EDITORIAL: The Fashion Paradox

KATRINA SARK, University of Southern Denmark

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INTRODUCTION

This Special Issue of Clothing Cultures focuses on ethical fashion and empowerment in a collective effort to shift the fashion discourse away from the business-as-usual approaches and towards a more just conceptual framework and practice of fashion across disciplines. This issue is about the paradoxes of fashion, with a particular emphasis on trans- and plus-size fashion, sustainability, diversity, inclusivity, ethics and empowerment in constructive and solution-based ways. The articles in this collection have both a Canadian perspective and a global scope in understanding diverse fashion experiences within their respective cultures and urban settings. All articles engage with fashion as an intersectional, locational and paradoxical construct because of its very diversified practices and performative means to undermine its own value. These articles are not aimed at cataloguing or explaining the many unethical practices or abuses within the fashion industry, but rather engage in critical thinking about the ethical dimensions of fashion identities, representation, inclusivity, diversity, consumption practices, social justice issues and various forms of empowerment through fashion, as well as reconfiguring the ethical dimension of everyday interaction with clothes on an individual level. Together, the articles in this Special Issue allow us to reimagine fashion from a position of empowerment, rather than scarcity, lack or under-representation at a critical time in fashion history.

We focus on ethical fashion and empowerment for two reasons: firstly, as a response to the pressing changes so urgently needed to transform fashion education, fashion studies and the fashion industry; and secondly, to highlight the work of the members of the Canadian Fashion Scholars Network which I founded in 2014, and which has since evolved into a transnational collaborative platform for critical and decolonial fashion studies in Canada and beyond. Over the past eight years, I have been bringing together fashion scholars, curators, designers, educators and other professionals from across many diverse disciplines to build a community and collaborative network that has the capacity to shape new directions in fashion studies, influence fashion education and by extension also transform the fashion industry. The articles collected in this volume represent our first collective efforts not only to work together across and beyond Canada, but also to develop collaborative work dedicated to critically engaging and innovative fashion research. This Special Issue is our first volume of articles that push for change in fashion through the lens of ethics, diversity, trans- and size inclusivity, feminism and empowerment. The authors in this volume examine the ways in which fashion can be a system for symbolic, economic, political and environmental negotiations of our changing values and practices.

When we approach a research field such as ethical fashion and empowerment, we have to be ready to tackle and accept oxymorons, contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes. As fashion scholars, we can map out and make these conflicting and contradictory paradoxes more transparent, which I do later in this introduction, and which the contributors tackle in their own ways in the articles collected here. We can observe patterns, make them visible, interpret them and provide blueprints and guiding posts for possible solutions and change. When I sent out the call for papers for this issue, I specifically invited
submission for ‘solution-based, ethical and sustainable fashion practices, consumption, consciousness-raising change in the industry, social justice activism, and empowerment’. The case studies collected in this volume are all testaments of the authors’ courage to tackle oxymorons and paradoxes in pragmatic ways. But what exactly do we mean by ethical fashion and empowerment?

By ‘ethical’ we mean non-exploitative, non-objectifying, nor dehumanizing, non-toxic, non-polluting, non-abusive, non-racist, non-appropriating conditions of production, circulation, representation and consumption within the field of fashion. Ethical also implies social interaction, which we interpret to include relationality, communication, responsiveness and a responsibility (literally, the ability to respond) towards others. According to the UK Ethical Fashion Forum (set up in 2006), ‘ethical fashion represents an approach to the design, sourcing, and manufacture of clothing which maximizes benefits to people and communities while minimizing impact on the environment’ (Ethical Fashion Forum 2014).

As Sue Thomas explained in the context of fashion, the term ‘ethical’ is most often used in relation to manufacturing, consumption, fashion design and trading, as well as to the positive impact of a designer, a consumer choice or a method of production as experienced by workers, consumers, animals, society and the environment (Thomas 2008: 525–40, quoted in Haug and Busch 2016: 319–20). Today, many people use the concept of fashion ‘ethics’ (the moral principles that govern our behaviours) interchangeably with ‘sustainability’ (the ability to maintain a certain level of ecological balance). Sustainability has become a paradoxical umbrella term for anything from social, economic and environmental change to greenwashing. Ethics, when it comes to fashion, has been primarily used in relation to labour practices, human rights abuses, animal welfare and colonial extraction and exploitation of human and natural resources. In terms of production and consumption practices, ethics and sustainability began to overlap with the overproduction and disposal of fast fashion in landfills around the globe, plastic pollution of the oceans and the dumping of second-hand clothing in developing countries. While both ethics and sustainability are increasingly interconnected, the focus of the articles in this volume remains on ethics and empowerment from the point of view of individuals and communities in terms of how we can all contribute to social change.

