy, pleading, begging, I want to know about you.

(Serote 1981: 58-59)

The figure of John Coltrane looms large in jazz texts that sound out the innovative edge of black consciousness. Whether the Coltrane of the nondiatonic extensions of bebop, the “sheets of sound” Coltrane of the early 1960s or the avant-garde Coltrane in the wake of *Love Supreme*, the saxophonist has been central in “the continuous (which is not to say uniform) emancipation of the soloist from the accompanying rhythmic and harmonic framework” (Kofsky 1970: 162).⁴ There is, perhaps because of the historical scope of his career relative to that of Charlie Parker, no figure more associated with the revolutions in black music and their relation to cultural and political ideology.⁵ Further, Coltrane emerged as a “giant in black culture” because he represented one of the “elder statesmen, black men who had gone through the mill and survived, not empty handed, but with peculiarly black solutions to particularly white problems” (Sidran [1971]1995: 134). Thus it is that he so commonly embodies black innovation, resilience and survival as well as the simultaneous creative amplification of oppression’s quotidian and the visionary search for a political and spiritual “beyond”.

The passage above celebrates an alternative to the sanctioned history of the apartheid regime: “digging” suggests both empathetic appreciation (in jazz argot) and the journey down the genealogical lines of one’s inheritance. It is only by connecting one’s history (“where you come from, what happened”) to the present that one is adequately placed to improvise a future. It is in his search for an original innocence (“starting from the beginning, as if a newly born baby”), this “digging”, that Molohe is led to imagine a form of relational knowledge that connects his being-in-the-world with Coltrane’s performance (“I want to know about you”). Arguably, survival in a state of oppressive occlusion depends on the capacity of the subject to develop a poetics of emergence and insurgency, and this is accomplished here through the

protagonist's relation to the Coltrane performance. Thus it is that Molohe listens so avidly to Coltrane's fashioning a selfhood and history against the grain of historically occlusive categories, for in that improvisation he hears the guerrilla tactics of a black survivor.

We can relate Molohe's description of Coltrane's performance to improvised musical practice at several levels. First, the jazz improviser both acquires a language by listening to his predecessors (the luminaries in a history of creativity) and, in the most memorable instances, overcomes the real or perceived limitations of its lexicon and syntax by elaborating new combinational possibilities. That is, he faces both the tradition he embodies and the community of his practice even as he assembles paths that reach beyond the present in leaps of the acoustic imaginary. Molohe hears in Coltrane's playing a cultural and political genealogy: he searches for the "father" at the same time as he clears a space to fashion a way forward. This version of jazz is compelling: that one incorporates history as a way of overcoming its limitations; one enters *jazz-time*⁶ to recover, refashion, and to either extend or overcome historically constituted constraints. Memory exists, in this understanding of performance, in a negative dialectical relation with innovation: improvisation is a zigzag movement between the past and potential futures.

Second, Coltrane is represented as a tactician undertaking short, searching heuristic bursts of discovery rather than contriving a work fashioned in accordance with formalist criteria. The coherence of an opus, it emerges, is less at issue here than the imperfect political logic of a desperate search for an ontological and epistemological mode that is not caught up in the sweep of the hegemonic collusion of power and knowledge. Perhaps this addresses to an extent Sole's sense that Serote's motifs proliferate contradictory meanings. "Protean" and "contradictory" patterns (Sole 1991: 57), as he refers to them, are conceivably elements of a dialogical heurism that, in its compulsive nomadism, works off the evaluative criteria of coherence and cogency. Cacophony, polyphony and dissonance cannot, we might argue, be "clarified", cannot be composed into a seamless organic unity.

Molohe places the collapse into madness and the eventual silence of Kippie Moeketsi⁷ against Coltrane's zigzag code of black survival:

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.

(Serote 1981: 60)

Moeketsi's silence resounds, at some level forcing Molohe into a transatlantic imaginary. It is a silence that Molohe himself unwillingly embraces towards the end of the first part of the novel. Having been stopped by police and beaten for witnessing the aftermath of an assassination, Molohe and Boykie encounter

another roadblock and are taken to a local police station. There they are brutally assaulted and thrown into prison. This somatic encounter with the facticity of violence and oppression leads Molohe into the immobility of a deep despair: it seems, from his subsequent silence, that his being subjected to the unmediated and undiluted power of the state forecloses on his capacity to signify. Importantly, when he arrives home, he (as always) plays a jazz record, but now it sounds into an ontological void.

