

**Analyzing Miriam Makeba's  
1950-60s Musical Performances: A  
Precursor to Steve Biko's Black  
Consciousness Movement**

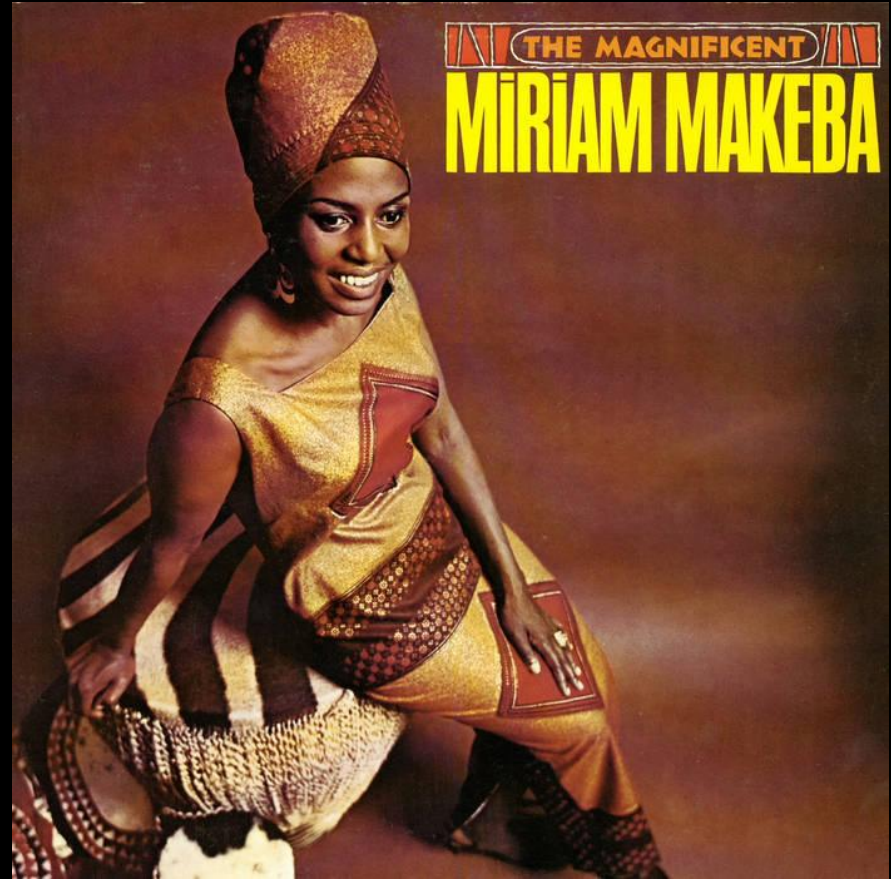
*and a Response to the Epistemological Erasure of  
Blackness in Urban South Africa*

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**Urban South Africa**

**Fall 2023**



# Research Interests



- Black Performance
- South African History
- South African Music
- Postcolonial Theory



# TABLE OF CONTENTS:

1. WHO IS MIRIAM MAKEBA?
2. MAKEBA & ANTI-APARTHEID
3. THESIS
4. BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS
5. METHODOLOGY
6. 3 SONGS
7. PAPER LIMITATIONS
8. PRIMARY SOURCES
9. RESEARCH QUESTIONS
10. MY FINDINGS
11. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS
12. BIBLIOGRAPHY



# Who is Miriam Makeba?



- Zenzile Miriam Makeba (1932-2008), also known as Mama Africa, is one of the most prominent singers and activists in the anti-apartheid struggle.
- She contributed to musical genres including Afropop and jazz.

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- Makeba made 30 original albums, 19 compilation albums and in 1966, she became the first African artist to receive a Grammy Award; the influential scale of Makeba's work is in itself a counter to Black erasure.



# Basic South African Policies of Black Erasure

Some South African policies of removal that Makeba is both directly and indirectly referencing stem from—

1. **The 1913 Native Lands Act** which prevented Africans from owning or gaining land outside of “reserves—” which initially included 7% of land throughout national borders.
2. This policy then led to the **1923 Urban Areas Act**; constructs legalized areas for blacks to live in; they cannot acquire property or business outside of the black area.
3. Springing 30 years forward, Makeba and her counterparts are subjected to the **1950 Population Registration Act**, which led to the **Group Areas Act** and the establishment of Bantustans.
4. Shortly thereafter, **The Suppression of Communism Act** is formed and any group or individual who attempts to spark political, economic, industrial or social change is labeled an illegal “communist.”
5. Finally, home ownership is completely eliminated due to the **1952 Native Laws Amendments Act** which increasingly limits the residential and labor rights of urban blacks.



