

# 'The mangled flesh of our griots': music in the verse of Seithamo Motsapi

---

MICHAEL TITLESTAD AND MIKE KISSACK

## ABSTRACT

This article considers the use of black Atlantic music in Seithamo Motsapi's volume of verse, *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*. In his poetry, Motsapi constructs a critique of the popular music industry while heralding the therapeutic potential of various dissonant musical modes, central among which is free improvisational jazz. We are concerned to appraise whether this musical genre, which by its own insistent definition resists representation, is adequate to the poetic and intellectual role Motsapi requires it to fulfil. This allows for an examination of the relationship between modernist aesthetic solutions and, what we might term, the black diasporan imaginary. Our tentative conclusion is that inscribing a dissonant practice, based in the right to deny and defy, can lead poetry to turn on a constitutive absence. In the case of *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*, we argue that this absence both indicates the complexities of a "transformational poetics" and casts doubt on the very therapeutic turn the verse describes.



According to Laura Chrisman (1996:60), Seithamo Motsapi's *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (2003 [1995], hereafter *ES*) comprises "rich, experimental poetry, raining down fresh imagery, complex conceits, carefully patterned to produce a volume of striking originality and stylistic rigour". In terms of its political import, she continues, "Motsapi's pan-African militancy eschews the reductive version of manichean ideology found at times in 1970's black consciousness writings" while it is simultaneously a "very far cry from the official New South

Africa pietistic discourse of reconciliation". In addition to its formal accomplishment, then, she identifies two political trajectories in the verse. The first is Motsapi's simultaneous indictment of post-colonial (South) African corruption and his critique of global economic imperialism, perpetrated chiefly by a nation he trenchantly calls "amerikkka" (*ES*:24). The second is that Motsapi's verse, in its complex webs of references and resonance, surpasses a local politics of affiliation through both a pan-African political solidarity and "techniques of exhortation, com-

memoration and purification" (1996:60) that articulate with the global experience of black privation and resilience.

While Chrisman does not use Paul Gilroy's (1993) terms explicitly, many of the practices of meaning she identifies are rooted in (or, more accurately, routed across) the black Atlantic. We have identified three orders of this practice, although others might well be present in Motsapi's poetry. The first both signals the Afri-centrism<sup>1</sup> of diasporan historiography in references to the ancient kingdoms of Ethiopia,

Egypt and the Sudan (“Meroe” and others) and constructs a lost past, “an ancient well” (in, among other poems, “tenda” *ES*:11), that has been occluded by colonialism and continues to be suppressed by post-independence global economic imperialism. The second involves either adopting the dialects of the Atlantic diaspora (that is, various Caribbean creoles, such as that of the Rastafari, or a range of African American sociolects, including both a blues and gospel idiom) or referring to militant poetic proponents of diasporan signifying (Mataburuka and Linton Kwesi Johnson).

Although we address both of these in passing, it is the third order of practice that we have elected to consider in some detail. While Motsapi elaborates a poetic idiom and style that has its precursors in the jazz poetry of Ntozake Shange, Amiri Baraka, Michael S Hamburger and Yusef Komunyakaa, as well as the improvised prose of Nathaniel Mackey, black Atlantic music has a distinct significance in his verse. Its multivalent meaning, we will see, is fashioned at the intersection of the poet’s local context (South Africa) and global flows of the black historical imaginary. Through references to reggae, jazz, dub, gospel and the blues, Motsapi constructs a complex response to the culture of repetition and commodification that defines capitalist modernity, as well as to the afflictions of (black) subordination that mark its emergence. Music, he suggests, holds out therapeutic promise even as its potential for healing is constantly threatened by its abuse in what Adorno calls (1989:199–209), in another context, “the culture industry”. We are concerned not only to explore but also to evaluate the particular sense of historical *recovery* (in both senses of that word) that Motsapi develops in his references to music. We will argue that his commitment to the dissonance of free jazz specifically and his more general resistance to the popular music industry indicate a parti-

cular mode of ideological critique based in reclaiming the freedom to deny and defy. We will consider, in the light of this ideological commitment, whether, in its resistance to representation, this preferred mode of dissonance impedes rather than elaborates a cogent political advocacy.

*earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* comprises a series of heuristic investigations into a set of interrelated themes. It is, therefore, possible to move among poems in the course an exegesis. Let us turn first, though, to Motsapi’s “maasai dreadbeat” (*ES*:26–27). Broadly speaking, the poem describes, as do several others in the volume, the rupture in the integrity of the black past caused by the advent of imperial modernity. In an earlier poem (“the sun used to be white” *ES*:23–25) we are told that the “ancestor maasai/[are] melting into the purple nikon pose/of touroist disca/dence”. “maasai dreadbeat”, taking Kenya as its ostensible context, weaves together East and West Africa in an assemblage of references (Onyame, ananse, kikoi, lonrho, griots) to map African social disintegration in the face of international “tourorism” and the symbolic exchange and real economy on which it depends. Even the sacred and arcane, it seems, have been surrendered to the interests of capitalism: “our diviners talk to new gods/ while the shrines gather dust”. “Seers” have been “stitched into nairobi’s intestines” and the “kikoi”, that marker of a more coherent past, has given “in/to sweet tooth neon spider”. African culture, then, has unravelled into the spectacle of the commodity (“the nikon pose”) and a greedy materialism that has destroyed the sense of collectivity that Motsapi understands as those cultural practices that were once a “bridge to brother to nation”. The very source of communal sustenance has been corrupted and a sinister duplicity now lurks in every hypocritical gesture.

now ananse has polluted the wells  
 what viper lurks in the handshake  
 what bite skulks in fraternal syllable  
 what kwashiorkors claim the yam  
 (ES:26)

Not only has the storytelling anti-hero ananse – the spider-man trickster figure of Ashante mythology – polluted the “wells”, but also any sign of a nourishing intersubjectivity is now invalidated by a pervasive sense of threat. The world is starved and its embodiment, the kwashiorkor, snatches the last source of sustenance.

The poet in this cultural wasteland imagines himself reaching out (“i want to embrace you/one last time”) to the memory of a communal and cogent past “before red takes over the sky”. He discovers, in his longing, only the violation of history by the mechanisms of modernity: “the mangled flesh of our griots/stashed into belly of synthesiser”. Griots, the singing chroniclers of the West African past, those embodied archives of cultural continuity, have been “mangled” in the apparatus of a deafening capitalist synthesis. A coherent acoustic regime, the sung record of the past that wove communities together both synchronically and diachronically, has been dismembered and ingested by the Leviathan synthesiser. The synthesiser is a recurrent trope in Motsapi’s verse. It occurs in “farover” (ES:20) (“already they stagger

to makossa/& chicco their dreams into synthesiser”; in “solo/together” (“while my son’s synthesiser/spat blue red venomous disco/dant”, ES:49); and in “moni” (“mbira grows into synthesiser/the songs ask for more sugar”, ES:55). There a sense that “synthesis” in this mode generates nothing other than, what Motsapi calls elsewhere, “the convenient noises/of popular music” (“drum intervention” ES:29). Far from the Hegelian dialectic, this is a synthesis that produces only the *synthetic*; a disembodied mechanical pastiche of a meaningless cultural middle-ground defined in the first instance by its marketability. The means of reproduction, the very mechanisms of mixing and repetition, have reduced history and culture to a commodity, an anodyne “world music” suited to the expectations fashioned by an industry of musical platitude.<sup>2</sup> Motsapi implicitly warns us against simply vaunting the hybrid or syncretic: all forms of relational ontology, of mixing, are not equal.

Given this account of “maasai drumbeat” we might anticipate that Motsapi inscribes a narrow version of tradition as a permanent repository of value. He is, though, by no means an advocate of some simplistic therapeutic nostalgia. Motsapi’s hope for healing the cultural and personal disease he identifies in African modernity

lies not in some purer antiquity or in tradition, but with a group of griots in Chicago.

send me don moye’s bruised  
 fingers  
 the drums gather dust  
 the hallelujahs are impatient  
 send me joseph jarman’s lungs  
 too long, way too long  
 the mountains haven’t heard the  
 flutes  
 i hold out for now  
 mau mau won’t fall again  
 the forest is on our side  
 (ES:27)

Famadou Don Moye and Joseph Jarman were respectively the percussionist-drummer and saxophonist-flutist of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, an AACM group that rose to prominence in the late 1960s and had a productive life extending over three decades. The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) had been established by Muhal Richard Abrams and others in 1965 “to encourage innovative black musicians to create their own opportunities to play their music” (Heble 2000:66). As a musical cooperative, Heble argues (2000:66), it not only encouraged and facilitated experimental improvisation, it elaborated the significance of the music into an ideology of “communal interaction, responsibility, and mutual forms of tolerance amongst both its practitioners and its listeners”. Don Moye, himself, represents the aim of the AACM as “the dissemina-

tion of “great Black music ... To further the music on our own terms, without the intervention of the normal industry manipulations” (Moye in Heble 2000:67).

