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Paul Simon's *Graceland* and the Anti-Apartheid Cultural Boycott

"Culture flows like water. It isn't something that can just be cut off." – Paul Simon

Introduction

In 2012 Paul Simon went to South Africa to perform a concert in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the critically acclaimed album *Graceland*. Simon was also excited to reunite with the musicians who had worked on the album with him. He found much had changed in the country. Apartheid had ended eighteen years earlier in 1994. When Simon went to South Africa in 1986 there had been a global cultural boycott against the country. Simon, who had completely disregarded the boycott, had not been welcome into the country by leading anti-apartheid activists. Upon his return, in 2012, the African National Congress (ANC) leaders who were against him in 1986 were now glad to see him and meet with him. Additionally, there were no death threats against him as there had been in 1986. Liberation leaders expressed that they felt that the album had a profound impact on anti-apartheid resistance around the globe. Simon's changing reception reflects broader changes in anti-apartheid activists' approach to the cultural boycott—changes that debates about *Graceland* had helped to cause. This paper explores how Simon's disregard of the global cultural boycott of South Africa inadvertently caused the ANC to make its policy more lenient and therefore more effective in combating the apartheid regime.

A Brief History of Anti-Apartheid Boycotts

For almost fifty years (1948-1994), black South Africans were subjected to severe and violent oppression by the minority-led apartheid regime. In order to combat the regime, the United Nations along with the ANC had enacted boycotts, which evolved and changed in many ways. Early boycotts, which involved culture and sports, were sanctioned by the United Nations in the 1950s. The sports boycott was felt first in 1964 (before then it had been relaxed) when South African sports teams were barred from the Olympics (they weren't included again until 1988) (Duncan 2016, 68). The cultural boycott from the 1950s was ill-enforced regarding "inward" cultural interactions and was stricter on "outward" cultural interactions (Herbstein 1987, 33). This meant that it was still very possible for musicians to come to South Africa and hold concerts; it was hard to prevent this without global support. In December of 1981, the UN voted to endorse a stricter boycotts of culture and sports (Beaubien 1982, 8). By 1984 the boycott also included academia. The academic boycott started as a total boycott but had quickly begun to put a strain on activism. Many global anti-apartheid movements gained attention on college campuses. Academic scholarship proved important in the spread of anti-apartheid knowledge globally, and it was decided that excluding South African academics from exchange of knowledge was, in fact, a constraint for the cause (Hyslop 2006, 60). By 1989, the academic boycott turned into a selective boycott. The ANC was able to pick and choose which academic interactions were allowable, which proved even more difficult (Hyslop 2006, 60). Economic divestment was also practiced as a means to constrict the country economically. However, many countries, including the United States, had a hard time voting to enact such divestments of the vast amount of wealth entangled with South Africa, so this form of boycott took longer to affect the country.

However, as the anti-apartheid struggle became increasingly violent, attention expanded across the globe. Many musical artists began taking a political stance in their songs as tensions grew, some of the most notable being Stevie Wonder, Peter Gabriel, and The Specials. Global outcry made way for a stricter cultural boycott as people demanded action from their governments. But what exactly does it take for a boycott of this scale to be effective?

There are many goals of a boycott and they are hard to maintain and enforce without support. The goals of a boycott, according to University of Johannesburg professor Jane Duncan, “are important tools for change; they isolate oppressive governments, preventing them from normalizing relations with the outside world and cut off important global supports” (Duncan 2016, 60). Duncan argues that without support both internally and externally, a cultural boycott cannot be successful (Duncan 2016, 61). Both the United Nations and the ANC agreed that a boycott would be effective in isolating the apartheid regime and delegitimizing them as a government. Additionally, a cultural boycott would send a message around the globe that the violent, racist disenfranchisement of an entire group of people would not be tolerable on the world stage. But such a large, all-encompassing boycott is tricky to enforce nation-wide and globally.

Although many activist groups were pushing towards a stricter cultural boycott before *Graceland*, there were many mixed reactions. As time went on and the regime became more oppressive, the boycott became stricter and broader. Many black South Africans feared that the boycott would further isolate them, therefore stifling any chance of self-improvement (Beaubien 1982, 16). A common counter-argument can be seen in exiled South African journalist Denis Herbstein’s argument that the boycott gave black South Africans the platform needed to develop their own artistic talents and enrich their culture (Herbstein 1987, 34). With a rise in talent and

homegrown culture, black South Africans may become more unified in freedom struggles and resistance. With conflicting views in the country there was a strong reliance on activists around the world, especially in the United States, home to a lively anti-apartheid movement (Goodman 2008). However, American activists had a hard time imposing any boycott on South Africa because the US government wasn't on their side. The US voting record in the UN for resolutions regarding South Africa was pretty dismal: the General Assembly in 1981 proposed sixteen different resolutions and the US only voted yes on two (Beaubien 1982, 9). There was a vast amount of wealth invested between the US and South Africa, explaining the American leaders' resistance to divestment. Without the US government condemning South Africa, activists had a tough time convincing people in the United States to practice the cultural boycott. Eventually the United States did divest from South Africa in Congress's Comprehensive Anti- Apartheid Act passed in 1986 (Goodman 2008, 159).

