MEETING IN DIFFERENCE

RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY IN FASHION ENCOUNTERS ON THE SILK ROAD

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Abstract

We examine tensions and possibilities arising from the 2023 Responsible Fashion Series in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, arguing that responsible fashion requires structural shifts away from extractive aesthetics toward relational, pluralistic, and decolonial practices. Drawing on Kazakh, Indian, Celtic, and Aotearoa New Zealand positionalities, we critique Eurocentric conference formats and propose multilingual, place-based, co-creative methods that center Indigenous and local knowledges. We show how embodied encounters—workshops, dialogic making, and slow pedagogies—operate as sites of cultural survivance, joy, and ecological reciprocity. Advancing a pluriversal ethics, we call for fashion futures that foreground land, language, and collective responsibility.

Keywords: *Relationality; Pluriversal Fashion; Decolonial Design; Extractive Aesthetics; Cultural Survivance.*

INTRODUCTION: MEETING IN DIFFERENCE

The 2023 Responsible Fashion Series convened international fashion practitioners and scholars in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to engage in critical dialogue on sustainable and responsible fashion. The stated goal was to facilitate reciprocal exchange and support. Yet, what unfolded revealed profound tensions shaped by entrenched modern/colonial power dynamics (Quijano (2000) on coloniality of power; Mignolo & Walsh (2018)) These included disparities in voice, challenges of cultural translation, and implicit hierarchies of knowledge. This article is a collaborative reflection from four positionalities—Kazakh, Indian, Celtic/Aotearoa, and European–Belgium/Dutch—exploring what responsibility means when fashion encounters occur across difference.

We question assumptions embedded in international fashion conferences, particularly in postcolonial settings. When Western experts are invited to share knowledge, how are local voices positioned? Who is given the role of speaker and who is the listener? Across sessions, we observed a format echoing long-standing hierarchies: papers in English, institutional venues, and local craftspeople positioned as demonstrators or exhibitors. These roles inadvertently reinforced Eurocentric knowledge as universal, while local practices were aestheticised rather than engaged with in depth. Rather than seeking to provide definitive answers, we reflect through a decolonial lens on how

relational practices, Indigenous ontologies, and pluriversal design ethics can unsettle dominant narratives. How can fashion resist erasure instead of perpetuating extractive, assimilationist models? What might responsibility entail when Western experts are welcomed into postcolonial contexts still navigating recovery from cultural suppression? Our aim is to contribute to a pluriversal dialogue that honours complexity, centres care and amplifies historically marginalised voices.

An overlooked complexity in convening international forums is the assumption that proximity to foreign knowledge equals empowerment. Positionality matters. The knowledge centered through keynotes, workshops, and exhibitions frequently mirrored Global North discourses in sustainable fashion. Indigenous frameworks—such as Kazakh ideas of *obal* (waste) and *uyat* (shame)—were rarely afforded comparable analytic rigor.

Expectations that Kazakh and Uzbek participants speak the dominant language—both literal (English) and symbolic (Euro-American fashion theory)—rather than visitors learning local paradigms reproduce asymmetries of hospitality. Instrumentalized hospitality risks colonial extraction: local communities provide setting and culture while visiting academics and designers extract stories and inspiration. Responsibility demands structural shifts.

Hosting, then, should involve welcoming the other and empowering the self: prioritize local keynotes; convene in village or community settings; offer sessions in Kazakh or Uzbek to foreground linguistic equity; and recognize traditional crafts not as "pre-fashion", but as alternative modernities with distinct logics, aesthetics, and systems of transmission.

FASHION AS RELATIONAL, SITUATED, AND AFFECTIVE

In many Indigenous and ancestral traditions, fashion is not a consumer product—it is a lifeway. To fashion is to relate, to care, to remember. In Kazakhstan, Tekemet carpets made in community gatherings embody ancestral connection, social coherence, and ecological mindfulness. Similarly, Indian dowry quilts and woven cloaks in whānau hold genealogy, reciprocity, and love (Langlands, 2018).

