Water from an Ancient Well: Abdullah Ibrahim as pilgrim and healer

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And you sing, far away,  
the sangoma of Allah  
rolling the ivories.

Here, we are with the street, and brown chests  
heaving under brightly coloured burdens,  
Orange white and blue, red green and gold,  
and black:  
So many curtains to tear down,  
to make way for the river.

Houses will smoulder.

from Martin Jacklin’s ‘Ornament (for $ Brand)’ (1991: 14)

In 1960, Bessie Head met Abdullah Ibrahim, then Dollar Brand. Her unpublished portrait of the pianist, which she describes in an accompanying letter as ‘slightly hysterical’ (NELM ms. 96.1.3), is delightfully immoderate in tone: ‘Dollar Brand is not a good jazz pianist. He is a GREAT one!’ (NELM ms. 96.1.9: 1). By her own admission, she was ‘infatuated with him and also slightly dazed at the first meeting’ (NELM ms. 96.1.3). Coetzee and MacKenzie (1996: 32), who mention the unpublished portrait, suggest that ‘the piece reveals Head’s tendency (evident even in her more mature writing) to eulogise in a way that fails to engage seriously with the subject in hand’. Without discounting either the effect of her infatuation or her inclination to enthusiastic eulogy, her descriptions of Ibrahim’s ‘independence’ (NELM ms. 96.1.9: 1), ascetic dedication, the ‘detailed beauty’ of his music (NELM ms. 96.1.9: 2) and his potential redemption of South African ‘culture’ are not untypical of the succession of immoderate descriptions that characterise representations of Ibrahim and his music.
generally. Given our concern here with the tropes of 'pilgrim' and 'healer' in this textual history, Head's portrait serves as a trenchant departure.

Head begins by describing Ibrahim as 'a most surprising phenomenon of South African life'.

South Africa has no tradition of serious thought or culture. It is a desert of gold mines and an advertisers [sic] paradise. All art is commercial; and will be so until there are independant [sic] spirits. Therefore, it is a surprise to find a bloom, a complete and perfect flower in this desert; surviving independant [sic] of the arid life around it; and in fact, capable of giving life – that is Dollar Brand and his music.

(NELM ms. 96.1.9: 1)

The opposition this inscribes, the commercialised cultural wasteland potentially redeemed by the 'independent' aesthete, is developed in Head's juxtaposition of our 'society of fools' and Dollar's 'struggling for the best in life; [his] complete absorption in the one medium through which he sees life, and, through which life has reason and purpose'. Whereas society, bereft of vision, muddles along in its quotidian foolishness, Ibrahim is intent on 'reaching perfection' (NELM ms. 96.1.9: 1). While 'they', in their crassness, 'demand that Dollar play dance tunes and not bother them with his greatness', he is likely to expose their philistine torpor when he 'explode[s] like a thunderbolt before their blind stupidity and complacency' (NELM ms. 96.1.9: 2). His artistic practice cuts through lethargic routine with the disconcerting force of revelation.

You cannot [Head assures us] treat Dollar Brand's music like Sunday sermons and the pleasant after-Sunday-dinner feeling. He hurls a challenge at you; disturbs you; teaches you and expects perfection from you. He does not cry for your 'understanding' of his music. There is nothing to understand. His music is perfection itself and you accept perfection as you accept the final and detailed beauty of a flower.

(NELM ms. 96.1.9: 2)

Rather than being an intellectual matter, Ibrahim's music is a 'refreshing breeze to the soul' (NELM ms. 96.1.9: 2). It is, in other words, epiphanic in that its perfection is instantaneously revealed, but it is also apocalyptic in tearing asunder the veils of our illusions and, to shift metaphors of mystical enlightenment, in guiding us out of the desert of unknowing towards an ineffable truth. His pilgrimage becomes – if we are willing to have our complacency 'disturbed' – our own. Further, we will recognise the immanence of this truth and its incontestable nature at the instant of its advent: 'There is no mystery in this. Dollar Brand is as real as the universe!' (NELM ms. 96.1.9: 2).

In consonance with Head's metaphorical deserts of commerce, modernity and apartheid, is Zygmunt Bauman's account of pilgrimage. According to Bauman, the desert is the 'habitat that [the pilgrim] must choose' for its 'horizon [is not] packed with huts, barns, copses, groves and church towers', each of which might potentially distract him from the 'gravity of his future destination' (1996: 20). Further, since the pilgrim's earthly life 'is but a brief overture to the eternal persistence of the soul' (ibid.), the here and now, these Cities of the
Plain, represent only obstacles to be overcome, threats of being led astray and places to gaze beyond.

For the pilgrim, what purpose may the city serve? For the pilgrim only the streets make sense, not the houses – houses tempt one to rest and relax, to forget about the destination. Even the streets, though, may prove to be obstacles rather than help, traps rather than thoroughfares. They might misguide, divert from the straight path, lead astray.

