

CULTIVATING A RELATIONAL FASHION SYSTEM FOR PROSPERITY

EMBRACING DECOLONIAL EMBODIMENT AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN CARE THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF DEEP-WEARING

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Abstract

Wearers are locked in endless cycles of acquisition, disenchantment and disposal. Time spent with our garments is fleeting. We are encouraged to *have* clothes, to *buy* clothes, but not to *care for them*, to *be in an embodied relationship with* our clothes. We need to implement practices of care and relationality in more-than-human worlds or face ecological and societal collapse. Care is an intersectional relational practice that encompasses the entire spectrum of sustainability of our world - social, cultural, spiritual, and economic.^[1] In response to over a decade of ongoing research-through-design project engaging in a “conversation across worlds,” as articulated by de la Cadena and Blaser (2018) fostering dialogue and interaction between diverse epistemologies, ontologies, and cultural perspectives the authors enacted a short temporal deep-wearing project that centres decolonial body-garment relations. This paper contributes to defining the concept of prosperity fashion by cultivating alternative value systems and modes of exchange for holistic, metaphysical oneness with our clothing in our everyday lives. This aligns with a process of decoloniality, embracing diversity in ways of knowing and being, through mind-body-spirit that towards the aim of multispecies flourishing, goals that are far outside of the capitalist, growth-oriented lens. Drawing from Indigenous Knowledge; Chinese, Celtic and Māori; making visible and assigning value to what was erased by Modernism, the Cartesian divide and the colonial order. It applies Taoist theory and methodology that accepts that, everything, including ourselves ^[3] and our clothing is energy.

Keywords: *Relational Fashion, Decolonial Embodiment, More-than-Human Care, Indigenous and Taoist Knowledge, Pluriversal Materialism*

INTRODUCTION

SUSTAINABILITY IS A CRISIS OF WORLDVIEW AND THE STORIES WE CHOOSE TO TELL OURSELVES

It's becoming abundantly clear from the lack of success of the sustainability initiatives employed by the fashion industry (BoF, 2020, p. 15) that it is either suffering from a cognitive dissonance between its beliefs, and its actions, or more accurately, that it does not want to *really* change. It is no surprise that the prescriptive, solution-focused approaches by the industry have failed as they come from the same logic, values and narratives of the broken system. As Jennifer Craik describes, the fashion industry upholds a worldview that is a “late-capitalist, neo-liberal, post-Fordist

mindset from the Global North” (Craik, 2020, p. 923). A colonial, human-centred perspective that deepens divisions between people Global North and Global South and nature, fostering arrogance and a sense of superiority while disregarding the voices and concerns of garment producers and consumers in the Global South. This worldview lies at the heart of many of the crises of this time (2018, Escobar, 2014, Klein et al). It is a wholly anthropocentric approach to sustainability that only permits transactional solutions and relationships i.e. “sustainable fashion.” Sustainability is framed as a purchasable object - a garment. Overproduction and overconsumption are not questioned as industry growth is more important than the needs of the non-human world. The complexity and

reality of sustainability as a verb and a process, based on cultivating relationships is diminished. Audre Lorde said, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (1984, p. 110). If indeed the fashion industry wants to do no harm, it needs to expand its narrative framework and delink what it has silenced and erased, to be open to other ways of knowing, from a relational, pluriversal perspective. The latest UN climate report (2024) underscores the critical need for the fashion industry to embrace new value-creation models and incorporate broader social and ecological factors into their success criteria. We need to advocate for more relational, inclusive approaches to knowledge and existence (Fig. 01).

THE COLONIALITY OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS

The contemporary fashion system is emblematic of the ideas and values of modernity. (Jameson, 1991, Simmel, G. 1957). As Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez (2013) say, when we peel back the narrative of modernity, we reveal the logic of “coloniality” and its ongoing, hidden processes of extraction, separation, exploitation, and pollution that sustain this story. Coloniality and colonialism are distinct concepts (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). While colonialism denotes direct political and economic domination, coloniality signifies the long-standing patterns of power that emerged from colonisation. As Maldonado-Torres (2007, pg. 243) posits ‘coloniality survives colonialism’ - as the invisible yet pervasive set of practices, & beliefs, that shape contemporary societies, coloniality is always with us. As wearers of clothing, we are aware; to varying degrees; of the colonial legacies embedded in the production of clothing and cloth as the modern/colonial project dominated the economy, politics, power and knowledge. (Barber, 2021, Barenblat, A., & Mayer, A. 2019, et al). We are perhaps less aware of how coloniality sought to control our senses and the way we perceive ourselves, others, or the world around us (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013). It is difficult to comprehend how this affects everything, how we interpret, understand, or view a situation, object, or ourselves. In the context of this paper, we will specifically refer to how it affects our contemporary relationship with clothing and our embodied practices of wear. As modern individuals in the 21st century, coloniality has shaped/and is continuing to shape us, as

we “breathe coloniality all the time and every day” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Mignolo and Vázquez claim that our collective colonial wounds remain present and open, manifesting “in the everyday experience of most people on the planet” (2013). Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 24) suggests that our relationships, including those with clothing, are shaped by colonial notions of relationality. Coloniality has imposed specific values and frameworks for relating to clothing - in terms of how we understand power (hierarchical, human/industry-centered), time (linear progress), space (geographical exploitation), subjectivity (racial and gendered identities), and knowledge (Western/Eurocentric expertise) (Fig. 02).

