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Steve Biko and Stoned Cherrie: Refashioning the Body Politic in Democratic South Africa

Abstract

Steve Biko was a well-known hero and martyr of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Detained, tortured and ultimately murdered in detention by the security police in 1977, he became a symbol of resistance in the mass mobilisations against apartheid that characterised the 1980s. His face appeared on the t-shirts of activists at rallies and funerals of others killed at the hands of the state. In contemporary, democratic South Africa, the politics of protest has given way to a new dynamic of black economic empowerment, the rise of a new black middle class and, with these, expressions of confident middle class black individuality. The mass character of politics prior to 1994 has given way to the more prosaic forms associated with a constitutional democracy. But there have also been ways in which these two tropes have melded. The present article examines the use of Steve Biko's image in post-apartheid South Africa by home-grown design label Stoned Cherrie on its high fashion t-shirts and asks how we are to read this gesture.

Introduction

Practices of dress/performance/display have the capacity to either contest or reinforce existing arrangements of power and flesh out the meanings of citizenship (Landes, 1995: 101).

Roland Barthes pointed out that fashion is serious and frivolous at the same time. Fashion has the ability to imply novelty, the compulsion for change and difference at the same time as normalising and reproducing dominant mores. Fashion, as a system of communication which employs the body as a medium upon which to write its messages, constructs images of masculinity and femininity and acts as a meeting point for relations of power, be they of gender, class, race or sexuality. Fashion is at once fantasy and social regulation – a place where we find and construct images of imagined selves and desires which in turn serve to construct versions of both the aspirational and the despised self. In fashion we find not only fictions of the self but also fictions of a more social kind – of national identity and political selfhood.

This article is an attempt to suggest a variety of possible readings of one particular fashion moment in contemporary South Africa: the employment of the image of martyr of the anti-apartheid movement, Steve Biko, on haute couture women's t-shirts by award-winning local fashion brand Stoned Cherrie. Judith Butler (1996: 122) has argued that forms of protest which have the greatest efficacy are those that, while drawing on existing cultural conventions, are not immediately legible, 'the ones that

challenge our practices of reading, that make us uncertain about how to read, or make us think that we have to renegotiate the way in which we read public signs'. Stoned Cherrie's use of Steven Biko's image as a fashion accessory is provocative because it instigates a renegotiation of meaning both of the past (apartheid, the anti-apartheid struggle and its heroes) and the present (femininity, African identity, the distinction between the public and the private, the body and the social). Conventional practices of interpreting both the feminine and the political are here challenged giving rise to multiple possible readings which are difficult to order hierarchically or to reduce to a single overarching logic.

Steve Biko

Steve Biko (1946-1977) was the first president and one of the founders of the Black People's Convention (BPC) which was established in South Africa in 1972. The BPC was an umbrella body for some 70 different South African black consciousness groups and associations, including SASM (the South African Students' Movement) which played a significant role in the Soweto uprisings of 1976. In 1973 Steve Biko was banned by the Apartheid government. The terms of his banning order restricted him to his home town of Kings Williams' Town in the Eastern Cape.

On the 21st of August 1977 Biko was detained by the Eastern Cape security police and held in Port Elizabeth. On the 7th of September he sustained a head injury during interrogation. The doctors who initially examined him, naked, lying on a mat and manacled to a metal grille, disregarded overt signs of neurological injury. By the 11th of September he had slipped into a continual, semi-conscious state and the police physician recommended a transfer to hospital. Instead he was transported 1200 kilometres to Pretoria – a 12-hour journey which he made lying naked in the back of a Land Rover. A few hours later, on the 12th of September, alone and still naked, lying on the floor of a cell in the Pretoria Central Prison, Steve Biko died. The then South African Minister of Justice, James Kruger initially suggested Biko's death was the result of a hunger-strike – a claim that was dropped following local and international media pressure. An inquest was conducted which revealed that Biko had died of brain damage, but the presiding magistrate failed to find anyone responsible, ruling that Biko had died as a result of injuries sustained during a scuffle with security police whilst in detention.