(1996: 20)

The quotidian is, then, what Matthew Arnold describes as, this ‘darkling plain/swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/where ignorant armies clash by night’ (1985: 137). Against this ‘darkling plain’, in the pilgrim’s Weltansschauung, is arrayed a future-perfect paradise. In the language of contemporary identity theory, she seeks to organise – and often to overlook – the quotidian by reaching towards a ‘disembedded’ and ‘unencumbered’ selfhood that can act ab nihilo (Bauman 1996: 21). And, since the pilgrim’s journey in the quotidian is understood with reference to a true place that is ‘always some distance, some time away’ (1996: 20), these unencumbered practices of identity necessarily delay gratification in a protracted process that we might, following Bauman, consider to be ‘saving for the future’ (1996: 23).

Unlike the ontology of the pilgrimage, the postmodern condition necessitates that the game be kept short (Bauman 1996: 24). The pilgrim’s progress – that gradual extrication from the byways of the city – has little place, Bauman suggests, in a world of tourists, vagabonds, flâneurs and players. In counterpoint to the pilgrimage, he develops a chorus of postmodern subjectivities or identities based in assembling provisional and contingent knowledge, predominantly in the present tense, without the consolations of desert-logic. It is, though, not to this chorus that we turn to consider the pilgrim’s apparent successors, but to the everyday practice of walking, the ‘pedestrian’ epistemology, theorised by Michel de Certeau. His intellectual project, explored in more detail elsewhere (see, among others, Ahearn 1995, Buchanan 2000 and Titlestad 2001), emphasises the practitioners in a terrain of meaning, those who, through various ruses of appropriation, manipulation and recombination, trick the panoptic order into meaning something other than that ordained by ‘epic of the eye’ (De Certeau 1984: xxii). That is, his analysis eschews the overview of the ‘voyeur-theorist’ in order to listen to the ‘chorus of idle footsteps’ (ibid.: 97) that traverses cities and variously establishes sequences of place-events in the syntax of its trajectories. De Certeau’s walkers temporarily inhabit a regime of power and knowledge by seizing, what Reynolds and Fitzpatrick (1999: 74) elaborate as, ‘transversal territory’. Given the obliquity of their pathways to the system they traverse, though, and since their practices are evanescent and relentlessly threatened, their gains are fleeting: pedestrians cannot keep what they find and cannot, unlike pilgrims, save for the future.

In contrast with De Certeau’s pedestrians, then, pilgrims appear to embrace a ‘scopic’ totalisation (De Certeau 1984: 92) of a diversity of contingent and provisional pedestrian practices and, if we follow Bauman, adopt an essentially ‘archaic’ means of ordering knowledge. Obviously, though, secular, religious and
political pilgrimages persist in the modern world in diverse forms (see, among others, Reader and Walter 1993), while the trope of the pilgrim remains simultaneously deeply embedded in modernity’s social imaginary. Clearly, this persistence suggests the tenacity of this means of ordering experience and its interpretation. Alongside the tactical improvisation of contingent and provisional meaning by a postmodern subject as theorised by De Certeau, Bauman, Lyotard (1984) and others, we witness everywhere, then, forms and relics of strategic pilgrimages that subjugate a multitude of possibilities to mythical cartographic orders and then imagine individuals’ teleological progression within them. One possible explanation for this remainder is that, in a world increasingly given over to representation, absence, dissemination and the epistemology of the trace, we are nostalgic for the teleology of enlightenment and liberation. Perhaps pilgrimage is just another grand narrative, to use Lyotard’s notion (1984: 79–82), or a hermeneutic relic we cannot bring ourselves to deconstruct and, hence, deconsecrate. There is doubtlessly something consoling in, what Reader (Reader and Walter 1993: 9) describes as, ‘the idea of quest, of seeking something that lies outside of the accustomed patterns of everyday life, and that hence requires a process of movement from the everyday’. This ‘consolation’, though, seems insufficient to account for the insistent hold that, as we will see, the pilgrim has on the postcolonial imaginary. In particular, we will consider, with reference to representations of Abdullah Ibrahim and his music, some of the cultural and historical possibilities that the pilgrim’s journey is deployed to organise.

De Certeau himself suggests one way in which the ‘archaic’ is used to narrate pathways across seemingly intractable panoptic orders of meaning. He argues that there ‘is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can “invoke” or not’ (1984: 108), and that these haunted places are, in his view, ‘the only ones people can live in’ (ibid.). Each story, each discursive trajectory, is shadowed by spectral forms, figures and devices. It is in the persistent form or figure, the narrative remainder and the literary relic that ‘a past sleeps … in which ancient revolutions slumber’ (ibid.). ‘Tales’, in De Certeau’s understanding, are ‘living museums of … tactics’ (ibid.: 23) that translate the memory of cultures from earlier instances to present uses. In appropriating and manipulating their elements, ‘contemporary’ narratives invoke these ‘ancient revolutions’ and drag into the present the aura (what we might, following Derrida, consider the disseminating reference) of historical ways in which meaning has been territorialised. This sense of the past endlessly penetrating the present casts doubt on genealogies, such as Bauman’s, based in the succession of succinct epistemologies and the subjectivity they foster. The pilgrim’s way of being and knowing, we will see, becomes a source, or narrative archive, for the (pedestrian) postmodern assemblage of meaning. More generally, the tactics of modernity comprise networks of possibility that derive from appropriating, manipulating and recombining historical narratives.

