

AFFECTIVE PASSAGE IN TOXIC TIMES

FASHION AND JOY AS RESISTANCE

KHAYA MCHUNU

University of Johannesburg
khayam@uj.ac.za
Orcid 0000-0001-8451-0187

NIRMA MADHOO

RMIT University
nirma.madhoo.chipps@rmit.edu.au
Orcid 0000-0002-7827-9545

CONTEXT

The amplification of right-wing, fascist rhetoric in 2025 is manifesting material effects on the lives of women, trans and queer communities, and Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC). In their treatise, Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis (2023, p.2) write that in spaces of continued “colonialism, fascism, and violent nationalisms”, developing the “theoretical tools necessary to engage with the ongoing production of race and racisms” is a necessary and urgent task. As the “we” of “our” voices in this editorial have felt simultaneously confronted by the unfolding of events through the year on our mobile devices, and drawn in by the performativity of Majority World diverse bodies and praxes speaking against social injustice, this affective engagement has compelled us to action. Deriving from a duty of care in our positionalities as fashion researchers and members of a global BIPOC community, feminist (Vergès, 2021) and postcolonial theories (Said, 1993; Spivak, 1999) are used as critique of the asymmetric distribution of power to platform concerns and discourse ranging from issues of gender identity to decoloniality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Azoulay, 2019; Gaugel & Titton, 2019). Coloniality has forcefully instilled Eurocentric ways of knowing that underpin the capitalist and late-capitalist extractive mindset largely responsible for keeping the previously colonised in an economically disadvantaged and culturally inferior position (Jansen & Craik, 2016). In this manner, the decolonial thought is, as Negedu (2025, p.143) suggests, not a “one-night stand event whose phase will pass once it is completed” but rather, a continual “fighting “for” an ideology” and action that centres livability for all.

It was important that the Call for Papers for this issue provoked multiple views and points of intervention to make explicit fashion’s entanglement with the complexity of the issues at hand. This 5th Issue of *Fashion Highlight* has emerged from a series of fourteen contributions that propose how fashion making, worldbuilding, archiving and other forms of fashion praxis that speak of joy, love, pain, beauty, brutality, pleasure, precarity (Moore, 2018; Love, 2019; Makhubu & Mbongwa, 2019; Wachter-Grene & Chude-Sokei, 2020; Ekpe, Sherman & Ofoegbu 2023 and; Okello, 2024) are being configured from different perspectives for perceiving the world in its fuller spectrum. Our co-edited issue is divided into three

sections, with the first entailing essays and papers, followed by a section of creative and reflective works, and closing with an exhibition and book review. This introductory section has set the context briefly for this special issue. We next outline the peer-reviewed articles, “feeling-thinking” through these - or *sentipensare* derived from South American indigenous and Afro-descended worldviews (Escobar, 2020) to conclude how these contributions, through their pluriversal engagement with fashion studies and praxes, may be both understood and experienced as different forms of affective passage through these perilous times.

ESSAYS & PAPERS

DRESS, CORPORALITY, RESISTANCE

One of the most horrific atrocities that 2025 has witnessed has been the livestreamed dehumanisation and genocide of indigenous populations in Gaza¹ (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, 2025). From this perspective, we open this issue with an important work that contributes to an understanding of how dress is ontologically entangled in the political production of bodies, and by extension, humanity. *Clothing Without Bodies: Watching care and connection in images from Gaza* by Todd Robinson and Cherine Fahd responds sensitively to images that “show no bodies, no wounds, only clothing” taken in occupied Gaza and gleaned from Instagram. The article employs affective and reparative methods in an effort to emphasise the possibilities of care, solidarity, and political awareness through an intersection of photography and fashion studies.