The brutal circumstances of Biko's death caused a worldwide outcry and he became a martyr and symbol of resistance to Apartheid. In the wake of his death, the South African government banned a number of individuals (including journalist Donald Woods) and organisations closely associated with Biko. The United Nations Security Council responded by finally imposing an arms embargo against South Africa. The three doctors connected with Biko's case were initially exonerated by the South African Medical Disciplinary Committee and it was not until a second enquiry in 1985 that any action was taken against them. The police officers responsible for Biko's death applied for amnesty in 1997 to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which had been set up in 1995 to bear witness to, record and in some cases grant amnesty to the perpetrators of human rights violations during apartheid. The Commission found that Biko's death was a gross human rights violation.

Biko was to become a prominent martyr of the anti-apartheid struggle and his image was a ubiquitous presence on the t-shirts of political activists at the height of political ferment in the 1980s. Then, the wearing of Biko's likeness, cheaply reproduced onto mass manufactured ordinary cotton t-shirts, communicated a clear message: defiance of the apartheid regime and political alignment with the ideas and purposes of the black consciousness movement. In post-apartheid South Africa, Biko's image has once again emerged on t-shirts but here the sign is more difficult to read.

Stoned Cherrie

Stoned Cherrie is a South African fashion brand established in 2000 by black female entrepreneur, Nkhensani Nkosi. Stoned Cherrie has set out to become a home-grown 'super brand' that is styled as an expression of afro-urban culture. In 2002 the brand won the 'best ladies' wear' category at the South African Fashion Awards. Various labels have labelled the 'high priestess of South African fashion' and 'celebrity mastermind', in addition to being a fashion entrepreneur, Nkosi holds a degree in Industrial Psychology and Sociology and is an acclaimed actress, entertainer, writer, television producer/host and media personality. Nkosi says of the Stoned Cherrie philosophy:

I like the idea of boldly moving forward and daring to be different and daring to be proud to be African. Stoned Cherrie is a unique African urban brand ... I am proud that we are able to translate what are old ideas into something new and provide the nostalgia that is part of our celebration. I am proud that we have been recognised by the industry as being at the forefront of redefining African street culture in a way that is exciting and revolutionary (Nokia Cape Town Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2005/ www.capetownfashionweek.com).

Stoned Cherrie's 'look' is often described as distinctively 'African'. Moreover, the A-line skirts which the label made famous are small at the waist and full at the hips which is said to suit the 'more rounded figure of an African woman'. Designs are described as an eclectic combination of 'ancient' African beadwork, trimmings and traditional Xhosa styles combined with 'serious urban flare'. The fabric use is often unique: 'seshweshwe bridal material and hardy Xhosa cloth' (Sampson, 2003), waists are belted, skirts cut on the cross.

One of the moves that the brand is most well-known for is t-shirts featuring covers of *Drum* magazine which have been hugely successful not only locally but also on the international fashion market. In 2003 Nkosi signed a deal with Bailey's Historical Archives in Johannesburg for the exclusive right to use images from *Drum* magazine directly on fabric. *Drum* was the first magazine that aimed to portray the situation of black South Africans in-depth, for black readers. The publication achieved renown in the 1950s for its investigation of racial discrimination under apartheid and perhaps even more notably for its vibrant photographs. The signature black and white images of *Drum* documented the jazz singers, political figures and sporting heroes – even the criminals – who defined the era (Penderis, 2005).

Ron Irwin (2004) argues that the use of images from *Drum* magazine has a special resonance in South Africa:

The 1950s is often looked upon by locals of all races as not only the beginning of the modern anti-apartheid movement, but also the beginning of black protest culture. *Drum* was the era's primary print outlet, and its black and white images have a bittersweet

poignancy. By wearing Stoned Cherrie clothing, black South Africans can feel they are taking back the censored past of their parents and grandparents.

But while an avowedly political project, *Drum* was also always associated with a knowing, chic urban black elite at play. Its tone was often irreverent and its coverage by no means limited to the serious political concerns of the day. In that sense, the decision, by Stoned Cherrie to employ the image of Steven Biko on its designer t-shirts can be understood in part as following the logic of the *Drum* project, but also as departing significantly from it. Biko was an irreducibly political figure, his tragic death as clear a marker as there ever could be for apartheid in its most bloody and brutish manifestation. How are we to read the inversion of this overtly political symbol in the service of a seemingly very different purpose: the apparently frivolous and purely decorative project of fashionable adornment with its associated connotations of bourgeois excess and circumscribed hyper-femininity? There are a number of possible readings which chaotically clamour to be heard, some of which are suggested here.

