

AFFECTIVE FABRICS OF RESISTANCE

FASHION, EMBODIMENT, AND POLITICAL FUTURITY IN TOXIC TIMES

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Abstract

This is a theoretical essay that examines fashion as a site of affective resistance and epistemic worldmaking amid resurgent fascist and neoliberal logics. Drawing on Haraway's (1988) situated knowledges and Jansen's (2020) decolonial critique of fashion's entanglement with modernity, it proposes a transdisciplinary framework connecting affect studies, feminist critique, and decolonial thought. We analyze how sartorial practices mobilize joy, care, and speculative imagination to counter systemic violence, erasure, and aesthetic exclusion. Fashion is approached not as surface or spectacle but as embodied archive/anarchive, critical pedagogy, and political infrastructure. Through examples drawn from BIPOC, queer, and diasporic practices, we show how dress reconfigures relations between body, memory, and futurity. The essay's contribution is to conceptualize fashion as an anarchive of embodied worldmaking and as soft power from below, clarifying its political promise and limits under conditions of ongoing structural oppression.

Keywords: *Fashion Activism; Affective Resistance; Decolonial Aesthetics; Embodied Politics; Counter-Modernity; Soft Power; Anarchive; Worldmaking.*

INTRODUCTION: DRESSING AGAINST FASCISM—FASHION, AFFECT, AND EMBODIED RESISTANCE

Fashion, often dismissed as frivolous or apolitical, becomes a critical site of resistance and epistemic worldmaking when examined through the lens of affect theory, decolonial critique, and feminist aesthetics. In the face of resurgent authoritarianism, necropolitics, and epistemic violence, clothing practices emerge as more than aesthetic choices—they constitute infrastructures of survival, visibility, and speculative becoming. This essay unfolds as a theoretical intervention grounded in concrete sartorial practices. It theorizes fashion as affective infrastructure: a material and symbolic

terrain where bodies negotiate visibility, emotion, and futurity in conditions of constraint. This framing departs from both liberal narratives of self-expression and critical views that reduce fashion to capitalist ideology. Instead, it asserts that fashion—like sound or gesture—functions as a vibrational practice, generating affective fields through which subjectivity is shaped, relationality is enacted, and worlds are imagined (Eidsheim, 2015; Manning, 2016). The discussion begins with a critique of fascist aesthetics and the aesthetic governance of marginalized bodies, exploring how fashion mediates between erasure and articulation. Drawing on the concept of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and on decolonial critiques of modernity (Cannon, 2014;

Jansen, 2020), it analyzes how clothing operates as a counter-modern archive of survival and refusal. This includes both historical garments (Guryanova, 2022) and contemporary digital styling strategies (Pham, 2015). Particular attention is paid to practices of radical joy (Okello, 2024; Ekpe, Sherman, & Ofoegbu, 2023) and emotional resilience (Renati, Bonfiglio, & Rollo, 2023; Hasan et al., 2022) as they materialize in fashion collectives, diasporic design, and queer aesthetics. Ultimately, the argument converges on the notion of fashion as a speculative infrastructure of worldmaking (Goodman, 1978; Wachter-Grene & Chude-Sokei, 2020), where materiality, memory, and affect converge to challenge linear temporalities, colonial genealogies, and dominant aesthetic regimes.

THE POLITICAL BODY: FASHION AS EMBODIED AGENCY

In contexts marked by authoritarian aesthetics and affective control, fashion becomes a site where political pressure is inscribed, contested, and sometimes transfigured. The body is never neutral. It is governed, aestheticized, regulated, and often erased through regimes of visibility that operate at the level of clothing, gesture, and affect (Jackson, 2016; Puar, 2017). The politicization of dress is not a contemporary invention: colonial regimes used fabric and silhouette as mechanisms to racialize, sexualize, and infantilize entire populations (Said, 1978; Hall, 1992). These practices persist today through fashion media and institutional logics that exclude, appropriate, or commodify racialized and gender-nonconforming styles (Brans & Kuipers, 2023). Yet resistance also emerges in and through these aesthetic economies. Fashion, when articulated from minoritarian positions, does not simply reflect oppression—it archives its force and reorients its affective charge. Here, the archive is not a static repository of cultural memory, but what Erin Manning (2016) calls an anarchive: a living, embodied field of variation that exceeds linear documentation. Clothing, in this view, stores gestures, frictions, and survival strategies. Garments worn by trans, racialized, or veiled bodies index not only cultural meaning but capacity under pressure—what Puar (2017) theorizes as the strategic navigation of debility and resistance. The case of Alok Vaid-Menon, a gender-nonconforming writer and performance artist, offers a compelling instantiation of