The phrase “Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future”, was adopted by the Art Ensemble of Chicago as its slogan; it “sums up the philosophy of these musicians and makes explicit their effort to expose the African roots of their music” (Heble 2000:69). A typical concert by the Art Ensemble tends, in Heble’s description (2000:68–69), to be a “quasi-theatrical romp (complete with pantomime, flag waving, minstrelsy, staged pandemonium) through jazz from its earliest forms to its more recent manifestations: in short, a kind of abridged history of accomplishments in black music”. Further, Favors, Moye and Jarman conventionally performed in elaborate pan-African garb and were decorated with striking body and face paint.

A performance of the Art Ensemble is described in Rafi Zabor’s remarkable novel about an ursine tenor player, *The bear comes home* (1998:39–40). It warrants quotation at length, if only because it gives such a vivid sense of both the spectacle and the music of the Ensemble.

“We’re overdoing the costume shit tonight. You’ll be lucky if anyone even notices you,” Bowie said, and he might have been right: bassist Malachi Favors had painted his face white and wore tribal style robes of silver lamé; Joseph Jarman had topped off his cloaks and warpaint with a pair of fluffy pink bunny ears; drummer Don Moyé was wearing approximately Dogon regalia; Roscoe Mitchell, in streetclothes and black cotton watchcap, merely nodded hi ...

After standing with the band in silence facing east – a nice moment actually, an effective tune-up – things had begun in a rumour of gongs and bird-calls, and the Bear had stayed out of it, a few stray notes excepted. Standing at the bass, Malachi Favors began muttering into a bullhorn, Lester was

breathing hoarsely in and out of his horn, and something in these gathering strands of music caught on his fur and before he knew it he was involved in a converse of whispers with Roscoe Mitchell on the other alto while Joseph Jarman roamed the gong-world behind him, occasionally punctuating the groundswell with a bicycle horn ... He and Roscoe tangled further and drums and bass came up under them like some thickening storm and Jarman raised a rattle of bells and chimes before the rising wind, in a matter of minutes the Bear was involved in successive tumults of free-blow with Roscoe’s pretty much atonal alto, and the band’s whole sound rose in a wave.

Heble (2000:69) discerns the accomplishment of the Ensemble in its insistence on naming its own music and its reclamation of an elided cultural history and identity, both of which create “institutions and practices that counter the devastating and dehumanizing effects of misrepresentation”. The musicians, he argues, seize the right to self-representation and occupy spaces of definition in performances by appropriating and manipulating salient historical and cultural possibilities. Theirs is, then, an improvisational engagement with history and culture, an insurgency into (and re-colonization of) the technologies of representation. Rather than deriving a doctrinaire sense of alterity, though, the Ensemble’s performances contradict any notion of an essential black identity – their dissonant spectacles suggest endlessly fluid selves and the multiple and changing contexts of their emergence. The force of their engagement destabilizes the settled orthodoxy of imperial expectations; it tears asunder the veils of received meaning by inserting new and (epistemologically) unsettling possibilities. We might conclude that the music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, in its defiance, does not constitute a new acoustic order, but resists the very fixities (the codification) on which such a regime would depend.

Given even this brief portrait of Moyo and Jarman's political aesthetic, it is significant that Motsapi should resolve his poetic vision in "maasai dreadbeat" in an appeal to "don moye's bruised fingers" and "joseph jarman's lungs" (ES:27). Elsewhere in *earth-stepper/the ocean is very shallow*, Motsapi (in the first part of "djeni," entitled "calabaas" ES:34) heaps vitriol on Euro-American white-black pop icons and the industry of their making.

i am the new man, mad i chant  
 loves song – gobbledigoon i  
 mumble  
 chant me michael jerksin the  
 spepsi s/perm  
 while they kwashiorkor me  
 they the world  
 as sah geldof shuttles out  
 of the sand of the tv crew  
 in addis

(ES:34)

