Ruth Feldstein

"The World Was On Fire": Black Women Entertainers and Transnational Activism in the 1950s

7 ears before Maya Angelou was a famous author, dancer, or poet laureate at Bill Clinton's 1993 presidential inauguration, she was a young black woman living in Manhattan and trying to build a name for herself in the entertainment industry (Figure 1). Looking back on those formative days, Angelou recalled one night in the late 1950s when she had some free time and was trying to figure out what to do. Jazz vocalist Abbey Lincoln was singing at a club in Greenwich Village; Malcolm X, the charismatic leader of the 116th Street Mosque No. 7 in Harlem, was giving a speech; and Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba was attending meetings at the United Nations. With those choices, Angelou wondered, who could know where to go (1)?

Angelou was part of a loosely connected cohort of black performers who came of age professionally and politically in New York in the second half of the 1950s, amid a prevailing sense that entertainment, cultural innovation, and a politics of black emancipation could reinforce each other in unprecedented ways (2). Some black artists chose to affiliate publicly with civil rights, on stage and off, while others supported black freedom struggles in less direct ways. Songs such as "Fables for Faubus," by jazz giant Charles Mingus, overtly mocked the



Figure 1. Maya Angelou (1928–) is best known today for writing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and reading her poetry at President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993. But when this photo was taken during the 1957 Caribbean Calypso Festival in New York, Angelou had been touring as a singer and dancer. She settled in the city the next year and began to write and organize in support of civil rights and African liberation. Angelou was part of a cohort of black women entertainers who mixed politics and culture in the crossroads of New York and beyond. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Charles Mingus, overtly mocked the white Arkansas governor and segregation supporter, Orval Faubus. Harry Belafonte's hits such as Greenwich Village, on a movie set in Hollywood, performing before a live television audience, or at an international music or film festival

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"Day-O" and "Jamaica Farewell" did not speak to the headlines of the day, but away from recording studios and nightclubs, Belafonte advised and supported civil rights organizers. Regardless of the specific choices performers made, it felt like "the world was on fire," as Angelou put it, evoking a time and place when artists, entertainers, and intellectuals with disparate personal and performance styles, class, regional, and national backgrounds, and political perspective, all came together in one city (3).

Black women were among the entertainers who became prominent in these overlapping worlds of civil rights politics and entertainment in the 1950s. They felt, in the words of actress Ruby Dee, that this "was a time of giving birth and of getting born into a wider concept of ourselves as actors, and into a heightened sense of art and the Struggle as inseparable bedmates" (4). As activist-entertainers, however, they also stood out. In their public performances and their political protests-and crucially, in the myriad instances when the lines between those blurredmany black women drew attention to unequal relationships between blacks and whites and to relationships between men and women. Whether they were at a jazz club in in France, black women entertainers such as Angelou, Dee, Miriam Makeba, Nina Simone, Abbey Lincoln, Odetta, and Cicely Tyson all drew attention to the fact that they were women and black. In all sorts of ways, they insisted that the liberation they desired could not separate race from sex. Because they had fans around the world and were not all American born, their activism had international dimensions. Through black women's work as entertainers, popular culture and civil rights together crossed borders (5).

This essay suggests that to understand the interconnections between politics and culture, between domestic and international relations in the 1950s, and between the civil rights movement and women's liberation, we must expand the realm in which we see people acting politically. As scholars and teachers it is all too easy to "segregate" these categories and offer a trajectory of social movements in the 1960s into the 1970s that runs sequentially from civil rights to second-wave feminism. However, when we consider gender and race, and culture and politics in the 1950s in relation, our strategies for teaching and the stories we teach change; we see two pivotal social movements in the twentieth century developing in tandem. Certainly, ministers, marches, activist leaders, grassroots organizers, and legislation were important to the way that civil rights politics became relevant to ordinary Americans and non-Americans-but so too was a global mass culture in which black women entertainers played a crucial role. To appreciate the political work of black women entertainers and the impact that they had into the 1960s and 1970s, we must first consider the worlds they moved into in the 1950s.

Civil Rights Background

It is difficult to say when the civil rights movement started. In fact, the word *movement* is itself potentially misleading given how many strands were braided together in struggles for black freedom that developed over a long period. Nevertheless, by the late 1950s, activism that had been evident for decades among African Americans escalated into more visible and sustained struggles for black freedom—in rural and urban areas nationally, and with overlapping strategies that included nonviolent interracial activism, separatism, and self-defense (6).