Fashion, in this view, sustains intergenerational bonds between people, land, and craft. It is situated—emerging from whenua (land), fibers, colors, and rituals. It is affective—transmitting memory through tactile and visual means—challenging dominant narratives that center individualism, innovation, and consumption When fashion is disconnected from place, it becomes a tool of capitalist abstraction. Fragmented supply chains alienate worker from wearer and dyer from soil. In contrast, situated practices—felting in Central Asia, barkcloth in the Pacific—require attunement to climate, cycles, and kin. During the Series, the act of dyeing silk with walnut husks and learning felt manipulation invited slowness, listening with our hands, and relation with material.

These moments exemplify what Haraway (1988); Smith (2012); Oyěwùmí (1997) call "situated knowledges"—ways of knowing that are partial, embodied, and relational. Fashion becomes a site of epistemic resistance that transmits knowledge beyond English, slides, or academic citation—valuing intuition, repetition, and muscle memory. As one Uzbek artisan noted, "We do not need to say why we use this motif. We live it".

These embodied practices defy erasure by refusing assimilation. The joy of felting, pride in intergenerational embroidery, and the satisfaction of natural dyes act as cultural continuity and resilience. They do not require validation from global fashion centres. They fashion otherwise (Fig. 01).

Fig. 01

ERASURE AND EXTRACTIVE AESTHETICS

Contemporary fashion often celebrates the "modernisation" of tradition, rewarding surface over substance. When heritage is rebranded as "inspiration" or "trend", it risks detaching from communities, ecologies, and relations. Trade platforms and shows may enable extractive approaches—borrowing motifs, mimicking silhouettes, and tokenizing craft without equitable collaboration or credit (Jansen, 2020).

During the Series in Almaty and Turkestan, several collections referencing "Kazakh tradition" were explicitly tailored for foreign markets. Artisans who wove or dyed textiles were often unnamed. "For export" signalled both ambition and constraint, correlating success with self-editing. As one of us observed: you only realize how much your culture means when you must explain it to others—translation exposes both richness and vulnerability.

Pressure to simplify heritage through external frameworks flattens complexity and reinforces Orientalism—the positioning of the non-Western world as exotic, knowable, and consumable (Said, 1978, 1993). Designers are often expected to perform an "authentic yet modern" identity legible to Euro-American aesthetics, which narrows experimentation and internalizes colonial logics of legitimacy.

Extractive aesthetics also widen gaps between designers and craftspeople. An Uzbek artisan was asked to make a river-spirit motif "cleaner" for a show; asymmetry born of hand-spun yarn—its "river"—was corrected away. Erasure can arrive as opportunity. As Makhubu and Mbongwa (2019) argue, love that refuses difference is not love—it is discipline. To counter, we ask: what would it mean to design for the river, not the runway? (Fig. 02).

DECOLONIAL PRAXIS AND JOY AS RESISTANCE

Following Vázquez and Walsh (2018), we understand decoloniality not simply as critique, but as praxis—a generative mode of re-existence. This perspective rejects the notion that to decolonise is only to dismantle; it is also to imagine, remember, and reweave. At the Responsible Fashion Series, this principle emerged most clearly in our co-creative workshops. These sessions did not aim for a final product but instead foregrounded relationship. They offered space for listening, for awkwardness, for tears—and for joy.

Fig. 02

Joy, in these contexts, is not a distraction from politics. It is politics. As Love (2019) and Okello (2024) and Mbembe (2001) assert, Black and Indigenous joy is a refusal of sub-humanisation. It is a loophole of retreat, a declaration of worth. During our time in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, joy took many forms: a spontaneous circle dance after a felt workshop; a grandmother showing her sewing kit passed down three generations; a participant singing in her mother tongue while ironing indigo cloth. These were not planned moments. They emerged from trust.

These workshops were marked by a quiet attentiveness. In one session, participants were invited to sit with the wool—without tools, without instruction—and to begin felting through observation and touch. Rather than focusing on technique or outcome, the process itself became a form of learning. There was little talking. The atmosphere encouraged stillness and presence. Some participants instinctively reached for their phones to document the moment, but gradually, they put them away. The workshop shifted from being an activity to being an encounter—with material, with others, with self. It was a moment of making that invited slowness and connection, rather than spectacle or performance.

Such presence is rare in fashion education, where students are often taught to render process

invisible. The industry privileges final products, innovation, and technical mastery. Yet in this moment, we were reminded that resistance can look like sitting together in quiet creation. It can sound like laughter shared across languages. It can feel like warm wool on your palms. As Pinther, Kastner and Ndjio (2022) write, affect is not outside of politics—it is how politics are lived through the body.