Reading one: profaning Biko

One reaction to the appearance of Biko's image on the fashion catwalk has been outrage at the deployment of his likeness for such an overtly commercial purpose. Those who take this view invoke Biko's socialist sympathies, suggesting a sense of disrespect and betrayal of his legacy at finding his face adorning the ramparts of one of capitalism's most extreme expressions of consumerist excess. Lwandile Sisilana (2004) takes this view, asserting that these icons stood for certain principles and they would not like to be remembered in this way. 'Is Biko's memory, then, not being killed: killed, that is, by being improperly remembered?', Sisilana asks. He argues that not only is the manner of the remembering improper but also the vehicle: 'he might have issues with being associated with the black middle class he did so much to warn us against'.

The argument here is that this form of popularisation of political figures is an empty and meaningless form. The faces of political figures are worn without the wearer having any real knowledge of the ideas and philosophies that the image stands for. Similar indignation is expressed about the wearing of Che Guevara t-shirts or Tupac styling himself 'Makkaveli' or his Outlawz giving themselves names like 'Kastro', 'Kaddafi', 'Edi' (for Ugandan dictator Idi Amin) and 'Napoleon'. What this reading suggests is that there is a 'true' and authentic way to wear a t-shirt with a political icon emblazoned upon it and an unacceptable, fake way of doing so. To be authentic means to have a true knowledge of what the person stood for and to be truly and consciously aligned with those views. It means moreover that the wearing is done for a solemn political purpose rather than a decorative one.

The view of fashionable dress as decadent and wasteful has a long heritage in the Western Christian tradition. Perhaps the most influential of proponents of this outlook was Thorstein Veblen whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* was first published in 1899. His view of fashion as self-indulgent conspicuous consumption was taken up by Jean Baudrillard in the 1960s. Left-wing thinking, until recently, has been dominated by the idea that fashion can be understood as little more than 'the search for distinction by the upper middle classes' (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001: 2).

The outrage that some feel at the perceived prostitution of Biko's image for commercial gain is rendered more intelligible perhaps, and certainly more poignant, if we recall the circumstances of his death. Again and again, the image is of a naked Biko – manacled to a grille, in the back of a Land Rover, on the floor of a cell. The stripping of Biko was clearly a crucial component of his persecution. Kate Soper (2001: 21) argues that the preservation of human dignity and autonomy is closely bound up with the wearing of clothes and the choice of what one wears. It is precisely because of this that one, very insidious way of exercising control over others is by means of control over their mode of dress. Nowhere is this more cruelly exemplified than in the denial of clothing altogether. To take away a person's clothing is to take away their human dignity. 'As all prison camp guards and torturers have always been well aware, to force strip the victim is to initiate the process of dehumanisation, to signal contempt for personal identity by playing with or mocking at the aspiration to preserve it' (Soper, *ibid.*). The painful circumstances of Biko's humiliation and subsequent murder are, for many South Africans, emblematic of apartheid in a more general way. This is what being a martyr means: it is to stand for or represent a broader set of circumstances, experiences and beliefs. The use of this particular image then to make a fashion statement, to express individuality and empowerment in a milieu of fun and frivolity seems, to many, profane.

Reading two: making politics hip

But the reading of fashion as merely trivial and sacrilegiously worldly, is perhaps too naïve a contention given our contemporary acknowledgement of the inevitability and validity of multiple meanings and interpretations of a single sign. While structuralists like Roland Barthes (1985) and Alison Lurie (1981) attempted to approach fashion as a system of signs which could be read like a language, the messiness and complexity of fashion as it is lived and practised in everyday life, resists a single or definitive reading. As Fred Davis has argued, fashion is more like music than speech, suggestive and ambiguous rather than bound by precise grammatical rules (cited in Entwistle and Wilson, 2001: 3).

In contrast to the idea of the fashion industry's disrespectful trivialising of Biko and his legacy, Stoned Cherrie and others have painted a picture of fashion in contemporary South Africa as avowedly political both in terms of its effects and intentions. Speaking with South Africa's *Sunday Times* of the *Drum* project and specifically of her Biko shirts, Nkosi said it was seen as a 'test phase to see if people would actually wear an outfit with a photograph of a black man with his fist in the air' (20 April, 2003). 'Part of my thinking was to make history part of popular popular culture ... We are currently negotiating our identity as South Africans. There's a new kind of consciousness about. I would like most people to learn about the history of their country from my clothes' (cited in Sampson, 2003). Nkosi has attributed the success of her clothes to the fact that they 'express a social and political awareness and make us feel proud of who we are' (Cowrie, 2004: 10).

