# SAY IT WITH YOUR WHOLE CHEST

## T-SHIRTS AS EVERYDAY JOY AND RADICALLY SOFT RESISTANCE

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**Abstract**

As an arts-based sustainability practitioner, I am interested in what moves people to transform themselves, and the systems in which they live, to be more supportive of the wellbeing of Earth and its connected inhabitants. In this autoethnographic paper, I discuss leverage points for systemic transformation, and the role and potential of fashion as an 'everyday intervention' gently challenging the political and environmental climates in which we find ourselves. This paper began as a thought experiment about "wearing my convictions" as a sustainability practitioner by using t-shirts to activate civil conversations and memorialise activists, leading to research into the history of resistance t-shirts as wearable art and "honouring rituals as activism" in South Africa and elsewhere.

I share examples of praxis by artists, activists and designers that offer inspiration for practice-based research grounded in creative response-ability and "soft radical" activism, representing and giving voice to that which is overlooked or silenced by "business as usual". These creative methods and histories illustrate how fashion (and Fashion) – as wearable art and cultural history – builds on these traditions, offering evolving symbols of joy, hope, and resistance, which can strengthen the relationship between personal transformation, responsible citizenship and systemic change towards relational fairness and care. I briefly consider sustainability imperatives that need attention in the creation of all clothing, especially resistance clothing. The article concludes with an appeal to creatives and consumers, particularly in the Global South, to remain critical of what we 'advertise' every day with our bodies and consider ways to disrupt western sociocultural expectations.

**Keywords**: *Transformation; Resistance T-shirts; Honouring Rituals; Affective Resistance; Radical Softness.*

## CALL AND RESPONSE: INTRODUCTION AND POSITIONING

A call for papers (CfP) is not always a call to action, but the one sent out by this issue's editors seemed to be both, as it focused on forging the "theoretical tools necessary to engage with the ongoing production of race and racisms" and to "mobilise to challenge the negative effects of … global changes". Drawn by the invitation to "historians, practitioners, designers, activists, educators" and "members of civil society", I was moved to share the appeal of fashion as wearable art and activism in my personal, public and professional contexts, as fashion can speak gently but clearly in spaces where little else can.

As an arts-based sustainability practitioner, I am interested in what moves people to transform themselves, and the systems in which they live, to be more supportive of the wellbeing of Earth and its connected inhabitants. The assertion in the CfP that the "formation of joy … is a radical choice and a resistance to sub-humanising conditions" seemed poignant, since grief is common amongst sustainability practitioners – who face every day the corrosive social-ecological effects of poverty, pressure on planetary boundaries, and the acceleration of extinctions (Rockström, *et al.* 2009; Raworth, 2017).

I contend that fashion and creative methods and histories have an important role in challenging the political and environmental climates in which

we find ourselves. I am not a BIPOC person but was inspired by the question of how fashion praxis might allow BIPOC and other bodies "to resist" and "allow affective passage for their generative being and becomings". The examples of praxis by artists, activists and designers in this paper have offered inspiration for my return to practice-based research grounded in creative response-ability, soft radical activism, and considering the relationship between personal transformation, responsible citizenship and systemic change towards relational fairness and care.

This paper began as an autoethnographic thought experiment about "wearing my convictions" as a sustainability practitioner, and my longing to use t-shirts to extend the reach of my academic work, activate civil conversations, soothe the trauma of the news cycle, and make sure that the names of those martyred and lost in tragic circumstances do not fade quickly from public discourse. As in other countries, t-shirts in South Africa are used to represent sports-team support and unity, institutional celebrations and special family events and are particularly well known as symbols of mass action and anti-apartheid struggle (Tulloch, 2022), and political affiliation or advertising (Letsoalo, 2021). My interests in the transformative potential of fashion as wearable art/activism have since deepened, as I am considering ways to adapt my clothing so that it gives voice to stories aside from "business as usual" in the "current atmosphere imbued with instances of gross erasure and silence", including academic conferences.