According to the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations c.2020 (United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, n.d.), “[n]o one will ever be truly safe until everyone is safe”. Beyond the basic need for physical safety that all humans should rightfully have, the premise for the conditions for a safe world is one where there is “equity by design” (Gutiérrez and Jurow, 2016), so everyone has the opportunity to lead dignified lives and partake in the cultural production that designs the future they want to live. A theoretical essay by Miriam Martinez Villar and Antonio Francisco Alaminos-Fernandez, which adopts an interdisciplinary

¹ This appears to be followed closely by escalating violence and mass killings in Sudan (Dominguez et al., 2025).

lens of peace education on fashion as a site of “affective resistance and epistemic worldmaking”, therefore follows. With reference to African-centred examples of fashion produced by Orange Culture and Thebe Magugu, *Affective Fabrics of Resistance*’s (abbreviated title) contribution lies in its proposal, as the authors write, to conceptualise fashion as “an anarchive of embodied worldmaking and as soft power from below”.

With a title that reads as a manifesto, Shashi Cullinan Cook’s *Say it with your whole chest* describes the affect she experienced at a fashioned performance with camp attributes - an embodied reaction of a much larger magnitude in contrast to her reaction to more cerebral forms of scholarships. Cullinan Cook’s object of analysis in this autoethnographic, textual piece becomes the use of t-shirts, expanding into the South African political context as it argues for fashion’s potential as an “everyday intervention” that gently challenges the political and environmental climates. Similarly, Elisa Fiorilli, Tannaz Rahmani, and Zeynep Karlidağ’s *Styled for Dissent* (our shortened version) analyses three case studies to argue fashion as embodied resistance in contemporary protests. Here, such things as aesthetics and humour are encoded in vestimentary signifiers, presenting a soft type of resistance. These two papers illustrate that a collective’s strength is often in the differences within the collective in action. This idea dates back to when white feminists fought for ‘women’s rights’, yet excluded the plight of BIPOC women. (Crenshaw, 1989). According to Audre Lorde (1979), survival is predicated on a paradigm shift that entails perceiving differences as strengths rather than grounds for division or as weaponised for oppression. “[S]urvival is not an academic skill... For 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.” (Lorde, 1979, p.99).

HUMANITY AS TAPESTRY

In *Meeting in Difference: Relational Responsibility in Fashion Encounters on the Silk Road*, Alua Duisenbek, Angela Jansen, Richa Sood, and Jennifer Whitty drive the previous point about difference home by examining the tensions and possibilities arising from in-person attendance of the 2023 Responsible Fashion series in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Herein, the authors argue that

“responsible fashion requires structural shifts away from extractive aesthetics toward relational, pluralistic, and decolonial practices”. This is exemplified in the subject matter of the next two papers. In *Reclaiming Indigenous Fibres of India as Acts of Ecological Resistance*, Amruthalakshmi Rajagopalan, Pramila Choudhary, and Rachel MacHenry weave together the stories of three textile systems i.e., Kala cotton, desi sheep wool and Eri silk to explore the capacity that traditional practices have, to carry ecological knowledge and cultural memory. In their article, *KUN.BE: A Servitisation Framework for the Sustainable Revival of Goa’s Kunbi Saree*, Divya Agarwal, Angelica Vandi, and Paolo Bertola resist the erasure of this archetype despite systemic challenges and propose cultural and economic strategies to revive it “in contemporary fashion economies”. By expanding on non-dominant textile histories, history and philosophy are instrumentalised as a means for decolonisation (Raju, 2013; Cheang *et al.*, 2021). These considerations of alternative textile-making traditions illustrate that human and non-human actors that produce these are embedded in the production process, foregrounding this making as a praxis of living (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

BODY TECHNAI

This section of the issue is concluded by two studies conducted across quantitative and qualitative modalities that look at aspects of beauty and dress as “body techniques”² (Craik, 1994) that can be both toxin and antidote. Emmanuel Nwakanma and Adaku Ubeletjit-Nte’s *Changing toxic beauty culture and climate crisis in Nigeria* is framed by environmental injustice and anthropogenic climate change theories. The article explores the intricate connections between what the authors state are “evolving beauty standards, the pervasive “toxic beauty culture” that disproportionately impacts people of colour and its influence on deteriorating environmental conditions”. In *Lolita, Mountain Witches and Sexy Gals* (abbreviated title) by Hui-Ying Kerr, we unlearn that Lolita is solely a Nabokov character objectified for the male gaze. Such material and semiotic figurations as Lolitas and *gyarus* are proposed by Kerr to transmute meaning in a Japanese street culture context