This reading, then, would suggest that the intentionality is more subtly political than the usual practice of display for a political purpose as in for example, the deployment of purple, white and green by British suffragettes or the wearing of (leader of the then banned African National Congress) Oliver Tambo t-shirts at 1980s funerals

of activists killed by police in South Africa. The argument is that the deployment of Biko's image by Stoned Cherrie can be read neither as 'merely' decorative nor entirely apolitical. To be sure, wearing a Stoned Cherrie t-shirt featuring Biko's face is not necessarily an indication of a deliberate intention to commemorate his legacy specifically and knowledgeably. Nor is it an indication necessarily of support for the particular political ideas that he stood for. Indeed it is unlikely that the wearers of these t-shirts would be able to say very much at all about who Biko was. Nevertheless there is a more general politics present here: a politics in which is echoed tropes of self-affirmation, black pride, the legitimacy of the anti-apartheid struggle in a general sense and the celebration of freedom. In many ways it is a quite profound political point that so uncontested is the legitimacy of the struggle that its most hard-bitten ideological purists are now the new 'cool'. It represents a sense in which 'politics' itself has become somewhat 'fashionable' with contemporary youth who experience their own lives as lacking in clear goals or focus looking back with nostalgia at an era where the enemies were clearly defined, the opportunities for acts of daring abundant and the heroes larger than life.

Parkins (2002: 101) has argued that fashion and commodities can become 'sites for the declaration of a political allegiance and the contestation of existing political arrangements'. However, the question would then become, what is this particular deployment of the political on the part of Stoned Cherrie declaring allegiance to? And is it contesting or affirming existing political arrangements? In his book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, perhaps the most iconographic of all South African political figures, founding democratic President Nelson Mandela describes an event at his school, Healdtown, whose significance for him was 'like a comet streaking across the night sky'. The occasion was a visit by Krune Mqhayi who, appearing on stage in Xhosa dress and holding an assegai aloft, tells the audience: 'The assegai stands for what is glorious and true in African history. It is a symbol of the African as a warrior and the African as artist'. Mqhayi is unequivocal in his rejection of Western culture: 'What I am talking to you about is not ... the overlapping of one culture over another. What I am talking about is the brutal clash between what is indigenous and good and what is foreign and bad ... We cannot allow these foreigners who do not care for our culture to take over our nation. I predict that one day, the forces of African society will achieve a momentous victory over the interloper' (Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 1994, p. 41).

Black consciousness, Ngugi wa Thiongo (2003) has recently argued, is about 'the right of black peoples to draw an image of themselves that negates and transcends the image of themselves that was drawn by those who would weaken them in their fight for and assertion of their humanity ... It seeks to draw the image of a possible world, different and transcending the one drawn by the West by reconnecting itself to a different historical memory and dreams'. For wa Thiongo, the main challenges of Biko's life, thought and legacy are 'to disengage ourselves from the tyranny of the European post-renaissance memory and seize back the right and the initiative to name the world by reconnecting to our memory'. He argues that while the state can create an enabling democratic environment and resources, 'no renaissance can come out of state legislation and admonitions ... renaissance, as rebirth and flowering, can only spring from the wealth of imagination of the people, and above all, from its keepers of

memory'. One possible reading then is that Stoned Cherrie's appropriation of Biko's memory and legacy is part of this renaissance springing from the imagination of our own people, reconnecting us with our legacy and memories. This is certainly the reading that the brand's founder has offered. The alternative is that it represents a selling out to the European interloper, proof that Mqhayi's optimism was ill-founded.

