

Sedition *à la mode*? The transfiguration of Steve Biko in post-apartheid fashion and décor design

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Abstract

The portrait of slain anti-apartheid revolutionary, Steve Bantu Biko, has been variously transfigured and commodified in political and consumer discourse since his death in 1977. This process is evident in the reproduction of Biko's portrait on garments and décor accessories. At the time of his death, a commemorative T-shirt hastily printed for his funeral was promptly banned. Three decades later, images of Biko's face adorned tank tops and cushion covers displayed in trendy, upmarket boutiques. The focus in this article is the appropriation and reproduction of Biko's portraits in a selection of South African fashion and décor designs. I ask whether the images of radical political figures are necessarily domesticated or denuded of subversive power once rendered and consumed as fashionable, retro accessories. If invoking Biko's name, as Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo (2008:234) suggest, is to invoke a legacy of struggle and sedition, what new meanings arise when historic signifiers of this icon are consumed as retro fashions? These questions are explored within the context where Biko's work and image are given new prominence by young black activists who were born in a democratic South Africa, but are not yet enjoying the freedoms that Biko's generation fought and died for.

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Introduction

As a prominent and vocal opponent of apartheid and white racism, Steve Biko (1946-1977) was under a banning order from the state and vilified in the Nationalist-supporting press as a terrorist and an embodiment of *swart gevaar* (black menace). At the time of his death in 1977, few South Africans might have imagined that his portrait would one day adorn trendy fashions and décor accessories. In the decades after his death in police detention, Biko's image underwent dramatic transfiguration and commodification in both political and consumer discourse. This process is evident in the reproduction of Biko's portrait on dress and décor, ranging from activist T-shirts in the late 1970s, to tank tops, cushion covers and tote bags forty years later. In this article, I look at four instances where Biko's image was reproduced on fashion and décor.¹ The four examples are chosen for their prominence within significant moments in South Africa's recent history. The various motivations for reproducing his image on dress and décor items, and the drastic shifts in the uses and meanings of the items, coincide with the significant changes that occurred in both South African politics and design in the late twentieth-century. In this analysis, I aim to demonstrate how the appropriation of Biko's image and (re-)activation of its different meanings intersect with the shifting significance of Biko's legacy in political, popular and consumer discourse.²

The first example I discuss is a T-shirt printed for Biko's funeral by Robin Holmes, on request of opposition organisations. The T-shirt was, however, banned by the state two days before the funeral. The second and third examples are collections by fashion brand Stoned Cherrie, and interior design brand Design Team. I focus on their repurposing of *Drum* magazine covers, specifically the portrait of Biko that featured on the November 1977 issue, which was dedicated to Biko, following his murder in police detention. I discuss their respective *Drum* collections and the commodity re-inscription of icons and symbols of the anti-apartheid struggle in terms of retro and Afro-chic, which emerged as prominent design trends in post-apartheid South Africa. The fourth example is the Biko tote bag, conceived by designer and activist Siki Msuseni as wearable art that makes a political statement.

My reading takes place two decades after the first democratic elections and I reflect on the selected designs in a context where Biko's politics, name and image have, since 2015, been given new public prominence in and through the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall student movements. Radical student politics and the renewed emphasis on black pride and beauty also infused popular culture and youth fashion. I examine the Biko tote bag by Msuseni – herself a participant in the 2015 student movements – as confluence of radical youth politics, activism and fashion born from this context.

While several authors (see Nuttall 2004; Vincent 2012; Rovine 2015) have written about Stoned Cherrie's Drum collection, the appropriation of Biko's portrait by interior designers has not been examined.³ This paper presents a reading of home décor decorated with Biko's portrait as it might be used and displayed in the private, rather than public, domain. I consider retro fashion's potential for new ways of remembering and foregrounding those stories and historical figures that were marginalised in Nationalist histories. I further ask whether images of revolutionary figures are necessarily depoliticised or denuded of subversive power once rendered and consumed as fashionable accessories. Can the image of a radical political figure – such as Biko or Ché Guevara – retain its power as a site of resistance, even when it is commodified and consumed as fashion? I argue that Biko's image has resisted the market's co-opting of social agitation against neoliberalism and anti-black racism, because it is continually re-activated as a source of revolutionary power, pride and agency by radical grassroots movements.