These embodied practices did not erase grief. On the contrary, they gave it form. Participants reflected on traditions disrupted by Soviet industrialisation, languages at risk of disappearing, and communities transformed by labour migration. Yet alongside these losses, there was resilience. As one participant noted, felt making was "a community maintaining medium", a practice where "loved ones, neighbours used to gather around" and create together. The textiles, they explained, were not just objects—they were carriers of knowledge and values, holding space for both continuity and care across generations.

We saw this joy-as-resistance embodied in visual motifs as well. Spirals, horns, and sacred geometries appeared not as retro trends but as encoded affirmations. In one collaborative exercise, we explored these forms by tracing them with our eyes closed. The resulting drawings—uneven, overlapping, deeply personal—were displayed not as art, but as evidence of shared presence. (Fig. 03)

To practice decoloniality is not only to speak about the past, but to feel into possible futures. These futures may not be scalable or fundable. They may not appear in lookbooks. But they live in touch, in song, in the moment when one stops recording and begins participating.

TOWARD A PLURIVERSAL FASHION FUTURE

The notion of a pluriversal future challenges the dominance of a single narrative, aesthetic, or system within the global fashion world. It insists on the validity of many ways of knowing, designing, and being. Fashion need not be universalised through Eurocentric metrics to be considered innovative or impactful. Rather, by rooting practices in community, place, and ecological responsibility, we begin to build the foundation for a fashion system that celebrates difference rather than smoothing it out.

Pluriversality, as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) describe it, invites us to step outside the one-world

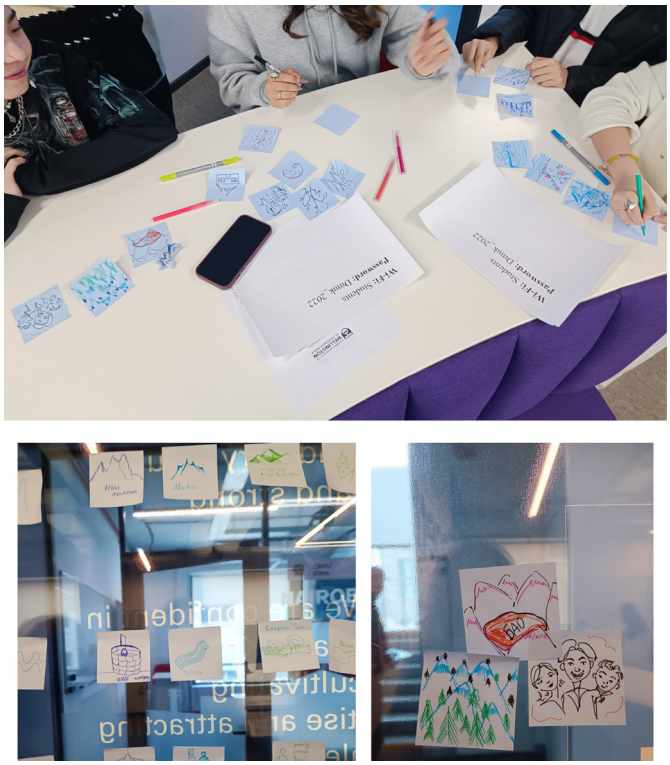

Fig. 03

logic of modernity and embrace many worlds—coexisting, interwoven, sometimes in tension. In the context of fashion, this means moving away from industry models that rely on extractive supply chains and spectacle-based events, toward ones that honour process, ritual, and reciprocity. It requires more than inclusion; it demands restructuring. Fashion institutions—schools, museums, trade fairs—must reckon with their roles in centring Euro-American modes of design. While many have launched initiatives under the banner of diversity, the underlying frameworks often remain unchanged. For example, funding tends to favour projects that translate "ethnic" aesthetics into recognisable formats for global markets. But what about work that resists translation? That remains intentionally opaque or embedded in community? Pluriversal fashion supports this refusal of legibility.