In addition to satirizing "michael jerksin" and "sah [they the world] geldof," Motsapi presents a "mahvan" [Gaye] "elegy/critique" that "suggests in part that the problem lies less in the music than in its appropriation" (Chrisman 1996:64). It is the capitulation of black performers to a white reception that leads them to be "buried to their crooning necks/in the shallow airth/of the amerigan top folly" ("mah boy stah" ES:38). In contrast to these "bones blk & rotting to riddim" ("djeni" ES:34), to the "commodified

life" (Ramakuela 1997:37), are the creative luminaries of the Art Ensemble whose spirit of redemptive discordant creativity could return to the mountains the "talking drum" (ES:26) and the inspirational flutes of a past just waiting to be improvised upon. Unlike the historical disillusion of Mau Mau's vision of uhuru ("mau mau won't fall again"), this liberation will remain growing and fecund. The "forest", in the poem's final image "is on our side" (ES:27).

To seek inspiration for an African regeneration in the musical practices of Moyo and Jarman suggests a black Atlantic poetic imaginary of an intricate order. At one level, it describes the complex ways in which an African "romantic spirituality" (Chrisman 1996:60) participates in global exchanges of, and elaborations on, aesthetic and political possibilities. Chrisman (1996:65) characterizes Motsapi's poetry as "a consideration of political and spiritual expressions of power, in both local and global dimensions, juxtaposing exploitative and regenerative versions of this power". This seems valid, but demands elaboration. The version of recovery Motsapi constructs juxtaposes, as we have suggested, the *synthesised* and the *improvised*. While the former is soothing and anodyne and inextricable from the demands of industrial capital, the latter

faces the history of black privation and, in acts that are simultaneously historiographic and existential, sounds off against the orthodoxies of representation. It is significant, though, that it is in *free* or total improvisation that hope lies. We need to dwell on this further before we turn to two further Motsapi poems in which free jazz is invoked.

In his seminal work, *Noise: the political economy of music* (1985), the theorist Jacques Attali contrasts "mass music" (which he identifies with a cultural economy of "Repetition") with free jazz (which he associates with an idiosyncratic definition of "Composition"). Mass music (1985:111) is

a powerful factor in consumer integration, interclass levelling, cultural homogenisation. It becomes a factor in centralisation, cultural normalisation, and the disappearance of distinctive cultures ... It slips into the growing spaces of activity void of meaning and relations, into the organisation of our everyday life: in all of the world's hotels, all of the elevators, all the factories and offices, all of the airplanes, all of the cars, everywhere, it signifies the presence of a power that needs no flag or symbol: musical repetition confirms the presence of repetitive consumption, of noises as ersatz sociality.

Free jazz, on the other hand,

was the first attempt to express in economic terms the refusal of the cultural alienation inherent in repetition, to use music to build a new

culture. What institutional politics, trapped within representation, could not do, what violence, crushed by counterviolence, could not achieve, free jazz tried to bring about in a gradual way through the production of a new music outside of the industry.

Free jazz (otherwise known as “total improvisation”) entails heuristic musical production unconstrained by the regulatory mechanisms of key, rhythm or mode. While traditional jazz is limited to the exploration, in solos, of the harmonic and melodic potentials of a tune (usually a “standard” announced in the head), free jazz is altogether less formulaic, less inclined to what Ted Gioia (1988:70–94) identifies as “neoclassicism”. We need only think back to Zabor’s description of the performance by the Art Ensemble of Chicago. In its refusal to conform to any particular code of acoustic practice, free jazz resists the politics of repetition and the consolations of synthesis. We might go as far as to consider it an acoustical expression of a negative dialectic: it holds elements in creative tension by militantly resisting their synthesis. This, as we have seen in Heble’s argument, leads to the persuasive sense that, in its dissonance and its defiant politics of production, free jazz *is* dissidence, that its “discrepant engagements”, to use Nathaniel Mackey’s phrase (1993), are a tactical subversion of the economy of reproduction, accumulation and lack.

