PROSPERING DRESS EXPLORING "TEXTILE_KNOWLEDGES" AND "SITUATED_FASHIONS"

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Abstract

Dress cultures are more extensive than Fashion (Niessen, 2022), and their diverse dimensions are conceptualized here as *situated_fashions* and *textile_knowledges*. Drawing on Haraway's concept of *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988), such dress enables rich belongings with more-than-human worlds, grows interdependent prosperity and sustains intra-active relationships (Barad, 2007). The paper presents and discusses the results of the seminar *NatureCultureFashionStudies – Autoethnographic Field Research*, which took place in spring 2024 at the Institute of Material Culture, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg. The aim was to find a certain language for the relations between nature, culture and fashion that expresses the vibrant materiality (Bennett, 2004) of these fields. During the research-based learning other functions of textiles became important, and with them the material, the cut, the processing. On this mental, sensually perceptible and fertile soil, textile literacy grows, and other fashions prosper.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Situated knowledges, More-than-human worlds, Textile literacy, Education for sustainable development (ESD)

INTRODUCING TEXTILE CIRCUMSTANCES

The prosperity of 'capital-F Fashion' (Niessen 2022, p. 440) is based on an economic understanding of growth that ignores the finite nature of natural resources (Fletcher, 2022). This 'world's mainstream fashion system' (Holroyd, Farley Gordon & Hill, 2023, p. 129) favours the abundance of everyday textiles and their inherent obsolescence to drive their production and thus global trade. It is easy to see that this involves materials that produce profits during their processing, which are ultimately not used to maintain their sources. Also, only a few people in the global north really get their money's worth. The actual added value of Fashion is largely symbolic (Barnard, 2020, 1996), and it can be renewed and sold indefinitely (Mitterfellner, 2020). Currently, the sustainable values of Fashion are in high demand because they promise consumption without harmful consequences (Perry et al. 2025). Although there are increasingly sustainable design strategies (Bye, 2020, p. 25) the textile materials themselves are finite and cannot be reused over and over again. Our overload of Fashion symbols materialises in an ever-growing mountain of textile waste, in a flood of micro plastics, whether sustainably or conventionally produced (Kedron et al., 2024). But although this knowledge is available, it is not concretely tangible. The public lacks general knowledge about textiles and an understanding of materials. The function of clothing as an expression

of human communication needs is contrasted by the impoverishment of the perception of other vestimentary needs and agencies. Hardly any other term is more multifaceted in its implications than that of sustainability, especially in the field of Fashion (Henninger et al. 2024). Its unwieldiness is its potential (Grober, 2013 p. 17), on the one hand, for a continued rapid growth in profit-maximizing greenwashing, but on the other hand, for a slow, sustaining and developing environmental education. Therefore, in the context of education for sustainable development (ESD), ways must be sought to enable genuine experiential knowledge. Material literacy is one of the key concepts that is invoked in the cultural-anthropological academic training of textile educators (Becker, 2005), as well as curators (Lehmann, 2012) and cultural scholars (Cooke, 2022). And it is not only historical biographies of various things that are meticulously written down using the methods of detectivelike acquisition of knowledge (Mida & Kim, 2015). A wide range of methods (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017) enables intensive research into the material of textile things (Woodward, 2020). In this way, the most diverse contexts of Fashion production, distribution and use are explored, and important cultural, social and technological knowledge is generated. The question is whether this knowledge affects us in such a way that it provokes transformative action. The Earth Logic plan of Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (2019) is inspiring to me when I think of the urgent changes needed in fashion design. But why do we always start from the point of creation? This question arises for me around textile education in schools, as I have been training textile teachers more and more in recent years. I think this is an important field for initiating different attitudes towards fashion, dress and textiles. To imagine other fashion futures, speculative imagining is certainly useful. But do these 'fashion fictions' (Holroyd, 2020), these wonderful and smart alternative worlds, really change our everyday actions or do they remain small refuge utopias, like green fashion?