Stoned Cherrie's founder, Nkhensani Nkosi, is not oblivious of the importance of the question as to which of these two readings is the most compelling. In interview after interview she is concerned to describe the *Drum* project in avowedly political terms, as 'making history part of our popular culture'. Moreover, she sees her overall approach to fashion design and clothes as explicitly political in that these forms of expression are central to the building of an authentic African identity which looks to its own imaginative wellsprings in the crafting of a new nation rather than settling for imitation: '[clothes are] about our identity and our pride, about who we are ... [Stoned Cherrie is] ... a mouthpiece for an expression that never found a vehicle and a reaction to pessimism that black South Africans could not make a mark in a fashion scene so dominated by European designs'. Nkosi has described herself as 'exhilarated' that people are increasingly excited to be South African and are embracing their identity instead of looking to the West: 'There's a new sense of expression, boldness and attitude, a new confidence; we are trying to define ourselves and are not hero-worshipping other cultures. And it's a state of mind; a question of headspace rather than of age or demographic' (cited in Kennedy, 2004).

Nkosi is by no means the only local designer to describe her project in such explicitly political terms. On the contrary, this reading of the role of fashion in the new democratic order enjoys a wide consensus. Co-founder of youth media company Black Rage Productions (which is among other things home to an urban culture focused website www.rage.co.za) Maria Mcloy writes:

'It used to be that wearing locally-made clothes was considered cheap and Italian designs were en Vogue. Not anymore: any truly trendy type in their right mind only wants to wear local designer wear from designers like Black Coffee, Loxion Kulca or Sun Goddess ... and Stoned Cherrie ... People are coveting funky fashions by up and coming young designers available in cool small boutiques' (*Mail and Guardian*, 'We Had a Dream', 17 June, 2005). Fashion Week organiser Dion Chang concurs: 'Five years ago people wanted Guess and Diesel but kids of today want Darkie or Native; that gets more street cred than international designs. Ten years into democracy there's a whole generation who want to believe in South Africa and want to wear clothes that have a sense of where they come from so we've stopped copying Europe and America. If you're wearing a Stoned Cherrie shirt it speaks volumes and makes a strong statement about what you feel about your country and yourself' (ibid.).

Reflecting back on Stoned Cherrie's unveiling of its third collection in August 2001, *Sunday Times* journalist Craig Jacobs chose to headline his story 'Seams like liberation. A Celebration of Democracy'. The header went on to declare that designers were 'breaking away from the dictates of the West, tipping the African aesthetic into the mainstream' (*Sunday Times* 25 April, 2004). Jacobs points out that the use of 'a black man with his fist in the air plastered onto t-shirts' (ibid.) was not the only item of explicitly political symbolism in that landmark show. It was also the show in which Soweto supermodel Nompumelelo Gwina strode down the ramp wearing the highly recognisable colours of the African National Congress: black, green and yellow. A

local Afrikaans newspaper was to comment of the show that it had a ‘strong ANC focus’ (Jacobs 2004). Far from merely sporting the logo colours of a political party, however, the reference here was more subtle and complex since it was common to see young activists in particular, literally wearing the colours of the liberation movement as they draped themselves in the banned flag at mass rallies at the height of the struggle in the 1980s. More sobering was the reference to coffins also draped in flags at weekly funerals of activists killed in violent confrontation with the apartheid security forces that the image also explicitly echoed.

While the imagery is described both by Nkosi and by aficionados of the South African fashion industry as ‘symbolising a breakaway from the Eurocentric dress of the West and a return to our African heritage’, in reality the references are much less broad than this and much more explicitly positioned within a particular political tradition than general references to the legitimising mantle of ‘African heritage’ would suggest. When European fashion was touting military-style cargo pants and camouflage prints Stoned Cherrie, concerned to avoid merely copying international trend by rote, hardly resorted to an aesthetic of traditional African battle dress. Instead, the military references were to Umkhonto we Sizwe (the spear of the nation) the military wing of the African National Congress in exile. Indeed the association with *Drum* magazine and the Sophiatown milieu of the 1950s is specifically non-traditionalist in its references. *Drum* magazine’s projected audience as Sarah Nuttall has pointed out was expressly cosmopolitan (2004: 436). As Lewis Nkosi’s *Home and Exile* puts it: ‘the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve – urbanized, eager, fast-talking and brash’ (1983: 8 cited in Nuttall, 2004: 436).