Attali considers free jazz to offer a model of the utopian alternative to repetition that he defines, with idiosyncratic abandon, as “composition”. “Composition”, in his view, is “the only utopia that is not a mask for pessimism, the only Carnival that is not a Lenten ruse” (1985:147). It is beyond our scope to consider the intricately textured meaning of composition that Attali develops or all the reasons for the political claims he makes in its name. Let it suffice to say that he bases his argument on the notion that all “knowledge moulds itself to the network within which it is inscribed”. In

composition, this network is “cartography, local knowledge, the insertion of culture into production and the general availability of new tools and instruments” (1985:147). Composition, then, both *redefines* its means of production and, by simultaneously disrupting the accepted division between producers and consumers (composers, performers and audiences), bypasses the constraints of replication and reproduction. In this disruptive production, it contrives a radical relation to the past: “a staggering conception of history, a history that is open, unstable, in which labour no longer advances accumulation, in which the object is no longer a stockpiling of lack, in which music effects a reappropriation of time and space”. Premised thus on denying repetition, composition also resists representation; it announces the “permanent fragility of meaning after the disappearance of usage and exchange” (1985:147).

While free jazz is the model for developing his notion of composition, it is significant that Attali (1985:140) identifies and explains what he sees as its political failure. He acknowledges that free jazz did create “*locally* the conditions for a different model of musical production, a new music”, but is less optimistic than Heble about the potential extrapolation of this tactical victory over the hegemonic politics of repetition. Attali argues that since

this noise was not inscribed on the same level as the messages circulating in the network of repetition, it could not make itself heard. It was the herald of another kind of music, a mode of production outside repetition – after having failed as a *takeover of power in repetitive society*.

In resisting the repetition on which representation depends, composition must run the risk of being an agitational cultural critique that can do nothing other than advocate an

identity (or range of identities) based on this refusal, on being persistently dissonant to the orthodox possibilities of meaning.

This begs two questions relating to Motsapi's verse. First, is his faith in free improvisation a cogent response to the political crisis he identifies? Second, does Motsapi's own poetic approximate to free jazz (or to "composition"), therefore run the risk of exalting dissonance at the cost of coherent critique (which relies, of course, on representation)? Differently stated, can it, as it settles on the ineffable power of music and the indescribable valence of the protocols of creative performance, make itself heard? There is, of course, no simple answer to either question. In what follows we examine two other uses of jazz in Motsapi's verse to consider what the ludic improvisation of relational musical possibilities contributes to the poems' meaning. We will also consider the ways in which these two poems, more explicitly than "maasai dreadbeat", stitch together the local and global context. This is a necessary if we are to consider their poetics of transformation as an aesthetic response to, what Motsapi identifies as, post-apartheid cultural crisis.

In "solo/together" (*ES*:49–52) Motsapi maps the march of "the harmies of amerikkka [that] shoot over the/celluloid/

vengeant & patriotic like a swarm of televangelists". Militarism and capitalism combine in perpetrating atrocity ("boiling intestines were fed the marines/as the coca cola cartels were/the rats dancing in the maze"). In the second and third stanza, in fragile counterpoint to these global politics of evil are "the restless mbira clamour lilt/of the bones of ancestor khoisan" and "the drums [that] remembered the bruise". "My son's synthesiser" and the "electric-kisses" of "much-married guitars", though, drown out these historical sounds and the relentless march of the amerikkkan "alligator" resumes. It is only towards the poem's conclusion that a measure of tranquillity is discovered. In place of Jarman and Moye it is John Coltrane's music that holds out hope. Coltrane's tenor instils a tranquil, even hallucinatory, recollection of selfhood.

trane rolls off my walls at night  
& dreamily nirvanas the ancient  
wells  
of my heart that dreams of hills  
into whirls of hypertenors

(*ES*:51)

The balm of creative musical improvisation reconciles the poetic imagination with an ineffable power, with a recondite sense of origin and belonging. Unlike in "masaai dreadbeat", the respite in "solo/together" is a private, inner healing, but as in an earlier poem, "tenda"

(*ES*:11), the source of healing is "water from an ancient well", an improvised anamnesis that is therapeutic. By now we are familiar with the premise: it is not the version of the past "chalked up" by the "antflopologists" ("farover" *ES*:20) that offers a release from the history of black affliction, but an improvisation on the past ("the whirls of hypertenors"), a practised acoustic historiography. Dissonant heurism, then, neither restores nor retrieves the past, but clamours against the prevailing order of meaning, recalling the constitutive repressions on which it depends.

