

# 'Echoes From Africa': Abdullah Ibrahim's Black Sonic Geography

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## Abstract

This article aims to listen, read and move with the South African musician Abdullah Ibrahim by focusing on various works in his corpus that see him weave together a sonic aesthetic and identify sound, space and time as fundamentally intertwined with and constituted by the experiences of racial violence and anti-blackness in a modern colonial world. Part of our critical pursuit is to highlight Abdullah Ibrahim as a theorist of black geography invested in the everyday sounds ringing through the ghettos, townships and reserves created as debased and inexhaustible reservoirs for cheap labour by colonial-apartheid regimes. We will also examine how some of Abdullah Ibrahim's music interrogates the status of the black subject through the modalities of a black Islamic sonic aesthetic. This is one of the factors which qualifies it as a layered site of mythical and experimental histories and enables us to identify his body of work as deeply connected with the articulations of loss, suffering, the cadence of change, and hope.

**Keywords:** Abdullah Ibrahim, sound, black geography, marabi, black, colonialism, Cape Jazz.

## Prelude

What follows are meditations inspired and conducted by Abdullah Ibrahim's music and thought. Structured in sections named after individual or multiple songs or

albums from an oeuvre spanning over 60 years of recorded music, the songs launch flights of thought that are given direction and precision by Ibrahim's words expressed through a variety of interviews and writings. The form of the paper, it is hoped, will summon the reader as also listener, emphasising that the reading of a master musician need not purely rely on literary comprehension but also points towards an understanding reliant on the viscosity of the musical performance. We aim to map out the methodological and theoretical approaches to the transformation of sound that Abdullah Ibrahim's music inspires in the moment of struggle. And to further reflect on some of the ways through which Abdullah Ibrahim's work can help us contest the idea of sound as an abstraction, instead of focusing on how meaning and value are conferred on it, we want to look at the ways it produces them – that is, how they are not outside of sound itself, thus enabling to contain all the ambiguities and contradictions of social historical reality.

### **Charting an African space program?**

To begin with blackness and space, we quote McKittrick at length:

Black diasporic histories and geographies are difficult to track and cartographically map. Transatlantic slavery, from the slave ship and beyond, was predicated on various practices of spatialized violence that targeted black bodies and profited from erasing a black sense of place. Geographically, at the centre are the slave plantation and its attendant geographies (the auction block, the big house, the fields and crops, the slave quarters, the transportation ways leading to and from the plantation, and so on). The plantation evidences an uneven colonial-racial economy that, while differently articulated across time and place, legalized black servitude while simultaneously sanctioning black placelessness and constraint. In the Americas, free labour under bondage thus marked black working bodies as those 'without' – without legible-Eurocentric history narratives, without land or home, without ownership of self – as this system forcibly secured black peoples to the geographic mechanics of the plantation economy. This paradox – an economized and enforced placelessness that demanded the enslaved work and thus be chained to the land – normalized black dispossession, white supremacy, and other colonial-racial geographies, while naturalizing the racist underpinnings of land exploitation as accumulation and emancipation.<sup>1</sup>

McKittrick here traces the various historical/ontological dynamics and practices that work towards and preserve the destruction of a black sense of place. In other words, the foundational ways in which black people have experienced a

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1 K. McKittrick, 'On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12, 8, 2011, 948–949.

physical, existential and violent displacement and separation from not only a sense of belonging but also a sense of being from. Central to this for McKittrick is the transatlantic slave trade, not only through its extraction of people from places they considered home to new worlds insistently unfamiliar or within which unsettledness is paradigmatic, but also through the very production of a people as black, as subject to being rendered property and thus without legitimate claim to property, place and themselves. However, the destructive urge of modern white supremacy and capitalist accumulation does not obliterate all faculties and enactments of defiance amongst the dispossessed and enslaved and their descendants; as McKittrick points out there are many routes and roots of life long established in the midst of the most uncondusive and hostile conditions:

The conditions of bondage did not foreclose black geographies but rather incited alternative mapping practices during and after transatlantic slavery, many of which were/are produced outside the official tenets of cartography: fugitive and maroon maps, literacy maps, food-nourishment maps, family maps, music maps were assembled alongside 'real' maps (those produced by black cartographers and explorers who document landmasses, roads, routes, boundaries, and so forth). These ways of understanding and writing the world identify the significant racial contours of modernity. This is to say that the racial underpinnings of modernity, of which transatlantic slavery and colonialism are salient features, situate black people and places outside modernity just as black people and places serve as the unspoken labourers of modernity, just as black people and places fully participate in the intellectual narrative of modernity. With this in mind, a black sense of place can be understood as the process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter. Racism and resistance to racism are therefore not the sole defining features of a black sense of place, but rather indicate how the relational violences of modernity produce a condition of being black in the Americas that is predicated on struggle.<sup>2</sup>

A black sense of place then, for McKittrick, is the creative preservation and renegade construction of a black geographic imagination in a world and time premised upon the making of blackness inextricable with placelessness. A black sense of place therefore need not be wholly defined or exhausted through its presence or emergence within specific racist environments, but also by a methodological approach foregrounding a historical struggle for space, place and, thus, humanity. We must however consider the charge that McKittrick's conceptualisation of a black sense of place, beginning with the slave ship and the consequent centralisation of the plantation in the Americas, is heavily reliant on an 'Atlantic' notion of blackness (and,

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2 Ibid., 949.

perhaps furthermore, a North American notion of blackness) that falls short of being experientially and conceptually satisfactory in a myriad of African contexts. Indeed, it can be argued that many Africans in Africa have in fact not struggled to maintain a very strong sense of place historically, wherein ancestral lines can be traced to the centuries prior to European expansion into the hinterlands of the continent, and for whom European presence did not come with a major geographical disturbance.