The passing of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act coincided with the release of Simon's *Graceland* album. Surrounding this action, global activism reached an all-time high, helping to lead to the regime's demise. From the mid-1980s popular musical artists began to outwardly condemn the apartheid regime. A notable example was the seventieth birthday celebration of Nelson Mandela in 1988 in London (Mandela was still in prison at the time). Many artists gathered together to celebrate his birthday and send a message of distaste for the brutality of the apartheid regime. The phrase "Free Nelson Mandela" became the new slogan for anti-apartheid activism. In this climate, Simon inadvertently set off a global uproar about the cultural boycott.

The Making of Paul Simon's *Graceland*

During the height of the cultural boycott, Simon was compelled to go to South Africa in order to collaborate with black South African artists. In the summer of 1984 Paul Simon was given a tape which had a recording of a Soweto band, Juluka. He was so inspired by the music he immediately planned a trip to Johannesburg in order to record with acts like Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Stimela, the Boyo Boys and Tao Ea Matsekha (*Under African Skies*, 2014). Together they recorded hundreds of hours of music in Johannesburg, in October of 1985. The lyrics and the mixing of the album were done in New York City. Simon stated he felt very uncomfortable in South Africa because of the racial tensions that he admitted he had underestimated. Before the album was released, in May of 1986, Simon flew Ladysmith Black Mambazo as well as the band he had recorded with in South Africa to New York City to perform on American television show, *Saturday Night Live*, and received immediate praise. Following the album's release in August of 1986, Simon and many of the South African musicians he recorded with went on an extremely successful world-wide tour. While the album was a great success, it was still surrounded by controversy.

Simon was admittedly ignorant of the extent of the oppressive political climate in South Africa at the time. However, he was still aware of the tensions in the country and decided to ask his friend and fellow American music artist and anti-apartheid activist, Harry Belafonte, for advice about going to the country. Belafonte advised him to seek permission from the ANC's president, Oliver Tambo. Simon did not heed the warning and went to South Africa. Simon stated that he didn't believe he was doing anything wrong because he wasn't performing for segregated audiences and he wasn't recording for the government; he went specifically to find black South African musicians. Simon stated that he "wasn't going for political motivations, it was for the music" (Holden 1986). The Musicians Union of South Africa (MUSA), a small trade

union made up of about seven hundred black South African artists, unanimously decided that Simon coming to collaborate would be beneficial to them (Fricke, 1986). In contrast, the ANC, other activist groups, and the UN would express strong objections against Simon's visit and collaboration.

Response to *Graceland*

The response to *Graceland* was mixed. Those involved with the album believed it would be beneficial for black South Africans. In the United States, the album won two Grammy's (was nominated for four), has sold over sixteen million copies, and created three Billboard top one hundred hits. Musicians involved with *Graceland*, like Joseph Shabalala of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, felt the collaboration was important because it was an example of a black man working with a white man with a positive outcome (*Under African Skies*, 2014). Ray Phiri, South African *Graceland* guitarist, said "music is like a religion, it brings people together. It helps find solutions to problems. This album did it" (*Under African Skies*, 2014). Hugh Masekela, a black South African musician who was on the *Graceland* tour, argued that he was happy with the collaboration because it was promoting growth amongst black South Africans. Before this black South African music had been in limbo, he and other musicians suggested, never moving forward because of all the restrictions placed on them by the ANC and the UN (Denselow, 2012). Backing up this argument, it should be noted that all organization of the cultural boycott was being conducted by activists in exile, the UN and various groups from abroad not taking into the consideration the inevitable constraint for the everyday black citizen of South Africa (Nixon 1994, 167). It was clear the musicians involved in the project felt the experience would ultimately benefit the resistance, but leading anti-apartheid activists felt differently.

