

# The black sonic gestures toward just planetary futures in Africa

*Editorial essay by the Guest Editors: mpho ndaba & Rachael Nyirongo*

**I**n a song collaboration that featured Eryn Allen, Ami Faku, Bonga Kwana, Msaki and Zolani Mahola, we are reminded that “*Ilizwe likhohlakele*” (the world is a terrible place) (Ungazilibali, 2019). How we come together, in any form of gathering is shaped by the deep-seated appreciation of the sinister nature of world. How divisiveness, violence and harm, are strategies of colonial separation; shaping our modes of seeing, being and feeling, while colonial logics remain in place. Every region of the world, regardless of where they might be located, is organised by these decisions to relegate some bodies, people, spaces and beings as unworthy of aliveness and life in general.

Africa remains caught up in this crisis, yet, the plunder of lives, ecosystems, traditions, landscapes continues. Whenever there is an opportunity to reflect on the state of the planet and the continent’s place in it, we must, as a matter of radical necessity, draw from the histories of resistance politics, remembering how Africa came to occupy its current place in the modern world. As such, then, jazz music, black music composition, is a great place to start from.

What is history? In the opening parts of the song “What is History”, composed and performed by a jazz collective comprising drummer Tumi Mogorosi, guitarist Reza Khota, vocalist Gabi Motuba, visual artist Zen Marie and sound artist Andrei Van Wyk, Motuba’s voice can be repeatedly heard asking: “What is history?” From there, Motuba declares: “We find our humanity on the other side of death and despair.” That, “[t]his settler’s world is a hostile world; a world with an atmosphere of fire and shock”.

Fire, hostility, shock and discomfort, in the ongoing accounts of ecological destruction in Africa, has coincided with hunger and a lack of safe and adequate housing as infrastructure fails (Forsyth & Le Maitre, 2019:8-9; Rajagopal 2022:5). These are all features of climate change on the continent, which despite being the least polluter, is most affected (Azour & Selassie, 2023)

The addressing of the climate question in Africa exists alongside the permanent imprint of racial slavery and settler colonialism: How the quest for modernity violently marked black people, while also laying claims to territories, histories, languages, cultures and the Earth (Mbembe, 2017:14-15). Therefore, it makes sense to begin this introductory ►



essay by inviting you as our reader to ponder on the truth offered by the black sonic meditations with which black artists reorient us towards liberatory practices. Here, there is deep recognition that another world is fundamentally necessary; that for us to achieve this, we must draw from the words of Aimé Césaire and call for the “end of the world as we know it” (Savransky, 2021:2). Meaning, while you will find the contributions present in this iteration of *New Agenda* useful in their own ways, the central aim of putting together these pieces of work, is in recognition of the unsustainable nature of the current planetary relations in which Africa is open to assault.

In the traditions of jazz composition, in what currently exists as South Africa, music has been pivotal to black artists’ attempts to carry forward, into the future, drawing from the past, and reading the current moment, the histories of critique aimed at the state, systems of racial domination and private interests. Here, young black artists, especially after 2013, have gone on to produce piercing music, addressing the black ontological wound that sits with our being – doing so by borrowing from the organising strategies of the anticolonial struggles in South Africa and across various parts of Africa. With these, there is a refining of the lens with which we make sense of how South Africa, like many parts of the continent, exposes black people to psycho-material harm.

Groups of individual artists, working together as a collective, made up of people who bring to the collective different perspectives, have been pivotal in the analysis of South Africa as a settler colony. There is something profound about the decision to form part of a collective. Precisely because in the case of music composition, this human and artistic practice is complex in its own way.

In the South African contexts of liberation politics of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and right into the new dispensation in 1994, we have been reminded, time and again, that music is not meant to be an individual endeavour (Dalamba, 2006; Makhathini, 2018). More so when it comes to thinking about the abject state of blackness. Here, of course, we must equally account for how no man is an island; that even with artists who work “alone”, there are collaborators who pour parts of themselves to make a particular message clear.