In this paper I discuss leverage points for systemic transformation, share the history of resistance t-shirts as wearable art and activism in South Africa and elsewhere, and how fashion (and Fashion), keeps expanding on these traditions, offering new (and old) symbols of joy, hope, faith and resistance. Lastly, I consider sustainability imperatives that need attention in the creation of all clothing, especially resistance clothing.

## WHAT MAKES PEOPLE CHANGE?

When asked at a sustainability research meeting to share something personally transformative, I spoke about a YouTube clip of British actor Tom Holland dancing to Rihanna's song "Umbrella" on the American show *Lip Sync Battle* in 2017. The show was a contemporary follies, with celebrities lip-syncing pop songs, often in drag. Holland – a trained dancer – gave a performance that was brilliantly in the pocket.[1] Dressed in a neat black corset, he moved with astonishing confidence and precision. Avoiding slapstick or mockery, he gave the performance with his whole chest, clearly feeling himself in the role (Fig. 01). Watching it, I had a queer reaction – something akin to G-force. My scalp contracted, I got tunnel vision and swore aloud.

Unable to articulate what combination of music, visual splendour and performative energy induced this reaction, I read the YouTube video comments and was amused to find many others blown away by this transformative performance. As one commentator put it, "I just transcended lol". Many others described the performance as revising their sexuality and notions about gender (Lip Sync Battle, 2017). I had long taught Visual Literacy for new university students at an art and design faculty, exemplifying how gendered clothing codes have changed throughout history – for example, corsets and high heels are presently coded as queer of feminine in mainstream western pop culture but have been worn as core parts of male fashion in the historical past. Although I shared theory that framed gender as performed and conveyed through apparel and attitudes, Holland's performance drove this home in a way scholarship had not. After my "Lip Sync Battle epiphany", masculinity and femininity became detached forever from so-called male or female bodies, changing my cisgender notions of gender and sexuality. Since Holland's performance was staged without "specific intentions" it can be framed as a practice of radical softness, as it became "a revolutionary moment and a crack in a world of hardened borders … causing a softening of roles and stable identities" (Kærgaard-Andersen, et al. 2020, p. 4).

### WHAT MAKES PEOPLE CHANGE SYSTEMS?

Influential systems theorist Donella Meadows (1999) argued that to change a system, one must do so at the level of paradigm or worldview – to align a system's intent with its design. While there is much focus on parameters, numbers and feedbacks in organisations and institutions, we only really enter the realm of transformative change when looking to systemic design and the paradigm informing it (Meadows, 1999). Real paradigm shift is most difficult to achieve, but it is often instantaneous

1 Drummer parlance for a tight performance with a consistent groove.

Fig. 01

and irreversible – when one "clicks", it shifts one's understanding of the world (Meadows, 1999, p. 18). My response to Tom Holland's performance is an example of such a "click".

Thomas Kuhn claimed that systemic transformation requires continually "pointing at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm" and coming "loudly, with assurance, from the new one", ensuring that people who represent the new paradigm have "public visibility and power" (cited in Meadows, 1999, p. 12). Holland's performance was a liberating example of this, but "loud, assured" strategies can also operate to remove freedoms – with clear examples of this currently playing out to shocking effect in contemporary global politics.

The recent lambasting of wokeness that is seemingly grounded in a conservative backlash against queer and trans rights, and the dismantling of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) reforms in the US and queer and trans rights in Britain, sets a worrying precedent for similar advances in other countries. Naively, given the lessons of history, I never dreamt that queer, BIPOC and women's rights advances could, so quickly and cruelly, become destabilised. The speed with which DEI has been dropped in the US shows it was an adjunct to existing power norms and structures rather than a deep paradigmatic transformation, which would be less easy to eject.