The first memorial T-shirt

Stephen (Steve) Bantu Biko was a political activist, writer and philosopher who became a leading figure within the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Since he was a student, Biko was a vocal and inspiring critic of apartheid, systemic racism, and white liberalism. He was the first president and later publications director of the South African Students Association (SASO), a nationally representative, black student organisation established in 1969. Biko was further instrumental in developing Black Consciousness as an investigation into black experience under white domination, and as the philosophical basis of a stance affirming black pride, dignity and self-reliance in the bitter struggle against apartheid. For Biko (1987:48,144), liberation required that black people take pride in their blackness, in black culture and in African heritage, and shed the interiorised psychological burden of inferiority resulting from centuries of racist dehumanisation. 'The interrelationship between the consciousness of the self and the emancipatory programme is of paramount importance', he wrote in 1971 (Biko 1987:48). The defiant message of black self-consciousness and pride found fertile ground, particularly among South Africa's disenfranchised black youth who mobilised themselves in the fight against institutionalised racism.

Under security legislation, the apartheid state repeatedly arrested, detained and charged (but never convicted) Biko. In 1973, Biko was banned by the state and restricted to his hometown of King Williams Town in the Eastern Cape. On 18 August 1977, he was arrested and detained in Port Elizabeth under the Terrorism Act and on 12 September of the same year, Biko died in police custody. The inquest into his death showed that Biko was stripped and shackled after his arrest, that he sustained brain injuries while in

custody, was denied medical attention, and was transported over 1100 kilometres, naked and manacled, in the back of a police van.

The news of Biko's violent death and his funeral, attended by 20 000 mourners, was extensively covered in the media and Biko quickly became an international symbol of resistance to apartheid, Black Consciousness, and the state's cruelty (Hill 2015:47). News reports of his death and funeral juxtaposed images of an animated, healthy man with posthumous photographs showing his sunken, injured face. Sharron Hill (2015:49) writes, '[g]iven that his likeness was printed alongside narratives of a long death, the two become one in the language of visual culture'. In this manner, Biko's portrait and his name (as indexical signifier) became symbols of both state violence and black political martyrdom.

Biko's funeral would be the first occasion that his portrait would be multiply reproduced on clothing. From the late 1970s, T-shirts with a martyr's portrait introduced a new genre of visual culture to appear at funerals of anti-apartheid activists (Hill 2015:35). The T-shirts were mass produced on cheap garments and the often-rudimentary designs included the deceased's portrait, name and sometimes political slogans or an organisation's logo. While the Biko T-shirt contains no text, it was probably the first such memorial T-shirt (Figure 1).



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Robin Holmes. 1977. Two T-shirts with Steve Biko's portrait produced for Steve Biko's funeral. The beige T-shirt (right) is printed with the inverse of the portrait printed on the white shirt (left). Screen printed cotton T-shirts. Photograph reproduced with permission of Francis Andrew.

The shirt was designed and screen-printed by Robin Holmes, a former member of the liberal party who frequently did printing work for opposition movements.⁴ In an interview with Francis Andrew, he recounts how he was approached by Importance Mkhize in the days following Biko's death, with the request to print memorial T-shirts for the funeral (Holmes 2011). The production of the T-shirt was initially funded by Holmes, who worked on a shoestring budget, hitchhiking across his home province of KwaZulu Natal to source cheap materials.⁵ He printed his design on reject shirts, bought in bundles from Scottford Mills in Ladysmith. The thick, cotton shirts, Holmes (2011) says, were produced for the mines and were colloquially called 'mineboys'.

The T-shirt's design was determined by the purpose of the garment: to faithfully represent Biko and through the public display of his image, proclaim his tragic death and commemorate his political legacy. The design is austere in its minimalism: a profile portrait of Biko facing left is printed in black ink on the white T-shirt. The portrait – which Holmes found in a newspaper or magazine – is cropped below Biko's collar and shows him gazing straight ahead, his face dramatically lit from the front as if he is looking towards the light. There is no text printed on the shirt.

Holmes completed two small print runs and delivered the T-shirts to opposition organisations in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. After the second delivery, he was promptly detained and questioned by security police who had been following him (Holmes 2011). Two days before the funeral, the memorial T-shirt was banned by the state. 'To try and get around the banning', Holmes (2011) explains, 'I reversed the picture [because] then it was a different picture isn't it?'. Although a consignment of T-shirts was sent to King Williams Town for the funeral, much of it was confiscated by the police before it could reach its destination, and Holmes was charged for the production, distribution and possession of banned material.⁶

The story of the banned memorial T-shirt reveals the Nationalist government's fear of the influence of Biko's powerful message – as represented by his image – on the black majority. Wearing the banned T-shirt would have declared defiance that was fearless, as doing so would have placed the wearer's own body in great danger. The risks taken by the patrons, the producer, the distributors and ultimately, the few wearers, of the banned T-shirts, speak of their determination to a cause and ideal that went beyond the individual, but was committed to every individual's emancipation.