In New York, African Americans organized widely after World War II, despite efforts by the government to suppress the Left in the inaugural decade of the Cold War (7). New Yorkers who cared about civil rights were active and ideologically diverse. Well before "black power" became a phrase with cachet, black power perspectives were taking shape and circulating in organizations and in cultural commodities coming out of New York (and elsewhere). Well before Larry Neal wrote, in a 1968 manifesto, that the black arts movement was "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept," and represented "the art of politics," black writers and performers were developing strategies to represent blackness in politically relevant ways that they controlled and that captured the complex vitality of their lives and cultures (8). By the mid-1950s, a tremendous sense of potential percolated in and out of organizations. Black musicians, writers, actors, artists, and intellectuals who cared about cultural creativity and racial equality all contributed and responded to a sense of intertwined political and cultural vibrancy (9).

United Nations Activism

While Harlem and Greenwich Village were home to jazz clubs, experimental theater, and publications, the United Nations on the East Side of New York was another location that reinforced this vibrancy. African diplomats from newly independent countries who argued for freedom at the U.N. and then went to their temporary homes in New York created opportunities for social interactions and political dialogue between African Americans and non-Americans of color. Maya

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Angelou took time away from her work at the New York office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to hear Vusumzi Make and Oliver Tambo, South African representatives, respectively, of the Pan Africanist Congress and the African National Congress, speak at the home of African American writer John Oliver Killens. South Africanborn Miriam Makeba's apartment became a nerve center where entertainers and diplomats from Africa mingled with African Americans. Organizations such as the American Society for African Culture (AMSAC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Urban League organized dinners and other social events for African dignitaries that provided further occasions for contact between diplomats from abroad and African American organizers, intellectuals, and entertainers (IO). These and many other ordinary encounters in restaurants, apartment buildings, taxicabs, and jazz clubs reinforced a global perspective on race relations.

The United Nations was also a launching pad for celebrations and for protests—a political theater of sorts—that connected people and ideas from different nations. Black Americans in New York participated enthusiastically in parades and motorcades in Harlem welcoming visitors to New York and to the United Nations, including Ghana's prime minister Kwame Nkrumah in 1958, and Cuba's Fidel Castro in 1960. The crowds were far less jubilant in February 1961, when several hundred people, including jazz singer Abbey Lincoln and a group of black women who called themselves the Cultural Association of Women of African Heritage, staged a rally outside of the United Nations to protest the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the deposed prime minister of newly independent Congo. Lincoln and the other women publicized the event and spent the afternoon before sewing black armbands and veils for protesters to wear as a symbol of their mourning (II).

Seemingly apolitical interactions could also foster transnational connections. In December 1959, the twenty-six-year-old South African singer Miriam Makeba landed in New York's Idlewild Airport (renamed John F. Kennedy Airport four years later). When she peeked offstage before her first show at the Village Vanguard, she saw vocalist Nina Simone, musicians Duke Ellington and Miles Davis, and stage, film, and television performers Diahann Carroll and Sidney Poitier sitting together at a well-placed table in front. They were joined by Harry Belafonte, a star whose album, Calypso (1956), was the first ever to go platinum. Selling more than a million copies in one year, it pushed both Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra off the charts. Makeba recognized these celebrities because they were popular in her native South Africa. She quickly earned their admiration and became a part of their politicized communities. Several weeks later, actress Cicely Tyson was preparing for a role on television as a young pregnant African woman. She befriended Makeba and sought advice on how to play the part accurately. Makeba's response to the question, "How does a pregnant African woman behave?" was "a pregnant woman is a pregnant woman!" Socially, culturally, and politically, then, New York was a crossroads at which people, and meanings of blackness and representation, intersected (12).

More Than an American Problem

In this atmosphere, many (though not all) of the black entertainers, artists, musicians, and writers who took a stand against racial discrimination assumed that white supremacy was more than an American problem. Indeed, efforts to engage with decolonization struggles and independence movements in Africa and Asia contributed to the renewed sense of energy and innovation among entertainer/activists in many different culture industries (13). In 1959, for example, jazz singer Abbey Lincoln's album *Abbey Is Blue*, her first to include lyrics that she wrote directly addressing the black freedom movement, introduced the song, "Afro Blue" (with lyrics by Oscar Brown), about Africa's meaning to African Americans. In 1960, Randy Weston and

Melba Liston composed *Uhuru Afrika*, an album that celebrated independence movements in Africa (14).

