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AFFECTIVE PASSAGE IN TOXIC TIMES
FASHION AND JOY AS RESISTANCE

Edited by Khaya Mchunu and Nirma Madhoo

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On the cover:
Image produced by Ludmila Christeseva, Elena Volkova reworked by the editorial staff: the performative ritual of artist Ludmila Christeseva, with ties knotted on tree branches. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt.

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EDITORIAL

AFFECTIVE PASSAGE IN TOXIC TIMES
FASHION AND JOY AS RESISTANCE

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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; Gaugele & 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 Gaza[1] (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

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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 Karlıdağ'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

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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.

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DOI: 10.1080/14623520601056240

ESSAYS

CLOTHING WITHOUT BODIES

WATCHING CARE AND CONNECTION IN IMAGES FROM GAZA

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Abstract

This essay responds to two images shared on Instagram from occupied Gaza: a Palestinian child's bloodied pink jacket, laid out and covered in blood, and a field of scattered clothes left behind after a group of Palestinians were forced by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) to undress. In both images, the people have gone, but the clothes remain powerfully embodied. They prompt us to see clothing as something that carries the weight, warmth, and presence of a human body as well as the community from which it comes. We live in a time of relentless exposure to horrific acts captured in images and shared on social media by Palestinian citizens and journalists, but these two images affect us differently. They show no bodies, no wounds, only clothing. It is images of clothing without bodies that resonate with us. In a political climate of denial and deflection, where mainstream media constantly denies that anything is happening, the clothes insist that something has. Clothes become a political site that bears the trace of the body, speaking to what has been done even when the body is gone. This essay explores how fashion studies, through its focus on embodiment, can facilitate a reparative reading of images depicting Palestinian dispossession and Israeli state violence. Using affective and reparative methods, we emphasize the possibilities for care, solidarity, and political awareness in our engagement with these images. We further develop this approach through an analysis of photography and political theory, addressing the ethical responsibilities involved in viewing images of atrocity.

Keywords: *Social Media; Embodiment; Fashion Studies; Political Affect; Image Ethics.*

"Perhaps we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am. This possibility does not dispute the fact of my autonomy, but it does qualify that claim through recourse to the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own" (Butler, 2004, p. 28).

BACKGROUND

This essay addresses how images of atrocity reach us within a contemporary visual culture shaped by the constant stream of social media posts on Instagram. A large proportion of images in our feeds— photographs, screenshots and video reels— depict apocalyptic scenes of death and destruction from occupied Gaza. Images arrive as a steady stream of human suffering. They are confronting in their immediacy, often marked by timestamps such as "posted 1 hour ago". These temporal details are important in grounding genocide in the present. In some of these images, the absence of human bodies in relation to everyday objects, especially clothing, emphasizes a rupture between life and death. This essay proposes that fashion studies, particularly as it attends to the relationship between clothing and bodies, offers a mode of interpretation—one that responds to these images not merely as representations of violence, but as affective and ethical provocations that demand witnessing, care, and political consciousness.

We came of age in the 1980s in Sydney, Australia. At school, we read *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), visited Holocaust museums and made paper cranes for Hiroshima. We were drip-fed images through the daily news, in newspapers, television documentaries, current affairs shows and editorials from *Time Magazine*. Images in the media exposed us to scenes from the Cold War, bombs in Belfast, the Lebanese Civil War, Iran v. Iraq and the war in Afghanistan, among other conflicts. In those days, images of atrocities were carefully edited by picture editors.[1] The ones we remember as "iconic", that live in our collective memory, are the same ones judged by the news media to possess the perfect confluence of composition, photojournalistic craft, and suffering.[2]

Seared into memory is Khalil Dehaini's black-and-white photograph of a woman crying in the street, arms outspread, her white T-shirt splattered with blood, minutes after a car bomb exploded in a crowded neighborhood of West Beirut in 1986, killing 13 people, including three children. Behind her is a billowing black cloud spread across the horizon, transforming the rubble and detritus-strewn street into a stage for the woman's shocked expression. Our grief is focused on her bare and bloodied feet, the vulnerability of her skin against the shards of broken windscreen glass. And of course, the photograph that claimed to have stopped the Vietnam War shows nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc running naked among other screaming children, severely burned by napalm. Can there be another "iconic image" of atrocity that brings an end to the killing of Palestinians, just as the "trophy" images of torture and degradation from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq brought the criminality of American soldiers into the minds of Western audiences?[3]

Against this historical background of atrocity, two images from Gaza, shared and reshared on Instagram, stay with us. In one, a small Palestinian child's pink parka lies bloodied on broken concrete, arms spread (Fig. 01). The child is gone. In another, a screenshot from a wide-frame video reel reveals hundreds of garments scattered across a dusty grey expanse (Fig. 02). Despite the staggering number and diversity of images from Gaza, these two demand from us further consideration and care. Though the bodies are absent, the garments remain distinctly embodied. These are not fashion images, they do not belong to the aestheticized or spectacular fashioned body, yet they are filled with clothing and remind us that clothing need not be worn to be evocative of human form.

We approach these images from intersecting perspectives of political theory, photo theory, and fashion studies. Our primary aim is to consider how fashion studies, particularly those aspects that emphasize the relationship between clothing and the body (Entwistle, 2015), provide a framework for understanding the affects of these images. As practitioners and scholars attentive to both visual culture and fashion, we are especially attuned to the deep, inextricable connection between garments, bodies, and images. We undertake a reparative reading of these images, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's formulation of "reparative reading" as an interpretive practice that privileges affect, attachment, care and relationality over objective analysis and critique (Sedgwick, 2003). Sedgwick's work reminds us that scholarship need not keep us at a distance, in theory alone. In this sense, this analysis becomes a way of refusing the passivity of detached scholarship.

Our reparative method of reading these images emphasizes the bodily, social and affective dimensions of them, how they have impacted us as viewers in the present, and how they invite action and solidarity beyond the fatalism of memorialization. This method allows us to register in the textures of fabric, the common fragility of clothing and bodies, and binds us to the resistance of the Palestinian people. Images from Gaza do not stay on screens; they move into bodies. This way of working asks us to acknowledge how images act on us, how they move us to wear the keffiyeh, to march in protest, to share pictures of our refusal to stay silent on genocide and occupation, and, in turn, to write this essay.[4]

Our question is twofold: first, to mobilize the conceptual and disciplinary tools of fashion studies and photography theory to illuminate

1   For an in-depth examination of documentary photography and pictures of war, violence, and atrocities, see *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (Batchen, Gidley, Miller, & Prosser, 2012).

2   The aesthetics of suffering and the paradox of artistic beauty in images of atrocities are examined in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Sontag, 2003).

3   A critical reading of the Abu Ghraib images is undertaken in relation to the civil responsibility of spectatorship in *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Azoulay, 2008, pp. 254–256).

4   On 16 September 2025, Israel's actions in Gaza were found to constitute genocide. See *Gaza: Top independent rights probe alleges Israel committed genocide* in United Nations News. https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165856

how clothing, even when unworn, can operate as a site of embodied trace and affective intensity, particularly within the context of images that reach us in an unfolding and insistent present.[5] Second, to consider how fashion studies can, in fact, offer meaningful engagement with political and humanitarian concerns. This is not a call to expand fashion studies beyond its limits, but rather to reveal its reparative and political capacities as already embedded within its scope.

This essay is structured in three sections. In the first two, we address the images individually, considering both the content of the images and how they affect us, drawing on studies of fashion and the body. We foreground our affective and embodied encounters with both images and the clothing depicted. Both images first appeared in our feed as still images. They were shared and reshared with their authorship unclear, though eventually we learned that Saber Nuraldin took the original photograph of the pink parka, and the screenshot was from a video reel captured by Belal Mortaja, as detailed below.

It is important to note that these images are authored by Palestinians in Gaza, where foreign journalists are barred from entering. In this respect, Gaza is unique in that the victims are forced to narrate and document their own destruction. These images, like many coming from Gaza, make powerful, affective and ethical appeals to viewers; they draw attention to Palestinian resistance and ingenuity, as well as their grief and suffering. In the third section, we draw on the work of political theorists whose ethical focus on the body, vulnerability, relationality and responsibility recognizes our human-to-human entanglement. In this section, we grapple with the work of Judith Butler and the precariousness of the body and life, before moving on to Ariella Azoulay to reflect on the role of the spectator and ethical demands placed on us to write about these images.

A PINK PARKA

April 25, 2025. Gaza City. Saber Nuraldin, a Palestinian journalist working in Gaza, posts a photograph of a Palestinian child's pink parka on Instagram (Fig. 01). The parka is buttoned up to the collar, and the arms are outstretched as if reaching out to embrace us or imploring someone to save them. The visual T-shaped form is indexed to a very young child, perhaps two years old. The voluminous folds of the parka fill out the form of a small body. The shoulders rise as soft curves, creases at the sleeves, shoulders, and waist, articulate the tiny joints of wrist, elbow, neck and abdomen. They intimate the movements and gestures of the little child we imagine that once wore it, a wave of the arms, a turn of the head, and the bobbing up and down of the torso.

The figure of the pink parka lies on a ground strewn with debris.[6] The heterogeneity of the materials— shards of wood, brick, rock, dirt, and a nearby floral cloth—speaks to the terrifying destructive force of explosives that not only obliterate the built environment but also rupture the ontological organisation of the world, collapsing distinctions between domesticity and the debris. There are small scraps of paper and bright blue threads of plastic, as well as an empty aluminium bottle that might contain medicine. It's difficult to identify what is in the rubble. It is the bloodied pink parka that devastates us.

We reflect that it does so, not only because it refers to an event in which a small child has been injured or possibly killed by the IOF. It affects us because we are exposed to the child's vulnerability, which moved the parents to dress that small child. Elaine Scarry explains in *The Body in Pain* that artifacts, by virtue of their being designed and made by human action, are sentient of human

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5   It is important to distinguish the images at the centre of this essay from other visual representations of atrocity. For example, the devastating photographs documenting Nazi crimes of the Holocaust, particularly those taken during the liberation of concentration camps of the piles of shoes and the warehouses of clothing. These images initially served an evidentiary function for the prosecution of war crimes, and they have, over time, come to operate as visual forms of testimony, remembrance and memorialisation. In contrast, the images we are discussing here evoke a response from us as atrocities unfolding in the present. We are not writing about past events, though images from past events such as the Holocaust, remain with us as we write and reflect in the present moment.

6   Save the Children reported that in 2024, an average of 475 children per month sustained potentially lifelong disabilities due to explosive weapons. The report also notes ongoing aerial, land, and maritime bombardments across the Gaza Strip, resulting in civilian casualties and the destruction of residential buildings and public infrastructure. Handicap International reported that over 12,000 bombs, each weighing between 150kg and 1,000kg, were dropped on Gaza within the first seven weeks of the occupation. Additionally, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor estimated that Israel had dropped more than 70,000 tonnes of explosives on Gaza since October 2023. https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-155-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem?

Fig. 01

beings' vulnerability. (Scarry, 1985).[7] A blanket, for example, internalises "within its design the recognition of the instability of body temperature and the precariousness of nakedness, and only by absorbing the knowledge of these conditions into themselves" (Scarry, 1985, p. 88).[8] This sentience materialized in the form of a design, in this case a child's parka, embodying two events: first, the perception of a child's suffering (to feel cold, exposed, vulnerable to the elements), and secondly, the parent's wish for that suffering to end (to have the child feel warm, comfortable and protected from the elements). This doubly affects us. We implicitly recognize the protective qualities of the parka as a symbol of active and enduring compassion, yet in this context, it was unable to protect the child from harm.

These observations strike in us a discordant moment of reflection marked by urgency and a need to act now. Near the two small diagonal zipper pockets are blood-soaked stains, bright red. Is it the child's blood, or does the blood belong to a relative who carried the child? We keep wanting to refer to the child as she. Surely, the pink parka must have belonged to a little girl.

In this context, the parka no longer functions only as a piece of clothing. It embodies both the child

living and the child who is missing or dead. It embodies the care of the child's loved ones. Our instinct to care for the child, to find her, to help her, to pick her up, is directed at the image on our phone and linked to the parka. We tap the image on our screen with our index fingers. This contact with the parka prompts a "like." We "like" the post as a gesture of solidarity and witnessing, but how can we genuinely like what the image shows? A child's figure lying amidst utter destruction, utterly alone. Fashion studies over recent decades have developed theoretical resources to account for aspects of our encounter with this image and others like it. This body of research has attempted to move beyond representation to highlight the relationship between bodies and clothing in constituting social life. Joanne Entwistle's work on the socially situated "fleshy body" argued for including the lived body in fashion studies. She draws on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (2002) that conceives human existence as fundamentally embodied, to argue that fashion is inherently an embodied practice. More recently, scholars have similarly employed phenomenological approaches, recognising the centrality of the body in sartorial life, most often from feminist and/or sensory perspectives (Negrin, 2025; Young, 2005; Findlay, 2016); while Ruggerone's notion of the "feeling of being dressed" (2017) draws on affect theory to foreground our relational experiences of clothing. Collectively, these studies consider the interconnection between bodies and clothing as a basis for embodied subjectivity in everyday life.

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7   For a richer understanding of the relationship between designed artefacts and the human body, see Scarry (1985, pp. 281–282), who notes that the woven gauze of a bandage placed over an open wound as a substitute for the missing skin.

8   It's also worth noting, bombs, missiles and bullets carry knowledge of the fragility and vulnerability of human tissues and bones.

Drawing on this work, our focus extends the application of clothing and embodiment in two ways. First, through our spectatorship, we encounter and experience the inseparable connection between clothing and bodies, even when the immediate presence of the wearer/s is absent. Second, we are confronted with a corporeal absence registered in images of clothing that elicits powerful affects in us. This confrontation makes sense to us with reference to scholarly and creative work on the social, affective and material traces in the clothing of deceased bodies in museological and archival contexts (Stallybrass, 1999; Taylor, 1990; Sampson, 2020), as well as in de Perthuis's *Darning for Mark* (2017), which links clothing to an affective domain of loss, bereavement and memory. However, our encounter with these images foregrounds the capacity of images of clothing not only to retain traces of past human presence and sociality, but to reflect incongruously, both forms of care and world-destroying violence in the present. We mourn this child in the here and now of unfolding violence.

A VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF SCATTERED CLOTHING

Fig. 02

This violent reality is witnessed in another image circulated as a screenshot from a video reel that has gone viral. Our view of it is drawn from its shared and reshared pixelated form, rather than from the original videographer's upload (Fig. 02). The screenshot shows a dusty expanse of abandoned clothing scattered across an apocalyptic landscape, framed by two partially destroyed concrete buildings and piles of rubble. There is a small group of clothed figures in the far distance. The subtle blur of motion captured in the screenshot abstracts the image slightly, though not enough to conceal a dystopian image of urban ruin, and the evocation of images that might have inspired CGI imaging of war games like *Call of Duty*.

The clothing in the foreground appears at first randomly scattered, as if an entire population had instantaneously de-materialised, the clothing on their bodies falling to the ground, marking the exact spot where they stood. Close observation reveals different kinds of relational order. Dispersed garments and accessories reflect a variety of styles, colours, and patterns that take shape and connect as ensembles of trousers and shirts, shirts with jackets, shoes with socks. The variety of size, style and color suggests the expressivity and agency of sartorial life, where we choose to dress according to taste, mood, age, gender or disposition tuned to the socio-cultural context we inhabit, but also something of the particularity of the individuals who wore them.

Moreover, the spatial arrangement of clothing in this desolate clearing, in clusters composed of six or seven, sometimes three or four, suggests connection and relationships, social and familial groupings—fathers and sons, uncles and nephews, friends and neighbours. We can't help but gender these male, seeing the prevalence of trousers and pants, shirts and jackets and knowing the fate of other men and boys in contexts like this.[9] Even in their discarded and disembodied state, these strewn garments reveal a complex social fabric, holding in tension social structure and individual identity (Entwistle, 2015, p. 113; Simmel, 1971). We ascertain that the entangled ensemble of discarded clothing is indexed to a group of Palestinian people,

9   For evidence of images of men and boys stripped and detained by IOF soldiers, see ABC News. (2023, December 8). Video of Palestinians stripped and forced to sit by IOF soldiers raises concern. https://abcnews.go.com/US/video-palestinians-stripped-forced-sit-idf-soldiers-raises/story?id=105496215

Al Jazeera. (2023, December 8). Video, photos appear to show detainees stripped to underwear in Gaza. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/8/video-photos-appear-to-show-detainees-stripped-to-underwear-in-gaza

profiled collectively, who have been taken away against their wishes by the IOF, where we do not know, but who nevertheless retain and assert their individual and collective presence. Put simply, this image carries the trace of Israeli state violence and of the profound absence and attempted erasure of Palestinians.

AN ACT OF WITNESSING
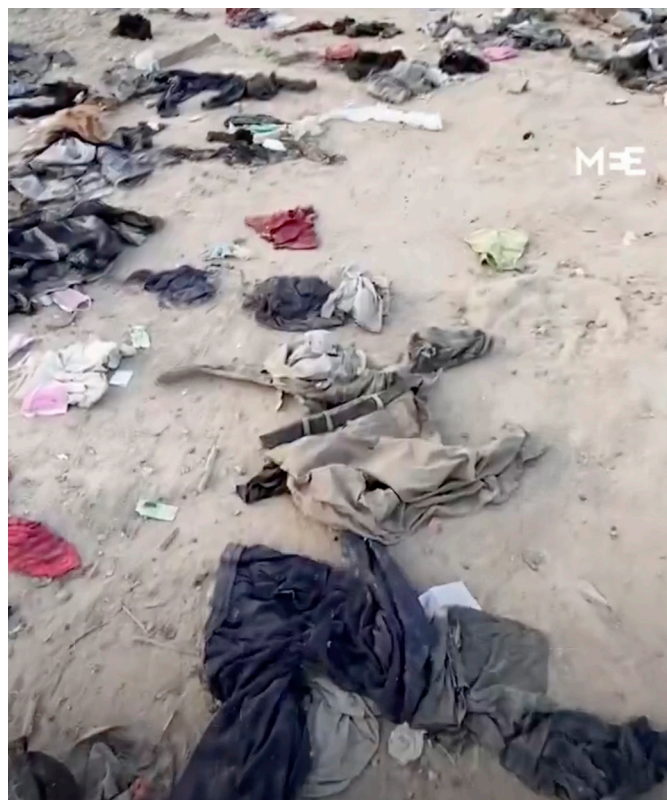
Fig. 03

The screenshot of scattered clothes on the ground was the primary catalyst for this essay (Fig. 02). While we have seen countless images showing far greater violence, destruction and suffering, this image affected us deeply. Through the course of writing this essay, we undertook further research that shed more light on its circumstances. It comes from a video reel posted by the UK-based independent media organisation, Middle East Eye, and time-stamped 21 January 2025, with the location pinned as "Gaza, occupied Palestine". The video shows Palestinian journalist Belal Mortaja documenting a site located in the northern Gaza Strip. Mortaja is recording himself saying: "You would be standing like this when the army tells you: take off your clothes". He then pans to the scene, where people in the distance appear to be running, and the flattened rubble of what was once a road is strewn with hundreds of clothes. "Unfortunately, this is what they did to everyone

here in the hall, this place, and the schools". He pans further, showing the community hall, showing more clothes; "there were almost more than 150 to 200 people present here in this place". He points to the clothes while walking, saying, "And these are their clothes because they forced them to take off their clothes and kept them naked [...]". In the words of Judith Butler, we are "*undone*" by this image (Butler, 2004, p. 24).

As sociological accounts of fashion and dress have shown, clothing holds our social identities in place, issuing a sense of self within our communities that confers dignity and belonging (Crane, 2000). To dress is to show something of ourselves on the surface, to be seen and to see others (Entwistle, 2000). Hannah Arendt writes that being visible in public is what makes speaking, acting, and civic life possible (Arendt, 1998). This visibility is implicitly sartorial. In contrast, when clothing is forcibly removed, scarce or taken away, dignity, selfhood and social connection are undermined, resulting in psychological and physical harm. Through the lens of human rights, the forced removal of clothing is a dehumanising mechanism that aims to render those bodies illegible, and subject to a violent form of political, corporeal and social erasure.[10] International law names these acts as violations of human rights under the Geneva Convention III (Art. 13), Geneva Convention IV (Art. 27), the UN Convention Against Torture, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (James, 2008). Clothing is, in this sense, ontologically linked to the body even when the body is absent. The act of dressing and undressing ourselves, of clothing our bodies, is an act that recognises, asserts and participates in social life. Bodies, Judith Butler argues, embody vulnerability, mortality and sociality. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler notes:

"[...] the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence [...] Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life [...]" (Butler, 2004, p. 26)

If, as Butler argues, bodies are formed in relation *with* others and *with* the world, then clothing (like the gaze, like touch and like violence) makes that relation visible (Butler, 2004, p. 22). What fashion

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10   For a description of men and boys being forced to undress under occupation, see Azoulay (2008, pp. 316–319).

studies illuminates is how clothing carries the body's impressions, gestures, smells and shapes. As we can see in the pink parka and in the field of scattered clothing, the individual and communal traces of the wearer remain. The warmth, intimacy, and vitality of the wearer linger, and the clothing bears the imprint of life. What has *undone* us and made us grieve is how the clothes retain the body's vulnerability, mortality, sociality and most significantly, dignity. Clothing represents a social body that has been held, touched, seen and loved by a community of others.

Our embodied awareness of dressing and undressing ourselves attends to a pair of beige trousers (Fig. 03). They lay on the ground, done up at the waist, still belted. We imagine the man's body; he must have been underweight, so he pulled the trousers down without needing to undo the belt. As spectators, we create the event that lies outside the photographic frame. In this way, the visual field and the Palestinian man lives within us. We read in the buckled knees of his trousers, the collapse of his body. We want to help him. We want to do something to stop the violence.

The specificity of our spectatorship is a convergence of affective and scholarly forces. Through writing this essay, we act and appear in solidarity with Palestinian life and are conscious witnesses to atrocity and state violence. In turn, we catalyze what Ariella Azoulay (2008) calls the "civil contract of photography," whereby, as spectators, we are called upon by the photograph's subjects to reconstruct an event portrayed in the photograph. This is our civic responsibility. Azoulay writes: "When and where the subject of the photograph is a person who has suffered some form of injury, a viewing of the photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted upon others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation […] The citizen has a duty to employ that skill the day she encounters photographs of those injuries – to employ it in order to negotiate the manner in which she is ruled" (Azoulay, 2008, p. 14).

We heed Azoulay's call to action by employing our civic skills.[11] We don't look at the images as artful reportage depicting past events, but "watch"

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11   Azoulay's work is devoted to the ways photographs of Palestinians under imperialist violence emerge from her own citizenship in the country in which she was born and raised and has since denounced. She states that her project is 'writing about photography, mainly photographs of Palestinians and the continuing injury caused them by the occupation' (Azoulay, 2008, pp. 15–19).

them in the present moment. We learn from Azoulay that there is a difference between looking at the photograph and watching it. "The verb "to watch" is usually used for regarding phenomena or moving pictures. It entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image" (Azoulay, 2008, p. 14).

In this vein, we watch the pink parka and reconstruct the child's tiny body, the softness of her small hand, her laughter, her delight, her brushed hair, her unsteady walking and running in the streets of Gaza. We watch as her father tickles her, her sister and brother play with her, her grandmother and grandfather feed her, and her mother dresses her in the pink parka, doing the zipper up to the top to keep her warm. We bring the pink parka, its wearer, the wearer's body, her kin, her community and the photographer who encountered her jacket bloodied into our existence, recreating the events as ones that affect and inflect the haunting ordinariness of our everyday lives. Thus, we perform Azoulay's theory of photography, bringing the events of the photographs (their subject), the photographer, and ourselves, the spectators, into contact.

Additionally, through writing this essay, we engage in what Azoulay described as "not only showing the photograph but showing responsibility toward the photographed" (Azoulay, 2008, p. 316). We transform the images we are affected by on social media into "objects of research" by reflecting and writing on what is being watched. Azoulay notes: "On its own, the photograph is incapable of conveying the event to which it attests. The photograph is thus only a point of departure for the reading carried out by whoever stands before it, for who decides to look and to watch. It is the spectator who transforms what is photographed, what happens, into an event" (Azoulay, 2008, p. 316).

CONCLUSION

Our aim has been to use the attention fashion studies brings to the relationship between clothing and bodies to offer a reparative reading of two images from Gaza. We found these images stayed with us, and we wanted to understand why. They certainly weren't the epic, iconoclastic photographs we have come to associate with reportage. Though we recognized them immediately through a history of atrocity pictures as documentary evidence. However, limiting our reading to the political safety

of evidence in a human rights framework would have misled the reader about our intent. As Butler states:

"Perhaps we make a mistake if we take the definitions of who we are, legally, to be adequate descriptions of what we are about. Although this language may well establish our legitimacy within a legal framework ensconced in liberal versions of human ontology, it does not do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally" (Butler, 2004, p. 25). This sentiment accurately captures our need to see these images as emotional and ethical provocations that have stirred grief, anger, and solidarity with Palestinian life in the face of genocidal violence by the IOF on unarmed civilians, who nevertheless continue to resist occupation.[12] Our focus has been to reconstruct the role clothing plays in social life, and the dimensions and instances of care and community intrinsic to Palestinian society. Hence, as we have argued, the photographs in question have an additional function beyond the evidential: they, through representations of clothing without bodies, demonstrate strong interpersonal, familial, and social bonds and, in doing so, counter the dehumanizing rhetoric Palestinians are subject to.

These images are a call for help, communicated through an ethical appeal to intersubjective care and compassion. They speak to shared human experiences: we all understand the vulnerability of children, we all understand familial and social connection, and what it means to be part of a community.[13] The appeal is universal, but also incredibly dignified. It makes perhaps a too generous appeal to our better natures, respond not with pity, but with recognition, and action. And yet, in many ways, we are failing to heed that call.

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12   On 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a provisional ruling in the case brought by South Africa against Israel, alleging violations of the Genocide Convention in Gaza. The Court found that the Palestinian people face a "real and imminent risk" of genocide. The full summary of the ICJ's order is available here: https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203454

13   We see this notion expressed by Judith Butler when she writes about "we": 'Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire' (Butler, 2004, p. 20).

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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 anarchive 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 Campt (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 anarchive 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—rewearing, 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 anarchive: 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: Campt (2017) calls this tense presence, a way of being seen without

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—anarchive, 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 anarchive 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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SAY IT WITH YOUR WHOLE CHEST

T-SHIRTS AS EVERYDAY JOY AND RADICALLY SOFT RESISTANCE

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Abstract

As an arts-based sustainability practitioner, I am interested in what moves people to transform themselves, and the systems in which they live, to be more supportive of the wellbeing of Earth and its connected inhabitants. In this autoethnographic paper, I discuss leverage points for systemic transformation, and the role and potential of fashion as an 'everyday intervention' gently challenging the political and environmental climates in which we find ourselves. This paper began as a thought experiment about "wearing my convictions" as a sustainability practitioner by using t-shirts to activate civil conversations and memorialise activists, leading to research into the history of resistance t-shirts as wearable art and "honouring rituals as activism" in South Africa and elsewhere.
I share examples of praxis by artists, activists and designers that offer inspiration for practice-based research grounded in creative response-ability and "soft radical" activism, representing and giving voice to that which is overlooked or silenced by "business as usual". These creative methods and histories illustrate how fashion (and Fashion) – as wearable art and cultural history – builds on these traditions, offering evolving symbols of joy, hope, and resistance, which can strengthen the relationship between personal transformation, responsible citizenship and systemic change towards relational fairness and care. I briefly consider sustainability imperatives that need attention in the creation of all clothing, especially resistance clothing. The article concludes with an appeal to creatives and consumers, particularly in the Global South, to remain critical of what we 'advertise' every day with our bodies and consider ways to disrupt western sociocultural expectations.

Keywords: *Transformation; Resistance T-shirts; Honouring Rituals; Affective Resistance; Radical Softness.*

CALL AND RESPONSE: INTRODUCTION AND POSITIONING

A call for papers (CfP) is not always a call to action, but the one sent out by this issue's editors seemed to be both, as it focused on forging the "theoretical tools necessary to engage with the ongoing production of race and racisms" and to "mobilise to challenge the negative effects of … global changes". Drawn by the invitation to "historians, practitioners, designers, activists, educators" and "members of civil society", I was moved to share the appeal of fashion as wearable art and activism in my personal, public and professional contexts, as fashion can speak gently but clearly in spaces where little else can.

As an arts-based sustainability practitioner, I am interested in what moves people to transform themselves, and the systems in which they live, to be more supportive of the wellbeing of Earth and its connected inhabitants. The assertion in the CfP that the "formation of joy … is a radical choice and a resistance to sub-humanising conditions" seemed poignant, since grief is common amongst sustainability practitioners – who face every day the corrosive social-ecological effects of poverty, pressure on planetary boundaries, and the acceleration of extinctions (Rockström, *et al.* 2009; Raworth, 2017).
I contend that fashion and creative methods and histories have an important role in challenging the political and environmental climates in which

we find ourselves. I am not a BIPOC person but was inspired by the question of how fashion praxis might allow BIPOC and other bodies "to resist" and "allow affective passage for their generative being and becomings". The examples of praxis by artists, activists and designers in this paper have offered inspiration for my return to practice-based research grounded in creative response-ability, soft radical activism, and considering the relationship between personal transformation, responsible citizenship and systemic change towards relational fairness and care.

This paper began as an autoethnographic thought experiment about "wearing my convictions" as a sustainability practitioner, and my longing to use t-shirts to extend the reach of my academic work, activate civil conversations, soothe the trauma of the news cycle, and make sure that the names of those martyred and lost in tragic circumstances do not fade quickly from public discourse. As in other countries, t-shirts in South Africa are used to represent sports-team support and unity, institutional celebrations and special family events and are particularly well known as symbols of mass action and anti-apartheid struggle (Tulloch, 2022), and political affiliation or advertising (Letsoalo, 2021). My interests in the transformative potential of fashion as wearable art/activism have since deepened, as I am considering ways to adapt my clothing so that it gives voice to stories aside from "business as usual" in the "current atmosphere imbued with instances of gross erasure and silence", including academic conferences.

In this paper I discuss leverage points for systemic transformation, share the history of resistance t-shirts as wearable art and activism in South Africa and elsewhere, and how fashion (and Fashion), keeps expanding on these traditions, offering new (and old) symbols of joy, hope, faith and resistance. Lastly, I consider sustainability imperatives that need attention in the creation of all clothing, especially resistance clothing.

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE CHANGE?

When asked at a sustainability research meeting to share something personally transformative, I spoke about a YouTube clip of British actor Tom Holland dancing to Rihanna's song "Umbrella" on the American show *Lip Sync Battle* in 2017. The show was a contemporary follies, with celebrities lip-syncing pop songs, often in drag. Holland – a trained dancer – gave a performance that was

brilliantly in the pocket.[1] Dressed in a neat black corset, he moved with astonishing confidence and precision. Avoiding slapstick or mockery, he gave the performance with his whole chest, clearly feeling himself in the role (Fig. 01). Watching it, I had a queer reaction – something akin to G-force. My scalp contracted, I got tunnel vision and swore aloud.

Unable to articulate what combination of music, visual splendour and performative energy induced this reaction, I read the YouTube video comments and was amused to find many others blown away by this transformative performance. As one commentator put it, "I just transcended lol". Many others described the performance as revising their sexuality and notions about gender (Lip Sync Battle, 2017). I had long taught Visual Literacy for new university students at an art and design faculty, exemplifying how gendered clothing codes have changed throughout history – for example, corsets and high heels are presently coded as queer of feminine in mainstream western pop culture but have been worn as core parts of male fashion in the historical past. Although I shared theory that framed gender as performed and conveyed through apparel and attitudes, Holland's performance drove this home in a way scholarship had not. After my "Lip Sync Battle epiphany", masculinity and femininity became detached forever from so-called male or female bodies, changing my cisgender notions of gender and sexuality. Since Holland's performance was staged without "specific intentions" it can be framed as a practice of radical softness, as it became "a revolutionary moment and a crack in a world of hardened borders … causing a softening of roles and stable identities" (Kærgaard-Andersen, et al. 2020, p. 4).

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE CHANGE SYSTEMS?

Influential systems theorist Donella Meadows (1999) argued that to change a system, one must do so at the level of paradigm or worldview – to align a system's intent with its design. While there is much focus on parameters, numbers and feedbacks in organisations and institutions, we only really enter the realm of transformative change when looking to systemic design and the paradigm informing it (Meadows, 1999). Real paradigm shift is most difficult to achieve, but it is often instantaneous

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1   Drummer parlance for a tight performance with a consistent groove.

Fig. 01

and irreversible – when one "clicks", it shifts one's understanding of the world (Meadows, 1999, p. 18). My response to Tom Holland's performance is an example of such a "click".

Thomas Kuhn claimed that systemic transformation requires continually "pointing at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm" and coming "loudly, with assurance, from the new one", ensuring that people who represent the new paradigm have "public visibility and power" (cited in Meadows, 1999, p. 12). Holland's performance was a liberating example of this, but "loud, assured" strategies can also operate to remove freedoms – with clear examples of this currently playing out to shocking effect in contemporary global politics. The recent lambasting of wokeness that is seemingly grounded in a conservative backlash against queer and trans rights, and the dismantling of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) reforms in the US and queer and trans rights in Britain, sets a worrying precedent for similar advances in other countries. Naively, given the lessons of history, I never dreamt that queer, BIPOC and women's rights advances could, so quickly and cruelly, become destabilised. The speed with which DEI has been dropped in the US shows it was an adjunct to existing power norms and structures rather than a deep paradigmatic transformation, which would be less easy to eject.