The memorial shirt carries no text, not even Biko's name, which might have been a tactical decision by Holmes. Omitting Biko's name from the design might have served to protect those who distributed and wore a shirt commemorating a banned activist. Very few whites at the time, Holmes (2011) explains, knew what Biko looked like. To most whites,

the portrait on the T-shirt would have been just a 'picture of somebody, a picture of a black man' (Holmes 2011). Without Biko's name, the specific political message of the T-shirt would have been legible predominantly to black South Africans and those in the opposition movement. Thirty years later, when models wore T-shirts with prints of Biko's portrait on a Cape Town catwalk, it was celebrated as avant-garde fashion representative of a new democratic era. In the next section, I examine the twenty-first century transition of Biko's portrait from political to fashion statement through retro commodification.

New trends, retro and Afro-chic in post-apartheid design

For South Africans, the 1990s was a 'double moment' of change and continuity, marked by optimism and disquiet as government and citizens had to forge a democratic future from a fraught, divided past (Hadland, Louw, Sesanti, & Wasserman 2008:1-2). Shifts in notions of citizenship, nationhood, and cultural and personal identity took place at the intersection of the local and the global. In this context, designers were faced with the challenges of design in and for a diverse, multicultural society that also hoped to re-integrate with the wider continent and distinguish itself on the world stage (Sauthoff 2004:37). Notions of cultural and national identities emerged as a significant theme in design, and state and corporate stakeholders focused on fostering a distinctively local design aesthetic (Sauthoff 2004:35).

The context of the "new" South Africa, the optimism about the dawn of democracy and the greater personal and creative freedoms it effected, promoted new inventiveness and playfulness in design and consumer expressions of fashion consciousness. New fashion, graphic and interior designs – such as those of Stoned Cherrie – emerged from fast-changing contexts and spoke of the melding of cultural heritages, urban and rural vernaculars, and subcultural styles. Designers borrowed freely from the country's archives to create products that tell stories and challenge official historical narratives, while making a fashion statement and exploring personal and collective identities.

In the decade after 1994, writes Desiree Lewis (2012:74), the notion of "home-grown" in design, marketing and consumption reflects both commercial and subjective responses to national shifts. Designs promoted as "proudly South African" or signifying the "Rainbow Nation" featured prominently on design expositions, in lifestyle magazines and in boutiques. The local and "home-grown" were suggested in designs that cited indigenous fauna and flora, natural landmarks, the new South African flag, elements of indigenous cultural heritage, and familiar, local brands, logos and (mostly) black politicians and celebrities from the struggle decades.

The 2010 trend feature, *Africa Tombola* (Africa raffle) (Figure 2), includes several examples of such designs, which suggests an exuberant, hybrid (South) African modernity. The

designs incorporate and repurpose vintage *Drum* covers, African commemorative cloth, barber shop signs, and the new flag. Through quirky juxtapositions, crowded designs, and saturated hues in vivid contrasts, the overall mood conveyed by this magazine feature is upbeat, celebratory, and encapsulates the notion of the “Rainbow Nation”, a term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe the unified, diverse nation.

The designs in *Africa Tombola* also exemplify retro and Afro-chic; trends that fashion writer Dion Chang (Tait 2010) identifies as central to post-apartheid design. Lewis (2012:81) describes Afro-chic as a trend that represents mid-twentieth century urban sophistication and African modernity, often created through appropriating stylistic motifs, brands and symbols associated with black urban experiences. In retro and Afro-chic designs, select symbols and images of township life, such as dancing couples, jazz musicians, barber shop signs, or slang phrases, feature prominently. Borrowed material is often digitally modified to produce a bright, Pop art aesthetic or a nostalgic, retro look.

Retro, writes Elizabeth Guffey (2006:9-11), is a ‘half-ironic, half-longing’ stylistic device evoking of the modern, recent past in visual, popular and consumer culture, and it became a prominent commercial strategy in the last decades of the twentieth century. In mainstream, post-apartheid design for advertising, fashion and interiors, the retro references made to the figures, fashions and brands of South Africa’s past are often sentimental, conjuring a recent past of shared citizenship through consumerism. Retro and Afro-chic also emerge in attempts to reactivate the past in the present and foster pride in black history, as seen in Stoned Cherrie’s motivation for creating the Drum collection.

Stoned Cherrie was launched in 2000 by actress, entrepreneur, and celebrity Nkhensani Nkosi. When the brand revealed the Drum collection at the 2001 South African Fashion Week, trend analysts and fashion publications lauded it as ground-breaking. Stoned Cherrie collaborated with Bailey’s Historical Archives (BAHA) to create the Drum collection, which included T-shirts and tank tops with reproductions of vintage *Drum* magazine covers featuring black models, celebrities and – on the now iconic T-shirt – Steve Biko.⁷

Drum was founded in 1951 as a magazine for black readers. It evolved into a platform for black writers and photographers and reflected the distinctive urban political and cultural expression of black South Africans. While it showcased music, fashion, theatre, fiction, news, and celebrity gossip, its rhetoric was distinctly anti-apartheid and it reported on anti-colonial struggles across the continent. With its pan-Africanist vision, writes Tom Odhiambo (2006:157-158), within a few years of its establishment, *Drum* became one of most significant media spaces where black Africans and people of African descent ‘were



FIGURE N^o 2

Melanie Tait. 2010. Décor in brief: Africa tombola (*De Kat* [sp]). Image reproduced with permission of *De Kat* magazine.

able to imagine, construct and disseminate notions of Africa, African culture and their political beliefs’.