But "solo/together" addresses yet another imperial rend: the historical isolation of apartheid South Africa within the black Atlantic. *Water from an ancient well* (Roots Records ROH 112, 1998) is a defining recording by the legendary South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim. In a study of Ibrahim (*ES*:53–68), Titlestad examines the ways in which he is represented in literature and reportage as a figure of political pilgrimage traversing the constant institution of cultural imperialism generally, and the desert of apartheid history in particular. Motsapi's combination of a local and diasporan archive, in this instance Coltrane and Ibrahim, is an index of a recurrent move in his poetry: he assembles a polyphonic and dialogic ensemble

that avoids the mundane synthesis of the middle-ground. Instead his ensembles improvise, at the intersection of the national and the black Atlantic, a performance that doubles both the historical moment and the community of its significance.

Motsapi's poetic imagination settles on the combination of South African and African American jazz most richly in "malombo paten dansi" (*ES:39–42*), a poem dedicated to the Mamelodi guitarist, Philip Tabane. Tabane, of course, has recorded and performed for decades with changing personnel under the name "Malombo", which refers, in chiVenda, to the ancestral spirits. Given his commitment to free forms of improvisation and, what we might call, exploratory acoustics (he specializes in an eruptive combination of discordant guitar and vocalization), Tabane has been sadly – but perhaps unsurprisingly – under-recorded by the South African music industry. The poem begins with an inspirational injunction to the speakers' fellow musicians and a sound-check:

les c what we can do  
to the mountain –  
plug the mic and les start  
what we have come to do

alo, alo  
u hear me? okeh

(*ES:39*)

The group's first performance is a success: "we had them eating/from the sweaty palms of our connected souls" (*ES:39*). Not only is the audience enraptured, but the musicians are woven together by the protocols of improvised performance, what, to return to Heble's (2000:66) account of critical dissonance, we might characterize as "communal interaction, responsibility, and mutual forms of tolerance". This sense of community, achieved significantly outside of South Africa, reso-

nates with the historical moment, with an envisaged liberation.

it was a time of journeys  
when all we felt was espousal  
to the long untravelled road  
that leads to Sun  
to Self  
to nation

(*ES:39*)

The actualization of a future-perfect imaginary is prefigured by the dissonance of the group's performance, by sound that at once jars against the old false harmonies and signifies the pains of an indeterminate but apocalyptic birth. Thus it is that "while the panthers thought to x the clan",

we scratched the violins into a furious bleed  
& mauled the drums into a new stance  
saxes screeching to the sun for rebirth

(*ES:40*)

The poem, in many respects the equivalent of the Art Ensemble of Chicago's archival and future-imaginary project, looks back from this moment of dissonant revolutionary hope to the music's past. It offers, like so many tributes to South African jazz, the history of its emergence and a tribute to its effects.

the sun was not oblivious  
for soon it rose with spokes over the gloom  
saxes tromboning dorkay to heal us  
from the decay & weals  
we cd always jitterbug jakes to calm  
endlessly humming  
when dyani was pensively humming  
there was a precarious assurance  
that with abdullah walking the ivories  
we cd always do a thing or two  
to the fetters

(*ES:40*)

From Spokes Mashiyane's "enchantments/on the thin spines of pennywhistles" (*ES:40*), to Dorkay House, "Zig Zag" Zakes Nkosi, the



bassist Johnny Dyani and finally Abdullah Ibrahim, jazz has, in Motsapi's vision, always offered the chance to "silence the predator's howl/that had rent eardrums/through-out history into submission" (ES:40). The potential of jazz, then, rests in its capacity to drown out the abject state of apartheid's victims, to rupture or displace, albeit temporarily, the acoustic regime ("the predator's howl") of oppression and to "do a thing or two/to the fetters".

The second and third parts of "malombo paten dansi" concern the experience of exiles who like "other pilgrims [...] had left the world of illusions/well before dawn" (ES:41). This is the world "across the atlantic" [where] "trane was entrancing the village vanguards", it is the world of "[Albert] ayler", "the brotherhood of breath", "[Cecil] taylor", and "[Anthony] braxton". The music of this free jazz *avant-garde* is represented as apocalyptic, as a titanic struggle for freedom.

there was steel and skin  
preaching truth is serious bizness  
blood & chafe / singe & scorch  
(ES:42)

The strident imagery of the fight for liberation – "struggling hard against the fire" (ES:42) – combines with an almost ecclesiastical sense of insight and knowledge to make

jazz musicians both the agents of political subversion and cultural shamans capable of a version of healing. In Motsapi's verse, then, they are, in performing these two roles, militant prophets of transformation who play against the sanctioned orthodoxy imposed on them; facing the past, they improvise a way out of a malign present marked by the effects of history.