fashion as an archive and epistemic insurgency. Vaid-Menon's styling practice—what they describe as *emotional architecture* in interviews and writings (Vaid-Menon, 2020)—blends floral fabrics, body hair, and sharp eyeliner, and draped silhouettes in ways that confound normative aesthetics of gender, decorum, and professionalism. Their dress rejects the logic of assimilation and instead constructs opacity as power. Rather than seeking visibility in the terms set by heteropatriarchy, Vaid-Menon performs unreadability, aligning with what Camp (2017) calls the grammar of black futurity. Vaid-Menon's wardrobe is not a costume; it is a political text. Through color, layering, and the juxtaposition of elements coded as masculine or feminine, they materialize what Haraway (2013) calls monstrous promises—figures who disturb taxonomies and invite more capacious forms of being. As Alaminos-Fernández (2014, 2021) shows in relation to music, aesthetic performance generates emotional knowledge that can subvert dominant affective economies. Vaid-Menon's work enacts a similar grammar: through visual language, they produce discomfort, curiosity, joy, and care—redistributing what Sara Ahmed (2014, 2010) describe as the emotional orientations of public life. The gender politics of clothing are especially salient here. As Flicker (2013) observes, the Western suit is a technology of control—designed to suppress emotion, individuality, and bodily expression. In contrast, queer and trans fashion practices often reclaim flamboyance, softness, and sensuality as tools of self-determination. Yet such reclamation is not always legible or safe. Gill-Peterson (2018) argues that trans children and youth develop forms of aesthetic agency long before institutional recognition arrives, resisting normative timelines and bodily expectations. Fashion, in this sense, becomes a pedagogy of survival—teaching bodies how to live in hostile environments.

This pedagogy is never solitary. It is enacted in community, online and offline, through networks of mutual recognition and symbolic labor. Pham (2015) explores how racialized and veiled women use digital platforms to curate personal style blogs that both contest and reframe dominant beauty paradigms. These micro-archives function as anarchives: dynamic, affective, and communal. Similarly, the work of South African fashion collectives such as Mantsho, Rich Mnisi Studio, and Thebe Magugu's collaborators within Fashion Revolution South Africa builds aesthetic solidarities

that displace Eurocentric logics of elegance and value (Pinther, Kastner, & Ndjio, 2022). Alongside Vaid-Menon, Orange Culture in Nigeria threads androgynous tailoring with Yoruba motifs to stage care as design principle. Its soft suiting and fluid silhouettes queer corporate formality while refusing Western timelines of disposability, enacting a counter-modern ethic of slowness and archival futurity. For instance, in his *Law and Order* (2019) and *Heritage* (2020) collections, Thebe Magugu mobilizes archival patterning and juridical iconography so that garment construction doubles as evidence handling—folding testimony and affect into fabric and activating what we interpret, following Rose’s (2022) framework of visual methodologies, as an anarchiving of South African feminist jurisprudence.

RADICAL JOY: AFFECTIVE PRACTICES OF RESISTANCE

In authoritarian climates that instrumentalize fear, shame, and despair as tools of social control, joy becomes not a luxury but a necessity. It is a practice, a stance, a method—cultivated not in the absence of pain but in defiance of it. Fashion, in this context, becomes a medium through which joy is not only expressed but produced, shared, and politicized. Far from being an aesthetic indulgence, sartorial joy interrupts the emotional economies of neoliberalism and fascism, reclaiming space for pleasure, presence, and collective survival (Ekpe et al., 2023). Radical joy is not a spontaneous eruption; it is a labor-intensive form of resistance. As Okello (2024) argues, Black joy functions as a loophole of retreat—a space carved out within systems of anti-Blackness where affective sovereignty and interiority can be nurtured. This retreat is not escapist, but strategic. It involves the cultivation of emotional autonomy under conditions of constant extraction. Similarly, Love (2019) frames joy as a core component of abolitionist pedagogy, emphasizing its role in disrupting narratives of disposability and cultivating creative agency in minoritized youth. Joy, then, is not the opposite of struggle—it is one of its most generative modalities. In fashion, joy materializes through color, texture, rhythm, and risk. The vivid palettes of queer fashion, the sensory tactility of handmade garments, and the experimental forms of diasporic design do more than delight the eye—they generate emotional atmospheres that resist despair. Drawing on Alaminos-Fernández’s (2014, 2021) empirical