16-Jul-1963 00:09:57

South African singer Miriam Makeba addresses the Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa at their 18th Meeting.

Available Language: Original

# What is Makeba's role in the anti-apartheid movement?



16-Jul-1963 00:09:57  
South African singer Miriam Makeba addresses the Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa at their 18th Meeting.

Available Language: Original

*"South Africa has been turned into a huge prison."*

-MM

# Makeba & Black Performance Theory

Racial inequality is an integral part of South African law and society. Therefore, it cannot be easily reversed through legislation. Through a series of theoretical analysis, we can explore other functions and patterns that Makeba used to challenge white supremacy; with the hope of achieving economic, social, and political progress for all people.

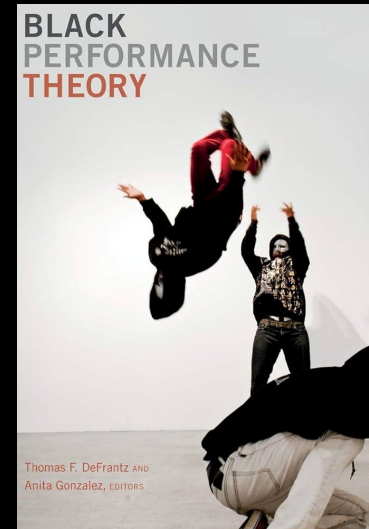


It is crucial to situate an analysis of Makeba's mid-twentieth century performances in a broader framework detailing the development of black performance theory. Emphasizing the entangled nature of these political institutions through a performance studies framework will offer an alternative way to examine the historical complexities of conflict and memory with an equally multifaceted approach

# What is Black Performance Theory?

Black performance scholars provide analysis and vocabulary to articulate the structural complexity and diversity that was at one point absent from Western practices of knowledge-making and preservation tactics. Black performance's disciplinary umbrella includes anthropology, musicology, dance, theater, visual arts and literary studies.

In the late 20th century, black performance became a public discourse used to complicate and provide aesthetic and literary theory that counters Western perceptions of blackness; a subordinate concept wrongfully tied to fixed social practices that oppose Eurocentric conceptions of whiteness.



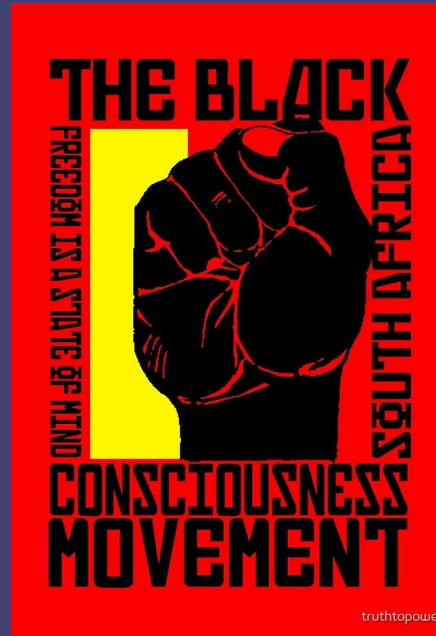


# THESIS:



In this paper, I will argue that three of Makeba's musical performances released in the 50s and 60s create space for the Black feminist perspective prior to the public rise of the BCM in the 70s. The coded movements, sensory aesthetics and the body's sonics that Makeba shares with her audience serves as a precursor to the BCM as a whole.

# BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS MOVEMENT:



Makeba's linguistic performance challenges the epistemological erasure of the Black feminist presence in South Africa. As an affirmation of Blackness, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) began as an ideological symbol of beauty, creativity, competence and diversification.

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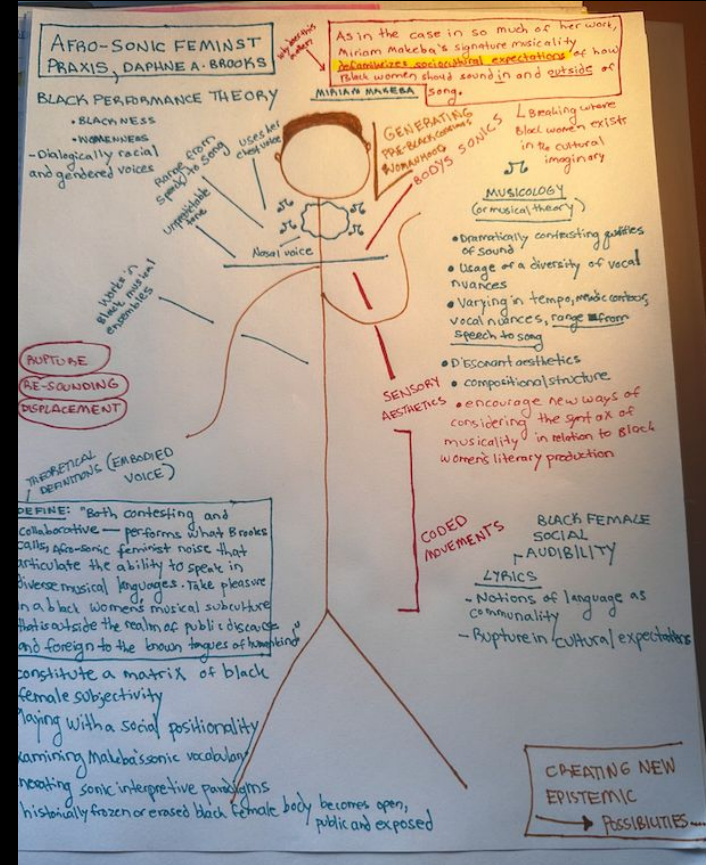
As a result, this paper asks: What are Makeba's songs sung in Xhosa "doing" to linguistically resist the South African apartheid regime and promote key ideological elements of Black Consciousness?