This makes it more urgent than ever to hold ground in the campaign for human and nature's rights – which are fundamentally based in the fact of existence, and protection of the right to continue existing. With so much on fire in the world, people who care about these burning issues need to connect with one another for support and strength. For those who are not of the "loud" and "assured" set, and more in "the vast open-minded middle" (Meadows, 1999, p. 18) – how do we form affinities in realms on and off social media and outside of our homes? How do we speak to each other about what concerns us, and find communities of collaboration, help and comfort more quickly?

## T-SHIRTS: 'SELF AS BANNER' AND 'HEARTS ON SLEEVES'

One answer to this emerged from my resolve to print a still of Holland's performance on a t-shirt as a visual call to other fans to respond in joyful recognition. Even though Holland was wearing a corset, not a t-shirt, it is the impulse to use the t-shirt as a visual call which was one of the many practice-based yearnings that sparked the reflections in this article.

While t-shirts may seem quite understated, as Meadows (1999, p. 12) explains about leverage points in transformation, ideas can be amplified when platformed by influential figures – for

example, Chilean American actor Pedro Pascal wearing a "Protect the Dolls" t-shirt in April 2022 to a premiere in London, UK, as a response to the blow to trans rights dealt in that the country at that time (Goldberg, 2025).

T-shirts originated as a US navy-issue undergarment in the early 1900s, evolving to become popular outerwear in the 1950s (Ho, 2018), and have been leveraged to great effect to articulate public (social, political and environmental) ideals, priorities, and intentions. As Avitha Sooful (2020) explains, "t-shirts are comfortable and practical as everyday wear and function as statement attire when inscribed with a message associating an individual with a particular brand of music, movie character or a social commitment".

When t-shirts are "worn at political rallies, these are branded with a particular colour and visual image that become the first interface of communication announcing resistance" (Sooful, 2020). Sooful differentiates between a symbol like a t-shirt worn collectively, or on an individual standing alone outside of a march "practicing an 'everyday resistance'" – James Scott's (1985) phrase describing "non-political forms of resistance" (cited in Sooful, 2020). Repeating "everyday resistance" "has an impact that is not always noticeable. In wearing a "struggle" t-shirt the practice becomes an embodied representation of resistance as it personalises the stand and serves as a "weapon" against authority" (Sooful, 2020).

Resistance t-shirts treat "self as banner" (Tulloch, 2022, p. 115), articulating and evoking responses to problematic issues or traumatic events that might otherwise be washed away in the tide of making a living and doing homework. In 2020 in the US, when George Floyd was suffocated to death by a policeman standing on his neck, it drew fresh outrage at patterns of brutality towards African Americans. Floyd's sister Bridgett wore a t-shirt featuring his last words – "I can't breathe" – at a television news appearance reflecting on his murder. Carol Tulloch referred to this t-shirt as "an 'honouring ritual' as activism, … part of 'designing personal grief rituals'" (Sas & Coleman, 2026, cited in Tulloch, 2022, p. 131). Resistance or memorial clothing constitutes a visual call for important people and principles to remain seen and heard, offering ways of honouring ancestors and role models, and being brave and vulnerable enough to share love, heartbreak, grief and hope with others in a "radically soft" way (Kærgaard-Andersen, et al. 2020).

## THE HISTORY OF T-SHIRTS IN MASS ACTION AND RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The role of t-shirts in South African Struggle is well established. In the 1980s, a cultural boycott was initiated to isolate the Apartheid government. The boycott escalated and the then-government responded by censoring "'political' artwork, writing, posters, photographs, records and tapes, declaring them to be weapons of war and an incitement to violence against the state" (Sooful, 2020). Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, cited in Sooful, 2020) shares the power of resistance conveyed by "thousands of t-shirt clad protestors wearing the same or similar printed image of protest, … a powerful collective tool of defiance". The sale of t-shirts were also effective fundraisers for anti-apartheid movements (Tulloch, 2022).

The South African History Archives (SAHA: Embodiments of Resistance, 2025) launched a project of "in-depth archival, and oral history research into t-shirts as an "embodied practice of resistance and testimony" and the role of (often unknown) designers and artists in contributing to the liberation struggle". This was intended to enable "research and reflection" on the visual vocabulary of these t-shirts, inform socially engaged contemporary South African art, craft and design, and "introduce learners, students and activists to this heritage" (SAHA: Embodiments of Resistance 2025).