We need to recall, though, that De Certeau’s pedestrian condition is one of constant threat. We can imagine – given the vulnerability of itinerant and
mobile selfhood – that the narrative tactics of memory and identity, these ‘turns’ to ancient revolutions, might accommodate to the degree and nature of the crisis they engage. Let us consider, for instance, something as imprecise as ‘colonialism’. Colonialism generally manifests in postcolonial literary texts and reportage as a violent cultural and temporal rupture leading to disjunction, discontinuity and dislocation. This rupture, as we see in innumerable South African and other examples, is often addressed in the emergence of archaeological narratives that reach – deep into a real or imagined archive – towards a measure of ‘therapeutic’ continuity. The ‘living museum’ of the tale functions, in these instances, as a cultural resource that ‘inverts the schema of the Panopticon’ (1984: 108) by recovering that which has been subjugated to the status of a hidden or antiquated order of knowledge. The ‘archaic’, in other words, is deployed, as is ‘tradition’,3 in assembling an imaginative vision of a ‘not-here, not-now’ that, in some measure at least, eludes hegemony’s constitutive gaze. This is achieved, as De Certeau suggests in relation to the gothic (1984: 108), through interjecting archival fragments into the epistemic order, which introduce, in their turn, dissonance into the system of concepts and their expected syntax. A local ‘symbolic revolution’ (De Certeau 1997: 21), then, is potentially achieved by looking backwards, reclaiming ‘forgotten’ fragments and relics and manipulating them to subvert contemporary semantic surveillance and epistemic policing.

This relates to pilgrimage in at least two ways. First, to invoke the pilgrimage is to transpose, through recourse to a cultural archive, the idiom of modernity into a different tonality. Since our muddled quotidian and fragmentary experiences are – through this invocation – situated in the overarching narrative of the pilgrimage, they become inflected, as we have seen, with the desert-logic and idiom of teleology. The present (i.e. the city’s cluttered horizons) becomes, then, less the context of our ‘journey’ than the distant past (the ‘ancient well’) and the City of God that lies far off. The ‘modern’, if not simply discounted in this appropriation of the archaic, is reduced to the condition of a station or stage in the pilgrim’s progress and, we will recall, its intriguing worldliness threatens to enthrall her and distract her from her course. True knowledge, in this view, is that which remains uncontaminated by ‘the human stain’,4 and an authentic selfhood is achieved only by transcending the humdrum of our mundane embodied selves. Important for our purposes, though, is the seeming paradox of the postmodern fragmentary appropriation (the ‘pedestrian’ use) of a teleological form. The pilgrimage, to summarise, circulates in our contemporary context as a collection of fragments casting an aura of abiding, persistent and transcendent order. These are combined into pathways of meaning, a move that links, in certain senses uncomfortably, the pilgrim’s conviction and the pedestrian’s itinerancy.

The second significance is that the tactical archaeology of the pilgrimage implicates functional notions of memory and ‘healing’. Not unlike the shamanic imaginary,5 an overarching logic constructs continuities from the fragmentary present by extending the symbolic range of memory (and, hence, time) beyond
the quotidian. If one’s temporal frame of reference is vast enough, present catastrophes are reduced to typical manifestations of a post-lapsarian human condition. The move beyond the here and now, in other words, orders the present in terms of a transcendent logic that achieves a persuasive and compelling measure of coherence. The impression of a planned eternity bequeaths a pattern to the present, at once constructing hope and guiding individuals otherwise condemned to thrash around – to use W.B. Yeats’s phrase6 – in ‘the rag-and-bone shop of the heart’. On one level, then, pilgrimage (and the image of the pilgrim) might be interpreted as potentially a response to individual suffering or trauma. On another, its invocation might also be considered a tactic constituting the cultural imaginary by (re)constructing or (re)assembling coherence from the fragments of a ruptured history.