This makes it more urgent than ever to hold ground in the campaign for human and nature's rights – which are fundamentally based in the fact of existence, and protection of the right to continue existing. With so much on fire in the world, people who care about these burning issues need to connect with one another for support and strength. For those who are not of the "loud" and "assured" set, and more in "the vast open-minded middle" (Meadows, 1999, p. 18) – how do we form affinities in realms on and off social media and outside of our homes? How do we speak to each other about what concerns us, and find communities of collaboration, help and comfort more quickly?

T-SHIRTS: 'SELF AS BANNER' AND 'HEARTS ON SLEEVES'

One answer to this emerged from my resolve to print a still of Holland's performance on a t-shirt as a visual call to other fans to respond in joyful recognition. Even though Holland was wearing a corset, not a t-shirt, it is the impulse to use the t-shirt as a visual call which was one of the many practice-based yearnings that sparked the reflections in this article.

While t-shirts may seem quite understated, as Meadows (1999, p. 12) explains about leverage points in transformation, ideas can be amplified when platformed by influential figures – for

example, Chilean American actor Pedro Pascal wearing a "Protect the Dolls" t-shirt in April 2022 to a premiere in London, UK, as a response to the blow to trans rights dealt in that the country at that time (Goldberg, 2025).

T-shirts originated as a US navy-issue undergarment in the early 1900s, evolving to become popular outerwear in the 1950s (Ho, 2018), and have been leveraged to great effect to articulate public (social, political and environmental) ideals, priorities, and intentions. As Avitha Sooful (2020) explains, "t-shirts are comfortable and practical as everyday wear and function as statement attire when inscribed with a message associating an individual with a particular brand of music, movie character or a social commitment".

When t-shirts are "worn at political rallies, these are branded with a particular colour and visual image that become the first interface of communication announcing resistance" (Sooful, 2020). Sooful differentiates between a symbol like a t-shirt worn collectively, or on an individual standing alone outside of a march "practicing an 'everyday resistance'" – James Scott's (1985) phrase describing "non-political forms of resistance" (cited in Sooful, 2020). Repeating "everyday resistance" "has an impact that is not always noticeable. In wearing a "struggle" t-shirt the practice becomes an embodied representation of resistance as it personalises the stand and serves as a "weapon" against authority" (Sooful, 2020).

Resistance t-shirts treat "self as banner" (Tulloch, 2022, p. 115), articulating and evoking responses to problematic issues or traumatic events that might otherwise be washed away in the tide of making a living and doing homework. In 2020 in the US, when George Floyd was suffocated to death by a policeman standing on his neck, it drew fresh outrage at patterns of brutality towards African Americans. Floyd's sister Bridgett wore a t-shirt featuring his last words – "I can't breathe" – at a television news appearance reflecting on his murder. Carol Tulloch referred to this t-shirt as "an 'honouring ritual' as activism, … part of 'designing personal grief rituals'" (Sas & Coleman, 2026, cited in Tulloch, 2022, p. 131). Resistance or memorial clothing constitutes a visual call for important people and principles to remain seen and heard, offering ways of honouring ancestors and role models, and being brave and vulnerable enough to share love, heartbreak, grief and hope with others in a "radically soft" way (Kærgaard-Andersen, et al. 2020).

THE HISTORY OF T-SHIRTS IN MASS ACTION AND RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The role of t-shirts in South African Struggle is well established. In the 1980s, a cultural boycott was initiated to isolate the Apartheid government. The boycott escalated and the then-government responded by censoring "'political' artwork, writing, posters, photographs, records and tapes, declaring them to be weapons of war and an incitement to violence against the state" (Sooful, 2020). Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, cited in Sooful, 2020) shares the power of resistance conveyed by "thousands of t-shirt clad protestors wearing the same or similar printed image of protest, … a powerful collective tool of defiance". The sale of t-shirts were also effective fundraisers for anti-apartheid movements (Tulloch, 2022).

The South African History Archives (SAHA: Embodiments of Resistance, 2025) launched a project of "in-depth archival, and oral history research into t-shirts as an "embodied practice of resistance and testimony" and the role of (often unknown) designers and artists in contributing to the liberation struggle". This was intended to enable "research and reflection" on the visual vocabulary of these t-shirts, inform socially engaged contemporary South African art, craft and design, and "introduce learners, students and activists to this heritage" (SAHA: Embodiments of Resistance 2025).

SAHA has a collection of 500 Struggle shirts (Ho, 2018), and worked with Frances Andrew, "a fashion curator and theorist focussing on political clothing", to document the collection, curating an exhibition of 35 "Struggle T-shirts" made as a form of "public testimony and political protest" (Fig. 02). As Andrews writes in the exhibition material: "The body in the T-shirt became a site of resistance, the physical self willingly identified to represent messages of resistance, solidarity, testimony, commemoration and defiance" (cited in Ho, 2018). Memorial t-shirts were often used as honouring and galvanising rituals in anti-apartheid campaigning in South Africa. For example a t-shirt made by Clive Pillay memorialises Lenny Naidu, a member the ANC's military wing uMkhonto weSizwe, who was killed by apartheid forces (Fig. 02). Some activists trace the use of memorial t-shirts to the funeral of Bantu Stephen Biko – the Black Consciousness and student leader slain in detention in 1977 by Apartheid police (SAHA, 2014). Poet,

Fig. 02

artist and political activist Ben Dikobe Martins "printed a Steve Biko memorial T-shirt in 1978" and "was later arrested for producing a banned Steve Biko t-shirt" (SAHA, 2014). Researchers have written in some depth about the South African fashion design company, Stoned Cherrie, making t-shirts featuring Biko's face in the early 2000s – "re-memorialising" this respected leader (Rassool, 2004; Vincent, 2007; Conradie, 2020; Tulloch, 2020). Stoned Cherrie said the "Biko campaign … sought to transform the way Africans feel about themselves in 21st century Africa" (Stoned Cherrie, 2014 cited in Conradie, 2020, p. 9). As Ciraj Rassool (2004, p. 291) explains, this was ostensibly to introduce "the image of Biko to the otherwise uninformed youth" and while "this may have served to take the cause of "Biko preservation" from the domain of the party ideologue" and free him "from the mausoleum", Black Consciousness activists still objected to the "pop idolisation" of these "legends". Memorial t-shirts indeed run the risk of commercialising and decontextualising images of the dead, especially given increased contemporary awareness about issues of consent in sharing images of people – but there is still poignancy in acknowledging those who dedicate their bodies, lives and faces to a principle, if their families agree to the practice.

Amongst the most ubiquitous t-shirts in contemporary South Africa are those that political parties provide to voters in the run-up to elections – often criticised for being high-turnover, dispensable and superficial items costing money that might better be allocated to other causes (Rassool, 2004, p. 291; Letsoalo, 2021). Sankarist David Letsoalo (2021) acknowledges the "honour and stature" of political t-shirts in "anti-apartheid Struggle" but argues that the South African public "need to interrogate the power of T-shirts in our political spaces", cautioning readers that wearing them turns one into an advertisement endorsing "the party or the individual emblazoned thereon" – while the people (who Letsoalo argues are already neglected) "are further abused by promoting the party free of charge". T-shirt campaigns have also, however, played an important role in addressing contemporary social injustices, stigmas and taboos – for example, well-known contemporary South African awareness campaigns such as the "HIV Positive" t-shirts used by the Treatment Action Campaign, and the LoveLife Campaign, an HIV prevention initiative focused on youth (Moletsane & Lolwana, 2012).

HONOURING-RITUALS-AS ACTIVISMS

I want to respond creatively to joys and injustices and use art to call to communities with whom I can make change, but as an academic working from hand to paper, my capacity is limited. T-shirts are an avenue that fashion offers for high-visibility art to circulate in society – the sale of which can help to fundraise for collective action. It may seem joyless to make memorial t-shirts reminding us of so many who have passed in awful circumstances, but the real joylessness is in forgetting these people or failing to address the circumstances of their hardships and deaths.

The first t-shirt I wanted to make of a social-justice issue was in response to the death of 5-year-old Michael Komape who fell into a pit latrine at school in 2014. In my pain-rage, I craved didacticism, envisaging t-shirts featuring a hand reaching for help emerging from brown sludge on the front, with details on the back of who to hound so that it never happened again. I never made that t-shirt and, since then, Lumka Mkhethwa (5) and Unecebo Mboteni (3) have also drowned in pit latrines at their school – in 2018 and 2024 respectively. For the last 11 years, children have remained exposed to open cesspits at their schools, where going to the toilet should not be such a hazard.

Another series I envisioned making/wearing is called "A few Africans" after Sue Williamson's series *A few South Africans*, created in the 1980s (see the full series of images at Sue Williamson, 2025). It commemorated women who had played an important role in the resistance of colonialism and Apartheid, including well-known political figures such as Albertina Sisulu and Helen Joseph, and those less recognised – such as Annie Silinga, who was harassed all her life by security police for refusing to carry a pass; and academic and activist Jenny Curtis Schoon, who was killed, with her daughter, by a parcel bomb sent by security police (Sue Williamson, 2025). Williamson's series was brightly coloured, decorative and relatable, and postcards of the images were printed and widely distributed.

It is partly due to series like these that many South Africans know the names and faces of heroes of the colonial and apartheid resistance, such as Charlotte Maxeke and Lilian Ngoyi, because these have been "canonised" and regularly commemorated, but contemporary heroes are less well known. I was heartened to find that the Centre for Environmental Rights recently commissioned graphic designer Sindiso Nyoni to illustrate images of community leaders and whistleblowers who have been assassinated, such as Ma Fikile Ntshangase (Fig. 03), an environmental activist who was murdered in 2020 for opposing mining ventures that threatened the wellbeing of her community and environment, and Babita Deokaran, who was murdered for her role in stopping corruption.

The revised series name, "A few Africans", has a Pan-Africanist intention to address xenophobia, and would include great African leaders such as Wangarĩ Maathai, who founded Kenya's Green Belt movement.

I would also honour Muhsin Hendricks, South Africa's first openly gay Imam, who was assassinated on 15 February 2025, and other queer activists, by applying Sang Thai's (2021) t-shirt-design strategies to "challenge and disrupt hegemonic subjectivities" and "racial and queer marginalization and discrimination through styling and fit". The style and heart of the work mentioned in this paper (by Nyoni, Pillay, Thai, Williamson, Magugu) offers inspiration for creative response-ability using clothing as honouring-rituals-as-activisms (Tulloch, 2022, p. 131). In my dream project as an arts-based sustainability practitioner, I envision the clothing being ethically sourced and

Fig. 03

artfully co-designed by community-based creative groups. Fashion need not be didactic or yoked to activism, but collaborations between designers and citizens or scientists could unite conceptual artistry with everyday resistance and, like music or dance, raise consciousness while telling "us something lovely and vivacious about ourselves" (Sachs 1990, p. 11).

THE NEED FOR ETHICAL STRUGGLE CLOTHING

There is unfortunately sometimes an ethical obliviousness with clothing that centres Earth Day or environmentalism in retail – particularly with children's clothing where statements such as "I love my planet" are printed in plastisol inks and glitter, rendering them unrecyclable. Fired up with the inspiration to wear more resistance clothing, I looked online to find t-shirts that would better signify my environmental values while allowing me to contribute financially to resistance initiatives. Where protest t-shirts come from is now more important given concerns about working conditions in global sweat shops (Rivoli, 2009, p. 127), and increased awareness of sustainability.

Fig. 04

The official GreenPeace shop advertises t-shirts marketing their collaboration with singer-song-writers such as Jacob Collier and designer Vivienne Westwood (Greenpeace, 2025). In order to leverage funding from t-shirts, Greenpeace's t-shirts are made to order from organic cottons and toxin-free inks using renewable energy, and every step of their "supply chain, from seed to shop, is audited by independent, third party certifiers, … ensuring toxic-free wet processes that the Greenpeace 'Detox My Fashion' campaign is aimed at, and meeting the requirements of Greenpeace's 'Textiles Procure-ment Standard'" (Greenpeace, 2025).

While designers need to pay close attention to these standards, there is also a need to promote these measures amongst consumers, and celebrate the long lifespan of old t-shirts, whether upcycled into memorial blankets, or turned into cleaning cloths, before disposal at fabric recycling depots.

RESIST T-SHIRTS

In South Africa, mainstream retailers and buyers seem to be paying more attention to clothing that represents local visual and design languages and sources of African pride, yet western conventions remain entrenched in professional and casual wear. Clothing at stores such as Mr Price, PEP, Ackermans and Pick n Pay, which are found at most malls and have a significant footprint in smaller towns, often feature seemingly aspirational but acontextual, empty references to States in the US. Many South African citizens are walking "advertise-ments" for US imperialism with "Los Angeles" and "California" emblazoned on their t-shirts. It is possible that t-shirts are too closely aligned with the model of consumerism and imperialism that

has imperilled Earth and its people to be deeply transformative.

There are many inspiring examples of a more intentional adoption of signifiers in fashion and design that offer different paths and possibilities. Čájet Sámi Vuoiŋŋa ('ČSV') means 'Show Sami Spirit' – a slogan used by the Sami community in so-called Northern Europe during the Sami revital-ization movement in the early 1970s "as a means of expressing Sami identity". ČSV "encouraged the incorporation of Sami clothing, joiking, art, and other Sami symbols into everyday life … to make Sami culture more visible and counter centuries of marginalization and minoritization in both legal frameworks and everyday experiences (refusing harmful paradigms, assimilation)" and "to confront feelings of ethnic shame and inferiority" (Dankert-sen, 2016, cited in Tomateo & Grabowski, 2024). The brevity and boldness of t-shirt design can be found in other garments which still fulfil the function of reminding us of important legacies. For example, in his moving series of waxprint fabrics, *Heirloom*, South African fashion designer Thebe Magugu recalls the long African history of waxprint commemoration of important public figures but replaced these figures with photos of his own family members. Later, in *Heirloom II* (Fig. 04), Magugu's team opened this service to customers, allowing them to order commemorative waxprint fabrics featuring their own family members (Tiwane, 2023). As Magugu's website explains, "In our fast-paced world, memories can often fade too quickly. With the Thebe Magugu Heirloom Project, we aim to bring those cherished memories to life in a way that you can wear and carry with you every day" (Thebe Magugu, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Creatives and consumers, particularly in Africa and the Global South, need to remain critical of what we advertise every day with our bodies. The creation and sale of ethically sourced fashion that offers possibilities for sharing joy, sadness, respect and care has the potential to give more public presence to activists' concerns, help fund activism, and start conversations with likeminded collaborators and open-minded sceptics.

Donella Meadows (1999, p. 18) argued that "the way to change a paradigm is to model a system, which takes you outside the system and forces you to see it whole". Small acts of everyday fashion resistance, regularly repeated, can help to visually signify the "outsides" of dominant systems, and our resistance to harmful or homogenising systems with which we may be tacitly complying. Expressions of support for those working towards pluriversal wellbeing – conveyed compellingly by everyday clothing – may disrupt expectations, unsettle norms, and promote regenerative intentions.

CAPTIONS:

[Fig. 01] Screenshot from Tom Holland's performance at Lip Sync Battle (Lip Sync Battle, 2017).

[Fig. 02] Clive Pillay (designer), Memorial t-shirt for Lenny Naidu, Hambe Kahle Lenny Naidu, 1989, fabric (Sooful, 2020).

[Fig. 03] Sindiso Nyoni (designer), Mam Fikile Ntshangase 1957-2020, image commissioned by Centre for Environmental Rights, 2020 (Centre for Environmental Rights, 2020).

[Fig. 04] Thebe Magugu (designer), screenshot of order form from ThebeMagugu.com for his classic *Heirloom* Shirt, 2025 (Thebe Magugu, 2025).

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STYLED FOR DISSENT
FASHION AS EMBODIED RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY PROTESTS

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Abstract

This paper explores fashion's function as a multidimensional form of protest that transcends symbolic expression, positioning clothing as an affective, spatial, and political infrastructure of dissent. Grounded in theories of affect, performativity, and consumer culture, it examines how garments act as embodied agents that generate emotion, mediate presence, and navigate power. Through three case studies, Pussy Riot's neon pink balaclavas, the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt campaign, and the Pikachu protester in Türkiye, the paper suggests that protest fashion creates emotional collectivity, reshapes public space, and negotiates visibility within global media. It ultimately proposes a context-sensitive understanding of protest fashion as both a powerful and fragile form of aesthetic resistance, shaped by tensions between activism, consumerism, and commodification.

Keywords: *Protest Fashion; Emotional Collectivity; Aesthetic Resistance; Commodification; Symbolic Dissent.*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion has long served as more than a tool of self-expression; in protest contexts, it becomes a powerful form of embodied dissent. Whether through rebellious balaclavas, slogan T-shirts, or humorous costumes, clothing becomes a material form of resistance; this paper argues that protest fashion operates beyond symbolic communication. These garments do not just represent resistance; they perform it.

To fully explore the multidimensional nature of protest fashion[1], this study analyses three distinct case studies: Pussy Riot's neon balaclavas, the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt, and the Turkish Pikachu costumed protester. By examining these diverse cases, rooted in different geographies, media dynamics, and political contexts, the paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how protest fashion functions across affective, spatial, and ideological terrains. Through this triangulated approach, the paper builds towards a nuanced conclusion about the power and contradictions

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1   Protest fashion uses clothing and accessories as a visual and symbolic means of communicating ideologies, affiliations, and resistance. Specific colors, symbols, slogans, and styles are employed to express political, social, and environmental beliefs, conveying messages of dissent, solidarity, or a call for change (Amani, 2025)

of aesthetic resistance in contemporary protest cultures.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach to investigate how fashion operates as a multidimensional form of protest. Drawing on foundational works in visual culture studies (Darts, 2004; Hebdige, 1979), affect theory (Ahmed, 2014), consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and performativity (Taylor, 2003; Butler, 2015), the analysis combines visual analysis, discourse analysis, and contextual interpretation to explore the affective, material, and political functions of clothing within protest contexts. The three cases: Pussy Riot's neon balaclavas, "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt, and the Pikachu protester in Türkiye, were purposefully selected for their diversity in geography, media circulation, and political scope. Each represents a distinct mode of sartorial resistance: collective anonymity and feminist performance, slogan activism within celebrity culture, and humorous spectacle within protests. Together, they allow comparative insight into how protest fashion functions across local, mediated, and global contexts, highlighting both convergence and contrast in affective strategies and risks of commodification.

The research process involved collecting and analyzing a range of primary and secondary materials, including photographic documentation, media reports, social media content, and published interviews. Visual analysis focused on aesthetic strategies, performative practices, and spatial interventions, while discourse analysis examined the narratives, symbolic meanings, and language attributed to these sartorial acts by activists, media, and audiences.

To ensure methodological rigor, thematic coding was applied to identify recurring patterns across cases and enable systematic comparison of affective impact, materiality, and visibility. The framework also considers audience reception and cultural interpretation, acknowledging that the meaning and perceived authenticity of protest fashion are context-dependent. By examining how symbols are mediated, circulated, and potentially commodified, the study captures the tensions between empowerment, visibility, and co-option in both local and global contexts.

The methodology recognizes its limitations, including reliance on mediated sources rather than direct ethnography and the interpretive nature of visual and textual analysis. Nonetheless, by foregrounding different operational logics rather than imposing a universal model, this approach offers a critical, context-sensitive understanding of protest fashion as both an infrastructure of dissent and a site of ongoing negotiation between activism, consumerism, and commodification.

FASHIONING DISSENT: THEORISING THE MATERIAL POLITICS OF CLOTHING

To understand the political function of clothing in protest, it is essential to move beyond a semiotic framework and explore how fashion operates materially, spatially, and emotionally. According to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), consumption is a social and cultural practice of actively creating meaning. CCT suggests that consumers use commercial products to build their identities and lifestyles (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Protest contexts amplify this dynamic, as clothing transforms from commercial objects into political agents.

Protest fashion has long drawn on earlier repertoires of dissent. The suffragettes used white and violet dresses to signal purity and unity, while the Black Panther Party's uniform of leather jackets and berets projected militant solidarity. During the AIDS crisis, ACT UP's "Silence = Death" shirts turned the body into a billboard (Crimp & Rolston, 1990; Gould, 2009). Feminist art-activists such as the Guerrilla Girls[2] adopted gorilla masks in the 1980s to anonymize themselves and focus attention on their critique of patriarchal institutions (Simmons, 2013). These precedents demonstrate how clothing has historically operated as a medium that fuses collectivity, visibility, and critique. They form what Diana Taylor (2003) terms the repertoire: embodied acts that preserve and transmit social and cultural memory. Butler (2015) argues that public assemblies are a "performative" exercise of the "right to appear", where the presence of bodies constitutes a political claim, separate from spoken words.

Drawing on affect theory, one can understand garments in protest settings as agents that generate

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2   The Guerrilla Girls are anonymous artist activists who empturnloy provocative headlines, striking visuals, and compelling statistics to shed light on gender and ethnic bias, corruptions, and discrimination within the art, film, political, and popular culture spheres (https://www.guerrillagirls.com/, n.d.).

emotional collectivity (Kuryel & Fırat, 2015; Aydınoğlu, 2025) through embodied experience. This aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2014) argument that emotions are not private but a social phenomenon that produces collectives. Protest fashion produces sensations and cultivates atmospheres of urgency, solidarity, and provocation (Yuksel, 2025). Through CCT, we can see how consumer agency reveals the affective power of these garments, as the practices of wearing and sharing turn them into carriers of collective political emotion (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). These emotional charges circulate through fabric, movement, and contact, allowing protest fashion to function as what Bruce (2014) calls an "affect generator".

CASE STUDIES
TEXTILES AS EMBODIED PROTEST: PUSSY RIOT'S BALACLAVA

Pussy Riot's[3] 2012 performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior was a pivotal moment in protest art and visual resistance. This unauthorized act transformed a sacred space into a platform for radical dissent and drew global attention. Central to its impact was the group's brightly colored balaclavas, which became enduring emblems of feminist rebellion. These garments were not incidental; they were deliberately crafted tools of subversion, disrupting visual norms, erasing individual identity, and confronting entrenched structures of religious and political authority.

The group established a collective identity prioritizing resistance over individual fame (Chambers, 2020; Bruce, 2014), drawing inspiration from feminist predecessors like the Guerrilla Girls (Myzelev, 2021). Pussy Riot used garish color schemes, including shocking pinks, acidic greens, and electric blues, to disrupt the solemn decorum of religious institutions, enacting a form of aesthetic sabotage (The Moscow Times, 2012).

By staging a protest inside an Orthodox cathedral in kaleidoscopic attire and performing a "punk prayer", the group enacted what cultural criminologists describe as the carnivalesque, a subversive inversion of order through satire and spectacle (Presdee, 2000). The legal and societal backlash they faced intensified the protests' symbolic power, with authorities inadvertently affirming its visual

effectiveness (Chambers, 2020). The state's reaction, provoking emotions such as fear and disgust, demonstrates Ahmed's (2014) argument that such feelings are used to police social boundaries, marking certain bodies as others to justify their exclusion.

International audiences rapidly seized on the group's aesthetic. The masked, colorfully clad protester became a symbol of anti-authoritarian defiance, catapulting Pussy Riot to global activist iconography (Myzelev, 2021). However, this visibility is shaped by existing privileges: international media attention, Western interest, and the symbolic resonance of Pussy Riot's protest amplify their recognition in ways that may not extend equally to less visible or marginalized activists, highlighting how protest fashion can produce both empowerment and selective recognition.

The group's visual identity democratized activism. The balaclavas served as an open-source template for global protest, adaptable across diverse contexts, from reproduction rights in South America to anti-police brutality demonstrations in North America (Bruce, 2014).

Furthermore, Pussy Riot's conscious engagement with visual politics expanded the grammar of feminist resistance. Their attire was not just a costume, but a visual theory of protest rooted in play, disruption, and visibility. A Pussy Riot member referred to their approach as a "feminine punk game", a notion that collapses binaries between seriousness and playfulness, the artistic and the political, individuality and collectivity (Seal, 2013). This framing challenged traditional expectations that protest must be grave, solemn, and masculine in tone. Pussy Riot's performance wielded color, anonymity, and performativity to assert a bold, unruly femininity that refused containment (Chambers, 2020).

This emphasis on collective anonymity subverted patriarchal norms equating visibility with power. By covering their faces, Pussy Riot not only protected themselves from state surveillance but also resisted the commodification of protest through celebrity (Chambers, 2020). The balaclavas thus became more than a disguise; it evolved into a wearable manifesto (Bruce, 2014).

Even in the courtroom, their attire retained political weight. Prosecutors fixated on their appearance as civic and moral deviance, exposing anxieties around non-conformist femininity. By rejecting sartorial norms of respectability, Pussy

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3   Pussy Riot, a Russian Feminist band based in Moscow, is known for their provocative punk rock music and performance art. Their subjects of concern include LGBTQ rights, feminism, and opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin (https://pussyriot. love, n.d.).

Riot challenged not only the legal framework but also broader regimes of gendered discipline and national respectability (Myzelev, 2021). Pussy Riot's use of the balaclavas follows a longer history of feminist masking, most notably the Guerrilla Girls' gorilla masks in the 1980s, which combined anonymity with critique of patriarchal institutions. As Simmons (2013) notes, "the Guerrilla Girls adopted gorilla masks to conceal their identities, ensuring that attention was focused on the critique rather than the critic" (p. 52). This exemplifies what Taylor (2003) calls the repertoire's power to transmit history through embodied, non-archival means. Each performance, from the Guerrilla Girls' masks to Pussy Riot's balaclavas, is an "act of transfer" that sustains feminist resistance as living, confrontational practice.

SLOGANS AS WEARABLE PROTEST LANGUAGE: 'PROTECT THE DOLLS' T-SHIRT

In early 2025, a white T-shirt with the phrase "Protect the Dolls" became a viral cultural phenomenon. Created by London-based designer Conner Ives, the shirt aimed to demonstrate solidarity with trans women. "Dolls", a term rooted in queer and trans vernacular, symbolized affection and community for the wearer (Denny, 2025). Initially intended as a fashion item, the shirt gained international recognition when actor Pedro Pascal wore it on the red carpet, catapulting the phrase into public and political discourse (Chang, 2025). Unlike Pussy Riot's balaclavas, where anonymity was key, the shirt's virality was largely attributed to celebrity endorsements. Pedro Pascal's public appearance in the shirt was interpreted as both a personal and political gesture, given his open support for his transgender sister, Lux Pascal (Gupta, 2025). Celebrities like Troye Sivan and Charli XCX followed suit, further amplifying the shirt's message across the music and fashion industries (Manzella et al, 2025).

The T-shirt as a vehicle of dissent has deep roots in protest culture, from anti-war slogans of the 1960s to ACT UP's "Silence = Death" shirts during the AIDS crisis, which transformed clothing into a mobile billboard of resistance (Crimp & Rolston, 1990). As Gould (2009) observes, ACT UP's shirts functioned as 'wearable calls to action' (p. 175), collapsing the boundary between private body and public protest. Similar to Pussy Riot's case and its "act of transfer" within feminist resistance, each sloganed T-shirt is an "act of transfer" that

draws on this inherited repertoire of dissent, carrying its historical power while applying it to contemporary struggles (Taylor, 2003). What distinguishes "Protect the Dolls" is its circulation within celebrity and consumer culture, where high-profile figures transformed a grassroots slogan into a global fashion trend, blending activism with viral marketing (Chang, 2025; Gupta, 2025). These celebrity endorsements sparked a surge in purchases, raising over $70,000 for trans advocacy organizations (Sim, 2025).

From a sociological perspective, the "Protect the Dolls" shirt exemplifies symbolic interactionism, how individuals use symbols, such as clothing, to communicate their identity and values (Blumer, 1969). The term "dolls", once confined to trans subcultures, entered mainstream discourse, highlighting the diffusion of subcultural codes into mass culture (Hebdige, 1979). The T-shirt serves as aesthetic resistance, protesting through visual and cultural expression (Darts, 2004). It emerged during a period of unprecedented anti-trans legislation in the U.S and Europe, with over 500 bills targeting LGBTQ+ rights in 2023–2024 (ACLU, 2024). Against this backdrop, the shirt becomes a public response to pain; a collective "interpretation that this pain is wrong ... and something must be done about it" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 174). It functions as soft power, using cultural influence to counter legal and ideological attacks (Nye, 2004).

Celebrities who wear the shirt function as cultural legislators, shaping public sentiment without engaging in formal politics (West, 2005). This symbolic alignment with trans rights carries weight precisely because it leverages fame as a political amplifier, demonstrating the role of celebrity activism in postmodern politics (Street, 2012). Furthermore, this T-shirt offers identity affirmation for both trans individuals and allies. This demonstrates what Ahmed (2014) calls "affective alignment", where an ally's feeling of solidarity and a trans person's feeling of being seen differ yet orient around the same affective object, creating a powerful collective bond.

Beyond a mere trend, the "Protect the Dolls" shirt is a multifaceted cultural object that intersects fashion, activism, and identity. Its impact extends beyond the donations raised or the celebrities who wore it. Instead, it serves as a symbol of resistance and solidarity during a tumultuous period for trans rights. This case illustrates how symbolic

COSTUMES AND CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS: PIKACHU PROTESTER

In March 2025, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu was wrongfully arrested just before announcing his presidential candidacy against the incumbent president, Erdoğan. His arrest sparked nationwide protests (Reyes, 2025). Amid widespread police violence, the global media focused on a protester dressed in an inflated Pikachu[4] costume, adding an element of humor and absurdity to the protest. This surreal image resonated beyond Türkiye, appearing in anti-Trump protests in the U.S. and Georgia during pro-European demonstrations (Dhodapkar, 2025; Yuksel, 2025). The costume used humor and absurdity to resist state oppression, embodying what is termed "soft resistance" (Aydınoğlu, 2025). This dynamic reflects Ahmed's (2014) notion of "stickiness", where emotions attach to objects and shape collective politics.

Costumes and carnivalesque disguises have long been part of protest repertoires, from medieval "feasts of misrule", where peasants mocked authority through parody and inversion, to the inflatable dinosaur suits and clown brigades of the early 2000s alter-globalization movement (Presdee, 2000; Velocci, 2018). As Bogad (2016) argues, clowning and absurd disguises disrupt the seriousness of police power, creating "tactical frivolity" that unsettles hierarchies (p. 32). The Pikachu protester continues this lineage of absurdist resistance, but its novelty lies in mobilizing a globally recognizable pop-culture character whose cuteness and meme-ability amplified the protest globally (Lin, 2025; Yuksel, 2025). In Taylor's (2003) terms, the Pikachu protester created a transportable scenario, a repeatable action that can be adapted in other political contexts and demonstrated the repertoire's power to circulate cultural memory and tactics globally.

The Pikachu protester exemplifies how full-body, pop-culture-based costumes have become emotional communication tools in protests. Rather than mere uniformity, protest fashion now operates as performance art (Velocci, 2018). Pikachu's playful-

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4   Pikachu is a globally recognizable Japanese cartoon character. With its recognizable yellow color and bubbly personality, it is associated with playfulness in popular culture.

ness and cuteness visually opposed the militarized appearance of riot police (Lin, 2025). Its soft texture, bright color, and round form evoked empathy and childlike innocence, further reinforcing its symbolic power (Yuksel, 2025). Shared humor helped unite protesters, mixing laughter with anger into a collective emotional experience (Kuryel & Fırat, 2015).

Mascots and internet memes facilitate global engagement and soften the authority's perceived power. By evoking innocence, such creative interventions undermine state narratives. Pikachu moved from a meme to a cultural moment, forging emotional resonance and challenging authority through playfulness rather than confrontation (Aydınoğlu, 2025; Yuksel, 2025).

The rapid online spread of the Pikachu protester carries risks. Overemphasis on spectacle can dilute a protest's seriousness, reducing it to a fleeting online moment and overshadowing the underlying issues. The original Pikachu protester claimed his goal was simply to uplift spirits, not to make a political statement. (Özkök, 2025). After going viral, the Pikachu protester began appearing at festivals and cultural events, creating a social media persona (@hasanntaskan, n.d.). While this may be a strategic way to remain visible via pop culture, it also risks trivializing the original political message. Pikachu thus represents both the potential and contradiction of creative protest in the digital age. Ultimately, the materiality of protest fashion, its emotional impact, and visual spectacle can mobilize support but also risk undermining the gravity of protest if not grounded in political intent. While emotions are politically powerful, their "stickiness" (Ahmed, 2014) is not guaranteed; the connection between an affective object and its political cause must actively be maintained to prevent it from turning into solely a spectacle.