WORDS HAVE POWER - THE DECOLONIALITY OF EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS, LANGUAGE, AND NARRATIVES

A significant part of our clothing experience is culturally created through everyday conversations, language, and narratives. Language is not ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’ but it is encoded and loaded with belief systems and knowledge of the dominant culture, or as Tuhiwai Smith (1999, pg42) “imperial eyes”. Language not only shapes how we perceive the world, but it can also limit our perception. Research indicates that how we see colour can vary depending on our gender, ethnicity, geographical location, and what language we speak. (Brogaard, 2020). As Robin Wall Kimmerer states, ‘Science is a language of distance, which reduces [the world] to its working parts—it is a language of objects’ The language and narratives of sustainability often perpetuate reductionism and separation, that is rooted in Western knowledge systems. (Escobar, 2011). In contrast, language from outside of this worldview fosters a sense of kinship, reciprocity, and balance with nature and each other by framing humans as part of a larger ecosystem (Magan, M. 2022). This begs us to ask: is our language limiting our perception? Whitty’s own indigenous language (Irish - *Gaeilge*) has thirty-two words for “field,” which reflects a deep attentiveness to subtle environmental distinctions and an inseparable connection between the Irish landscape and its language (Magan, 2020).) This linguistic richness offered our ancestors a magical, poetic and nuanced way of seeing their environment. In Māori, the term *whakapapa* refers to genealogy but extends beyond human ancestry to include all living and non-living entities, acknowledging kinship with nature.

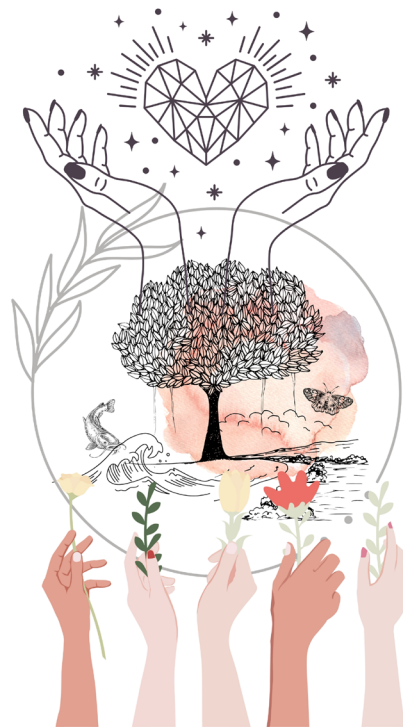
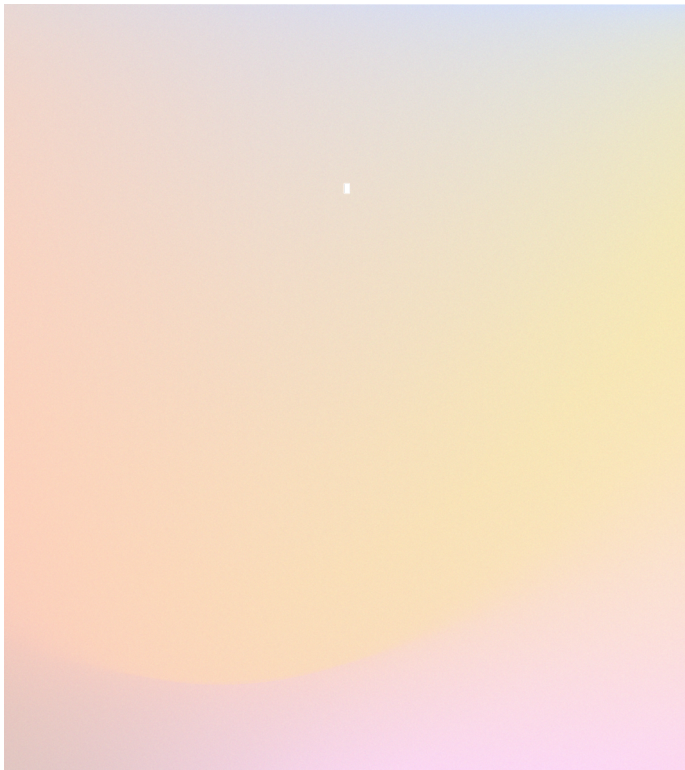