Nevertheless, for our purposes here, we push back against this notion of a fundamentally different kind of blackness informing the conceptual grounding of McKittrick's black sense of place and want to argue that not only does it hold within an African context, but it is precisely the kind of thought and practice that Abdullah Ibrahim attempts to articulate through his musical works, song titles, writings and spoken words. Put differently, through the ways in which he links spaces and places by virtue of their people's (variously black, black African, coloured, African) creative manoeuvring of life under the violent constraints of historically established racist regimes, Ibrahim seems to be engaged in a constant imagining and conceiving of a black geography, or in adding to McKittrick's words, a black sense of places. Mbembe is crucial in helping us further our thoughts, firstly pointing out how:

For a long time, in the Western imagination, Africa was an unknown land. But that hardly prevented philosophers, naturalists, geographers, missionaries, writers, or really anyone at all from making pronouncements about one or another aspect of its geography, or about the lives, habits and customs of its inhabitants... Africa is sometimes a strange land, marvellous and blinding, and at other times a torrid and uninhabitable land. It appears sometimes as a region afflicted with an irreparable sterility; at others, as a country blessed with spontaneous fertility... But whatever the beauty or ugliness of its face, *the destiny of Africa is to be dispossessed*.<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added)

And secondly, in a discussion of colonial forms of sovereignty, Mbembe writes at length:

Colonial occupation itself was a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area – of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations. The writing of new spatial relations (territorialization) was, ultimately, tantamount to the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the classification of people according to different categories; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries. These imaginaries gave meaning to the enactment of differential rights to differing categories of people for different

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3 A. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 70–71.

purposes within the same space; in brief, the exercise of sovereignty. Space was therefore the raw material of sovereignty and the violence it carried with it. Sovereignty meant occupation, and occupation meant relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood. Such was the case of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Here, the township was the structural form and the homelands became the reserves (rural bases) whereby the flow of migrant labor could be regulated and African urbanization held in check. As Belinda Bozzoli has shown, the township in particular was a place where 'severe oppression and poverty were experienced on a racial and class basis.' A sociopolitical, cultural, and economic formation, the township was a peculiar spatial institution scientifically planned for the purposes of control. The functioning of the homelands and townships entailed severe restrictions on production for the market by blacks in white areas, the terminating of land ownership by blacks except in reserved areas, the illegalization of black residence on white farms (except as servants in the employ of whites), the control of urban influx, and later, the denial of citizenship to Africans.<sup>4</sup>

What these Mbembe quotes allow us to consider are the continuities in the way the territorial entity that was pre-colonial and early colonial Africa (and sub-Saharan Africa in particular) was variously figured and represented from without as enigmatic, abstract, fabulous, magical, dark, non-existent, dangerous, empty, uncultivated and inhospitable – anything other than a normal place inhabited by normal people. And this prefaced a colonial presence that rendered the territory, and by extension its people, as fodder for creative manipulation into a variety of categories not governed by the ethical groupings of encounter prevalent at the time, and so as extractable, controllable and ownable. In other words, the new world plantation as the determinative habitat of the slave and the basis for a modern understanding of blackness is pre-empted through the delineation, description and characterisation of the place that is Africa, such that the extraction and dispossession of people as chattel should not be separated from the dispossession and extraction of their lands as ownable by colonisers.

Of course, the specific unfolding and nature of colonialism differs across Africa, as does the distinct occurrence of enslavement for the transatlantic slave trade; but what is paradigmatic is that these both required the creation of a space from which it was acceptable to take, and on which it was acceptable to define and confine. In South Africa, the making of this space happens from the earliest colonial occupation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Cape by the Dutch East India Company (which was promptly followed by the importation of slaves from the rest of the continent as well as from Asia) to the present. As Mbembe shows us above, South Africa's late colonial and apartheid history involve the creation of rural reserves and urban townships, both

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4 A. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', L Meintjes (trans.), *Public Culture*, 15, 1, 2003, 24–25.

logical extensions of the numerous frontier wars and Voortrekker movements, as well as the 1913 Natives Land Act which restricted African ownership of land to the native reserves totalling only 13% of the country. And it is in South Africa, the country with the longest and most severe settler colonial occupation on the continent, where the most extensive theorisation and articulation of blackness as both resultant of and positioned against colonialism and apartheid were developed. Indeed, the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, primarily emergent from the student movements of the late 1960s, articulated a rendition of being black that on the one hand revealed it as a degraded, dysgenic, (non) positionality or subjectivity predisposed to scarcity in resources, abundance in violence, and banishment, and on the other hand, a performative posture that enables insight into an alternative set of meanings and values.

With its political and conceptual forebears and contemporaries being, amongst others, the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, the Black Power and Black Arts Movements of North America and the Negritude Movement of the Francophone countries, the Black Consciousness Movement took seriously the iteration of South Africa's colonial white supremacy, considering as Black all those categorised as non-white who undertook the political commitment and responsibility. It is within this milieu that we place Abdullah Ibrahim. Not necessarily as a known proponent, member or champion of the Black Consciousness Movement, but as an artist and thinker concerned with the ways in which black geographies or a black sense of places come to be. Additionally, Ibrahim appears also to be interested in developing a sonic variation of blackness alongside the BCM's definition of Black, that draws upon his coloured identity – inclusive of the indigenous Khoi Khoi and San, Cape Malay and other slave community roots, as well as Southern African cultures, and the cultures of the black people of the diaspora. As Mason<sup>5</sup> suggests, it is upon his return to Cape Town from a New York scene heavily invested in the Black Arts Movement and Black Power politics and spiritualism in the 1960s that Ibrahim finds himself disgruntled with a South African scene that fails to innovate from its vast resources of local music and cultures. And for him, this investment did not merely entail a deeper exploration of one's own identity, but also revelled in the cultures and traditions of others. And although he could never be accused of being overtly political during these times, as Mason points out, he does however begin to gesture towards fundamentally bridging the racial categories of the day, specifically the fissure between coloureds and Africans towards a more inclusive category that also takes seriously the everyday lives of people living in the kinds of environments that the apartheid regime confined them to.<sup>6</sup>