CIRCULATING PROTEST FASHION GLOBALLY: DEPOLITICIZATION, COLLECTIVE UNITY, AND RISKS OF BACKLASH
GLOBAL CIRCULATION OF PROTEST FASHION

An important discussion in modern fashion studies and social activism is the global circulation of protest-originated fashion through viral images and commodified products. Protest fashion simultaneously unifies and destabilizes politics, identity, and media. As it can produce a strong feeling of

unity, it can also dilute the original message and risk exclusion or backlash. In this process, the global market often creates an illusion of resistance: garments or slogans that once carried embodied risk become purchasable symbols of "authentic" dissent, where wearing or sharing a protest look can feel like activism without demanding real political engagement (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). Protest fashion's reach has always extended beyond its original sites, but digital media has accelerated this process, often shifting meaning in the transition. What begins as a locally situated act of dissent may, once circulated as an image, meme, or commodity, lose the political grounding that gave it force (Gaugele & Titton, 2019; Niessen, 2020). This shift reveals that the political message is not fixed upon circulation but is actively reinterpreted by global audiences, whose differing social positions determine the ultimate meaning received (Hall, 1980). As Tufekci (2017) notes, digital platforms enable rapid visibility but also favor spectacle over substance, often amplifying effect while detaching action from its original context.

Pussy Riot's balaclavas exemplify this duality. Locally, they disrupted Orthodox sacred space and directly confronted state authority; internationally, they were taken up as fashionable symbols of feminist resistance, sometimes sold as edgy accessories devoid of their political stakes (Chambers, 2020; Myzelev, 2021). Similarly, the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt carried different meanings depending on context: within queer and trans communities, it served as affirmation and solidarity, while globally it circulated through celebrity culture as a branded commodity, vulnerable to what Banet-Weiser (2012) calls the "politics of ambivalence" in brand culture, where authenticity is marketed even as it is destabilized. The Pikachu protester reveals this tension most vividly. During protests, the costume offered comic relief and resilience against police violence; online, it circulated as memes and AI-generated images, becoming a viral spectacle, easily shareable but detached from the risks and stakes of the local protests (Lin, 2025; Yuksel, 2025).

DEPOLITICIZATION THROUGH MEME-IFICATION AND COMMODIFICATION

The commodification and meme-ification of protest fashion can result in significant depoliticization, stripping it of its power and context. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) defines this as a dynamic

where consumers' resistance against marketplace ideologies is often commodified by the market itself (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Criticisms of capitalist exploitation are consistent with this phenomenon when resistance becomes marketable as conformity. According to Hebdige (1979), the diffusion of subcultural codes into the mainstream frequently leads to the commodification of authenticity and dilution of symbolism. This is a process where the "repertoire" of subcultural performance is captured, flattened, and sold as a commodified "archive"[5]. This is exemplified by the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirts, which transitioned from a celebrity-endorsed tool for trans solidarity to a viral fashion trend and commodified mass production item, risking the loss of activist intent and material impact. This reflects a core concept in CCT: Protest fashion functions as a resource for consumer identity projects, enabling individuals to signal solidarity, while its commodification undermines this political force by integrating it into the marketplace it critiques (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Similarly, the Pikachu protester shows how humor, visual effects, and absurdity can overshadow political context by meme-ification, shifting focus from state violence to trivialization. As Ahmed (2014) notes, emotions not only "stick" to objects but can also "slide". When a symbol of protest fashion circulates globally, the connection can slide away from its political origins. This "sliding" is what happens when an act of repertoire is converted into a decontextualized archival object. The archive, as Taylor (2003) explains, cannot hold the embodied knowledge of the original performance.

CREATING UNITY AND EMOTIONAL COLLECTIVITY THROUGH FASHION

Despite the risks, the global circulation of protest fashion creates unity and collective identity. Its performative nature displays dissent, bringing like-minded individuals together and publicly displaying solidarity. Applying Butler's (2015) concept of "right to appear", garments are not just symbols but an essential infrastructure of dissent. They are the materials that enable individual bodies to appear as a unified political force. Whether it be shared slogan T-shirts, color codes, or distinctive costumes, fashion serves as a solidarity badge and a tool to create emotional collectivity (Kuryel &

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5   Archive is a term Taylor (2003) uses for the material records and media believed to preserve cultural history.

Fırat, 2015; Aydınoğlu, 2025). When feelings of dissent and solidarity "stick" (Ahmed, 2014) to a garment, it becomes a powerful tool for bringing individuals into a collective, making their shared political positions visible. Kuryel and Fırat's (2015) argument on emotional collectivity is evident in both historical examples, like the suffragette colors, and in contemporary symbols like Pussy Riot's neon balaclavas, which provide a bridge between cultural, national, and linguistic divides. Additionally, the emotional effects of protest fashion can be used to create empathy and moral awareness between participants and observers. The rapid spread of slogans, symbols, and visual motifs via social media amplifies these effects, increasing global engagement (Geise et al, 2025; Yuksel, 2025).

EXCLUSION, CRITICISM, AND RISKS OF BACKLASH

Forming a collective identity through clothing also risks exclusion. Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory suggests that identifications like shared clothing can both unify an in-group while creating distinct boundaries with out-groups. Dress codes may marginalize those with differing religious, gendered, or cultural identities. Gender and sexuality usually become sensitive points as queer, trans, or feminist fashion causes concerns about "respectability", increasing both internal movement debates and external backlash, from state repression to right-wing criticism (Chambers, 2020). Ahmed (2014) argues that collective bodies are often formed through "othering", in which emotions like hate, fear, and disgust are directed at those who do not fit into social norms. Yet visibility itself is uneven: celebrities wearing slogan T-shirts are celebrated and amplified, while anonymous or non-Western protesters are often silenced or criminalized. Visibility can empower, but it can also privilege those with cultural capital while excluding those whose dissent does not fit dominant media narratives (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This is evident in how Pussy Riot's appearance defied gender norms during their prosecution, in "virtue signaling" accusations against "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt wearers, and in media claims that the Turkish Pikachu protester was part of a foreign conspiracy (Chambers, 2020; Cumhuriyet, 2025; Dejung, 2025). Moreover, the global circulation of protest fashion is shaped by postcolonial power structures. Western audiences may celebrate certain protest aesthetics as "brave" while dismissing others

as "chaotic", reflecting cultural and racial biases (Gaugele & Titton, 2019). This struggle is rooted in how dominant power structures systematically define which interpretations are valid, often dismissing others as "misunderstandings" of the intended message (Hall, 1980). As Rovine (2009) notes, "who has, and who does not have fashion is politically determined, a function of power relations" (p. 46). This process shows how dominant cultures use their archives to determine which performances from the global repertoire count as meaningful acts of resistance and which are dismissed (Taylor, 2003). In one context, a form of authentic resistance may be celebrated, while in another, it may be criminalized or trivialized. These biases are aligned with the critique within decolonial fashion studies (Jansen, 2020; Slade & Jansen, 2020).

CONFLICTS OF PROTEST FASHION IN GLOBAL CIRCULATION

Protest fashion is inherently conflicted within global circulation. Shared visual identity can create solidarity and emotional collectivity (Aydınoğlu, 2025; Kuryel & Fırat, 2015), but it also becomes open to dilution, exclusion, commodification, and backlash. As a form of "aesthetic resistance", protest fashion holds communicative power but risks depoliticization and unintended consequences (Bruce, 2014; Aydınoğlu, 2025). Gaugele & Titton (2019) call for an approach that considers the "multi-sided and various nature of design practices" (p. 12), the global circulation of meanings and materials, and the limitations of symbolic acts in shifting power dynamics (Blumer, 1969). Protest fashion intersects art, commerce, politics, and identity. It is evidence of both the power and the fragility of visual resistance in the modern day (Maynard, 2004; Velocci, 2018). Moments like the balaclavas of Pussy Riots, the memes of the Pikachu protester, and the virality of "Protect the Dolls" T-shirts can be inspiring and uniting, but these impacts are conditional. The same visual and emotional power that unites and inspires can also lead to appropriation, backlash, or misinterpretation. This duality highlights the need for a critical, context-sensitive understanding of aesthetic resistance.

In sum, protest fashion is a compelling but unstable expression of dissent: worn, felt, and circulated, it possesses emotional force but remains politically fragile. Its effectiveness ultimately depends on its

positioning within broader social dynamics and the constant negotiation between the repertoire and its enduring, often distorted, representations as the archive (Taylor, 2003).

CONCLUSION

Protest fashion, as seen in the cases of Pussy Riot's balaclavas, the "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt, and the Pikachu protester, emerges as a complex and dynamic tool of resistance. Drawing from the material politics of clothing, this analysis demonstrates that garments in protest settings do much more than communicate messages; they shape atmosphere, mediate presence, and use performance and sensory cues to inspire dissent. As these symbols circulate globally, their meanings risk being commodified and misinterpreted, yet their affective power continues to create unity and collective identity. Clothing thus becomes an infrastructure that both enables embodied resistance and exposes the fragility of aesthetic dissent within global circulation.

Critically, these case studies reveal that protest fashion operates according to distinct logics rather than a single, universal framework. Pussy Riot's balaclavas enact a logic of collective anonymity and visual subversion, offering a performative feminist critique that resonates on local and global levels. The "Protect the Dolls" T-shirt follows a different logic, utilizing celebrity culture and irony to translate activism into mediated visibility. The Pikachu protester, meanwhile, demonstrates how humor and visual spectacle create a logic in which visibility can rapidly generate viral attention, highlighting tensions between resistance and trivialisation.

By proposing these different logics, this analysis shows that protest fashion's meanings, reach, and political effects are shaped by context, audience, and strategy. This comparative approach illuminates both the empowering potential of protest fashion and its vulnerability to being co-opted, emphasizing that each case operates within its own distinct dynamic.

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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.

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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RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS FIBRES OF INDIA AS ACTS OF ECOLOGICAL RESISTANCE

DESI WOOL, KALA COTTON AND ERI SILK (HIMACHAL PRADESH, GUJARAT AND ASSAM)

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Abstract

This paper weaves together the stories of three textile systems rooted in indigenous fibres, *kala* cotton from Gujarat, *desi* sheep wool from Himachal Pradesh, and Eri silk from Assam, to explore how traditional practices carry ecological knowledge and cultural memory. Each fibre is deeply embedded in its landscape, shaped by the rhythms of local ecosystems and sustained through intergenerational care.

Kala cotton, cultivated without irrigation or chemical inputs, is being revived by small land holding farmers in Kachchh as a form of climate-resilient and decolonial design. In Himachal Pradesh, wool practices linked to Gaddi pastoralism reflect how seasonal migration and domestic weaving nurture livelihoods and cultural identity. In Assam, Eri silk-reared and woven by Rabha women, is produced in harmony with forest systems, offering a model of ethical and feminist labour.

These stories are not about nostalgia or preservation, but about sustaining slow, rooted practices in a fast-moving world. They remind us that textiles are not just material objects, they are acts of care, memory, and quiet resistance. In an era of ecological crisis, these practices invite us to imagine futures built on joy, kinship, and reciprocity with the land.

Keywords: *Local Fibers; Land-Based Fibre Practice; Forest and Agricultural Systems; Migratory Pastoralism.*

METHODOLOGY

All three authors have extensive experience with artisanal communities across India through craft-based revival, community-driven, and collaborative design projects. Pramila and Amruthalakshmi first met in 2011 at the National Institute of Design (NID) during their Master of Design with a focus on Textiles and Crafts. Later they collaborated on projects using natural fibers such as cotton, wool, and jute across regions including Rajasthan, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. For her ongoing PhD at Concordia University, Montreal, Pramila connected with Rachel after discovering their shared work on craft and material culture, including Rachel's engagement with 7Weaves in India and artisanal communities in Pakistan and Nepal (Fig.01). Their shared focus on fibers, *kala* cotton, eri silk, and wool, rooted in ecological and social systems, guided multiple Zoom meetings, email exchanges, and collaborative writing sessions, shaping this paper to highlight the cultural, relational, and ecological significance of these fibers.

CASE STUDY I
WOOL-PASTORALISM, ARTISANAL LABOUR AND REVIVAL OF DESI (INDIGENOUS) WOOL

In this section of the paper Amruthalakshmi Rajagopalan traces the life of indigenous wool in Himachal Pradesh, a State in Northern India, through three interconnected frames: the migratory

Fig. 01

pastoralism of the Gaddi community, the artisanal labor practices that emerged around wool, the erosion of these systems due to economic pressures, and the recent revival of these practices in response to broader ecological and economic shifts. Following wool from flock to fiber, from domestic looms to contemporary craft initiatives, this section of the paper examines how mountain economies navigate change while sustaining values, such as livestock-based self-reliance, communal wool sharing, and seasonal material knowledge. (Fig. 02)

MIGRATORY SHEPHERDING: GADDI NOMADIC PASTORALISM AND THE WOOL ECONOMY

Himachal Pradesh is a State in Northern India, framed by the Himalayas. Here, nomadic pastoralism, a traditional occupation, forms the first link in the region's wool-based textile economy. The Gaddi community, one of the several native pastoral groups in the region, have since time immemorial, reared sheep and goats for meat and wool. This practice follows a well-established ancient system of seasonal migration that follows the ecological rhythms of weather and fodder availability across diverse landscapes, scrub forests, coniferous woods, and subalpine grasslands, navigated through inherited routes and seasonal

knowledge passed down over generations. Their inherited knowledge of the landscape is shaped by generations of close observation, memory, and seasonal familiarity with shifting weather patterns, varied terrain, and seasonal vegetation cycles that structure pastoral life.

To the Gaddis, livestock is not simply a source of income but *dhan* (wealth), intimately tied to survival, dignity, and collective memory. They primarily rear *desi* (indigenous Gaddi and Rampur-Bushair) breeds of sheep and goats, well-adapted to regional conditions and yielding coarse, durable wool. The animals are sheared two to three times yearly, with some wool used within pastoral households and the remainder traded locally.

SPINNING AND WEAVING TRADITIONS: ARTISANAL LABOR AND WOOL-BASED LIVELIHOODS IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

From the migratory wool economy emerges a vibrant culture of making and wearing that shapes the social and material fabric of Himachali life. Traditional textiles, the *pattu* (women's shoulder drape), *patti* (handwoven yardage), *topi* (woolen cap), and gardu and gardi (pastoral blankets), are crafted from *desi* wool and serve both everyday and ceremonial purposes. These textiles do more than preserve tradition, they reflect personal histories, regional identities, and the environments in which they are made.

The foundation of this culture lies in artisanal labor rooted in domestic and community spaces. Rural homes continue to spin, knit, and produce cloth in small quantities, integrating textile work into the seasonal rhythm of agrarian and pastoral life. Most households maintain a small loom, or *racchch*. Even where handweaving has declined, commissioning a *pattu* from a local weaver remains common practice, with weaver and wearer collaborating on design, color, and layout.

This embodied, intergenerational practice affirms a sense of authorship and joy, expressed through the tactile language of color, pattern, and care. Designing and wearing one's own textiles becomes a form of self-representation, where aesthetics and memory intertwine. The motifs and colours on a *pattu* have evolved over several generations into a coded language of checkered patterning paired with tapestry woven borders. Motifs and patterning in the *pattu* are not isolated to the region, but share a pattern vocabulary from across borders, from along the trade routes with China.

Fig. 02

Ask a woman about the *pattu* she is wearing, and her eyes light up as she shares with animated pride about its age, wool quality, pattern, and the stories behind its colors. This moment isn't just about the cloth, it reveals how memory, pride, and making are woven together. By choosing to wear these traditional textiles, crafted by hand from local wool, wearers assert a refusal of sameness, celebrating the particularities of local wool, color, and craft, a quiet defiance of homogeneity.

It is in this maker culture and ecosystem that co-operative structures such as Bhuttico (Bhutti Weavers Cooperative Society), established in 1944, formalized artisanal crafting into viable livelihoods. They connected skilled weavers, about 60% of them women, to broader markets while allowing them to remain within their communities. The Kullu shawl, handwoven and GI-tagged for its distinctive patterned borders, continued to represent this blend of tradition and economic sustenance.

LAND-BASED RHYTHMS: THE FRAYING AND REVIVAL OF DESI (INDIGENOUS) WOOL ECONOMIES

Himachal Pradesh's wool economy was traditionally rooted in land-based systems, where the rhythms of pastoral migration and seasonal fiber work structured daily life. Yet, despite communities continuing to rear sheep and maintain knowledge of indigenous wool processing, the material itself is increasingly undervalued. Shepherds often shear and discard local wool, unable to find viable markets or infrastructure to support its use.

This decline reflects shifts in both material preferences and production systems. Imported merino wool, prized for its softness, dominates higher-end markets, while synthetic blends meet the demand for cheaper goods. Even in craft-rich districts like Kullu, handwoven traditions face erosion, power-loomed imitations from industrial hubs like Ludhiana (a textile center in Northern India) are sold to tourists, displacing artisanal labor and devaluing localized economies.

REVIVAL OF DESI (INDIGENOUS) WOOL: CARE, CONTINUITY, AND QUIET RESISTANCE

Though traditional systems declined under industrial and economic pressures, pockets of practice quietly endured, sustained in rural homes and re-emerging in new forms through community-led revival. With support from organisations like the Centre for Pastoralism's Desi Oon initiative and the Eicher Group Foundation's Himalayan Knot Project, attention is returning to community-led systems that centre local fibres, knowledge, and livelihoods.

Among the region's active efforts, Kulvi Whims has rebuilt pastoralist-artisan linkages over the past decade by sourcing and handcrafting with nearly 12,000 kg of *desi* wool annually. The brand supports a network of spinners, dyers, and weavers, positioning indigenous wool as a viable material for contemporary markets. Similarly, The Wool Knitters, who once worked primarily with imported merino, have shifted to using *desi* wool, training over 500 women in the region to create contemporary product lines. Their more pragmatic approach blends a small amount of merino into some of their products to meet market expectations for softness, helping buyers grow familiar with the distinct texture of *desi* wool.

Such efforts do not seek to preserve tradition as static heritage, but to renew the social and ecological relationships that sustain land-based material practices. Through place-based design, skill-sharing, and market adaptation, such initiatives build continuity without romanticising the past.

In contrast to the extractive, fast-paced systems of industrial fashion, this work places value on attentiveness to material lifecycles, slow making, and mutual ties in craft networks. It repositions wool not simply as raw material, but as a practice rooted in care and memory, where making holds together people, place, and purpose.

CASE STUDY II KALA COTTON – DROUGHT-RESILIENT CROP AND DECOLONIAL DESIGN IN KACHCHH

In this section of the paper Pramila Choudhary explores the life of *kala (pronounced kah-lah)* cotton, a native variety of *desi* cotton *(Gossypium herbaceum)*, through three interconnected frames: its ecological resilience in Kachchh's arid landscape, the artisanal labour practices of spinning and weaving that have emerged around it, and the slow, community-led revival of indigenous cotton systems. Following cotton from seed to spindle, from loom to garment, this section of the paper explores how communities in Kachchh navigate ecological and market changes while holding onto values of land-based care, circular making, and aesthetic autonomy (Iyengar, 2021; Border & Fall, n.d.; Khamir, n.d.).

Kala cotton thrives in the semi-arid ecology of Kachchh, (also spelled Kutch) is a district in the western Indian state of Gujarat, bordering Pakistan and the Arabian Sea. Known for its salt desert (The Rann of Kachchh), it has historically been home to diverse communities of pastoralists, artisans and agriculturalists. *Kala* cotton is considered "Old world" cotton, with its lineage tracing back to the ancient Indus Valley Civilisation. It was a primary source of cotton for the subcontinent and a key part of India's textile trade before and during colonial rule (Moulherat et al., 2002).

After the 2001 Bhuj earthquake spurred industrialisation and displaced traditional livelihoods, Khamir, a non profit organisation, founded in the Kukma village, Bhuj in 2005 by Kachchh Nav Nirman Abhiyan and the Nehru Foundation for Development, has led efforts to restore and revive handicrafts, such as *kala* cotton and rebuild local livelihoods (Jha, 2018).

Once a locally dominant fibre and a key input to regional textile trade, *kala* cotton declined during the colonial and post-colonial eras as long-staple, hybrid, and later genetically modified varieties such as Bt cotton (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) were promoted for higher yields; these shifts, together with changing markets, sidelined *kala* as "inferior" and nearly drove it from mainstream cultivation (Jha, 2018; Mongabay India, 2019). Unlike the hybrids favoured for mechanised production (Iyengar, 2021), *kala* cotton requires no irrigation, no chemical inputs, and minimal external intervention, its short-staple, *desi* ecology fits rainfed farming systems and avoids groundwater overextraction (Khamir, n.d.).

Communities in Gujarat and across India grew and spun short-staple *desi* varieties well into the 19th century. The colonial introduction of American long-staple cotton (*Gossypium hirstum*) in the mid-19th century disrupted this stem, as it was better suited to mechanized mills in Bombay and Lancashire. While long-staple cotton generated higher commercial value, it required more water

Fig. 03

and chemical inputs, displacing local varieties and threatening rural livelihood. Evidence of resistance can be seen in Gandhian-era advocacy of *khadi* (hand-spun yarn and handwoven textile) which explicitly promoted *desi* cotton as an anticolonial symbol of self-reliance (Aravind & Girisanker 2022). In recent years, farmers in Kachchh have begun to reclaim this fibre, especially as climate variability intensifies. As Paresh Mangalia, who works with the non-profit Khamir and has been closely involved in the revival process along with the community members, shared, "This is not just a crop, it's a philosophy. *Kala* cotton allows farmers to work with nature, not against it" (Mangalia, 2024, personal communication). Reviving *kala* cotton is therefore an act of decolonial design: it restores seed sovereignty, reinforces regional self-reliance, and strengthens community resilience. (Fig. 03)

HANDSPINNING AND HANDWEAVING TRADITIONS OF ARTISANAL COMMUNITIES OF KACHCHH, GUJARAT

Once cotton is harvested, it enters the hands of spinners and weavers whose practices are equally rooted in ecology and memory. Kachchh's artisanal economy faced rapid disruption after the 2001 earthquake, which paved the way for large-scale industrialisation. Between 2001 and 2011, over 400 large and medium industries were established in Kachchh, turning it into one of India's fastest-growing industrial districts (Government of Gujarat, Kachchh District Human Development Report, 2016). Large projects and special economic initiatives accelerated urbanisation and drew labour away from rural, craft-based livelihoods, while industrial land use and mechanised production eroded local markets for handmade goods. Although industrialisation created wage employment and improved certain physical amenities, it also disrupted artisanal supply chains, reduced access to raw materials and workspace, and weakened intergenerational transmission of craft skills, pressures that many weavers and craft families responded to by shifting to factory work or migrating for wages (Government of Gujarat, 2014; Gandhy & Jain, 2008; Mehta, 2010).

As Meera Goradia (former director of Khamir) reflects, "Reviving *kala* cotton was not a one-year

1. Kala Cotton is procured from farmers

2. Spinning on Amber Charka to make yarn

3. Women make the warp for the loom

4. The weft yarn is rolled onto a bobbin

5. Yarn is woven into fabric
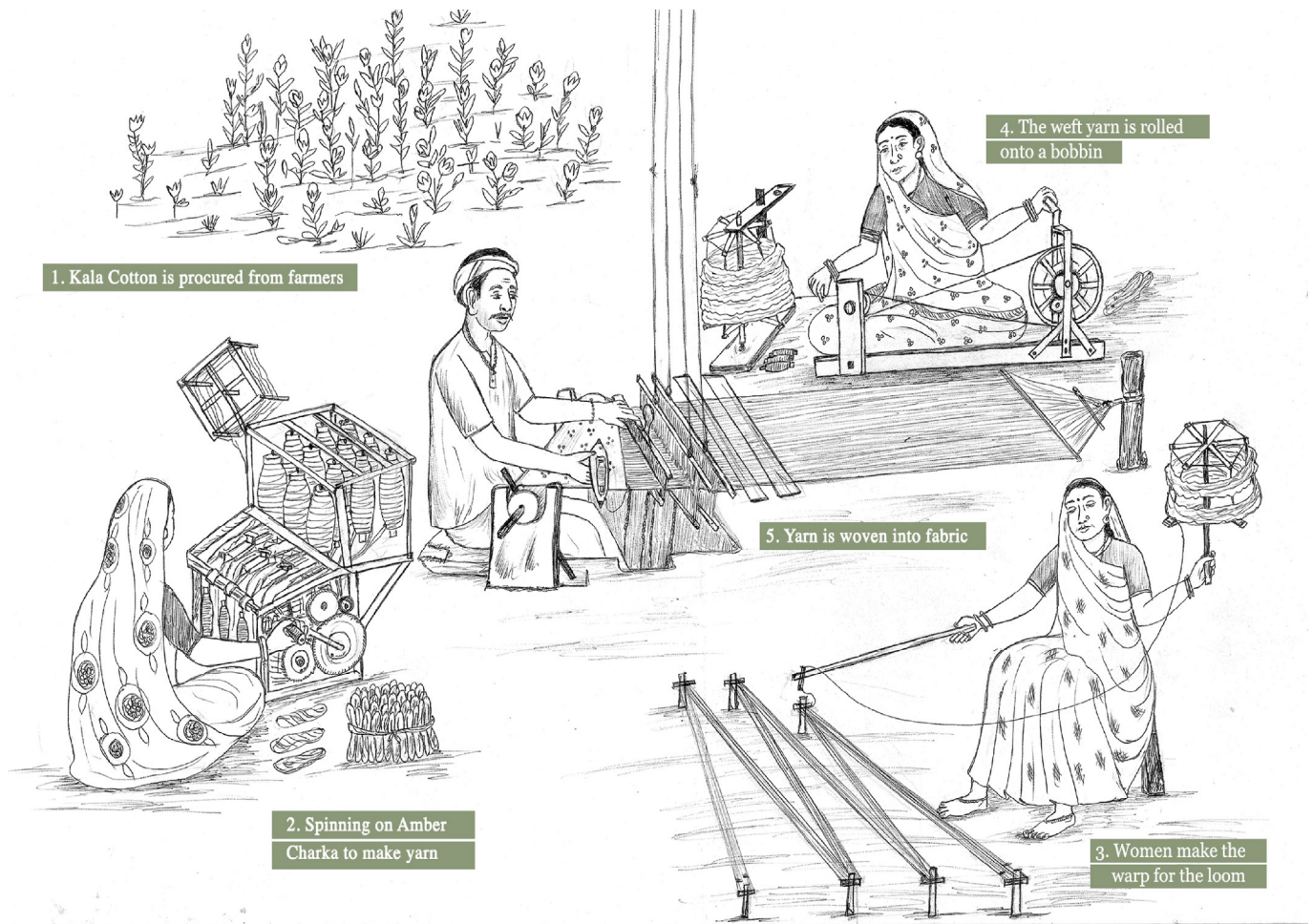
Fig. 03.1

project, it took more than a decade of patient collaboration. The turning point came when we started listening to what the land and people already knew" (Goradia, 2024, personal communication). Under her leadership at Khamir, the *kala* Cotton Initiative was born, connecting farmers, ginners, handspinners, and weavers to create a fully localised value chain.

The return to Gandhian spinning tools such as the *ambar charkha* and the reactivation of home-based looms re-established pride in textile making. The cloth produced, coarse at first touch, softens with wear and time. It speaks of slowness, tactility, and place. Each yard of fabric becomes a quiet act of resistance against homogenised fashion systems. As weavers narrate their relationship with yarn, their labour becomes not only economic but expressive, tied to community, self-representation, and cultural survival. (Fig. 3.1)

REVIVAL OF INDIGENOUS COTTON: CARE, CONTINUITY, AND QUIET RESISTANCE

The resurgence of *kala* cotton is not just a revival of a fibre, it is a renewal of relations. This revival,

driven by everyday practice and mutual care, challenges dominant textile logics that privilege speed, sameness, and distant supply chains. My methodology is informed by prior apprenticeship research on indigenous cotton systems and continues through immersive fieldwork and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Inspired by my grandmother, Anchi Devi,who handspun fibres and worked alongside Meghwal weavers, I approach *kala* cotton as a living archive. Her seasonal fibre choices and dye palettes reflected what Ingold (2013) describes as "relational making", a process grounded in observation, experimentation, and intimate environmental knowing. Brands working with *kala* cotton's revival have also been supported by a growing network of ethical fashion brands that collaborate with artisan clusters in Gujarat. Brands like Bandhej, Maku Textiles, Anavila, AND by Anita Dongre Design, 11.11 / eleven eleven, Runaway Bicycle, Lafaani, The Summer House, and Injiri among others are helping reposition this humble fibre on the global stage. By working closely with Khamir and local weavers, these brands create handspun, handwoven textiles rooted in traditional knowledge

Fig. 04

and climate-resilient practices. Their collections foreground natural dyes, slow processes, and respect for maker agency, reframing *kala* cotton as a symbol of sustainability and aesthetic integrity. Today, *kala* cotton represents not a return to tradition, but a reimagining of what futures can look like when rooted in care. The fibres spun, woven, and worn reflect not only ecological resilience but also a creative refusal, where design emerges not from trend, but from kinship with soil, season, and story. This movement offers a counterpoint to extractive economies, a grounded, feminist, and ecologically attentive way forward.

CASE STUDY III: ERI SILK – NON-VIOLENT FIBER AND FEMINIZED LABOUR IN ASSAM

In this section of the paper Author3 explores the forest-dependent Rabha communities, where Eri silk is transformed into textiles through community-rooted craft practices shaped by traditional ecological knowledge. Current initiatives aim at revitalizing Eri silk by repositioning it within contemporary fashion and design. Following the thread of Eri silk from homesteads and

handweavers to emerging markets, this section explores how indigenous craft and agricultural systems can persist and thrive, grounded in values of cultural resilience and ecological continuity.

THE STORY OF ERI SILK IN ASSAM: THE *BARI* HOMESTEAD SYSTEM AND FOREST-DEPEN-DENT RABHA COMMUNITIES.

Rabha indigenous communities live primarily in the humid plains and densely vegetated low hills of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam, in one of the planet's most biologically rich regions. Known for their skill as weavers, they have traditionally produced Eri silk for use within their communities, a tradition dating back several thousand years. Handspun and handwoven Eri silk – also known as "*ahimsa*" or "peace" silk – is soft, durable, absorbent, and breathable, making it particularly suitable for the humid climate.

The forest-dependent Rabha communities live and work within the indigenous *bari* homestead system (a mixed use system including managed forest, fruit trees, gardens and Eri silk production)

navigating an understanding of interconnected ecological care and forest-land management that includes approaches such as mosaic planting for fodder crops and natural dye plants, where for example, indigo seedlings are planted under the canopy cover of forest trees, offering ideal growing conditions for the dye plants. These mixed plots are interspersed with traditional food crops and community-managed forests on their tribal lands, allowing families to sustain themselves while preserving native plant and tree species and providing habitat for many living beings.

Eri silk production is one aspect of this interconnected ecological approach. Using organic agricultural methods, Eri silkworms (*Samia cynthia ricini*) are reared on *bari* homesteads. The caterpillars are fed on leaves from the castor plant (*Ricinus communis*), and are carefully tended until the pupae have matured. Most pupae develop into moths and leave the cocoon naturally, while some are harvested to be used as a protein-rich food source by the community.

Throughout these different aspects of *bari* life, community members employ traditional ecological knowledge passed through the generations: an understanding of the carrying capacity of the land, an awareness of multiple interconnected ecosystems, and the need for balance in human/non-human interactions. Nearly everything the communities use in daily life comes from their coexistence with and care for their environment, transforming the bounty of the land into food, medicine, clothing and shelter. (Fig. 04)

TRANSFORMATION: REARING, SPINNING AND WEAVING ERI SILK

Rabha systems of rearing and processing Eri silk for textiles are deeply embedded in community-based craft and agricultural practices, guided by indigenous ecological knowledge. After the moths emerge, women degum the cocoons, and then tease and align the short-staple fibres. Spinning is carried out using a traditional hand-held drop spindle, and threads are dyed with plant materials including barks, roots, leaves, and seeds.

Most of these activities are collective: women work together to spin, dye and weave. At each stage, the practice of community and ecological care is evident, as through their collective efforts women transform raw materials using place-based knowledge and embodied skills. When dyed with natural materials, Eri textiles are fully compostable and will biodegrade at the end of their life, contributing to carbon capture and soil enrichment. Instead of contributing to environmental degradation, they complete the cycle of ecological care, reinforcing interconnections between people and the land.

In Assam, it is said that "every home has a loom and every woman is a weaver". In the Rabha community, rearing, spinning and weaving Eri silk all constitute key aspects of women's labour and identity; weaving skills in particular are highly valued, and often a source of great pride. Women gather to work and talk, with older women carrying out the bulk of the skilled labour, while girls learn by helping their mothers. Alongside textile skills, knowledge of local dye plants is passed down through generations, along with traditional uses of plants for medicine, basketry, and as foraged foods. These intergenerational exchanges underscore the vital role of women in preserving cultural knowledge and sustaining life through ecological care, as well as illustrating the interconnectedness of Eri textile production with broader ecological and cultural practices.

Through its transformation from raw fibre to complex cloth, Eri silk carries profound cultural significance, and its use is enmeshed in Rabha daily life. Worn as wrapped clothing by both men and women, Eri is used for everyday wear, as well as for celebratory and ceremonial occasions, reinforcing community identity. The ongoing cultivation of Eri silk allows the Rabha people to retain control over a critical element of their cultural lexicon, ensuring the transmission of craft skills and ecological practices. As such, Eri silk embodies resilience, resistance, and joy, offering a tangible expression of cultural knowledge and continuity.

REVITALIZATION: ERI SILK WITHIN CONTEMPORARY FASHION AND DESIGN

Currently, there is renewed interest in regional fibres and craft practices within fashion and design, as disillusionment deepens with the extractive nature of much of mainstream fashion production. Efforts to reposition Eri silk focus on its environmental benefits and its roots in community and land-centered production guided by traditional ecological knowledge. These practices also have potential to strengthen local economies, and to create employment opportunities within indigenous communities, built on intergenerational

know-how and skill.