The Stoned Cherrie brand was born in the years following the first democratic elections, in the dynamic, cosmopolitan Johannesburg city centre. Designs for their clothing and accessories combined contemporary high fashion and street style, the silhouettes of 1950s fashions, bold prints, beading and saturated colours. The brand was popular with urban, fashion-conscious young people who incorporated the retro renditions of local history into their personal sartorial expressions (Vincent 2007:88; Nuttall 2004:432,436). In 2003, Stoned Cherrie collaborated with Woolworths, giving the collection more mainstream connotations (Lewis 2012:76). This upmarket franchise introduced the collection to a wider demographic, boosting the acceptance of *Drum* magazine as a desirable reference for fashionable consumption.

For Nkosi, turning archival material into fashion offered a means to transform not only the appearances, but also the consciousness of wearers. A statement on the company’s webpage reads,

[i]n an effort to rewrite our history we raised the humble crochet to the catwalk, emblazoned our heroes on t-shirts with the Biko campaign, and sought to transform the way Africans feel about themselves in the 21st century Africa (Stoned Cherrie 2014).

By foregrounding people, events and achievements that were omitted or silenced in the official historical record, the brand was promoting pride in black history and beauty. For Biko (1987:28-29, 100), the destruction and distortion of African history under colonialism deepened what he described as the “inferiority complex” and “spiritual poverty” of blacks and, therefore, achieving black consciousness demands revising and rewriting black history. In the years following the end of apartheid, the collection therefore presented new possibilities for self-fashioning while simultaneously expressing one’s trendiness and pride in black heritage.

Nearly a decade after Stoned Cherrie’s collection, Pretoria-based Design Team, the company of interior textile designers Lise Butler and Amanda Haupt, launched their *Drum* collection, Novelty, also in collaboration with BAHA. The collection comprised upholstery fabrics, wallpaper and cushions decorated with mid-twentieth century *Drum* covers sporting black celebrities, musicians, and revellers. The collection also included a scatter cushion with the 1977 cover featuring Biko’s portrait (Figure 3). Unlike Stoned Cherrie’s Biko T-shirts, or Design Team’s cushion cover, the magazine cover’s anchoring sub-heading – ‘A special report in words and pictures’ – is cropped, possibly to simplify the design and fit it to the square cushion’s dimensions.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Design Team. [Sa]. Biko scatter cushion, Novelty collection (discontinued). Screen printed linen, 60x60cm. Image reproduced with permission of Lisa Butler, Design Team. (Material life 2017).

Novelty was aimed at predominantly middle- to high-income earners and it shifted the political icon from sartorial, predominantly urban and youth consumption, to the private domestic realm of suburban consumers.⁸ Wearing a garment with Biko's portrait in public differs from displaying it as a décor accessory in the home, where homeowners can generally control who observes their style choices. The "statement" made by displaying the icon is therefore quite safe. The collection's presence in décor boutiques, magazines and design expositions earned Novelty the status as a trendy must-have, which in turn created a sense that the objects bestowed distinction on its owners. While it would be reductive to read the consumption of the collection in terms of race and class, judging from the media and retail platforms where Novelty was marketed and consumed, *Drum* as décor was frequently consumed by whites, whereas *Drum* magazine has always had a largely black readership. In the suburban homes of

affluent consumers – especially so in white homes – the black icon with a reputation for radical politics is a potentially controversial décor accent. To most white South Africans, the anti-apartheid struggle played out in townships, far removed from white suburbs. Whilst black, anti-apartheid icons are celebrated locally and internationally, to some people their portraits on décor items may still connote the strange or illicit. For this reason, some consumers might use the cushion to distinguish themselves as ‘open-minded’ or even *risqué* in their style choices.

The consumer use of a scatter cushion also differs to that of a garment, which adds to the meanings the printed object may have for its owners. As one leans into, rests on or against it, the materiality of fabric and softness of the cushion makes for a highly tactile and intimate experience. Writing about meaning-making through the sensory viewing of photographic objects, Elizabeth Edwards (2009:333) writes that, ‘[m]ateriality constitutes the presentational forms which themselves structure visual knowledge’. The handling and viewing of a unique photograph differs in many respects from that of a commercial product printed with a copy of a photograph, but there are parallels to be drawn. Meaning-making occurs in relation to the human body when photo-objects (like the *Biko* cushion) are held, caressed, scrutinised with fingertips, hugged, sat on, or slept on. When visually consumed through physical engagement, the image is re-temporalised, re-spatialised, and viewers invest the object with narrative and memory (Edwards 2009:336-337). Decoding therefore occurs through activation: each viewer will activate and structure meaning by linking *Drum* and/or Biko with narratives and memories situated within the temporal, spatial realm of personal experience.

