

“Everybody haffi ask weh mi get mi Clarks”: Clarks Originals and cross-cultural appropriation

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Abstract

Following the release of Jamaican deejay Vybz Kartel’s song ‘Clarks’ in 2010, Clarks Originals have hit the headlines with an unlikely tale of a ‘quintessentially British brand’ turned Caribbean sub-cultural style essential. The recent publication of a book about the history of Clarks Originals in Jamaica along with a Newsnight feature and countless other articles offer a fascinating account of how the ‘Clarks booty’ has been taken up as an iconic item of Jamaican sub-cultural style. Despite all this publicity the question remains: why has this happened? Looking at both the affordances the design offers this unlikely market and the social circumstances of its migration the paper will start by applying sociological and anthropological theory concerning the cross-cultural appropriation of material culture to understand what is so special about the Desert Boot. The paper will proceed by drawing on data gathered during interviews with the Clarks Originals team to investigate what this particular case study can contribute to theories of perception and structure-agency debates: what can the Jamaican interpretation of Clarks Originals tell us about the dialogue that exists between the producer and consumer and the social life of the shoe. Moreover, why has this unusual appropriation excited such public interest in the UK.

Vybz Kartel ‘Clarks’ 2010:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORi4xwSwWlM>

1. Introduction

In 2010 Vybz Kartel, the Jamaican dancehall deejay, released what was to become the latest chapter in a history spanning over 60 years of Clarks in Jamaica. The Somerset company, often thought of as ‘quintessentially British’ and associated in the UK with school shoes and the ‘preserve of

middle England’ (Newman, 2012, 11), perhaps seems an unlikely brand to achieve cult status in the Caribbean. Despite their rural English origins, in Jamaica, Clarks Originals are considered well and truly Jamaican. But what made Originals so appealing to Jamaicans and, far from a passing fad, what ensures their longevity? Furthermore, what makes this story so appealing in the UK *now*? - After Vybz Kartel’s song ‘Clarks’ was released, a book on *Clarks in Jamaica* and several news articles covering the Jamaican phenomenon were published and a (somewhat condescending) feature on the BBC’s *Newsnight* was aired in December 2012.

Today I want to look at this Jamaican phenomenon from a material culture perspective: Anthropologist Alfred Gell explained that material culture should be analysed in an anthropological way by understanding that people develop social relations with objects. As a result, people merge with objects and people merge with other people via objects (Gell, 1998:12). Shoes, then, make a very interesting set of objects by which to understand this process especially when considering the ways people use them to establish a sense of their own identity and their place amongst others in cultural and global contexts. While the wearer creates the shoe’s identity the shoe simultaneously creates the identity of the wearer – the two merge. Appadurai’s influential work on the ‘social life of things’ (1986) and Kopytoff’s ‘object biographies’ (1986) practically show us how we can investigate the object’s role in the construction of identities by following the life of the object. As we will see, Clarks Originals (by which I’m referring to the classic designs the Wallabee, Desert Trek, Lugger, Natalie and particularly the Desert Boot: Fig 1) over time and through use, have developed a rich social life of their own. Appadurai proposes that to understand how things come to life “we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories.” (Appadurai, 1986: 5).



Fig.1: Clarks Originals classic designs

So drawing on the company's own historical documents this paper will start by following the trajectory of Originals brand, but particularly the Desert Boot, from its conception in the 1940s through to its present day use. The second half of the paper will then use anthropological and sociological theory, in conjunction with data gathered from interviews with Clarks employees and wearers, to put this trajectory into context in order to understand the reasons the Clarks Desert Boot lends itself so well to such varied appropriation across cultures and generations - establishing itself as a comparatively stable and dependable symbol of cultural identity.

2. The History of Clarks Originals in Jamaica

The Desert Boot, as we now know it, was first produced by Nathan Clark, a fourth generation member of the Clarks family, who saw the design in 1944 on the feet of fellow officers during his World War II service in North Africa. Originally manufactured in the bazaars of Cairo, Nathan made a paper pattern which allowed him to create a sample of the shoes when he returned to the Clarks offices in Street. At this time though, the shoe was dismissed as a non-seller in the UK. Undeterred and in his capacity as Overseas Development Manager Nathan presented it at the Chicago Shoe Fair in 1949, after which it was picked up by an American agent, Bronson Davis, who took the shoe to market believing it had a teenage casual appeal not reflected by the more formal footwear of the time. A wholesale business principally based on the Desert Boot was developed and alongside America; West Africa and the West Indies were successfully cultivated.