SITUATING PROSPERITY FASHIONS

In many years of critical working as a researcher and teacher in the fields of cultural studies, fashion design and textile education, I have not yet been able to recognise or effect any major change in practice. And although I have increasingly focused on questioning the roots of the Fashion system, particularly in the way we teach the theory and practice of designing textile goods, this radical attitude (Gardner & Mohajer va Peseran, 2023) has had little impact on the general academic education system. In my opinion, the teaching of fashions and textile material knowledges is still more about maintaining a comfortable economic prosperity and less about the urgent change to an ecological prosperous sustainability. I think that an important reason for this is that we disregard general education in the field of textiles and fashion. In my view, we cannot achieve a fundamental transformation of the Fashion system just by changing the design, production, distribution and use of products. Without a broadly informed, enlightened society, the change will not succeed. And with that, I am not focusing on consumer education in the sense of a class of buyers, but the imparting of cultural fashion knowledge by establishing personal relationships with direct and concrete environments. This vision of textile knowledge transfer is aimed at each single persons and their relationship to the more-than-human world, it can and should take place in all possible learning situations. That is why I have been looking for other ways and places to engage with fashion, dress and textiles. I found these other perspectives outdoor, during my two-year advanced training in nature-based environmental education¹. And now I combine outdoor teaching (Au & Jucker, 2022; Huppertz & Schatanek, 2021; Scheidegger 2018) with autoethnographic research methods (Ellis & Bochner, 2003) and share both in research-based learning settings. At the same time, I am drawing on Donna Haraway's well-known concept of 'situated knowledges' (1988), which is no less relevant after almost four decades:

Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as a slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of 'objective' knowledge (p. 592). From this, I derive the following founding figures

for my research: *situated_fashions* and *textile_*

¹ The certificate course that I completed is offered by SILVIVA in collaboration with the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (Certificate of Advanced Studies, NUB/Naturbezogene Umweltbildung): 'SILVIVA has been enabling education providers to connect nature and learning effectively since 1985. The foundation has an evidence-based approach: using the best available data to develop a practical and innovative methodology that also includes the advantages of digital tools.' (https://www.silviva.ch/en/ 29.12.2023)

knowledges. The situatedness of the diverse fashions of the past, present and future reminds us that the Eurocentric understanding of Fashion is a fallacy of globalised modernity. The countless textile knowledges worldwide need to be preserved, rediscovered and respectfully included in the canon of a sustainable understanding of our co-worlds. I wonder how a sustainable understanding of the agency of all participants can be achieved: How can relationships of this kind be perceived at all? - I am trying to find this out by investigating the NatureCultureTransfer in Textile. Here, too, I refer to the early Haraway (1985), the Cyborg Manifesto, whose call for a rework of nature and culture has not yet materialised in such a way that our textile activities have changed accordingly: "nature is still the almost inexhaustible resource for appropriation or incorporation through culture" (p. 67). To truly dismantle this polarity and hierarchical dominance, they must remain identifiable as long as the dominant culture of Fashion flourishes on a hegemonic, anthropocentric and dualistic power structure. For me, NatureCultureTransfer is therefore about the continuous transfer of one into the other and vice versa. This reciprocal performative practice of permanent transfer between nature and culture has a special epistemological potential. The conditionality of materialities and meanings of Fashion and its textile transfer provides insights into the relationship between people and their environments. It can be viewed with Karen Barad (2003) as a "dynamics of intraactivity" (p. 807). The textile is thus a discursive space of thought and an essential tool in nature-cultures research (cf. Gesing et al., 2019). The concept of the fashion-agency (Venohr, 2020) is thus extended to include the essential sphere of the transfer between nature and culture, which locates the self and the textile in a relational and intra-active space. The aim is to make the textile dimensions of one's own situatedness and the respective partial perspective tangible. The attempt to expand the spheres of fashion into the outdoors is not about proclaiming a return to nature or following a romanticised yearning for nature. Rather, it is about the direct bodily and sensual experience of the connection with what already exists around us and about leaving the cultural, comfortably arranged comfort zone, let's call it prosperity as we know it. In my opinion, this is why textile education is essential right from primary school. Situated fashions and textile knowledges must be firmly anchored and further

developed as an essential content with transformative potential in education for sustainable development (ESD).