Connecting community-made textiles with the distant world of fashion and design necessitates educating designers, retailers and customers about the deep contexts from which these textiles emerge: the ecological systems they sustain, the cultural knowledge they preserve, and the value of slower, place-based production. This reframing positions Eri silk as a counterpoint to fast fashion: a form of luxury grounded not in excess, but in care, ethics, and connection.

Design-led initiatives are central to this transformation. The community-based initiative We Are Kal offers a range of thoughtfully designed Eri silk pieces directed towards the European market, with careful consideration of how story-telling and design-led products create meaningful connections with clientele, thus amplifying the economic and cultural impact of their work.

With a focus on materials innovation, 7Weaves is another community-based initiative that is reclaiming traditional knowledge while connecting handwoven Eri textiles to the global slow fashion and design movement. Rooted within Rabha culture, 7Weaves has developed a place-based production system while seeking out global opportunities for collaboration. These include exhibiting carefully designed textile collections at international fashion trade fairs, partnering with fashion designers to develop micro-collections tailored to specific markets, and working with fashion education programs to connect Eri textiles with the next generation of conscious designers. These approaches seek to reposition community-made textiles as an ethical luxury within contemporary design, one centred around place-based knowledge and a culture of care, and reinforcing the interrelationship between craft, community and ecology.

Beyond educational and market strategies, such initiatives also cultivate networks of indigenous solidarity. Through exchanges with communities in Meghalaya, Bhutan, and beyond, 7Weaves and others are fostering a revival of indigenous textile knowledge systems across regions. In doing so, they suggest a vital, living vision of fashion where land-based fibre practices not only persist and thrive, but also foster care, survival, and joyful resistance.

CONCLUSION: AFFECTIVE PASSAGE IN TOXIC TIMES – FASHION AND JOY AS RESISTANCE

In an era defined by ecological degradation and the toxic aftermath of fast fashion, the revival of indigenous fibre systems signals a transformative affective passage. These practices challenge dominant narratives of sustainability that remain entangled with colonial economies and industrial systems. Instead, Kala cotton, Himachali wool, and Eri silk reorient us toward place, practice, and people.

Their making, slow, relational, and embodied—stands in stark contrast to the alienation of mass production. Each handspun thread, each naturally dyed fabric, becomes a conduit of memory, agency, and quiet defiance. These fibres carry with them ancestral knowledge, ecological rhythms, and the care of communities who continue to steward land through craft.

Fashion, in this context, becomes more than consumption. It becomes a medium for joy and resistance, a way to remember what has been forgotten, to revalue what has been dismissed, and to build solidarities across geographies and generations. The warmth of wool, the softness of silk, the sturdiness of cotton—they are not just materials, but metaphors for survival, suggesting future scenarios where fashion production is rooted in community and the land, and where luxury is based on care and ecological flourishing.

Through this affective and material passage, we glimpse futures rooted in regeneration, not extraction; in continuity, not rupture; in collective thriving, not individual accumulation. These fibre stories offer us not only a critique of the present, but a sensorial map toward more just, joyful, and life-affirming worlds.

NOTES

Khamir collaborates with organizations to support craft revival and community development. It works with Kachchh Nav Nirman Abhiyan (KNNA) on craft initiatives, while the Nehru Foundation for Development (NFD) and KNNA helped establish the Khamir campus in earthquake-affected areas. Khamir partners with Craftroots on craft development projects, and KMVS links women waste collectors to supply Khamir's Plastic Recycling Project.

Rabha communities are organized around the

bari homestead system, with extended families living and working on small plots of land within the forest. These homesteads form a transitional band between forested hills and agricultural river valleys and include managed forest trees, fruit-bearing trees and vines, forest-gardens of vegetables and herbs, plots of castor plants and Eri-rearing sheds, and animals such as chickens as well as the family's tools of production including looms, agricultural tools, and food storage systems.

LOCAL WORDS

Ahminsa - nonviolence
Bari - homestead system
Kala Cotton- (*pronounced kah-lah*) cotton, a native variety of *desi* (*local*)
Desi - indigenous
Pattu - a woollen drape worn by women in Himachal Pradesh
Patti - handwoven yardage
Dhan - wealth
Topi - woolen cap
Gardu and *gardi* - pastoral blankets
Racchch – a handloom

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Illustration of India Map, indicating three regions, covered in the paper, Gujarat, Himchal Pradesh and North east of India.

[Fig. 02] Local women draped in handwoven *Patti*, made at home using *desi* wool for personal use, are pictured alongside sheep grazing at BakharThaach (Shepherd Field), located at the base of Hanuman Tibba in the Greater Himalayas. Also shown is a contemporary adaptation of traditional *Pattu* check designs by The Wool Knitters. Photo Credit: Rajahopalan, A.

[Fig. 03] Kala cotton growing in a farm in Kutch, Gujarat, is pictured alongside Meera, a weaver at her loom, and her mother preparing the warp. This image highlights intergenerational craft and the resilience of indigenous fibers. Photo Credit: Khamircrafts Kutch.

[Fig. 03.1] An illustrated overview of the kala Cotton process, from cultivation to handspun yarn, highlights the resilient, rain-fed cotton native to Kutch, Gujarat. The visual traces the fiber's journey through harvesting, ginning, spinning, and weaving—each step grounded in traditional, low-impact techniques practiced by local artisan communities. Photo Credit: Khamircrafts, Kutch.

[Fig. 04] Women artisans from the Rabha community engage in natural dye preparation— winding bobbins, sorting Eri cocoons, and working with dye materials like myrobalan (a natural mordant) and Indian madder (a traditional source

of red dye). This process reflects the community's intimate ecological knowledge and sustainable dyeing practices passed down through generations. Photo Credit: MacHenry.

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KUN.BE

A SERVITISATION FRAMEWORK FOR THE SUSTAINABLE REVIVAL OF GOA'S KUNBI SAREE

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Abstract

The Kunbi saree, once an integral part of tribal Goan identity, is now threatened by colonial erasure and mass production. Despite its historical and cultural richness, attempts at revival have not yet reclaimed its importance. Located at the intersection of cultural protection and sustainable innovation, the study identifies systemic challenges and proposes service-driven strategies to re-establish the Kunbi saree into contemporary fashion economies. Services such as digital engagement, co-creation, and craft-based story-telling present a culturally located and economically viable model for the revival of Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs), by restoring value through the service-led design approach. The project *Kun.Be* positions servitisation as a tool of cultural resistance and economic sustainability, and proposes a replicable model for reviving endangered heritage crafts through service-driven engagement.

Keywords: *Kunbi Saree; Servitisation; Heritage Textile Revival; Cultural Resistance; Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs).*

FROM LOSS TO RESISTANCE

The Kunbi saree, also known as the *Kapod* or *Dhentulli*, is Goa's most ancient saree tradition, which was once part of the everyday attire of the Kunbi-Gawda people (Correia, 2006; Monteiro, 2015; Fernandes & Desouza, 2022). Once woven and worn by the agrarian Kunbi tribe, the saree embodied everyday resilience. It's red-and-white checkered patterns, rudraksha motifs, and life-stage colour coding represent resilience, social hierarchy, and ritual continuity. (Fig. 01)
Although there is no proof of the Kunbi people being the first weavers, from 1930 to 1950, the Shettigars of Candolim, Rasquinhas of Bastora, and Kamats were three large families that dominated this saree industry (Gaatha, 2020–2022). The

Portuguese colonial rule abruptly disrupted this continuity, wherein the local traditions were kept out and traditional attire such as Kunbi saree was relegated with restrictions (Monteiro, 2015; Vas et al., 2021). Today the craft is near extinction, with less than twenty operational weavers today, influenced by globalised fashion, modern silhouettes, and mass-production (Sharma & Sornapudi, 2024).
The saree has survived in spite of cultural opposition, having been preserved in secret chambers and reasserting itself later in ritual contexts like *Shigmo* celebrations and *Dhalo* dances (Rodrigues, 1977; Monteiro, 2015). The saree then embodies what Said (1993) has coined as "survival through subaltern aesthetics" - where material

COMPONENTS & DRAPING OF KUNBI

Body Checks inspired by religious 'Chowk' design

'Chowk'

'6 mukhi Rudraksh'

4.5 inch Border on top and bottom- generally features two lines of motifs representing 'Rudraksh'.

Pallav Design generally features stripes

Pallav/ Pallu usually knotted on right shoulder, In some cases the knot is also place at front

Till 1940's was worn without top/ Blouse,until the law in 1560 that mandated wearing the blouse

Knee length saree with Dobby border in silken flat inset is usually a nine yard saree

Pleats in the front

Fig. 01

culture is a place of hidden resistance. The global fast fashion boom, as well as the post-liberalisation era of the 1990s, have further marginalised the handwoven crafts. The younger generation perceived the Kunbi saree as "backward", and machine-made replicas and man-made fabrics stripped it of its authenticity and financial worth (Sharma & Sornapudi, 2024). Moreover, Goa's tourist economy converted cultural identity into leisure and *Lusophone* culture, and in the process, diluted the tribal narrative in the state's visual culture (Ifeka, 1985; Alvares, 2002).

In this framework, the decline of Kunbi sari weaving is not merely due to economic disinterest but as a result of deep-rooted challenges of Cultural invisibility, postcolonial marginalisation, and postcolonial displacement (Barbosa, 2012; Fernandes & Desouza, 2022; Shetye, 2023; Vas et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to revive the saree, through strategies that actively promote cultural empowerment, emotional identification, and socio-economic respectability.

This research responds to the wider challenge of reimagining fashion as a site of pleasure, power, and care, particularly in times of socio-cultural vulnerability. It explores how servitisation strategies can be useful not just for economic purposes, but also contribute to emotional and cultural revival in heritage textile systems.

Initially rooted in industrial management (Vandermerwe & Rada, 1988) and developed through Product-Service Systems (Tukker, 2004; Mont, 2002; Baines et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2008), servitisation reformulates consumption as experience instead of transaction. Its application has since been expanded in diverse sectors, including Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs) (Sundbo, Rubalcaba & Gallouj, 2021), wherein it focuses on value co-creation, customisation, emotional engagement and lifecycle extension. Moreover, research reveals its potential for the sustainable revival of traditional crafts (Ho, 2024; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; LaSalle & Britton, 2003; Sundbo et al., 2021). Against the backdrop of this context, the research adopts servitisation not only as a business model but as a culturally situated, design-driven strategy for resistance and preservation. Value here is not embedded solely in the product, but it is co-created through ongoing services (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). This shift evolves

the craft from static preservation to dynamic participation (Mont, 2002; Baines et al., 2009). On the contrary, the Kunbi saree revival has so far been on an aesthetic level in which the systemic cultural and economic exclusions have largely been ignored (Gaatha, 2022).

In contrast, servitisation offers a more emotionally resilient and socially embedded model (Chapman, 2005). As Baines et al. (2019), Bigdeli et al. (2017), and Tukker (2004) note, servitisation is a progressive transformation strategy that supports sustainability and unlocks new revenue streams. This study proposes a four-stage model, adapted from Baines et al. (2009), and reimagined for the Kunbi saree's revival, reframing fashion as care, continuity, and cultural resistance (Haraway, 1988; Makhubu & Mbongwa, 2019).

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

This study is excerpted from a broader master's thesis titled *"Revival of the Kunbi saree-A servitisation based approach"*, conducted at Politecnico di Milano in the MSc of Design for the Fashion System (Agarwal, 2025). The article reflects the researcher's situated knowledge as an Indian (Hindu) female researcher, which informed the study with cultural familiarity and sensitivity. Grounded in a feminist and decolonial ethics of care (Serafini, 2021), while the thesis provided a comprehensive exploration of the craft's decline, stakeholder analysis, and systemic barriers, this article focuses specifically on how service design strategies can act as tools of cultural care and resistance within heritage textile systems.

This study employs a qualitative, design-driven methodology to explore ways in which servitisation strategies can enable the revival of the Kunbi saree tradition as cultural care, economic empowerment, and resistance against erasure. The author navigated between academic research and embodied field experiences to create a framework embedded in weavers' daily lives and respond to systemic revival gaps.

Servitisation, first introduced in manufacturing industries (Vandermerwe & Rada, 1988; Baines et al., 2009), refers to a shift from merely selling tangible goods to offer product service systems. This concept in Creative and Cultural Industries, refers to a shift from selling artefacts to providing experiential products and services, such as renting, repairing, co-creation, that add cultural, economic or emotional value. This study adapts the servitisa-tion model to the Kunbi saree weaving industry and positions it as both a business model and a cultural preservation delivery system.

The study progressed in four iterative stages: the initial phase involved understanding the socio-historical background of the Kunbi saree and concepts of servitisation through literature review. More than 50 secondary sources comprising policy reports, electronic repositories, research articles, and textile studies reports were analysed. to determine the gaps in past revival efforts and understand the applicability of servitisation models in CCIs (Tukker, 2004; Sundbo et al., 2021). This phase also comprised comparative studies of best practice in CCIs, such as Gaatha, *"Weaving time"* by Incas (Gagarin, 2020), and *"I was a Sari",* to inform how services like repair, narrative, or digital connectivity could be transposed for heritage crafts.

In the next phase, the primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews of two key stakeholders: Verma D'Mello, Executive Director of the NGO- Goa Sudharop, and Radha, founder of Sincro, a digital platform dedicated to Kunbi sarees. While none of the two interviewees belong to the community directly, they were selected due to their direct involvement with Kunbi weaving revival. They both work closely with weavers and act as a mediator to foster connection between indigenous knowledge and contemporary fashion.

Verma D'Mello has been actively working with weavers through an NGO- Goa Sudharop, aiming to support and uplift the community and Kunbi saree since 2017, Radha's connection to the craft stems from her mother's revival initiative at Goa College of Home Science since 2011. Their prolonged engagement with the members of the community and the craft have provided significant insights on revival challenges and maintaining authenticity of the craft. Nevertheless, the study acknowledges the limitation of not interviewing direct community members. Future research must address this gap for deeper validation of authenticity concerns. The interviews focussed on exploring the challenges in retaining cultural authenticity while modifying designs to attract younger generations and maintaining the emotional significance during the revival process. The study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis model that consists of: familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes and producing

the report. This process ensured that the recurring ideas were strategically identified. For example, the codes referring to "challenges in authenticity" and "youth disinterest", were grouped into the broader themes of "technological barriers" and "socio-cultural challenges", situated within the overarching category of challenges in the Kunbi saree industry. Through this process, the literature analysis and transcription of interviews revealed two overarching themes: (1) Challenges in the Kunbi Saree Industry and (2) Opportunities for servitisation.

The third phase was about developing a model through design synthesis. Building on the insights derived from Phase 1 and 2, a four- stage servitisation model was developed, namely- Awareness, Engagement, Innovation and Scaling. This phase mixed the theory and the empirical results to create a progression model and a service design proposal tailored to Kunbi Saree's socio-economic and cultural environment. In applying the servitisation model to the Kunbi saree industry, the model is also theoretically anchored to Howard-Grenville et al. (2011) understanding of liminality in cultural change. This is to ensure that the progression stays within the boundaries of authenticity (liminal), with meaning and cultural authority intact, without diverging into commoditization or detachment (liminoid). Cultural custodianship is therefore still paramount in each of the four stages, regulating the way services, collaborations, and international outreach are developed and leveraged. Within this framework, the model focuses on digital storytelling, repair services, co-creation, and experiential offers as forces towards long term sustainability (Baines et al.,2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Mont, 2002).

Finally, in the last phase the study translated these insights into the project Kun.Be, that provides a progression model, specific to the Kunbi Saree weaving industry, to ensure practical implementation of servitisation. The study emphasises participatory and culturally aware methodology, understanding design's role not only as an intervention tool, but as a practice that incorporates listening, translating and rebuilding community roots.

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

The modern dilemmas of the Kunbi saree weaving tradition are not just the result of economic disregard or market obsolescence, but also of more profound cultural stigmas and structural breaks wrought by colonialism, casteism, and global fashion capitalism. Based on the interviews with Verma D'Mello and Radha, two engaged voices in the saree's revival, and supported by secondary literature, this section identifies the socio-cultural, economic, and technological obstacles to revival, and examines why standard interventions have been insufficient and how servitisation can prove to be a better solution.

Amongst young Goans, the saree is found to be largely out of fashion, and a signifier of low caste status (Gaatha, 2020; Fernandes & Desouza, 2022). Such stigma, along with the erosion of intergenerational transfer of knowledge, leads to fewer elders weaving and less youth interest. These reports align with broader trends reported by Majeed (2018), Ghosh (2011) and Ghosh & Ghoshal (2019), which mention rural artisans increasingly moving towards urban employment, considering traditional weaving to be economically unviable.

In spite of its lush pictorial and symbolic lexicon, the present situation of the Kunbi saree in the world of fashion is tenuous. Shows such as Verma's in Cannes provide temporary visibility but do not necessarily result in sustained economic infrastructure (FABUK Magazine, 2017). Radha's experiments in design have been receiving growing attention but remain niche. Without institutional support, such interventions risk becoming sentimental instead of systemic.

Economically, the craft suffers from high raw material costs, low scalability, and non-Geographical Indication recognition that limits its authenticity and traceability (Sharma & Sornapudi, 2024; Verma D'Mello). Policy delays and institutional neglect further hinder advancement. Additionally, the price of cotton yarn increases the production cost, mostly because it's imported from the neighbouring states, due to unsuitable climatic conditions for growing yarn in Goa. This makes the saree uncompetitive with the machine-made alternatives. Weavers lack credit, subsidy and corporate facilities, and therefore, are reliant on NGO support or patronage. This absence of structured financial support discourages new entrants and limits the opportunities for innovation in the craft. Besides, absence of market relationships and formal distribution channels, limits artisans access to scalable and regular markets. The absence of GI tags adds to the

complication of the situation, failing to protect the originality of the weave, and allowing cheap replicas to dodge weaver economies. Moreover, the saree remains highly disconnected from digital markets, which further exacerbates the problem. Kethan et al. (2022) and Mishra et al. (2022) discuss that the problem lies not with demand but with infrastructure. The weavers still have no access to digital tools for design iteration, price transparency, and e-retail platforms. This exclusion distances them from new avenues of sales and commerce.

Both the interviewees highlighted the need to develop digital ecosystems. Verma stressed the value of digital storytelling as a memory project, archiving local dialects, weaving rituals, and personal histories of women who wore the saree. Radha emphasised the need to develop a digital infrastructure to reach and meet the practical needs of young and global consumers. This means that technological renaissance is not just an issue of digitisation but of culturally-sensitive tech design that takes into account the rhythms, literacy levels, and emotional attachments of the community.

SERVITISATION STRATEGIES FOR REVIVAL

As per the challenges identified in Section 3, it is clear that the revival of Kunbi saree cannot be done just by the aesthetic intervention or discrete programmes. These problems jeopardise the sustainability and the cultural meaning of the craft. In combating these issues, servitisation presents an attractive alternative. It repositions the Kunbi saree from being merely a piece of clothing, to an interactive space for cultural continuity. For example, repair and restyling can contribute to the longevity of products (Mont, 2002; Vargo & Lusch, 2008); narrative platforms, such as Gaatha, can form emotional connections. Possibly, craftsmanship can be converted to lived experiences through experiential workshops (Tukker, 2004; Gebauer, 2021; Chai-Arayalert et al., 2021). Global examples, such as Italian Artisan, indicate that partnerships between designers and artisans can promote identity and economic growth. Therefore, the strategies proposed here are a direct response to the social, economic, and technological challenges discussed earlier, not as discrete solutions but elements of networked strategies for resilience through education, engagement, innovation, and collaboration.

EDUCATIONAL REVIVAL AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

As discussed in the previous section, a major challenge in the Kunbi Saree weaving industry is the decline of intergenerational knowledge transfer and youth interest. Many young Goans transition to urban jobs for better earnings and security, as they associate Kunbi weaving with backward labour and caste stigma. This pattern resembles the broader trends across traditional Indian crafts, where young artisans leave the handloom practices for more economically viable employment (Majeed, 2018; Ghosh & Ghoshal, 2019). This has led to the declining number of skilled weavers and thus threatens the survival of the generational knowledge transfer.

Servitisation, converts weaving to an experiential learning process. Partnerships with schools, youth groups and community organizations can restate the history, tradition and symbolism of Kunbi saree weaving industry into an experiential curriculum, building early adoption and emotional bonds. Incorporating digital components like virtual story-telling and game-ified weaving lessons may offer experiential learning while building emotional bonds. Media campaigns among young people, emphasizing the cultural and environmental significance of the saree, can also help reimagine the saree within contemporary values of identity and sustainability.

These initiatives respond not only to the lack of generational transfer but also to the stigma associated with Kunbi saree as outdated. Consequently, these strategies may present weaving as a green and innovative practice, while addressing cultural invisibility and economic downturn, by making the Kunbi saree relevant to modern youth values. This opens up possibilities for the next generation to view weaving as a viable and sustainable career path, and not only become the recipients of knowledge but also the custodians, transmitting craft skills to generations to come.

CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Additionally, the other major challenge in Kunbi saree is regarding its perceptions in contemporary fashion. Younger consumers tend to view traditional garments like the Kunbi saree as outdated while cultural purists resist changes in the design. Moreover, for an extensive period the saree has been stigmatized as a garment associated with the lower caste and an attire worn by farmers or a

specific agrarian community (Gaatha,n.d.). Thus, the role for servitisation here is to maintain the balance between originality and modernity.

This can be done through annual cultural festivals. These festivals, featuring Kunbi saree through fashion shows, and traditional dances, will provide artisans a platform to demonstrate their weaving skills. Eventually, highlighting Kunbi saree significance and thereby improving its perception (Ho, 2024). Interactive weaving workshops, where participants can learn about the history and cultural importance of Kunbi saree. Activities may also include co-creating simple woven pieces such as bookmarks or scarves, providing the opportunity for hands-on experience and lasting memories. Moreover, tourism-driven experiences can be integrated into Goa's cultural economy and promoted through platforms such as TripAdvisor. This will help generate revenues for weavers and increase experience for tourists.

Initiatives like these, will acknowledge the saree as a part of Goa's heritage. Importantly, these strategies might also reaffirm the saree's symbolic significance and build long-term respectability, by making the saree visible in both community rituals and global cultural circuits. The local fashion designers, cultural organisations, and tourism industries are the key stakeholders in incorporating the saree into the identity economy of Goa.

DIGITAL INTEGRATION FOR MARKET DEVELOPMENT

The limited digital adaptation, and low visibility adds on to the problem. Since weavers don't have access to digital tools, they remain dependent on occasional exhibitions or NGO for visibility. This allows machine-made replicas to dominate in the market.

Servitisation circumvents this by positioning digital infrastructure as a collaborative and empowering space (Gebauer, 2021; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). The strategies include creating a dedicated platform for digital storytelling archives. This ensures that the legacy of the saree is conveyed, increasing cultural visibility. Specialised e-commerce websites, virtual try-on, and customisation transform the weaver's capacity to engage with consumers directly, eliminating middlemen and ensuring transparency. Training programs for artisans can equip them with the important craft skills as well as skills to use social media, and integration with

craft tourism ensures that technology adoption is culturally sensitive as well as pragmatically feasible. Another strategy can be to create gamified digital interfaces that allow consumers to experiment with motif placements, drapes, and colours, within the liminality of the culture, create deeper emotional bonds with the product, shifting the saree from a transactional commodity to a co-authored experience.

This digital integration addresses the critical disconnect between artisans and markets, making the weavers reach a wider audience. It provides visibility and forms emotional connections. In this way, technology becomes a culturally sensitive tool for empowerment. It thus, positions weaver as active participants in shaping their market presence and narratives. Tech Firms, Artisans, and government textile boards are crucial stakeholders to enable this transition.

FASHION COLLABORATION AND CO-CREATION

Finally, the craft faces a crisis of limited design innovation. As discussed in previous section, there is a tension between cultural purists and

PERSONAS

Non Resident Indians

Name: Nancy   **Age:** 28

Job: Stylist living in Stockholm
Hobbies: Yoga, Cooking, Attending Indian events, Vlogging

Nancy is a newly married woman, She loves to celebrate Indian festivals while in abroad. She longs connection and warmth from her motherland. Her choices are a blend of modernity and cultural tradition, with an emphasis on uniqueness, sustainability, and authenticity.

Traveller

Name: Preeti   **Age:** 51

Job: Content creator living in London
Hobbies: Travelling, Thrifting, learning about indigenous crafts

Preeti is a proud Indian who seeks experience and cultural discovery. She travels to India every two months to connect to her roots. She loves visiting museums and meet people. However, she struggles to find stakeholders for meaningful engagement with indigenous crafts.

Fashion Forward Fusionista

Name: Monica   **Age:** 30

Job: Travel blogger living in Bengaluru
Hobbies: Styling, Photography, Reading about history and crafts

Monica is single women, grounded in the ethos of Indian heritage and intentionally delves into the traditional textiles from a contemporary point of view, blending heirloom fabrics with modern styling. She loves to collect crafts and historical books from different parts of India.

Occasion Based Buyer

Name: Jhilmil   **Age:** 23

Job: Young professional or student living in Delhi, Bangalore, or Singapore
Hobbies: Shopping, attending social events,Scrolling Social Media.

Jhilmil is a highly ambitious individual. She is a fashion-conscious, convenience seeker who buys sarees for special occasions. She relies on the older aunts to help her drape. She seeks hassle-free, and trendy, occasion wear pieces.
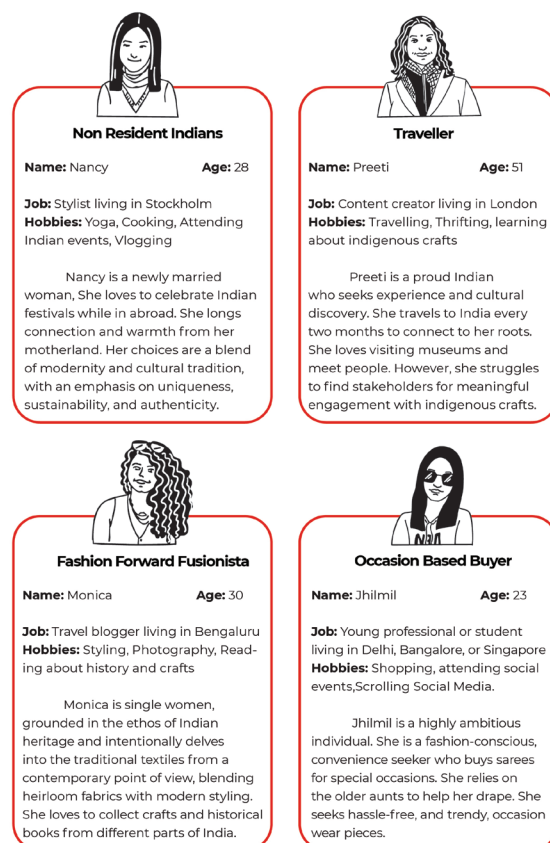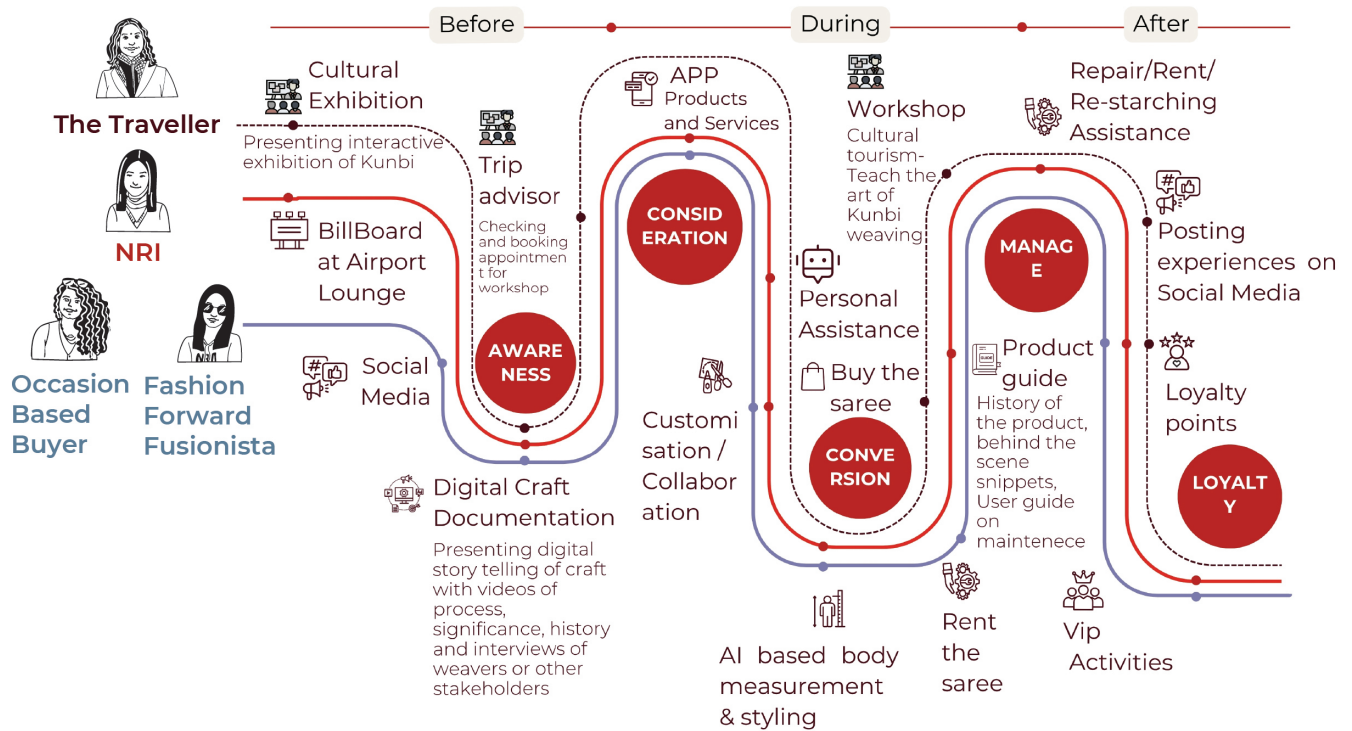
Fig. 02

Fig. 03

contemporary designers. It appears that the scope of design innovation in Kunbi saree is limited. Also, unregulated attempts of modernising Kunbi saree can dilute the craft significance and slip into cultural appropriation. Therefore, it is important that innovation is carefully regulated. Servitisation solves this problem through co-creation and collaborations. Partnerships with contemporary designers may generate hybrid garments that blend traditional motifs with modern aesthetics. This expands the saree's appeal without erasing cultural DNA. Personalisation services, such as pre-stitched pleats, customised embroidery, or tailored draping tutorials, can embed consumer identity while maintaining authenticity of weaving traditions. Virtual co-design platforms further extend this engagement by allowing consumers to experiment with patterns, yarns, and drapes, through a preset menu. Thereby turning the saree into a cultural platform rather than a static product. These strategies expand the meaning of the Kunbi saree by enabling innovation without erasure. Co-design platforms and hybrid garments provide relevance to contemporary consumers while safeguarding traditional motifs and weaving practices. This balance between tradition and change ensures that the collaboration strengthens the authenticity.

Such co-creations imbibe the creators' personal identity into the Saree making it special and

memorable for them. However, the balance lies in creating the sarees within the threshold of liminality, where cultural identity is renewed without losing its symbolism. To ensure this, the collaborations and co-creations must be guided by cultural knowledge holders from the Kunbi community. This will guarantee that the strategies expand possibilities without compromising the originality and meaning of the craft.

However, strategies alone do not ensure effective servitisation. As argued by Baines et. al. (2009), servitisation is most effective when carried out as a non-linear progressive transformation. This study adopts Baines' model for the specific situation of the Kunbi saree weaving industry, suggesting a new four-stage model — (1) Awareness, (2) Engagement, (3) Design Innovation, and (4) Scaling — that aligns with CCIs.

PROPOSAL: A REVITALISATION FRAMEWORK AND THE PROJECT-KUN.BE

Kun.Be envisions a service-based revival of the Kunbi saree as an experiential cultural system rooted in care, co-creation, and sustainability. The project combines product, experience, and digital interventions to reverse economic, generational, and symbolic decoupling in Goa's heritage weaving system. Secondary research and interviews reveal a perception gap, while the consumers respect the

Kun.Be PROGRESSION TIMELINE

Phased progression over 3.5 years

Sep 2025

Awareness

Create recognition of Kunbi saree's cultural & economic value

Nov 2025

Key Activities:
- Digital Documentation
- Billboards and social media campaigns

Feb 2026

- Immersive exhibitions during Carnival festival Goa

Immersive Weaving Exhibition

Mid-feb 2026

Engagement

Develop emotional and cultural connections

Key Activities:

Aug 2026

- Product Launch
- Making videos - Know your artisan
- Basic services like renting, restarching, and pre- stitching

Product Launch on APP

Basic Services

Sep 2026

Design Innovation

Modernize the Kunbi saree maintaining authenticity & attracting young consumers.

Oct 2026

Key Activities:
- Simple personalisations like embroidery
- AI based styling and fitting

Nov 2026

- Experiential Workshops for tourists & young consumers

Workshop

Personalisation

Oct 2027

Scaling

Expand globally through e-commerce & digital storytelling

Nov 2027

Key Activities:
- Design services for colours, motifs, and layouts for individual & small scale enterprises.
- Designer Collaborations

Jan 2028

- Virtual workshops on dyeing and weaving

Designing

Desiger Collaboration

Fig. 04

saree as a cultural heritage piece, they don't include it in their contemporary wardrobes.