The album received a lot of controversy within South Africa and abroad. Dali Tambo, son of ANC president Oliver Tambo, and the leader of a group called Artists Against Apartheid, stated, “Paul coming was a threat because it wasn’t sanctioned by the ANC, it wasn’t the right time” (*Under African Skies*, 2014). The ANC felt that by simply coming to South Africa, whether the intentions were political or not, “you become part of apartheid’s attempt to become legitimized” (*Under African Skies*, 2014). The United Nations blacklisted Simon for having disregarded the boycott, adding him to the list of people had violated the cultural boycott. Being on the list meant the UN sanctioned a boycott of Paul Simon. Many, like American music historian Charles Hamm, argued that the album did little for the collective struggle against apartheid despite giving many opportunities to the individual black South Africans involved with the album and subsequent tour (Hamm 1989, 300). He also argued that groups like Ladysmith Black Mambazo were already very successful within the country and the only new opportunity they gained was more wealth (Hamm 1989, 300). South African music culture historian Andrew Tracey argued that, in the short term, the album was just another example of a black man helping a white man do his job. Paul Simon was still in the front of the song, mirroring the social relationships of black and white men throughout history (Hamm 1989, 302).

While in the eyes of many Americans the album, as well as the controversy surrounding it, made them curious about what was happening in South Africa, the measure of how many people actually became motivated anti-apartheid activists because of music is impossible to determine. But it is clear that with more attention on the regime, government agencies were forced to act against the regime. In the direct future, many more sanctions against apartheid would come about including the above-mentioned Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Acts. Seeing the musicians perform with Paul Simon as well as growing media coverage put human faces to

the apartheid struggle rather than names in a newspaper (*Under African Skies*, 2014). It should be noted as well that Simon didn't collect any funds from the successful *Graceland* tour and instead paid the musicians well and donated his portion in thirds; one third to an anti-apartheid charity, one third to the United Negro College Fund, and one third to various charities in the cities they played (Nixon 1994, 165).

Boycott Reconsiderations

The *Graceland* collaboration highlighted flaws with the policies of the cultural boycott. Following the response to *Graceland*, the ANC was forced to reevaluate their strategy regarding the cultural boycott. Much of the discontent with the boycott came from local South African artists. As the artists became increasingly frustrated, and organized, they held a meeting in Amsterdam (Hamm 1989, 168). The meeting consisted of members of the MUSA and activists in exile. The goal of the meeting was to develop stipulations for a more relaxed boycott, contending that “world isolation of apartheid had to be complemented by international exposure to creative energies of the South African Artists” (Hamm 1989, 168). A looming problem with the boycotts was that they were run by ANC members in exile who therefore were not privy to the struggles of the artists in the country. Artists campaigned for a selective boycott, one that they would be in charge of. Barbara Masekela, secretary of culture for the ANC, agreed that anti-apartheid culture had to be seen around the world. Citing the Freedom Charter, Masekela justified the decision to relax the boycott policies toward collaborations between South African and foreign artists: “The doors of learning and culture shall be opened... All cultural treasures of mankind shall be opened to all by free exchange of ideals and contact with other lands” (Masekela 1987, 19). However, Masekela maintained that “cultural boycott—in conjunction with other mandatory and

comprehensive sanctions—will have an effect that will force a speedy resolution in the South African crisis” (Masekela 1987, 19).

Thus, the ANC, still believing the cultural boycott to be essential in their activism, decided to adopt a few concessions and relax their policies. Artists wanting to come to South Africa or collaborate with black South African artists (music, art, theatre, or literature) still had to be vetted by the ANC, something Paul Simon had failed to do in 1984, but exchanges were more encouraged. Princeton University professor Rob Nixon argues that there was a vast contrast in culture and the apartheid struggle from when the boycotts were first enacted to the late 1980s when they began to dissolve. Simply put, when the boycotts were first enacted they were more effective. The globe was rapidly changing by the mid-1980s, technology and media had been making great strides providing new avenues for cultural consumption, making it increasingly difficult to stifle black South African culture exposure. As curiosity grew it also became apparent that the spread of black South African culture around the world would be helpful to the struggle. Artists were able to spread anti-apartheid views through theatre, song, and literature faster than the ANC could, proving to be an asset to the overall goals of the ANC and humanizing the cause globally.

Conclusion

Looking back at the album twenty-five years later, attitudes shifted. Dali Tambo stated recently that in the end he respects Paul Simon and knows he didn't mean any harm with the album, and he recognizes the importance of *Graceland* (*Under African Skies*, 2014). It can be perfectly legitimate to recognize the importance and the influence the album had on global anti-

apartheid awareness, but still be frustrated that Simon was careless and insensitive in the way he chose to disregard the boycott and collaborate with black South African musicians. The difficulty with the South African boycott was that one group of people—white South African officials—were being boycotted for their oppressive policies and grave human rights violations, however, ordinary black South Africans felt the brunt of the boycott the most. Many artists, like Joseph Shabalala, felt the boycott was just adding another layer of oppression (*Under African Skies*, 2014). In the end, the album was able to highlight the rich culture of black South Africa on a world stage, giving a face to the struggles of apartheid around the world as well as influencing a more relaxed cultural boycott.

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