RESEARCHING FASHION OUTSKIRTS

The seminar NatureCultureFashionStudies -Autoethnographic Field Research, held in spring 2024, was an experiment in this sense. The aim was to find out whether the framework concept outlined above could be applied in practice in the form of specific teaching and research-based learning settings. As this was my first semester as an interim professor at the Institute for Material Culture at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, neither the students nor I knew what we could expect from each other. However, based on my own experiences, I had the following assumptions: The environment itself is perceived differently, more consciously; direct, regular contact with a personally selected outdoor environment would provide insights into various physical needs; the protective function of textiles becomes more important, and with it the material, cut and processing; clothing can perhaps even be understood as a mediator between humans and non-human kinds of being; ultimately, Fashion itself takes a back seat in the more-than-human world experienced in this way and becomes culturally questionable. The announcement in the course catalogue read as follows:

<u>NatureCultureFashionStudies – Autoethno-</u> graphic Field Research

What is culture? What is nature? What is fashion? Why does it make sense to consider these three concepts in their interdependency when searching for possible answers? We will try to find out by means of autoethnographic research methods. The aim is to explore one's own experiences in such a way that they can be conveyed, shared and thus gain social weight. The presentation of the research path to be explored is both a process and a product, it is literary, documentary, fictional and speculative. The aim is to find a language for the connections between nature, culture and fashion that expresses the materiality of these fields. This is achieved through direct and unusual engagement with the things that surround us, both inside and outside.

In the seminar, we will study relevant cultural texts, visit natural sites, research fashion stories, appreciate the dynamics of discussions, engage in informative dialogues and cultivate self-effective individual paths. We question scientific conventions and find a somewhat resistant research format that ultimately fits into the form of a term paper. I speak of 'we' here because, in addition to my role as a teacher, I also participate as a learner and an autoethnographic researcher.

Participants were students from the BA Textile Studies, MA Museum and Exhibition and MA Cultural Analyses, a very diverse group, which I very much welcomed. First, I introduced some methodological basics of ethnography, which we tried out together, and then we did exercises on autoethnographic writing (Fig. 01). Above all, however, all participants chose a place, a kind of NatureCultureFashionSpace, outside of the university and everyday life, and visited it regularly. In between, we read theoretical texts such as Haraway's Situated Knowledges (1988), went to the Haarenniederung, a nearby nature reserve, and reported on changes to our place over the course of the seasons. And again and again, we tried to find out what all of this might have to do with fashion, dress and textiles. In autoethnographic explorations, we sensually captured our perception, the needs and the belongings in the natural space and cultural place. We did this by engaging directly and unusually with the vitality of the things (Bennett, 2010) that surround us, both inside and outdoor (Fig. 02). Among other things, we used mindfulness methods from nature-based environmental education to train our sensual attention. Some students were initially unsettled by not knowing where the process would lead them. They were accustomed to fulfilling clearly formulated tasks or creating and substantiating theses based on objective knowledge. That is why they had difficulties with the autoethnographic writing. It was only later in the semester, when we had built up sufficient trust, that they were able to formulate their partial perspective through a consciously placed 'I'.

In the following, I will present three different approaches and results, using excerpts from the term papers of the participants Olivia Reents, Jule-Schirin Lüthans and Hareth Mufleh as examples². As the works provide a special insight into the process of changing your perception and attitude, they are very meaningful and valuable for my research. In the following, I will refer to their specific perspectives as *bareness, protection*



Fig. 01



Fig. 02

² All participants have given me written consent to use their results in my further research, and I did the translation into English.

and *extension*, according to their own respective focus. All of them found their own tone of voice to critically reflect on their experiences and present them as acquired knowledge. I consider this to be particularly remarkable. Based on these examples of research-based learning using auto-ethnographic methods, it will be shown that the human-centred basic understanding of fashion must be transformed into a material and ecological esteem of textile, so that prosperity fashion can be understood as rich and diverse belonging to more-than-human worlds.

BARENESS

At the beginning of the seminar, Olivia was very sceptical about whether it would be of any use to her at all. She found it very difficult to engage in the open-ended, uncertain process of her own research. Unlearning the usual completion of clear work tasks in teacher training was a particular challenge for her. When one of the seminar sessions took place in the Haarenniederung and some participants walked barefoot through a tall meadow with stinging nettles, she felt great aversion (Fig. 03). This was very noticeable to me and made me feel insecure. For her, the stinging nettle was, as she later wrote in her essay, the biggest hurdle, the "final opponent" (Reents, 2024, p. 10), which made her question everything at that point. It was here, at the latest, that her personal process of unlearning began. And I had grasped what it actually means to accept all participants in their different approaches and at their different speeds.

