

Celebrity and Protest in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

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Abstract

This special issue proposes to juxtapose accounts of anti-apartheid protest and solidarity efforts with the field of celebrity studies in order to deepen our understanding of both through their conjunction. As our contributors show, opponents of apartheid in South Africa and beyond were cognisant of the importance of cultivating ties with local and global media, as well as with individuals who enjoyed easy access to the media as a consequence of their “celebrity capital” (Olivier Driessens, 2013). This introduction to the special issue revisits the notion of “networked celebrity” (Fred Turner and Christine Larson, 2015) in order to set the stage for the case histories that follow. Rather than considering the actions of individual women and men of renown with respect either to their individual “consecration” as celebrities (Bourdieu, 1994), or their capacity to extract individual benefit from it, the emphasis falls on understanding various manifestations of celebrity culture that take their bearings from the collaborative and decentred nature of the global protest against apartheid. The special issue challenges the individualising emphasis of celebrity studies and its predominantly metropolitan orientation, offering

in the process a new set of perspectives on the transnational dimensions of the global anti-apartheid struggle.

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In 1989, BBC presenter and music critic Robin Denselow termed The Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute Concert the “biggest and most spectacular pop-political event of all time, a more political version of Live Aid with the aim of raising consciousness rather than just money” (1990, 276). A photograph in the *Free Nelson Mandela Festival Concert Book* produced to commemorate the event introduces, in strikingly visual form, a cluster of concerns located at the interface between celebrity culture and anti-apartheid political protest that this special issue seeks both to explore and to revisit. The photograph in question depicts Jim Kerr, lead singer of the Glasgow rock band “Simple Minds,” who worked closely with impresario Tony Hollingsworth and with Jerry Dammers of “The Specials” to inaugurate the birthday tribute (Benson and Nickson 1988, 112). In this portrait by Tim Jarvis, Kerr is pictured onstage at Wembley stadium—his arms clasped behind his head, his expression spellbound as he surveys the 72,000-strong crowd before him. The composition of the image is almost monochromatic, save for a single red spotlight that forms a smudge of colour in the lower left hand corner of the frame. Kerr is lit from behind. A thin, sinuous band of light traces the contours of his raised arms, and makes a halo of his dark hair. The singer is transfigured through codes of visual representation that are deeply reliant on religious iconography. Kerr has become literally auratic, but his transfiguration is not only a matter of the retrospect that the photographic image confers. The secular redemption that his live stage presence offers in the name of Nelson Mandela, and that his celebrity status promises to convert into fungible currency in support of the anti-apartheid struggle, provides a foretaste of a more encompassing redemption as yet unachieved: the liberation of South Africa and of her political prisoners from the shackles of apartheid.

As redemptive cipher, Jim Kerr's presence on stage and the mediation of that presence for a further 600 million distant television viewers in 67 countries, interacted profoundly with Nelson Mandela's absence. Mandela's own face in its seventieth year could not, of course, have been known to the contemporary audience since the circulation of his image was banned by the South African government. An old image of a much younger Mandela, now segmented into strips reminiscent of prison bars and integrated into the foreground of the stage design, did however provide a form of visual surrogacy for the imprisoned leader. As the greatest musical celebrities of the day mounted the stage in their turn, their presence consolidated Mandela's already established reputation: a reputation, Rob Nixon reminds us, that would come to achieve "near-messianic dimensions" (1991, 43). The imprisoned political leader's status as an "absent signifier" in Keyan G. Tomaselli and Arnold Shepperson's apposite phrase (2009), worked precisely to enhance media fascination with him, as Nixon has argued (1991, 44).

Over the course of the decades since Mandela's release from prison on February 11, 1990, his iconic status has been amply documented across a variety of disciplines. Scholars have asserted his talent for political performance (Lodge 2006: ix); his ability to establish the terms of the media narrative about himself (Boehmer 2008, 124); as well as the lines of continuity between the use of his persona post-1990 and its earlier strategic deployment in the anti-apartheid struggle in Britain from the late 1970s onward (see Klein 2009). For Mandela, the young activist, as for others in his circle, the idea that celebrity could become a facet of political resistance might well have seemed scarcely credible, however cannily the early opponents of apartheid sought to use the media in the service of the struggle (see Zalmanovich and Evans, this issue). Yet granting the force of this incredulity, and equally, the force of the anachronism that threatens to attach itself to the descriptor "celebrity" when used of the "young" Mandela in retrospect, does not mean that the field of "celebrity studies" has nothing to offer us when assessing the power of Mandela's spiralling celebritisation, or when considering how the international anti-apartheid movement recruited the fame of others as one of the most foundational strategies in its arsenal.

The Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute Concert stood at the peak of a long campaign that elicited global support for the struggle against apartheid through

exploiting the resources of celebrity culture from as early as the 1950s and 1960s. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, opponents of apartheid, both in South Africa and outside the country, were cognisant of the importance of cultivating ties with local and global media, as well as with individuals who enjoyed easy access to the media as a consequence of their fame as writers, musicians, intellectuals or high-profile clergymen. Activists were alive, in other words, to the power of “celebrity capital” as Olivier Driessens reworks the term: that is to say, the influence that accrues to the celebrity as a consequence of her “recognisability, or [...] accumulated media visibility that results from recurrent media representations” (2013: 552). Anti-apartheid activists intuited that celebrity capital might be harnessed to amplify awareness of what Luc Boltanski has memorably termed “distant suffering” (1999). Media scholar, Lilie Chouliaraki reminds us that the brand value of certain celebrities legitimizes their “function as a source of collective moralization.” Through their performances of empathy, she points out, celebrities add an “implicit pedagogical dimension” to the public sphere “that engages public sensibilities at the level of the imagination” (2013, 86). In Chouliaraki’s account, the celebrity is a “communicative figure” who serves to articulate “aspirational performances of solidarity” (104), thus impacting larger collectives. On these grounds, we maintain that the pairing of “anti-apartheid protest” with “celebrity” stands to deepen our understanding of both these objects of study precisely through their conjunction.

This does not mean to say that our intervention sits entirely comfortably within existing paradigms of celebrity studies. Together with Graeme Turner, we acknowledge the bias in the field that Turner identifies when he argues that much of its scholarship tends to be drawn from “a limited pool of individual celebrities” (2010, 13). As a corrective to the individualising orientation of the field, we challenge the prevalent neoliberal narratives of celebrity which typically train our attention on the story of a singular individual. At the same time, we challenge the Northern or metropolitan orientation of much existing scholarship. Working from a set of case histories that unfold in relation to the global anti-apartheid struggle, we use the category of “networked celebrity” (Turner and Larson 2015) to unearth solidaristic performances of celebrity that cannot be reduced to familiar forms of humanitarian advocacy whose analysis currently accounts for much of the research issuing from the field of celebrity studies in its engagements with the global South.

For the purposes of our argument, the concept of networked celebrity in our understanding of the term needs to be differentiated from its uses elsewhere. The term “networked celebrity” is pivotal for Fred Turner and Christine Larson’s account of the emergence of “a newly influential kind of celebrity, the network intellectual” in contemporary entrepreneurial culture (2015, 55). While we are aware that an emphasis on the interaction between figures of renown and an economy of circulation disseminated through a variety of media platforms brings our use of this concept into conversation with Turner and Larson’s model, we are not primarily interested in the power of (digital) social networking “to produce both ideas and reputations”—concerns that sit at the centre of their analysis (55). The networks upon which we focus, unlike those of the network intellectual, are often temporary, diffuse and fragmented. They take their bearings from the collaborative and decentred nature of the global protest against apartheid as a “movement of movements” in Håkan Thörn’s phrase (2006, 8; see also Grant 2017, Skinner 2017, Konieczna and Skinner, eds., 2019, among others). Rather than considering the actions of individual women and men of renown with respect either to their individual “consecration” (Bourdieu, 1994), or with respect to their capacity to extract individual benefit from this consecration, we propose to excavate various sets of relations between a range of figures (not always typically deemed “celebrities”) and organized acts of protest against apartheid in the public sphere. We consider the women and men who surface in the pages that follow—individuals as varied as Jean-Paul Sartre, Trevor Huddleston, Nelson Mandela, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Wole Soyinka and Todd Matshikiza—as nodes in ramified and expansive networks of solidarity whose constraints, contingencies and affordances are themselves a dimension of the story that we seek to recount here.¹ This repositioning has the advantage of opening both objects of study, celebrity and protest, more fully to their *transnational* dimensions while responding to Graeme Turner’s call for increased scholarship concerning the “social function of the cultural formation of celebrity” (2010, 15).

