



“This is Not A Song, It’s An Outburst” How Musical Moral Entrepreneurship Fueled the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement

Alexander O’Neill, McGill University

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ABSTRACT

Challenging traditionally-conceived narratives surrounding the dialectic of Apartheid, many Afrikaners became facilitators of in-state resistance alongside their black peers after becoming disillusioned with the South African regime’s foreign policy initiatives during the 1970s and 1980s. Afrikaner men were conscripted to fight in their country’s dirty wars in Rhodesia and Angola, which destabilized the regime’s legally-enshrined white privilege and fueled resistance expressed through musical movement. This idea connects to tactics used by the American government to assert racialist sovereignty as a tenet of stratifying South Africa’s domestic society through soft power. This paper demonstrates through semantic and musical deconstructions how and why Paul Simon’s “Graceland” project and the Voëlvry punk movement worked to dismantle tenets of racial governance at the grassroots level in South Africa. From the usage of the English language to the usage of Western instrumentation with “reclaimed” rhythm, these cases show a broader yet calculated transgression from mediatic expressions of Apartheid through moral entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Moral entrepreneurship is defined as the ability of an individual actor or an organization to successfully shape social and political norms (Boli and Thomas 1997, 171). Actors involved in moral entrepreneurship (a moral entrepreneur) include non-governmental organizations, grassroots political parties, and celebrities, whereas the narratives they seek to advance are not premised on economic gain but on moral welfare. Grassroots movements started by such actors often blindsided key domestic and foreign political projects by organizing what James Scott refers to as “everyday forms of resistance”—actions outside of the periphery of the ruling elites that are often organized in isolated or rural communities. Yet, little emphasis is made in existing literature regarding these actors’ abilities to procure moral capital and thus wield substantial political power against national governments (Holzscheiter 2005, 739). A deeper analysis of the activities of moral entrepreneurship showcases its role in dismantling the apartheid regime in South Africa, which resulted in the National Party’s fall from grace in 1994. Above all, music provided the incendiary spark in equipping populist movements with moral enterprise within and outside South Africa and for historically marginalized and privileged backgrounds.

Two case studies will defend this assertion. First, the cross-racial collaboration by Paul Simon on *Graceland*—a Grammy-award-winning record released in 1986 featuring grassroots collaborations from black South African musicians. Second, the Voëlvry Movement, an Afrikaner-led blues rock movement from Jo-

hannesburg. Both projects capitalized on anti-establishment sentiment within the Afrikaner population (Grundlingh 2004, 483). These case studies will be preceded by a discussion of theoretical concepts surrounding moral entrepreneurship. They will be framed within the context of how music affected South Africa’s broader policy initiatives and how the United States played a key role in maintaining them until the fall of apartheid.

Moral Entrepreneurship and Its American Musical Origins

Flores-Yeffal and Sparger (2022) define moral entrepreneurship as a procedural process. It starts by seeking out a common ideological enemy known as a “folk devil.” It then seeks to instill a collective consciousness against this social actor through grassroots social movements. This is only possible through the galvanization of a collective consciousness, which is manifested and sustained through the continued adoption of these beliefs through formal and informal streams.

Cohen further notes moral entrepreneurs are either characterized as rule creators or rule enforcers (1972, 2). Within the framework of grassroots political movements, popular musicians first identify a root cause for concern of a particular demographic and then express this collective social identification through lyricism that identifies with the cause. Through time and growth in popularity, an increased level of political legitimacy surrounding their performance gives musicians the moral agency to craft and shape the social movement in question. In turn, it is the duty of the musician

to continuously enforce their agenda onto their fanbase, ensuring their movement's successful political result. Thus, musicians maintain the role of managing what Jean Baudrillard calls the signifier and its signified – which, within the framework of international relations scholarship, can be treated as a form of soft power. This role allows musicians to engage in the construction of a political economy that objectifies cultural capital rather than being premised on monetary gain to spread and maintain political influence (Meger 2016, 154).