The intimacy of visually consuming the cushion printed with Biko’s portrait further stems from what Edwards (2009:334) calls photography’s ‘lamination of image and referent’: the ambiguity between signifier and signified which is the result of established conventions of viewing and speaking. Looking at the portrait reproduced on the cushion cover, a viewer might well state, ‘[t]hat is Biko’. She or he is of course not confusing or conflating the photo-object and the human, but affirming a link between the man photographed and the reproduced image. For some, the correspondence between signified and signifier may attribute something of the political icon’s aura to the cushion, making it an apt vehicle for commemorating and memorialising Biko.

This attribution to the object-image may also raise objections to its domestic use: people leaning against, cleaning and “scattering” – never mind sitting on – the object could be perceived as insulting or harming the legacy and dignity of the icon. The nature and purpose of the object may add to this reading: a scatter cushion is an inessential object to be arranged, strewn, or tossed about at will. Its value is in its appearance and the comfortable support it offers those sitting on or leaning into it. Scatter cushions and their

covers are promoted as a cheap way of updating home décor and they are frequently discarded once a collection or trend has gone out of style.

Fashion is frequently associated with consumerism, capitalism, individualism and superficiality, which are traits generally regarded as antithetical to radical, revolutionary politics and mass political movements. In the following section I consider this seeming paradox in relation to the Drum collections of Stoned Cherrie and Design Team, and I evaluate the potential of retro and Afro-chic commodities to tell and commemorate the fraught histories of black experience under apartheid.

Radical politics as retro history

Raphael Samuel (2012:114) writes that retro-chic may 'have prepared the way for a whole new family of alternative histories' that depart from the material culture of everyday life. Retro, suggests Samuel (2012:113), might animate history in new ways and awaken new interest in yesteryear's people, artefacts and their past lives. Rather than traditional and academic modes of research, retro's creative revivalists synthesise and source eclectically and irreverently, through browsing, appropriating, and replicating images, styles and motifs from historical archives, popular and high culture (Guffey 2006:26). Retro histories (be it blogs, zines or fashions) are accessible to wide audiences and offer new opportunities for showcasing creative endeavour and publicising omitted or subversive voices that may challenge official histories. This was the impetus for Stoned Cherrie's Drum collection. To wear garments with the images of black celebrities and activists, Stoned Cherrie suggests, could be a performative revision of South Africa's modern history and a statement of pride in a previously silenced heritage, including the legacy of Steve Biko.

Some critics, however, consider the fashionable production and consumption of Biko's image to be a desecration of his values and legacy. To invoke the name Biko, write Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo (2008:234), is to evoke the unity of a seditious life, of death as a 'politicising thing' and 'the many ways he helps us learn to live in the here and now'. After noticing Biko's image and name in a boutique and coffee shop of Rosebank Mall, Veriava and Naidoo (2008:234) note that 'Biko is "big" in Rosebank'.⁹ In this context, the emancipatory message and work of Black Consciousness is potentially side-lined and Biko's image depoliticised and de-historicised when it is worn and discarded as fashion dictates.

The success of Stoned Cherrie and Design Team's Drum collections encouraged other entrepreneurs and designers to follow suit in producing fashions and merchandise that feature or imitate the icons and images from vintage *Drum* magazines. Mid-twentieth

century *Drum* frequently featured the influence of African American jazz music and dress styles on metropolitan black identities, and these images have been most readily appropriated by designers and entrepreneurs. Signifiers of mid-twentieth century township life, such as dancing couples, jazz musicians, barber shop signs or slang phrases abound in the Afro-chic placemats, plates, mugs and pillowcases that are sold in department stores. The general impression is that of a dancing, boozing, jolly township life and an African modernity achieved through the consumption of western styles and lifestyles.

What this retro trend omits in its focus on dance halls, celebrities, and dress, is that townships, such as Sophiatown, were also sites of intellectual labour, political organisation, and material hardship. Retro-chic pastiches of township life under apartheid as seamlessly chic, jolly, and harmonious, are reproduced in celebratory tones not unlike the mythologising of struggle icons and histories in the name of nation building. Discussions of the vintage *Drum* fashions sometimes casually connect the *Drum* era with the notion of the 'fabulous fifties' (Lewis 2008:28). The term designates a revisionist packaging of North American consumer culture after the Second World War. In the context of retro, Afro-chic, the term signifies the creative vitality of black urban life and culture despite the constraints of apartheid. However, life for black people in South Africa during the fifties was by no means the one conjured up by the retro montages found in mass-produced Afro-chic. In memorialising the past as chic, retro commodities might foreground and celebrate black history, but it also obscures and romanticises black experiences of racial oppression.