Jamaican independence in 1962 coincided with a decade of economic growth, but racial and class divides were only made worse by the new regime (Clarke, 2006, 421-423). West Kingston was particularly badly affected by mass unemployment and overcrowding, the product of which was a disenfranchised male youth, alienated to the point that 'many [...] became *rude*' (White, 1967, 39). The Jamaican rude boy took pride in his appearance with Clarks Desert Boots quickly establishing themselves as a staple item being expensive, stylish and made in England (King, 2002, 30-32). Practically, the boot was versatile, strong and could withstand lots of wear; its crepe or 'cheese' bottomed sole made barely a sound so it afforded the rude boy an element of surprise that quickly earned Clarks an unsavoury reputation with Jamaican law enforcement (Newman, 2012, 44). A combination of push and pull factors had contributed to the post-war Jamaican Diaspora. Emigration was fuelled by employment opportunities in the UK during the late 1940s and 1950s, and the economic hardships in

the 1960s and 70s along with rising street crime and violence meant that there was an exodus of Jamaicans that were set on moving to the UK, US and Canada (Cooper, 1985, 742-743; Eyre 1984,). Those that came to the UK inhabited economically depressed areas in North and South London and the Jamaican or Rastafarian style, featuring the Desert Boot, had a strong impact on the disaffected working-class white youth subcultures at the time (Foner, 1985, 711), particularly amongst the Mods who, drawn to its underground, non-commercialised and secretive scene, sought to emulate the rude boy image (Hebdige, 1993 [1975]: 149).¹

Not only limited to the disenfranchised youth of Jamaica and the UK, the Desert Boot was also gaining popularity through disenchanted student protestors in Paris. This European market was developed by Nathan’s second cousin Lance Clark, who was involved in the subsequent development and continental success of the ‘Clarks Wallabee’ and Desert Trek. Again aimed at a younger consumer they featured what was becoming the hallmark crepe sole.

Jamaican influences took a while longer to penetrate America, particularly the suburbs of New York, but the racial diversity created by West Indian immigrants to the Bronx and Brooklyn meant that sales grew rapidly from \$24,000 in 1974 to \$900,000 by 1982, having also inspired an Afro-American clientele with a preference for the Wallabee (Email correspondence, Joe Grinnelli, January 9 2013). Taking Clarks by surprise, it propelled the brand into previously untapped markets, reaching consumers it had never traditionally connected with. Company memos of the time documented the buzz this new consumer base created amongst Clarks employees. More recently Tom Austin, President of Clarks of England at the time, reflected that it was a phenomenon ‘transported’ from Jamaica, something he confidently claimed was grass roots led with no Public Relations intervention, “we didn’t do anything to inspire the [US] Jamaican market,” he said, “but did attempt to carefully ride on the trend without alienating the rest of our customer base” (Email correspondence, Tom Austin, January 7 2013). The independently emerging social life of the Desert Boot was gaining momentum.

¹ The Jamaican influence on British working class subcultures is of course documented in Hebdige’s 1979 study *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* which focused on the appropriation of style symbols like the Desert Boot throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s.

Historically regarded as ‘international’ products, the ‘Desert’ items continued to do a good trade in foreign markets and this was recognised in the mid 1980’s when the Desert Boot was given the spotlight in an international advertising campaign featuring photography by Helmut Newton (Clarks Courier, November 1987). This was followed with increasing interest from Japan. The popularity of the Desert Boot and the Wallabee grew amongst Tokyo retailers who wanted to satisfy a burgeoning youth oriented market whose preference was for an authentic product manufactured using original materials, in the country of origin. Unlike the couture catwalks of Milan and Paris, young Japanese ‘cool hunters’ regarded Great Britain the home of street fashion. Similar requests for authenticity were coming from North America, driven by young consumers from Manhattan.

Working as Clarks International Brand Manager, Graham Sim identified ‘global fashion early adopters’ as the consumers responsible for this upsurge in popularity (Email correspondence, Graham Sim, February 20 2013) and in the late 90’s an article in *Arena* magazine attributed their success to a consumer backlash against faceless brands like Nike (*Arena*, 1998). People were ‘fed up with the consumerist lifestyle’ (Byrom, 1998)² Clarks Originals grew out of this movement - the sub-brand being created to epitomise all that was British and authentic and launched with a series of images shot by David Bailey in the late 90’s that traced their historical lineage. It would coincide with a contemporary phenomenon in Britpop, Cool Britannia and a new-found pride in the nation’s cultural identity.

