Dr. Kat Sark has been teaching Fashion Studies in the Design Culture program, Department of Design and Communication at the University of Southern Denmark since 2019, where she is intent upon decolonizing the curriculum. Since completing her Ph.D. at Montreal’s McGill University in Literatures, Languages, and Cultures in 2015, she has taught media, cultural and gender studies courses at the University of Victoria in Canada. In 2014 she founded the Canadian Fashion Scholars Network and is currently building an International Fashion Scholars Network. She also launched the Chic Podcast that includes interviews with international fashion scholars and fashion professionals. Her career already boasts a long list of publications (including the co-authored Urban Chic book series – with an upcoming volume on Copenhagen Chic). In the past year she has edited two volumes on Ethical Fashion and Empowerment (forthcoming with Intellect) and Social Justice Pedagogies (submitted to University of Toronto Press).

Sandra Niessen: Kat, you have recently applied for several grants to help you develop the European Fashion Scholars Network. What are your goals and how do they relate to decoloniality in fashion? How has this passion for reforming Fashion Studies developed within your research and teaching?

Kat Sark: When I was hired to teach Fashion Studies at SDU in 2019, I knew right away that I would have to reconceptualize and redevelop the fashion history course to reflect a global, multi-layered, decolonial, feminist, and multidisciplinary perspective. Having been trained and professionalized in the post-TRC (Truth and Reconciliation) academic environment of Canada (the TRC Reports were published the year I graduated and started teaching at UVic in 2015, and that influenced my teaching, activism, and research and allowed me to develop a pedagogical methodology based on intersectional feminism, decoloniality, and social justice that I described in more detail in the forthcoming volume on Social Justice Pedagogies), I was particularly attuned to issues of decoloniality and the need to decolonize all culture, media, and technology, including fashion history, fashion studies, and the fashion industry. Having had the experience of working as a researcher, educator, organizer, and activist in Victoria, I understood decoloniality not just from a theoretical perspective, but also from a personal, political, experiential, and lived perspective. Redeveloping a whole fashion stream was not a small undertaking, but I knew I could do it, despite the fact that, at best, my colleagues and students would ask to explain what decolonization means, and, at worst, they would not see what it had to do with fashion, and what was wrong with the old ways of teaching. So, I immediately started research that would help me understand, and then teach others, where we are in the Fashion Studies landscape, what the most pressing issues are right now, and what needs to be done. I compiled a literature review that I shared with colleagues in Denmark, Canada, Germany, and other places, asking for feedback. My guiding influence in reframing fashion history was Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun’s Fashion History: A Global View (2018), in which they argue that we are currently within a paradigm shift in Fashion Studies, and that fashion has to be reconceptualized as a global history that does not originate in Europe with the Renaissance and center on Western elites and specific privileged market societies, but has a much more diverse, multi-cultural, longer, and contradictory history, or rather histories. Unfortunately, there is as
yet no book on how to turn this theoretical paradigm shift into practice and teach fashion history and fashion studies from a non-white-supremacist or non-Eurocentric perspective. While there is important work being done on decoloniality and much published on specific case studies, a comprehensive and multi-history textbook is needed to help us all understand how historical narratives look from a decolonized perspective. (The closest is perhaps the Berg Encyclopedia of Dress and Fashion, but you cannot assign all ten volumes of it to undergrads, and it is also theoretical and historical rather than practical or pedagogical. So, right now, everyone is still using old fashion history textbooks, and then tries to supplement them with some “non-Western” case studies.) A new book on teaching fashion history and fashion studies is a huge project that no one person can undertake on his or her own. This is why I have started reaching out to experts, scholars, researchers and educators; organizing workshops, sharing my literature review, and applying for network-building funding to be able to bring people together to work on these issues collaboratively, and hopefully to produce new research, tools, and publications that we all can use for teaching, curating, and publishing from the perspective of decoloniality. For my own research, my goal is to map-out and make visible the connections between decoloniality, sustainability, ethics, cultural appropriation, exploitation, paradoxes, and creativity within fashion and culture. Currently these are seen as separate issues that different people are addressing or beginning to address but from different sides. When they are all recognized as being part of the same problem (colonially-conditioned and exploitative treatment of people and the planet), we can begin focusing on solutions. I believe it all starts with fashion education of the next generation of fashion makers, managers, and visionaries. My fashion students are graduating in two years and I want them to feel more empowered to enter the job market to do things differently, even when it is not the easy way of doing things.

S.N.: Why does networking with other scholars figure so importantly in achieving the reforms that you wish to see? What are the mechanics of establishing a network that will help you achieve your goals?

K.S.: Right now, there is a lot of important work and research being done in disconnected and fragmented silos, in different countries. I spent most of last year travelling and visiting different universities, fashion schools, labs, research and development facilities, and consulting firms, and talking to many different scholars, innovators, makers, and designers in many different countries. Most of them want a more enlightened, fair, just, ethical, and sustainable fashion system and a stronger fashion education system that equips and empowers the next generations. Right now, most of them are working mostly on their own, like I had to when I had to redevelop a whole new fashion curriculum. Just imagine how much faster and more efficiently we can work if we collaborate and help each other with our respective expertise, research, and innovations. Time, as we all know, is a non-renewable resource that we all are running out of. So, for me the answer to these problems lies in building a Network on the principles and common goals of decoloniality, intersectional feminisms, human rights, and social justice, which will allow people to connect on different projects and areas of interest more easily and collaborate in a non-hierarchical way.

S.N.: What is the next step for you after the network has been established? What are the changes that you would like to see?

K.S.: I would like to see experts in the fields of decoloniality, ethics, sustainability, innovation, and education come together to co-design and redevelop fashion education to reflect both decoloniality and sustainability in the fashion curricula. The Network can facilitate that work, allowing us to meet at
conferences and in working groups to solve concrete problems, like for example, how to decolonize a fashion history course, or make sustainability the default of all fashion systems, so that each of us does not have to do it on our own every time. The Network can also allow us to gather and compile resources like course outlines, bibliographies, teaching materials, other research networks and tools, and generally map out the expertise of existing scholars around the world. After bridging ethics (including decoloniality) and sustainability, and re-conceptualizing fashion education from a decolonial perspective to educate the next generation of fashion scholars and professionals, the Network can also begin to work with the fashion industry and consult on ways that the industry needs to be decolonized. Right now, there is a big gap between fashion research and the fashion industries because the industry is lacking historical and theoretical knowledge and analysis, and most researchers and scholars lack entrepreneurial thinking/skills. I envision the Network becoming a bridge to facilitate these collaborations in a productive and reflective way. These collaborations can produce different publications, pedagogical tools, think tanks, and hopefully also start-ups and consultancies that can make a difference both in education and in the industry.