In the townships of apartheid South Africa, writes Victoria Rovine (2015:221-222), style and fashion emerged as a form of defiance when black South Africans adopted African American fashions. Jazz music and American fashions signified an embodied and performative freedom that testified to black agency under apartheid. Angela Davis (1994:43), commenting on the fashion industry's co-opting of the dress and fashions of black activists in the United States, argues that the political significance embodied in revolutionary fashion is downplayed when it is commodified, decades later, as fashion revolution. The cultural heritage, vernacular expressions, and lived realities of black people offer important resources for claiming and expressing existential authenticity and freedom in contexts of oppression. In a speech of 1971, Biko (1987:46) emphasised the importance of cultural expression such as music and dress to the defiant message of black pride. Modern black culture, he said, 'emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression', that 'finds expression in our music and our dress' and 'that is responsible for the restoration of faith in ourselves' (Biko 1987:46). According to Lewis Gordon (2012:102), the political significance and the complexity of culture is, however, 'lost to presuppositions of popular representations of mores and folkways, where groups

seem to “have culture”, as one has style or fashion’. In other words, the popular and commodity appropriation and translation of symbols of black culture as a retro trend or “look”, potentially thwarts black efforts at asserting belonging through culture in a public realm awash with consumer images that lack historical understanding.

The two Drum collections brought modern, black history into the realm of popular culture and public discourse in the decade following the end of apartheid. Their retro fashions and accessories presented new ways of expressing pride in black histories and historical figures. Irrespective, however, of the intentions of its creators, retro appropriations run the risk of reducing cultural heritage, that speak of shared experiences of oppression, into a “look” that is consumed and discarded as trends change. The retro commodification of visual records of black experiences under apartheid therefore exemplifies appropriation and commodification that both foregrounds *and* obscures, celebrates *and* mitigates black history.

An icon resisting domestication

It is not uncommon or new for designers and entrepreneurs who want to give edginess to their products, to decorate fashionable clothes with portraits of political icons, even when the appropriated icon’s ideological position contradicts or criticises consumer culture. A prime example is Ché Guevara (1928-1967), whose portrait has adorned fashion and every type of merchandise. Guevara was an Argentine-Cuban physician, tactician of guerrilla warfare, communist revolutionary, and politician. He was a fierce opponent of imperialism, neocolonialism, and the United States. He spent his final years in Bolivia engaged in guerrilla warfare and was executed by Bolivian forces aided by the CIA in 1967. From the late 1960s, Guevara was adopted as an icon of revolution and radicalism by young European and North American leftists, for whom his image embodied anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism (Memou 2013:449). Concomitant to the rise in his popularity among activists, entrepreneurs increasingly capitalised on Guevara’s image. Since then, Guevara’s face has appeared on everything from album covers, tourist souvenirs, haute couture, streetwear, cigars and restaurant logos.

In these examples, the connotations of Guevara’s image with socialism, militancy and political martyrdom have mostly given way to a safe edginess. Nevertheless, for Jeff Larson and Omar Lizardo (2007:429), the unbridled commercialisation has by no means depoliticised Guevara’s image. Citing the re-appropriation and reworking of the mass-produced portrait by workers’ movements, anti-neoliberal and indigenous organisations in countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Italy, Spain, Argentina and Kazakhstan, they argue that ‘the collective consumption of material culture objects might be associated with a renewed radicalisation of political struggles and a strengthening

of collective identities and ideological commitments' (Larson & Lizardo 2007:449). Where people are drawing from their everyday experiences of shared social and political struggles and invent ways to re-radicalise Guevara's image, Antigoni Memou (2013:240) finds a use of the image that is 'more resilient, resistant and hopeful', as it does not conform to capitalist market logic.

The chief South African example of the commodification of a revolutionary political icon is that of Nelson Mandela; in national history and mainstream markets, his image is that of the globally acknowledged peacemaker and benign father of democratic South Africa. Connotations of militancy, violence and conflict have been evacuated from portraits of Mandela – either as the young, athletic activist or smiling, elderly statesman – that decorate purses, clockfaces and keyholders. Rather than a symbol of radicalism and emancipation, for many who are disillusioned with the notion of the "Rainbow Nation" and feeling betrayed by the African National Congress's negotiated settlement, Mandela's image symbolises unfulfilled promises and the betrayal of the black majority.