Reading three: fashioning the self

Biko’s ideological progenitor, Frantz Fanon, in his celebrated essay ‘The Fact of Blackness’ (1952: 1) describing the consciousness of being black in a world of white power, argued that to be black in a racist culture is to be defined in relation to whiteness. Moreover, he suggested, the converse is not true. ‘The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man’. Kadiatu Kanneh (1998: 160) has argued that in this context of invisibility and negativity with regard to the representation of blackness in the popular imagination, ‘the changing meanings of Black styles and fashion in music, dress and hair point to a healthy and active resistance’. Kobena Mercer (1994: 100) similarly writes that ‘the question of style can be seen as a medium for expressing the aspirations of black people historically excluded from access to official social institutions of representation and legitimation in urban, industrialised societies ... [B]lack peoples ... have developed distinct, if not unique, patterns of style across a range of cultural practices from music, speech, dance, dress and even cookery, which are politically intelligible as creative responses to the experience of oppression and dispossession’. Richard Majors, in his study of black masculinity and sports refers to what he calls ‘cool pose’ as a set of lifestyle behaviours ‘often developed and used by black men as a response to the limits that institutionalised racism places on their other opportunities for self-expression’ (2001, 209). Style and dress then, are far from innocent of racial politics even when adopted without straightforward political intentionality.

Nuttall (2004: 432) has referred to this phenomenon as the 'stylizing of the self' in which young people 'seek to transform themselves into singular beings ... the rise of the first-person singular within the work of liberation'. In this labour of constructing the self historical materials drawn from a rich struggle heritage clearly are valuable resources but, Nuttall argues, 'new youth cultures are superseding the resistance politics of an earlier generation, while still jamming, remixing, and remaking cultural codes and signifiers from the past' (2004: 436). For Nuttall, Stoned Cherrie's designs 'speak in several registers' (ibid.) so that the use of Steve Biko's image is less about affirming a message of black consciousness than 'that a sartorial style is being marked as in-your-face contemporary through the remixing and recoding of an icon' (2004: 437). The class connotations too are more complex than the straightforward critique of middle class excess would suggest. Designs draw on street and township cultures, affirming the vibrancy of an urban working class milieu, including for example branded overalls, denim wear and sports shoes.

More latterly, Stoned Cherrie's Biko t-shirts have inspired another remarkable range of clothing named after Hector Pieteron, reportedly the first child to be killed in the 16 June, 1976 Soweto uprising and one of the most recognisable visual symbols of anti-apartheid resistance. Abasha Creations is co-founded by Pieteron's youngest half sister and distributes the Hector Pieteron range of clothes and accessories. It is significant perhaps that contemporary political figures are not celebrated or seen as appropriate fashion accessories with the possible exception of founding father President Nelson Mandela. A harkening back to struggle heroes past is a far safer option than the more overtly political and thus potentially controversial and necessarily 'serious' business of positioning oneself within contemporary political debates and aligning oneself with contemporary political figures. Nelson Mandela is contemporary but he is also the supreme representative figure of the incontrovertibly heroic nostalgic political as opposed to the messy normalcy and ordinariness that inevitably is associated with politics in the present. In this sense to remain only at the level of celebrating past heroes while disengaging from the political in the present is potentially conservative and politically emasculating in its implications. It is easy to side with what history has proven right. Far more morally taxing is to make decisions and choices on matters which history has yet to judge. It is moreover politically far more provocative and thus far more bold to deploy contemporary figures for ends which are subversive of their own self-projection. Lipovetsky (1994, cited in Parkins, 2002: 15) defends fashion as the 'ultimate phase of democracy' because of the importance he assigns to the role of the frivolous in the development of a critical, realist, tolerant consciousness. When satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys appears as Winnie Madikizela Mandela draped in a Nelson Mandela T-shirt we are challenged on multiple levels: an Afrikaner-Jewish drag queen impersonating a black woman who many see as the 'mother of the nation', who also happens to be the disgraced former wife of the iconic founding father of the nation. Loren Kruger (1997: iv) has argued that the hybridity of this image challenges South Africans 'to think sceptically about national icons and founding fictions'.

Reading four: using the past for profit

A different version of the argument from authenticity is to point out that not only is the use of political icons in this way potentially emasculating but it is also, of course, not

particularly original. One could argue that Stoned Cherrie merely replaced, for financial gain, the ubiquitous image of legendary revolutionary Che Guevara, now sported on a million off-the-peg t-shirts, with the face of Steve Biko. Even in local terms the idea was foreshadowed by Marianne Fassler's 1994 ball gown which featured leopard prints and Nelson Mandela's face in ANC colours (Jacobs, 2004). It was Fassler who designed the dress teeming with African beads that actress Alfre Woodard wore to the Golden Globe Awards in 1999 to much acclaim.