Like countless improvisations incorporating the same themes, reportage biographies of Abdullah Ibrahim commonly include reference to a succinct range of events. They are given here, in skeletal form, in order that we might consider their elaboration. Born Adolphus (according to some sources, Adolph) Johannes Brand, in the Cape Town suburb of Kensington in 1934, he changed his name to Dollar Brand and then to Abdullah Ibrahim following his conversion to Islam in 1968. He was raised in the tradition of the American (African) Methodist Episcopal Church, of which his grandmother was a founding member. His professional music career began when Brand was hired to replace Todd Matshikiza following his sudden departure from Mackay Davashe’s Shantytown Sextet in 1954 – while they were touring the Cape. Brand, Coplan notes (1985: 191), was to become the closest friend of the alto saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi, an association that would lead to their collaboration, in 1960, in the first band that Brand was to lead, the legendary Jazz Epistles. The Epistles famously struggled for recognition and performance opportunities, their short life ending with Brand’s departure for Europe in 1962, where he spent two years playing at the Café Africana in Zurich. During this time he met (through the agency of his jazz-vocalist wife Sathima Bea Benjamin) Duke Ellington, an encounter that has been enshrined in South African jazz mythology. Ellington fostered Brand’s career in various ways,7 perhaps most significantly by recognising and publicly acknowledging his ‘genius’ – thus was Ibrahim, countless representations would have it, welcomed into the inner-circle of the jazz world. This status was purportedly confirmed when, in 1966, he was invited to lead the Duke Ellington Orchestra. He returned to South Africa, though, just two years later, having performed in New York with, among others, Don Cherry and Pharaoh Sanders. Seemingly influenced by the prevailing spirit of Elijah Mohammed’s Nation of Islam and the conversion of so many jazz luminaries, he adopted the faith on his return to this country in 1968. In January 1973, according to the Eastern Province Herald (20 January), Brand left on his first pilgrimage to Mecca, returning a ‘fully fledged hadji’. Mannenburg – Is Where It’s Happening was released in 1974,8 the title tune from which has become not only a South African jazz standard but arguably, as Jaggi (cited in
Lucia 2002: 126) suggests, ‘an unofficial national anthem’. In 1976, following the Soweto uprising, Ibrahim began a fourteen-year exile, only returning to South Africa in 1990 after playing a high-profile cultural role in the resistance movement. Since his return, interviews and accounts have tended to emphasise his role as an educator, his dedication to Zen Buddhism and the martial arts, and his philosophical pronouncements on the importance of this country’s musical legacy.

A substantial literature recounts or references these events, including Ibrahim’s own self-representations in scores of published interviews. We are concerned here with neither the events themselves, in any direct sense, nor contesting interpretations of their significance, but with the ways in which this literature invokes the order of meaning and being described here as the pilgrimage. That is, how do representations of Ibrahim and his music construct a transcendence of the quotidian and how is this mapped as a potentially therapeutic response to the violent history of apartheid? While one might dispute the notion of a representative narrative tactic (much is at stake in the assumption that one instance stands for a range of others), the diversity of accounts and representations in the field necessitates the selection of examples that are ‘typical’. The pathways we trace, albeit that their selection is contestable, may be profitably placed in counterpoint to others that are not explicitly considered. Since a complex intertextual web of representation clearly cannot be rendered in its entirety, this is at least one way to proceed.

In 1959, the same year that Bessie Head described Ibrahim as a ‘complete and perfect flower in the desert’, Drum journalist, Benson Dyantyi, composed a profile of the pianist following his arrival, two months earlier, in Johannesburg. In retrospect, given Ibrahim’s protracted periods in exile, his opening question to Brand has a poignantly prophetic ring. 10

‘Where’s your home?’ I asked. ‘A man’s home is where he can have a drink and sleep,’ answered Dollar Brand, the greatest pianist to hit Johannesburg since John Mehegan, and a man who has won the admiration of Johannesburg’s jazz musicians.

(1959: 27)

Ibrahim’s characteristically proverbial and enigmatic response suggests a radically unlocated, even unbounded, selfhood. Much of Dyantyi’s interview is a journalist’s quest for fixity and definition, the frustration of which endeavour is suggested by the interrogative title of the piece: ‘Crazy? Genius? Beatnik? Dollar Brand’ (1959: 26). This sense of defying definition, of an enigmatic identity that refuses to stay put beneath the semantic web of ‘accepted’ subject positions, marks many of Ibrahim’s self-representations. When he accedes to definition, it is commonly by analogy to some mystical or arcane subject position. Asked, for instance, about the origin of the name ‘Jazz Epistles’, the band he had come to Johannesburg to establish, Ibrahim’s explanation invokes, unsurprisingly, the Christian apostolic tradition.
'Epistles' was not a name chosen accidentally as many musicians choose names for their groups. Dollar Brand chose it because essentially he is a teacher and, like early Christian teachers, he believes he is writing his Epistles.

(1959: 27)

This explanation, at the risk of labouring the point, functions on at least two levels. First, it asserts Ibrahim's claim to a tutelary role and thus implies his 'enlightenment' and, second, it suggests that this role as a 'teacher' or 'guide' is sanctified (i.e. it is sanctioned in deriving its authority from the divine). His music – represented as 'his Epistles' – is, then, configured as communicating the will of God to humanity, with Ibrahim acting as an intercessionary. This is one of the earlier expressions of a conviction that would become increasingly prevalent in comments and descriptions: that Ibrahim's music accesses and expresses a sacred and ineffable truth.11

Both Abdullah Ibrahim and those writing about him would elaborate, over the next decades, this sense of an ineffable divinity. In 1963, for instance, Jack Lind quoted Brand – in Downbeat 30(30), 21 November: 34 – as asserting that:

There is only one reason for music – to glorify God and sing of His wonderful work.12 It's like Duke says; he's afraid to sit in a house with people who don't believe in God. He is afraid the walls might come tumbling down.