# METHODOLOGY:

## Ex. Daphne Brooks



The coded movements, sensory aesthetics and the body's sonics that Makeba shares with her audience serves as a precursor to the BCM as a whole.



# DEFINITIONS:

The visual elements I will analyze include the song's **coded movements** (rooted in Makeba's individual gestures), **sensory aesthetics** (based on audience engagement and the ensemble's collective movements), Makeba's **body's sonic patterns** (both planned and improvised).

Examining the **discursive aspects** of each song rely heavily on an in-depth lyrical analysis and a careful tying together of certain verses sung in Xhosa and translated into English.

# 3 SONGS



“Pata Pata”



“Into the Yam”



“Click Song”

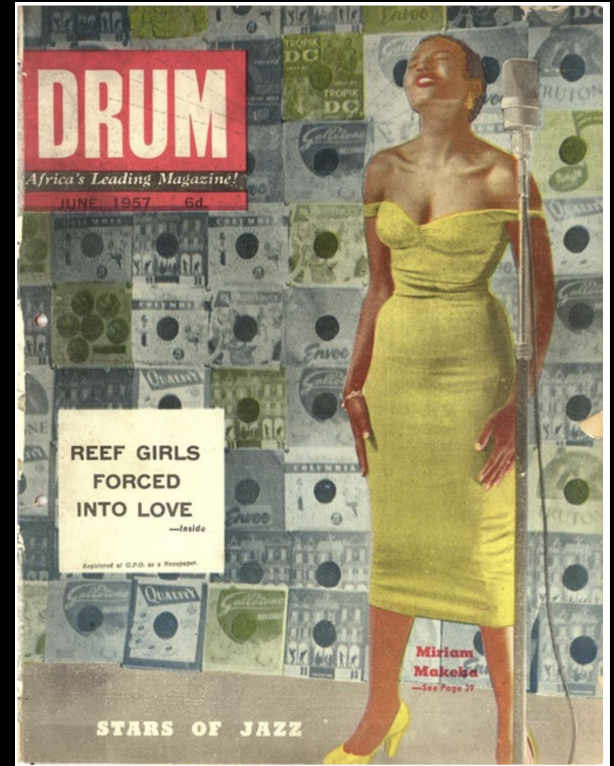
Three songs which have brought Makeba the most international attention in the United States and Europe include: “Pata Pata,” the “Click Song” in English (“Qongqothwane” in Xhosa) and “Into the Yam;” all performed in the click sounds of her native Xhosa language.



# LIMITATIONS:

Some potential limitations of this paper include:

- 1) Although I will have a nuanced understanding of Makeba's relationship to Xhosa, I do not have direct experience reading, writing or speaking these languages, nor an ability to directly translate certain content, and
- 2) As a result of my first point, I will focus on a seemingly "subjective" examination of "linguistic expression;" how language is used to convey meaning, emotion or intention, rather than a seemingly "objective" investigation of "linguistic analysis;" rooted in objective investigations and identifying structural patterns of grammar and semantics.



Drum, June 1957. On the cover: Miriam Makeba.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

As a result, this paper asks:

- **What are Makeba's songs sung in Xhosa "doing" to linguistically resist the South African apartheid regime and promote key ideological elements of Black Consciousness?**
- Other potential research questions to consider include:
  - How can discursive and visual depictions of Miriam Makeba's image be used as a lens to explore Black and female South African voices in Steve Biko's notion of the Black Consciousness Movement (as described in his text, *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa*, 1978)?
  - How is Makeba's linguistic and musical performance a form of protest that is relevant to contemporary conversations about the Black liberation struggle?