² Craik (1994; 2009) draws from anthropologist Marcel Mauss’ ‘techniques of the body’, 1973 to theorise this concept for fashion studies.

through the serialised appropriation of dominant sartorial references mashed up with subversions of local narratives of femininity, in order to embody “soft rebellion” and heterotopic worldbuilding as performativity.

CREATIVE & REFLECTIVE WORKS

Given Issue 5 of *Fashion Highlight* was partly conceptualised on Australian, unceded Aboriginal land, we are honoured to open the creative works section with *Ember*, a photographic triptych and ekphrastic essay by Christian Thompson AO. We take up the invitation to engage with image and text as an enmeshed provocation by Thompson, who is of Bidjara/Irish/Chinese-Australian heritage. Here, artwork becomes altar, its iconography gender-confounding; the chromatic and symbolic are viscerally tensioned with the simultaneously human and more-than-human body, and draw in our gaze. We are enthralled as we feel transported, yet grounded by the sensorial spangles in *Ember* and the serpentine as “coil of paradox” that we encounter as otherworldly, yet familiar spiritual figuration in BIPOC lore.

Next, *Roses of Ties*, authored by Elena Volkova and Ludmila Christeseva, describes their evolving project as a “socially engaged craft initiative”. This creative work is an exhibition that delves into conjoined themes of gender and feminist craft as post-migration cathartic practice. Readers can then (figuratively) step into author Anna-Mari Almila’s “flat red boots” in a ritual of daily dress to join “voluntarily childfree” kin in the Pride march. *Joyful under the Dragonfly: An Autoethnographic Fashion Account of Helsinki Pride 2025*, is a reflective piece engaging themes of “comfort, visibility, invisibility”, joy, resistance, and the complexities of multiple dressed bodies at the annual event.

EXHIBITION & BOOK REVIEW

We close this issue with a review of works that ultimately pose questions of belonging - *In Case*, an exhibition by Cypriot artist Anber Onar, is reviewed by Shajwan N. Fatah, and a recently published book by Judith Beyer, is reviewed by Karmen Samson. According to Fatah, Anber Onar’s body of work adopts the concept of folding of fabrics into “tied-folds” as objects installed to evoke themes of “war, forced migration and diaspora” while *Antigender Fashion: The Possibilities of Gender-fluid and Non-Binary Fashion Design*

authored by Judith Beyer in 2025, is reviewed by Karmen Samson as a timely publication for “an inclusive, antigender future”.

CLOSING SENTIPENSAMIENTOS

It is a time where imperial and settler-colonial projects continue their progress at all steep human and environmental costs (Wolfe, 2006; Adhikari, 2021). There are many of “us”, who, as a global collective recognise that it is a time of crisis; “we” may be asking “ourselves” how not to lose hope in the face of man-made afflictions such as genocides and famines, and how fashion practices may still be of significance in times of emergency.

The published works presented in this issue offer insight into how the discipline may be woven into the very fabric of what makes “us” human. Contributions meander through distributed nodes of fashion scholarship, offering thought-provoking intersectional ideas and practices that show how resistance can be forms of soft rebellion and soft power. According to Nye (2017), soft power can be described as non-coercive, diffuse forces that tend to emanate from civil societies. By being politicised (and potentially culturally pluralistic), soft power may enable those who engage in the conversation to think with more clarity (Nye, 2017). The proposed praxes are therefore not presented as conquest-oriented, but are rather motivated to express a pluriversality (Escobar, 2018) of differences and foster regenerative ways of being.