To better understand musical-political grassroots movements in apartheid South Africa, we may consider the role of American moral entrepreneurs in shaping American foreign policy. Prior to the Second World War, Nelson Rockefeller, as an imperialist endeavour, collaborated with governmental authorities to “win hearts and minds” in Latin America with jazz diplomacy. Jazz bands, consisting of historically marginalized African American musicians, travelled across Latin America in a stream of performances, upholding American idealism within the framework of expansionist motives – such as the later involvement in deposing Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 to assert an American agenda in that region (Rosenberg 2012, 66). This coincided with the state-sponsored touring of symphony orchestras in the region, who, according to Gienow-Hecht, “performed the nation” – an idea that helps in actualizing the abstract concept of the imagined community (Anderson 1983). As was openly stated by a US agency known as the Office of Inter-American Affairs, or OIAA, these tours were created as a form of cultur-

al propaganda to ensure that Latin American countries maintained favourable diplomatic ties with the United States. With Leonard Bernstein, a born-and-bred American, conducting this musical operation, audiences and governments remained inclined to interpret these endeavours not as outright imperialism but as the installation of a legitimate and stable political authority via the United States (Campbell 2012, 30). This foreign policy initiative evidently follows the model outlined earlier regarding rule creation and rule enforcement through means of soft power (Cohen 1972, 2).

Erstwhile, Dudziak (1988) demonstrates how global media enterprises were responsible for questioning the moral authority of the United States' involvement in African foreign affairs, providing the usage of segregation within their borders. As per a 1952 decree at the United Nations, the United States, as a way of circumventing the Nuremberg Laws that explicitly prohibited the discrimination of “non-Aryans,” proclaimed that while apartheid was a social project diametrically opposed to the UN Charter, interference with South Africa's domestic affairs did not lie within the UN's scope (Lauren 1983, 1). On the global stage, the United States continues to be publicly framed as a saviour of human rights in international law while at the same time engaging in support of overtly racist policymaking. This produces a double standard that middle-power countries such as South Africa have had to wrestle with to maintain their political survival (Goldstone 2005, 874). Criticism on this matter was paradoxically provided by then-South African Ambassador to the United States, H.L.T. Taswell, who re-

called that the Americans are incapable of “appeasing liberal and negro sentiment by taking a hardline” against apartheid policy (Morgan 2003, 14). This required Richard Nixon to recify his position on South Africa – which he did through the enactment of the Southern Strategy. These tactics, which came to fruition during the early 1970s, appeased Nixon’s white voter base in the southern United States and were founded on the premonition that “there had never been an adequate black nation” (Morgan 2003, 6). Even so, in the grand scheme of the United States’ complex web of diplomatic ties, apartheid remained a secondary issue; they did not de facto condone it, which appeased domestic left-leaning critics (Thomson 2005, 52).

This double standard in America’s foreign relations essentially shaped how South Africa manifested its own international relations propaganda techniques, for it is ultimately in opposition to these American-inspired social projects that reactionary moral enterprise developed in marginalized South African social circles (Rosenberg 2012, 67). Above all, grassroots social commentary, through transnational webs of advocacy, became central to popular discourse on apartheid in the West by the early 1980s. Near the end of the decade, this discourse became heavily centred around the freeing of Nelson Mandela from imprisonment on Robben Island, eight kilometres off the coast of the South African mainland. Mandela, who had initially been conceived as an almsgiver of communism to the black South African population, was, therefore, an enemy of the United States (Bortelsmann 2001, 156). As such, Mandela’s situation became the subject of Western

celebrity fanfare – much of which was done in self-interest.

Paul Simon and Graceland

Above all, celebrities used their moral authority, vis-à-vis their social status, to mobilize action through popular mediatic networks in their country of origin – otherwise referred to as “rooted cosmopolitanism” – for an international cause (Cohen 1992, 479). Rooted cosmopolitanism is linked to a 2004 study undertaken by Tsutsui and Wotipka, whose results showcase a direct correlation between celebrity-backed mobilization and increased adherence to grassroots movements (Huliaras and Tzifakis 2010, 257). In South Africa, celebrity activism beginning in the early 1980s provided an impetus for both apolitical movements and ones of a systemic nature, such as the African National Congress (ANC), the integrationist political party that has governed South Africa since the downfall of apartheid, to thrive. Of these celebrities was Paul Simon, an American singer-songwriter previously known as one-half of the folk-rock duo Simon and Garfunkel. Simon understood his role as a celebrity actor with a high degree of moral agency. He lent himself to causes such as Artists United Against Apartheid’s Sun City, a protest track denouncing the eponymous casino and hotel resort open to whites only in the former Transvaal province (Ullestad 1987, 67). In the same year, Simon released *Graceland*. This project wrestled with systematic opposition to apartheid policy on two levels: one, it involved a collaboration between Blacks and whites to create collective social change through music, and two, it provided

an internationally recognized forum to marginalized peoples in South Africa to express their cultural identities.