SAHA has a collection of 500 Struggle shirts (Ho, 2018), and worked with Frances Andrew, "a fashion curator and theorist focussing on political clothing", to document the collection, curating an exhibition of 35 "Struggle T-shirts" made as a form of "public testimony and political protest" (Fig. 02). As Andrews writes in the exhibition material: "The body in the T-shirt became a site of resistance, the physical self willingly identified to represent messages of resistance, solidarity, testimony, commemoration and defiance" (cited in Ho, 2018). Memorial t-shirts were often used as honouring and galvanising rituals in anti-apartheid campaigning in South Africa. For example a t-shirt made by Clive Pillay memorialises Lenny Naidu, a member the ANC's military wing uMkhonto weSizwe, who was killed by apartheid forces (Fig. 02).

Some activists trace the use of memorial t-shirts to the funeral of Bantu Stephen Biko – the Black Consciousness and student leader slain in detention in 1977 by Apartheid police (SAHA, 2014). Poet,

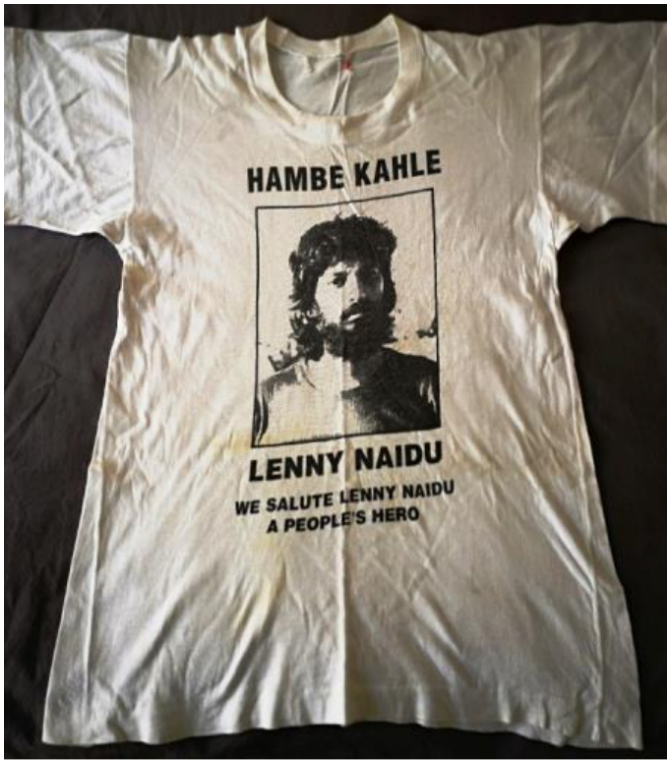


Fig. 02

artist and political activist Ben Dikobe Martins "printed a Steve Biko memorial T-shirt in 1978" and "was later arrested for producing a banned Steve Biko t-shirt" (SAHA, 2014).

Researchers have written in some depth about the South African fashion design company, Stoned Cherrie, making t-shirts featuring Biko's face in the early 2000s – "re-memorialising" this respected leader (Rassool, 2004; Vincent, 2007; Conradie, 2020; Tulloch, 2020). Stoned Cherrie said the "Biko campaign … sought to transform the way Africans feel about themselves in 21st century Africa" (Stoned Cherrie, 2014 cited in Conradie, 2020, p. 9). As Ciraj Rassool (2004, p. 291) explains, this was ostensibly to introduce "the image of Biko to the otherwise uninformed youth" and while "this may have served to take the cause of "Biko preservation" from the domain of the party ideologue" and free him "from the mausoleum", Black Consciousness activists still objected to the "pop idolisation" of these "legends". Memorial t-shirts indeed run the risk of commercialising and decontextualising images of the dead, especially given increased contemporary awareness about issues of consent in sharing images of people – but there is still poignancy in acknowledging those who dedicate their bodies, lives and faces to a principle, if their families agree to the practice.