One such environment is Manenberg, a predominantly coloured working class and poor township in Cape Town. *Mannenberg* is of course a productive point of departure for us, not only because it is the obvious starting point for many people's entry into Ibrahim's canon – it being a song on, and the title of, one of the best-selling

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5 J. E. Mason, "'Mannenberg': Notes on the Making of an Icon and Anthem," *African Studies Quarterly*, 9, 4, 2007.

6 Ibid.

South African albums of all time (and so makes it one of the most recognisable songs and sounds in the general black South African cultural world) – but also it best exemplifies what we suggest is Ibrahim’s black sonic geography.

### **Manenberg to Soweto is where it’s at**

In the 1987 documentary titled *A Brother with Perfect Timing*, South African musician Abdullah Ibrahim charts a sonic geography that traverses the areas of District Six, Manenberg, Soweto, Sophiatown and Marabastad against the backdrop of violent colonial apartheid spatial policies, through the provision on an African ‘sound scientist’ account of early township music known as *marabi*. The documentary periodically cuts to two young men swaggering through Manenberg township while Ibrahim’s recording of the song *Mannenberg* plays. These young men, we come to know, are the protagonists in a story that saxophonist Basil ‘Manenberg’ Coetzee, who plays a legendary solo on the recording, relates to Ibrahim. The scene is set: a smoky Saturday morning, busy, dogs and cats and chickens roam, children playing everywhere – their uncontrollable excitement at the arrival of the weekend is palpable and they are seemingly more numerous than on a weekday morning. The young men emerge, effortlessly moving to and as the rhythms of the place. Unexceptionally, a little girl playing beside them is suddenly in danger, at the mercy of a fast-approaching car. One of the men reacts quickly, snatches her away from the car’s prow and lands her safely, all within a single movement that allows the man to carry on walking without breaking metrical stride. Ibrahim hails this as perfect timing, the work of everyday master musicians.

Perfect timing for Ibrahim means getting to the ‘same point, at the same time, in the easiest way’.<sup>7</sup> The unplanned and unrehearsed but environmentally orchestrated synchronicity (structured improvisation) of the two young men, and indeed the little girl and menacing car and the general township, is what fascinates Ibrahim and betrays a keen, intuitive and studied sense of musicality necessary in the navigation of everyday township life. Improvisation for Ibrahim also bears on the process of self-discovery in its vectorial give and take with communal discovery. In an interview with Mthobi Mutloatse, Ibrahim insists that:

Improvisation is like being a samurai warrior, one of whom said ‘Under the sword lifted high there is hell. But go through it fearlessly and you will find bliss.’ It’s just like improvisation. Maybe that’s why jazz musicians have a fear of improvisation, despite their musical knowledge. But taking musical risks in public is only a means to an end – self-discovery.<sup>8</sup>

Ibrahim makes this case by noting a fundamental linkage between the compositional and sonic aspects of *marabi* music (pointing out how *Mannenberg* is

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7 C. Austin (director), G. Bond (producer) and A. Ibrahim, *A Brother with Perfect Timing* (New York: Rhapsody Films, 1987).

8 M. Mutloatse (ed) and A. Ibrahim, *Umlhlabu Wethu: A Historical Indictment* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1987), 38.

structured in the key of F which he suggests invokes a physicality) and the movement of and in the township. The music in this case need not precede or catalyse a physical and spatial response but could well also be an attempt at catching up to it. Marabi is named after the township of Marabastad after all, Ibrahim tells us. And like District Six from which many residents of Manenberg settled, and Sophiatown from which many residents of Soweto settled, Marabastad was also subject to the forced removal of people to racially separated townships further away from the Central Business District of the city of Pretoria.

Forced movement, violent relocation and endemic placelessness are key conditions and consequences of blackness in the modern world. In other words, the historical dispossession of black people, the aftermath of which is still strongly felt today, happened primarily through colonialism and slavery, which were fundamentally reliant on the construction of Africans and blacks in general as without adequate rooting. Indeed if rootedness and settledness is a mark of civilisation in that it displays the ability of human settlements to triumph over geographic and climatological whims, thus evading the nomadic impulse to relocate once natural resources turn scarce, then African groupings, particularly in Sub-Saharan – within which existed societies that colonists regarded as barely agrarian at their most advanced – could not really have adequate and historically legitimised claims to most of the space in the respective region. This of course also coincides with supposed tenuous claims of Africans to geographically and historically documented familial, communal and societal networks of kith and kin. The land and people of the region thus emerge as that which can be taken without consequence, given that it belongs to no one.