Nevertheless, while not entirely new, there is no doubt that we are given pause by this most recent of indications that capitalism is undaunted in its ability to absorb and tame forces of radical opposition. Biko's was a profound and far-reaching social critique. Ironically, perhaps, he advocated psychological liberation of the self in the mould of Fanon as a necessary condition for political and social liberation. In contemporary consumer society the idea of self-liberation is much in vogue but the link with the political and the social is lost in what Christopher Lasch (1979) has famously called a 'culture of narcissism'. Lasch writes (1979: 96): 'The disparity between romance and reality, the world of the beautiful people and the workaday world, gives rise to an ironic detachment that dulls pain but also cripples the will to change social conditions, to make even modest improvements in work and play, and to restore meaning and dignity to everyday life'.

The dominant ideology of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle emphasised its mass character – the unity and oneness of the oppressed. In the 1980s t-shirts featuring the images of jailed, killed or exiled activists were a ubiquitous feature of marches, rallies and mass funerals. These were cheaply and quickly produced protest items frequently manufactured in low-tech circumstances using hand silk screens and low-budget production processes. In Stoned Cherrie's appropriation of struggle icons these are used as items of consumption not in the construction of a mass political movement but of individual subjectivity. Here the low-budget item of mass identification whose specific purpose is to signal the subsumption of individual identity within the goals of a broader political movement becomes re-interpreted and reconstituted as an expression of individualism, creativity and the watchword of the new dogma, entrepreneurship. To 'make a fashion statement' is to make an individual statement with the adornment of one's own body. The political icon is here specifically removed from its mass political (struggle) context and placed in a new context, more particularly a context characterised by a certain decadent celebration of the self. It was precisely this celebration of the self and of individuality which was frowned upon by the mass populist politics of the liberation struggle era with its emphasis on duty and self-sacrifice in the service of a goal much greater than any single person. The fact that the contrast is so stark is what makes it startling.

Reading five: contesting dominant gender norms

Craig Native, whose street-styled denim is worn by US rocker Lenny Kravitz, is another South African designer who uses clothes to challenge dominant norms and expectations. In his collection inspired by South Africa's obsession with sports he combined the springbok rugby emblem with a pink T-shirt, subverting the iconic symbol of white male heterosexual masculinity. Does Stoned Cherrie provide a comparable contestation of dominant constructions femininity? For Stoned Cherrie's

2002 SA Fashion Week show which took place in the renovated industrial space of the Turbine Hall in Johannesburg's Newtown, the brand adopted the themes of initiation, courtship and marriage to create what one observer termed 'elements of femininity from shebeen queen to heroine chic ... a powerful female urban aesthetic that could stand its own in any capital' (Blignaut, 2002).

This suggests a further possible reading of the effects of Stoned Cherrie's use of political icons in women's fashion: that of contesting the construction of the fashionable female subject as decorative but apolitical. Women's fashionably dressed bodies typify docile femininity. In contrast, Stoned Cherrie fashions and in particular the use of political icons to emblazon them suggest a mode of defiant challenge which deliberately calls on the onlooker to look again (Parkins, 2002: 107) thus employing the mechanism of the gaze but turning it against itself. This subversion of the accepted binary opposition between the ornamental and the political (Parkins, 2002: 108), calls into question the accepted logic of feminine docility. In this sense the brand is part of a generalised assertion in the culture of women's political and economic ascendancy: the celebration of women in South Africa's 'new gender order'.

Clearly we can be critical of this strategy in that it is necessarily a strategy of middle-classness, a strategy which affirms the constitution of the self through consumption and one which is by definition available only to the privileged few. However, it might be argued that while the majority of South African women would not be able to afford a Stoned Cherrie garment, the effect of the contestation of femininity's apolitical status is useful to all women. The effect of Stoned Cherrie is to reconstruct practices of conventional hyper-femininity, as represented by the world of modelling and high fashion, as 'political', thus serving to confirm that women, even in their capacity as icons of hyper-femininity, are political subjects. In this way, what are usually assumed to be clear lines of demarcation between fashion and politics are unsettled. This echoes Parkins's observations about the way in which the suffragettes of the early twentieth century made use of practices associated with fashion to both contest contemporary constructions of the political terrain and to offer a new version of what it could potentially mean to be a 'political' subject (2002: 101).