‘Fashion’ is a complex concept that goes beyond its practical meaning of clothes-making, buying, selling, recycling, repurposing, conserving, exhibiting and constructing symbolic meanings. It can be applied to the industry that regulates it; but also to art, craft and creativity that inspire and sustain it, to the material goods and services that circulate it, the social rules that dictate or renegotiate its boundaries, and the shifting values that are assigned to it before and after it has served its original purpose and may be discarded, resold, recycled, repurposed or conserved for display in museums. Fashion is simultaneously a material commodity, an industry, a system of economic exchange, a semiotic system of signs, signifiers and symbols, a sociocultural system to reinforce or break gender binaries and a visual culture and artistic artefact that documents human history, progress and creativity. This volume focuses on diverse examples of the ways in which the paradoxical nature of fashion can be both exploitative and empowering (often at the same time), and how we make sense of these paradoxes in our everyday experiences with clothing and fashion systems. While all the articles are critical of contemporary fashion practices within the fashion system, industry, media, production and consumption, this volume also provides positive, empowering and inspiring examples of engaging with fashion in today’s no-longer-sustainable fashion system.

Finally, by ‘empowerment’ we mean the ways and means to reclaim a position of personal, social, political, economic, ecological or professional power and/or identity. Nanette Page and Cheryl E. Czuba
defined empowerment as a ‘multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives’, and ‘fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement)’ power ‘for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society’ (Page and Czuba 1999). It is multidimensional because it involves both personal and collective work and transformation, or a ‘synthesis of individual and collective change’. We agree with the authors that empowerment, by definition, ‘is a social process, since it occurs in relationship to others’, and is a process ‘similar to a path or journey’, as we work through it. We also interpret empowerment as a creative process in building relationships, environments, communities, and cultures. By connecting fashion with individual or communal empowerment, we believe that a counter-movement can be developed against the exploitative and abusive practices that have become representative of fashion as a colonial and capitalist symbol of power scarcity.

As a cultural analyst, I personally approach ethical fashion and empowerment from the perspective of fashion culture, a framework and methodology I developed in my previous work on fashion, cities and culture, as the examination of fashion representations, networks, mediations, imaginations, scenes and identities in their urban contexts. I understand fashion culture as the foundational amalgamation of a city’s or a community’s fashion identity, history, industry, manufacturing practices, labour conditions, gender and identity politics, spaces and scenes, as well as media and branding representations. The methodology of fashion culture is still under-defined and underutilized in fashion studies. I rely on the interdisciplinary methodologies of cultural analysis for fashion precisely because it allows me to look at public histories, private stories, visual and narrative representations, public events, topographical transformations, gender, race and class politics, branding messages and strategies, social and political change, as well as economic development in different cities or spaces to assemble both a broad perspective and deeper focus on particular recurring themes within a history and a culture of fashion. I agree with Fred Davis’ assessment in his book Fashion, Culture and Identity (1992) that fashion can serve as ‘a vehicle for the broadening of minds’ because it can:

- initiate persons into realms of thought and experience that could otherwise have bypassed them. Some of this can be attributed to the circumstance that the molders of fashion are persons who often are in close contact with leading creative and progressive elements in the arts, sciences, politics, and culture generally. (Davis 1992: 198–99)

I argue that location, and particularly urban space and culture, as well as global negotiations of cultural capital and fashion-ability and fashion-desirability ground fashion not only in the individual bodies but also in cities and communities.