The history of South Africa, in general, and the Cape where Ibrahim is from, in particular, is a testament to centuries of violent dispossession, gradual encroachment and bad-faith negotiation when it comes to land and its ownership. This is unsurprising within the historical context of a region where enslavement, indentured labour, worker exploitation and insubstantial/inconsiderable provision of citizen rights are endemic. The sound produced in these environments are the:

[S]ound of the bonds, of sacrifice, of being separated from loved ones but maintaining that spirit of togetherness. So, the song itself, or the sound of the song, serves like a link between the people who leave or are forced into exile and those within the country. And that hopefully, inshallah, after the revolution this song will serve as a rallying point.<sup>9</sup>

For Abdullah Ibrahim, the music emanates from these communities fundamentally shaped by these histories and presents of dispossession and violence. And it is these realities that map a sonic black geography where the song or sound of the song sustains despite and because of this often-enforced geographic separation. It is also the sound of perpetual and potential radicality, positioned as being a prospective

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9 Austin et al., *A Brother with Perfect Timing*.



space in which the song will still serve as a rallying point even after the transitional (or transformative) stage of revolution. 'Perfect timing', thus, emerges not only as an intra-township dynamic displayed by the people of that place responding to and creating the space, but as an inter-township dynamic allowing geographically distinct and distant locales to reach the same point, at the same time, with minimal effort. It also emerges as the sharp instinct cultivated in rough and unpredictable environments that for one engenders close escapes in the very nick of time. Ibrahim elaborates on this instinct in a 2017 interview titled 'How Improvisation Saved My Life' with Jazz Night America, where he notes the irony of being the recipient of honorary university doctorates after being refused the opportunity to study in universities in his younger years, and how the ethic of improvisation and self-study was a foundational element of his music education.<sup>10</sup> In response to the question of 'Dr Ibrahim, how does one improvise?', he unearths a genealogy of musical pedagogy offered by his surroundings: 'come with us on a Saturday night, take a walk in the township, you see. Around midnight. When you see that gang coming around the corner towards you, you better improvise. Ok? So, this is the way that we lived'.<sup>11</sup>

### **Bra Timing from Phomolong – Underground in Africa**

For Ibrahim, then, the brothers with perfect timing gliding the streets of Manenberg essentially move with the same beat as *Bra Timing from Phomolong* (Soweto), the name Ibrahim gave to influential journalist and jazz critic Mike Phahlane (the man who is said to have given Ibrahim the name 'Dollar Brand'), whose toughness and famed ability to move in the wildest, well-timed and elusive ways cemented a reputation of surviving countless death-defying situations. It is a timing resulting from and coincident with a spatial reality that calls upon the constant survival of death-defying situations as a norm. Indeed, in regular Johannesburg township lingo, past and present, to have 'timing' is to have smarts, wherewithal, maturity beyond your age, your wits about you; to lack timing is not to have that sense, to do things or be in a way that lacks a perceptive contextual awareness. To be sure, what is meant by perfect timing here need not imply or invoke a melodically pleasant, accurately metered, harmonically intact, compositionally and performatively proficient sound. The sound, like the life from which it proceeds, can function in a cultural economy intelligible to itself and similar places. Ibrahim mentions how the 'subcultures' of District Six 'ran so deep, that only the people from the community can see what is going on' and in this regard goes on to compare it to Sophiatown, Western Township and Harlem in New York about which he says: 'Harlem is the same, you could be walking around Harlem and there would be so many things going on that you cannot see as an outsider'.<sup>12</sup> In these places, there are uniquely developed systems of meaning

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10 N. Chinen, 'Abdullah Ibrahim: How Improvisation Saved My Life' (NPR Jazz Night America, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/13/557418166/abdullah-ibrahim-how-improvisation-saved-my-life#:~:text=The%20music%20of%20pianist%20and,that%20both%20transporting%20and%20immersive.>

11 Ibid.

12 Austin et al., *A Brother with Perfect Timing*.

and symbol which although peculiar in content seem to be similar in form to each other.

There is no doubt that a significant aspect of this culturally ingrained and spatially reproduced characteristic of remaining invariably unintelligible to the outside eye in these kinds of black urban communities is the existence of hostile often colonial/apartheid authorities with strong surveillance networks and legally ordained recourse to violence and arrest. The movement, language, sounds of the people and their places must therefore do and be as Bra Timing does: elusive, evasive and erratic. For Ibrahim, the subterranean ecosystems of these places, the underground in plain sight, is the real heart of them. The potentially subversive and radical and criminal and beautiful does not operate outside of the restrictive and repressive and resourceless mundane of everyday township life; they are happening at the same time, weaving in and out of each other, depending on who is looking. Edouard Glissant gives the name 'forced poetics' to the creative and literary practices and study engendered in communities historically and actively constrained by the far-reaching parameters of colonialism.<sup>13</sup>

In extending the conceptual use of poetics to include music as well as everyday creative practices, Glissant's contention about the nature of this kind of poetics helps us understand the productive importance of obscurity that Ibrahim also notes as being central features in communities like Manenberg and Harlem. 'The thrust behind this counterpoetics,' Glissant writes, 'is therefore primarily locked into a defensive strategy – that is, into an unconscious body of knowledge through which the popular consciousness asserts both its rootlessness and its density'.<sup>14</sup> Forced poetics or counterpoetics, therefore, are fundamentally structured by the historical uprooting and 'un-rooting' process of colonial modernity and apartheid, resulting in the development of a defensive and collective density that seeks to remain as fleeting as it is contextually embedded. To further quote Glissant at length:

The poetically unsayable seems to me tied, in the West, to what one calls the dignity of the human being, in turn surpassed since the historical appearance of private property. This daring leap allows us to argue that poetic passion, insofar as it requires a self, assumes, first, that the community has abandoned its basic right to be established and has been organized around the rights of the private individual. The poetically unsayable reflects the ultimate manifestation of the economics of the right to property. Paradoxically, it is characterized by transparency and not by obscurity. I have constantly contrasted this keen awareness of the individual with the no less intense feeling for the dignity of the group, that appears to be characteristic of many non-Western civilizations. In contrast to the progression: private property – dignity of the individual – the poetically unsayable, I placed another that seemed to me equally fundamental: indivisibility of the land – dignity of the community – the explicitness of