Amongst the most ubiquitous t-shirts in contemporary South Africa are those that political parties provide to voters in the run-up to elections – often criticised for being high-turnover, dispensable and superficial items costing money that might better be allocated to other causes (Rassool, 2004, p. 291; Letsoalo, 2021). Sankarist David Letsoalo (2021) acknowledges the "honour and stature" of political t-shirts in "anti-apartheid Struggle" but argues that the South African public "need to interrogate the power of T-shirts in our political spaces", cautioning readers that wearing them turns one into an advertisement endorsing "the party or the individual emblazoned thereon" – while the people (who Letsoalo argues are already neglected) "are further abused by promoting the party free of charge".

T-shirt campaigns have also, however, played an important role in addressing contemporary social injustices, stigmas and taboos – for example, well-known contemporary South African awareness campaigns such as the "HIV Positive" t-shirts used by the Treatment Action Campaign, and the LoveLife Campaign, an HIV prevention initiative focused on youth (Moletsane & Lolwana, 2012).

## HONOURING-RITUALS-AS ACTIVISMS

I want to respond creatively to joys and injustices and use art to call to communities with whom I can make change, but as an academic working from hand to paper, my capacity is limited. T-shirts are an avenue that fashion offers for high-visibility art to circulate in society – the sale of which can help to fundraise for collective action. It may seem joyless to make memorial t-shirts reminding us of so many who have passed in awful circumstances, but the real joylessness is in forgetting these people or failing to address the circumstances of their hardships and deaths.

The first t-shirt I wanted to make of a social-justice issue was in response to the death of 5-year-old Michael Komape who fell into a pit latrine at school in 2014. In my pain-rage, I craved didacticism, envisaging t-shirts featuring a hand reaching for help emerging from brown sludge on the front, with details on the back of who to hound so that it never happened again. I never made that t-shirt and, since then, Lumka Mkhethwa (5) and Unecebo Mboteni (3) have also drowned in pit latrines at their school – in 2018 and 2024 respectively. For the last 11 years, children have remained exposed to open cesspits at their schools, where going to the toilet should not be such a hazard.

Another series I envisioned making/wearing is called "A few Africans" after Sue Williamson's series *A few South Africans*, created in the 1980s (see the full series of images at Sue Williamson, 2025). It commemorated women who had played an important role in the resistance of colonialism and Apartheid, including well-known political figures such as Albertina Sisulu and Helen Joseph, and those less recognised – such as Annie Silinga, who was harassed all her life by security police for refusing to carry a pass; and academic and activist Jenny Curtis Schoon, who was killed, with her daughter, by a parcel bomb sent by security police (Sue Williamson, 2025). Williamson's series was brightly coloured, decorative and relatable, and postcards of the images were printed and widely distributed.

It is partly due to series like these that many South Africans know the names and faces of heroes of the colonial and apartheid resistance, such as Charlotte Maxeke and Lilian Ngoyi, because these have been "canonised" and regularly commemorated, but contemporary heroes are less well known. I was heartened to find that the Centre for Environmental Rights recently commissioned graphic designer Sindiso Nyoni to illustrate images of community leaders and whistleblowers who have been assassinated, such as Ma Fikile Ntshangase (Fig. 03), an environmental activist who was murdered in 2020 for opposing mining ventures that threatened the wellbeing of her community and environment, and Babita Deokaran, who was murdered for her role in stopping corruption.

The revised series name, "A few Africans", has a Pan-Africanist intention to address xenophobia, and would include great African leaders such as Wangarĩ Maathai, who founded Kenya's Green Belt movement.