To bridge this gap, the project recognises four consumer archetypes, whose diverse motivations and constraints drive both the brand and its staggered launch. (Fig. 02 e 03).

- NRI is a diasporic identity who seeks authenticity and pursues hybrid formats that blend western aesthetics, sustainability and heritage. *Kun.Be* helps them to re-establish a connection with Indian textiles through digital narratives, customisation, and virtual styling and hence make their experience of craft accessible and emotionally rooted.
- Travellers experience craft via discovery and engagement. As cultural visitors, they are no longer satisfied with passive consumption but seek active involvement—via weaving workshops, crafts experience. *Kun.Be* situates the saree in experience spaces, where the consumer can co-create or archive their experience, converting consumption into cultural stewardship.
- The Fashion-Forward Fusionista, resides in the space where trend-sensitive modern and deep-rooted tradition coexist. They use heritage as an inspiration for innovation, looking to forms for values and aesthetics to fulfill. They are limited by the lack of modern interpretations for traditional crafts. *Kun.Be* responds with design-driven personalisation, virtual co-design space, and work with visionary fashion designers, making the saree a living entity that can absorb style, identity, and narrative.
- The Occasion-Based Buyer, is a utilitarian use of culture - where heritage clothing is used episodically for functions or weddings. Price, convenience, and styling serve their purposes. *Kun.Be* meets this need by providing rental, pre-stitched, and styled services that lower access barriers whilst promoting longer cultural use.

THE *KUN.BE* PROGRESSION MODEL
Organised in four non-linear stages- Awareness, Engagement, Design Innovation, and Scaling- the project adapts Baines et al. (2009) servitisation progression model to CCIs. Instead of being a rigid business model shift, the *Kun.Be's* 3.5 years' timeline is deliberately flexible, responsive to ground realities, stakeholder support and readiness and institutional collaboration. (Fig. 04)

STAGE 1: EXPLORATION - AWARENESS (SEPT 2025 – FEB 2026)
For Kunbi weaving, the Exploration stage is reinterpreted as *Awareness*, to create recognition of the saree's cultural and economic value among policymakers, weavers, and customers (Pine & Gilmore, 2011 and Ho, 2024). This phase counters the decline in intergenerational knowledge by raising public awareness and involvement. The *Kun.Be* app is an online platform that acts as an archive for Saree's oral history, podcasts with weavers, and in-process videos of the craft. Furthermore, exhibitions will be conducted during *Carnival Festival Goa* and *Dastkar's*. This exhibit will showcase the history of Kunbi saree, and a digital loom for participants to experience the weaving process. These digital designs by participants will lead them to the QR code to the app. This ensures that recognition translates into respect for the craft. Moreover, Social media campaigns will place the saree as a cultural icon and a symbol of resistance. Targeting Fashion Forward Fusionistas and Occasion-based Buyers, this concise but imperative phase uses emotion, nostalgia, and storytelling to place the saree into sight and into desire.

STAGE 2: ENGAGEMENT- ENGAGEMENT (FEB 2026 – AUG 2026)
This stage involves launching simple service offerings like rentals and repairs. Unlike the business-focused "Engagement" of Baines' model, this stage fosters emotional and cultural involvement. Here, the *Kun.Be* app offers behind-the-scenes videos and QR-code-linked sarees, tracking the maker's stories. Other services include, rental, restarching, and repair services, aimed at occasion-led users. Furthermore, digital try-on and styling, will personalise the user's experience. This stage is particularly for NRIs and Occasion-Based Buyers. Within this mid-term phase the saree evolves from an artefact to an emotionally linked object of memory.

STAGE 3: EXPANSION - DESIGN INNOVATION & COLLABORATION (SEPT 2026 – OCT 2027)
The third stage, *Design Innovation & Collaboration*, takes place of expansion in the Baines model. The third stage, *Design Innovation & Collaboration*, takes the place of expansion. During this stage the tools for co-creation and fashion collaborations are

initiated on the app. Here, the consumers as well as designers are provided a space to create hybrid designs. The app allows creators to choose motifs, colours, and check patterns from the preset digital menu of design elements. This serves the desires of Fashion-Forward Fusionistas' for uniqueness and personalisation in fashion. Apart from this, virtual try-ons and styling tools will enable consumers to judge and create their own unique looks. The virtual training workshops on natural dyeing and other aspects related to Kunbi saree weaving can be booked by upcoming artisans as well as consumers in this phase. Designers such as Pero will be able to create the contemporary version of the saree, to be launched as a small batch limited edition product. Evidently the collaboration and co-creation process will be led by artisans or the members of the community, making sure that the craft's DNA is not compromised and the balance between contemporary relevance and traditional authenticity is maintained.

STAGE 4: EXPLOITATION - SCALING (NOV 2028 ONWARDS)

Lastly, the Scaling stage with an aim to expand the saree's presence globally, replaces Baines stage of exploitation. E-commerce website and digital storytelling, facilitates long-term sustainability and placing the saree in the world heritage fashion economy. Designer collections made in collaboration, will feature as a luxury heritage collection. Such expansion in traditional crafts runs the risk of dropping out of liminality, where action continues to hold social and symbolic power within the group, and into the liminoid, where meaning becomes disconnected and commodified (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011). Therefore, the weavers remain the primary cultural knowledge holders of these collaborations. The digital platforms are used as enablers rather than replacements of cultural agencies. Partnerships with UNESCO, museums, and policy organisations make it more culturally significant.

Focussed on Travellers and NRIs, this maintains the significance of the saree and its cultural exchange. Moreover, this enables the saree to be shared beyond borders and yet remain rooted in culture.

DISCUSSION

The revival of the Kunbi saree through servitisation repositions the idea of fashion from a commodity model to an interplay of cultural care, memory, and continuity. As opposed to hierarchical preservationist approaches, servitisation reimagines heritage as a collective process, where activities like repair, renting, customisation, and co-design foster lasting relationships between people and product (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), thereby opening a new approach where the focus shifts from product ownership to experience participation, as suggested by Tukker (2004) and Mont (2002).

To the Kunbi people, weaving is not fashion-driven but identity-determined (Rodrigues, 1977; Monteiro, 2015; Gaatha, 2020–2022). The red-and-white checks. *Rudraksh*-motif, and the colour signification of life stages in the saree, is not just decoration but a symbol of survival, belonging, and social identity (Gaatha, 2020–2022). In order to recover these histories, the service-led approach offers a model for cultural care, where the Product service system prolongs the life of the craft, story-telling retrieves the lost genealogies, and co-creation facilitates mutual ownership of the heritage for new generations. These shared services reflect Haraway's (1988) concept of "Situated Knowledge", where knowledge is always connected with context or experience, which fosters the evolution of Kunbi saree without the loss of its cultural essence.

Further, these services reimagine fashion as resistance, bridging digital divides, re-engaging youth, and placing the saree in local & global markets. The Kunbi saree then emerges as a living archive of textiles that not only contain memories but also a promise of transformation. In decolonial fashion discourse, as Jansen (2020) says, this is an act of reclaiming those genealogies, interconnectivities, and aesthetics that have been violated and erased by fashion discourse, challenging modernist binary logic that perceives indigenous fashion such as Kunbi saree weaving as outdated or backward. The Kunbi saree resists these modernist dichotomies—fast/slow, tradition/innovation, West/rest—and instead presents a pluriversal logic of care, community, and continuity. Thus, servitisation is not just an economic revival plan; it is a cultural tool that enables the saree to not remain as relics of the past, but as evolving, living traditions.

CONCLUSION

The Kunbi saree thus emerges as a strong symbol of resistance and resilience against cultural erasure. In a global fashion conversation where non-Western

aesthetics are largely articulated in terms of Western fashion as producers or consumers (Riello & McNeil, 2010), the saree is reimagined as a site of cultural memory, an economic stimulus, and resistance. Adopting the servitisation framework, this research has demonstrated how heritage craftsmanship can be reconfigured from a product to a value-based system. The servitisation model proposed in this research not only rejuvenates a product but also rejuvenates cultural intimacy and maximises lifecycle value. This model offers a strategic blueprint for other endangered handicrafts in the face of fast fashion, colonial destabilisation, and capitalist homogenisation. Through servitisation, the Kunbi saree evolves as a tactile archive of memory, survival, and pride. Fashion, thus, is not what we wear, but how we remember, resist and care.

ABBREVIATIONS

AI – Artificial Intelligence
CCI – Creative and Cultural Industry
CCIs – Creative and Cultural Industries
GI – Geographical Indication
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
NRI/NRIs – Non-Resident Indian(s)
PSS – Product-Service System(s)
QR- Quick Response

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Components and Draping of Kunbi Saree. Courtesy: CottonsDaily https://cottonsdaily.com/products/goa-mangrove-delight-blue-kunbi-saree, Gaatha.org https://gaatha.org/Craft-of-India/kunbi-saree-weaving-goa.

[Fig. 02] Personas for Craft Revival – Kun.Be Project. Source: Authors.

[Fig. 03] Consumer Journey Map across Kun.Be Ecosystem. Source: Authors.

[Fig. 04] Kun.Be Craft Progression Timeline (3.5 Years). Source: Authors, Includes AI-generated and edited visuals by author; select visual references courtesy of @shopSincro https://www.instagram.com/p/DCs-MnSNXMF/, and Niramneela https://www.niramneela.in/products/blue-check-ered-kunbi-cotton-saree?srsltid=AfmBOopH2tUYUOwz-V3KQdPC9a5E3CysUfjfwaShmiUvAW43G7LVhVcuU.

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CHANGING TOXIC BEAUTY CULTURE AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate connections between evolving beauty standards, the pervasive "toxic beauty culture" that disproportionately impacts people of colour and its influence on deteriorating environmental conditions. The continuous shift in beauty ideals and the societal emphasis on achieving a "pleasing" appearance significantly influence how men and women make beauty choices. The relentless pursuit of these ideals often predisposes people to harmful procedures that endanger human health and the environment. The study aims to examine these beauty ideals and toxic beauty trends, analysing their impacts on POC and the subsequent consequences for environmental conditions. 400 respondents were purposively selected from Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom and Delta State. Descriptive survey design was used to demonstrate the implication of toxic beauty trends. The environmental injustice perspective and anthropogenic climate change frameworks were adopted to explain the intersectional systems of oppression, racialised beauty practices and the consequences of toxic beauty culture on health and the environment. The paper argues that hazardous ingredients banned in developed nations have remained vital components of beauty products exported to developing nations, including Nigeria. The study concludes by recommending the adoption of sustainability principles within beauty practices and the beauty industry to promote human health and an eco-friendly environment.

Keywords: *Toxic Beauty Culture; Environmental Injustice; Racialised Beauty Practices; Anthropogenic Climate Change; Human Behaviour.*

INTRODUCTION

The constantly evolving culture of unattainable perfection (trend-chasing) and the urge to conform to ideals and fit into societal construction of beauty have become toxic. Heather Widdows (2018) noted that there is a convergence of beauty ideals giving rise to a globalized dominant and demanding beauty ideal. Cosmetics, beauty products and procedures play a ubiquitous role in contemporary society, shaping perceptions of beauty, identity, and self-expression. From skincare routines to makeup application, the beauty industry encompasses a diverse array of products and procedures designed to enhance and transform one's appearance. Daily habits of using personal care products and cosmetics expose people of colour (POC) to diverse chemicals. Unregulated toxic chemicals in personal care products are a global problem. Edwards, Ahmed, Martinez, Huda, Shamasunder, McDonald, Dubrow, Morton, & Zota, (2023) link the high level of beauty-product related chemicals for POC to entrenched social and economic systems like colonialism and slavery that favour Eurocentric beauty standards.

In today's globalized society, the concept of beauty has become deeply intertwined with cultural norms, media representations, and commercial interests. While beauty culture can serve as a source of empowerment and self-expression, it also harbours toxic elements that perpetuate harmful beauty standards and practices.

The pervasive influence of societal pressures and

ideals surrounding appearance negatively impact people and the environment. From a young age, individuals are bombarded with images of "ideal" beauty propagated by mass media, advertising, and popular culture. These unrealistic standards often prioritize certain physical traits, such as fair skin, slim bodies, thick lips and symmetrical features, while marginalizing diverse expressions of beauty. As a result, individuals may internalize these standards, leading to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and the pursuit of unattainable perfection through cosmetic interventions. Beauty ideals or standards refer to a set of cultural norms that dictate what is considered aesthetically pleasing across cultures and periods and may intersect with such social identities as race, ethnicity, gender or class (Kaur, Asif, Aur, Kumar, & Wani; 2023). Cultural norms and traditions play a significant role in shaping beauty ideals and practices within different communities. For example, in many societies, lighter skin is associated with wealth, status, and beauty, leading to the widespread use of skin-lightening products and the perpetuation of colourist attitudes. Similarly, gender norms and expectations dictate acceptable standards of beauty for men and women, reinforcing stereotypes and inequalities based on appearance.

The beauty industry, a multi-billion-dollar global enterprise, thrives on the perpetuation of toxic beauty culture through targeted marketing tactics and product offerings. Advertising campaigns often exploit insecurities and vulnerabilities, promising consumers transformative results through the use of beauty products and cosmetic procedures. Whether promoting anti-aging creams, weight loss supplements, or hair straightening treatments, advertisers capitalize on societal beauty standards to drive sales and profits.

Since the early 2000s, the rise of social media and influencer culture intensified the commodification of beauty, with influencers promoting products and lifestyle ideals that align with dominant beauty norms. The constant exposure to curated images of beauty on social media platforms can create unrealistic expectations and foster feelings of comparison and inadequacy among users, contributing to the perpetuation of toxic beauty culture.

At the individual level, psychological factors play a significant role in perpetuating toxic beauty culture and its associated behaviours. Body image dissatisfaction, fuelled by internalized beauty standards and societal pressures, can lead individuals to engage in harmful practices such as extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery and procedures, and excessive exercise in pursuit of an idealized appearance. Moreover, the prevalence of body dysmorphia and eating disorders underscores the detrimental impact of toxic beauty culture on mental health and well-being. In addition, interpersonal relationships and social networks can influence perceptions of beauty and body image. Peer pressure, family expectations, and cultural norms may reinforce certain beauty ideals and discourage deviation from societal standards, further perpetuating toxic beauty culture within communities.

Beauty, a concept as diverse and subjective as humanity itself, has long been a cornerstone of Nigerian culture. From traditional rituals celebrating natural aesthetics to modern-day beauty standards shaped by global influences, Nigeria's beauty landscape has undergone a profound evolution (Ubelejit-Nte, 2023). However, amidst this transformation lies a complex and often overlooked reality: the intersection of Nigeria's changing beauty culture and the escalating climate crisis. Historically, Nigeria's beauty standards have been deeply rooted in cultural traditions, societal norms, and colonial legacies. The perception of beauty has been shaped by factors such as skin tone, facial features, body shape, and hair texture, reflecting a blend of indigenous ideals and external influences. Yet, alongside the celebration of diverse beauty, Nigeria has grappled with the pervasive impact of colourism, Eurocentric beauty ideals, and the commodification of aesthetics.

In recent decades, Nigeria's beauty landscape has witnessed a seismic shift fuelled by globalization, urbanization, and the proliferation of digital media. For instance, in southwestern Nigeria, the Yoruba people have long valued a voluptuous figure, seeing it as a sign of health, prosperity, and fertility. This ideal, encapsulated in the term "lewa", continues to hold cultural currency. However, the influx of global media, particularly American and European television and social networking platforms, has introduced the countervailing ideal of a thin, slender body. As a result, many Yoruba women now navigate a paradoxical aesthetic: they seek to maintain the traditional curvy figure while also aspiring to the flat abdomen and toned limbs associated with global beauty norms. This has led to the popularity of practices like waist training

and cosmetic procedures that aim to achieve both ideals simultaneously (Eze & Akpan, 2019). The use of skin-lightening products, a phenomenon with historical roots, has been exacerbated by global advertising that often associates lighter skin with success and beauty. Similarly in southeastern Nigeria, the Igbo traditionally celebrated a natural, unadorned beauty. The focus was on a healthy, well-fed appearance, often symbolized by a glowing complexion and a full figure. But then again globalization has significantly influenced this beauty landscape by introducing a strong consumerist ethos (Okafor, 2021). In northern Nigeria also, the Hausa and Fulani cultures maintained a more resilient connection to their traditional beauty standards, which are deeply intertwined with religious and social customs. Beauty here is often expressed through modesty, grace, and intricate traditional adornments like henna (lalle). However, like in other cases, the advent of social networking platforms, beauty blogs, and influencer culture has democratized beauty, providing a platform for diverse voices and challenging conventional norms. Consequently, beauty standards have become more fluid, inclusive, and reflective of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage. However, beneath the surface of this changing beauty landscape lies a darker reality: the toxic underbelly of the changing beauty culture. Despite strides towards inclusivity, colourism continues to permeate societal attitudes, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and disparities based on skin tone. Moreover, the prevalence of skin-lightening products, often laden with hazardous chemicals, underscores the enduring influence of Eurocentric beauty ideals and the normalization of harmful practices on people of colour (Edwards, et al, 2023). The association of Nigeria's beauty culture with the anthropogenic climate change further complicates this narrative. As the world grapples with the devastating impacts of climate change, the beauty industry's contribution to environmental degradation cannot be ignored. From the extraction of natural resources for cosmetics production to the disposal of plastic packaging, the beauty industry life cycle assessment shows a significant ecological footprint, exacerbating Nigeria's vulnerability to climate-related risks. The climate crisis disproportionately affects communities already marginalized by societal inequities, widening existing disparities in access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare. Furthermore,

the relentless commodification of beauty through unsustainable consumption and single-use products fuels a self-perpetuating cycle of environmental degradation, positioning toxic beauty culture as a direct contributor to the climate crisis and a critical issue of social and environmental justice. Against this backdrop, the study examines the changing but toxic beauty culture and their impact on (POC) in the context of the climate crisis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the literature on toxic beauty culture and the climate crisis has traditionally been examined as separate phenomena, recent research has begun to explore the interconnected dynamics between these two issues. Policy frameworks have emerged to elucidate the pathways through which toxic beauty culture contributes to environmental degradation and exacerbates the impacts of climate change on human health and well-being. The Minamata convention on mercury is the most recent global agreement on environment and health adopted in 2013 (UNEP), banned personal care products containing more than 1mg/1kg of mercury. For over three decades, environmental justice movement had made concerted efforts to address the issue of unregulated chemicals in consumer products and their implication to people of colour (Sze and London, 2008; Cole & Foster, 2001). Empirical studies have documented the environmental footprint of the beauty industry, highlighting its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, air and water pollution, and resource depletion. The production, packaging, and distribution of cosmetics and beauty products rely heavily on fossil fuels, energy-intensive processes, and non-renewable resources, leading to significant environmental impacts across the product lifecycle. The disposal of cosmetic waste, including packaging materials and single-use plastics, further exacerbates environmental degradation, contributing to marine pollution, landfill waste, and ecosystem disruption. The release of microplastics from beauty products poses additional risks to aquatic ecosystems and wildlife, highlighting the interconnected nature of toxic beauty culture and worsening climatic conditions.

The connection between toxic beauty culture and the climate crisis represents a complex and multifaceted issue with profound implications for human health, environmental sustainability, and social justice. Toxic beauty culture refers

to the pervasive influence of beauty standards, practices, and products that prioritize unrealistic ideals of beauty at the expense of human health and environmental sustainability. A plethora of studies have documented the drivers and impacts of toxic beauty culture on individuals, societies, and ecosystems.

The impacts of toxic beauty culture are manifold, ranging from adverse health effects associated with chemical exposure to environmental pollution and ecosystem degradation. There is a link between hair dye and breast cancer (International Journal of Cancer, 2019), while direct or indirect exposure to mercury from the use of skin lightening products is a risk factor for diabetes (Beautywell Project, 2023). Research has documented the presence of potentially harmful ingredients, such as, formaldehyde, phthalates, parabens, lead, mercury, triclosan, and benzophenone, in cosmetics and beauty products, linking them to various health issues (Chow and Mahalingaiah; Dodson, Nishioka, Standley, Perovich, Brody, & Rudel, 2012; Pierce, Abelmann, & Spicer, et al, 2011), like cancer including allergies, hormonal disruptions, and reproductive disorders. Extant literature provides a connection between harmful chemical ingredients of cosmetic and hygiene products sold to people of colour and adverse health conditions (Helm, Nishioka, Brody, Rudel and Dodson, 2018; Lianos, Rabkin, Bandera et al, 2017; Rao, McDonald, Barret et al, 2021; McDonald, Lianos, Morton & Zota, 2021). Moreover, the production, packaging, and disposal of beauty products contribute to environmental pollution, resource depletion, and waste generation, exacerbating the climate crisis and environmental degradation.

The climate crisis represents a global challenge characterized by rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events, driven primarily by human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial processes. While the nexus between the climate crisis and sectors such as energy, transportation, and agriculture are well-documented, the intersection with toxic beauty culture has received less attention in the literature.

Recent studies (Alnuqaydan, 2024; Nguyen, Nguyen, & Vuong, 2024; Okafor, 2021), have explored the connections between toxic beauty culture and the climate crisis, highlighting the environmental footprint of the beauty industry and its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions,

air pollution, and resource depletion. Research has shown that the production and distribution of cosmetics and beauty products rely heavily on fossil fuels, energy-intensive processes, and non-renewable resources, leading to significant carbon emissions and ecological impacts (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Vuong, 2024; Okafor, 2021).

The disposal of cosmetic waste, including packaging materials, single-use plastics, and non-biodegradable containers, further exacerbates environmental degradation, contributing to marine pollution, landfill waste, and ecosystem disruption. The release of microplastics from beauty products such as exfoliating scrubs and glitter poses additional risks to aquatic ecosystems and wildlife, further underscoring the interconnected nature of toxic beauty culture and the climate crisis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of environmental injustice of beauty is a derivative of the environmental justice approach that incorporates beauty perspectives into existing environmental justice theoretical and methodological frameworks. This approach explains a systemic and institutionalized discrimination against people of colour through exposure to banned harmful chemicals that are constituent ingredients of cosmetic and hygiene products sold to POC in order to maintain Eurocentric beauty norms. It links intersectional systems of oppression such as race, age, gender and status to racialized beauty practices, unequal chemical exposures, and adverse health outcomes (Zota & Shamasunder, 2017). The intersection of toxic beauty culture and the climate crisis embody a profound environmental injustice rooted in systemic disparities in access, impact, and accountability.

The environmental injustice of beauty framework unveils the intricate dynamics exacerbating ecological harm and social inequities within this context. Toxic beauty culture perpetuates a cycle of environmental degradation through resource extraction, production, consumption, and disposal. From petroleum-based ingredients in cosmetics to the excessive packaging and single-use plastics, the beauty industry contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, water pollution, and waste accumulation. This environmental burden, however, is not distributed evenly. Communities already marginalized by race, class, and geography bear the brunt of this toxicity. They

often live in close proximity to extraction sites, manufacturing facilities, and waste disposal sites, exposing them to heightened levels of pollution and health risks. Moreover, the marketing of beauty standards predominantly caters to Eurocentric ideals, further marginalizing individuals with diverse ethnicities and features, perpetuating social hierarchies and reinforcing environmental injustices. In the context of the climate crisis, these disparities are exacerbated. Climate change disproportionately affects frontline communities, amplifying existing vulnerabilities and injustices. Extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and shifting ecosystems exacerbate health disparities and socioeconomic inequalities, compounding the impacts of toxic beauty culture on marginalized populations.

The global nature of the beauty industry exacerbates environmental injustice on a transnational scale. The extraction of raw materials often occurs in the Global South, where regulations are lax, and communities lack resources to defend their rights. These materials are then shipped to manufacturing hubs, predominantly in the Global North, where they are processed into beauty products marketed worldwide. This global supply chain further entrenches power imbalances, perpetuating environmental degradation and exploitation along racial and economic lines.

The theory of anthropogenic climate change posits that human activities, particularly the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation, have significantly altered the Earth's climate system, leading to global warming, changes in precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events. In the context of toxic beauty culture, the excessive use of cosmetics and beauty products containing harmful chemicals contributes to environmental pollution, resource depletion, and adverse health effects on individuals. Toxic beauty culture poses significant risks to human health, as many cosmetics and beauty products contain a myriad of chemicals like aerosolized particles from hairsprays, perfumes, and nail polishes that can be harmful upon prolonged exposure. Ingredients such as talcum, Trichlorocarbanide (TCC), EDTA, parabens, phthalates, formaldehyde, and heavy metals have been linked to various health issues, including allergies, hormonal disruptions, reproductive disorders, and even cancer. Additionally, the use of skin-lightening products containing hydroquinone, corticosteroids and mercury (Agorku, Kwansah-

Ansah, Voegborlo, Amegbletor, & Opoku, 2016; Ladizinski, Mistry, & Kundu, 2011) can lead to skin damage, discoloration, and systemic toxicity. Racial discrimination based on European beauty norms can lead to internalized racism, body shame, and skin tone dissatisfaction, factors that can influence product use to achieve straighter hair or lighter skin.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a descriptive survey method to meticulously examine the intricate connections between changing toxic beauty culture and its implications for the climate crisis within Nigeria. The choice of a descriptive survey was driven by its efficacy in gathering detailed information on perceptions, attitudes, and reported behaviours concerning beauty practices and environmental awareness among the target population. Data collection was primarily facilitated through an online Google Form questionnaire. This digital approach was chosen for several reasons pertinent to the Nigerian context. It offered widespread accessibility, enabling the researchers to reach a diverse demographic of individuals across different states within Nigeria, overcoming potential logistical and cost barriers associated with traditional paper-based surveys. Furthermore, Google Forms ensured anonymity and confidentiality, creating an environment where respondents could provide candid answers without fear of identification, thereby enhancing data validity.

The questionnaire comprised a consent form and fifteen carefully structured thematic questions, each aligned with the study's objectives. Ten (10) of these questions were close-ended, primarily employing multiple-choice, Likert scale, or rating scale formats. These questions aimed to quantify specific variables such as the frequency of engagement in certain beauty practices, the types of beauty products regularly used, awareness levels regarding product ingredients, perceived health effects, and the level of concern about the environmental impact of these products. This quantitative data allowed for the identification of patterns, trends, and statistical relationships within the dataset. In contrast, five (5) open-ended questions were included to solicit richer and in-depth qualitative insights. These questions encouraged respondents to elaborate on their personal experiences, motivations behind their beauty choices, challenges faced in adopting more

sustainable practices, and their perspectives on the broader societal pressures related to beauty ideals. The questionnaire was specifically distributed among individuals identified as "people of colour" residing within Nigeria, predominantly focusing on the experiences of Black Nigerian women and men, who are disproportionately affected by the pervasive nature of toxic beauty culture and its attendant environmental consequences. The survey included 400 respondents from four purposively selected states in Nigeria, namely: Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, and Delta State. These states were chosen because they are situated in the Niger Delta region, a space marked by intense socio-economic and environmental complexities. The region is characterised by heavy oil exploration, which has long contributed to ecological degradation and public health concerns, thus making questions about environmental harm particularly salient. At the same time, urban centres such as Port Harcourt, Yenagoa, Uyo, and Warri have become hotspots of consumer culture where globalised ideals of beauty, skin-lightening practices, and cosmetic industries thrive. These conditions create a convergence of issues: a visible struggle with toxic beauty standards, racialised aesthetics, and their connection to both individual health risks and wider ecological damage. Selecting these states therefore allows the study to explore the subject within contexts where environmental decline and beauty consumption practices overlap most sharply. Respondents were reached mainly on social networking sites, online community platforms, and through targeted digital groups that are widely used by young people in particular, as these demographics are often the most active participants in conversations around beauty practices.

The overarching aim of this study, to examine the impact of toxic beauty ideals on people of colour and the resultant worsening climate condition in Nigeria, was directly supported by this methodological design. By gathering both measurable data on behaviours and subjective insights into perceptions, the survey method allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how racialized beauty practices contribute to environmental injustice and anthropogenic climate change within the specific Nigerian context. The subsequent analysis of these data sets, employing both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, provided the empirical foundation for the study's arguments and recommendations.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the descriptive survey of 400 respondents across Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, and Delta States in Nigeria. It integrates both quantitative data, obtained from the closed questions, and qualitative insights, gleaned from the open-ended questions. This dual approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between toxic beauty culture, its effects on Nigerians, and its broader contributions to the climate crisis.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS

To provide a comprehensive overview of the survey participants, a detailed sociodemographic distribution is presented below. This information is crucial for contextualizing the study's findings on toxic beauty culture and its environmental implications within Nigeria.

The demographic data as shown in Table 1 reveal a sample composition that is largely aligned with the characteristics of the target population for this study. The higher proportion of female respondents (70%) directly reflects the study's focus on beauty practices, which are often more overtly marketed to and engaged in by women in the Nigerian context. This distribution is vital for understanding the disproportionate impact of toxic beauty culture on women.

The age distribution highlights that the majority of participants fall within the 18-47 age range (90%), with the largest segment in the 18-27 years category. This is significant as these age groups represent the primary consumers of beauty products and are highly susceptible to evolving beauty standards propagated through social media and popular culture. Their experiences offer critical insights into contemporary beauty trends and their associated impacts. The occupational breakdown indicates a diverse economic background among respondents, with a notable presence of students (25%) and self-employed individuals (30%). This diversity suggests varying levels of disposable income and exposure to beauty product marketing, providing a broad perspective on consumption patterns. The mix of private and public sector employees further enriches the dataset, reflecting different professional environments that might influence beauty choices. In terms of religious affiliation, the sample largely mirrors Nigeria's predominant religious landscape in the Southern region, with Christianity (75%)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Per (%)
Gender	Women	280	70.0
	Men	120	30.0
Age Group	18-27 years	160	40.0
	28-37 years	120	30.0
	38-47 years	80	20.0
	48-57 years	30	7.5
	58 years and above	10	2.5
Occupation	Student	100	25.0
	Unemployed	60	15.0
	Self-Employed	120	30.0
	Private Sector	80	20.0
	Public Sector	40	10.0
Religion	Christianity	300	75.0
	Islam	80	20.0
	African Traditional Religion (ATR)	10	2.5
	Others (e.g. Atheist)	10	2.5
Level of Education	First School Leaving Certificate	20	5.0
	Senior Secondary School Certificate	80	20.0
	Tertiary (OND/HND/B.Sc.)	200	50.0
	Post Graduate (M.Sc./Ph.D.)	80	20.0
	Others	20	5.0
State of Residence	Akwa Ibom	100	25.0
	Bayelsa	100	25.0
	Delta	100	25.0
	Rivers	100	25.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 1

and Islam (20%) accounting for the vast majority of respondents. While direct links between religion and beauty practices were not the primary focus, this distribution ensures that the findings are representative of the broader Nigerian society. The educational attainment shows a strong representation of individuals with tertiary education (50%) and postgraduate qualifications (20%), indicating a relatively educated sample. This level of education suggests a greater potential for awareness and critical thinking regarding health and environmental issues, making their reported perceptions particularly valuable for the study's objectives. Finally, the equal distribution across the four purposively selected states (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers) was a deliberate methodological choice. These states, representing diverse regions and socio-economic contexts within Nigeria, ensure that the findings capture regional variations in beauty culture and environmental concerns, thus enhancing the generalizability of the study's conclusions within the targeted areas. This comprehensive demographic profile provides a robust foundation for interpreting the subsequent findings on toxic beauty practices and their environmental implications.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
The study's primary objective was to examine the impact of toxic beauty ideals on people of colour (specifically Nigerians) and the attendant worsening climate condition in Nigeria. The findings are discussed below, structured around key themes derived from the survey data.

PREVALENCE AND TYPES OF TOXIC BEAUTY PRACTICE
Quantitative data unequivocally highlight a

significant engagement in beauty practices widely associated with toxic beauty culture among the surveyed Nigerian population. A staggering 65% (260) of all respondents admitted to having used skin lightening or bleaching products at some point in their lives (see Table 2). More critically, 30% (120) reported current regular use (at least once a week). When disaggregated by gender, this trend was more pronounced among women, with 70% (196 out of 280 female respondents) reporting past or current use, compared to 50% (60 out of 120 male respondents) among men. This indicates a deeply entrenched societal preference for lighter skin tones across genders, though women remain the primary consumers.

Similarly, the prevalence of hair chemical treatments was high. 78% (218 out of 280) of female respondents confirmed using chemical relaxers or other strong chemical treatments for hair straightening or texturizing within the last six months. This widespread use points to the pervasive influence of beauty standards that favour straightened or altered

Beauty Practice/Aspect	Category / Detail	Frequency (n)	Per (%)	
Skin Lightening/Bleaching Product Usage	Used at some point in life (Overall)	260	65.0%	
	Current regular use (at least once a week)	120	30.0%	
	Women (Past/Current use)	196 (out of 280 females)	70.0%	(of women)
	Men (Past/Current use)	60 (out of 120 male respondents)	50.0%	(of men)
Hair Chemical Treatments (Female Respondents)	Used chemical relaxers/treatments in last 6 months	218 (out of 280 females)	78.0%	(of women)
Product Sourcing	Purchased from informal markets/online vendors	220	55.0%	

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2

hair textures, often at the expense of natural hair and exposure to harsh chemicals.