This reiterates that Ibrahim's music exalts God's creation, but introduces the notion that – as at Jericho – it has the power to bring down the fortifications of the unrighteous and expose them to the agents of divine wrath. The musician, then, in addition to communicating grace and redemption, potentially wields the power of judgement and retribution. In a 'desert of gold mines and an advertisers' paradise', to return to Head's phrase, or, in Ibrahim's words, 'in the heart of the [South African] beast' (1987: 87), the divinely inspired musician – by communicating God's truth – reveals the extent of injustice and hypocrisy that prevails.

We began with an extract from Martin Jacklin's poem, 'Ornament' (1991: 14). 'So many curtains to tear down, to make way for the river' expresses this sense of apocalyptic destruction to make way for God's truth. 'Houses will smoulder' as the Cities of the Plain are laid waste. Whether as a Christian, Muslim or Buddhist soldier, representations of Ibrahim commonly invoke the iconography of the warrior and 'crusader'. Don Palmer's profile, 'Abdullah Ibrahim: Capetown [sic] Crusader' (Downbeat 52(1), January 1985: 20–2), and Brian Priestly's 'Cape Crusader' (The Wire 88, June 1991: 16–19, 33), for instance, both extend the notion of a 'crusade' to cover a Muslim's quest to rid his 'Holy Land' of the infidels perpetrating the sin of apartheid. Ibrahim's lifelong dedication to Japanese martial arts has provided an additional philosophy and iconography for exploring the intersection of the sacred and the militant. On more than one occasion, he has likened the improviser, in process and on trial, to a samurai swordsman.

Improvising music is like being a samurai warrior, one of whom said: 'Under the sword lifted high, there is hell. But go through with it fearlessly and you will find bliss.' It's just like improvisation. Maybe that's why musicians call their instrument an 'ax'. When students ask me to teach them improvisation, I tell
them to go to kung fu school. That will teach them to act something out in the present and not be afraid. So many accomplished musicians have a fear of improvisation, despite all their musical knowledge. But taking musical risks in public is only a means to an end – self discovery.

(Index on Censorship 12(1), February 1983: 20)

Ibrahim represents himself as journeying, through this ‘hell’ of improvisation, towards knowledge. The struggle to create, though truly threatening, is a persuasive route that we might follow to come to know ourselves and our potential. Through the tactical struggles of musical statement, it seems, the greater reality in which we participate will be revealed. On the other side of the lifted sword is a place of healing. Interviewed by Mothobi Mutloatse (1987: 87–8) in New York in July 1985, Ibrahim describes his chosen engagement with the unspeakable injustices of his homeland.

Music is a healing force. It reaches the heart of human beings. What is deepest in the heart of human beings really dynamos life on this earth. Allah called it ‘my most closely guarded secret.’ Music transcends all political, social and ethnic barriers because it speaks directly to the heart. It is the primordial sound, the ‘ah’ of Allah.

I do not think of myself as a pianist or a composer. My talent is a medical formula handed down from the creator. I am a dispenser of medicine.

Two years later he would explain to the poet Hein Willemse, in very similar terms, that:

In our traditional society, especially (in) Africa, the position or job of the so-called musician was never viewed (as it is today) in the western world, where the musician is an entertainer. In the traditional society if, at an early age, you showed any musical inclination you were immediately drafted into the field of medicine. Because in the traditional society medicine and music were synonymous. A healing force. My grandfather was a medicine man. I remember, he knew all the herbs. He was a stable boy for Paul Kruger.

(Willemse 1987: 26)

The generic ‘traditional society’ Ibrahim invokes contrasts with the contemporary ‘nervous condition’ of the dispossessed; music has been cheapened (i.e. commodified as entertainment) and has lost its therapeutic role in the life of both individuals and the body politic. As recently as 1995, Ibrahim described the impact of colonialism in these terms: in the modern world ‘musicians are supposed to be entertainers, but in traditional societies we were priests’ (in Buettner 1995/2002). His closing aside, describing an ancestral healer reduced to a racist demagogue’s ‘stable boy’, is a further measure of this disintegration.

The very mechanisms of sound health have been brought to nought as the colonist’s ‘Western’ modernity has occluded the ‘traditional’.

In Ibrahim’s view, healing involves an order of recovery that was described earlier as ‘tactical archaeology’. We will dwell on the ways in which it constructs the musician as assembling, and combining meaningfully, the diverse (and often elided or neglected) sounds, the acoustic regime, of subaltern life and history. In these constructions, based as they are on an understanding of hybridity and syncretism, Ibrahim emerges as a chronicler of history and experience, his music as its unfolding record. This often entails the globalisation
(or re-contextualisation) of South African subaltern experience through reference to coextensive diasporic histories. Ibrahim’s exile – from which Okuley derives the notion that he is an ‘African wayfarer’ (1968: 45) – contributes to an outsider’s overview, an itinerant and hence more inclusive perspective on apartheid politics. Both archaeology and globalisation, thus understood, present as hermeneutic devices for ‘ordering’ a history of oppression.