In 1951, the South African government passed the Bantu Authorities Act, which relegated black members of South African society to small, isolated, and largely infertile swaths of land outside of the country's main cities. This was coupled with the Bantu-Self Government Act of 1959, which established these entities as semi-autonomous regions. Through complex webs of bureaucracy that alienated Bantustan residents, it was nearly impossible to leave at one's own volition. Informally, Bantustan residents were used as bait for much wealthier white patrons, who would hire them for menial tasks such as domestic work (Kaur 1994, 43). Because Bantustans were treated as territorially autonomous, with their own laws and respective governing bodies within the South African constitution, this labour was considered 'migratory.' This created an intrastate governing system that emulated interstate relations between two state actors with opposite viewpoints, ideologies, and political agendas.

As an attempt to subvert this political alienation, Paul Simon made a controversial trip in 1986 to several townships – urban, non-white settlements in Bantustans that lacked running water and electricity, among other life necessities – to engage in fieldwork with local musicians (Meintjies 1995, 52). This trip opposed the ANC's informal academic boycott, which soft-pressed foreign governments to cease academic and cultural exchange activities with the apartheid regime. This position informed various international policy measures, most

notably of which was the United Nations' International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, passed in July of 1976. Ironically, the ANC would have no role whatsoever in Simon's decision to create Graceland.

Academics point to the fact that these boycotts while targeting white South African scholarship, had an indirect impact on diminishing any potential socio-academic progress within non-white communities. Like sanctions, informal measures, like these actions, failed to consider the obvious racial and economic nuance between social actors within an international political framework, instead wrongly treating the population as one collective entity. By 1986, the ANC realized the counterproductivity of these informal measures. Given the political climate at the time in which cross-racial movements to free Nelson Mandela were occurring internationally, they believed that Simon could add to this momentum (Meintjies 1990, 54). Even so, in a 2012 interview at the Sundance Film Festival, Simon proclaimed that had the ANC asked him for a statement of support, he "would have been very happy to do so" (Martin 2012). Despite a lack of direct involvement from established anti-apartheid activism, the album assigned moral enterprise to social actors that helped dismantle South Africa's international reputation as a racist state. Simon and his colleagues – which included male vocal group Ladysmith Black Mambazo, bassist Bakithi Kumalo, and saxophonist Barney Rachabane, among others – would create a fusion of American and South African music that would resonate with and be legitimized

by a wide audience. This is expressed through musical fluidity, which involves a mixture of “township” rhythm with Western musical idiom alongside racially integrated group membership (Bennighof 1993, 227). For example, a mbaqanga polyrhythm, a style of dance music from Soweto that incorporates Zulu and jazz elements alongside a complex rhythmic structure, permeates the entirety of *The Boy in the Bubble*. Overtop a rock bass groove, the song’s melody is played on an accordion – a through-and-through European invention – by Forere Motloheloa, a Basotho musician who did not speak English (Coplan 1991, 181). Marginalized social circles’ identities fight for moral agency and thus involve exchanges that are not through speech but through acts of performative musical expression.

Even so, lyricism in apartheid South Africa underwent heavy censorship. As a result, authors turned to Aesopian Language, a form of cryptic meaning construction through words, to circumvent this (Drewett 2003, 189). Their performance constitutes oral tradition, a concept that has been noted in IR scholarship as an “ideal vehicle for cultural resistance” (Scott 1990, 160). Rhetoric surrounding Black empowerment diametrically opposed Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd’s initiative of “separate development” – an idea driven by the foreign policy concern that black South African human development needed to occur separately for apartheid interests to flourish on the global stage (Richardson 1978, 186). Under *African Skies* criticizes this idea through cross-spatial framing. Simon uses a character named Joseph, after Ladysmith Black Mambazo’s lead vocal-

ist Joseph Shabalala, who explores the links to his Zulu ethnicity through music while also proclaiming that he is from “Tucson, Arizona” (Meintjes 1990, 61). Having Joseph rekindle his heritage through these means alludes to a dichotomy that permeates land assertion claims in apartheid states more generally: while Indigenous groups claim ethnic ties and patronage, foreign claims to the land justify their presence through economic growth, which leads to a relentless identity clash (Adam 1994, 15). This persisted in South Africa for so long due to the international community’s continued insistence on non-intervention in domestic apartheid activities.