Fig. 01

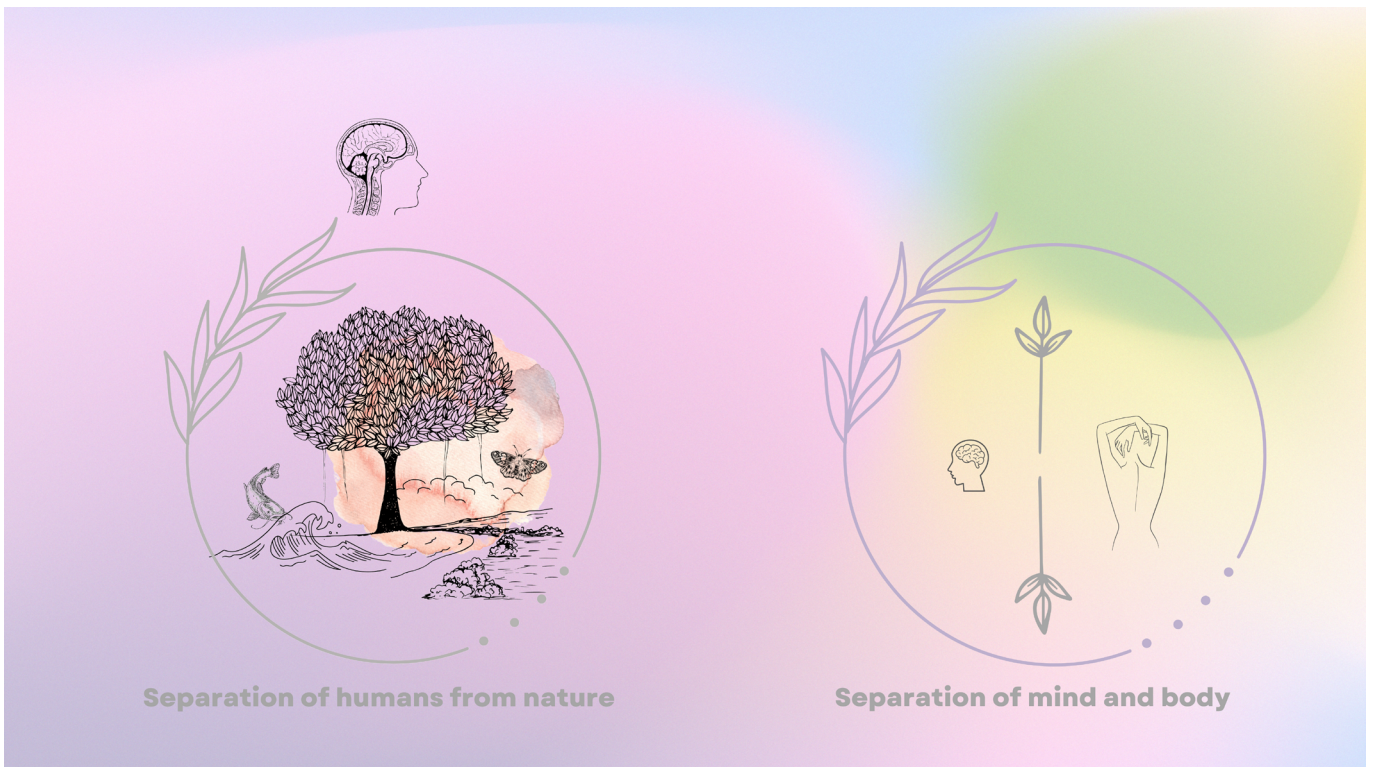


Fig. 02

Relearning languages suppressed by colonialism is a decolonial act that goes beyond linguistic skills, transforming ontological perspectives, relational orientations, and worldviews.

LISTEN TO OUR BODIES - DECOLONIAL BODY-GARMENT RELATIONS

Our bodies are central to our lived experience, our health, our well-being, and our sense of connection. They form the basis of our immediate reality—as an interface between our internal world of organs and thoughts, to the external world of skin and nature. Our bodies are deeply interconnected systems, composed of ourselves as host organisms and the vast microbial communities inhabiting us inside and out. When we accept that fashion as a soil-to-soil system (Burgess, R 2019) it reveals the integral role of soil not only in clothing production but also in who we are. The boundaries between our inner selves and the external environment are fluid, underscoring their fundamental unity. In many Indigenous worldviews, soil and land are seen as “kin,” offering a relational framework to care for and nurture the Earth as we would a family member. (Pihamā, L., & Smith, L. T. 2021). This reciprocal relationship extends to our bodies and our clothing - our chosen second skin. We exist on the Earth in our clothed bodies, which in turn shapes our interaction with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, Elizabeth Grosz, 1994) Embodiment - our lived experience of having and being a body is central to human perception and being-in-the-world. From the Māori worldview, *mauri*—the life force—exists in relationship with all things (Durie, 2001, p.21). This perspective recognizes that the well-being of humans and non-humans is deeply interconnected. Sickness is not merely physical; it is also spiritual (*taha wairua*) emotional/mental (*taha hinengaro*), physical (*taha tinana*), family/social (*taha whānau*) (Durie, 1997). The Indigenous belief system of China, Taoism is based around the understanding that everything in the universe is interconnected and interdependent. (Kirkland, 2004). The flow of energy (referred to as *qi* or *chi*, 氣) binds all things together, whether they are human beings, nature, or the cosmos, as they are always in relationship in this paper, we collectively reflect on the exchange of fashion knowledge and experiences within the context of unequal power relations shaped by the modern/colonial order. Drawing from our respective positionalities, knowledge, and experiences, we examine what it means to engage