I would also honour Muhsin Hendricks, South Africa's first openly gay Imam, who was assassinated on 15 February 2025, and other queer activists, by applying Sang Thai's (2021) t-shirt-design strategies to "challenge and disrupt hegemonic subjectivities" and "racial and queer marginalization and discrimination through styling and fit". The style and heart of the work mentioned in this paper (by Nyoni, Pillay, Thai, Williamson, Magugu) offers inspiration for creative response-ability using clothing as honouring-rituals-as-activisms (Tulloch, 2022, p. 131). In my dream project as an arts-based sustainability practitioner, I envision the clothing being ethically sourced and

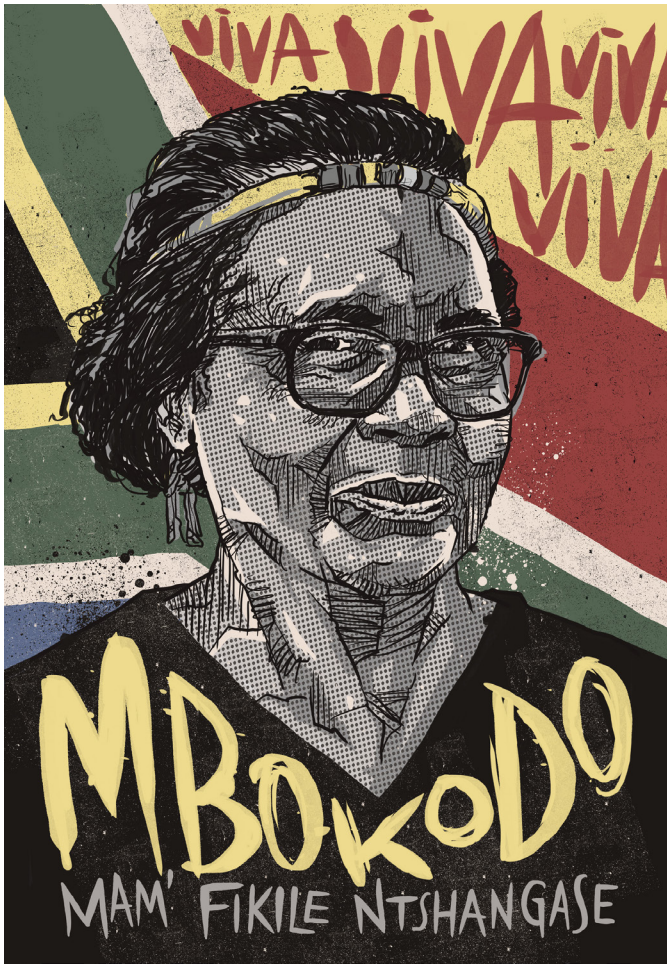


Fig. 03

artfully co-designed by community-based creative groups. Fashion need not be didactic or yoked to activism, but collaborations between designers and citizens or scientists could unite conceptual artistry with everyday resistance and, like music or dance, raise consciousness while telling "us something lovely and vivacious about ourselves" (Sachs 1990, p. 11).

## THE NEED FOR ETHICAL STRUGGLE CLOTHING

There is unfortunately sometimes an ethical obliviousness with clothing that centres Earth Day or environmentalism in retail – particularly with children's clothing where statements such as "I love my planet" are printed in plastisol inks and glitter, rendering them unrecyclable. Fired up with the inspiration to wear more resistance clothing, I looked online to find t-shirts that would better signify my environmental values while allowing me to contribute financially to resistance initiatives. Where protest t-shirts come from is now more important given concerns about working conditions in global sweat shops (Rivoli, 2009, p. 127), and increased awareness of sustainability.


Fig. 04

The official GreenPeace shop advertises t-shirts marketing their collaboration with singer-song-writers such as Jacob Collier and designer Vivienne Westwood (Greenpeace, 2025). In order to leverage funding from t-shirts, Greenpeace's t-shirts are made to order from organic cottons and toxin-free inks using renewable energy, and every step of their "supply chain, from seed to shop, is audited by independent, third party certifiers, … ensuring toxic-free wet processes that the Greenpeace 'Detox My Fashion' campaign is aimed at, and meeting the requirements of Greenpeace's 'Textiles Procurement Standard'" (Greenpeace, 2025).