The shoes, now defined under their own sub-brand ‘Clarks Originals’ had reached what Malcolm Gladwell might term a ‘tipping point’ (2000): a trend of epidemic proportions brought about by ‘connectors’ or ‘early adopters’: people with an ability to span many different worlds with their personality traits of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability and energy (Gladwell, 2000, 49). One might argue that the Jamaican Diaspora were those very such connectors, spreading Originals with their migration around the world and ultimately selling the appeal of Clarks Originals back to the country that originally developed them. The popularity of Clarks Originals continued to spread through music and, understanding the counterculture statement that a pair of Clarks Originals made, the stylistically and musically astute British ‘connectors’ such as Johnny Marr, Massive Attack, Oasis and The Verve, amongst others, took

² *Independent on Sunday*, March 22 1998.

them up as part of their own style repertoire. UK accreditation of Clarks’ status was cemented by Richard Ashcroft’s grey Wallabees on the cover of the Verve’s 1997 album, *Urban Hymns* along with exposure via Massive Attack, the Sneaker Pimps, Wu Tang Clan and Ghostface Killah. Oasis remained particularly outspoken of their love for Clarks and in 2000 Liam Gallagher approached Clarks to propose collaboration with his clothing brand Pretty Green (picture)

This was about as overt as Clarks collaborations go though. Temptations to capitalise on these associations in any substantial form have tended to be generally disregarded, and this is still the case. Indeed pressure was also being applied on the company by its Italian agent to brand the products (particularly the Desert Boot) externally, primarily owing to concerns about counterfeiting, but also to capitalise upon its cache. When the matter was referred to Nathan Clark as its founder, a moment of Quakerly contemplation followed, before Nathan looked over his glasses and said, ‘Branding is vulgar. The only person who needs to know it is a Clarks Desert Boot, is the wearer’, and this ethic remains today (Email correspondence with Graham Sim, February 20 2013).

Nathan himself appreciated the cyclical trend of the Desert Boot as a product discovered by each generation and by such a wide range of cultures: In China, Clarks is considered a luxury product, a member of the A[quascutum] B[urberry] C[larks] of British Brands. Clarks Desert Boot remains the preferred item of footwear for a sophisticated clientele in France, Italy and Japan whereas it is perhaps perceived as a more utilitarian product in the UK.

3. Sociological and Anthropological Interpretation of the Migration of Clarks Originals

So the biographical account of Clarks Originals raises several interesting concepts, the study of which can help us to understand why Clarks Originals mean so much to so many different people. One of the main issues to emerge is perhaps a perceived sense of authenticity that seems to be inherent in the Desert Boot, another: the affordances offered by the materiality of the shoe. I will go on to discuss both of these themes in a moment. Firstly though a principal theme that should be acknowledged is the appropriation of Clarks Originals in the creation of subcultural identities.

Throughout the decades, facilitated by popular representation in visual culture and the music industry, the Desert Boot has become closely

aligned with various subcultures and this has generally been consumer led. Vybz Kartel is by no means an isolated example of the types of representation that fortify the Desert Boot's subcultural value. In his book 'Clarks in Jamaica' Newman provides countless examples of references to Clarks Originals in Jamaican music from as early as 1975 (Newman, 2012, 104-5). Spoken about and seen on the feet of the 'right people' or 'connectors', the shoes' appearances visually and through language imbue them with meanings that can be utilised by wearers to help them associate with and differentiate themselves from others. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, himself a part of the Jamaican Diaspora, describes linguistic and visual representation as "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (Hall, 1997) - we produce meaning about the world *through* representing it (Ibid. 7). So popular representations like Vybz Kartel's song cannot be underestimated in their ability to create and shift the meanings of these shoes.

The Desert Boot's rich history in popular culture makes it particularly easy to become preoccupied with the semiotic denotations and connotations of the Desert Boot that make them a meaningful object. The cultural meaning or language of the Desert Boot does not fully account for its continued success though. As Hebdige acknowledged "[f]orms cannot be permanently normalized. They can always be deconstructed [and] demystified [...]" (16): the Desert Boot's associations with sub-cultural rebellion are as prone now to the historical re-writing that initially created their social significance. One might assume then that the endorsement of the Desert Boot by the 'wrong' people, for example when Tony Blair wore them in 1999, might *unmake* their appeal, however this does not seem to have happened. Even if it did, history would seem to dictate that each new generation would continue to discover Originals in their own way. This is where we turn to the second main theme to emerge from the previous historical account. The appeal of the materiality of the shoe itself.