**FASHION PARADOXES: A CULTURAL HISTORY**

This collection began with the question whether fashion can ever be truly ethical, and whether there can be any real empowerment through fashion? Or are ethical fashion and the ideas of free choice or empowerment within the fashion industry merely oxymorons, as Tansy Hoskins argued in Stitched Up: The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion (2014: 104). After all, knowing what we know about fashion’s impact on the environment, its corporate, exploitative and toxic labour practices, as well as the manipulation of body images of women and girls and the lack of true representative diversity in fashion media, why do we still care about fashion? As Hoskins very convincingly laid out in her study, the fashion industry has polluted the planet, exploited its workers, abused, manipulated and body-shamed its women and girls,
and put its consumers into perpetual debt, in a constant pursuit of brand merchandize that promises the prestige and power we are otherwise precluded from accessing in our daily lives. And yet, we cannot seem to stop our torrid fascination and infatuation with fashion. Moreover, we still harbour the wish, hope and illusion that fashion can be accessible, egalitarian and somehow democratic, actively ignoring the fact that ‘fashion consumption is deeply unequal’, and that ‘fashion is not about answering human need, but about producing corporate profit’ because as Hoskins reminded us, ‘if everyone bought only the clothes they needed, it would spell disaster for corporations’; so instead ‘false needs’ (manufacturers’ needs not the consumers’ needs) are created to keep us continuously shopping (Hoskins 2014: 55). Many cultural studies and media scholars, as well as sociologists (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2002; Raymond Williams 1980; Deborah Cook 1996; Angela McRobbie 2002; César Bolaño 2015; Amirhosein Khandizaji 2017; Emma Keltie 2017) have provided enough research and evidence to show that the culture industries, including the fashion industry, along with film, music, art, media and more, are a capitalist matrix designed to keep us hungry – literally and figuratively – for more. So, why do we still care about fashion, including ethical fashion, or fashion and empowerment, when we know that corporate capitalism always wins? In this section of the introduction, I provide a literature review of the paradoxical nature of fashion, as well as my analysis of why fashion persists to be one of our main objects of desire despite and perhaps precisely because of its paradoxical nature.

Aside from the obvious reasons that we need clothes every day, for multiple seasons, functions, purposes, occasions and in varying styles to express our individuality and assign meaning to our identities and behaviours, and aside from the fact that there is real pleasure in wearing clothes that make us feel good, empowered, protected, seen or even respected. Perhaps we still care about fashion as an industry and as a cultural product for the same reason we like to consume films, music, video games, media and technology, as well as other products of the culture industry, precisely because of their paradoxical nature. We know their toxicity and yet we continue to desire more and more variations of the same products with slight upgrades in a perpetual overconsumption and accumulation of commodities. Once we reach an overflow, we ‘donate’ the used items to charities or simply dispose of them in landfills. Our paradoxical relationship with fashion oscillates, vibrates and is perpetually sustained in the liminal space between the ethical and unethical acceptance of a cultural product’s individual or collective value. This acceptance of fashion’s ethical value is collectively negotiated and renegotiated depending on current social, political and economic pressures, and while most fashion scholars (discussed below) have acknowledged a paradigm shift in how we value fashion as a craft, product, commodity and environmental pollutant, it remains a paradox that very few scholars are equipped to unpack. Its dual and conflicting nature has troubled fashion scholars long before technological and social media innovations have granted us access to information and the ability to document environmental and human rights abuses in real time.

If we know that ‘fashion production is exploitation’, as Tim Edwards noted in Fashion in Focus: Concepts, Practices and Politics (2011), then the questions ‘why we apparently do not care, cease to care, or simply don’t care enough’ become inevitable. Edwards believes that the answers lie ‘in the idiosyncrasies of fashion itself, what defines it as different, and what characterises it as quite unlike anything else’ (Edwards 2011: 120). Edwards is not the only fashion scholar who leaves us with vagueness – there is a whole canon on fashion ethics and sustainability that merely recycles similar questions and vague answers. After reviewing the literature and scanning the field of ethical fashion scholarship, it becomes apparent that we have not gotten much further than this vague acceptance and
even reverence of fashion as ‘idiosyncratic’, paradoxical, and contradictory. As Ulrich Lehmann reminded us, we are drawn to fashion and study it because of its ‘ephemeral, transient, and futile character’, whose ‘insubstantiality’ and ‘marginal position in the cultural spectrum’ reflected the fragmented nature of modern culture and modernity – a metaphor that was developed in early fashion scholarship of the early twentieth century (Lehmann 2007: 423). Theodor Adorno, in his last work, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970, 1984), acknowledged his debt to Walter Benjamin ‘in battling for a perception of fashion as fundamental to aesthetics and politics alike’, and stressed its close connection to art, because ‘fashion is one of the ways in which historical change affects the sensory apparatus and through it works of art’ (Adorno 1984: 255, quoted in Lehmann 2007: 424). It is precisely because of fashion’s close and sometimes direct connection with art, culture, creativity and innovation that we are all still drawn to it, and allow it to be elevated into the symbolic realm of art and ideas, and out of the mundane and exploitative reality of industrial production and the rules of the market. In our minds, the creative process of conceptualizing fashion (imagining it, sketching it, touching it, wearing it, etc.) is split from the reality of pollution, exploitation and abuse that goes into the process of ‘democratizing’ it and making it available, cheap and fast in a global economy. The fashion paradox allows us to split the concept of fashion into separate realms of art and economy and to oscillate between the two as we see fit.