Apartheid might well be remembered as, among many other things, a struggle for territorial sovereignty that necessitated the awkward task of constructing and servicing particular notions of tradition. The version of the nation-state it inaugurated depended on the tactical deployment of forgetfulness, on assembling an imagined totality based in reified and hypostasised constructions of heritage and the choked historiography from which they derived. These were hermeneutic operations that reduced diverse cultural practices to convenient, monolithic and often indistinguishable pasts that took little or no account of South Africans’ complex and creative engagements with modernity. In the face of these violent interpretations, healing has commonly entailed ‘reconstruction’ (i.e. assembling – from marginalised archives, community histories and traces of lived memories – coherent self-representations).

It is common in representations of Brand’s music to emphasise its ‘blending of a wide variety of South African and international music styles’ (Goldstuck 1990: 26) or his ‘diverse background’ (Okuley 1968: 18). Identifying the various strands of his compositions and improvisations functions to suggest the music’s hybrid or syncretic nature while also implying something of the (personal and cultural) history of its emergence. Thus, Okuley, essentialising ‘the African’ in ways not uncommon in the American jazz press of the 1960s, suggests that his compositions:

> are a blend of many things, with discernible traces of African tribal rhythms and European folk tunes and religious hymns, classical and jazz strains (especially Ellington and Thelonious Monk), all somehow blended through Brand’s own unique conception into an intricate harmonic and melodic whole that is his own.

(1968: 18)

At once genealogical and musicological, this list describes, in Gilroy’s sense, both the ‘roots and routes’ of Ibrahim’s music. It also suggests the extent to which it combines the local and global, an idea that frames much of the music’s critical reception. Interviewed by Lind in 1963, Ibrahim had himself pointed to the diversity of his sources, suggesting that this diversity mirrored (or, escaping a visual idiom, sounded out) his context and its history. Having asserted that, apart from Monk, he had been ‘influenced by no one source’, he commented:

> South Africa itself has been my prime source of influence ... all the different concepts of South African music – the carnival music every year in Cape Town, the traditional color music, the Malayan strands, the rural lament.

(Lind 1963: 13)

As recently as 1992, Ken Franckling, reviewing Mantra Mode (1991) for Downbeat (October 1992: 23), ‘discovers’ Ibrahim’s roots in his childhood
mastery of both 'native music [sic] and gospel music in the South African branch of the A.M.E. church which was founded by his grandmother'. In 1997, Alan Webster, reporting on an East London concert for the Daily Despatch (11 December 1997: 20), would repeat (in an eloquent appraisal) what had by then become an orthodox representation.

The intention of the tour – aside from testing of the waters for the potential of jazz academics around the country – is, according to Ibrahim, to demystify South Africa’s heritage; to salvage our multi-hued culture and traditions from the danger of collapse in a frenetic modern world. Last night’s performance undoubtedly followed this theme perfectly. The music of Dollar Brand/Abdullah Ibrahim has always been evocative and multi-textured, encompassing the many influences on South African culture: there was the ever-recognisable presence of his home town, Cape Town, with Malay tonal structures and the vibe of Cape Jazz; subtle hints of Eastern and Arabic influences, the breathtaking poly-rhythms of Africa; and the full range of the century’s European and American jazz.

Webster maintains, then, that in improvising from the diverse soundscapes of his context as well as global acoustic regimes, Ibrahim has developed an inclusive and relational South African musical idiom. Weaving together diverse strands of ‘traditional’ music (African poly-rhythms, Malay tonal structures, Eastern and Arabic influences) and a history of black Atlantic musical signifying (expressed in ‘the full range of the century’s European and American jazz’), Ibrahim at once ‘salvages’ elided histories and places them in ‘living’ relations that articulate with the present. It follows that his improvisations implicate particular practices of memory and, in this (and the records they leave in their wake), function as an acoustic historiography. His improvisations present, then, a Deleuzean map of both nation and history, while simultaneously expressing the musical idiolect – the individual pathways – of one who travels across the spatial and temporal plain it simultaneously reflects and (re)constitutes.

Two further examples will serve to underscore this idea. The first is the opening paragraph of Lewis Nkosi’s article, ‘Dollar Brand’, published in The New African in 1965 (Nkosi 1965: 27–8). The portrait was composed following an interview with Brand during his initial exile in London.

‘I believe I have found the language, I think I know the way.’ The words are Tom Wolfe’s but they could issue just as appropriately from the mouth of Dollar Brand, the South African jazz pianist who has coined out of many elements and influences a musical language which is both tender and violent, serious and comic, a music which periodically reveals the menace of interior sounds and voices from the midnight violence of our South African streets recollected in the tranquillity of exile.