Furthermore, the album is conveyed in the English language. It can be seen as an ideological failure by the apartheid educational system to have a marginalized group use this language of imperial control to elicit collective action. English, alongside Afrikaans, became a legally enshrined weapon against non-white natives: in 1955, post-primary curriculums became taught exclusively in these two languages (Wheeler 1961, 245). This policy was designed to prevent the mobilization of grassroots anti-apartheid moral enterprise. Instead, the policy resulted in events such as the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, where over 7,000 Zulu nationalists, who demanded an end to ‘pass’ laws that mandated all non-whites to carry internal passports limiting their freedom of movement and educational opportunities, were mercilessly killed. After this event, instead of conceding to non-white political demands, Apartheid authorities officially banned the ANC, fueling the fire of racial tensions even further (Gurney 2000, 142).

These authorities justified these laws by proclaiming it would be “too expensive” to continue delivering curriculums in a plurality of languages; this curtailing of literacy led to the sidelining of potential criticism of apartheid on the domestic level (Hirson 1981, 221). This statement is rooted in colonial rhetoric. Identical sentiments were echoed by British MP T.B. MacAulay’s “Minute on Indian Education,” a memorandum that prefaced the United Kingdom’s passage of the 1835 English Education Act within its colonies (Gupta 1995, 73). Within a South African context, this was expressed through Hendrik Verwoerd’s mission to “undo the tribal system” and “progressively transplant [non-whites] into a Western form of society,” as stated at the 1961 National Party congress (Reagan 1987, 301).

These views became reinforced by domestic broadcast law: the South African Broadcasting Corporation, or SABC, imposed a total ban on lyrics that could be interpreted as critical of the apartheid regime (Jury 1996, 99). Additionally, religious institutions such as the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, or Dutch Reformed Church, were recruited by the state to weed out content seen as contradictory to official policy on international airwaves. At the same time, they attempted to defend the country from ‘moral indecency’ – an extension of missionary activities into the postcolonial realm. Similarly, the United States believed that the advocacy of racial integration would mobilize a collective misunderstanding of South Africa’s political orientation towards communism on the global stage, thus posing an external security threat to the country’s sovereignty. To illustrate, a con-

fidential letter sent in 1983 by the US Foreign Secretary Robert Eagleburger to his South African counterpart Pik Botha outlines the potential “public humiliation” from the Soviet Union if South Africa were to make this choice (3). Despite Graceland succeeding in its lyrical temperance, the featuring of a lineup of mixed-race performers led to its ban on state-owned radio airplay; this was done in an effort to continue to uphold an ethno-nationalist and anti-communist global order.

The Voëlvy Movement

Subsequent anti-apartheid grassroots movements arose across the African continent and within the African diaspora throughout the globe. Surprisingly, most of these movements come from within South Africa’s white minority, who became a crucial force in dismantling apartheid from within. The Voëlvy, or ‘Outlaw’ Movement, formed in Johannesburg around 1989 by and for Afrikaners and toured South Africa. This scene developed parallel to black South African music circles; it was predicated on the anger of a sizeable minority of Afrikaners who became disillusioned with their government’s predatory foreign policy measures. To this end, the movement arose due to two primary factors: one, the recruitment and exploitation of lesser-educated white South Africans, who hid behind the privilege of their skin colour to evade poverty, and two, as a re-birth of South African creative culture, which had been controlled by the state as to uphold its racialist image on the international stage (Grundlingh 2004, 485).

The Gereformeerde Blues Band – whose

name is a mockery of the Dutch Reformed Church's religious and musical censorship activities – developed the most sizable following of any group in the movement. Indeed, its success has been described as “Boer Beatlemania” (Grundlingh 2004, 485). By playing blues music, an African-American conception, the band challenged the country's cultural framework since the 1960s. In accordance with official American government positions on the matter, then-Prime Minister P.W. Botha declared the emergent Hippie Movement in San Francisco as “alien and dangerous” to South African values (Grundlingh 2004, 487). Consensus on this matter was maintained for the following two decades. This stance was a result of collective self-actualization by white South Africans of their relative privilege in comparison to their non-white counterparts.