across differences, as individuals based in the Global North and the Global South. We acknowledge the power imbalances inherent in this collaborative writing process, rooted in disparities of race, age, life experiences, institutional education, and social status. Additionally, we recognise our diverse positionalities and the distinct perspectives from which we each speak. With one another. The Eight Energy Body Theory is a framework describing different layers of existence and consciousness that integrate the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person. These associations can be understood as influencing the emotional aspects of our being, often referred to in a broader spiritual or energetic context. Whitty’s Ancient Irish ancestors believed that nature was sacred and that all material phenomena (objects, landscapes etc.) had agency—they were alive with spirit, meaning, and power (Freeman, P. 2021). It is interesting to note that the design discipline that is the most intimately connected to the body, it has been systematically silenced and marginalized as an unthinking object. Our clothing relationship is shaped by colonial notions of relationships and interactions. —dividing humans from nature, self from others, and body from spirit (Descartes, 1996). Garments are often created as exercises in aesthetic refinement, frequently neglecting their relationality to the soil, and to our emotional/mental, physical, family/social bodies. As a result, our clothes fail to support us, leaving us physically, psychologically, and spiritually unwell. (Cline, E. L 2012, Wicker, A. 2023). This system is self-serving and is failing human-nature - we are producing more clothing than ever before, but we are wearing garments less frequently. Between 2000 and 2025, the number of times a garment worn before being throwaway decreased by 36%, while garment production doubled between 2000 and 2015 (Textile Exchange, 2024, p. 13).

It compels us to ask why has it been silenced? Is a disembodied relationship easier to exploit through our insecurities, feelings of inadequacy, & anxieties? What might our bodies say if they were allowed to feel? Would they also sense when clothes were not made in *mauri* or *chi*, and were made in pain? If our clothing relationships were decolonial, grounded in *mauri*, and *chi* (氣) they would foster vitality and well-being across humans and non-humans? (Fig. 03)



Fig. 03

POSITIONALITY

In this paper, we reflect collectively on what it means to exchange fashion knowledge and experiences in a setting of unequal power relations due to the modern/colonial order. We reflect from our respective positionalities, knowledge and experiences on what it means when we meet in difference, as people based in the Global North and the Global South. We want to acknowledge the power inequalities in this collective writing process due to the modern/colonial order and our differences in race, age, life experiences, institutional education and social status. We also want to acknowledge our different positionalities and where we are each speaking from. Oli Dong, a young Chinese woman who was born and works in China but who was educated in the UK, is from the post-90s generation (90后). Oli grew up under the one-child policy during a time of rapid modernization, digital connectivity, and urbanization in China. Her generation, markedly different from those before it, reflects the cultural tension between tradition and modernity. Yan Yuan is a Chinese woman, born and educated in urban China (Beijing and Xi'an) as part of the Post-60s Generation (60

后) (Liù Líng Hòu), she grew up during the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. Yan was educated in fashion design, and traditional Chinese rituals and practices that embody Confucianism, Taoism & Buddhism (the three main philosophies of China), such as the tea ceremony, playing the guqin (古琴) an ancient Chinese stringed musical instrument. Yan is a mother, daughter, wife and an Associate professor in Fashion Design. Her generation serves as a bridge between China's revolutionary past and its rapid modernization, embodying a mix of traditional values and a growing awareness of global influences. Jennifer Whitty, a white woman, as Muintir na hÉireann, a person descended from the native people of Ireland, now living as tau iwi (Māori term to refer to newcomers to Aotearoa, New Zealand). As a colonized, third-culture individual Whitty's experience of living in-between cultures—navigating a state of non-belonging between insider and outsider perspectives—has shaped her ability to build bridges across worlds. Learning about Indigenous Chinese culture has deeply resonated with her, feeling substantial and profoundly aligned with values she has long held but had not fully articulated. It has also illuminated, as Magan

(2022, p. 289) describes, the “deep psychological block” created by the trauma of colonization—a separation from traditional reverence for the land and the loss of her Indigenous language. Over her 10 years of visiting China, Whitty has learned and unlearned much about the country, often challenging her Eurocentric and colonial view of China as a monolithic culture. While China has increasingly adopted a consumption-driven culture, there is also a renaissance of Indigenous ethno-ontological wisdom and a metaphysical philosophy which is where our work finds its place.

LEARNING FROM THE PLURIVERSE – WE NEED TO COME TOGETHER

The colonial worldview has divided from one another, “othering” people who exist outside Western frames of reference - The Global North and Global South. In response, we advocate for the inclusion of diverse ontologies—such as Indigenous cosmologies—in addressing environmental issues. These perspectives offer valuable insights into sustainability and relational approaches that are essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable future. This work is part of a growing wave of decolonial confidence. Our external perceptions of each other’s cultures have highlighted how deeply our worldviews are shaped by our cultural contexts and the necessity of unlearning entrenched assumptions. It is only by coming together in the difference that we realise we are more similar than dominant narratives might suggest. Engaging with decolonial practices has been both humbling and destabilizing. It enabled us to confront the reality that much of what we thought to be “real” or “true” was shaped by a dominant worldview that marginalized alternative perspectives. This paper is part of an ongoing research-through-design project that has evolved over a decade of collaboration across mainland China and Aotearoa, New Zealand. During this time, we have opened ourselves to each other’s worldviews, reflecting on our positionalities and engaging in what de la Cadena and Blaser (2018) describe as “conversation across worlds”—a process fostering dialogue and interaction between diverse epistemologies, ontologies, and cultural perspectives. This collaborative approach embraces the coexistence of multiple ways of being and knowing, challenging the dominance of a singular worldview and rejecting the “one-world reality” (Law, 2015). Cross-cultural dialogue is essential for addressing global challenges. By coming together, we

aim to overcome differences, build relationships, and foster connections among ourselves and others (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 2). We are all designers, wearers and educators - clothing is a site of meaning, and rich potential for practices of care and new relations to emerge on the soil in our bodies.