In her canonical 1985 study, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, Elizabeth Wilson identified fashion’s ‘ambiguities’ and referred to fashion as ‘modernist irony’ ([1985] 2013: 15), quoting Alison Lurie and Roland Barthes, who described fashion as ‘irrational’ ([1985] 2013: 57). Wilson traced the beginnings of the industrialized fashion production to the period from 1890 to 1910 in Britain and North America, although Singer patented the sewing machine in 1851, and sweatshops and home labour continued to exist along with manufacturing in factories ([1985] 2013: 76). But her chapter on the fashion industry ties up neatly with the passing of the Trade Boards Act that regulated wages and labour conditions in Britain, largely thanks to the feminists’ campaigns of the 1890s. In the later chapters, Wilson does acknowledge that the ‘exploitation of workers goes hand in hand with the creation of a fashionable image’ ([1985] 2013: 86), and that ‘a glamorous façade continues to conceal a life of corrosive toil for the workers hidden from sight’, so that ‘the glamorous seems almost inseparable from the exploitation’, but ‘the glamour, nonetheless, continues to entice’ ([1985] 2013: 90). This paradoxical nature of fashion as a ‘glamorous’ cultural product and a daily necessity places fashion into a special category, previously exempt from vigorous critique or protest. Simultaneously, Wilson was critical of Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School for their ‘deeply pessimistic’ and ‘puritanical’ view of consumer culture, defending fashion as ‘one among many forms of aesthetic creativity which make possible the exploration of alternatives’, while believing that ‘the pointlessness of fashion is precisely what makes it valuable’ ([1985] 2013: 245). For Wilson, fashion ‘acts as a vehicle for fantasy’ through its ‘performance’, ‘compulsiveness’, ‘ambivalence’ and the ‘immense psychological (and material) work that goes into the production of the social self’ ([1985] 2013: 246). Thus, its value always transcends the material conditions of its production and consumption, and continues to generate value in the symbolic and sociopolitical realms. She identified that fashion’s ambivalence is that of ‘contradictory and irreconcilable desires, inscribed in the human psyche’ and that fashion as a performance art acts as a vehicle for this ambivalence, communicating ‘dread as well as desire’, reflecting the ambivalence of the ‘flawed’ culture of modernity ([1985] 2013: 246). The Frankfurt School critics did not devote much time to writing about fashion as a product of the culture industry, and Wilson, while acknowledging the paradoxical nature of fashion, culture and modernity, does not tie her analysis of fashion’s ambiguity to
the culture industry, nor use the word ‘paradox’ to describe it. She remains affirmative in her celebration of fashion’s creativity, and her intellectualization of fashion as a semiotic system of social expressiveness and performativity of identities. The ethical, environmental, moral, economic and corrosive uses and effects of fashion are the subjects of Tansy Hoskins’s study (2014), which comes much closer to explaining the full extent of the paradox that fashion has become today.