Martha Evans’s contribution to this special issue with which the volume begins, “Nelson Mandela’s ‘Show Trials’: An Analysis of Press Coverage of Mandela’s Court Appearances,” illustrates the working of networked celebrity in the early years of the anti-apartheid movement. The considerable reputation that Nelson Mandela

garnered in the local and international public spheres during the Rivonia trial was not solely due to the power of his oration from the dock on 20 April 1964, Evans points out. It also resulted from the work of fellow activists, Ruth First and Ahmed Kathrada, who had previously helped to create and to sustain Mandela's media persona as the "Black Pimpernel." If the infrastructures of the African National Congress and the Communist Party of South Africa secured Mandela's physical well-being while underground, so too activists like First and Kathrada mobilized personal and professional connections with local and foreign journalists in order to secure coverage of Mandela—even at his most clandestine. Similarly, Evans reminds us that the decision for Mandela to speak from the dock at the opening of the defence in the Rivonia Trial, was a group decision. Yet the speech would constitute a pivotal moment in what was thereafter often referred to as "Mandela's trial," with powerful consequences for the later Anti-Apartheid Movement's (AAM) choice of Mandela as synecdoche for the struggle.

Working similarly within the context of the early years of resistance to apartheid in South Africa, Tal Zalmanovich's article "'Trevor is 'News': Celebrity as Protest in the Early Anti-Apartheid Struggle, 1948–1960" shows how the radical Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston owed his reputation as a fearless defender of black South Africans to his positioning within intricate networks of white British and South African liberals, journalists, businessmen, politicians, and prominent members of the Anglican elite, but no less crucially, to his emplacement within networks comprised of black artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals whose activities centred on Huddleston's parish of Sophiatown in Johannesburg. "Celebrity has always required the reproduction and circulation of the celebrity's image, words, or voice," Sharon Marcus observes (2015, 3). Indeed, Huddleston's connections provided him with ready access to foreign and local media, also affording a privileged point of entry into literary circles in South Africa and Britain. The book publication of his memoir *Naught for your Comfort* in 1956 built on the strength of these connections to consolidate Huddleston's authority on all matters South Africa. Huddleston's membership within the British elite, together with his prominence within the Anglican establishment and within broader ecumenical circles, Zalmanovich argues, ensured that his claims to speak on behalf of black South Africans achieved wide resonance, a

factor of considerable significance when Huddleston came to assume his position as head of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Zalmanovich's analysis encourages us to move beyond the thematisation of celebrity as a form of secular redemption with which this discussion began. Her focus on Huddleston's celebrity within the Christian faith community responds to historian T. D. Mufamadi's call to scholars to reinstate religious experience as a dimension of the anti-apartheid struggle (2011, 4). Zalmanovich's contribution to the special issue intersects a growing body of writing currently emerging in this regard (Skinner 2009; Bonner 2010; Macqueen 2017; Zalmanovich 2019). Religious activism is one component of the conversation around celebrity that various contributors to this special issue maintain within its pages. The salience of Christian activism as a backdrop for Jean-Paul Sartre's involvement with the French anti-apartheid organisation initiated by Jean-Jacques de Felice and Elizabeth Mathiot, the *Comité français de liaison contre l'apartheid*, detailed in Tal Sela's contribution "Not Merely a Newsworthy Commodity: Jean-Paul Sartre's Engagement in the Struggle against Apartheid," reinforces the importance of Christian faith communities in supplying a crucial institutional infrastructure to anti-apartheid activists.