DEVELOPING RITUALS AND PRACTICES FOR DEEP DECOLONIAL WEARING

This decolonial wearing temporal intervention began as a thought experiment: could attuning to the clothing on our bodies deepen connections with the human and non-human worlds? Could it shift our values and foster a relational understanding of clothing? As designers and wearers, instead of striving for detached perspectives, we can begin to cultivate—through small, tangible actions in our immediate environments—an engagement with our “situated knowledges,” (Haraway, 1988, pg575–99.) our existing clothing, and practices of care, fostering what Haraway refers to as “ways of seeing” (Haraway, 1988, pg. 583). It advocates for the quietly radical act of resisting the neoliberal capitalist rhythms of productivity and consumption by simply dedicating time to being present with our clothed bodies.

METHODOLOGY

This deep-wearing intervention draws upon a holistic, decolonial framework aimed at encouraging fashion wearers to adopt decolonial mindsets and embodied practices intervention integrates multiple frameworks, and philosophies namely:

- **Phenomenological & Embodied Practice:** Inspired by the focus on lived experiences Merleau-Ponty (2012) and Grosz (1994), the intervention challenges Cartesian dualisms between mind/body and nature/culture. It incorporates Taoist-inspired practices, including the Eight Energy Body Theory (Frantzis, 2019), which fosters integration of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual connections. Corresponding with Clark’s concept of shifting worldview and introduce new values to fashion through “everyday values. sensory studies, micro phenomenology” (2019, 323) Building on Whitty’s work (2024, 2023) on care being deeply connected to touch, and our embodied, sensory knowledge of being in our clothed bodies. Decolonial approaches: Decolonial AestheSis: (Mignolo & Vázquez,

2013), which integrates thought, action, and sensory experience into a seamless process of knowing and being. This approach recognizes the embodied experience as a legitimate form of knowledge, by challenging colonial separations between mind and body. Drawing on the work of Pihama and Smith (2021), Magan, (2022), Kimmerer, R. W. (2013) this intervention is an act of reclaiming Indigenous ways of being, creating a space where fashion practices thrive outside the confines of modernity, aligning with Jansen's (2020) idea of redefining fashion as a "multitude of possibilities" that move beyond monocultural Eurocentric frameworks. It builds on it by changing the micropatterns of social life, on the ground, with each other to decolonize ourselves. The project also incorporates non-linear Indigenous temporality. Part of this practice decolonial practice draws from mindful awareness practice that primarily stems from Eastern spiritual and meditative practices as a counterpoint to habitual and unconscious practices of wearing. It encourages us to "unthink" ingrained assumptions and unlearn biases rooted in Western knowledge systems, fostering a more reflective and intentional relationship with clothing. Building on Whitty's (2024) work on care, as a relational, collaborative process.

- More-than-human perspective, as proposed by Craik and Peirson-Smith (2020) an approach that shifts from anthropocentric sustainability models towards relational care within broader ecosystems Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). Whitty's previous work (2023) on being in common with our clothes as an embedded relational practice to cross the conceptual divide between human and nonhuman:
- New materialism - Karen Barad's (2007) concept of agential realism and Rosi Braidotti's (2013) relational ontology further inform this approach, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all phenomena. The project also draws on Indigenous animist beliefs (Chinese, Māori, and Celtic), which view objects, landscapes, and natural phenomena as imbued with spirit and agency (Freeman, P. 2021), (Durie, M. 1997), The ArtEZ Fashion Professorship promotes a new way of engaging with fashion's matter and materialities through 'New Ecologies of Matter,' viewing fashion's materialities, including sensuous living bodies, as part of a continuum

of living matter.

- Expanding the framework for clothing - a decolonial alternative logic to the binary framework of Western fashion, a "third way" curator Claire Wilcox (2020, p. 131) 'Fashion as an expression of artistry'—or as art itself. This approach aligns with Bari's (2020) view of dressing as a philosophical and existential act, emphasizing clothing as mnemonic objects rather than mere utility or style.
- This research builds on the decolonial embodiment work of Yuan and Whitty (2021) 'Taoist mind, body clothing service, the meditation workshop delivered at Responsible Fashion Series in Antwerp (2021), and the workshop 'Fashion utopias: An exploration of the possible based on Whanaungatanga (relationship building), Whakapapa (genealogy), and Kaitiakitanga (guardianship) with clothes' (Whitty 2023).

METHODS

This intervention employs a qualitative methodology to explore the lived experiences of fashion wearers in the context of sustainability, using embodied, autoethnographic, phenomenological and experimental methods. The authors engaged as participants in a 5-day practice involving mindfulness with their everyday clothing to explore embodied connections to their own clothing. The data collection methods took the form of a collaborative mural board, discussions, and artifacts:

- Mural board: A collaborative mural board was set up with prompts and questions to be reflected on and responded to over the course of the day - morning, afternoon, and evening, with reflection over the whole day. The participants were encouraged to document their daily experiences and reflections on digital post it notes on the board, the board could be accessed on the participants' phones to allow for accessibility and immediacy. All responses could be seen by all participants at any time to encourage collaborative learning/sharing.
- Artifacts: Participants created outputs (e.g., photos, garments, drawings) during the exercise that can be analyzed.
- Discussions: Pre- and post-reflective discussions to gather insights, and to understand changes in perspectives.