And then 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 harmony and rhythm, when the pants are down,⁸ the silence is there. This is not easy to find. I could no longer listen to the music that had taught me so much!

Out there in the streets something with a loud bang, called soul, screamed and popped and dragged our children along.

(Serote 1981: 137)

Nothingness, a lacuna, defines subaltern existence that, at any moment, can be ruptured by the impact of power. In the space of this rupture, Molohe's experience suggests, it becomes impossible to improvise meaning from the fragments of a subaltern repertoire, to achieve a creative relation even to the possibilities that derive from the communal history of black Atlantic oppression. In a sense, then, Molohe experiences a personal failure of the blues and jazz matrix⁹ as a political and ontological code. Perhaps this does not imply that the code *itself* buckles under the force of hegemony's descent, but that, faced with the blunt irruptive effect of its violence, the improviser's fluid manipulation, appropriation and recuperation of possibilities is impossible.

At an earlier stage of the novel, Molohe meditates, in a "turn" of the black Atlantic imagination, on the slave trade.

Everything that time had been against us. Those ships sailed for miles and miles and miles across the seas, to far and strange lands. Canned inside their guts was a terrible pain, a brutal pain, the worst results that the human heart can produce.

(Serote 1981: 84)

The counterjourney by, among his other guides, Davis and Coltrane presents Molohe with the creative matrix of this suffering, its consequences and its reworking. The resilience required to fashion evanescent meaning against these historical odds is, though, constantly under threat. At any moment violence potentially drags the subject from her homeland, deprives her of language and subdues her will to strive for creative emancipation. Tsietsi Molohe's eventual flight into exile simply embodies the violent disjunction forced on him by the collapse of his capacity to improvise tactics of being and knowing. It is not

coincidental, then, that “soul” is the music of the second part of the novel. The failure of improvisation, its silencing, gives way to the uniformities, the collectivity, of its propulsive beat and its embodied rhythms. By the end of the first part of *To Every Birth its Blood* the time for reflective improvisation is over and the age of “loud bangs”, “screams” and “pops” has dawned. The sounds of heurism are overwhelmed, in Serote’s ideological scheme, by the march of history.

If Serote’s novel describes both the potential and limits of improvisation, it does so at the seam of violence and creativity. It suggests neither that improvisation is *itself* inadequate, nor that the blues matrix is insufficient to the political tasks of black Atlantic ontology. What emerges, though, is that, if the political imaginary is constructed as the tradition of the saxophone facing that of the jackboot, there will always be occasions when the jackboot prevails, when the individual’s capacity to gain ground within a system of meaning falls prey to a violence supreme. Thus it is that the two parts of the novel and its divergent modes of representation face one another. They present and elaborate, among other things, the task and constraints of signifying the communal self against the grain of history. When Molohe’s jazz falls silent, we are facing the brutal facticity that is both the condition and limitation of the political realism of the novel’s second part.

4 Coda

In South African literature, jazz has been most commonly used to imagine relational communities that link South African subalterneity to other black diasporic experiences of privation, trauma and violence. In various instances it allows writers to imagine nonrealist solutions to historical and material constraints; it has been, differently stated, a site of symbolic proliferation in which new subcultural languages have been inaugurated in attempts to bypass the ponderous signifying of the state (which has sought to clarify and fix identities and histories in its own ideological interests). Given its achievements in the symbolic domain, South African jazz carries the burden of optimism: it seems always to circulate as an anthem of defiance and innovation, of an improvised modernity assembled from the relational language of diasporic race and class history.

To Every Birth its Blood sounds a cautionary note. It not only stages the limits of jazz improvisation as a model of political liberty and cultural historiography, it also casts doubt on the very idea that modernist existential exploration and self-representation can function as ideological resistance. The critical debate following the publication of the novel marks a particular horizon in South African political history: the rejection of testimonial discourse as a

form of opposition in favour of the collective construction of a future imaginary rooted in a materialist version of history. At one level, jazz, tainted as it is by the politics of modernism, has no place in this emergent order; we have to give up, it seems, on the very politics of improvised production on which its existence depends.