So if we take the cultural connotations out of the picture for a moment, the practical and versatile qualities of simple classic design, honest natural materials and authentic construction are important considerations when trying to understand their popularity. The senior designer for Clarks Originals, clearly influenced by the modernist principles of democratic design and truth to materials, reproduces these qualities for each new season, careful not to change the tried and tested original recipe too much. Disparaging of designs that are overly decorated

or that chase trends, she strives to maintain a shoe that can be described more accurately as a style essential rather than a fashion fad.

There is a sense, then, that the very particular yet simple design and materials offer certain affordances to the wearer that are extremely universal; appealing to a wide range of cultures and age groups. Drawing on Gibson’s theories of affordances Fisher explains that the “affordance of an artifact – or material – means we use it to suit our physical and *psychic* needs, both because of its physical properties and because of the “heritage” that is associated with it.” (Fisher, 2004, 26) So in the case of the Jamaican story, the combination of the physical and practical qualities of the Desert boot along with their cultural associations with Britishness and quality suited the ends of the Jamaican youth culture around the time of decolonisation in the 1960s. Similarly, as previously discussed, their affordances also suit the ends of other cultures for example Japan, France, Italy, the U.S., and of course Britain for what are often quite different reasons.

There are of course other shoes that provide similarly universal affordances. The Senior Designer for Originals describes the Desert Boot as an archetypal shoe, part of a set of archetypes that include the Doc Marten and the Converse Trainer. Like the Desert Boot these shoes seem to have maintained an element of neutrality³: when placed next to their antitheses Blahniks or Louboutins for example - highly fashioned and often sexually fetishised - these archetypes seem comparatively culturally neutral, un-gendered and non age-specific.

So what makes Originals and these similar archetypes so special? “[t]o put it simply, [perhaps it’s] the fact that they are not special”, (Engelke, 2005, 131) One might describe them as ambivalent and innocuous objects. Certainly Nathan Clarks’ decision to avoid ‘vulgar’ external branding can be seen to aid this innocuous appeal: the shoes remain blank, perhaps even more blank than their counterparts (for example the Doc Marten which has strong political associations in many cultures), and although this may make them prone to being ripped-off (there are many ‘Original’ style shoes on the market at present) it also makes them appealing to both those consuming for their practical affordances, as well as those who are in on the ‘secret’ and that fetishise the brand for what it

³ This is not to say any of these shoes are entirely neutral or that this neutrality is universal, the Doc Marten has strong political associations throughout many cultures.

stands and its connections with music genres and subcultures.⁴ Engelke describes these types of objects as ‘sticky’: in that their neutrality and practicality attracts use, becoming a practical channel through which social life is conducted. The Desert Boot is distinctive, but not too much so; it seems to attract identities but not so much that the shoes become permanently stuck on a particular ‘type’ of wearer.

Although it is tempting to credit the designer for intentionally creating this relatively universal appeal, Fisher asserts that: “affordances cannot simply be ‘built into’ or ‘read out of’ artifacts, but are discovered by users through interaction with them.” And these interactions may not necessarily correspond with their intended use (Fisher, 2004, 26). The unexpected appropriations, for example by the Jamaican criminal underworld, create a sense of authenticity around the shoes – the company itself has had very little to do with these sometimes baffling adoptions and in that sense they add to an interesting current debate about the authenticity of mass consumer culture. As Miller shows with his research on the consumption of Coca Cola in Trinidad, despite being associated with globalisation, global brands become enmeshed with local people, politics and consumption, creating a hybrid product that mixes the global with the local. A particularly committed Originals wearer explained to me that “yes they were made in England, but built for Jamaicans and no one is brave or stupid enough to claim otherwise!” adding that “if the Wallabee could talk then it would speak patois and not English.” In this way they are regarded as *authentically* Jamaican despite their British roots.⁵

This view gives a new meaning to ‘authenticity’ that is perhaps more helpful when thinking about the way we engage with mass consumer culture. Boyle explains that “[a]uthenticity doesn’t just mean reliving the past: it means using it to find new ways of living – maybe even new kinds of progress. The most authentic isn’t necessarily the most true to the past; it could be the most creative or the most human.” (Boyle, 2003, 44) When Clarks employees or consumers describe Originals as ‘authentic’, as is so often the case, it seems that rather than referring to a particular historical

⁴ It is important to note though that desire for the practical and symbolic affordances is not mutually exclusive – they are intertwined as the Jamaican example shows.