To capture the essence of everyday life, the intervention took place over five regular

working days, during which participants engaged in the practice of “deep wearing” with their everyday clothing. This period coincided with an exceptionally busy time for Yuan and Dong, which influenced their level of engagement. However, this added authenticity, providing an accurate reflection of what a typical day entails. The intervention utilized a digital mural board, with each participant assigned a dedicated section featuring 8 prompts (Appendix 1) in both English and Chinese.

The prompts were developed from Taoist principles, and Māori knowledge, designed to align the garment-body-mind-spirit connection with the natural rhythms and patterns of life. The prompts covered a range of themes, including body awareness, environmental awareness and principles explicitly rooted in Taoist philosophy designed to encourage participants to cultivate a deeper relationship with themselves and their environment.

The relational principles included:

1. Chi/Qi (气) – Vital Energy Practices, to cultivate and harmonize the flow of energy (Chi) within the body. Practice/Prompt: Body-garment Awareness: to circulate energy and calm the mind.
2. Wu Wei (Effortless Action) - to act in harmony with the Tao by aligning with the natural flow of life rather than resisting it. Practice/prompt: mindful wearing - focus on how the body moves through the garment. Observation of Nature: Spend time outdoors observing how garments interact with nature.
3. Relational Harmony (He 和) and mauri—the life force—exist in relationship with all things to cultivate harmonious relationships with oneself, others, and the environment. Practice/prompt: Clothed Body Awareness: Participants were asked to pay attention to how garments interact with their body—how they feel, move, and support or constrain your flow of energy. Interpersonal Presence: Practice deep listening and non-verbal awareness in interactions, aligning with the mauri and Tao's flow in relationships. They were asked to tune into their body—what messages is it sending you through the sensations of wearing this garment?
4. Meditation and Stillness - to Achieve inner peace and clarity by quieting the mind and tuning into the present moment. Practice/prompt: participants were asked to check in and focus their attention on different parts of their

clothed body, noticing sensations.

5. Connection to Nature: to reconnect with the natural world to restore balance and alignment with the Tao through clothing. Practice/prompt: Participants were asked to consider the lifecycle of their garment, from its origins (soil) to its eventual return to the earth (soil-to-soil). They were asked to Observe how the sun interacted with their garments.
6. Taoist Rituals - to honour the interconnectedness of all life and bring intentionality to daily actions. Practices: Morning Intentions: Participants were asked to begin each day by expressing gratitude and setting mindful intentions aligned with the Taa through the garment.

(Fig. 04)

FINDINGS

EMBEDDEDNESS OF COLONIAL MODERNITY

From the outset, the influence of colonial modernity on participants' values and mindsets was evident. On the first day of the project, Yuan and Oli's immediate focus was on their lack of new clothing, reflecting a strong association of fashion with newness. Asking participants to consider clothing beyond this frame of reference was challenging, as it felt unfamiliar and foreign to their habitual ways of thinking about fashion.

LACK OF LANGUAGE

The participants struggled to articulate their feelings towards their clothing, finding both English and Chinese insufficient, and lacking to fully capture their deep wearing experience. The language of clothing relationships is binary or transactional- it either reinforces functional or aesthetic relationships or goes to the domain of human relationships. In response, Whitty experimented with alternative modes of expression, using images, inventing new terms, or even incorporating sounds to better convey emotions and connections.

SHIFT FROM OBJECT TO SUBJECT

Interestingly, of the three participants two of them described their clothes as subjects rather than objects. Yan likened her clothes to “a friend to help me.” Whitty, over the course of the exercise, developed a deep connection with her clothing. Each morning, she began by expressing gratitude, speaking to her garments and saying, “I’m so