Furthermore, product sourcing patterns revealed a significant vulnerability. Approximately 55% (220) of respondents indicated purchasing beauty products from informal markets (e.g., street vendors, local shops without formal licenses) or online vendors. This practice is concerning as these channels often lack stringent regulatory oversight, increasing the likelihood of exposure to banned or harmful ingredients in products, directly impacting consumer health and contributing to unregulated waste streams.

PERCEIVED HEALTH EFFECTS OF TOXIC BEAUTY PRACTICES

The direct impact on human health was evident from respondents' reported experiences. Among those who engaged in skin lightening, 40% (104 out of 260 users) reported experiencing various adverse skin reactions, including rashes, thinning skin, hyperpigmentation (often leading to a darker, uneven complexion in the long run), or persistent irritation. For users of chemical hair treatments, 35% (76 out of 218 users) reported issues such as scalp burns, severe hair breakage, or significant hair loss, directly attributing these problems to the products used.

Beyond immediate skin and hair reactions, qualitative responses revealed a profound underlying anxiety about long-term systemic health risks. Respondents frequently voiced concerns about the potential for organ damage (e.g., kidney and liver damage) and various types of cancer, associating these fears with prolonged exposure to undisclosed hazardous chemicals in beauty products. While

Health Effect Category	Specific Issues Reported	Affected Group	Per (%) of Affected Group	Freq (n) of Affected Group
Adverse Skin Reactions	Rashes, thinning skin, hyperpigmentation, persistent irritation	Users of skin lightening/bleaching products (n=260)	40%	104
Hair & Scalp Issues	Scalp burns, severe hair breakage, significant hair loss	Users of chemical hair treatments (n=218)	35%	76
Long-Term Systemic Concerns	Organ damage (kidney, liver), various cancers	All respondents (based on qualitative data, not quantified percentage of total)	Not quantified	Not quantified

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3

these were based on personal belief and anecdotal observation rather than medical diagnoses, they underscore a deep-seated public mistrust and fear regarding product safety. A respondent from Bayelsa poignantly shared, "[m]y aunt used a popular lightening cream for years, and now she battles kidney problems. It makes me genuinely scared about what these chemicals are doing to our insides". This highlights the human cost of unregulated beauty practices, aligning with the concept of environmental injustice of beauty, where marginalized populations bear a disproportionate burden of health risks due to exposure to harmful substances.

AWARENESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT AND CONTRIBUTION TO CLIMATE CRISIS

The study found a notable gap in respondents' explicit awareness of the direct environmental ramifications of beauty products, particularly regarding chemical pollutants. Only 25% (100) of all respondents demonstrated a clear understanding of how the production, use, and disposal of beauty products contribute to broader environmental degradation (e.g., microplastic pollution, chemical runoff into water bodies, and carbon emissions from manufacturing and transportation). However, a more generalized concern about packaging waste was evident. A significant 70% (280) of respondents expressed worry about the sheer volume of plastic packaging generated by beauty products. This indicates a visual awareness of solid waste pollution, even if the more insidious chemical impacts were less understood. A minority, 15% (60), specifically articulated concerns about chemical runoff from beauty products contaminating water sources, particularly Nigeria's rivers and boreholes, suggesting a nascent understanding among some individuals of the broader ecosystem impact.

The findings suggest that while direct knowledge of

the beauty industry's contribution to anthropogenic climate change via fossil fuel-derived ingredients and industrial pollution is limited, there's a growing discomfort with visible environmental pollution like plastic waste. This highlights a critical area for public education and awareness campaigns to bridge the gap between individual beauty choices and their collective environmental footprint. The sheer scale of product consumption, especially those with toxic ingredients and non-biodegradable packaging, contributes significantly to waste accumulation, chemical leaching into soil and water, and increased carbon emissions throughout the product lifecycle—from extraction of raw materials (often petroleum-based) to manufacturing, transportation, and disposal.

UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE BEAUTY

Qualitative data provided critical insights into the complex motivations driving engagement in toxic beauty practices. The most dominant theme was the overwhelming societal pressure and the pervasive influence of media (including social media platforms and the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood). Respondents frequently articulated that lighter skin tones and specific hair textures are heavily promoted as ideals of beauty, success, and even social mobility. Many confessed to feeling inadequate or less desirable if they did not conform to this prevailing aesthetics. A respondent from Rivers State lamented, "[l]ighter skin is constantly paraded as more beautiful, more successful. It's what we see everywhere, in films, on billboards, even among our friends". This illustrates the powerful socio-cultural forces shaping beauty standards and driving the demand for products that promise conformity.

Some respondents explicitly linked their beauty choices to perceived better social, economic, or relationship opportunities, believing that conforming to these ideals would grant them advantages in various aspects of life. Conversely, a recurring sentiment was the lack of accessible, affordable, and effective "natural" or "safer" alternatives to conventional beauty products. Many also expressed a severe lack of comprehensive and reliable information regarding the harmful ingredients present in common products, leading to uninformed choices.

Despite these challenges, there was an encouraging openness to more sustainable alternatives.

Approximately 50% (200) of respondents indicated a willingness to transition to more eco-friendly and natural beauty products, provided they were readily available, affordable, and demonstrably effective. Critically, there was a strong expressed desire for increased public education on product ingredients, their health risks, and sustainable beauty practices. As one participant from Akwa Ibom emphasized, "[w]e desperately need to be taught what is truly healthy for us and the environment, not just what makes us look good temporarily". This highlights a significant opportunity for interventions focused on consumer education and the promotion of a truly sustainable beauty culture in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the intricate connections between changing toxic beauty culture, its disproportionate impact on Nigerians, and its contribution to the worsening climate conditions in the country. The findings unequivocally demonstrate that a pervasive toxic beauty culture is deeply entrenched in Nigerian society, driven by powerful socio-cultural pressures and amplified by media influence. This manifests in widespread engagement in practices such as skin lightening and chemical hair treatments, with 65% of all respondents having used skin lightening products at some point, and 78% of women using chemical hair treatments. These figures resonate with existing literature that highlights the global prevalence of skin lightening, particularly among women of color, often rooted in colonial legacies and colorism that equate lighter skin with higher social status and beauty (Blay & Twine, 2017; Glenn, 2008). The alarming rate of product sourcing from informal markets (55% of respondents) further corroborates concerns raised by studies on unregulated cosmetics, which often contain banned and harmful ingredients (Adebamowo & Adeyemo, 2009; Ladd & Ladd, 2013).

The findings strongly support the environmental injustice of beauty framework, revealing the severe human health consequences borne by those engaging in these practices. A significant 40% of skin lightening users reported adverse skin reactions, and 35% of chemical hair treatment users experienced hair and scalp issues. Beyond these immediate effects, qualitative data unveiled profound anxieties about long-term systemic health risks, including organ damage and cancers, directly linked by respondents to prolonged chemical

exposure. This aligns with research indicating that marginalized communities, often due to targeted marketing and lack of access to safer alternatives, disproportionately bear the burden of exposure to toxic chemicals in beauty products (Quirindongo & Campbell, 2016; Environmental Working Group, 2016). The poignant testimonial about kidney problems underscores the very real, often hidden, human cost of these beauty ideals, directly manifesting the health dimension of environmental injustice.

Crucially, the study also establishes the link between toxic beauty culture and anthropogenic climate change. While explicit awareness of the broad environmental ramifications of beauty products was limited (only 25% demonstrated a clear understanding), a substantial 70% expressed concern about plastic packaging waste. This highlights a gap between visible environmental problems and the more insidious chemical and carbon footprints of the beauty industry. The sheer volume of non-biodegradable packaging and the reliance on fossil fuel-derived ingredients for manufacturing and transportation of these products contribute to increased greenhouse gas emissions, waste accumulation, and chemical pollution of Nigeria's ecosystems (UNEP, 2019; Hawes & Hennessey, 2023). The continuous demand for such products, driven by societal pressures for "ideal" appearances, creates a feedback loop that intensifies environmental degradation. This directly reinforces the anthropogenic climate change theory, illustrating how human actions – in this case, consumer demand for specific beauty products and the industry's supply chain – directly contribute to environmental decline.

Despite these challenges, the study identified an encouraging openness towards sustainable beauty practices, with 50% of respondents willing to transition to eco-friendly alternatives. This willingness, coupled with a strong desire for increased public education on product ingredients and their risks, presents a significant opportunity for intervention. It suggests that while the current beauty culture is deeply ingrained and toxic, there is a receptive audience for initiatives promoting healthier, more sustainable choices. This underscores the need for multi-faceted approaches that not only challenge existing beauty ideals but also facilitate access to safer products and empower consumers with knowledge.

In essence, this research provides empirical evidence from Nigeria that toxic beauty culture is not merely a superficial concern but a critical public health and environmental issue. It is a manifestation of environmental injustice, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations through direct exposure to harmful chemicals, while simultaneously exacerbating the climate crisis through unsustainable production and consumption patterns. Addressing this complex challenge requires a concerted effort to dismantle harmful beauty ideals, enforce stricter regulations on product ingredients, promote consumer education, and champion the widespread adoption of sustainable principles across the beauty industry in Nigeria and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study call for urgent, practical steps that place sustainability, health, and justice at the centre of beauty practices in Nigeria. Addressing toxic beauty culture must go beyond individual choices to systemic reforms that align with global sustainability principles. First, the adoption of sustainable beauty measures should be prioritised by both industry and government. This includes stronger regulation of ingredients, mandatory labelling of cosmetic products, and certification systems that highlight safe and environmentally responsible options. Creating transparent supply chains, where product origins and compositions are traceable, will reduce reliance on informal markets and discourage the circulation of harmful chemicals.

Second, eco-friendly beauty practices must be actively promoted through public campaigns and education programmes. Women and men alike should be encouraged to embrace natural beauty routines, such as the use of locally sourced plant-based oils and herbal treatments, which have long histories in African cultures. Encouraging refillable packaging, biodegradable containers, and support for brands that champion waste reduction would further reduce the environmental footprint of the sector. Media platforms and influencers, who currently reinforce harmful ideals, should be engaged as advocates of safer, greener alternatives. Third, sustainability requires a cultural shift in beauty ideals which involves challenging the colonial and colourist roots of skin lightening and chemical modification, while celebrating diverse skin tones and hair textures as socially valuable and beautiful. Schools, community organisations, and

religious institutions can be partners in this cultural transformation, embedding healthier standards of beauty in everyday life. Finally, the Nigerian beauty industry must embed sustainability principles across its operations, from sourcing renewable raw materials to reducing carbon emissions in production and transport. Partnerships with environmental organisations can accelerate the adoption of circular economy models, where waste is minimised and resources are reused. By pursuing these measures, Nigeria has the opportunity to redefine beauty in ways that honour human dignity, protect public health, and safeguard the environment.

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LOLITAS, MOUNTAIN WITCHES AND SEXY GALS

JAPANESE FASHION AS REBELLIOUS STYLE FROM THE LOST DECADES TO NOW

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Abstract

Coinciding with the global economic stagnation of the 2010s has been a rise in the adoption of Japanese youth fashions of the 1990s and 2000s, called the Lost Decades. A time of prolonged economic stagnation in Japan, these street-fashion subcultures became known for their vibrancy and originality in resisting wider narratives of high youth unemployment and being labelled the Lost Generation. This paper explores the street-fashions of *gyaru* and Lolita, as proponents of a rebellious Japanese youth fashioning heterotopias of their own making, challenging prevailing narratives of femininity through social deviance, soft rebellion, and mortality. Comparing them to UK *gyaru* and Lolita communities, it explores how these styles are evolving to answer different subcultural needs outside Japan, which has been little studied. While capturing imaginations of youth globally, they bring into question as new knowledge the meaning of Japan to a new disenfranchised youth and the ethics of adopting subcultural dress from other cultures. Locating it within the specific cultural and historic environment of the Lost Decades, often understudied in relation to these subjects, this paper emphasises the need to reposition these fashion subcultures against the specific conditions within which they are practiced to better understand their underlying implications.

INTRODUCTION

In existing literature on Lolita and *gyaru* fashion subcultures, prominent texts include Kinsella (2005) on early *gyaru* culture, Kawamura (2012) on Tokyo fashion districts, and Monden (2015) exploring gendered Japanese fashion subcultures. Recently, there have been studies on Lolita especially, which has developed into a mature international culture; Nguyen (2016) who takes a more theoretical approach, and Rose (2020; 2022), who focuses on the niche splinter styles of *fairy-kei* and *decora*. However, lacking in many of these studies has been the explicit contextualisation of the historical period and economic situation from which these subcultures spring. Likewise, apart from Tinelli's (2025) recent work on London

Lolitas, little has been done on UK Lolitas, especially those referencing Japanese fashion subcultures outside fashion capital cities, and to date no evidence of study of UK *gyaru*. This paper aims to rectify that, reframing the development of Lolita and *gyaru* to the specific conditions of Japan's Lost Decades, continuing the work of Kawamura (2012) and Monden (2015) in comparing the two fashion subcultures. It also proposes new research in the exploration of the recent phenomenon of UK *gyaru* as an offshoot of Japanese subcultural fashion performed by UK girls, positing implications of cultural appropriation of Japan within the Lolita and *gyaru* communities.

This research draws on historical, economic, cultural and material analysis. Interviews were

conducted with individuals in the Lolita subculture community in the UK, recruited through Lolita-related events such as the 2023 Otoku World Japan Fest in Cromford Mills, Derbyshire, and the press opening for the 2024 Cute exhibition at Somerset House, London. Media analysis of UK social media sites for Lolita was also conducted, alongside that of UK *gyaru* influencer, Lizzie Bee, including an analysis of a video-recorded *gyaru* meet-up in Manchester in 2022, available online. Due to the sensitivity of Lolita and *gyaru* to social harassment, care was taken to anonymise participants.

BACKGROUND: THE LOST DECADES

In 1989, Japan's "Bubble Economy" (1986-1989) finally burst. After four years of unparalleled growth in land, stock and asset values, the Bank of Japan raised interest rates, halting the economic party of cheap credit, overvalued yen, and booming property and consumer markets. This lead to widespread consolidations, restructuring, bankruptcies, redundancies, and a nationwide graduate employment freeze (Andressen, 2002; Cargill & Sakamoto, 2008; Hamada, Kashyap, et al., 2011). With land prices only falling from 1991, the Bubble's effects took time to dissipate, turning into the "Lost Decades" (1990-2015) through the 1990s into the 2010s. This marked the end of the miraculous rise of Japan from the postwar period into becoming the second largest economy in the world, tipped to overtake the US (Hamada, Otsuka, et al., 2011; Mosk, 2008; Vogel, 1979). The Lost Decades of the early twenty-first century thus came to signify a new era of stagnation and unhitching of the twentieth century Japanese contract of hard work and loyalty with reward.

Instead, the Lost Generation emerged, drifting from label to label; NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), grass-eaters, herbivores (emasculated men), parasite children (adults reliant on parental support) and *hikikomori* (recluses/shut-ins). They reflected the conditions of insecurity in a newly hostile economic environment and social and moral panic. Influenced by a string of shocking events, from the late-1980s serial schoolgirl murders by *otaku* manga and anime fan, Miyazaki Tsutomu, to the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attacks by the Aum Shinrikyo Cult, Japanese youth were perceived by the media as a moral danger to society, alienated and unable to obtain or commit to respectable employment (Matthews

& White, 2004). Subsisting on part-time jobs and shunning social responsibilities, the youth were seen as both victims of the economic climate and perpetrators of a national social and moral decline (Azuma, 2009; Brinton, 2011; Galbraith, 2019). Yet concurrently, Japanese popular culture was booming domestically and internationally. From the fertile ground of the Miracle (1955-1973) and Bubble (1986-1989) economies, Japanese culture and design enjoyed a boom in prestige and attention. These included internationally renowned architects such as Kenzo Tange (1913-2005), furniture designers such as Sori Yanagi (1915-2011), fashion designers such as Rei Kawakubo and her brand, Comme de Garcons (est. 1973), and innovations in product design and technology, such as the development of the Sony Walkman (1979), and Nintendo Entertainment System (1985). By the 1990s, Japanese manga, anime, television, film, pop music and fashion were making inroads globally, becoming the basis for cultural soft power in the form of the government-sanctioned Cool Japan policy of the 2010s. Examples include manga and anime such as *Akira* (1988), *Dragon Ball Z* (1989-1996), and *Sailor Moon* (1992-1997); television programmes such as *Oshin* (1983-1984); films such as *Ring* (1998) and *Battle Royale* (2000); and streetstyle fashion as depicted in the popular magazine, *FRUiTS* (1997-2017). These new Japanese cultural products were characterised by a dynamic synthesis and cross-cultural collaboration of West and East, making them familiar and excitingly unfamiliar for global audiences.

While many twentieth century Japanese youth subcultures have been characterised by this dynamism of cross-cultural influence, the Lost Decades' street-fashion has particular appeal and influence. This was due to improved class conditions for more Japanese youth, who had grown up during the affluence of the 1980s Bubble Economy. Compared to other subcultural products such as manga, anime, and film, street-fashion also has a physicality, materiality, and immediacy, creating intimacy with the wearer. Worn on the body and associated with specific fashion districts, its performative and territorial aspects make both the wearer and Tokyo sites of cultural contestation and destination, attracting commentators and visitors through their visibility and embodied practice. The areas of Harajuku and Shinjuku became areas of vibrant subcultural fashion display,

creating meccas for performative fashion and impetus for a dynamic retail industry. Meanwhile, striking images disseminated by magazines in a flourishing publishing industry meant that street-fashion had wide influence and appeal nationally and internationally, with photographers such as Shoichi Aoki, founder of street-fashion photography zines such as *STREET* (1985) and *FRUiTS* (1997), becoming known for their documentary DIY approach.

GYARU, GANGURO AND YAMAMBA: FORMALISED DEVIANCE, FEMININE CHALLENGE, RACIAL REBELLION

Emerging from this fevered environment was the *gyaru* style. Characterised by bleached blonde hair, tanned skin, vibrant make-up and revealing, colourful clothing, the term, *gyaru* (for girls, *gyaru-o* for boys), derives from the English slang, gal. Frequenting the influential 109 department store, *gyaru* staked Shibuya as their territory, self-referring as gangs, with their own language, hierarchies, rituals, and rules of engagement. These included deliberately opaque slang combining abbreviations of Japanese and English words, and hierarchical structures with group leaders, deputies, and strict seniority system with enforced retirement (Kawamura, 2012).

With their own logic of cool, deviance went beyond *gyaru* fashion. Evolving from the bodycon women's fashion of the 1980s, *gyaru* prized social deviance beyond staying out late and clubbing. As Kawamura (2012) and Kinsella (2013) observe, unmarried cohabitation, promiscuity, unprotected sex, fighting, arson, drinking one's own urine, setting fire to one's own pubic hair – these were seen as behaviours raising one's esteem within the group, according to complex points-based systems (Arai, 2009). Contrasting this was a requirement to adhere to strict internal rules, including intergroup politeness, formalised voting, and strong group discipline. Rituals were rigorously observed, including formalised retirement parties for outgoing members re-entering conventional Japanese society through work or marriage. While from a contemporary Western perspective these behaviours may seem standard teenage rebellion, within the Japanese context this deviance challenged not only social norms, but expectations for Japanese femininity. Coined in the late-nineteenth century, *ryōsai kenbo* (good

wife, wise mother) became a byword for women's place in society, emphasising through education women's duties to the nation as second pillar to the husband/father in the family dynamic. Coinciding with the start of the Meiji Restoration and Japan's increasing militarisation and nationalism, this definition of women's roles was about upholding the social and moral fabric of society, while achieving national aims of population advancement and discipline (Tanaka, 1998; Tanimoto, 2012). Implicit were women's location inside the home, modesty, pre-marital chastity, marital fidelity, and responsibility and commitment to the education, development and care of one's husband, elders, and children. Against this, *gyaru* deviance was not only taboo-breaking but a direct rebellion against societal expectations of girls and women to remain pure, passive, and in service of others.
Ganguro and *yamamba* are an offshoot of *gyaru* culture and derive from the words, *gan* and *kuro* (exceptionally dark/black), and *yamamba* (mountain witch). Revolving around the Shibuya and Ikebukuro areas of Tokyo, both styles defined themselves through extreme tans, excessive, dramatic light-coloured make-up, light contact lenses, bleached, brightly coloured hair, hair extensions, and vibrant clothing and accessories (Kawamura, 2012). Easily misunderstood as blackface parody, *ganguro* and *yamamba* were engaged in a more nuanced challenge to the norm (Kinsella, 2005, 2006). Exhibiting fierceness and aggression, they broke with expectations of Japanese feminine passivity and shyness. The deep tans, meanwhile, rebelled against what Miller (2006) identifies as the prized *bihaku* norm of fair skin as refined Japanese feminine beauty. *Gyaru* girls identify tans as strong and cool, connecting femininity with strength and coolness through the tan and rejection of fair skin cultivated through staying indoors (Kawamura, 2012). Brightly-coloured clothing, hair and make-up emphasise the tan's darkness, enabling them to visibly stand out in public, not through beauty but strength of image. Using beach-like signifiers of Hawaiian leis and tie-dye sarongs, *ganguro* and *yamambas* portrayed themselves as fun-loving and allied to an internationalist outdoors that included Pacific beach cultures and "authentic living". As Befu (2001) has identified fairness as characteristic of essential Japaneseness in a practice of modern Japanese nationalism called *nihonjinron*, so *ganguro*, in rejecting fairness so dramatically,

demonstrated rebellion against constraints of integral Japaneseness as imprinted into their very skin. In this, *ganguro*, *yamambas* and wider *gyaru* tanning culture, provided a counterpoint to the mainstream practice and acceptance of *nihonjinron*, that had surged in popularity since the 1970s in tandem with Japan's rising economic fortunes. Tied together in what Sugimoto (1999) identified as the triangle of nationality, ethnicity and culture, Yoshino (1992) observed that the main proponents of *nihonjinron* were the "salarymen" (businessmen) as they endeavoured to explain Japanese working practices to the international community through the lens of cultural distinction and economic and corporate nationalism. *Gyaru* tanning became not just a rebellion against the dictates of idealised pale feminine Japanese beauty, but one in which young women from the periphery of the economic system were challenging the cultural, economic and ethnic nationalism promoted by patriarchal Japan.

However, while *gyaru* subcultures may have been a visible challenge to conventional social norms, *gyaru* rule-breaking was also framed as exorcising one's deviance before settling down, with retirement from gang circles necessary to re-enter Japanese society. Underpinning *gyaru* philosophy was the understanding that early deviance would promote stable mature adulthood, and Kawamura (2012) has observed *gyaru* to be more conservative than they appear. Despite apparent opposition to social norms, *gyaru* may provide an important outlet for youthful rebellion, facilitating the wider Japanese system of conventional gender roles sanctioned by marriage and corporate employment. This echoes the historic dismissiveness towards Japanese youth subcultures by mainstream society, seeing them as rebellious phases such as the 1960s *dankai* generation youth protest movement, who eventually graduated into mainstream jobs and society, or passive disengagement, such as with the 1970s *shirake sedai* youth and 1980s consumerist *shinjinrui* (Matthews & White, 2004). However, Arai (2009) has noted that *gyaru* perceived their subculture not as passivity nor pointless rebellion, but as a process of self-actualisation through which they would attain self-determination and future success in society. For its participants, *gyaru* was thus as much a career strategy as other character-building practices.

LOLITA: 'EXTREME GIRLING', FEMININE REFUSAL, SELF-CHERISHMENT

Developing concurrently in the early-1990s were the Lolita subcultures. While commonly confused with the Nabokov novel, Lolita fashions are a separate category, based around idealised eighteenth and nineteenth century Western fashions of girlhood, invoking the styles of Rococo, Victorian and Edwardian periods (Nguyen, 2016). These include the use of lace, ruffles, full skirts, ribbons, bows, bonnets and sweet signifiers such as hearts, toys, stuffed animals, and soft feminine colours. While Kawamura (2012) and Monden (2015) have identified Lolita fashion as originating from 1970s feminine brands such as Milk and Pink House, Lolita can be seen as part of a wider practice drawing inspiration from European cultural aesthetics. These include the enduring popularity in Japan of Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland*; manga such as *The Rose of Versailles* (1972-73), featuring the eighteenth century Queen of France, Marie Antoinette; and mid-twentieth century artists such as Makoto Takahashi, whose illustrations featured young girls with large sparkling eyes in period Western dress. While undoubtedly influenced by the romanticism and decoration in 1970s and 1980s Japanese girl aesthetics (known as *hirahira*, an onomatopoeia of the fluttering of ribbons and frills), as Monden (2015, p. 113) notes, Lolita fashion does not draw exclusively nor faithfully from Western period dress, but engages with it as "transnational appropriation" that is creative and contemporary. Japanese Lolita effectively un-anchors Western dress, enabling it to become the locus for fantasy, wish-fulfilment and play.

Associated with the Harajuku area, surrounding streets from the 1990s became populated with Lolita fashion brands such as Angelic Pretty, Baby the Stars Shine Bright, and Atelier-Pierrot. Like *gyaru* subculture, Lolitas have a strong sense of community facilitated by specific language, centred around abbreviations for terms of dress, such as *coord* (a complete outfit of coordinated items) *wan pīsu* ('one piece' dress), and *cārdi* (cardigan). These often derive from the Japanese approach of abbreviating adopted foreign loanwords. Strict rules also tie the community together, featuring advice on skirt length, outfit creation, choice of fabric, quality, textile care advice, behaviour and rules of engagement whilst wearing a *coord*. Unlike *gyaru*,

Lolita subculture in Japan tends to be dominated by girls, who ostensibly are not required to retire, although, as wryly observed by a Lolita interviewed by Kawamura (2012, p. 66), it is "as long as you look young and don't have wrinkles around your eyes", indicating a natural aging out from active participation.

The most well-known and typical style is Sweet Lolita, with variations such as Elegant/Classic Lolita, Princess Lolita, Deco Lolita, and Pink Lolita. Drawing on a princess aesthetic, it was seen as a new wave of *shōjo* (young girl) culture that had developed since the early-twentieth century, catering to new consumer groups of schoolgirls and young women. Initially referring to cute stationary and other items known as "fancy goods" (*fanshī guzzu* or *komamono*) (Kinsella, 1995; Sato, 2009; S. Sugimoto, 2018), *shōjo* products soon expanded to include manga, literature, and fashion, with common themes being cuteness, coming of age stories and romance (Mackie, 2010; Treat, 1993). Taking inspiration from Butler's (2006) conceptualisation of gender as a sequence of performative acts which one not only is, but also does, Salih (2002), and Swindle's (2011) analysis of girlhood and "becoming-girl" as affective feeling, and observation of "girl" morphing in linguistic usage in the 1990s from noun to adjective – Lolita can be seen as an "extreme girling", where the practice of girl turns it into a performative and continuous verb. However, with Lolitas' emphasis on childhood, play, and innocence, rather than *shōjo*, Lolitas prefer the association with *otome* (maiden), and its members view it as a subculture created by maidens for maidens (Nguyen, 2016). In this is an important distinction between the English and Japanese translation. According to Treat (1993), rather than part of the binary of heterosexual relations, *shōjo* (and by extension, *otome*) constitute a third category of asexual gender, in which purity, innocence and chastity are virtues providing a foil and ambiguity in the formation of girl identity, allowing her to remain outside the constraints of sexual reproduction. Rather than being exclusive, Lolita is a style accessible through its emphasis on *kawaii* (cuteness) rather than *utsukushii* (unattainable beauty). *Kawaii*'s imperfections endow an endearing lovability, and a cherishing Lolitas draw on (Nguyen, 2016). Rather than solely a style, Lolita is a way of being in which enduring purity and inner authenticity is expressed through practice.

Self-expression, living to one's values, cherishing, and surrounding oneself with lovable things take precedence over outside influences. Lolita can be seen as more individual than *gyaru* culture, with less pressure to conform to points, rules-based systems, and hierarchies, and more enduring with importance placed not on behaviour but an inner authentic self.

Yet, for all their positive relationship to *kawaii* and *shōjo* culture, Lolitas have also been critiqued as detached from production, creating themselves through consumerism (Nguyen, 2016; Treat, 1993). In the novel turned 2004 live-action film, *Kamikaze Girls* (Nakashima, 2004; Takemoto, 2002), denial of involvement with production becomes the defining moment for the Lolita character, Momoko. Throughout the story she refuses to engage with work, preferring to obtain money dishonestly to buy her outfits, only using her embroidery skills under duress. When presented with an opportunity to work for her favourite brand, Baby the Stars Shine Bright, she deliberately turns them down, choosing to remain true to her calling as a pure Lolita consumer. However, rather than a simplistic reading of idleness (which is unlikely, considering Momoko's determined efforts adhering to the Lolita lifestyle), this is more a declaration of utter commitment to inhabiting the elegant, leisurely, unlaboured life of a Lolita maiden. In a sense this is an extension of the retreat into childhood, escaping the demands of adult society to work. Against the intense consumerism of the preceding Bubble Economy years where youth culture focused on designer brands and material consumption, followed by the collapse of the employment market and disillusion with work during the Lost Decades – the development of Lolita as a consumer-focused, work-avoidant Japanese youth subculture can be viewed as a reaction to these conditions.

Against the pressures of traditional Japanese femininity, girlhood – especially non-Japanese girlhood – enables an escape from patriarchy. Unlike the open rebellion of the 1920s *modan gāru* (modern girl) or the *gyaru* (Miller & Bardsley, 2005), by denying female adulthood, Lolitas refuse to engage altogether in production and reproduction as "good wives and wise mothers". Within this is the inherent ambiguity of girl objects, explored by Handyside (2017) and Swindle (2011), in which objects of girlhood can be both liberating and limiting of female subjectivities within the constraints of a capitalist neo-liberal, mediated

landscape. Similarly, while performing this exaggerated femininity can be seen as adherence to a patriarchal construct, "crafting and performing *shōjo* through gestures, and particularly clothes, allows Japanese women to present themselves as being segregated from obvious sexualisation". (Monden, 2015, p. 85). Rather than positioned as acceptance or ironic refusal of female sexuality, performing Lolita bypasses sexuality itself, signalling a removal from the discussion and application of sexual labels.

Lolita is therefore a radical act, where performance of extreme girling disrupts social norms on several axes. The embrace of regressive femininity is a rejection of feminism and the demands on women to compete for equality, while in using the West as limitless space for change and possibility, is rejection of traditional Japanese values limiting women in a gender-stratified society (Kelsky, 2008). In a stagnating economy, where the demands of work to conform through one's body, behaviour, time and efforts provided fewer rewards and women were already disadvantaged, Lolitas' refusal to participate in production were also signs of "soft resistance" (Nguyen, 2016, p. 26) against a failing and unequal capitalist system (McVeigh, 2000; Monden, 2014).

Developing from the sweetness of the classic styles of Lolita, are splinter styles with comparatively darker elements. These include characteristics of *kimo-kawa* (creepy cute), *itami-kawa* (sad-cute), *busu-kawa* (ugly-cute), *guro-kawa* (grotesque/horror cute), and *yami-kawa* (sick-cute). Seemingly at odds with Lolita aesthetics, they create a push-pull effect of opposite emotions, where sweet is offset by ugly, and the disfigured made adorable. The best known of these styles is Gothic Lolita, utilising the same frameworks of Victorian dress with a gothic twist, including dark colours and mourning, melancholic signifiers. Incorporating *kimo-kawa* and *itami-kawa*, Gothic Lolitas invoke the power of adorability to inspire affection and sympathy in things morbid or broken, signalling the acceptance for oneself at the heart of Lolita. Captivated by a morbidity and melancholy for the disappearing, Gothic Lolita manifest an honouring of lost childhood and innocence in their desire to freeze time. In a "death-like nostalgia" Gothic Lolita attempt to preserve their integral purity of maidenhood, creating an "eternal static reality" of the past, denying change that would impact on their sense of self (Nguyen, 2016, p. 27).

A further development from Gothic Lolita is the *guro-loli* (gruesome Lolita). Featuring elements of *busu-kawa*, *guro-kawa* and *yami-kawa*, they draw attention to and incite sympathy for the ugly, sick, disfigured, horrific parts of ourselves. Developing in the 2010s, these styles express more than denial of participation in the wider social and economic system through retreat into a fantasy past. Instead, through horror elements such as distressed makeup emulating soreness and wounds, bloodstained clothing, and medical implements such as c-pap masks and syringes as accessories, they actively engage with the diseased, disfigured and wounded as signifiers for sympathy, commenting on society as sick and cruel in its treatment of the disadvantaged. Through these styles, *guro-loli* teach us to see and treat people, including ourselves, as sympathetic beings, worthy of love, cherishment, and self-acceptance. Aligning with more traditional Japanese aesthetic philosophies such as *wabi-sabi* as the recognition of impermanence and imperfection, these Lolita can be seen as expressing a melancholic appreciation of transience and spiritual longing towards transcendence of the human condition.

GYARU AND LOLITA TODAY: CULTURAL APPRECIATION OR APPROPRIATION?

Since the 2010s, it is in the international sphere where Lolita and *gyaru* subcultures have developed further. Gaining pace through the 2000s, the 2013 Cool Japan government initiative helped propel Japanese popular culture as part of its soft power strategy. Notably, Sweet Lolita was the only street-fashion legitimised by the policy, establishing related events, communities, and retailers in North America and Europe, with significant online and commercial presence supporting communities that practice and disseminate the subculture (Kang & Cassidy, 2015; Tinelli, 2025).