work on music and emotion, we can understand fashion as a performative language of the body, one that encodes complex affective meanings through symbolic systems that are felt as much as seen. Clothing, like sound, operates vibrationally. It communicates mood, memory, and aspiration at the level of sensation. This sensory dimension is crucial to understanding the role of fashion in affective resilience. As Hill and O’Brien (2023) show in their study on grief and growth, personal and collective healing is facilitated not only by internal coping mechanisms but by shared symbolic environments where emotion is recognized and affirmed. Clothing participates in this ecology of support: what we wear can ground us, remind us, connect us. In times of loss, ritual dress becomes a conduit for memory (Interlandi, 2018); in moments of joy, styling becomes a celebration of survival, as exemplified by movements such as the Congolese Sapeurs (Hannig & Engelschalt, 2024).

Emotional regulation, too, plays a central role in the politics of fashion. Hasan et al. (2022) and Renati et al. (2023) demonstrate that the development of emotional resilience—particularly in times of crisis—depends on community-based practices fostering emotional awareness and mutual care. Re-embedded in community, fashion can operate as one such practice: styling circles, digital collectives, and shared rituals that affirm presence and dignity.

FROM ARCHIVE TO ANARCHIVE: SITUATED ARCHIVES AND COUNTER-MODERNITIES

Dominant fashion historiography has long been governed by Western modernity’s assumptions of linear progress, universality, and aesthetic hierarchy. This regime renders non-Western and minoritarian practices peripheral or belated, legitimizing exclusions and appropriations that naturalize Eurocentric taste (Jansen, 2020; Hall, 1992). Against this backdrop, situated fashion practices emerge as counter-modernities that reconfigure time, value, and knowledge: they root design in local epistemologies, slow material rhythms, and embodied continuities that exceed trend logics (Haraway, 1988; Cannon, 2014). Education and grassroots initiatives make these counter-temporalities concrete. Jakarta’s sustainable fashion curricula integrate traditional textile knowledges and ethical frameworks to cultivate relational sustainability rather than abstract metrics, privileging place, ancestry, and care (Zahra,

Suryawati, & Listiani, 2023). Independent designers and informal networks likewise bypass institutional gatekeepers to sustain niche communities, slower cycles, and experimental forms (Azuma & Fernie, 2003). Rather than seeking universal validation, these ecologies compose publics around sensorial belonging and shared accountability.

A core mechanism of this shift is the archival turn. Archiving—reweaving, repairing, narrating provenance—interrupts fast fashion's disposable temporality and preserves marginalized styles and stories (Mazzarella, Storey, & Williams, 2019). Yet archive here is not a museum of fixity; following Schneider (2011) and Manning (2016), it unfolds as an archive: a living, embodied field where gesture, remembrance, and variation circulate through garments. Clothes store touch, labor, grief, and pride; when reactivated, they transmit memory by difference rather than by mere repetition.

Religious-modest fashion clarifies how counter-modern aesthetics negotiate visibility and agency beyond Orientalist scripts. The hijab movement articulates continuity and innovation at once: styles index spiritual belonging while re-signifying inherited forms toward new political and affective ends (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Rofhani, 2020).

Instead of a linear narrative of modernization, we see braided time, where devotion, taste, and citizenship are co-styled. Digital platforms scale these anarchival practices. Racialized women's style blogs curate visual genealogies that resist erasure, turning so-called personal style into community pedagogy and affective theory-in-practice (Pham, 2015). Hashtags, reels, and collaborative rituals activate archives in real time, composing publics through atmosphere and relation rather than through institutional consecration. Read through Goodman's (1978) worldmaking, these practices do not merely reflect reality; they construct it via iterative selections, distortions, and projections.

What we call counter-modern is thus not nostalgia but futural continuity: a refusal of the imperative to move on that instead stays with the trouble of history to transform it (Haraway, 2016). Material choices—repair, upcycling, slow craft—become ethical infrastructures; silhouettes and motifs braid memory with anticipation; and collective styling rehearses forms of social life not yet authorized by dominant aesthetics. In sum, situated archives and anarchives relocate fashion's value from novelty and spectacle to relation and endurance.