To date, the critical reception of *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* encourages the sense that it marks the entry of South African poetry into a truly postcolonial moment; that is, because it shrugs off the essentialization of race and reification of history that mark the tactical platitudes of resistance and liberation in earlier black poetry, it represents a coming of age. The end of South Africa's apartheid isolation, Chrisman argues (1996:60), has both necessitated and enabled the emergence of new communities of meaning, new genealogies of identity that answer "the urge of collectivity" without falling prey to "empty rhetorical posturing" or the claims of a nationalist historical teleology. Motsapi's poetry, she claims, has "a richness of vision that is clearly 'New South African'", but which presents an "antagonistic relationship with the new country, in particular the country's prevalent ethos of rainbow nationalism" (ES:62). The

alternative to centring a national narrative of liberation that it constructs is its celebration of "the immensity of black inner resources" (1996:61). Clearly Chrisman identifies the poetry's achievement as this "outward" turn from sectarian politics to its ruminations on "the formation of a collective black liberatory subject" (1996:65). She discerns in the verse a "fluid hybrid of scribal and oral traditions" (1996:64) that is more richly textured than any national or narrowly ideological discourse would allow.

This sense of turning one's back on "official nationalism" (1997:34) is also praised in Nдавhe Ramakuela's extended review of *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*. Identifying Motsapi's as *the* poetry of "the new dispensation", Ramakuela argues that:

Motsapi's poetry is not primarily concerned with the new order in South Africa, or violence, unemployment, or the new political leadership in South Africa. The poems are a reawakening of a sense of self-worth, humanist in orientation but much more personal. Although the universal political situation as it reflects imperialism is not forgotten, it is its dehumanising tendencies that are called to account. The poetry clicks deep into our imagination and reminds us of the emptiness of the world we inhabit.

It is worth noting that Ramakuela, who is admittedly indebted to Chrisman's argu-

ment, comes to a similar conclusion. In his view (1997:40), the poet casts off the shackles of nationalism in particular and political affiliation more generally: "I see in Motsapi a transcendence of political correctness and a dislike for political ideology or any ideology at that, thus producing an independent voice calling for humanity to rethink itself." Ramakuela (1997:36) unabashedly holds up the notion of a universal theistic human condition, asserting that we are all faced simultaneously with our failure "to create a lasting and stable world" while we live in the presence of the "infinite grace of the creator". In his review (1997:37), all political concerns, though indirectly significant, are secondary to the "universal theme of seeing our world as empty, waiting for renewal". The "matured Motsapi," Ramakuela suggests, has given up "the language of the gun and fighting" (1997:38), evident in his earlier *Staffrider* poetry, in favour of charting a way forward to "our simple human responsibilities" (1997:40).

Our discussion of black Atlantic music in the verse of Motsapi both challenges and straddles these two interpretations of its significance.

as the sun recedes  
into the quaking pinstripe  
of my warriors  
grinning & vulgar in their muddled dreams  
of power

"sol/o" (ES:9)

Rather than simply affirming "the formation of a collective black liberatory subject" (Chrisman 1996:65), Motsapi improvises from diasporan flows of meaning a range of discrepant engagements with the crisis that marks the politics of South Africa's transformation. He is well aware that the demise of apartheid and the emergence of a post-independence state have occluded any guid-

ing principle of liberation. New tactics need to be adopted if the nation is to withstand the onslaught of "amerikkkan" economic imperialism and all it betokens for African political regimes. Although the post-apartheid (acoustic) regime differs so significantly from its predecessor, discordant improvisations need to be devised if a new politics of compliance is to be resisted.

In a mode he attributes to jazz musicians, Motsapi searches for "the songful green of a promised mend" ("atoun" ES:17) and with the "holler of prophets" heralds the

sun song saint hand in hand  
he's yellfire:  
my wounds are healing!  
a wave in the sea  
my wounds are healing!  
  
between pasture & sky  
green/blue whirl a mystic clang  
& his songs welcome  
their returning clay

Motsapi's wounded-healers are, though, relentlessly dissonant: they shriek, scream, holler, clang and clash their way through the volume. Refusing synthesis, official harmonies, and the acoustic regimes of prevailing orthodoxy, they wail and rail against the order of things.