What is interesting about groups, however, is how they borrow from the communal practices of “*Lekgotla*”: a kind of black gathering in which deliberations about conflict, disagreement, misunderstanding, welfare and being of black people is reflected on. “*Lekgotla*” is not only about people. It is instituted as the complete awareness of the world we, the people, inhabit. By reflecting on black music, emerging out of South Africa today, doing so by thinking about the state of the Earth, here, we centre the desires for radical planetary care.

In this editorial essay, on “Planetary justice and the future of Africa”, various reflections, essays, and journal articles follow in the tradition(s) of “*Lekgotla*”. We are asked: How else might we make sense of the world and its troubles; given the consistent shifts Capital makes as it attempts to find new frontiers for colonial extraction?

And by a way of elaborating on what ways jazz music gestures towards the end of the world, I find “What is History” – a song we were first introduced to as part of *Indaba*



Is (2020) album release – useful. This is a project that was spearheaded by pianist and composer Thandi Ntuli and vocalist and composer Siyabonga Mthembu of the band The Brother Moves On (TBMO).

Here, the elements that make up the song are generative in various ways. On the one hand, there is the inclusion of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s voice and reflection in which she focuses the attention on antiblackness during the era of apartheid. Here, Madikizela-Mandela demands that whoever gets to listen to “What is History” think of how black women and children who had never undergone forms of exiling from South Africa, at the time, were faced with particular forms of the brutality of the system. The listener is also encouraged to consider the post-apartheid rehearsals of public memory as that which has excluded certain narratives of the past; overrepresenting black heterosexual male figures like Nelson Mandela in how new South Africa revisits stories of black liberation. Within the broader context of “What is History”, The Wretched proposes that the violence, as a form of general antiblackness, and its brutality, never came to pass.

For people who come to what I propose we analyse as “climate *Lekgotla*”, the focus I suggest we foreground, at the backdrop of how settler colonialism created out of black people the racialised Other, is that the imagination of planetary futures are impossible without our collective attendance to black unfreedom. Meaning, the repair of the Earth must coincide with the repair of black ontological nowherehood (weNkosi, 2023). One of the popular phrases we have come to know, especially for those of us who form part of the climate movement, is that “environmentalism without class struggle is just gardening”. This phrase is useful in various ways, especially when we consider how in the case of Africa, people racialised black are largely on the receiving end of state neglect, unsafety and harm that is disproportionately distributed along race, class and gender lines.

The imagination of planetary justice, for black people, was contended in the wake of settler colonial imposition in which land theft, murder, disappearance were the strategies of making the modern world. For The Wretched, the analysis of the South African situation, including questions concerning the delapidated state of the planet, in the apartheid period, sees the country’s polity organised around black suffering (Dladla, 2017:205; Joja, 2021:165). Most importantly, how The Wretched differs from other collectives such as The Brother Moves On and Iphupho L’ka Biko is that here the group is clear about how racial antagonism is the modality through which South Africa is constituted. As such, then, we must ask: What might it mean to think of climate crisis when taking into consideration the historical formation of South Africa and the ways in which black people occupy the category of the racialised Other? How might the black sonic shape the ways in which we feel, see and relate with the planetary crisis?

This is a methodological question; demanding that we account for how the planetary crisis is lived through the material but remains psychic, spiritual and political. The usefulness of methods as a deliberate approach towards making sense of where we are at this current juncture is that we can notice how climate crisis has been historically lived in Africa. How the material and landscape ruin is all around us; and has been known by those who have passed on; that by inviting aural, oral and visual – as it is the case with artistic practices that emerge from jazz music – we have the capacity to lead to places we never ➤



imagined. Doing so while ensuring that the essence of the thing which we are all concerned about remains firm, in this case, the state of the planet.

Perhaps, what is most relevant – thinking of the collection of articles and reflective pieces in this issue as a form of gathering – we are attempting to bring the attention to the mutations, shifts and the reorganisations Capital and its historical intended aims. And how climate has been a site of gathering for global multilateral interests looking to refigure capitalist development to continue business as usual.

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