However, a critical juncture in Afrikaner privilege arose around the same time as the passage of the 1967 Defense Amendment Bill, which made two years of military service mandatory for white South African males (Berat 1989, 139). Identical to the Vietnam War draft policy, the law affirmed that university students were exempt from conscription. This meant that lesser-educated white South Africans became political pawns for South Africa's war-faring role in Namibia, Angola, and Rhodesia. As such, certain members of the Voëlvry Movement were victims of this law, including James Phillips, frontman of the punk band The Corporals, who served two years fighting in Rhodesia, as well as Dirk Uys, a former South African Defense Forces officer, who safeguarded musicians using covert tactics he learned

during his service (Jury 1996, 100). Thus, the impetus for constructing tangible moral enterprise within the movement was created by the shortcomings of the state itself to satisfy the political demands of a population it deemed as intrinsically superior.

The Voëlvry Movement's lyrical criticism was much more direct than that of Paul Simon. As members of the privileged ethnic minority, the Voëlvry could engage in more extensive dissent with fewer consequences and criticism. This is explored in Gereformeerde Blues Band's song *Sit Dit Af* (“Sit It Down”), which lunges personal attacks against Pik and P.W. Botha for being figureheads of apartheid. A translation of the song's third verse reads, “[...] it was PW's face / And next to him stands Uncle Pik / Well... I'm going to choke” (Kerkerrel 1989). Lyrical criticism of the apartheid regime was also done in irony. Moral entrepreneurs instilled rebellion in Afrikaners by corrupting the lyrics to popular South African vernacular songs. These included nursery rhymes and Boer military songs with altered lyrics, both of which were frequently chanted at Voëlvry concerts (Grundlingh 2004, 492). This coalesces with pseudonyms that members of the Voëlvry Movement adopted to protect their identities from potential arrest. Of these was Johannes Kerkerrel, whose alias translates from the Dutch for ‘church organ.’ This satirized long-standing colonial traditions that existed within South Africa and, by extension, criticized “Christian Nationalist” propaganda that was channelled through the National Party's political discourse (Jury 1996, 100).

The political ramifications of the Voëlvry

Movement on South African governmental affairs were immense. Within a year of its conception, the movement grew from its initial base of “acne-faced stoners” to garner the support of educated urban elites, which brought with it legitimacy within circles of the traditional political establishment (Grundlingh 2004, 499). Higher education institutions, such as the University of Stellenbosch, thus became breeding grounds for anti-apartheid sentiment despite remaining restricted to white enrolment. The National Party, which had held power since the advent of apartheid in 1948, split into two ideological factions: one that served to satisfy this burgeoning political dissent and another which remained hardline on apartheid policy and that relied on increased intervention from the Broederbond – an all-male, white ethnonationalist secret society that nefariously controlled governmental affairs from behind the scenes (Adam 1994, 15).

Towards the end of 1990, the National Party caved to its more progressive faction’s political demands and officially rebranded itself as a civic nationalist party. It was only at this point in South Africa’s history that political collaboration between systemic non-white movements such as the ANC and progressive factions of the white population occurred. This upset the United States, which relied on apartheid as a means of upholding the global anti-communist order; this cross-ideological and cross-racial collaboration corrupted the traditional dichotomy between patronage and economic expansion, which led to a loosening of diplomatic ties with South Africa (Manby 1995, 35).

Conclusion

Both Graceland and the Voëlvry Movement expose South African foreign policy with utmost accuracy, something inspired by its American equivalent. South Africa portrayed itself as a beacon of human rights practice on the international stage while at the same time engaging in a systematic disenfranchisement of its domestic population (Manby 1995, 37). Laws of anti-racial integration, mixed with inflammatory rhetoric informed by pseudoscientific conceptions of race, remained in place for five decades of de jure apartheid rule. Through a multifaceted approach underscored by musical performance, Paul Simon and the Voëlvry Movement, among other musical acts, would remarkably shift moral enterprise from authoritarian authority to the vox populi.

It was ultimately the regime’s uncompromising position on racial policy that led to the corruption of racialized and anti-communist order; the system, in essence, became its own worst enemy. Yet, international relations scholars still grapple with mitigating historical cleavages in human development and infrastructure that still plague non-white South Africans en masse to guide post-racial South Africa into being a global power. What remains clear, however, is that the political reclamation of pre-apartheid ethnic identity through moral enterprise has resulted in a concerted effort to overcome geopolitical hypocrisy and construct a pluralist state underscored by a constitution that mandates equitable opportunities for all South Africans (Manby 1995, 51).

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*N.B. The title for this essay is taken from the “The Establishment Blues”, recorded by Sixto Rodriguez, an American folk singer who became an “accidental pop star” in South Africa after unsold records from the United States were – and unbeknownst to the artist – shipped overseas to record shops in the townships. Refer to the film Searching for Sugar Man for more.