Interviewing non-Japanese Lolitas in London and the Midlands area in 2023 and 2024, it was apparent that in addition to their appearance they have similar values to Japanese Lolita. On introduction, they offered their Lolita moniker rather than given names as their Lolita identity. Many of these referenced Lolita styles, like *fairy-kei*, or cute foods, such as cherry or *ichigo* (Japanese for strawberry). In contrast, Japanese Lolita names are often classic Western names such as Sophia or Charlotte. Rather than identifying as an adoption or performance, British Lolita insisted that Lolita revealed their

true selves. As a transformative, performative subculture, Lolita is more than dress; it is a medium through which practitioners inhabit their own authenticity, something Egner & Maloney (2016) observe about drag. These Lolita declare their dedication through life-choices that permit Lolita as everyday practice including choosing careers with a flexible dress code, demonstrating privileging of subcultural expression over economic production. However, unlike drag, UK Lolita continue the Japanese Lolita philosophy of refusing sexuality as a defining factor, a place of safety from unequal sexual relations. This is evidenced in the exclusive online social media groups on Facebook, which use coded acronyms such as EGL (Elegant Goth Lolita) to avoid open reference to Lolita, and strict joining policies that require knowledge and familiarity with Lolita fashion culture, designed to protect existing members and mitigate online sexual harassment. Nevertheless, through values of acceptance, self-affirmation, and care, Lolita can be seen as a queer-adjacent subculture, where hyper-femininity subverts existing structures, demonstrating what Whiteley and Rycenga (2006) identify as an alternative way of interaction and world-ordering. *Gyaru* too has been making its mark on girl communities, with a vibrant presence through online communities, influencers, fashion, goods retailers, and in-person meetups. Contrasting with Lolita, there is less rejection of sexualisation, the style drawing more on the *ero-kawa* (erotic-cute) aesthetic. However, unlike Japanese *gyaru* circles, British *gyaru* do not mention delinquency or deviance, appearing to cosplay Japan as site for metamorphosis and alignment with internationalist values, as part of a larger transnational girling associated with East Asia. An example is a 2022 *gyaru* meet-up in Manchester, headed by the self-proclaimed *gyaru* influencer, Lizzie Bee (2022). Comprised of only girls, there was a mix of styles, with some wearing light-coloured *yamamba* makeup, but most dressed in a Lolita-aligned style called *hime gyaru* (princess *gyaru*), including full-coverage cute dresses, elaborately curled hair, cute makeup, with little sign of extreme tanning. Walking around Manchester, they visited East Asian-themed venues, including a photo-sticker booth, karaoke establishment, and manga-themed café. Rather than enacting Japanese *gyaru* socially deviant behaviour of sexual promiscuity, fighting or arson, the British *gyaru* participated enthusiastically in Japanese-themed consumerism, enacting the

high voices, childlike speech and mannerisms of *burriko*, a regressive Japanese feminine style commonplace in manga and anime (Kerr, 2022). At no point did there seem to be any adherence to a Japanese-style *gyaru* hierarchy or organisational rules. However, while not necessarily rebellious in behaviour, the deviance was potentially in the challenge of Western women engaging in extreme Japanese *kawaii* culture as opposed to the Western feminine norm.

While retreating to childhood and play as protest against adult norms, international Lolita and *gyaru* access the styles differently from their Japanese counterparts, locating the site of play as Japan rather than the West. Whereas for Japanese Lolita and *gyaru* the fashion subcultures provided an imaginary alternative as an escape from the pressures of Japanese conservative femininity, today Lolita and *gyaru* styles are seen as synonymous with Japan rather than Western dress, an alternative expression of femininity as route to self-authenticity. This was evident in the use of Japanese-inspired names and activities during meetups. Yet, in becoming a Japanese aesthetic performed by Western girls, this appropriation can be critiqued as reappropriation of an appropriation, an exoticized and orientalist cosplay of Japanese cool rather than Japanese feminine rebellion referencing Western dress (Hinton, 2023). Here, the exterior form of Japanese street-fashion becomes the locus for Western feminine fantasy and escape, hollowing out the underlying meaning of the styles. Nevertheless, while there are aspects of Said's (2003) Orientalism at play, as Lolita takes inspiration from Western period dress, it could also be said to align to what Al-Azm (2000) and Gabriel and Wilson (2021) have identified as reverse Orientalism, through accessing Japan's use of the Occident as a place of otherness, as well as radical Orientalism in which the East is aligned and positively identified with from a position of solidarity in resistance against Western imperialism, racism, materialism, and in this case, Western patriarchy (Cohen-Vrignaud, 2015; Wu, 2018).

UK Lolita and *gyaru* are part of the wider debate around cultural appreciation verses appropriation, from consumer appreciation in response to demands for neoliberal multiculturalism by transnational capitalism, to recognition of the problem of cultural inequality where "other, often marginalized, cultures are transformed into palatable sources of consumable difference" (Cruz

et al., 2024, p. 963). These competing demands have led to tensions between calls for consumers to appreciate cultural diversity, alongside consuming responsibly, acknowledging the issues of cultural appropriation. In their work on ethnic consumers navigating these competing demands, Cruz et al. (2024, p. 963) identified this as consumer self-authorisation, a "reflexive reconfiguration of the self in relation to the social world through which consumers grant themselves permission to continue consuming cultural difference when confronting an identity-relevant tension between the ethnic consumer subject and the responsibilized consumer subject". It is in this mode that UK communities play in the ambivalent and amorphous space of Lolita and *gyaru* fashion as a form of consumer self-authorisation and actualisation, skirting cultural tensions around appreciation and appropriation.

CONCLUSION

Since Japan's Lost Decades and post-2008 global economic stagnation, youth subcultures have adopted Japanese street-fashion to express discontent with the breakdown of the social contract, where effort no longer guarantees economic reward, and a growing exclusion of youth from societal participation. The styles of *gyaru* and Lolita have been pivotal in giving femininity a fashion through which to express social and cultural deviance, soft rebellion, and alignment with internationalist values, whether that of the limitless spaces of the West or playful heterotopias of modern Japan. "However, rather than being escapist, these subcultures can be interpreted as refusal to participate in a tough environment defined by scarcity and threat." Despite the decadence, flamboyant excess can be a radical act during a time of economic stagnation and cost-of-living crisis; extreme girling and childish regression rebellion against the pressure to be sexualised and reproduce; and refusal to participate in economic production and patriarchal reproduction radical in a broken and unequal system. However, while not without problems, such as the nihilism within soft resistance and cultural appropriation by Western girl culture, the purpose of feminine subcultures like Lolita and *gyaru* is not to offer clear answers. Instead, they are tools of critique and a silent but visible method of protest for the dispossessed. "Rather than being good wives and wise mothers, these feminine subcultures of resistance actively work to be neither wives nor mothers, nor indeed good or wise. Instead, through deviance and frivolity, in the face of gendered structural limitations, they demonstrate courage, playfulness, self-authenticity, and ultimately acceptance and self-love, regardless of appearance."

In exploring how girl cultures have used *gyaru* and Lolita fashion to articulate discontent and resistance against a rigid social and economic order, this research widens out the scholarship that has historically focused on male-dominated subcultural fashions such as punk, as markers of rebellious fashion. It follows work by authors such as McRobbie (2000), Handyside (2017) and Swindle (2011) focusing on girls as subjects worthy of subcultural study. Examining current expressions in the UK, it contributes to studies of Lolita and *gyaru* that have predominantly focused on Japan, while positioning the subcultures against economic, historical and cultural context, it adds necessary context often under-applied in studies on Lolita and *gyaru*. Finally, limitations to the research meant more in-depth interviews and a wider selection of participants would have enhanced the scope of the primary research, and future work would involve engaging more deeply with UK *gyaru* and Lolita communities to draw out richer insights.

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CREATIVE AND REFLECTIVE WORKS

AN EKPHRASTIC ESSAY
EMBER (IMAGINED ARTWORK)

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Abstract

This ekphrastic essay explores *Ember*, an imagined photographic triptych depicting a coiled, otherworldly figure set in a luminous red void. The central figure's long black hair, white floral adornments, gold-encrusted teeth, and dance-like posture evoke themes of survival, beauty, and cultural diversity. Drawing on visual analysis and symbolic interpretation, this essay weaves together elements of colour theory, Indigenous knowledge systems, and theories of fashion as resistance.[1] Through a discussion of aesthetic strategies, land-based spirituality, and ornamentation, *Ember* is positioned as an altar of joy and resilience during toxic times. Readers are invited to move between text and image, allowing the written word to guide a dialogue with the panels.

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1   This essay is informed by and thinks with the work of scholars, including Josef Albers on colour theory, Martin Nakata on Indigenous knowledge systems, and Yuniya Kawamura on fashion studies. Their ideas provided conceptual frameworks that helped shape the analysis of *Ember* and its visual language.

AN EKPHRASTIC ESSAY: EMBER

The central figure in *Ember* is not just a figure; it is a coil of paradox. It is a form that wraps upon itself, a posture that exudes both protection and provocation. The body folds like smoke, like a serpent resting after a strike. However, the tension is palpable. In this suspended moment, the figure throws its head back, red eyes gazing to the heavens, a cascade of long black hair unfurling into the crimson void, strands caught mid-motion as if stirred by an internal wind. The hair is adorned with tiny white native flowers — ghostly and delicate — like a garden blooming where it should not survive (Fig. 01).

The background is blood-deep and borderless: an endless red field layered with burnished tones that breathe and flicker like the dying coals. There is no horizon. The figure does not stand against this space but within it, not separate from the fire but forged by it. The skin is bronzed red, smooth, and gleaming like hammered metal, a surface shaped by heat and history. Around the neck lies a floral necklace, delicate and organic, echoing white flowers threaded through the hair. The petals are edged with gold, as if kissed by flames, their softness tempered by a shimmer that hints at resilience. Small matching floral wristbands circle each wrist — garlands, almost ceremonial — also lightly sprayed with gold, their gentle opulence contrasting with the figure's coiled posture and fierce expression. Light finds it and clings to the ridges of bone, to the curling fingers tipped with

Fig. 01

sharp black nails that glint like obsidian blades.

It is the mouth that demands attention. The figure's lips are parted in something between a grimace and a grin — a moment before laughter or a growl. Inside, a shimmer: gold teeth, dazzling, sharp, and extravagant. The grin is not just a grin; it is a defiance, a celebration of survival. It mocks pain and reveres survival in equal measure. It says, "I endured — and I emerge."

There is no mistaking this: *Ember* is not passive. It burns. The golden highlights across the body are not ornamental; they rise from within — scars turned sacred, defiance turned divine. The white flowers in the hair speak of memories, of softness grown from fire. They do not wilt. They bloom beside ash.

Either side of the central panel holds portraits that are turned away. These flanking figures, framed from behind, echo the central form's stillness and strength (Fig. 02 and 03). Their long black hair falls in an eerie fashion, almost. The strands fall with such deliberateness that they appear sculpted, frozen in time. Each is decorated with small white flowers as the central figure — a quiet continuity, a visual whisper of shared memory. There are no visible faces, only the slope of shoulders and the fall of hair, leaving the viewer to wonder whether these figures are past selves, guardians, or witnesses. Is this a person or an ancestral spirit figure that defies categorisation and revels in it? This figure
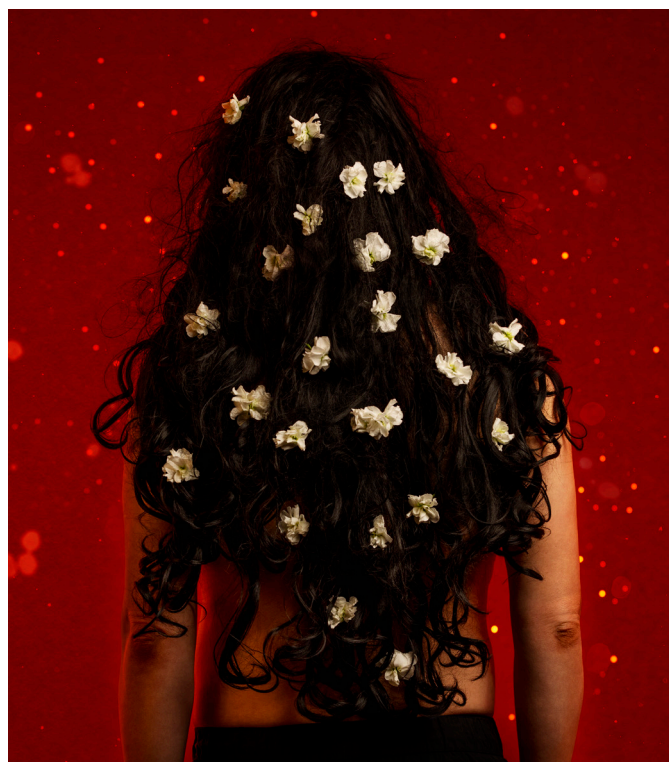

Fig. 03

Fig. 02

is not intended to be deciphered. It is meant to be felt — in the stomach, in the teeth, in the flesh. It is neither a man nor a woman, neither a warrior nor a victim. It is power-coiled. It is grief made gold. It is the smouldering quiet after history's blaze. It is power, raw and unyielding, a defiance of social norms and a celebration of identity.

Ember captures a truth that cannot be spoken, only survived through. The photograph does not demand attention. It commands it. Moreover, in its glow, the viewer feels themselves unravel — coiled in memory, lit by something old, something glowing, something new.

The power of *Ember* lies not only in its form but also in its palette — a carefully orchestrated symphony of red, gold, white, and black that vibrates with emotional and symbolic weight. The red is not just background, not just blood or fire; it is atmosphere, intention, memory. In Chinese culture, red carries profound significance, symbolising power, abundance, celebration, and life itself. It is the colour of good fortune and prosperity, worn at weddings, the colour of double happiness offering envelopes for marital bliss, painted on doorways, and carried in lanterns to ward off evil. In this context, the red of *Ember* may not only signal inner heat or emotional weight but also ancestral wealth and spiritual vitality. It evokes the ceremonial, eternal, and sacred. When viewed through this cultural lens, the images

take on an additional layer: the figure is not only burning but also blessed. It consumes the frame without overwhelming it, layered in varying intensities, from deep maroon to glowing crimson. Red becomes an emotional landscape — anger, passion, heritage, danger, rebirth — shifting in meaning as the viewer shifts in stance. It surrounds the figure but also seems to breathe through it, as though the figure has absorbed the very heat of its surroundings and becomes an ember itself (Fig. 01, 02 and 03).

Gold operates differently — not dominantly, but piercingly. It appears where light meets history: in the teeth, wristbands, and outlines of petals. It is the colour of treasure and triumph, of something valuable surviving destruction. Gold in *Ember* is not wealth; it is resilience and adornment made holy. It feels applied not for beauty's sake but as a ritual, as an offering, as an inheritance. It is sacred burnish — a marking, a crowning, a consequence. In its limited but potent presence, white becomes the most haunting. The small white flowers in the hair and on the body are symbols of fragility and mourning, but they also symbolise persistence. They are not bleached or sterile — they glow faintly, carrying the suggestion of spirits, of memory, of things that return. White does not purify; it punctuates. It breaks the red with softness, grief, and a touch of grace.

Finally, the black — found in the cascading hair and razored nails — is the work's anchor. It grounds the palette in the shadow and sharpness. The impossibly dark hair becomes a void of its own. A portal. A shroud. Black nails are weapons, yes, but also declarations. They point, claw, and remind. Taken together, these four colours create a graphic of immense power — not a simple harmony but a kind of chromatic tension that energises the whole triptych. Each colour plays off the other, just as each panel refracts the mythos of the central figure. The palette is as much a part of the narrative as the figure itself: the red of trauma, the gold of survival, the white of memory, and the black of depth. In this way, *Ember* does not merely show a body. It shows us cosmology.

The fashion and adornment of the central figure heighten this sacred, visual language. The gold-encrusted teeth glint with ritual extravagance, while the carefully arranged flowers — in the hair, around the wrists, across the collarbone — speak of ceremonial care. These are not random accessories; they are declarations of intent. They suggest preparation, reverence, and the embodiment of cultural memory. In Indigenous traditions worldwide, decoration has long been a form of storytelling — from the ochre that maps Country onto skin, to possum-skin cloaks inscribed with kinship, to feathered headdresses worn in dance. In *Ember*, adornment becomes the language through which the body speaks of its survival — not quietly, but with glittering, visceral clarity.

This act of self-decoration — lush, precise, unapologetically excessive — aligns *Ember* with the theme of affective passage in toxic times. This highlights how fashion and joy become tools of resistance. In a world scorched by violence, invisibility, and dispossession, the deliberate crafting of beauty is an act of survival. Ornamentation signifies defiance; joy signifies protest. The figure's dance-like posture, the feline alertness of its eyes, the gold teeth, and the black nails — all signal a life lived fully, fiercely, and with intent.

The sharing of embodied stories — of fashion, of land, of memory — is how *Ember* builds meaning. This work is born of interconnection, drawing from ancestral knowledge, cultural inheritance, and ceremonial imagination. Every gold fleck and bloom is part of a relational network that resists individualism and embraces the collective.

In *Ember*, ornamentation is not excess but essence. Opulence is not a mask but a mirror, reflecting the rich, complex entanglements of culture, history, survival, and celebration. The decorative does not distract; it concentrates meaning instead. Each golden gleam and floral gesture becomes a site of resistance, a reclamation of space in which the sacred and stylish coexist without contradiction. This is joy as freedom. This is beauty as a battle cry.

The emotional force of *Ember* lies in its refusal to be fully understood. It denies the viewer a straightforward narrative or fixed identity. Instead, it offers sensations, presence, and power. It asks not to be read but felt. *Ember* disturbs in precisely this way — it unsettles, resists taxonomy, and insists on being felt rather than understood. In doing so, it invites an affective encounter in which the viewer is not merely an observer but a participant. You do not watch *Ember*. You pass through it. You are scorched, ornamented, and transformed.

This photographic triptych is more than an artwork — it is an altar. A constellation of memory, movement, and meaning forged in the crucible of toxic times. And yet it glows. Fiercely. Elegantly. Unapologetically.

Ember reminds us that amid a rupture, we can still adorn ourselves with memories. In the aftermath of a fire, flowers still bloom. This joy, when carefully cultivated, can become a flame that never dies.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Thompson, C. (2025). Ember 1 [Actualised artwork]. Courtesy of the artist.

[Fig. 02] Thompson, C. (2025). Ember 2 [Actualised artwork]. Courtesy of the artist.

[Fig. 03] Thompson, C. (2025). Ember 3 [Actualised artwork]. Courtesy of the artist.

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ROSES OF TIES

MEMORY, GENDER, AND CRAFT AS POST-MIGRATION PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION

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Abstract

Roses of Ties is a socially engaged fashion and craft initiative led by Belarusian-born, Sweden-based artist Ludmila Christeseva, in collaboration with the Women of Artten collective. Initiated in response to the displacement caused by the Russo-Ukrainian war, the project invites women-many of them Ukrainian refugees-to transform donated men's neckties into rose-shaped textile brooches. In this process, a symbol of patriarchal authority is reimagined through acts of feminist care, embodied memory, and shared ritual.

This article explores Roses of Ties as a situated fashion practice that foregrounds gendered resistance, emotional durability, and the politics of making. Drawing on feminist theory, craft studies, and decolonial fashion discourse, the project exemplifies how collective making can function as both healing and political action. By reframing fashion as a site of affective passage, Roses of Ties challenges the extractive logic of fast fashion and offers an alternative vision rooted in joy, care, and transnational solidarity. Here, brooches become living archives — quietly resisting erasure and stitching feminist futurities from grief, displacement, and loss.

Roses of Ties is a socially engaged craft initiative and evolving exhibition led by Belarusian-born, Sweden-based artist Ludmila Christeseva, in collaboration with the Women of Artten collective in Stockholm. Initiated in response to the displacement caused by the Russo-Ukrainian war, the project invites women-many of them Ukrainian refugees-to transform donated men's neckties into rose-shaped textile brooches (Fig. 01). In these quiet, participatory workshops, women stitch, fold, and repurpose an object traditionally associated with patriarchal authority into delicate floral emblems of memory, mourning, and resilience. This project doesn't circulate in galleries alone but lives in bodies, stories, and community. Here, fashion becomes both a vessel of mourning and a method of survival-insisting on sustainability not as trend, but as embodied memory.

For centuries, the necktie has functioned as a potent symbol of control, hierarchy, and masculine professionalism. Originating from the 17th-century cravat worn by Croatian mercenaries, the tie evolved through the tightly knotted styles of the Victorian era into a staple of Western male attire. It became a visual marker of patriarchal order, discipline, and respectability. Worn by generals, bankers, bureaucrats, and corporate executives, the tie communicates authority and conformity within institutional structures. Even today, it remains embedded in gendered dress norms that uphold social order and professional legitimacy (Crane, 2000; Entwistle, 2000; Hollander, 1994).

Fig. 01

The brooch, by contrast, carries a distinct symbolic weight. From ancient Celtic fibulae and Viking cloak pins to Victorian mourning jewelry and suffragette rosettes, brooches have served as both functional fasteners and personal emblems of identity, memory, and resistance. As portable and wearable symbols, they have historically communicated political allegiance, social status, and emotional connection (Arnold, 2001; Pointon, 1999; Riello & McNeil, 2010). While the tie constricts, the brooch reveals. If the tie aligns the body with institutional order, the brooch marks emotional presence-love, grief, and resistance. Roses of Ties brings these symbolic traditions into dialogue, placing them in tension and ultimately transforming them into a new, collective form. At the core of this work is the transformation of the tie-not through erasure, but through reworking. The tie isn't discarded; it's folded into something more tender and enduring (Fig. 02 e 03). This echoes Luce Irigaray's theory of mimesis-not imitation, but repetition with a difference. For Irigaray (1985), mimesis becomes a feminist strategy to occupy dominant forms and subtly shift their meaning. In Roses of Ties, mimesis softens patriarchal power without parodying it. An accessory once knotted at the neck is now tied to tree branches and carried to the workshop's gathering place, where the ritual of reclamation and

reconstruction continues (Fig. 04 e 05). Women gather around the donated collection of ties, each carrying the weight of memories and absence (Fig. 06). In their hands, these remnants of power are reimagined and reshaped through folding, stitching, and crafting (Fig. 07). As they create new forms, their gestures are generative rather than confrontational. The tie, once a symbol of authority, becomes a conduit for care, remembrance, and resilience. What was once worn to mark status is now transformed into roses, worn close to the heart - offering tenderness where there was once distance. The project opens up a deeply embodied fashion practice, shaped by trauma and sustained through shared solidarity. In workshops across Stockholm, Ukrainian women fold and sew ties once worn by husbands, sons, and fathers-men left behind or lost to war. Through the intimate acts of cutting and stitching, grief is processed collectively. The act of making becomes its own language. These brooches are not merely decorative; they are affective objects, worn close to the skin and imbued with relational meaning. As Parker (1984) and Adamson (2010) argue, craft can serve as a performative medium-materializing memory through gesture, repetition, and form.
Christeseva notes, "ties once symbolized male presence-now they become vessels for remembering absence". Swedish women have joined the project

Fig. 02

too, exchanging ties from deceased partners for rose brooches. This quiet exchange creates a shared emotional economy. The brooch becomes a wearable monument-intimate, public, and deeply felt (Fig. 08).

The labor of craft here is neither pastime nor nostalgia, but what bell hooks (1995) describes as aesthetic resistance-a form of survival enacted through beauty and making. The sewing needle becomes a timekeeper, its motion pacing through the fabric with hope. If fast fashion thrives on speed and disposability, these roses embody what bell hooks calls aesthetic resistance: slowness, care, and survival through beauty. As one of the participants put it, "by transforming ties, we resist and remember; by wearing them close to the heart, we find love and hope".

Importantly, Roses of Ties diverges from market-driven models of circular fashion. While the project reflects Scandinavian upcycling sensibilities, its emphasis isn't on resale or design innovation, but on ritual and repair. Sustainability here is emotional and cultural. The ties are reused, yes-but more crucially, they're reimagined and remembered. Craft, in this context, functions as care work-unpaid, gendered labor rooted in collective memory and transgenerational resilience. The project foregrounds the gendered politics of care labor-a mode of making that resists

commodification, reclaims domestic craft, and weaves solidarity among displaced women. The transformation of grief into hope follows the reworking of a fashion accessory into a work of collective art. The necktie-once a symbol of

Fig. 03

Fig. 04

Fig. 05

Fig. 06

Fig. 07

Fig. 08

patriarchal authority and institutional order-is softened into a rose, layered and hand-stitched with care. This metamorphosis is not merely visual. It signals a shift in meaning: from power to tenderness, from uniformity to uniqueness. Through this gesture, Roses of Ties reclaims fashion as a space for emotional labor and quiet resistance. Unfolding in countless forms, it shapes emotions and memories into rose petals without thorns— offering only care and love. Within its folds, the tie carries memory and presence, filling each moment with tenderness and becoming.

Many of the women in the project come from intergenerational contexts shaped by absence- whether due to war, political repression, or economic migration. Christeseva explains, "in Belarus, where I was born, and Ukraine, where many of the women I work with come from, grandmothers often raised children alone". The brooches become tactile embodiments of this history. They echo the idea of the feminine dowry as a cultural archive, reanimated in the context of forced migration. Fashion, traditionally a Western-coded system of visibility and power, is subverted here by women whose very presence challenges these hegemonies.

By transforming ties into objects carrying personal and collective histories, the women assert knowledge rooted in experience rather than Western fashion hierarchies. In doing so, they enact the pluriversal, situated forms of fashion knowledge called for in decolonial feminist discourse (Haraway, 1988; Jansen, 2020).

The affective force of the project is not only in its materials but in its gestures. As one of participants shared: "gently, carefully, we take down the ties, our fingers tracing the fabric. Hands that once tied them each morning, followed by a quick kiss at the door" (Fig. 09).

Further, the women engaged in the creative transformation of old ties articulate reflections such as: "how can such a small detail hold so much love - yet cause so much pain? It has been two years since my husband did not return from the war. I need something to hold onto". Such details exemplify what Barthes (1981) terms punctum - the piercing element within an object that carries an excess of emotional charge. In this context, the tie becomes a trace, and the brooch becomes testimony.

Each rose embodies a narrative - of fathers remembered, partners lost, and families fragmented by war and exile. Worn close to the heart, it renders both pain and loss visible. The accessories, enhancing the modest attire of their wearers, draw the gaze of passersby and invite questions. These encounters are vital: they open a space where individual stories can be shared while simultaneously enacting collective memory. Through such dialogues, the project continues to bloom - exploring and recording new colours, forms, and memories, and reinforcing the power of presence, care, and remembrance. The polyphonic archive is an attempt to confront the emptiness and loss of our time, where each rose speaks in its own voice yet resonates within a chorus of shared grief and resilience.

According to Professor Elizabeth Wilson, by transforming clothing and accessories, we engage with the persistence of memory, grief, and identity. Wilson (1985) emphasizes that fashion objects are not mere decoration but active mediators of memory and emotional presence. In Roses of Ties, the public visibility of these transformed ties underscores this performative dimension, illustrating how material culture mediates grief, resilience, and communal care.

Though small in scale, Roses of Ties prompts a broader reflection on fashion's role during crisis. In a world increasingly shaped by displacement, war, and systemic erasure, this project insists on fashion as a site of feminist world-making. It resists

Fig. 09

through tenderness, memory, and presence. Its power lies not in spectacle but in quiet insistence. In transforming ties into brooches, the women not only mourn what is lost but find joy in collective making-a radical act of resistance amid erasure. Ultimately, Roses of Ties reimagines what sustainability can mean. It's not only about material use but about emotional durability - the ability of garments to hold grief, transmit care, and remember what is lost. This is not seasonal fashion. It is memorial infrastructure. Through cloth, women stitch continuity from rupture. They resist forgetting. This is not a fashion exhibition in the conventional sense. It's a living archive. The women who make and wear these brooches do not perform fashion-they perform presence. And the ties, reshaped into roses, remind us that even symbols of power can be unknotted, reworked, and worn again-closer this time, to the heart.

In the long term, the vision for this handmade collection of unique accessories is that it will continue to expand and ultimately constitute a grassroots museum of women's resilience— an institution without walls, assembled instead through stories and performative acts, conceptualized as Roses of Ties. As Christeseva reflects, "Do we really need so many flowers?" The question highlights the tension between accumulation and meaning, suggesting that each rose is not merely decorative but a vessel of memory. Much like in Svetlana Alexievich's The Unwomanly Face of War (1985), every rose carries the testimony of mothers, sisters, and daughters, evoking the hardship and emptiness left in the wake of war. Roses of Ties unpacks this depth - a depth that grows with each passing year of war, beyond what words can fully capture, as the participants discovered while transforming men's ties into flowers. Within this framework, Roses of Ties operates at the intersection of ecology and heritage, positioning collective creativity as both a form of resilience and a potential instrument for peace.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Roses of Ties in women's hands. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt.

[Fig. 02] Handmade Rose of Tie. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt.

[Fig. 03] Roses of Ties: two different designs. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt.

[Fig. 04] The performative ritual of artist Ludmila Christeseva, with ties knotted on tree branches. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt.

[Fig. 05] Crafting a Rose of Tie. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt.

[Fig. 06] Discussion between visual artist Ludmila Christeseva and Women of Artten. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt

[Fig. 07] Crafting a Rose of Tie. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt.

[Fig. 08] Presentation of a Rose of Tie. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt.

[Fig. 09] Ties knotted on the tree branches. Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt. Images Photograph: Sebastian von Wachenfeldt

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JOYFUL UNDER THE DRAGONFLY

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC FASHION ACCOUNT OF HELSINKI PRIDE 2025

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Abstract

This paper offers an autoethnographic account of Helsinki Pride 2025, June 28. Reflecting upon comfort, visibility, invisibility, joy, and resistance, the complexities of dress, embodiment, and multiple dressed bodies are discussed. It is concluded that although Pride is a demonstration for the rights of sexual and gender minorities, its significance reaches beyond these in times when conservative, anti-democratic forces are increasingly gaining power in Europe. Beyond individual style, as great as its importance is, the joyful coming together of masses, irrespective of their dress choices, holds enormous potential for mass power and individual empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Fashion research has for a long time at least bent towards queerness and queer identities (Vänskä, 2014). For many, fashion is one fundamental element of representing, bending, crossing, consciously playing with gender boundaries (Cole, 2015). Fashion is a powerful tool for performing and experiencing queer identities (Holliday, 2001), but also a means for a minority to negotiate different audiences and social situations (Reddy-Best et al., 2024). Whether dress has been seen as a semiotic marker of queer identity (Schofield and Schmidt, 2005), or a key means of identification with, and a signifier of belonging in the queer community (Clarke and Turner, 2007), dressing as "visibly" queer can be a source of both distress (Reddy-Best and Pedersen, 2015), and empowerment and solidarity (Medhurst, 2023). It is well known that the liberation movement that became a series of Pride events around the world started in 1969 as embodied resistance to repeated and targeted police raids in New York, conducted on biased "moral" grounds (Merritt, 2023). With time, Pride parades have emerged as a carnivalesque space for queer self-expression, along with various political demands, in which the performing body is both aesthetic and political (Sandoval, 2021). Yet, in some conservative national contexts, overly visible, flamboyant queerness can be considered to work against the interests of the queer community in general (Horton, 2020). Minority dress communication

carries typically (at least) dual messages: ones for the majority, others aimed at the members of the community (e.g. Almila, 2018a).

In this paper, I reflect upon the Helsinki Pride 2025 event on 28th June where I marched in the bloc of the Voluntarily Childfree (*Vapaaehtoisesti lapsettomatry*); the Association's logo features a dragonfly, symbolising liberty and lightness. While my reflection is autoethnographic, as is typical in an autoethnographic account (Adams et al., 2024), I place my reflections within the wider political situation in Europe today. Helsinki Pride took place on the same day as the Budapest Pride, banned by Budapest Police (who were strongly encouraged by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán), but supported by the Mayor of Budapest Gergely Szilveszter Karácsony. In Budapest, up to 200,000 people marched, amongst them several MEPs, including Li Andersson and Jussi Saramo of the Left Allegiance Finland. In Finland, the march was estimated to have attracted 100,000 people. Many carried signs declaring solidarity to the Budapest queer community; other expressions of solidarity included the people of Palestine ("Queers for Palestine") and Iran ("One day we'll march in Iran"). In its fundamentally political character, Pride is one of the central public platforms where the battle between conservative and liberal forces is being fought in Europe today.