Stoned Cherrie's rise to prominence coincides with a more generalised feminisation of South Africa's public sphere with the entry of a large number of women into the national parliament and the rise to prominence of women in business, the media and a range of other social spheres, as well as a greater political focus on issues regarded as 'women's concerns' or the domain of 'women's rights' such as rape, abortion, and economic empowerment. Rita Felski (1995: 90) has described a similar milieu in Britain at the close of the nineteenth century in terms of a 'new prominence of icons of femininity in the public domain, and a concomitant emphasis on sensuousness, luxury and emotional gratification as features of modern life' (cited in Parkins, 2002: 98).

On the other hand what is being affirmed here is a particular version of (socially sanctioned slim, beautiful) femininity. As Entwistle (2000) has argued, dress is always about bodies – and not just anybody's dress can be deployed to refashion the body politic. Dress is a situated bodily practice. Part of the reason why Stoned Cherrie t-shirts work is because of the clash of cultural meanings created by the juxtaposition of the apparently frivolous, feminine with the seriousness of austere struggle images. The

unlikely of the juxtaposition between fashion and politics is only startling however because of the ubiquity of the distinction in the culture between the public and the private, the bodily and the social. The clash also only 'works' because it is a clash between the legitimate, culturally acceptable femaleness (hyper-femininity) of the models and a world from which femininity is traditionally excluded. Stoned Cherrie's use of political images like Biko's incorporated into fashion designs destabilises the binary opposition between the private sphere as the realm of consumption and the public sphere as the realm of politics. As women's clothing it also embodies a challenge to the idea that women and their interests in fashion and clothing demarcate them as part of the non-political private sphere and thus excluded from the political sphere. But it does not express or affirm a dissident or counter-hegemonic femininity in the sense that not just any body is paraded on the cat walk in a Stoned Cherrie t-shirt. The disparity of meanings that is ignited is bounded by traditional notions of feminine acceptability.

Conclusion

Practices of dress, both ceremonial and workaday, historically denote forms of citizenship in a variety of ways. In this sense, dress is an arena of political struggle which can be used either to confirm or subvert acceptable tropes of citizenship and the dominant norms of state power that enforce them. Clothing can be seen to be incorporated in a broader spectrum of symbolic political practices which, as Felski (1995: 150) argues, need not simply be seen as reproducing or reflecting an already constituted politics grounded in the economy or the state, but can be seen to operate as instruments of transformation, ways of reconstituting the social and political world. Dress, then, reflects not only something about the body and character of the wearer but also about the body politic, the character of the state. Stoned Cherrie makes this interaction very explicit with its use of the colours of the ruling party and the icons of the anti-apartheid struggle. But while the relationship is thus rendered explicit its meaning is by no means clear.

Sarah Nuttall argues that new stylisations of the self, embedded in cultures of the body, 'represent one of the most decisive shifts of the post-apartheid era' (2004: 449). The resultant mix of meaning and intentionality, of interpretation and legibility is chaotic and complex, defying easy readings in terms of race, culture or political identity. The patterns are promiscuous and conflicting, mutating readily, combining in a heady blend of past, present and future which is at once a reflection of lived experience, historical memory and memory-making and of as yet unrequited aspiration. In contrast to the dominant sense of belonging arising from shared oppression and shared political aspiration that characterised resistance politics in the pre-liberation period, contemporary South African fashion which is consciously looking to South Africa's political history for inspiration, offers the possibility of identity through consumption.

While there are those who shake their heads at the transient, ephemeral, and thus inevitably alienating nature of this form of identity construction, at the fact that one can through fashion associate oneself with a collective project but without any real personal investment or commitment to its continuity (Soper, 2001: 29), such a reading risks underestimating the extent to which structures of racism are profoundly

embodied experiences. It is one of the central elements of racism's colloquy that individuality is denied; to be black is to be representative of a group while to be white as Richard Dyer (1997) points out, is to be unique and infinitely diverse. The end of the political austerity and intensity of the apartheid period has opened up the space for greater political playfulness which is seen in the use of struggle icons in fashion in ways that would previously have been unthinkable given the status of these figures as serious political symbols. To insist that Biko's image can stand for one set of ideas only is to calcify the image and its meaning and in effect to deny that the image can be part of a (privileged) world of choice, diversity and hybridity.

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