We witnessed glimpses of pluriversality during the Responsible Fashion Series. In one session, Jennifer shared a pepeha—a genealogical introduction from te ao Māori (the Māori worldview), which locates the speaker in relation to mountains, rivers, and ancestors. As Tauiwi (non-Māori) living in Aotearoa, she engaged with this form through a publicly available template from The Pepeha Project—a Māori-led initiative that gifted the format to all New Zealanders as a gesture of connection. The pepeha was not shared as a performance or claim to Indigenous identity, but

as a respectful act of grounding—an attempt to acknowledge land, ancestry, and responsibility. In Aotearoa, such rituals are increasingly part of public life, reminding both Māori and non-Māori of deep relationships between people and place. Jennifer's understanding has been shaped by long-term proximity to Māori knowledge, and by learning from Taoist and Celtic relational worldviews. This engagement has reoriented her relationship to fashion—from industry and innovation toward ecology and kinship. As Vázquez (2018) reminds us, knowledge is not to be owned but owed. The pepeha becomes not a possession, but a practice of humility and listening. This raises ongoing questions: How can Tauiwi engage with Indigenous knowledge in ways that honour complexity without appropriation? Can practices like pepeha open space for reconnection—without collapsing difference? What might fashion look like if it started not with trend, but with gratitude?

While the Responsible Fashion Series created important space for cultural and relational depth, some moments were inevitably shaped by the practical and structural constraints common to international events. Sessions sometimes ran short on time, simultaneous translation could not always keep pace, and formal venues subtly influenced who felt comfortable participating. These are not failures of intention, but reflections of broader systemic norms that privilege academic delivery over dialogic exchange. As we continue to co-create more pluriversal spaces, we see the value in formats that make room for slowness, silence, and meaning that cannot always be easily translated.

To enact this shift, we advocate for a pedagogy of co-becoming. As Tunstall (2023) writes, cultural justice cannot be achieved through stylistic gestures. It requires structural reorientation: who teaches, who gets paid, who decides what counts. (Fig. 04)

A pluriversal future for fashion is not only possible—it is already here, in fragments. It exists in communal dye vats, in sewing circles, in oral stories shared across generations. Our task is not to invent it, but to notice it, honour it, and protect its conditions for flourishing.

RELATIONAL ECOLOGIES AND THE LAND

Fashion, in its most commercial forms, has long distanced itself from the ecological realities of its production. Garments appear in lookbooks,

Fig. 04

boutiques, or Instagram feeds severed from the land, water, and labour that made them possible. This disconnection is not accidental; it is foundational to how global fashion has been structured—as a system of commodification, rather than communion. To challenge this, we must centre relational ecologies, wherein the land is not a backdrop to design but an active participant.

In Aotearoa, the concept of whenua refers not only to land but also to placenta—an embodied reminder that land nourishes and births us. Under Māori worldview, rivers, mountains, and forests are kin, not resources. This is not metaphorical. Te Awa Tupua, the Whanganui River, has been granted legal personhood, recognising its inherent rights and mana. Such frameworks invite us to radically reimagine fashion as relational, not transactional (Vázquez, 2022).

While in Kazakhstan, the shrinking of the Aral Sea was often referenced as an emblem of the region's ecological trauma—particularly linked to Soviet industrial cotton production. Although we did not discuss this directly with community members during the Responsible Fashion Series, it remained present as a backdrop to conversations around material practices and environmental memory. Weaving, felting, and natural fibre traditions took on deeper significance in this context—not only as crafts but as quiet acts of continuity amidst historical and environmental disruption. The repetition

of handwork felt like a form of care and grounding, even if unspoken. These practices reminded us that fashion can hold grief and regeneration at once, even without articulating it explicitly.

This weaving is not a hobby. It is mourning. It is adaptation. It is memory made material. Fashion that ignores this context reproduces the very violence it claims to resist. Regenerative fashion must therefore go beyond circularity metrics. It must attend to land trauma, to histories of ecological imperialism, and to the epistemologies of those who live close to the soil.

Relational ecologies require slowness. They demand that we relinquish control and efficiency in favour of attention. They also require us to acknowledge complicity. Many of us in this project have taught or studied in institutions built on colonial extraction. Our task is not to perform purity but to be accountable, to turn toward repair.

To design in conversation with land is to invite uncertainty. Plants may not yield the colour we expect. Wool may not feel uniformly. Yet in these irregularities lies meaning. As Langlands (2018) reminds us, craft is not perfection—it is participation in a larger web of life. To engage in this way is to remember that fashion is not separate from the world, but of it.