For the readership of the review *Christianisme social* who would have encountered the writings of existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre on apartheid in its pages, Christianity no doubt informed individual understandings of the obligation to remedy social suffering deriving from racism. Yet, viewed from a different angle, Jean-Paul Sartre's association with the activities of the *Comité* had less to do with such considerations than with what Sela, basing himself partly on the work of Patrick Baert (2018), identifies as "the complex disposition of mutual relations and interdependence between different social actors involved in the celebrity-making/maintaining of the public intellectual." Through analysis of the relatively few occasions on which Sartre explicitly identified himself with the struggle against apartheid, Sela suggests that "Sartre's celebrity as a public intellectual augments the memory of his contribution beyond its actual proportions, on the one hand, while this self-same celebrity was strategically instrumentalised by the activists more centrally involved in the French struggle, on the other." Sela's painstaking close analysis of texts generated in the wake of Sartre's association with anti-apartheid activism, or texts on apartheid penned

by Sartre himself, prompts renewed consideration of the place of anti-colonial movements in French public opinion in the aftermath of the Algerian War of Independence, as well as a reconsideration of the impact of Third Worldist political paradigms in framing expressions of anti-apartheid resistance in France. Sartre's refusal to accept the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964 occupies a central place in Sela's analysis, providing a fascinating point of intersection with Karin Berkman's investigation of the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka's response to the politics of race embedded within the institution of the Nobel Prize, to which we will return below.

If Sela foregrounds the global dimensions of the phenomenon of intellectual celebrity, Andrea Thorpe's "'A Black Rather Well-Known South African Recently Arrived in London': Critical responses to Todd Matshikiza's *Chocolates for My Wife*" reminds us that celebrity, broadly speaking, is "also often culturally 'local,'" to draw on Su Holmes and Sean Redmond's insight (2010, 7). Certain fault lines between the local and the global are made visible through Thorpe's analysis of the responses of the talented writer, composer and journalist, Todd Matshikiza, to his exile in Britain. Through reconstructing responses to the publication of Matshikiza's autobiography, Thorpe investigates how the "multiplicitous" dimensions of Matshikiza's "hybrid, polymathic celebrity" were "delimited, by Matshikiza himself, by his publisher and by the news media." The debates concerning Matshikiza's text during the early 1960s in Britain, Thorpe claims, foreshadow later debates about the role of literature as a vehicle for political protest in South Africa of the 1980s. If her reading serves to orient us to these later developments, it is also the case that the tacit set of expectations that Thorpe uncovers concerning the role that Matshikiza was expected to play in Britain as an exoticised representative of black South Africa is reminiscent of the expectations of metropolitan audiences following the award of the Nobel Prize to Wole Soyinka in 1986 which Karin Berkman addresses.

Berkman's analysis of Soyinka's response to the Nobel Prize, "Literary Celebrity and Political Activism: Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize Lecture and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle" continues the theme of networked literary celebrity running through this special issue. Unlike Sartre, Soyinka does not repudiate the award although his standing as the first black African writer to have a Nobel Prize for literature conferred upon him makes straightforward acceptance impossible. Berkman persuasively shows

how Soyinka chose instead to devote his Nobel Prize lecture to the “depravities of apartheid” thus enfolded within it “a far-reaching critique of European racism that invalidates the exonerating construal of South African exceptionalism.” In her reading, Soyinka “deliberately and subversively” exploits the cultural assumptions that underlie the Nobel Prize in order to frame apartheid as an “extension of European constructions of race.” At the levels of form, content and institutional history, as Berkman astutely observes, Soyinka’s indictment of apartheid “is conditioned by the material considerations at play in its delivery, that is, by the apparatus of celebrity insistently present in the moment of the address.”

Counterbalancing the focus on high or canonical culture in this special issue, the contributions of Namara Burki and Mychal Matsemela Odom and Daniel Bankole Widener draw the discussion of celebrity and protest back into the domain of popular culture. Burki’s “*The Gods must be Crazy, or the Rhetoric of Apartheid: A (Re)evaluation of Jamie Uys’s Film in the Context of French Anti-Apartheid Solidarity*” revisits Uys’s “slapstick comedy” in the context of cultural manifestations of protest against apartheid in France of the period, offering a perspective at one remove from Sela’s investigation of Jean-Paul Sartre. Burki ties the positive reception of the film among French audiences, and the limited traction of protest initiated by anti-apartheid activists who campaigned against it, to ideological divisions within a French solidarity movement that “relegated the anti-apartheid cause to the whims of the French political party apparatus.” Activists largely failed to impact the film’s mitigation of apartheid and, indeed, of colonial racism, through the devices of comedy. Uys’s lowbrow “blockbuster” film was immensely successful, Burki shows, its circulation unimpeded in a context where recognizably high cultural instances of expressive culture like Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winton Ntshona’s *The Island* typically catalysed more successful interventions on the part of French anti-apartheid activists. This state of affairs contrasts sharply with Odom and Widener’s analysis of the intersection between celebrity, popular entertainment, cultural boycott, and local black political struggles in Los Angeles of the 1980s.