While designers need to pay close attention to these standards, there is also a need to promote these measures amongst consumers, and celebrate the long lifespan of old t-shirts, whether upcycled into memorial blankets, or turned into cleaning cloths, before disposal at fabric recycling depots.

## RESIST T-SHIRTS

In South Africa, mainstream retailers and buyers seem to be paying more attention to clothing that represents local visual and design languages and sources of African pride, yet western conventions remain entrenched in professional and casual wear. Clothing at stores such as Mr Price, PEP, Ackermans and Pick n Pay, which are found at most malls and have a significant footprint in smaller towns, often feature seemingly aspirational but acontextual, empty references to States in the US. Many South African citizens are walking "advertisements" for US imperialism with "Los Angeles" and "California" emblazoned on their t-shirts. It is possible that t-shirts are too closely aligned with the model of consumerism and imperialism that has imperilled Earth and its people to be deeply transformative.

There are many inspiring examples of a more intentional adoption of signifiers in fashion and design that offer different paths and possibilities. Čájet Sámi Vuoiŋŋa ('ČSV') means 'Show Sami Spirit' – a slogan used by the Sami community in so-called Northern Europe during the Sami revitalization movement in the early 1970s "as a means of expressing Sami identity". ČSV "encouraged the incorporation of Sami clothing, joiking, art, and other Sami symbols into everyday life … to make Sami culture more visible and counter centuries of marginalization and minoritization in both legal frameworks and everyday experiences (refusing harmful paradigms, assimilation)" and "to confront feelings of ethnic shame and inferiority" (Dankertsen, 2016, cited in Tomateo & Grabowski, 2024).

The brevity and boldness of t-shirt design can be found in other garments which still fulfil the function of reminding us of important legacies. For example, in his moving series of waxprint fabrics, *Heirloom*, South African fashion designer Thebe Magugu recalls the long African history of waxprint commemoration of important public figures but replaced these figures with photos of his own family members. Later, in *Heirloom II* (Fig. 04), Magugu's team opened this service to customers, allowing them to order commemorative waxprint fabrics featuring their own family members (Tiwane, 2023). As Magugu's website explains, "In our fast-paced world, memories can often fade too quickly. With the Thebe Magugu Heirloom Project, we aim to bring those cherished memories to life in a way that you can wear and carry with you every day" (Thebe Magugu, 2025).

## CONCLUSION

Creatives and consumers, particularly in Africa and the Global South, need to remain critical of what we advertise every day with our bodies. The creation and sale of ethically sourced fashion that offers possibilities for sharing joy, sadness, respect and care has the potential to give more public presence to activists' concerns, help fund activism, and start conversations with likeminded collaborators and open-minded sceptics.

Donella Meadows (1999, p. 18) argued that "the way to change a paradigm is to model a system, which takes you outside the system and forces you to see it whole". Small acts of everyday fashion resistance, regularly repeated, can help to visually signify the "outsides" of dominant systems, and our resistance to harmful or homogenising systems with which we may be tacitly complying. Expressions of support for those working towards pluriversal wellbeing – conveyed compellingly by everyday clothing – may disrupt expectations, unsettle norms, and promote regenerative intentions.

## CAPTIONS:

[Fig. 01] Screenshot from Tom Holland's performance at Lip Sync Battle (Lip Sync Battle, 2017).

[Fig. 02] Clive Pillay (designer), Memorial t-shirt for Lenny Naidu, Hambe Kahle Lenny Naidu, 1989, fabric (Sooful, 2020).

[Fig. 03] Sindiso Nyoni (designer), Mam Fikile Ntshangase 1957-2020, image commissioned by Centre for Environmental Rights, 2020 (Centre for Environmental Rights, 2020).

[Fig. 04] Thebe Magugu (designer), screenshot of order form from ThebeMagugu.com for his classic *Heirloom* Shirt, 2025 (Thebe Magugu, 2025).

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