As we supposedly return, in the terms with which we began, to “representing individual experience” (Thieme 2003: 1), we need to assess both the reasons for its suppression in the past and the habits of representation that made such suppression possible. What, for instance, had to be silenced to enable modes of representation fashioned from the devices of social realism and Marxist historiography?

The soundscapes of literary works are one level at which contending orders of representation can be compared. In *To Every Birth its Blood*, the jazz-inflected imagination of its protagonist runs its course, to be succeeded by the regular “pounding” beat of American soul. Yet, as we have seen, a truly relational poetics of solidarity and of identity is accomplished in the nonrealist representations of jazz improvisation, in contrast with which the soul music of the second part is both anodyne and politically bereft. To identify jazz at once with the past and a utopian future, but to imagine its inevitable suppression in the course of historical change, is to make an entirely ideological decision. The representations of jazz in the novel, emphasising as they do its political, historical and ontological creativity, as well as its communal and relational nature, at some level subvert the very basis of Molohe’s despondent rejection of the music.

Jazz, in Serote’s nonrealist representation, is clearly in excess of the schematic ideological division of the two parts of the novel. At one level, this simply demonstrates Kelwyn Sole’s notion that *To Every Birth its Blood* comprises “concurrent and mutually interfering modes of fictional portrayal” (Sole 1991: 77); that, in the terms of this argument, the representation of music is to some extent dissonant to the narrative logic or political scheme of the text. More generally, though, it demonstrates that in sounding out texts we stand to hear one ideological order, one way of imagining the link between history and ontology, fade away as another comes to dominate the soundscape. And this process, in its complex nonrealism and unique ways of constructing the relationship between individual creativity and collective histories, issues important challenges to our understanding of narrative modes.

Notes

1. It is beyond the scope of this article to summarise these debates. A useful departure point for those wishing to consider the seminal responses of Albie

Sachs (“Preparing Ourselves for Freedom”) and Njabulo Ndebele (*Rediscovery of the Ordinary*) to demands for political commitment, is Ashraf Jamal’s analysis of syncretism and the modalities of political resistance during the apartheid period (cf Jamal 2003a: 3-20, 2003b: 19-36).

2. The sense that jazz embodies a defiant individualism in the face of oppression is endlessly restated or implied in South African literature and criticism. Interestingly Albie Sachs, in advocating the need for a rebirth of the South African cultural imagination, uses jazz as an example for creative practice: the music of Jonas Gwangwa, Miriam Makeba, Abdullah Ibrahim and Hugh Masekela, he claims,
conveys genuine confidence because it springs from inside the personality and experience of each of them, from popular tradition and the sounds of contemporary life: we respond to it because it tells us something lovely and vivacious about ourselves.

(Sachs quoted by Jamal 2003b: 28)

Statements such as this, implying that jazz improvisation is somehow paradigmatic of the condition to which the arts in this country should aspire, are common. The question is whether these exemplary, even transcendent, qualities can be so readily assumed.

3. This excludes my own doctoral study (2003) and forthcoming book, “Making the Changes: Jazz in South African Literature and Reportage”).
4. Frank Kofsky’s “John Coltrane and the Revolution” in *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (1970), although it originally appeared in 1965 shortly after the release of *Love Supreme*, remains one of the most valuable analyses of Coltrane’s aesthetic and political contribution. Kofsky develops a feasible explanation of avant-garde music in the light of Thomas Kuhn’s theory of “normal” and “revolutionary” science.
5. This order of this claim reflects the opinion of such influential critics as, among others, Frank Kofsky (1970) and Ben Sidran ([1971]1995). It reflects the prevailing view of Coltrane and, almost without exception, the connotations carried by his name into the literary domain. While I would not, others might argue (in those rather meaningless evaluative disputes that proliferate in jazz circles) that Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, Anthony Braxton, Archie Shepp, Pharaoh Sanders, Sun Ra, Joseph Jarman, LeRoi Jenkins or Cecil Taylor are contenders for the crown of “*the* musical revolutionary”.
6. This phrase is introduced and elaborated in Ermarth 1992.

7. For a detailed account of the representation of Kippie Moeketsi, see Titlestad 2003: 25-36.
8. This recalls his assault at the police station.
9. See Houston Baker's compelling theory of the African-American blues matrix as a "vibrant network" of meaning and practice used to interpret and articulate black subalterneity (Baker 1984).

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