(1965: 27)

Nkosi’s suggestion that Brand ‘has coined [a musical language] out of many elements and influences’ functions as the basis of his belief in the music’s mimetic nature, that it ‘reveals the menace of interior sounds and voices from the midnight violence of our South African streets’. It is, in his view, an acoustic map rendered possible by the discovery of a ‘language’ that can bear the weight of this complex and politically charged representation. Wolfe’s comment, which
we might characterise as his discovery of a *via lingua*, elaborates this version of mimesis. It implies that a ‘journey’ is rendered possible by the discursive means of its production: we can, to put it another way, only go places when we have the language to take us there. This is the importance, in Nkosi’s view, of Ibrahim’s musical idiom – it creates unofficial maps that bear out people’s experience of colonial history and the tactics through which their trauma has been managed. It is, in the intricacy of its emotional valence and the diversity of its reference, a language that both establishes a *here – there* (De Certeau 1984: 99) and a *not-here, not-now*. In other words, it has the capacity to guide us down the streets of the contexts we know all too well towards something we can only imagine.

A second example is taken from Christine Lucia’s (2002: 125–43) analysis of Ibrahim’s various improvisations on his composition, ‘Mama’. Having traced its hymnodic improvisation on the twelve-bar blues and its various motifs and rhythms, she comes to the compelling conclusion that the ‘piece is not so much an embodiment of nostalgia … as a journey towards nostalgia’ (ibid.: 139). We are not, Lucia suggests, presented with a scheme of the past but are, in the course of Ibrahim’s improvisations on his composition, ‘being taken there’ (ibid.). Adding a Jungian interpretation to anything we have considered, she argues that the ‘past’ towards which we are guided is:

not only Ibrahim’s personal past, or the past of Cape Town or South Africa’s bruised history, but an ideal past that the listener is invited to share, and one we *can* share because it is an imaginary, archetypical terrain, the proverbial lost domain of childhood, inscribed through the title of the piece as the unimaginably sweet and forever unattainable realm which embodies the genesis of our being: the mythical ‘mother’ of the music’s title.

(ibid.: 136–7)

Lucia, then, situates ‘memory’ under the sign of the verb, transposing its mode from the recovered collage of experience to that of the journey or, in De Certeau’s idiom, a ‘walk’. By being ‘taken’ into the past and experiencing its imminence in relation to the present (i.e. the context of the performance), the audience participates in the acoustic conjunction of memory and imagination. However, neither memory nor imagination is, as Lucia suggests, exclusively individual. Both are irrevocably linked to regional, national and universal topographies of history and identity. In other words, when Ibrahim *plays* into the archive of the self, his pathway follows the border at which that self is implicated in communal, national and global territories of meaning. Musical ‘idiolect’ and dialect, in turn, merge endlessly with a universal language of truth unconfined by the contingencies of locality.

We might usefully conceive of this order of meaning in terms of the pilgrimage. While improvisation is conventionally conceived as the urgent manipulation of tactical musical contingencies, Ibrahim is repeatedly represented as engaged in an overarching logic that orders the crisis of the present. Rather than negating the quotidian, though, it is the platform for his journeys into the past. Much like De Certeau’s ‘tales’, then, his improvisations are ‘living
museums’ of tactics and ruses; they reference other acoustic regimes, indicating alternative (historical) ways of ordering meaning and being. Trajectories emerge, implicating different temporalities, in simultaneous relation to local histories and the ‘sacred’, ‘traditional’ or ‘ancient’. Thus it is that the acoustic surfaces of the present – ‘our South African streets’ (Nkosi 1965: 27) – accrue depth, gather gravity and become a prospective foundation of hope. Reviewing a concert in 1994, Don Albert gestures, if in somewhat lurid terms, towards this aggregating significance.

He has taken the rich history of African music and kneaded it with church, Malay and Cape Coon Carnival music ... he has dug deep down into his soul to give the world a taste of the South soil. One could almost taste the dust of the Cape Flats or feel the sincerity of the gospel being sung in a tin shanty. This was not Durbs by the sea or Fourth Beach Clifton, this was the music of the earth and Ibrahim had his feet deeply planted in the ground.

(\textit{The Star Tonight}, 7 November 1992: 6)

Depth metaphors of this order abound: it is as if drawing together the (acoustic) strands of the nation and placing them in resonant relation allows Ibrahim to uncover, even excavate, a fundamental unity and coherence only conceivable in terms of a mystical epiphany. In some sense, the representations we have considered suggest that Ibrahim departs from – only to return to – the present, but that his journeys (in coming back to the present from a different angle) bring a desert-logic to bear on ‘our’ situation. And it is this sense of the ‘infinite’ and ‘eternal’, a desert, uncluttered by the mundane, that we imagine allows us to see, some way off in the distance, the City of God.