FASHION AS WORLDMAKING: SOFT POWER FROM BELOW AND THE AESTHETICS OF POSSIBILITY

If fashion encodes memory and resists erasure, it also anticipates: it dreams, imagines, and projects new modes of being into the world. As a speculative medium, fashion does not merely respond to crisis—it rehearses futures. The act of dressing becomes a form of worldmaking, where fabric, form, and affect converge to construct alternative grammars of the social (Goodman, 1978). In toxic times, these grammars do not emerge from abstract theory or institutional scripts, but from bodies in motion—queer, racialized, migrant, trans—who make space for themselves through style. These sartorial worldings are not fantasies of escape, but material interventions in the here and now. Wachter-Grene and Chude-Sokei (2020) describe this phenomenon as Black radical pleasure, a mode of presence that affirms joy, desire, and collective becoming even under conditions of constraint. Fashion, in this register, is infrastructural. It provides the symbols, textures, and gestures through which insurgent subjectivities are performed and sustained.

This performativity generates what Joseph Nye (1990, 2017) calls soft power—the ability to shape preferences and mobilize consent through attraction rather than coercion. Traditionally theorized as a tool of state diplomacy, soft power in the context of grassroots fashion takes on a radically different form. As Alaminos-Fernández (2023) argues in relation to popular music, aesthetic practices can produce cultural soft power from below, where symbolic authority emerges not from institutions but from the aesthetic charisma of oppressed communities. In fashion, this insurgent soft power materializes in the virality of looks that defy categorization, in the collective allure of hybrid styles, and in the affective resonance of garments that signify survival and sovereignty. These sartorial formations generate transnational solidarities and emotional identification across difference—not by erasing particularity, but by affirming it. Fashion here does not ask to be understood; it invites relation. This is akin to Eidsheim's (2015) vibrational politics—affective frequencies that bind bodies not through discourse but through sensation, atmosphere, and resonance. Such practices also resist the visual economies of hyper-visibility and surveillance: Camp (2017) calls this tense presence, a way of being seen without

being reduced.

LIMITS AND RISKS: CO-OPTATION, SURVEILLANCE, AND AFFECTIVE FATIGUE

There are serious limits to fashion's political promise. Aesthetics of resistance are readily commodified, turning dissent into lifestyle while exposing minoritized wearers to intensified scrutiny. Hyper-visibility can collapse into surveillance (Campt, 2017), and signs of refusal are often reabsorbed by branding and trend cycles. Moreover, the labor required to dress otherwise accrues to already vulnerable bodies, amplifying what Puar (2017) names the uneven distribution of debility. The framework advanced here—an archive, affective opacity, and soft power from below—addresses these risks by shifting value from spectacle to relation, from transparency to refusal, and from institutional recognition to situated forms of collective endurance.

CONCLUSION: DRESSING OTHERWISE AS METHOD, MEMORY, AND WORLDMAKING

To dress in toxic times is to theorize with the body. It is to refuse the aesthetic mandates of conformity, the affective discipline of authoritarianism, and the epistemic closures of colonial modernity. This essay has argued that fashion, far from being a decorative or apolitical realm, constitutes a vibrant infrastructure of resistance—affective, speculative, and relational. Through practices of styling, archiving, and joy-making, minoritized communities activate fashion not as surface but as method: a mode of sensing, knowing, and imagining otherwise. The contribution of this essay lies in rethinking fashion as an archive of embodied worldmaking. Rather than offering a new theory of dress, it assembles a transdisciplinary constellation of frameworks—situated knowledge (Haraway), affective vibrationality (Eidsheim), radical love (Makhubu & Mbongwa), and soft power from below (Alaminos-Fernández)—to reframe how fashion operates politically. By reading fashion through the intertwined lenses of affect, decolonial critique, and speculative agency, the essay displaces consumerist and institutional paradigms of style and reclaims the dressed body as a locus of epistemic production. This reading resists over-romanticization. Dressing otherwise can be dangerous, exhausting, and ambivalent. Yet within this tension lies its power.

Garments carry not only cultural codes, but also memory, trauma, aspiration, and refusal. They allow us to perform opacity without apology, to mark survival without spectacle, and to gesture toward futures not yet authorized. Fashion, then, is not what follows politics. It is where politics begins again, at the level of skin, fabric, gesture, and feeling.

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