Hoskins also does not use the word ‘paradox’ to describe fashion, but her many arguments about the questions of ‘individual choice’, ‘least harmful options’, affordability and class as the primary factor in making choices (Hoskins 2014: 167) point to its conflicting and paradoxical nature. She provides a sobering acknowledgement that ‘there is no way out of sweatshop labour or environmental devastation via an individual route’, and that ‘you cannot shop workers in China to freedom’ or ‘shop the Aral Sea back to life’; and she believes that ‘we do have agency on an individual level but we must confront the challenges ahead collectively and with a realistic assessment of the barriers that people face’ (2014: 168). Her solution-based reforms of the fashion industry centre around the simultaneous methods on multiple fronts, including ‘people organizing collectively as consumers’, ‘shopping differently’, ‘government-led reform’, ‘reform amongst multinational corporations’ and ‘trade union-led worker reform’. However, all these actions require a global and cohesive organizational structure and network to educate, mobilize, organize and negotiate alternative models of production and consumption. Her book does not acknowledge the challenges of building such a cohesive network and structure, but rather provides a critique and a general call to action. Hoskins notes that most ethical fashion books provide ‘unhelpful solutions’ for consumers to try an ‘ethical calculus’ to figure out which issues matter most because she believes that the ‘inability to provide a decent answer stems from not wanting to name capitalism as the cause of the problem’ (2014:170). I would add that even when fashion scholars do identify capitalism as the problem (as Hoskins does), they do not trace the root of capitalist exploitation to colonialism and do not identify the need to decolonize the fashion industry as a primary goal in generating change. I argue that our desire for fashion, despite our knowledge of its web of injustices, can be seen as a displaced desire for creativity and for recognition of our individuality and our own empowerment, which in turn fuels the fashion paradox.

This paradoxical nature of interconnectivity of desire and fashion is one of the guiding points of Sandy Black’s Eco-Chic: The Fashion Paradox (2011), which engages with fashion sustainability and ethics, traces the development of sustainable fashion and provides designer profiles of brands, creators and research labs that focus on making fashion more sustainable. While acknowledging the paradoxical and contradictory nature of fashion, Black does not question the concept of a fashion paradox itself, and ends on an optimistic note, celebrating the sustainable practices emerging within the industry. Black asks, ‘can we resolve the fashion paradox of transience and sustainability?’ (Black 2011: 14), and how can we ‘reconcile the transience and inherent obsolescence of fashion’s constant change with the imperatives of sustainability and social justice, and fashion’s economic importance with diminishing resources? How can we consume clothing with a clear conscience?’ (Black2011:18). Her answer is that eco fashion must become the ‘norm, not the exception’, and that many consumers are ready to embrace clothes that have been ‘made more considerately’, and that ‘consumers can be a great influence for positive change’ (Black 2011: 18). This echoes Kate Fletcher’s call to sustainable arms in her chapter in Shaping Sustainable Fashion: Changing the Way We Make and Use Clothes (2011), where she noted that ‘in order to bring about change, sustainability values and experiences have to be real to people. Yet we know very little about people’s everyday encounters with fashion and sustainability’
In most scholarly works on sustainable and ethical fashion, the solution lies somewhere between the designers’ and consumers’ responsibility to bring about change. Moreover, this emphasis on the consumers’ responsibilities to educate themselves and make responsible and ethical consumer choices is a pattern across all cultural industries (especially when it comes to media literacy) in neo-liberal societies with increasingly deregulated economies and declining government regulations in labour practices and environmental health and safety. Because consumers are not a unified entity and often lack the economic means, the cultural capital, or access to information or education about the direct effects of their consumption practices, or simply because the responsibility becomes too overwhelming after a while, it brings us right back to questions of our abilities to resolve paradoxes. If fashion and consumption are ‘full of contradictions’ and our ‘desire to be fashionable’ and the desire for ‘constant change and renewal’ fuel the global ‘overconsumption and obsolescence’, but ‘Western consumers have come to realize that complex ethical issues are hidden behind all our fashion purchasing decisions’ (Black 2011: 17), then is it even possible to resolve this fashion paradox through alternative or more ethical consumer choices?