URGENCY, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND FASHION'S COMPLICITY

The amplification of right-wing, fascist rhetoric globally in 2025 is not abstract—it has real, material consequences. Women's rights are being curtailed. Trans and queer lives are under siege. Disabled people are systematically excluded from access and voice. Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) face heightened surveillance, silencing, and state-sanctioned violence. These dynamics are not new. What is new is their acceleration and visibility. Fashion, far from being neutral, is entangled in these violences.

As Hawthorne and Lewis (2023) argue, our task is to develop the theoretical tools to engage with the ongoing production of race and racisms. We must also recognise how cultural production, including fashion, can either reinforce or resist this violence. Edward Said's (1978; 1993) critique of imperialism's control over cultural representation remains urgent. Orientalist narratives continue to aestheticise otherness while denying agency. Black bodies, as Jackson (2012) shows, are still rendered as primitive spectacle. These practices live on in mood boards, in fashion shows, in brand storytelling. They are not just aesthetic—they are political.

During the Series, garments referencing "Silk Road heritage" were displayed without artisan attribution, while Western designers were more visible as speakers. This asymmetry echoes fashion's exclusionary relationship with modernity that privileges the West and spectacle over substance (Mchunu & Gounder, 2024). Social media intensifies erasure as Indigenous adornments circulate without context; brands post land acknowledgements while offshoring labour precarity. Such contradictions are systemic. Fashion media is not exempt. The rise of visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok has enabled global circulation of fashion imagery but also intensified issues of erasure and misrepresentation. Fashion influencers drape themselves in Indigenous adornments without context. Brands post land acknowledgements while outsourcing production to underpaid garment workers in the Global South. This contradiction is not a glitch—it is the system working as designed.

In our work, we have tried to resist this logic not through grand gestures, but through daily practice. In choosing to cite BIPOC scholars. In sitting with discomfort when we misstep. In asking who is missing from the room. In our workshops, we made space for rage and grief, as well as laughter. One participant described the series as "a gathering of wounds and weavers". We hold that phrase as a guide.

To fashion otherwise in these toxic times is to refuse complicity with dehumanisation. It is to acknowledge that pleasure, beauty, and adornment can be tools of survival—but only when rooted in relational ethics. As Ekpe, Sherman, and Ofoegbu (2023) note, joy is not escapism. It is a practice of resilience. It is a refusal to be erased.

This refusal must extend beyond aesthetics to structures. Who is funded? Who is visible? Who decides what gets remembered? Until these questions are answered differently, fashion's complicity in structural violence will persist—no matter how sustainable the fibre or how ethical the branding.

CONCLUSION: FASHIONING OTHERWISE

To fashion otherwise is a practice of unlearning, humility, and staying with the trouble. Our

encounters in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan revealed power asymmetries and translation gaps, but also care, collaboration, and joy. Fashion is an affective terrain with potential to connect rather than extract and to honour rather than appropriate. Felt circles, pepeha, and walnut-based natural dyes are not nostalgia; they are methodologies of connection and survival.

We call for shifts from designing for to designing with—reworking language (beyond English as default), location (beyond academic venues), and structure (valuing process over product). Fashion events can be multilingual, community-led, and embedded in place. Curricula can teach listening as design skill and critique as care. Responsibility is not a fixed goal but a commitment to remain in relation—especially when it is hard.

Let us not seek one future, but many. Let us fashion otherwise—with our ethics, our grief, our joy, and our hands.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Hands working together on syrmak and tuskiiz (felt products) using koshkar muiz in Shymkent, Kazakhstan — illustrating relational learning through material practice.

[Fig. 02] A contemporary white reinterpretation of a traditional Kazakh quilt motif—once rich with ancestral memory and protective meaning—now rendered as a clean geometric fashion piece, exemplifying extractive aesthetics and cultural flattening.

[Fig. 03] Kazakh students in Almaty engaged in a pluriversal grounding exercise informed by Te Ao Māori, using the Pepeha Project template to reorient their relationship with nature by naming mountains, rivers, and other elements as ancestors.

[Fig. 04] Learning in the round inside a Kazakh yurt in Shymkent, where participants from Belgium, India, the Netherlands, England, Bulgaria, Germany, and Ireland gathered with Kazakh hosts to share knowledge and wisdom—an embodied moment of the pluriverse in practice.

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