Odom and Widener’s article “From South Africa to South Central L.A.: Transnational Black Protest, Celebrity and the Cultural Boycott” proceeds from the understanding that Los Angeles constituted a crucial site of transnational black activism. Activism

around the cultural boycott, they claim, drew together a variety of black radical organisations in Los Angeles including the small but highly influential “Unity in Action” (UIA) grouping, a project of the left nationalist Patrice Lumumba Coalition, and allowed these formations to establish common ground in the face of internal ideological divisions. The actions of UIA, the authors observe, succeeded in “[injecting] politics into spheres of life, such as mainstream entertainment, where it is usually absent.” Odom and Widener’s detailed account of the UIA’s activities shows the organisation’s strategic awareness of the singularity of its field of action—the glittering celebrity culture of Los Angeles—and puts on display its notable success not merely in compelling entertainers to “honour the boycott but also to become active members of the struggle or risk losing prestige, authenticity, and ultimately, wealth.”

Like Odom and Widener, Myra Ann Houser’s article “‘We Are Worried Mothers:’ A Panel of ‘Ordinary South Africans’ on US Capitol Hill” focuses on the anti-apartheid struggle in the United States, juxtaposing an account of the well-known picket in front of the South African embassy in Washington over whose course notable African American celebrities were arrested with an examination of the role of “ordinary” South Africans in cementing a negative view of apartheid in the United States. In 1986, the Free South Africa Movement (FSAM) organized a Congressional hearing of black South Africans on Capitol Hill during which mothers and children, doctors and lawyers, described their lives under apartheid. The hearing, Houser argues, saw the emergence of “the subaltern as self-advocate” turning its black South African participants into “celebrities of a sort.” In contrast, however, with the relative immunity enjoyed by their larger-than-life celebrity counterparts, many of those who spoke out during the Congressional hearing would face state-sponsored harassment, even death, on their return to South Africa. Building on the “momentum that the already famous had crafted,” Houser observes, these ordinary black South Africans “themselves experienced a brief, and sometimes tragic, fame.”

This iteration of the making of “ordinary celebrities” troubles the boundaries of what we conventionally take celebrity culture to constitute. Clergymen and children, philosophers and political prisoners seldom make their entry into mainstream analyses of celebrity culture. But that, we feel, is all to the good. We are aware that the case

histories we present far from exhaust the productive coupling of celebrity and protest in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle. We can only gesture towards a range of topics that still stand to be explored. How, for example, might the Afro-Asian, Cuban and Soviet networks of a figure like Alex La Guma addressed in the work of Monica Popescu and Christopher J. Lee be reappraised when the specific feature of economies of renown in the Eastern Bloc are taken into consideration (Popescu 2010, Lee 2017)? Then again, Miriam Makeba's exile in Guinea has recently attracted renewed scrutiny. How does the *dirigiste* production of national culture in post-independence Guinea trade on Makeba's celebrity, and what are its pan-African dimensions?² To pose such questions is to join the contributors to this special issue in their commitment to positioning the intersection between celebrity culture and anti-apartheid political protest as a robust site for scholarly intervention. It is our hope that the conversation we have initiated will generate additional research that refuses to trivialize celebrity culture as seemingly incompatible with the high moral earnestness of the anti-apartheid struggle, positioning it instead as integral to the lived experience of forging political solidarity within and across national borders.

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¹ For studies of the role of anti-apartheid expressive culture in forging networks of "cultural solidarity" in the era of decolonization and beyond, see Helgesson, Bethlehem and Han, ed. (2018) as well as Bethlehem, Dalamba and Phalafala, ed. (2019).

² For explorations of Makeba exile in Guinea that address these topics without evoking celebrity studies as an explicit theoretical framework, see Bethlehem 2017, as well as Hashachar 2017; 2019.