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<sup>13</sup> E. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

song. Such an opposition between civilizations also helped to explain the ruptures in Caribbean culture, in which the African heritage (the feeling for the dignity of the group) came up against an impossible circumstance (the collective nonpossession of the land) and in which the explicitness of the song (the traditional oral culture) was impeded by Western education (the initiation into the poetically unsayable). We have surrendered to a fascination with poetic obscurity that it is long and painful to get rid of: Rimbaud did more than trade in Abyssinia.<sup>15</sup>

The intention in outlining these histories of the unsayable is not to essentialise what are obviously vast and varied places and times, both Western and non-Western. Nor is it to undermine the power of not being opaque and intentionally naming real people, places and histories as a way to show their existence against their erasure, something Ibrahim does throughout his cannon. But it is to further elucidate Ibrahim and Glissant's ideas around how obfuscation becomes a norm and method in places particularly subjugated through the histories of slavery and colonialism. The collective nonpossession of land is thus coterminous with a collective dispossession of land and the impediment that is Western education is coterminous with the establishment of Western colonial administrations. Insofar as the explicitness of song has been disturbed through a centuries-long assault of the dignity of a people, primarily through a violent separation of land and people, the unsayable and unseeable emerge as an idiom, a song, both resultant of a colonial-apartheid order and escaping from it. The song of varied explicitness is a song with perfect timing, possible under the conditions of broken time where 'sayability' as emerging from a dignity of people established under an indivisibility already deemed unintelligible has been indelibly compromised.

### **Maraba Blue – District Six**

And again, following Glissant, if the notion of private property makes its historical appearance in Western society and becomes an inseparable ideal to the fully realised Western self (the modern human), then colonial courtesy does not extend this promise to conquered lands where the spread of individual and communal wealth is precluded through dehumanisation, dispossession and exploitation. The outcome is that places like the ones that Ibrahim is interested in experience a foundational lack of material resources, with the people there being structurally impeded to accumulate capital and enjoy sustained membership of the propertied classes. Moreover, reflecting the paucity of resources within the communities from which marabi materialises are the discourses around the class dynamics surrounding the music. Bheki Peterson suggests that for whites and the elite African middle-class marabi 'was equally socially restrictive and infused with aspects of dehumanisation,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 137.

alcoholism, sexism, prostitution and violence. These qualities were seized upon by whites and the African middle class who exaggerated their presence and reduced marabi culture to being nothing more than “raucous, sex-charged ... [and] violent” ...<sup>16</sup> Because marabi music was characterised as being formed by base morality and the creative pursuits of lower-class African population it shows us ‘that the black elite was imbued with ideas and prejudices consistent with its educational experiences and its hopes for gradual assimilation and associations with white liberals.’<sup>17</sup>

Peterson drives home the point that ‘while both elite and marabi cultures were intended, in their different ways, to mitigate against the social alienation experienced by Africans, they revealed, as Dhlomo [H.E.] recognised, that despite qualifications, “there [were] sharp class differences amongst Africans”’.<sup>18</sup> Here spatial and temporal phenomena of the black African underclass are obfuscated by both the white colonial establishment and the aspirations of black elites:

As a member of the African elite Dhlomo initially shared its aspirations towards gradual assimilation into the important spheres of white society, a process, the African middle class thought, that could only be achieved by adopting a ‘progressive’ ideology that affirmed, among other things, the ‘retrogressive and reactionary’ nature of traditional and lower-class life and cultural practices. Their activities took place outside the restrictive terrain of the slumyards and shebeens, occurring instead in institutions such as schools, churches, cultural and sporting clubs.<sup>19</sup>

The restrictive terrains of the ‘slumyards and shebeens’ are, of course, within the structure of colonial violence, not significantly dissimilar to the ‘schools, churches, cultural and sporting clubs’ given their location in spaces reserved for blacks and thus devoid of adequate resources, and their impossibility of generally presenting favourable outcomes for their patrons. Ultimately, the respectability attempted through distancing marabi from markers of sonic, musical and cultural sophistication fails in the face of an indiscriminate modern white supremacist and capitalist administration. For Ibrahim, this also undermines the genius ingrained in the sonic and musical creativity of marabi considering that it is borne despite of and *because of* the most trying of conditions. These circumstances creatively affect the sonic viability of the song and the kind of musical product possible under conditions in which makers of song may not have access to the instruments and formal training required for a palatable sound.

In *A Brother With Perfect Timing* Ibrahim shares how the sound of marabi was created on the one hand as a result of improvising on the use of pump organs and harmoniums in attempt to attain a piano-like sound since many black musicians were priced and placed out of accessing pianos, and on the other hand, pushing these

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16 B. Peterson, ‘The Black Bulls of H. I. E. Dhlomo: Ordering history out of nonsense’, *English in Africa*, 18, 1, May 1991, 25–49.

17 *Ibid.*, 27.

18 *Ibid.*, 27.

19 *Ibid.*, 27–28.

instruments to their functional limits by, for example, placing matchsticks to hold down certain keys in the creation of sustained tones when pumped thus enabling the musician to play certain themes on top.<sup>20</sup> He likens this ethic to that of a sustained drone in bagpipe music reliant on periodic blowing into the bag that maintains the drone tone. He further makes the comparison in African music to the use of two reed pipes tied together, one that holds the drone tones and the other with holes in it where melodies can be played. But unlike the Scottish bagpipe, the reeds require a circular breathing technique in order to bring the melodies and constant drone tone into harmony.