Olivia's NatureCultureFashionSpace is a small patch of self-sown wildflower meadow in her new shared garden. She befriends it, visiting and observing it regularly, and calls it "Bean" (p. 3) because of its shape, or elsewhere the "Wild Unknown" (p. 15). She notes, that "even in a seemingly bare landscape, such as a freshly sown meadow in April, there was a strong potential for emotional resonance through the promise of growth and renewal that it embodies" (p. 11). In the sense of a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) she compares the initial bareness of the soil and the slow flourishing of the plants with the progress of her autoethnographic writing. An important realisation is that in both there is a structure that is not static and predetermined, but grows organically, and that things takes their times. Finally, she dares to go barefoot and realises:

In my self-experiment, I became aware of



Fig. 03

the importance of clothing. I overcame my fear of walking barefoot through a field that was not completely visible. So, my usual companions in such places – shoes and socks – were no longer necessary. This way, I was able to experience an environment similar to my nature/culture place in a different way. Despite my fears and the thought 'Do I really have to do this?' I bravely persevered. I'm proud of myself for overcoming my concerns, even though it was the second attempt (p. 12).

Barefoot, Olivia feels "strangely free, but also a bit vulnerable" and can "experience the world directly, without the filter" of socks and shoes (p. 10). Overcoming her fears of walking barefoot has strengthened her rationally and emotionally, and she now wants to do it more often. Through this very simple experiment, she has gained a different access to herself and her environment. I hope that she will take this experience with her and, later, ideally conduct similar experiments as a textile teacher. Textile lessons have the potential to open *NatureCultureFashionSpaces* for unlearning.

PROTECTIVE

"I don't like good clothes for bad weather," is how Jule begins her work, in which follows the question "What significance do clothes and fashion have for my individual well-being in nature?" (Lüthans, 2024, p. 1). She also had difficulties in getting involved with the method of autoethnography and reflected on it very precisely, which I will come back to later. At the same time, she wrote an enthusiastic text about the development of her *NatureCultureFashionRelation* during this one semester:

My research is particularly exciting because I don't have much of a connection to nature and it doesn't have much relevance in my life as a place to stay. By contrast, I am very interested in fashion as a form of self-realisation and self-expression (p. 1). In her intensive examination, she finds that she is particularly interested in the protective function of clothing in its various objectives. Apparently, she often did not feel comfortable outside because she felt exposed to the weather. In an interview with her mother, she found out that she was outside a lot as a child and that at home they acted according to the generally known motto 'there is no bad weather, only bad clothing' (p. 8). When exploring her NatureCultureFashionSpace, she consciously faced the different weather conditions without special clothing or equipment to collect data for her research. This had the effect that she increasingly relaxed and appropriated specific protective clothing and ultimately designed a speculative personal vision of an all-rounder jacket. Another result of her autoethnographic exploration is that she has found the topics of 'outdoor fashion' and 'smart textiles' that are important to her, and she could now explore them in more depth in further research. As a conclusion she writes: "I can definitely leave my comfort zone in nature, and being unprotected in nature can be fun for me" (p.14). And she revises her initial observation as follows: "I want my clothing for bad weather to provide me with the same comfort as my clothing for good weather. Because for me there is good and bad weather" (p.14).

EXTENSION

Hareth describes his *NatureCultureFashionSpace* as a 'lost place' (Mufleh, 2024, p.1). It has no 'urban functionality' (p. 1) and yet there are indications that this place is used by others as a retreat or hiding place. It is a small 'playparadise' (p. 2) with a kind of tree house and a swing made from an old car tyre. He perceived the 'hidden nature of the place' as protection and his regular visits provoked the "idea of seeing the surrounding nature, as well as the nature shaped by humans, as an extension of one's clothing" (p. 2). In his work, he impressively describes how the connection between him and his NatureCultureFashionSpace becomes increasingly closer. With reference to Baptiste Morizot (, for Hareth it is a matter of 'Sich Einwalden' in the outside world, whose 'lasting sensual impact cloaks' (Mufleh, 2024, p. 9) him. During his intensive autoethnographic explorations, Hareth refers to Michel de Certeau's canonical statement to conceptually distinguish between 'place' and 'space': 'In short, space is a practical place' (Certeau, 1984, p. 117). After numerous encounters with other beings and things here during the day and at night, he gradually develops the desire not only to visit and observe this space, but also to 'design the hidden green space' (Mufleh, 2024, p. 13). After a few unsuccessful attempts at furnishing, he finally realises, through a disturbing encounter with a stray dog, that what he is really seeking here is freedom in the sense of mobility, not property:

This experience helped me to see that the feeling of being part of a place or owning a space is only an illusion. [...] However, I can have access to nature if, instead of striving for selfish claims of ownership and use, I enter appreciative communication with nature and a cooperative relationship with other beings involved (pp. 15-16).

Hareth also comes up with the idea of carefully designing his 'small natural cosmos' (p. 15) from the observation that people, just as they "treat their own body negatively and badly, do the same to our immediate space, but also to the surrounding nature" (p. 17). At the end of his housework, he realises that he will continue his visits to "observe the changes in the annual cycle" (19 p.). He plans to remove the ropes from the tree, as they prevent it from growing. And he plans to properly dispose of the old tyre, which has long since outlived its usefulness as a swing. By collecting rubbish during many of his visits and by taking small things with him as soulful mementos, he extended his sense of responsibility for careful treatment and social care into the Mitwelt, "because it is our only great space" (p. 17).

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IS ENCOURAGING

The greatest difficulty for the students was not learning the ethnographic methods but rather leaving their usual academic paths (Fig. 04). Unlearning the familiar and taking a leap into the unknown were the hurdles most often mentioned during the seminar. On the one hand, this requires confidence in oneself, in others, and in the teacher. On the other hand, it takes courage to engage in a possible change of one's own thinking and acting. All participants described their participation as a constant rollercoaster of insecurity and empowerment. What was also particularly difficult to them was not knowing which aspect of fashion they should focus on. This concern also troubled me, but I avoided focusing on the textile or clothing aspect in conversations. I am even more satisfied that the participants found very individual approaches for themselves.

In Jule-Schirin Lüthans' work, it becomes very clear how much she was concerned about the feeling that her own point of view was not relevant enough for a scientific research approach. She impressively describes how the feedback from the other participants actually gave her the courage to address her own concerns. She quotes from a feedback card that she received after her first presentation of her research findings: 'Your thoughts and feelings have a claim to truth! Trust both, you inspired me and gave me courage' (Anonymous, cited in Lüthans, 2024, p. 5). I think that saying 'I' encourages saying 'you', and that this is what makes dialogue and intra-actions possible.

Although a period of just over three months is by no means sufficient to conduct ethnographic research, the results of a seminar of this kind are more than satisfactory: all participants have acquired basic ethnographic methods, tested them and critically reflected on the aspect of objectivity; they started to write autoethnographically, some with very good results; and they experienced and articulated their different difficulties in researchbased learning.

PARTIAL PERSPECTIVES ON PROSPERITY

Fashion prosperity was not the conceptual focus of the seminar, but relevant aspects for the transformation of Fashion can be derived from the above presented and only seemingly subjective results, once again with Haraway (1988): "So, not



Fig. 04

so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision" (p. 583). The partial perspective that the students experienced through the application of autoethnographic methods enables an objectification of prosperity independently of primarily economic interests. The participants from different degree programs each developed their own perspective, which allowed them a different approach to their prospering environment. This in turn led them to a transformed relationship to their clothing. Thus, the material and the environmental esteem for the textile was fundamentally increased so that prosperity fashion could be understood rich and diverse belongings to the more-than-human world. This result shows that in a more sustainable future, it is essential to impart textile knowledge using different methods: we must reconnect with the material and our own perceptions in order to appreciate textiles. As part of education for sustainable development, teaching textile knowledge must

be an important part of general education and should ideally begin in primary school.

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CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Autoethnographic writing exercises in outdoor learning. Credits: Olivia Reents.

[Fig. 02] The thing-power (Bennett 2024) of the tissue represents the spatially, previous presence of another human being at this place. Credits: Dagmar Venohr.

[Fig. 03] One participant walks barefoot and with closed eyes through tall grass. Credits: Dagmar Venohr.

[Fig. 04] Without hesitation one of the students lies down in the meadow. Credits: Dagmar Venohr.

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