Two events that occurred within months of each other-the sit-ins that started in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, and the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa on March 21, 1960—further galvanized these artists and encouraged them to view the problems facing black people in a global frame. Max Roach and Oscar Brown Jr.'s collaborative album of jazz music, We Insist! The Freedom Now Suite, offered a historical overview from slavery to contemporary freedom struggles in the United States and Africa. The album included vocals by Lincoln, who used screams and other techniques to transform her voice into what critics regarded as a political weapon, and the song, "Tears for Johannesburg," which directly evoked the Sharpeville massacre. The photo of three black male protesters sitting at a lunch counter on the album cover further linked the music to the sit-ins and the larger movement for black freedom (15). Come Back, Africa (1959), the anti-apartheid film in which vocalist Miriam Makeba appeared briefly as herself to sing two songs, and which brought her to the attention of Western audiences, opened in New York just weeks after the Sharpeville massacre. The Amsterdam News critic urged audiences to see the film, explaining that "inexperienced natives" had the "major roles" in the story, "but so do those we're reading about in today's headlines. And the impact is the same" (16).

As Makeba's singing career in the United States took off, she repeatedly insisted that she was "no diplomat, not a politician." In contrast to her friends Abbey Lincoln and Nina Simone, Makeba avoided commenting on race relations during her first few years in the United States (17). Yet, in the lively and fast-paced "Boot Dance," Makeba dressed in a (male) miner's costume and used dance and metaphor to evoke both the repressive apartheid regime and blacks' refusals to acquiesce to that regime. The song documented the bleak manual labor to which so many black men were subject under white rule even as it highlighted music as a means of resisting that degradation. "Jikele Mayweni" was a slow and mournful song about an African warrior. With accompanying instruments and with the timbre of her voice, Makeba evoked the pain and loss of defeat in ways that resonated in the post-Sharpeville years. Makeba and Lincoln embraced different musical styles and approaches to politics. Both, however, asserted their power as women performers and exposed Americans to apartheid and racial discrimination by making their voices heard in many venues-at jazz clubs, on popular television shows, on college campuses, and at benefit concerts for a range of civil rights-oriented organizations (18).

Theater and Film

Live theater was another arena in which politics associated with black liberation took shape and circulated internationally, and through which black women's careers flourished. On off-Broadway stages, black actors who embraced an activist avant-garde sensibility and a global perspective on race and colonialism collaborated with those who were less politically engaged but eager to work. In 1961, for example, Cicely Tyson won awards for outstanding achievement in off-Broadway theater for her performance in The Blacks, a controversial play by French avant-garde playwright Jean Genet. Steeped in French anticolonialist discourse, The Blacks, recalled one participant, "was delicious to our taste" because of its confrontational political content about race and rape. James Earl Jones later reminisced that until he was in The Blacks, he felt "fairly free of racial conflict and frustration"; working on this play, however, required him to "walk through the hatred, distrust, and disaffections that can split blacks and whites." The play became a "fixture" at the St. Marks Playhouse during its three-plus year run in the Village that included 1,400 performances (19). In this deeply politicized atmosphere, Tyson did not comment about race relations in the United States or abroad and avoided arguments on the set that others had about racial politics, colonialism, or commercial culture (20). Instead, she absorbed and performed the cosmopolitan perspective emanating from the content of the play and made that perspective available to enthusiastic consumers.

Film festivals and small art house movie theaters also introduced global ideas about race and anticolonialism to audiences in the 1950s who might not necessarily be directly involved in political organizing. Lionel Rogosin, a white New Yorker and independent filmmaker, lived in South Africa for over a year and collaborated with black South Africans to make the anti-apartheid film Come Back, Africa covertly in 1958. He smuggled his film about a black South African man struggling to find a job and a place for himself in urban Johannesburg out of the country and to the Venice Film Festival in September 1959, where it won the prestigious Critics Award. The low-budget production that combined a fictional story with documentary footage, opened to critical acclaim in Paris and London and earned a prize at the Vancouver Film Festival. Shortly after its debut in the United States in April 1960 at New York's Bleecker Street Theater, Time magazine selected it as one of the ten best pictures of the year. The elite film festivals and small art houses at which Come Back, Africa appeared had helped create a sensation, enabling nonmainstream racial politics to circulate internationally and stimulating a dialogue on both sides of the Atlantic about apartheid, race relations, and the documentary as a genre (21). Moreover, Come Back, Africa catapulted Miriam Makeba to international fame as "Africa's musical ambassador" and "Mama Africa."

Fashion, Hair, and Politics

On these and other stages, black women performers made political claims—not just for themselves as ambitious entertainers who wanted to succeed in male-dominated industries, and not only for black people facing racial discrimination, but also for black women across national boundaries. For both Abbey Lincoln, who began as a nightclub singer, and Cicely Tyson, who got her start as a high-fashion model, hair and clothing were crucial props. But both rejected prevailing definitions of glamour and female sexuality that came from these worlds.