We continue to operate on the assumption that a paradox has to be resolved in one way or another (perhaps through technology, if all else fails, as Sandy Black asks towards the end of her book) without any acceptance that by virtue of resolving one, we create other paradoxes. This is how we arrived at cheap, fast, unethical fashion in the first place. Perhaps it is not a matter of (re)solving paradoxes or problems that we create, but rather a matter of our incomprehension of the very nature of paradoxes and our inability to live with them. We continue to trap ourselves in polarities – we set out to resolve famine and hunger and end up with Monsanto. We set out to make fashion more democratic and affordable and end up polluting the planet and outsourcing all manual labour to non-unionized, non-ethical labour regulators. We set our creativity free and design incredible works of art, but the minute the market economy takes over, it becomes about the bottom line and profit margins, and we are right back to cheap, fast fashion. Later in her book, Black focuses on innovations in fashion technology and its ‘future visions’, asking the question we all pin our hopes onto:

could Nano-technology help solve the fashion paradox? If our clothes do more for us in our daily lives, they will become support systems, but still, fashion is relevant – will we want to forever dress in the same clothes as those found in Star Trek? (Black 2011: 102)

Technology has often been held up as a beacon of hope to resolve unresolvable problems and paradoxes across all cultural industries and economies, but just as placing the responsibility on the consumers, or eco-design practices, placing responsibility on technology is also a new paradox in the making. But what have we actually learned from our inability to reconcile paradoxes other than its close connection to our conflicting desires?

Desire and language play a very important role in our paradoxical relationship with fashion. The desire to be desirable and desired, to express a sense of self, to subvert gender norms, to be playful, provocative, invisible or seen, are all means and methods for asserting meaning, signification, freedom and identity. Fashion, as a system and as a culture, allows us to communicate and express our power dynamics and to claim space and rank within social hierarchies. As a non-verbal system of communication and ‘language of signs’ (Lurie 1983: 3) with a ‘sartorial vocabulary and a grammar’ like other languages (1983:4), fashion allows us to ‘define and describe ourselves’ (1983: 5) in everyday life.
In his 1967 study, *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes, described fashion as an ‘image-system constituted with desire as its goal’ whose ‘substance is essentially intelligible: it is not the object but the name that creates desire; it is not the dream but the meaning that sells’ ([Barthes 1967] 1984: xii). But our collective and competing ‘production of meaning is subject to certain constraints’, as ‘the system of meaning is that of a supervised freedom’ ([1967] 1984: 161). Thus, in many ways, the freedom, power, empowerment or status that fashion promises are not inherent in fashion itself, but rather in the language, labels, brands and collective meaning and significance we attach to it. Barthes agreed with Hegel that our bodies need clothing to signify meaning and power because ‘clothing guarantees the passage from sentience to meaning’ ([1967] 1984: 258). While our desire for identity, empowerment and meaning is very real, the means of expressing this desire through fashion or other commodities and privileges are socially constructed and negotiated. That means that they can also be deconstructed, reconstructed and renegotiated, and that is where empowerment can be found.

Another reason why fashion is so paradoxical can perhaps be explained with the help of René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, which he first outlined in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* ([1961] 1976), in which he argued that we borrow our desires from others because our desire for a certain object is always provoked by the desire of another person for the same object. This mimetic process can be traced psychologically within human development and neuro-psychology through mirror neurons and observational mimicry, including the processes how human and animal brains develop behaviours through a process of learning to copy other adult behaviour. This mimetic process can include the acquisition of identity, knowledge and material wealth based on observing and developing a desire to have something others possess. Applied to fashion, the memetic desire theory helps explain why certain trends become more persistent or viral than others, why the luxury fashion industry is still more prosperous than the sustainable fashion industry, and the ultimate paradox of why we all want to wear what others wear, while simultaneously craving our own individual style and modes of individual and personal expression.