Even though this circular breathing technique, Ibrahim slyly points out, has proven a tricky technical terrain for some of the most advanced classically trained musicians, for African musicians it has been part of the technical repertoire for as long as memory permits. The tradition of such techniques and approaches to performance continue in marabi and other forms of black music, representing the desire to alter the sonic purvey of musical instruments to replicate and innovate sounds long known in the sonic landscapes of the continent. This forms the basis of Ibrahim's conjecture that some of the musical traditions considered avant-garde/experimental and modern in contemporary music have long been established in African cultural worlds, subverting the notion that sonic time moves like colonial time in its ordained mission to urge Africa into modernity. Indeed, what Ibrahim's avant-gardism offers is not only a reworking of sound through improvisation on the functionality of instruments, or a temporal disruption in the historic structuring and unfolding of techniques and approaches towards experimentalism, but also the very ways in which a geographic setting itself sets the tone, rhythm and melody of the song; in other words, the ways in which the natural environment plays and makes the music. In the sixth stanza of his 1966 poem titled 'Africa, Music, and Show Business: An Analytical Survey in Twelve Tones Plus Finale',<sup>21</sup> Ibrahim writes:

Blues for District Six  
early one new year's morning  
when the emerald bay waved its clear waters against the noisy dockyard  
a restless south easter skipped over slumbering lion's head  
danced up hanover street  
tenored a bawdy banjo  
strung an ancient cello  
bridged a host of guitars  
tambourined through a dingy alley  
into a scented cobwebbed room  
and crackled the sixth sensed district  
into a blazing swamp fire of satin sound

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20 Austin et al., *A Brother with Perfect Timing*.

21 D. Brand, 'Africa, Music, and Show Business: An Analytical Survey in Twelve Tones Plus Finale', *Journal of New African Literature and Arts*, 1, 1966, 296-302.

early one new year's morning  
when the moaning bay mourned its murky water against the deserted  
dockyard  
a bloodthirsty south easter roared over hungry lion's head  
and ghosted Its way up hanover street  
empty  
forlorn  
and cobwebbed with gloom

Here, Ibrahim eulogises about the famous 'South-Easter' winds that strongly and periodically blow through Cape Town. This wind form part of the typical yet lively sonic landscape of pre-removal District Six, dancing its way through the community whilst picking up and picking at certain instruments leaving unique and gusty musical collaborations and legacies in its trail. The winds are also foreboding, as it turns out; their strength and sometimes pre-emption or accompaniment of inclement weather also being appropriate of the doom and turbulence following the apartheid government's decision in 1966 to remove people and some buildings of the area in order to declare it 'Whites Only'. This for Ibrahim initiates a new era of song and sound for District Six, responsive to the violence of the colonial-apartheid order, with the wind playing until such a day as it will find no person to play alongside; 'empty, forlorn and cobwebbed with gloom'. The 'South-Easter' is inexplicably part of the sonic history and landscape, itself having had to deal with the geological and cosmological dislocation that is colonial modernity, and thus reconfigured into the geographies where it is forced to partake in the representation of the divergent fortunes and fate of the people and places. It also finds itself embedded in the avant-garde or experimental cultures of the respective communities, as it does in Ibrahim's District Six, by being a crucial cog in the sonic possibilities of the space, and indeed as active a contributor as the musicians and instruments.

### **The Pilgrim – Hajj (The Journey) – Tuan Guru**

Kruger et al. make the point that the:

Atlantic high-pressure system, which is situated near the west coast, is a source of drier air which moves into the subcontinent from the southwest and southeast. The south-easterly wind blows mostly over the Cape Peninsula and is locally known as the 'Cape Doctor', due to its removal of pollutants in the air and possibly also because of the associated unpleasant dryness and gustiness. This wind can be quite persistent, as shown by ... the growth in a north-westerly direction of some trees in this region.<sup>22</sup>

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22 A. C. Kruger, A. M. Goliger, J. V. Retief and S. Sekele, 'Strong wind climatic zones in South Africa', *Wind and Structures*, 13, 1, 2010.

Similarly, in a discussion about the climatological aspects of the drought affecting Cape Town from 2015 to 2017, Burls et al. point out that ‘a ridging high refers to synoptic conditions during which the South Atlantic high-pressure system (Anticyclone) extends eastward around the southern tip of Africa into the Indian Ocean giving rise to strong south-easterly winds in Cape Town.’<sup>23</sup> What we glean from these two studies, together with conventional knowledge, is that the ‘South-Easter’ winds are an occurrence resulting from dynamics in the Atlantic (and to a lesser extent Indian) ocean. That the ‘South-Easter’ brings the ocean to bear sonically in Ibrahim’s District Six is appropriate and obvious for an artist and thinker who grounds their blackness in Cape Town and so allowing the ocean to have prominence as an essential and productive feature of a global black underground geography seeking to emerge from the hold of colonial modernity. For example, in response to a question regarding the representation of kaapse klopse music as basic, politically benign and possibly problematic in nature, Ibrahim configures the ocean as a site in black historiography that not only persists in the trauma of the Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Indian slave trade, but also holds histories of a black geographic imaginary being constructed as black humanity is being undone:

You want to say this is not traditional music? Then what is? If this is not the traditional music, what is? You know, the music functions as the music functions. And the music functions in society. Now you ask people in Cape Town if the Coon music is traditional music? And they will answer; ‘No, this is Diena-kanna-kiena.’ (cannot be translated). On the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1658 the Dutch ship, Amersfoort docked at the Cape with about 300 slaves from Angola. These slaves were captured by the Dutch ship from a Portuguese vessel, bound for Brazil. When we are playing this rhythm, people will say ‘this is samba, and samba comes from Brazil’. Do you know how it comes from Brazil? When you go to Brazil there’s a large Angolan community. This is how the samba got to Cape Town. From Angola. Slaves.<sup>24</sup>