When Lincoln left nightclubs for jazz music, she abandoned tightfitting gowns and rejected images of herself as the "Girl in the Marilyn Monroe dress." Demanding that "I be respected as a dignified Negro woman," she started to wear her hair natural. In 1958, her album of jazz music, It's Magic, featured a cover photograph of her with hair short and cropped (22). In 1959, on Camera Three, a Sunday morning television variety show that emphasized the arts, and again in 1963, as a fictional assistant to progressive social worker on the television drama East Side, West Side, Tyson also wore her hair in a short, cropped Afro. It was "my way of picketing," Tyson later said. Makeba, from her opening night at the Village Vanguard in 1959 and through her years of celebrity in the United States, refused to straighten her hair, opting instead for what she called her "short and woolly" style (23). Nina Simone wore her hair in dramatically different styles from one performance to the next, including straight-haired wigs; but as early as 1961 these included a natural Afro style (Figure 2). As with Lincoln, a change in Simone's physical presentation signaled a change in her musical repertoire. The Afro became visual evidence of Simone's willingness, by the early 1960s, to perform songs that challenged white Americans and interracial activism and claimed female strength-as she did so famously in the song "Mississippi Goddam" (24).

These and other black women were involved in a process of politicized self-fashioning in which race and femininity played intersecting parts. They insisted that how they looked mattered to their racial politics and insisted, despite prevailing racialized aesthetics that equated beauty with light skin and straight hair, that how they looked made

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Figure 2. Born Eunice Waymon, singer, pianist, and songwriter Nina Simone (1933–2003) was a popular performer living in New York in the late 1950s. While she initially avoided overtly political lyrics, that changed in 1963 with the murder of Medgar Evers and the Birmingham church bombing. Her answer was the fiery "Mississippi Goddam." Starting in the early 1960s, she began wearing her hair in a natural Afro style, an early sign of the change in her political thinking. (Courtesy of www.robinsonarchive.com; ©The Jack Robinson Archive)

them desirable and desiring black women. After an initial disastrous experience at an American beauty salon-she washed out her newly straightened hair—Makeba declared, "I am not a glamour girl." In fact, she and other black women were transforming meanings of glamour for black women around the world. They were part of a larger group of artists and musicians, writers, and singers who freed themselves artistically and individually in relation to more collective struggles for black freedom. But they were unique in the role that gender played in this process (25). In addition to Lincoln, Tyson, Makeba, and Simone, the singer Odetta, the modern dancer Ruth Beckford, jazz trombonist and composer Melba Liston, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and the fictional Beneatha-heroine of Hansberry's Raisin in the Sun (1959)were just some of the other women who wore their hair "natural" in New York in the late 1950s or early 1960s or otherwise challenged normative meanings of black womanhood and sexuality. In this emergent collectivity, female activism was at work.

In 1966, Miriam Makeba explained her choices in ways that drew attention to the gender-specific and transnational dimensions of black pride and black power. Natural hair had spread, she said, because it "makes you have a good feeling. It's as though Negro women are finally admitting they're proud of their heritage A Negro woman should look natural, and that's what this new look is trying to say . . . Those who press their hair and buy wigs are running away from themselves" (26).

Conclusion

Makeba was putting into words the political ideas about black power for women that she and other black women had performed and

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disseminated with their bodies for a decade. Starting in the 1950s, black women pursued commercial careers in the United States at the same time that they challenged racial hierarchies in and out of the United States, *and* at the same time that they challenged dominant assumptions about black female beauty, talent, and sexuality. In the 1980s, a group of black women writers declared that "all the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave" (27). Decades earlier, black women performers were being more than brave: in direct and indirect ways, they were crossing (and refusing) the divides between black liberation and women's rights, between culture and politics, and between the domestic and the international.

Endnotes

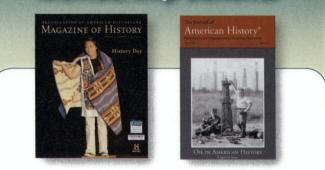
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initially, her young daughter) remained in South Africa and might have suffered the repercussions of her speaking out against the government. By the mid-1960s, Makeba became less reticent, and even testified before the United Nations.

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Ruth Feldstein is associate professor in the department of history and the graduate program in American studies at Rutgers University, Newark. She is the author of Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965 (Cornell University Press, 2000) and "I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s," Journal of American History (March 2005). Her book about black women entertainers and the civil rights movement is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

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