⁵ Although it is of course important to note that the Desert Boot originated in the Bazaars of Cairo and the Wallabee was originally a German shoe.

origin they are referring to authentic *qualities* of truth, creativity, experience and humanness.

Far from having a contrived identity, Originals have a life of their own and this is something Clarks are fervently aware of, seeing themselves more as ‘synthesisers’ dealing with and managing whatever comes along. There seems to be a general understanding amongst the close-knit Originals team that it is the consumers that make the shoes what they are. In this respect the Originals team value their roles and respect the biographies of these shoes.

To date, Clarks have been successful in riding the waves of the popularity of the Desert Boot, paying attention and responding to the varying types of consumer appropriation without interrupting or diverting this socially constructed biography to the point that they might alienate their loyal and passionate consumers. The Originals team seem to regard this unpredictability and communication with such passionate consumers as a fulfilling challenge in their day-to-day jobs. The authenticity of the shoes is clearly a property that is valued not only by consumers but also by those involved in their production.

Still, Miller explains that discussions of consumer culture and globalisation often reveal an uncomfortable fear of objects, or rather the commodity as a vehicle for capitalist dominance (Miller, 2002: 245). How can we forge an authentic sense of our own identities in the face of the potentially homogenising forces of global consumer culture? By studying how everyday items like shoes come to play in these negotiations between global structures and individual agency we are able to see how people practice identity in often fraught and constantly shifting contexts. Miller argues that the fear that objects can supplant people [and indeed cultural identities] (Miller, 2002: 245) is actually unfounded. What the Originals in Jamaica example shows us is that, as Miller puts it, “society [is] always a cultural project in which we come to be ourselves in our humanity through the medium of things” (Miller, 2002, 245) or indeed through shoes.

Perhaps it is these unexpected authentic biographies of objects that currently attract the media attention of programmes like Newsnight. They show us that we can enjoy and participate in mass consumer culture creatively without the danger of all becoming the same.

4. Conclusion:

So in conclusion I want to bring the story back to my research at Clarks head office. By focusing on the appropriation of Clarks Originals by an

exotic (to some) far off culture it seems we are going halfway around the world to rediscover a brand many of us thought we knew. For this reason the media focus has been as interesting for those at Clarks as it has for the British public. I propose that lessons learned from their appropriation by the Jamaican culture can help to lend insight to the Desert Boot's significant place in the *corporate culture* at Clarks head office.

My fieldwork at Clarks head office corresponded with a particularly intense period of transition for the Clarks employees themselves. The family company that so many of the employees had come to love, despite operating overseas for many years, was now officially going global. Some might interpret the very visible restructuring of the company as being at odds with the company's established Quaker family identity, and disconcerting for the employees' own identities by extension who had come to regard themselves, in many cases, as a part of this family. Just as globalisation can be seen as disconcerting for consumers, it can also be unnerving for employees. Following Miller's example, by ethnographically following the experiences of those employees within Clarks own head office it was interesting to see how many had very emotionally latched on to the Desert Boot as a stable and authentic symbol of the Clarks values and identity so many of them held dear, particularly those not directly involved with the Originals sub-brand. As the range manager explained: "[...] [P]eople do, they have very strong opinions on [the Desert Boot], myself included, I mean the more you get involved in it, cos it is like, it's a kind-of cornerstone of Clarks heritage".

In 2000 the head of Clarks American Operations remarked on the global appeal of the Desert Boot: "It could almost be seen as a 'World Shoe'. It sort of goes between or beyond cultures. [...] It goes with almost every culture." (Infantino in Chippendale, 2000, 15)

Just as so many other cultures have appropriated the Desert Boot as a steady and authentic symbol of their own identities and heritage, so too have the Clarks employees, in an unofficial way. This emotional attachment was expressed not only by wearing Originals but also by collecting them, dressing their children in them, talking fondly about them in interviews, explaining their own personal connections with the shoe's biography, and by reproducing them symbolically in internal documents and the occasional mini rapid-prototyped ornaments that decorated their offices.

Highlighting the importance of shoes in understanding who we are and where we fit, it seems that in the ever-increasing global culture in

which we now live, an authentic sense of cultural identity is maintained and recreated through, in this case, the Desert Boot, be it in the cultural context of Jamaica or the company’s own culture at their head office in Somerset.

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