Ibrahim proffers a historic and genealogical reading of the music associated with the Cape Town Minstrel festival that strongly invokes the city’s slave past enabled by oceanic flows of both the Atlantic and Indian oceans. For one in that it does not solely foreground the 19<sup>th</sup> century influence of American ‘minstrel’ troupes, instead calling upon prior histories of celebration in song and dance of Cape slave communities, particularly the Cape Malay, on the second day of the new year according to the Cape Dutch colonial calendar. Furthermore, it calls upon even prior histories of song and dance in reminding us that some of the first slaves at the Cape were not

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23 N. J. Burls, R. C. Blamey, B. A. Cash, E. T. Swenson, A. A. Fahad, M. J. Bopape, D. M. Straus and C. J. Reason, ‘The Cape Town “Day Zero” drought and Hadley cell expansion’, *NPJ Climate and Atmospheric Science*, 2, 1, 2019, 1–8.

24 H. Willemse and A. Ibrahim, ‘Abdullah Ibrahim speaks! Staffrider interview with poet Hein Willemse NYC Dec 1986’, <https://soulsafari.wordpress.com/2010/03/17/sa-jazz-abdullah-ibrahim-speaks-staffrider-interview-with-poet-hein-willemse-nyc-dec-1986/>.

from South-East Asia but were indeed Africans from the southern African region.<sup>25</sup> Included too are the remnants of the ways and worlds of the natives of the Cape, the Khoi Khoi and San, that are assaulted by the colonial imposition and find new forms amongst and together with the willing and unwilling new inhabitants. In one fell swoop, a 'traditional' music of the Cape touches five continents before it is played contemporarily, and as it permeates the 'modern' music that Ibrahim is associated with such as Cape Jazz or marabi.

As Titlestad maintains:

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 (expresses 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.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the ocean at the Cape is elementary in Ibrahim's sonic black geographic imagination in the way it is foundational to the story of Islam in the region. Even though the historiography of Islamic presence on the southeast African coast by way of trade and exchange must be noted and positioned against a dominant narrative that *only* presents the Cape, and to a lesser extent 19<sup>th</sup> century KwaZulu-Natal, as constituting the historical roots of Islam in Southern Africa, Cape Town's slave history is also a history of the preservation and localisation of Islam.<sup>27 28</sup> Ibrahim himself grew up Christian, but converted to Islam in 1968, in Cape Town, after a few years of living the indulgent life of a sought-after musician in Europe and the USA resulted in a desire for a spiritual purge: 'I went back to church; I didn't find it there. I went into all religions – the *Gita*, *I-Ching*. Then I realised most of the friends I grew up with were Muslim. Cape Town has a rare harmony, intermarriage.'<sup>29</sup> Ibrahim's conversion to Islam is important both for accounting for a different cosmology and history of dissent, for it is through what Mackey calls the dynamic quality of tones,

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- 25 For more about early slave expeditions targeted at the east coast of Africa as the interception of slave ships from Angola and Guinea, see R. C. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press published by University Press of New England, 1994); M. Boucher, 'The voyage of a Cape slaver in 1742', *Historia*, 24, 1, May 1979, 50–8; J. C. Armstrong and N. A. Worden, 'The Slaves, 1652–1834' in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 109–62; M. G. Upham, 'Uprooted Lives: Unfurling the Cape of Good Hope's Earliest Colonial Inhabitants (1652–1713)', *Remarkable Writing on First 50 Years* (2012), <http://www.e-family.co.za/ffy/RemarkableWriting/UL01WhatCantBeCured.pdf>.
- 26 M. Titlestad, *Making the Changes: Jazz in South African Literature and Reportage* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 237.
- 27 In *A Brother with Perfect Timing*, Ibrahim reflects on the song *Tuan Guru* and the person it is named after, portraying him as an early teacher of Islam brought to the Cape in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and an innovator of the Afrikaans language. See also R. C. Shell, 'Islam in Southern Africa, 1652–1998' in N. Levtzion and R. Pouwels (eds), *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 327–48; G. Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From slavery to post-apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014).
- 28 For other histories of Islam in southeast Africa, see V. Pawliková-Vilhanová, 'Rethinking the Spread of Islam in Eastern and Southern Africa', *Asian & African Studies*, 19, 1, 2010.
- 29 A. Ibrahim and M. Jaggi, 'The Sound of Freedom', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2001.



this reciprocal movement in the context of the music, that Islam offers a different spiritual, political, sonic and geographic possibility. He converted to Islam amid historic anti-colonial revolts, and perhaps unlike some of his friends and peers who were also converting to Islam through the preaching of Ahmadiyya<sup>30</sup>, Ibrahim chose to convert in South Africa while at the same time exposed to discourses of political and cultural anticolonial struggles. Argyle points out how the social and political milieu that Ibrahim found himself in 1960s America incorporated Islam and militant black power in a Pan-African conception of blackness that had a clear sonic and compositional manifestation.<sup>31</sup> That Ibrahim still decided to convert in Cape Town, at home, suggests an acceptance of Islam that is both black-militant as well as historical-communal. Both these categories actively invoke a geographic imagination that solicits the black Atlantic as well as the black Indian oceans particularly through the reiteration of Cape Town as a key creation and character in the story of the modern world, colonialism, slavery, apartheid, and the post-colonial/apartheid. These are the kind of coinherences, material and transcendental, that Mackey refers to as ‘vertical transcendence’<sup>32</sup>, a critical counterpoint to primarily secular material and transcendental (political and religious) aesthetic theories of music and the world. We can say Ibrahim’s conversion to Islam, and even his sustained study of Japanese philosophy of practice, is novel for offering a radical cross-cultural militant subjectivity that incorporates and goes beyond ‘African nationalism’ and Black Liberation theology dominant in South Africa at the time.