The first time I spoke out against the crimes of the South African government was before the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, July 16, 1963. In retaliation, South Africa banned my records.

# REMINDER: DEFINITIONS:

The visual elements I will analyze include the song's **coded movements** (rooted in Makeba's individual gestures), **sensory aesthetics** (based on audience engagement and the ensemble's collective movements), Makeba's **body's sonic patterns** (both planned and improvised).

Examining the **discursive aspects** of each song rely heavily on an in-depth lyrical analysis and a careful tying together of certain verses sung in Xhosa and translated into English.



# PRIMARY SOURCES:



*VISUAL ANALYSIS*



# MY FINDINGS:

*The realities of subjugation and legacies of systemic erasure are seemingly veiled by the great tonality of the singer's voice and supported by the complexities of her body parts. Similarly, Brooks argues, low female voices like Lauryn Hill and Amy Winehouse represent the figure of contralto "where cultural notions of scale, mass, sound, vision, race, and gender oddly converge... evocative of unspeakable histories which instead must be sung." (1:14)*



## 1. Coded movements

**(INDIVIDUAL/CHOREOGRAPHED):** Makeba's steady act of smiling, shoulder-touching and consistently moving her hips in a swift hula hooping motion.

**2. Sensory Aesthetics (COLLECTIVE):** Makeba uses 'Pata Pata' as a call and response tool needed to engage her back-up singers and the audience as a whole. *The call and response tactic is a common rhetorical device used during protests throughout the BCM and also shown in the 2002 film Amandla,*

**3. Body's Sonics (PHYSICAL/IMPROVISED):** Create dissonant aesthetics and varying compositional structures. The "click" sound followed by a touch of laughter and leading to the effortless pronunciation of each English word seems to have left Makeba's audience dumbfounded.

“Pata Pata”



**1. CM:** Echo some of the gestures she made in my previous analysis, Makeba smiles as she gradually rises from her seat, Makeba takes up more space— both vocally and physically, Makeba stomps her feet loudly

**2. SA:** She uses possessive pronouns such as “my” and personal pronouns including “I” to express a sense of ownership in an oppressive situation that could easily be viewed as bleak.

**BS:** From 1:50 to 1:58, Makeba sings with her eyes closed, mirroring a sense of safety and calmness. In what ways does this gesture of closing her eyes represent an unpredictable motion that breaks where Black women exist in the cultural imaginary?

“Into the Yam”



**1. CM:** (00:18-0:28) Masterfully, Makeba bounces between English and Xhosa as she explains the title of the song— Qongqothwane (in Xhosa); her native language... (0:21) Makeba's left eyebrow raises almost immediately as she says “the English-speaking people.”

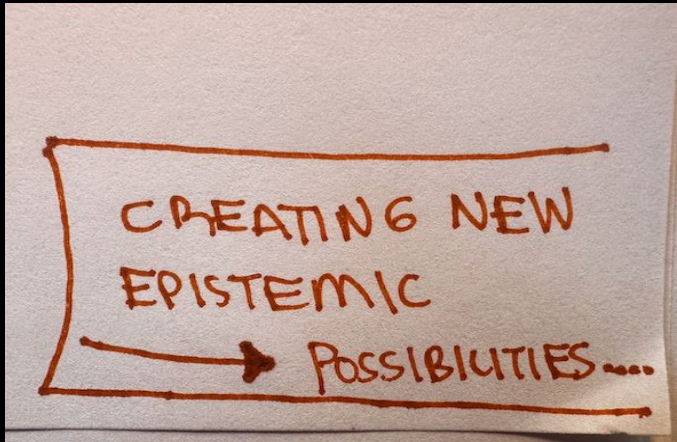
**2. SA:** Varying in tempo, and vocal nuances, Makeba speaks directly to the audience (as part of her song); she ranges from speech to singing in ways that show mastery of both Xhosa and English as well as the contrasting qualities of song.

**3. BS:** 0:50, Makeba makes a disruptive sound (212); she makes a break from conventional semantics, She shifts the audience's attention... (1:53), Makeba makes a similar sound of grunting that reassembles her mouth and disrupts the flow of her breath that represents a splintering or fragmenting in the song's compositional structure.

“Click Song”

## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS:

What are Makeba's songs sung in Xhosa "doing" to linguistically resist the South African apartheid regime and promote key ideological elements of Black Consciousness?



### REASONS "WHY" MAKEBA = PRECURSOR TO BCM:

1. "Call and response" tool for protest and used in each song
2. The "click" sound as a symbol of pride of her culture and language
3. BC called for a more diverse and humanist way of documenting Black experience → Makeba is embracing sonic expression as the complex articulation of self through the use of personal pronouns that semantically support aspects of BC

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