Two decades after the first democratic elections, to what degree has Biko's image – like Mandela's – been domesticated a safe commodity cipher that can be used to veil ongoing struggles for black liberation? Mandela's image is more widely consumed as dress, décor and novelty items, while Biko's is less so. Biko's political legacy is also unlike Mandela's, who lived to see the dismantling of apartheid, a constitutional democracy and rule by the black majority. Biko's defiance of apartheid was marked by confrontation, conflict and his violent death at a young age. Achille Mbembe ([sa]) writes,

in the story of black martyrdom, Biko stands opposite to Nelson Mandela, the hero who came up from death and captivity, unharmed in body and in mind. Paradoxically, Biko's death only served to further illuminate the ineradicability of his life.

While the retro *Drum* trend might have run its course in glossy magazines and design fairs, Biko's writings, image and legacy have been claimed by a new generation demanding radical transformation.¹⁰ The emergence of student movements Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall in 2015 gave new prominence to Biko and Black Consciousness. Young black people – most of whom were born into a democratic South Africa – demanded decolonisation of educational institutions and called for an end to persistent systemic racism and the economic marginalisation of the black majority.

Biko's work was studied and reclaimed as a source of strength and courage, and as a resource of emancipatory philosophy and political theory. Youth activists and members of radical political organisations such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) were pictured in news media wearing T-shirts or holding posters with his portrait and name.

This public citation of Biko's ideas and image established new connections between Biko and contemporary political revolutionaries (some of whom are known for their seditious acts) in the contemporary imaginary.

Biko's image and work were therefore re-imagined and reworked for and by black youth in the post-apartheid, neoliberal context where the sacrifices and struggle of their parents had not delivered full emancipation. Black Consciousness, write Veriava and Naidoo (2008:246), is not a static method for change. Instead, they write,

it allows for the changing, lived experiences of people to share and determine its own use and evolution. Black Consciousness roots the shaping of these revolutions in the everyday lives (or subjectivity) of the oppressed. It is this that allows us to mobilise Biko's words in our struggles in the here and now (Veriava & Naidoo 2008:246).

Turning Biko's image, his philosophy, and his history into fashion was Siki Msuseni's way of bringing Black Consciousness into contemporary public spaces and popular discourse.



FIGURE **Nº 4**



Pigments Studio. 2016. Biko tote bag, modelled by Siki Msuseni. Photograph by Pigments Studio, reproduced with permission of Siki Msuseni (Pigments SA 2016).



FIGURE **Nº 5**



Pigments Studio. 2016. Biko tote bag (obverse side, detail). Design and photograph by Pigments Studio, creative direction by Siki Msuseni and design execution by Xolani Dani. Printed canvas bag. Photograph reproduced with permission of Siki Msuseni (Pigments SA 2016).

Much like Nkosi of Stoned Cherrie, Msuseni's aim with the Biko tote bag was to unite fashion, politics, and activism. 'The bag was designed for the black South African youth. It was made for us,' Msuseni (2020) says in an interview. She conceptualised the bags as functional art and a precious personal possession, and she therefore produced a limited edition, taking care to print and construct accessories of the highest quality (Msuseni 2020). The design was influenced by Pop art, Andy Warhol, Banksy, and most importantly, political graffiti from the apartheid era, which conveyed powerful messages in just two or three words (Msuseni 2020).

Unlike the Stoned Cherrie and Design Team's collections, in Msuseni's product, Biko's name and product are not divorced from his violent death. On one side of the bag, black capitals on white pose the question 'Who killed BIKO'? (Figure 4). On the obverse, designer Xolani Dani has redrawn Biko's portrait to show the icon weeping (Figure 5). The union of candid question and portrait demands answers, not only about Biko's murder, but also about the current struggle against continued oppression and racism.

While the question clearly indicates that Biko *is* dead, the tears added to the portrait may suggest Biko mourning for black people in the present: a postcolonial – but not decolonised – South Africa. A former student of the University of Cape Town, Msuseni was part of the Fallist movements and she recalls the importance of authors such as Biko and Frantz Fanon to the young activists. ‘To us’, says Msuseni (2020), ‘Biko is a radical leader. He was pro-black, that’s what really drives us. There’s a sense of belonging and attachment to Biko’. Inspired by Biko who made his presence felt and who took up space, Msuseni (2020) says that ‘we were taking up spaces’ through protest action on university campuses.

For Msuseni (2020), the Biko bag makes a political statement that is beyond party politics: it proclaims black pride as a state of mind and a way of life. ‘It’s about claiming your space in society, claiming your identity’, Msuseni (2020) says. The act of claiming one’s space or taking up space becomes a radical political act in South Africa’s historical context where black people were robbed of the right to own or take up space in the so-called ‘white areas’ of their native country. To ‘take up space’ as a black person during apartheid was a dangerous political act, one for which Biko and many others were tortured and killed. After the end of apartheid, fashion as cultural practice became one way of symbolically taking back spaces that were declared white, such as city centres, suburbs and educational institutions. A fashionable accessory – such as Msuseni’s – in which Biko’s image is re-appropriated and reproduced as indivisible from his radicalism and martyrdom, exemplifies sartorial and consumer expression that re-radicalise a commodified image.