Issue 5 of *Fashion Highlight* is offered not as a means of escape from toxic times, but rather as a conduit through contributors’ accounts of embodied, affective and many-worlds decolonial praxes, across the gamut of joy and pain, solidarity and resistance and so the pluriversality of “our” worldviews, bodies, voices and fashion practices may remain grounded to mobilise a better world for all.

REFERENCES

- Adhikari, M. (ed.). *Civilian-driven Violence and the Genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Settler Societies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Azoulay, AA. (2019). *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (1st ed.). Verso.
- Cheang, S., de Greef, E. & Yoko, T. (eds.). (2021). *Rethinking Fashion Globalization*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.
- Craik, J. (1994). *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion*. London: Routledge.
- Craik, J. (2009). *Fashion: The Key Concepts*. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersec-

tion of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(8). <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>

Dominguez, GB., Sharma, N., Mahmoud, L., Dahab, M., Bedri, N., & Bhutta, ZA. (2025). Who Protects the Children and Women of Sudan? *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, 9(10), 735-743. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2352464225002378>

Ekpe, L., Sherman, A., & Ofoegbu, ED. (2023). Restoring Resilience through Joy: The Pursuit of Happiness in the Midst of Unprecedented Times. *Equity in Education & Society*, 2(3), 317-329. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9899679/pdf/10.1177_27526461231154012.pdf

Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Escobar, A. (2020). *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Gaugele, E., & Titton, M. (eds.). (2019). *Fashion and Postcolonial Critique*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

Gutiérrez, KD. & Jurow, AS. (2016). Social Design Experiments: Toward Equity by Design, *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 25:4, 565-598. DOI: 10.1080/10508406.2016.1204548

Hawthorne, C., & Lewis, JS. (eds.). (2023). *The Black Geographic: Praxis, Resistance, Futurity*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.6557185>

Jansen, MA., & Craik, J. (eds.). (2016). *Modern Fashion Traditions: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity through Fashion*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Lorde, A. (1979). The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House - Oct. 29, 1979.

Archives of Women's Political Communication, Iowa State University. <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2025/08/28/the-masters-tools-will-never-dismantle-the-masters-house-oct-29-1979/>

Love, BL. (2019). *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Makhubu, N. & Mbongwa, K. (2019). Radical Love as Decolonial Philosophy: In Conversation with Khanyisile Mbongwa. *Journal of Decolonising Disciplines*, 1(1), 10–26. <https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jdd/article/view/53/9>

Mignolo, W., & Walsh, CE. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Moore, DL. (2018). Black Radical Love: A Practice. *Public Integrity*, 20(4), 325-328. DOI:10.1080/10999922.2018.1439564

Negedu, IA. (2025). Why We Need Decolonial Methods in the Humanities. In *African epistemologies for criticality, decoloniality and interculturality*, H. R'boul (ed.). New York: Routledge.

Nye, J. (2017). Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. *Palgrave Commun* 3 (17008). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.>

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations. (2025). *Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza Strip, UN Commission finds*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/israel-has-committed-genocide-gaza-strip-un-commission-finds>

Okello, WK. (2024). Unspeakable Joy: Anti-black Constraint, Loopholes of Retreat, and the Practice of Black Joy. *Urban Education*. DOI: 10.1177/00420859241227956

Raju, CK. (2013). History and Philosophy of Science as a Means for Decolonisation. *Bharatiya Samajik Chintan*, 13(1), 87-90. <https://ckraju.net/papers/History-philosophy-of-science-as-a-means-of-decolonisation.pdf>

Said, E. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Spivak, GC. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

United Nations, Department of Economic Affairs. (no date). "No one is safe, until everyone is". <https://www.un.org/en/desa/%E2%80%9Cno-one-safe-until-everyone-%E2%80%9D>

Vergès, F. (2021). *A Decolonial Feminism*. London: Pluto Press.

Wachter-Grene, K. & Chude-Sokei, L. (2020). Black Radical Pleasure. *The Black Scholar*, 50(2), 1-4. DOI: 10.1080/00064246.2020.1727192

Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387–409. DOI: 10.1080/14623520601056240