Motsapi's own poetic might well be understood in these terms. Rather than a rejection of political immediacy in favour of universality (as Ramakuela claims) or an accomplished trans-Atlantic maturity born of overcoming the contingencies of the local (Chrisman), Motsapi's trajectories of recovery, like the music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, wilfully contradict the fixities of identity, history and culture. They are insurgent journeys into unlikely quarters of meaning, not because there is a simple aesthetic virtue in either black hemispheric or universal

consciousness, but because the liberated nation runs the risk of lapsing into a synthetic middle-ground fashioned from commodity fetishism and industrial obligations. What both Chrisman and Ramakuela identify as an “outward” turn, then, might be equally understood as an urgent and dissonant improvisation that signifies the need for persistent epistemological vigilance as we confront those codes of meaning that seek only our conformity.

The question this raises, we have suggested, is whether this symbolic apparatus (which we understand as a poetics of transformation), inscribing as it does the transcendent value of a dissonance that resists representation, is adequate to the political task it sets itself. In other words, is dissonant improvisation, as Motsapi suggests, a viable form of healing? Chrisman and Ramakuela rightly identify the verse’s imaginative achievement in its refusal to comply with the orthodox rhetoric of political possibility. At this level, its dissonance, in our estimation, engages a beautiful struggle to find a mode of practice for our increasingly stunted social imaginary that has become, in the clash of fear and desire, committed to repetition at all levels. At one level, perhaps, one can ask nothing more of poetry than this. At another, though, the inscription of the seeming promise of agitational free jazz, often through simple indexical reference to players, performances and recordings, drags the very limits of that music into the verse itself. Since we are left with only a vague sense of therapeutic promise emanating from the refusal to constitute a new acoustic order, Motsapi’s solution to a crisis in African modernity is finally aesthetic rather than political. Further, this solution might, as Attali so persuasively argues, be an inadequate contrary to the mass music of the synthesiser. Clearly, Jarman, Moye, Coltrane, Ibrahim, Ayler, the Brotherhood of Breath and others stand for the “the promised mend” (“bo jili”

ES:18), for the faith in their ability to “hymn us inwards over our fragmentations” (“rasu-la” ES:80). But in their militant resistance to representation they and their practices remain hauntingly and significantly absent from a verse that depends so fundamentally on their presence.

## Notes

- 1 “Africentrism” is Gilroy’s preferred spelling, which sheds some of the ideological baggage of the prefix “Afro”.
- 2 We cannot but be reminded of the electronic “cleaning-up” of the penny-whistle sound in the recording of Paul Simon’s *Graceland*. “In order to appeal more strongly to *Graceland*’s international audience, the *kwela* penny-whistle sound on “You Can Call Me Al” is “cleaned up”. The pitch is more exact and its tone production purer than that of the 1950s counterpart; there are fewer glissandos; there is more precision in beat alignment, and the timbre is not as “windy” (see Louise Meintjes 1990:44).

## Works cited

- Adorno, Theodor. 1989. Perennial fashion – jazz. In: Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Keller (eds), *Critical theory and society: a reader*. London: Routledge: 199–209.
- Chrisman, Laura. 1996. Seithlamo Motsapi (review). *New Coin* 32 (1):60–65.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The black Atlantic, modernity and double consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Heble, Ajay. 2000. *Landing on the wrong note: jazz, dissonance and critical practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. 1993. *Disreputant engagement: dissonance, cross-culturality, and experimental writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meintjes, Louise. 1990. Paul Simon’s *Graceland*, South Africa and the mediation of musical meaning. *Ethnomusicology* 34(1):37–73.
- Motsapi, Seithlamo. 2003 [1995]. *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*. Grahamstown: Deep South.

Ramakuela, Nдавhe. 1997. Stepping with Seithamo Motsapi: direction for South African poetry. *English Studies in Africa* 40(2):7–41.

Titlestad, Michael. 2003. "Water from an ancient well": Abdullah Ibrahim as pilgrim and healer. *African Identities* 1(1):53–68.

Zabor, Rafi. 1998. *The bear comes home*. New York: Norton.

[Sound recording] *Water from an ancient well*. Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand), Roots Records ROH 112, 1998.