From a psychological perspective, fashion represents ‘the desire to create a positive self-image’, and develops as a result of the ‘assertion of self-identity and social comparison’ (Cannon 1998: 24), however from a sociocultural and political perspective, it is mired in class, race, gender, labour and environmental injustices that can no longer be overlooked in the age of direct communication and social media technologies. When a clothing factory like Rana Plaza collapses in Bangladesh killing over 1133 and injuring over 2500 garment workers who were forced to work under despicable conditions, making it the ‘deadliest garment factory disaster in history’ (Hoskins 2014: 68), we know about it in real time. The paradox we all need to confront, then, is that we can simultaneously empathize with the workers in developing countries and keep on buying clothes made in these factories because they are affordable and, paradoxically, have the capacity to give us pleasure or empowerment. Hoskins reminds us that a Marxist understanding of the term ‘exploitation’ is that it occurs when people are ‘not recompensed for the full value of their labour. Workers are not paid for the work they do but for their “labour power” – their ability to work’ (2014: 70). Fashion, perhaps like no other manufacturing industry to the same extent, is ‘dependent on human labour’, meaning that everything we wear is the direct result of ‘detailed, repetitive, human toil’, which makes today’s fashion ‘inseparable not only from human labour but from its extreme exploitation’ (Hoskins 2014: 69). Knowing that, we nonetheless continue to be complicit in this economic exploitation of workers in around the world, while simultaneously demanding higher wages, equal pay, better standards of living and stronger labour unions at home in the western,
so-called ‘developed’ countries. Moreover, we not only buy cheap fast fashion produced in inhumane conditions precisely because it is affordable for us, we also want to purchase items that most people cannot afford, whenever possible and preferably at a significant discount or on consignment, to distinguish ourselves through this cultural capital as a fashion-conscious elite, able to ‘steal a deal’. So, perhaps the question should be, why are we so drawn to paradoxes?

There is a part of our brain that really likes puzzles and problem solving, and not just any problem solving, but the highly complex ones, the unsolvable ones and the paradoxical ones. Our brains are wired to contemplate, to solve riddles and puzzles, to figure things out, to organize things into manageable and meaningful categories and to always question the nature of things. We are also very responsive to our brain’s dopamine-reward systems, which make consumption addictions not only possible but inevitable, while the corporate advertising agencies have been accumulating capital for their clients for decades based on their data analysis of our addictive habits, needs and desires. As many culture industry critics have established, we can be conditioned, programmed and re-programmed through advertising, film, music and other media to crave certain products, and our individual and collective consumption patterns reflect these cravings and artificially constructed needs. In many ways, fashion can be used as a trigger for desire. As Marc Lewis explained in his book *The Biology of Desire: Why Addiction is Not a Disease* (2015),

> the brain is certainly built to make any action, repeated enough times, into a compulsion. But the emotional heart of addiction – in a word, *desire* – makes compulsion inevitable, because desire is the springboard to repetition, and repetition is the key to compulsion. (Lewis 2015: 33)

But the fashion paradox also implies more polarized contradictions, from exploitation, toxicity, human rights abuses and violence, all the way to the heights of human achievements in creativity, art, beauty, craft, finesse, innovation, liberation, self-expression, resistance and the ability to reclaim identities, while simultaneously also accumulating capital for corporate conglomerates. Perhaps we still care about fashion in the hope that solutions to the problems corporate capitalism poses are still possible. Perhaps we believe, as Eileen Boris claimed that ‘dress may be about hegemonic norms, but there is also room for resistance’ (Boris 2017: 172). Perhaps we are waiting for a loophole, a glitch in the matrix, because after all, history is full of narratives of struggles, where the odds are defied. Perhaps we just need to believe that the arc of history does indeed slowly bend towards justice in order to survive.

As we know from Joanne Entwistle’s study, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory* (2015), ‘fashion is about bodies: it is produced, promoted and worn by bodies. It is the body that fashion speaks to and it is the body that must be dressed in almost all social encounters’ (Entwistle 2015: 1). Thus, the fashion paradox is also directly connected with the interplay between confidence and vulnerabilities (or insecurities) we have about ourselves, our bodies, our class, race, gender, ability and our performative duties in the public sphere to maintain an ‘appropriate’ or ‘desirable’ self-presentation and a desired level of conformity to social norms. The question of embodiment of fashion becomes inevitably linked with various ways in which we can seek empowerment through fashion. Because clothing is one of the most ‘visible forms of consumption’, and also ‘performs a major role in the social construction of identity’ as Diana Crane explained in her study *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (2000), it is also one of the most ‘visible markers of social status and gender’ and thus the ‘principal means for identifying oneself in public space’ (Crane 2000: 1). It is
therefore difficult to disconnect fashion and clothing from questions of power and empowerment. Power is relational and so is fashion, because:

clothes are intended to be worn in public space; we dress for others not for ourselves. Therefore, the nature of public space influences the ways in which people use fashionable and non-fashionable clothes to express their identities and to make subversive statements. (Crane 2000: 237)