Islam also expands Ibrahim’s thought and practice through the figure of the pilgrim who undertakes the Hajj (pilgrimage), a journey reflecting a considerable commitment, duty, submission and renewal. Ibrahim himself took the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1970, an extension of the spiritual reset undertaken a few years prior.<sup>33</sup> Titlestad, in writing about representations of Ibrahim that set him apart as a mystical and ineffable figure, a healer-pilgrim, particularly in the wake of his conversion to Islam, asks ‘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?’<sup>34</sup> Our interest in Ibrahim’s pilgrim, is not quite invested in him as exalted or having ethereal qualities and abilities, but how his pilgrim represents an itinerant impulse, a sense of space as fractured and multiple yet traversable and passable, that is fundamentally ingrained in the quotidian which for blacks subjugated under modern colonial arrest is such that it must imagine a

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30 Chase makes the point that most of the Islamic missionary work amongst black communities in the sixties was done by the Ahmadiyya: ‘The 1940s Islamic tradition of Gillespie’s contemporaries had messianic and missionizing qualities. Known as “Ahmadiyyah,” this movement began with the work of Hazrat Ahmad (Ghulam) (1835–1908), a Muslim scholar and theorist in South Asia. Ahmad vigorously worked to defend Islam in the face of increasing political and religious tensions from both Hindu reform movements (such as the Arya Samaj and the pre- “Tat Khalsa” Sikhs), on the one hand, and also from Christian missionaries, on the other hand, also Christian missionaries who had become prominent in the Punjab state of British India. Ahmadiyyah’s missionization of the United States, explicitly designated as a goal for the movement was targeted at the African American community’ (165). W. C. Chase, ‘Prophetics in the Key of Allah: Towards an Understanding of Islam in Jazz’, *Jazz Perspectives*, 4, 2, 2010, 157–181.

31 Ibrahim and Jaggi, ‘The Sound of Freedom’.

32 S. R. Burge, ‘Music, Mysticism, and Experience: Sufism and Spiritual Journeys in Nathaniel Mackey’s Bedouin Hornbook’, *Contemporary Literature*, 54, 2, 2013, 271–302.

33 Ibrahim and Jaggi, ‘The Sound of Freedom’.

34 Titlestad, *Making the Changes*, 233.

transcendence of given geographic bounds against the ontological pervasiveness of white supremacy. We are also not extensively invested in the healer-pilgrim Ibrahim as a sagely historian whose excavation of times past is tinged with a nostalgia that points to a purer more pastoral time with the political purpose of recreating it through struggle and revolution. We agree with Lucia to the extent that Ibrahim evokes:

[T]he power of memory, using the past to create an anchor that had both a spatial axis (South Africa the place) and a temporal one (South Africa the past). Thus, his music of the 1970s makes more overt use of marabi, swing, dance music, carnival, blues, hymns, gospel and spirituals than it had done in the 1960s, and additionally it brought gestures from Sufi traditions with which he was surrounded as a child but to which, as a newly converted Muslim, he reconnected on a different level.<sup>35</sup>

But beyond the uses of memory, Ibrahim also mounts a historiographic intervention, bringing forth the past as evident of a long tradition of proactive and creative resistance to, and subsistence within, colonial, slave and apartheid regimes.

To return to Titlestad who observes Lewis Nkosi's reading of Abdullah Ibrahim and his work, writing that:

[T]he 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* 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.<sup>36</sup>

## Finale

Ibrahim's performance practice and the sonic quality of his compositions not only extend across only the colonial and Black Atlantic boundaries but open the geographical imaginaries eminent in the 'seas of the east' and how they come to bear on the social historical experience of black subjects. This is done in the attempt to reconfigure modern, slave-colonial narratives and enact cross-cultural sources of, in what Mackey's reading of Zickerkandl calls, 'the "dynamic quality of tones", the relational valence or vectorial give and take bestowed on tones by their musical context'.<sup>37</sup> This reading is meant to give us a musical conception of the world in which 'the world, music reminds us, inhabits, while extending beyond the eye, resides in but rises above what's apprehensible to the senses'. That is, escaping the hold of the

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<sup>35</sup> C. Lucia, 'Abdullah Ibrahim and the uses of memory', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 11, 2, 2002, 125–143.

<sup>36</sup> Titlestad, *Making the Changes*, 238.

<sup>37</sup> Burge, 'Music, Mysticism, and Experience', 30.

material and the transcendental in analysis and practices but rather insisting on their 'coinherence'. It is these conceptions of the world and music, of history and cosmology that critics have failed to capture in their analysis of Ibrahim's sound.<sup>38</sup> From the colonial spatial location to the sea, the sonic waves that inheres in Abdullah Ibrahim's musical conception of the world lends us an ear to the rebellious rhythmic propulsions of the brothers with the 'perfect timing' and the sounds of the sea of change. The sea waves bring forth enslavers and colonialists that begin to construct and mark the time of the nation, which we have already touched on, but it also brings forth the sounds and knowledges about the time prior to slavery and settler-colonialism. It is these sounds and knowledges of performances or figuration that is practice, which Ibrahim uses as an intervention against social historical experience in modern-colonial narratives about Africa and Africans.

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38 Chase, 'Prophetics in the Key of Allah'.