Having long understood the ways in which apartheid, that ‘constant institution of cultural imperialism’, has driven ‘the purity and the innocence and the rhythm of the community’ underground (Ibrahim in \textit{Staffrider} 6(4), 1987: 26), Ibrahim has been committed to the recovery of, what has become, ‘subterranean culture’ (ibid.: 26). Interviewed for an article to appear on the first day of 1994, the year of the final demise of apartheid, he would compare ‘the process of [national] change to jazz improvisation’ (Michael O’Reilly, \textit{The Cape Times}, 1 January 1994: 2). ‘One may have practised for years to attain technical brilliance, but ’’the first note is terrifying.’’’ His music has long been imagined as sounding the first note of a new syncretic nationhood, of a genuinely inclusive national identity. Drawing sustenance from ancient wells, his practice has always held out the hope, perhaps the necessary idealism, of nurturing new growth, of ’giving life’ (Head NELM ms. 96.1.9: 1) and, finally, of ’[making] way for the river’ (Jacklin 1991: 14).

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Notes

1. *Water from an Ancient Well* is the title of an Ibrahim recording (Roots Record Co. ROH112/Tusk, 1988).

2. This distinction between 'strategy' and 'tactics' derives from the work of De Certeau (1984: xii–xxiv).

3. We need to clarify the notion of 'tradition'. In his unparalleled study of black South African performance, Veit Erlmann cites the Comaroffs’ characterisation of 'tradition’ as the active process ... in which human actors deploy salient cultural categories to construct their self awareness’ (Comaroff and Comaroff in Erlmann 1991: 13). We are thus concerned with neither a hypostasised set of reified practices, nor an overarching range of differentiations that construct individuals as passive recipients of meaning. Rather, as Erlmann argues (1991: 11), tradition 'serves to create images of social reality and to construct a discourse that reflects the position of those who refer to it rather than what they refer to'. ‘Tradition’, as an endlessly reconstructed episteme of pre-modern or pre-colonial discourse, can be invoked by any number of constituencies for an array of purposes. Each invocation, though, might be considered a pedestrian intellectual intervention (to return to De Certeau’s epistemology) in the course of which selected meanings are appropriated and manipulated. In short, ‘tradition’, though conservatively viewed as a static archive of practices, objects and their significance, is taken here to present a repertoire for improvising identity and constituting social and intellectual spaces.


5. For a detailed discussion, see Titlestad (2002).


7. Ellington facilitated the recording of the Dollar Brand Trio (Brand p. Johnny Gertze b. and Makaya Ntshoko d.) for Reprise (6111) in 1963, linking his name (as Ellington presents ...) to that of Ibrahim.


10. For a discussion of the importance of 'home' in the work of Abdullah Ibrahim, see Christine Lucia’s ‘Abdullah Ibrahim and the uses of memory’ (2002).

11. Definitions of the ‘truth’ are central to countless comments by Ibrahim. Interviewed for *Tribute* (Goldstuck 1990: 26–32), in response to being asked about the effect of the 'political environment' on his music, Ibrahim responded: 'I'm no politician and I've never been a politician. We talk the truth and don’t ask me to tell lies. My involvement is in the relationship of people dealing with the truth, I don’t care where’ (ibid.: 32).

12. This sense of a single divine purpose remains even when it expresses a new orthodoxy. In 1968 (*Eastern Province Herald*, 26 October 1970), Ibrahim would claim, 'There's only one reason for my existence and that is for me to praise Allah.'

13. See also the 1995 interview with Buettner (http://www.geocities.com/a_habib/Jazz/ibrahim.html) in which Ibrahim develops the idea that the 'concept of martial arts is identical to the concept of jazz' (1995/2002: 5–6).

14. Ibrahim, explaining the rationale for his national tour in 1997 (*Weekend Post*, 13 December 1997: 14), stated: 'Ultimately, we want to reanimate the [music] industry in every major city in the country, through sound engineers, mixers, producers, et cetera. There must be a circuit of music that runs throughout the country. ... That is the only way that we will salvage our music, and our culture. So in many ways, this is
a damage-control tour to address the crisis that our country faces in music, as well as in culture.’

15. Deleuzean cartography, then, does not entail the dissection and representation of a plane of meaning, but produces a sense of manifold manipulations of meaning from provisional positions. It rejects roots in favour of *rhizomes*: those subterranean stems that, in Deleuze and Guattari’s work, aggregate countless meanings around the signifiers ‘connection’, ‘heterogeneity’, ‘multiplicity’, ‘transversality’, ‘rupture’ and ‘plateaus’. The Deleuzean map, it follows from the meanings it disseminates, comprises a *rhizoid* assemblage of ‘experimentation[s] in contact with the real’ that approximate in significant ways to De Certeau’s ‘tactics’. Both, as has been suggested, reject reduction of the terrain to the broader scheme of things in favour of a commitment to the movements of meaning across the levels of possibility in which they simultaneously intervene. They concern both the infinity of routes meandering across ever-changing planes of meaning and the ways in which they weave together, and keep apart, what Deleuze and Guattari configure as, the ‘thousand plateaus’ of force and difference.

**References**


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