Conclusion

Reused over and over, Biko’s image, suggests Hill (2015:49), informs his legacy and its reproductions become objects or signifiers that activate and are used to ‘persuade and affect us’ in the present. The various ways in which Biko’s image have been reproduced, appropriated and commodified since his death also testify to the desires, needs and dreams of individuals and collectives who experienced and experience South Africa’s slow transition from minority rule to the complete emancipation of all its inhabitants.

To different owners and consumers of garments and accessories with Biko’s portrait, the objects may simultaneously reflect any combination of lived experience, historical memory, fashion-consciousness, and political aspiration that draws on *and* critiques late-twentieth century resistance politics. These positionalities are not mutually exclusive and are subject to change as contexts and subjective experiences shift. Irrespective of whether designers used archival images for socio-political or aesthetic reasons, consumers

will ultimately – as they wear, use, display, care for and discard the objects – imbue it with personal significance and value.

The meanings and value assigned to portraits of Biko shifted radically over the past four decades, which impacted the ways that designers and consumers engaged with the image and objects bearing its reproductions. To Holmes and his contemporaries, the memorial T-shirt was not produced and worn for expressing personal fashion sense, but to communicate one's affiliation to an ideology and the mass resistance movement. In Stoned Cherrie and Msuseni's uses of the image, fashion and activism are melded, and their products (can be) proudly worn and displayed in public.

I have suggested that, while Stoned Cherrie and Design Team's appropriations of historical *Drum* covers bring modern, black history into the realm of contemporary popular culture, retro commodification risks obfuscating struggle histories while foregrounding it. However, where images of radical icons of political revolution are translated into and consumed as trendy accessories, the political and ideological connotations of the symbols are seldom wholly subsumed. I argued that this is the case with the image of Biko – whose youth as a reminder of his premature death – is increasingly synonymous with the unfulfilled task of liberation. According to Biko (1987:21), the ability to attain one's envisioned self was central to black emancipation, yet the vast majority of black South Africans still do not enjoy the freedom of self-determination, and struggle to access the resources necessary for attaining their highest potential.

Biko's image no doubt circulates as commodity cipher in cultural industries, but it simultaneously circulates as a symbol of social agitation against neoliberalism, anti-black racism, and capitalist exploitation. Through the public galvanising of Biko's image by those who assert their affiliation to the man and his political ideology in the fashions they wear, display and consume, the radical and subversive power of Biko's image is continually re-activated.

Notes

1. I do not suggest that these are the only instances where reproductions of Biko's portraits are appropriated for political and consumer purposes. T-shirts with Biko's image are sold in markets and stores across the country and there are countless websites selling merchandise sporting Biko's likeness.
2. The aim of this paper is not to determine why, and which, consumers purchase the products that are discussed. My research is qualitative and, rather than a quantitative research methodology, my approach is foremost that of contextual visual analysis.
3. The existing scholarship on the commodification of *Drum* magazine covers and Biko's image in retro fashion predominantly focuses on urban youth culture where appropriation of the political icon presents new modes of self-fashioning (see Lewis 2012; Nuttall 2004; Vincent 2007).

4. In several sources, production of the shirt is attributed to Dikobe Ben Martins. According to Holmes (2011), Martins did not create the T-shirts but was involved in transporting the T-shirts to Biko's funeral. Martins was, however, apprehended by security police and consequently charged for possessing and distributing banned material.
5. Owing to the state's suppression of political opposition, Holmes was never compensated for T-shirts he produced on order. He received a cheque for the second consignment but found that the organisation's bank accounts had been frozen when he tried to cash the cheque (Holmes 2011).
6. Holmes printed two other political T-shirts banned by the state, the one read "We are Everywhere, Even in your Kitchen" and the other "Mxenge, The Struggle Continues".
7. See <https://za.pinterest.com/pin/500814421045817154> for an illustration.
8. Portraits of Biko were consumed, customised, and displayed in black, working-class, and activist (including white activist) homes for decades before its appropriation for interior design by Design Team. Analysis of this phenomenon is, however, outside the scope of this article.
9. The authors are referring to a shopping mall in Rosebank, an upper-middle class suburb in Johannesburg. They also observe that Biko's legacy is turned into strategies for black self-advancement in an economy that is still exploiting the black majority (Veriava & Naidoo 2008:234).
10. Novelty was discontinued in 2015, and although the *Drum* and *Biko* cushions were available at online stores until 2018, this is no longer the case.

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