3.2 Findings

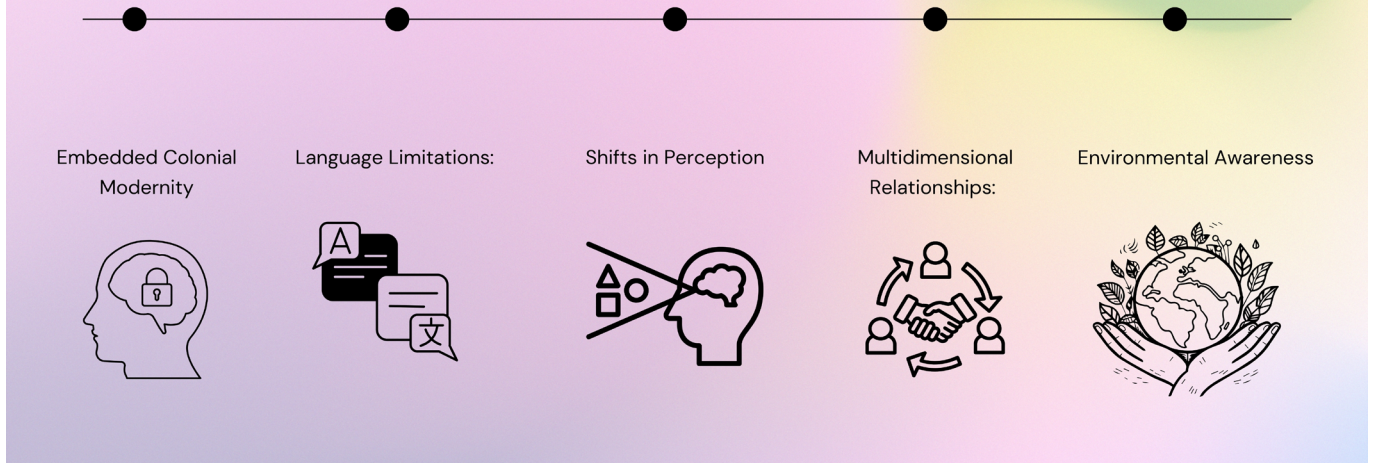


Fig. 04

grateful for all of your help.” She found this practice grounding and centering, and by the fifth day, it had become second nature. Her relationship with her clothes extended to her bed sheets, and her wardrobe no longer felt like a collection of random objects but rather a gathering of friends filled with memories. For Whitty, this process of mindful wearing enhanced her attunement to her surroundings and herself. Whitty stopped seeing clothes as specific items - ‘dresses, trousers etc.’ but started to second skin. The line between the fabric and how it responds to corporeality by turning into a skin.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL WEARING

Dong frequently spoke about the interconnectedness of mind, body, and clothing. For her, clothes provided a link between “protection and mood,” offering a sense of safety— “always bring the safe.” The relationship between emotional/mental well-being (taha hinengaro) and physical well-being (taha tinana) was evident in her reflections. On days when this harmony was achieved, she noted the ability to maintain the harmonious flow of Chi/Qi (气) through her clothed body, remarking, “Today—it can flow :).” For Whitty, she entered a space where the body and garment existed in a

dynamic, dialectical relationship—a continuum where dressing became a practice that nurtured creativity, and dialogue across cloth, space and body. The art of dressing and being dressed was - the goal. She noticed that over the 5 days, she paid less attention to the external appearance of her clothes and paid more attention to the interface of cloth to body in a sensory way free from pressures of aesthetic appearance as the measure of clothing success.

FINDING NEW TEMPORALITIES

Whitty and Yan expressed a desire to show more care and build deeper relationships with their clothing but felt hindered by a lack of time, language, and practical capability. To address this, Whitty experimented with slowing down her interactions with garments, taking more time to dress and undress, and engaging in mindful practices such as folding clothes with care. These small, intentional actions transformed mundane tasks into opportunities for building relationships, fostering care, and finding enjoyment in everyday rituals.

THE BODY AS A LIVING PROCESS

For Yuan and Whitty, this process highlighted the profound relationship between physical sensations—such as wearing—emotional awareness, and cognitive processes, reinforcing the body's vital role in shaping the mind. For Whitty breathing and dressing became interwoven in a continuous cycle: the living body depends on the rhythm of breath—inhalation and exhalation—mirroring the cyclical nature of our daily rituals. Breathing is an act of deep relationality with nature—a constant exchange that unites us with the atmosphere and reminds us of our interconnectedness. Clothing, in turn, is intrinsically tied to this act of breathing, arguably more so than any other form of design. She tuned into listening to her body's wisdom and then expressed or clarified that feeling through the mural board. Whitty's focus on the breathing, clothed body brought attention to this invisible yet essential exchange, cultivating a dynamic relationship with clothing.

MIND-BODY-CLOTHING RELATIONSHIPS

Mind-body-clothing relationship; and chose to wear the same outfit for an entire month, describing it as providing a sense of security and calm—the yin to the yang of her busy life. Initially, her sense of this practice lacked a clear narrative, but through focused attention during this project, she began to recognise its deeper significance. Her reflections uncovered insights into her sartorial practices that she can continue to explore and use as a grounding tool. She described the experience as “like the clothes of a monk—without thinking too much, just repeating the same colour and structure, so there's no need to concentrate my mind entirely on clothes.

CONNECTION WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

The intervention revealed that most of the authors, apart from Whitty, were unfamiliar with considering a garment's full lifespan, particularly its end-of-life. This aspect was often overlooked. For example, when asked about it, Dong admitted, “No idea actually—I can't imagine how this coat will end its life.” Yan referred to burning clothes as a common practice, highlighting cultural differences in sustainability perspectives. While incineration may be more prevalent in some cultures, it is less accepted in the West due to its severe environmental consequences, such as the release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. This finding

points to a significant gap in knowledge among fashion design professionals. Although they are typically knowledgeable about certain stages of a garment's lifecycle, there is often limited awareness or consideration of its entire lifecycle, particularly its conclusion. Addressing this gap requires a more holistic approach to sustainable fashion, one that incorporates all stages of a garment's existence, from creation to disposal, into design and practice.

CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

Deep wearing begins with a re-engagement with our embodied memories and bodily experiences that are historically ignored and erased. Despite our geographical differences, it is evident that we are all living and working within an anthropocentric system. This system often obscures latent, decolonial ways of being and thinking embedded in our bodies, minds, and histories. It prioritizes the human perspective in our relationship with clothing, perpetuating cycles that are difficult to disrupt and challenge. Breaking free from these Western-centric ideologies and belief systems requires a holistic approach that reconsiders our connection to fashion and the broader world. We have been conditioned to view “fashion practice” narrowly, as something that exists solely at the point of purchase and within the framework of consumption. Moving away from this thinking, doing and being takes time. As Jennifer Craik observes, “Sustainability solutions for the fashion system cannot be implemented by all players, at all times, or in the same way, but must highlight local specificity alongside universal implications” (Craik & Peirson-Smith, p. 942), we cannot expect the same uptake, or understanding from all.

The strength of this approach lies in the difficulties it presents, — unlike universal, monocultural strategies, decolonial methods cannot be measured or “implemented” in a standardized way. They do not rely on external validation but instead originate from within, rooted deeply in our intrinsic understanding and felt sense—what resonates in our gut. As Robin Kimmerer (2013) observes, some questions extend beyond the reach of science, requiring us to embrace deeper and broader ways of understanding the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans. As decolonial scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes, work by Indigenous peoples is often deemed “legitimate” or “real” only if it aligns with Western frameworks and holds value for the dominant non-Indige-

nous culture. Similarly, the practices explored in this project may not resonate with or appeal to the dominant fashion system, as they challenge conventional understandings of what fashion is and can be.

Recording feelings and experiential sensations is inherently challenging. The written word often fails to capture true meaning, particularly across languages, as language itself is an imperfect tool. The act of naming—rooted in Western taxonomies—implies that something does not exist until it is labelled (Hamilton Pearson, 1992, p. 33). At any moment, billions of data points are available to us, yet we can process and record only a fraction of them. This creates a narrow perspective, like glimpsing through a keyhole, where we assemble interpretations and overlay them with our own narratives. Deep wearing, as an embodied practice, becomes a form of art—an unknowable, flowing undercurrent that resists full capture. The constraints of paper and language cannot encompass its vastness, leaving much of its essence beyond the reach of documentation.

CONCLUSION

Wearing isn't neutral, it's a relationship - between humans and non-humans. According to Robin Kimmerer, dressing is a "phenomenon that is simultaneously material and spiritual" (2013, p. 46), emphasizing the dual nature of clothing as both a tangible and deeply meaningful practice. Wearing, like many physical activities, can often be done on autopilot, but it can also be approached with intention. While sleep wear-wearing reflects a passive, unconscious relationship with clothing, deep-wearing offers a revelatory experience where new meanings and connections come into focus. It fosters awareness and acceptance of the present moment, shifting attention away from the constant desire for more or new, and rooting us in the here and now.

In this context, deep wearing is not simply an external act, a transformative gesture for the wearer, or a statement of intent. Instead, it is a profoundly relational practice—an integration of mind, body, and spirit that goes beyond function or aesthetics. It becomes a process of weaving connection, uncovering something abundant and meaningful beyond the garment's immediate purpose.

Every small action matters. Each individual approaches sustainability from a unique entry

point, shaped by different motivations and ideals for change. A diversity of approaches, from the smallest gestures to systemic changes, is essential—each plays a vital role. Slowing down to attune to natural rhythms and temporalities is both transformative and impactful, reshaping how we exist in the world and how we view cared-for garments and deep relationships with clothing.

This small but potentially powerful practice invites us to rethink our connections and embrace more meaningful ways of being with the materials we wear. Sometimes, the smallest seed can grow into the largest tree; even the most mundane insight can open doors to new dimensions. Even if this seed is just a fleeting perception, it is enough to spark transformation. When the mind quiets and sensitivity and receptivity are attuned, a new clarity emerges. In this state of openness, when we pose a question to the universe, we become truly ready to receive an answer.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Whitty, 2025, *More Than Green: Weaving Culture and Spirit into the Fabric of Sustainability*.

[Fig. 02] Whitty, 2025, *Threads of Power: Coloniality in Fashion and the Separation of Nature, Body, and Mind*.

[Fig. 03] Whitty, 2025, *Clothing as Second Skin: A Tangible Interface with Nature and Self*.

[Fig. 04] Whitty, 2025, *Unravelling Threads: Coloniality, Language, Perception, and Relational Awareness in Fashion*.

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APPENDIX 1

DEEP WEARING PROMPTS

Morning:

1. Begin your day by giving thanks to your clothes. Reflect on their presence and purpose in your life.
2. Consider the lifecycle of your garment, from its origins (soil) to its eventual return to the earth (soil-to-soil).

Afternoon:

3. Engage in activities that connect you with your clothing. Observe how the sun interacts with your garments—does it warm, lighten, or illuminate them in new ways?
4. Reflect on how your body feels in the garment. Is it supportive, restrictive, or liberating?

Evening:

5. Tune into your body—what messages is it sending you through the sensations of wearing this garment?
6. Practice Relational Harmony (He 和): Can you align your clothed body with the natural rhythms and patterns of the Tao, finding balance and flow in your movements and surroundings?
7. Explore Chi/Qi (气) – Vital Energy: Reflect on whether your clothing supports the harmonious flow of energy through your body, fostering a sense of balance and vitality

Reflection:

8. How did you maintain the harmonious flow of Chi through your clothed body?