I will first briefly visit the idea of autoethnography, and what it means, or could mean, for study of dress and fashion. I then discuss the history and today of Pride in Finland and Europe, before moving on to describe the Helsinki Pride Day. In the conclusion, I reflect upon visibility and invisibility of dress, appearance, individual, and group, as well as the voluntary or involuntary nature of becoming (in)visible. In what follows, I write not only as a fashion scholar and a dressing person, but also as a *writer* wishing to push the boundaries of academic writing. Emerging from the positionality of a standpoint theorist (Smith 1992), I seek to do what Kathy Davis (2014, p. 174) describes as "a personal, passionate, and creative enterprise – something that enables us to take risks, embark on unexpected paths, and, in so doing, command our audience's full and appreciative attention." Emotions in academic writing are often treated as a problem, something to be "managed" (Janke et al., 2020). By dwelling not only in dress but also in the emotions triggered, experienced, and expressed by the dressed individual, I explore both social and academic realities and boundaries.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND FASHION

A classical definition of autoethnography describes it as "form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" as "a way to shape understandings of and in the wider world" (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1660). According to Adams et al (2014, p. 1), "[a]utoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience. With autoethnography, we use our experience to engage ourselves, others, culture(s), politics, and social research". In fashion research, it has been noted that autoethnographic content may become "a medium of [fashion studies], an amateur mode of critical inquiry into the same themes, topics, and ideas that scholars of fashion hold dear" (Luvaas, 2016, p. 83). In other words, fashion is for a fashion scholar both a topic of enquiry and, necessarily, an everyday practice, whether professional or not. In this paper, I use my reflections upon dress in a location and situation as a means of narrating political agency and visibility in turbulent times. Autoethnography "[u]ses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences", and perhaps even more importantly, it "[u]ses deep and careful self-reflection … to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political" (Adams et al., 2014, p. 1). An autoethnographic account therefore serves two purposes: it allows me to communicate the urgency of a lived situation, as it has been written immediately after the event it describes took place. Furthermore, it allows me to narrate a context both from within and outside, through observations concerning both myself and my environment. I was trained as a fashion designer and worked for a short period in the industry. In my scholarly accounts, I have made use of this experience and the related specialist knowledge (Almila, 2018b). A lot of my everyday dress style is a resistance of multiple factors: I resist the black so many designers (and also fashion scholars) seem to love in their personal outfits. I resist the demand of colourfulness that seems to be the very marker of 'creativity' for many. In fact, I love grey and carefully preserve the garments I can get when grey once again emerges as the colour of the moment.

In my reflections, I am strongly aware of some generally accepted, shared narratives (Lloyd-Parkes, 2018) about colours that seem to guide interpretations of Pride and Pride appearance: Pride is colourful, and this colourfulness seems to be synonymous with its joyfulness.

The nearest expression I can find for myself is gender vague, which could be interpreted as something near to gender fluid.[1] I have been externally gendered from my early childhood onwards but never was quite sure what I felt to be myself. The nearest to gender reflection I arrived when young, was to comment on any stereotypic gender accounts that I clearly must be a boy, if that is what "girls" and "boys" are and do (see Butler, 1988). Mostly my comment was an expression of frustration against the narrow boundaries the society wished to force me in. I have previously written research, involving autoethnographic accounts, from the point of view of a woman (e.g. Almila, 2021, 2022, 2025), but that to me has always meant being *treated* as a woman, not actually *being* one. If the society didn't care, I don't think I would care one bit. I am first and foremost a political and physical being, yet with multiple neurological and other issues that prevent me from taking as much part in political activities as one could hope. In Pride, I am never certain whether I am queer or an ally, and never much care, either. The one thing I deeply care about is right to legal, social, and corporeal self-determination, which is why I chose to march with my childfree peers – our slogan for the demonstration was "For self-determination". On the other hand, I like invisibility until I choose to become visible – and for an ageing gendered being labelled as a "woman", visibility is less and less available by the day (Twigg, 2013; Zeilig & Almila, 2018). In Pride, I chose to become visible, yet not necessarily visible as an individual.

PRIDE IN EUROPE AND FINLAND

In 1970, the London Gay Liberation Front held its first meeting and went on to hold its first demonstration. Another demonstration took place in 1971, but the first Pride march, with c. 2,000 attendees, is commonly dated to 1 July 1972 (Merritt, 2023). Other European countries and capitals followed. In Finland, the association for

Sexual Equality (*Seksuaalinen tasa-arvo SETA ry*) was founded in 1974, and the first demonstrations were organised soon afterwards. The first major demonstration march took place in 1981, and the Liberation Days (*Vapautuspäivät*) thereafter grew in both length and number of attendants. The Helsinki Area Sexual Equality (*Helsingin seudun SETA*) organisation was established in 1991 and took over the local organisation responsibility. During this decade, the Liberation Days march became increasingly carnivalesque and colourful. As of 2000, the march has been called Pride, following an established international vocabulary, and the organising association has been Helsinki Pride (Helsinki Pride, n.d.). There are several other Pride marches organised in different parts of Finland. From relatively early onwards, since the 1980s, the police have collaborated with the organisers, aiming to reduce risk of threat and harm to the demonstrations and gatherings. Nevertheless, in 2010,

"A major attack on the Pride parade took place in Helsinki … Three men attacked participants with gas bombs, teargas and pepper spray. A total of 88 people were injured. Soon afterwards, someone smashed windows at Seta's headquarters in Helsinki. Another Pride event held in Oulu was also targeted by violent opponents". (Poliisimuseo, n.d., p. n.p.).

As Helsinki Pride has grown and developed, the association has also become increasingly professionally organised, with partial public funding and established organisation, involving specialist sections, such as youth work and, increasingly, refugee work (Helsinki Pride, n.d.). In 2015, when a large number of refugees arrived in Europe, Together with Pride was established to support refugees of sexual and gender minorities. It is well known that to belong in such a minority is life-threatening in many national and cultural contexts. In accordance with the tenth anniversary, the main theme of Helsinki Pride 2025 was "Pride without Borders" (Together with Pride, n.d.).

As already mentioned above, Pride is in some places under threat even in Europe. While many countries have improved the legislative position of various sexual and gender minorities, other countries have moved against such tendencies, seeking to make the situation worse. In a European Parliament (2025, p. n.p.) Think Tank brief, the ban of Budapest Pride is described as follows:

"On 18 March 2025, a law was adopted in Hungary

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1   Consider the following citation from Judith Butler in 2021: "I don't have an easy answer, though I am enjoying the world of "they". When I wrote Gender Trouble, there was no category for "nonbinary" – but now I don't see how I cannot be in that category" (Gleeson, 2021, p. n.p.). This resonates with me.

restricting the freedom of assembly … On the basis of this law, Budapest police decided to ban Budapest Pride. While at first some of the police"s decisions were annulled by the Hungarian Supreme Court on procedural grounds and required new decisions, the Supreme Court later upheld these decisions and refused to check the law against the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) or make a preliminary reference to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). … The mayor of Budapest announced that Budapest Pride will be held as a municipal event, but the Budapest police have issued a decision prohibiting this".

It is well authenticated that the Budapest Pride 2025 was bigger than ever, and many interpreted this as a more general demonstration against Orbán's and others' conservative, reactionary, anti-democratic politics. Pride's significance has grown beyond its original purpose, and it can today be read as one battle ground between opposing liberal and conservative political forces. In Finland, Helsinki Pride has successfully framed itself as one of the biggest human rights events in the country, thus placing itself on the side of general human rights concerning all.

HELSINKI PRIDE 2025

I wake up on Saturday morning exhausted. This is a state in which I have spent already days if not weeks, so it does not particularly disturb me. However, it does mean that I need the safest clothes possible. I choose the Ukrainian design dress I bought in the early days of the war and the flat red boots I wore when I couch surfed around Europe as a student. Their long zippers have been changed once, but one of the sliders has again lost its pulling slip, which I have replaced with a now shapeless paper clip. Plenty of the area we will be marching through is covered with cobblestones, and I'm certainly not young enough to manage those in heels, as I used to be able to do. The dress was originally of dark blue cotton with small white-red-black horse print, but the colour has been lost as I have continuously worn and washed it through several summers. The dress has a lowered loose waist, shirt collar, hidden-buttoned front, and long sleeves; its wide hem comes down to my mid-calf. I wear my least breast-enhancing sports bra and very comfortable underpants. The weather is as vague as my gender identity, so I pack a small scarf against potential sun, and a turquoise umbrella. I'm a sensible adult; therefore, I wear sunscreen on my

face. It is not warm, so my grey buttonless trench coat with a long bindable belt will come in good use. I also pack the burgundy-coloured hospital quilt I have slept under on various park benches, airport floors, and train seats during my travels. It now mostly serves in our garden, but it is extremely washable. I can buy lunch on the way. I'm ready, I'm comfortable.

Many of us have trusted clothes that we choose when entering a new or challenging situation (Woodward, 2007). My safe dress is of material and cut that fulfil all my criteria of comfort, it makes me "feel right" (Woodward, 2005). I have argued elsewhere that dress comfort may contain numerous elements, including physical, psychological, and social. Even physical comfort may be culturally driven, not merely physiological (Almila, 2018b). Yet climate is rarely commented upon in fashion research, although its centrality to historical development of local dress styles is recognised, for example, in *The Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*. Getting ready for the Pride in Finland it is hard to forget the lamentations of my Sicilian friend that the Pride should take place during what is an unbearably hot season in the Mediterranean climate. At least so far, Helsinki is not quite as overheated.

I take the local bus to get to the nearest metro station. A couple of stops later, a young very feminine woman dressed in pale pink dress and black boots gets on. With those eyelashes, I find myself thinking, she is probably going to Pride. I am aware that no one can tell that that is where I'm heading. Is that weakness? No, I decide, I do have the right to determine my own visibility (see Nicholls, 2019).

When we gather with our small bloc before heading to the Senate Square where the march is due to begin, I see most of my fellows sporting some Pride symbols or colours. Yet I am quite happy with my neutral outfit and feel that I am surrounded by people who are happy to be together under our dragonfly flag. We head to the Square. I'm a bit worried about the potential noise levels, but the organisers seem to have taken seriously their promise of sensory accessibility. *I will survive* does not hurt my ears, it merely forces me to dance. I never was able to resist that one.

At noon, the rainbow tram leads the march up *Aleksanterinkatu*, the main shopping street at the heart of the city. We cannot find our correct bloc place, but no one really cares – we are near enough.

We're moving and it is barely raining. No need for an umbrella. In fact, I'm starting to sweat under my trench coat, yet do not want to strip it off – far too cold for that.

The first preacher is shouting his religious anti-pride message in a loudspeaker in the *Esplanadi* park, around half-way the march. We can just hear the topic, not what precisely he is shouting. We are helped by a marcher carrying their own small player, just now playing the 2007 lesbian hit song *Ihmisten edessä* (In front of people). "Jesus Christ", the preacher declares. "Jesus Christ", sighs my fellow marcher. We have just discussed the extreme conservativeness of the area of Ostrobothnia where she comes from.

At *Kasarminkatu*, a youngster is sitting on ground, holding a homemade sign in support of their "Hungarian siblings". Light grey-turquoise hair, loose pants of indeterminate material and colour and plenty of pockets[2], black short-sleeved top, piercings: a uniform that many of my gender studies students seem to don. They smile, we smile, someone goes and hugs them. Despite another preacher waving a sign at us – something about the gospel and salvation – it is impossible to feel anything but happy, being part of this huge collective movement, both physical and metaphorical. We do not risk being fined, arrested, or worse, for marching.

The psychological and emotional security felt in a group, or a crowd, can be increased by donning similar kinds of garments. In a demonstration, wearing unified dress can be used to make visual statements (Benda, 2022). In a minority group, chosen dress style may be a powerful indicator of belonging (Clarke & Turner 2007). But at the same time, being recognised, accepted, and valued by the surrounding society has significant consequences for an individual. There is safety in numbers, but also in knowing that one is not an outlaw. Pride is both a celebration of what has been achieved, and a statement and recognition that much still remains to be done.

Most people watching the march are carrying rainbow symbols and supportive messages. "I see you", declare many. When I read these, I have tears in my eyes. Both invisibility and visibility should always be chosen, not imposed upon people (see e.g. Almila, 2018a; Nicholls, 2018). We must have the right to be seen, or retire into invisibility, yet

both are a privilege. Dress cannot change skin colour; it cannot transform body size. These are qualities that change individuals' visibility, in many cases in negative ways (Alcott, 2006; Chatterjee, 2022; Streeter, 2003; Taylor and Hoskin, 2021; Wingfield and Wingfield, 2014). I reflect upon how extremely important it is that the people gathered to watch the march are carrying symbols that indicate that they are there to support, not to criticise or threaten. We are safe in numbers, marching together, yet we cannot be certain of the intentions or what the people around us intend, not unless they indicate that with their symbols and signs, as well as their behaviour. An important part of Pride today is the attitude, behaviour, and appearance of the people watching the march.

Just before the march arrives at its destination, we pass on the left-hand side a large blockhouse with spacious balconies. Several balconies display a pride flag and people are gathered there, standing, sitting, enjoying the day. People of all ages, of all outfits. Waving flags and flowers, greeting us, raising wine glasses. One elderly watcher with a messy grey hair, dressed in a long yellow coat, waves a large tulip in a slow circular dance. We have arrived.

The march crowds up at the entry to the *Kaivopuisto* park. It is slightly rainy, and parts of the park are muddy. Fortunately, the trees protect the people who gather under them. I'm very glad of the insulation capacities of my quilt. I remove my shoes and stretch my toes. My knees have been hurting occasionally, and I have great doubts as to how long I will be able to sit on the ground, but so far, the passing samba dancers keep me fully entertained. I see the balloons of the state alcohol monopoly company Alko floating nearby over the park, as well as the symbols of many other state institutions. What a change in just a few short years and decades. Pride has pushed itself from the margins and forced those who oppose it to the margins themselves, at least for a while. At least here.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Later the same day, I see a photo of myself marching. I look happy, and very much myself. Half visible, half invisible. Nice line of a figure, I think, a clean A-line. My extreme blondness is not particularly visible in Finland, yet elsewhere it would be. In mainstream media accounts, the colourfulness of the march is underlined, both verbally and visually. Colourful it was indeed. Practically any hair colour could be found, and in addition to rainbow

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2   For reflections upon gender, pockets, and feminism, see Gaillard and Vissen, 2022, Jayan, 2025.

patterns, a staggering spectre of other colours was presented. Dress styles comprised anything from a samba dancer's bikini to black leather jackets – as they should.

Yet it interested me to notice how many people were dressed in a very ordinary manner. We chose to step into a demonstration to make our bodies matter, to become visible, when we might have remained invisible. We live in a time when this choice must be taken very seriously indeed. It is no small thing. Recent developments in different parts of the world, such as in the US, show us how fragile our individual and political rights may be. Research on dress and political protest has often stressed shared dress styles to convey a shared message (Benda, 2022). This is indeed one element of staging striking, visually impactful demonstrations. But the demonstrating body is more than visual. A political protest in a public space is always embodied (Pabst, 2011). It matters to express one's identity and individuality, and to be allowed to do so, but at the same time, masses matter, too. They mattered in Budapest, where the Pride managed to really annoy and potentially also challenge Orbán and others. They mattered in Helsinki, where the radical right and fundamentalist Christians sit both in Parliament and Government. Fashion's visibility is not merely individual, it can become a visibility of a group, a crowd, a movement. In this, joy and happiness can have enormous power to bind people together, irrespective of dress style or appearance.

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EXHIBITION AND BOOK REVIEWS

ANBER ONAR'S
IN CASE

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Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

Narratives are often left unspoken, yet through visual language—particularly in art and fashion—they can be powerfully articulated. Anber Onar narrates our silenced stories through her evocative use of fabric, as she explained in an interview with *Artistry of Good*: "When I started this project, I actually started with my most worthless, old, out-of-fashion clothes and I was trying to transform each of them into an abstract object. I started to wrap each piece of clothing in the shape of rectangles that I liked, in a way that did not give much clue about what it was before, as an element that was no longer used for its intended purpose, and then tied them so that they would not fall apart". (Artistry of Good, 2025)

The Cypriot artist, Anber Onar, is recognized for her multidisciplinary practice across painting, photography, video, performance, and text. Her work explores themes of identity, gender, and cultural issues. She is the co-founder of the Sidestreets Educational and Cultural Initiatives in Cyprus (Artrooms at the House website). Onar's recent exhibition, *In Case*, held from March 21 to June 13, 2025, at the Art Rooms Gallery in Cyprus, is poised to make a notable contribution to the contemporary art scene. The artist invites viewers on a metaphysical journey through a body of work spanning installation, photography, collage, video, sculpture, and painting—all fundamentally rooted in the motif of tied-folds. As viewers step into the gallery, they find themselves in another space—one where the carefully curated blend of earthy charcoal scent, the fresh, grounding aroma of petrichor, and enveloping sound effects extends their experience beyond the physical confines of the gallery. These sensory elements work together to evoke a deeper, transcendental response, inviting the audience to engage with the work not only in the immediate context of the exhibition but also within the broader scope of their personal histories and cultural backgrounds. The distinct aromas, resonant sounds, and the view of the layered tied-folds create an immersive environment where perception is heightened, prompting the viewers to reflect on their own relationship to the world. By invoking these universal sensory triggers, the installation transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, offering a shared mode of perception that resonates with human experience at its most fundamental level. This transcendent engagement with the work suggests that, regardless of where we come from, there are common sensory experiences that connect us to the larger world and to each other. The exhibition engages with a wide range of themes, including land, war, migration, recognition, belonging, identity, freedom and restriction, memory and forgetting, and power dynamics (Fatah & Pasour, 2025). Central to Onar's visual language is her use of fabric, particularly what she terms "tied-folds". This concept, coined by the artist, refers to the folding of fabrics and other materials to create forms that act as metaphors for abstract concepts stripped of their original identity. She draws these materials from garments, cloth, and other sources, encompassing both personal and institutional textiles such as leather, bed sheets, and even straitjackets (Pillai, 2025). Here, I would like to draw attention to the inclusion of straitjackets, which, on the surface, evoke settings such as prisons and psychiatric institutions. However, beyond these literal associations, they symbolize a deeper sense of resistance—embodying suppressed voices and conveying the weight of unspoken or silenced narratives. In this context, the tied-folds act as metaphors for memory, trauma, and identity. Through this process of folding and binding, Onar creates works that are at once tactile and conceptual, inviting viewers to reflect on how histories and selves are shaped, constrained, or preserved across time and space. Her manipulation of fabric serves as a gesture of both remembrance and concealment, prompting a contemplation of what is held, hidden, or lost. The color choice, on the other hand, plays a crucial role; ranging from stark whites to vibrant multicolors, the palette seems to mirror the diverse identities of the viewers themselves. These chromatic variations suggest figures of different ages, genders, races, and ethnicities, allowing the audience to project their subjectivities onto the work. In doing so, Onar's art transcends the exhibition walls, challenging traditional perspectives and oscillating between past and present, material and metaphysical, individual and collective. The exhibition title *In Case*, semiotically invites multiple layers of interpretation: it evokes the phrase "if we were…" (CED) and also suggests contingency, anticipation, or preparedness for an uncertain future. Simultaneously, it conjures the image of bags or suitcases—objects directly tied to the visual language of the exhibition. Within the context of genocide and political upheaval, these symbols resonate with the experiences of immigrants and displaced individuals. Onar's choice of title

Fig. 01

thus becomes a conceptual entry point, guiding the audience through a reflective journey across fragmented spaces and temporalities. In other words, regardless of their origin or sense of belonging, viewers are encouraged to engage critically with each artwork, uncovering nuanced meanings embedded in the act of observation itself. Theoretically speaking, Onar's exhibition seems to investigate philosophical issues; for instance, it resonates with the principles of object-oriented ontology (Heft, 2017). That is to say, her visual language centers around silent, everyday objects that resist symbolic reduction, yet remain charged with affective and historical presence. These objects do not merely represent memory or identity; rather, they invite the viewer into a space where things themselves speak—bearing witness to the past while maintaining their own ontological autonomy. The artist also engages with the concept of space as a means to reveal the philosophical and unseen dimensions of these objects, treating them as signifiers that transform over time.

To begin with, "Current" (Fig. 01) features 800 tied-folds carefully positioned on a slanted surface that spans 2.35 meters in width and 5 meters in length, descending from a height of 1.45 meters to the floor. What is striking about this installation is the abundance of tied-folds, featuring multiple colors, including dominant whites and a singular red spot, which evoke constructed ideologies

shaped by diverse cultural, political, and racial contexts. The title, "Current", gestures not only toward the temporal present but also invites a moment of perception and reflection. Philosophically, the work appears to question how we attribute meaning to colors and to what extent these meanings are influenced by our subjective realities. From a temporal perspective, the linguistic choice of "current" suggests a dialogue with modernity and contemporaneity, encouraging both intellectuals and general viewers to engage with the artwork through the lens of their ideological frameworks, whether consciously held, lost, or newly discovered. An exceptionally stirring artwork, "Redoubt" (Fig. 02), the installation consists of nearly a thousand pale-hued, tied-folds, meticulously assembled into a three-dimensional configuration featuring wooden openings. While viewers are invited to peer through these openings, their vision is limited to whatever lies beyond the structure itself. As we examine this installation more closely, it begins to resemble a bunker, a prison, or a cluster of archival spaces that preserve fragments of the past. Onar connects the past to the moment of present observation through the sensory and symbolic presence of tied-folds, the earthy scent, and the wooden openings. These openings function as points of parapraxis — thresholds between what is hidden within the bunker and what lies outside. Yet, the past remains inaccessible. At this moment,

Fig. 02

Fig. 03

we, the viewers, are compelled to pause and confront the metaphysical dimension of the work: the unseen histories of war, genocide, and ideological resistance. The fabrics, in their folds, seem to enclose these lost narratives, reminding us that what we are witnessing is not the past itself, but a mediated surface — a barrier between us and what has been silenced.

Another evocative work from *In Case* is "Displacements No. 11" (Fig. 03), a digitally manipulated photo-collage. At the center of the composition is a mound of tied-folds rendered in grayscale, surrounded symmetrically by rows of individuals standing on either side. This visual arrangement invites multiple interpretations, particularly in relation to diaspora and genocide. The work resonates with the principles of object-oriented ontology, as the tied-folds assert their presence as more than symbolic objects — they possess an ontological weight that engages

the viewer directly. The archival color palette and composition evoke a sense of historical rupture, transforming the image into a frame that projects us into the past. We, as members of imagined communities and lands, are drawn into a temporal and spatial dislocation. Yet, in the very moment of observation, the tied-folds seem to articulate resistance — staging a dialectical encounter between thought and being, memory and materiality. What is particularly striking in this work is the positioning of the figures, their backs turned toward us. This gesture creates a subtle but powerful identification: they could just as easily be us. In facing the hazy, ghost-like image at the center, they embody our own act of looking — not only at the image, but through it, into a spectral space of memory, trauma, and displacement.

"Displacements No. 16" (Fig. 04), which presents Onar's suspended tied-folds resembling parachutes descending toward an indistinct land, invokes

Fig. 04

imagery of war, forced migration, and diaspora. The aerial perspective reinforces the detachment and disorientation experienced by those who are displaced, caught between land and sky, memory and movement. Semiotically, the artwork functions as a metaphor for identities that have been folded and scattered across space. These tied-folds have become signifiers—dense with meaning yet severed from clear referents—drifting in a void where the traces of origin are obscured or irretrievable. Onar's work stages the theoretical dimension of diasporic narratives: stories that emerge not from fixed points of origin but from imagined communities, whose destinies may never circle back to a single homeland. Whether these identities eventually land upon familiar soil or foreign terrain remains unresolved, and perhaps irrelevant—the emphasis instead falls on the suspended condition of perpetual displacement.

Through these selected pieces and others in the exhibition, Onar's tied-folds appear to recount narratives that span the past, present, and future. At the same time, she poses questions—or more precisely, invites viewers to question their sense of belonging. Her work prompts reflection on how political, cultural, and social ideologies construct and deconstruct our identities, and how resistance might be enacted through symbolic gestures. That is to say, by folding these ideologies, binding them, and leaving them suspended—anchored neither fully to land nor to space, but standing at the crossroads.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01]   Anber Onar's "Current"; installation, 145 x 235 x 500 cm (2025)

[Fig. 02]   Anber Onar's "Redoubt" ; mixed media, 210 x140 x 140 cm (2025)

[Fig. 03]   Anber Onar's "Displacements No.11"; digitally manipulated photo collage,100   x140 cm (2025)

[Fig. 04]   Anber Onar's "Displacements No. 16"; digitally

manipulated photo collage,100 x140 cm, (2025)

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JUDITH BEYER (2025)
ANTIGENDER FASHION

THE POSSIBILITIES OF GENDER-FLUID AND NON-BINARY FASHION DESIGN

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Fashion has always been a crucial arena for exploring and challenging traditional notions of gender, yet its pluriversal modes of being and progressive capacities have in recent years become increasingly amplified. Against a backdrop of growing social and political debates surrounding the politicization of gender and the scapegoating of queer and BIPOC communities under rising right-wing ideologies, Judith Beyer's *Antigender Fashion: The Possibilities of Gender-Fluid and Non-Binary Fashion Design* offers a timely and well-researched resource that engages with the growing field of gender-fluid fashion, while introducing "antigender fashion" as a related but more radical concept that resists the very categorization of gender itself. It presents not only a critical interrogation of dominant structures within the fashion system, but also, given that fashion reflects broader sociocultural shifts and plays a key role in the construction of identities, articulates a vision for an inclusive, antigender future that extends beyond fashion into the fabric of wider society.

Beyer frames fashion not merely as a commercial or aesthetic practice but as a site of resistance and identity construction. Through the lens of *antigender fashion*, a concept coined by Karaminas and Taylor (2022) that actively resists traditional gender categorization, the book seeks to answer the central question: "How does antigender fashion disrupt, challenge and trouble binary gender norms?"

The introduction outlines the book's methodology, with a particular focus on internet-mediated research and document analysis. Beyer draws on primary sources including advertising imagery, social media posts, and moving images such as catwalk shows, live streams, and fashion films. This approach allows her to capture the ephemeral and performative qualities of fashion in the digital age. The book is structured in two main sections: the first establishes the theoretical, historical, and methodological frameworks. The second section presents four case studies: JW Anderson, Gucci, Art School, and No Sesso, that exemplify antigender fashion practices in diverse ways.[1]

The book's first chapter establishes the theoretical framework, drawing from queer theory and poststructuralist thought, particularly the works of Judith Butler (2006) and Jack Halberstam (2018). This first chapter engages with Butler's concept of *gender performativity* and Halberstam's exploration of the contemporary state of gender, challenging the fixed categories often used to structure identity and fashion. Beyer effectively links these theories to fashion studies, suggesting that gender is not an inherent identity but a repeated stylized act, one that is largely performed through clothing. The incorporation of Patrizia Calefato's (2017) semiotic reading of fashion further deepens this argument, demonstrating how fashion operates as a system of meaning saturated with gendered codes. By grounding the analysis in queer and critical fashion studies, Beyer provides the reader with a robust framework for interpreting the expressive, performative dimensions of dress, and how their subversion might challenge or destabilize heteronormative gender identities.

The discussion then shifts toward a historical perspective in chapter two, *Tracing Fluidity: Understanding Moments of Gender-Blurring Fashion*, which maps key instances of gender-blurring in fashion to contextualize the emergence of fluid identities in dress, ranging from bohemian and flapper styles to the Peacock Revolution, punk, glam rock, and grunge youth subcultures. In doing so, the chapter effectively establishes a historical baseline for understanding today's gender-fluid fashion practices and how

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1 JW Anderson was founded in 2008 by Northern Irish designer Jonathan Anderson, JW Anderson is widely recognized for its innovative approach to menswear and later womenswear, known for challenging traditional gender boundaries through form, silhouette, and material.

Gucci was established in Florence in 1921 by Guccio Gucci (1881–1953) as a luxury leather goods company before expanding into fashion. The brand has undergone multiple creative transformations, most notably under Alessandro Michele, who served as creative director from 2015 to 2022 and introduced a fluid approach to gender through design, styling, and presentation.

Art School was founded in London in 2016 by Eden Loweth and Tom Barratt, and from 2020 onwards has been led solely by Loweth. Emerging from London's queer creative scene, The brand has been committed to inclusivity and representation, using its collections and runway shows to center non-binary, trans, and queer identities, and is known for its inclusive tailoring based on adaptable forms.

No Sesso was founded in Los Angeles in 2015 by designer Pierre Davis, later joined by Arin Hayes and Autumn Randolph, No Sesso (Italian for "no sex/no gender") explicitly positions itself as a non-binary, inclusive label. With a community-driven modus operandi, the brand combines storytelling, activism, and collaborative design practices.

they have never been fixed or immune to cultural reinterpretation. Particularly helpful is the distinction between *androgyny, unisex fashion, and gender-fluidity*, with Beyer arguing that unisex fashion often neutralizes gender but remains confined within a binary logic. Gender-fluid fashion, in contrast, actively seeks to destabilize and reconfigure those very logics.

Chapter three, *Antigender Fashion: Or, Why Can't Girls Have Dicks and Boys Have Boobs?*, introduces the central concept of antigender fashion. Like anti-fashion, which "refers to all styles of adornment which fall outside the organized system of fashion change" (Polhemus, 2019, p. 42), antigender fashion "uses the language of gendered fashion to reveal its construction and subvert its signs" (Beyer, 2025, p. 80). In doing so, it establishes the critical lens for the analysis of the subsequent case studies.

The second section of the book comprises four case studies, selected according to the following criteria: a) Adoption of a design approach that deconstructs and reconfigures gender signifiers to challenge norms; b) Application of an intersectional lens that accounts for race, class, age, ability, and body size; c) Incorporation of inclusive construction methods to accommodate diverse bodies; d) Maintain strong visibility within the fashion industry and media, particularly around gender fluidity. Collectively, these case studies illustrate how antigender principles have manifested in fashion design, production practices, and media representation, covering a time span of roughly twenty years.

It is evident that Judith Beyer has selected some compelling case studies, though their relevance to the central argument varies. The first two, JW Anderson and Gucci under the creative direction of Alessandro Michele, illustrate how traditionally feminine signifiers are integrated into menswear collections, and vice versa. Their engagement with antigender fashion is primarily aesthetic, manifesting in choices of color, fabric, and pattern. For instance, Gucci's Fall/Winter 2015 collection featured "large accessories, like chunky rimmed glasses, heirloom rings, bobble hats and fur-lined loafers; colourful coats with occasional fur cuffs and military double-button rows; flowing dresses and tailored suits with botanic floral prints; and chiffon blouses with *lavallière* bows worn by all genders" (Beyer, 2025, p. 123). While visually engaging, it must be noted that gender fluidity involves more than an eclectic blend of traditional

gender signifiers. JW Anderson and Gucci rarely incorporate the lived experiences of queer, trans, or BIPOC communities, nor do they truly challenge the capitalist structures that underpin mainstream fashion. As such, their treatment of antigender fashion seems to foreground aesthetic experimentation rather than a sustained political critique.

By contrast, Art School and No Sesso are portrayed as deeply embedded within their respective communities and as embracing an explicitly intersectional perspective. These younger, self-directed labels actively engage with anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-patriarchal politics through both design and practice. Queer, trans, and BIPOC individuals are involved not solely as models, but as integral creative contributors, suggesting a collaborative authorship that extends beyond representation. In addition, Art School and No Sesso's use of adaptable pattern cutting, stretch fabrics, and diverse casting choices marks a material and symbolic commitment to inclusivity. Importantly, Beyer frames these brands as more than just progressive aesthetics; they represent new systems of production and representation that seek to dismantle fashion's long-standing hierarchies, reaching beyond that of gender.

The first two case studies brought a notable sense of innovation during their initial emergence. Yet, when considered in the context of contemporary LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC discourses, their relevance and contributions appear more constrained, which somewhat limits their resonance within the book's broader critical framework. This limitation stems from the fact that both JW Anderson and Michele's Gucci primarily engage with stylistic, sartorial choices and garment taxonomies, rather than addressing the deeper socio-political dimensions of identity, embodiment, or intersectionality. As such, their approach remains largely surface-level, with little regard for the lived realities of marginalized communities or the structural inequalities embedded within the fashion system. Art School and No Sesso, on the other hand, show how fashion can be used as a tool for empowerment and collective identity formation.

While the case studies are compelling on their own, the book would benefit from a comparative synthesis that brings them into dialogue using the theoretical tools developed in the first half of the book. A concluding chapter that reflects critically on the successes and limitations of each label, and

what lessons they offer for the future of antigender fashion, would have enhanced the analytical cohesion of the work.

Nevertheless, Beyer's clear and well-structured writing, balancing complex theoretical material with accessible explanation, proves pedagogically effective. Her integration of primary source analysis, including advertising imagery, social media content, and moving images such as fashion films and runway shows, allows abstract concepts such as gender performativity, cyborg theory, afrofuturism and sartorial signifiers to be translated into real-world examples. In doing so, the book offers students and scholars alike valuable tools for critically engaging with fashion's role in contemporary identity constructions and expressions.

Antigender Fashion makes a fresh and necessary contribution to the growing intersection of fashion studies, queer theory, and cultural politics. By grounding its arguments in both theory and design practice, the book demonstrates how fashion can function as a site of resistance and possibility. Its adoption of antigender as a conceptual lens adds depth to discussions of fashion and gender, moving beyond surface-level aesthetics to interrogate the systems of meaning, power, and representation that underlie them.

Through Beyer's ability to move fluently between theoretical abstraction and practical application, she illustrates that fashion design, when liberated from the constraints of binary logic, can offer expansive, imaginative alternatives to the gender system. Importantly, these alternatives do not only serve non-binary individuals; they challenge all of us to rethink how gender is constructed, performed, and perceived.

In a time when gender diversity is increasingly under attack, Beyer's book is a timely and hopeful intervention. It demonstrates fashion's potential to challenge normative structures and open up space for more inclusive and fluid forms of self-expression. This book will be of particular interest to scholars of fashion, gender, and visual culture, as well as to readers engaged in exploring how dress intersects with the politics of embodiment and representation.

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