Empowerment is also relational and can only be generated from a dynamic (not static) relationship with power. On the one hand, fashion’s expression of power has traditionally been symbolized by luxury designer clothes, created by the select few celebrity designers ‘who made it’ and who are perpetually presented to us through the culture industry and media lens as geniuses or ‘daring and creative artists, but their activities are embedded in organizations that require high levels of investment to penetrate global markets’ (Crane 2000: 246), and are ultimately meant to construct and reinforce the exclusion of most social groups in order to elevate a select few (Crane 2000: 247). Paradoxically, cheap and fast fashion was initially a way to break down these social constructions of exclusion and simultaneously address our desire for change (and empowerment). Now, we are shifting our collective priorities and needs once again towards ‘zero waste production’, ‘cradle-to-cradle’ sustainable fashion, and calls for ‘new fashion systems, which fulfil this desire for flexibility and change, but which do not impact on our environment and society so severely’ (McQuillan 2011: 96). Resolution after resolution also perpetuates the fashion paradox. As Elke Gaugele wrote in her edited volume *Aesthetic Politics in Fashion* (2014), ethical fashion ‘definitely signifies a shift towards a new spirit of capitalism, where global capitalism aims to integrate social critique into its system’ because capitalism ‘cannot be generated exclusively out of its own resources’ (Gaugele 2014: 223). In other words, it is neither profitable nor productive to resolve the fashion paradox because its very contradictions perpetually fuel our collective conception and construction of what we want to keep defining as fashion.

As Elke Gaugele pointed out, fashion scholars have described ethical fashion as a paradox (Black 2011), a utopian promise (Clarke 2008), as celebrity activism (Winge 2008; Church Gibson 2012), an oxymoron (Clarke 2008), a green commodity fetish (Winge 2008), a precarious pedestal (Thomas 2008) and a necessity (Beard 2008; Gaugele 2014: 206). Moreover, there are more than 70 different definitions of sustainability, all deriving from the definition proposed by the Norwegian politician and Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, who headed a commission on sustainable development in 1987, that states, ‘sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Farrer 2011: 20). Identifying fashion, including ethical fashion, as a paradox, and a paradoxical field of inquiry, is only the beginning of this type of cultural analysis and research. Despite all the recent technological innovations, we do not yet have the full capacity to see all human beings, all of nature, all of the ecological environments, and even our own histories and relationships as deeply interconnected, which is a conceptual prerequisite for intergenerational empowerment and sustainability. And even when we do begin to see the consequences of our (consumer) actions, changing the collective patterns of production and consumption is a long and multilayered process that begins with mass education and access to information, then transcends into activism, collective action and government intervention, and ends with innovation, accompanied by prolonged financial investment in sustainable development of new practices. Our self-protection and survival-of-the-fittest instincts override almost all logical, informed, researched, fact-based rationality when our existence, well-being or access to power and empowerment
are even remotely challenged. That is why the climate crisis is the most threatening and yet simultaneously also the most contested issue of our time. Perpetually caught between guilt and fear, shame and inaction or deliberate lack of knowledge, we numb ourselves by consuming, binging and purging stuff that we do not need, thereby perpetuating the capitalist exploitation cycles without immediate consequences. But fashion, as a daily necessity (through clothing) and creative mode of expression (through symbols, identities and brands), continues to persevere in capturing our imagination and fuelling our desire mechanisms, as well as our capacity for imaging a better, fairer, more just and empowered vision of our own fashion-ability. Ethical fashion practices and empowerment need a lot more investigation, research and education investments to produce any lasting social change. Hoskins quotes a social media campaign that encourages people to buylesscrap.com that states; ‘join us in rejecting the tired notion that shopping is a reasonable response to human suffering’ (2014: 167). But despite this inescapable reality, we still crave newer and upgraded versions of escape into a ‘fantasy of a fashionable existence’ to experience various forms of ‘the desire for empowered elegance’ (Benstock and Ferriss 1994: 3). We want to continue to exist within the fashion paradox precisely because it is a paradox and because it brings us closer to our desires and our wish for empowerment.

ARTICLES OVERVIEW

Charlotte Carbone’s article, entitled ‘Trans* inclusivity in fashion retail: Disrupting the gender binary with queer perspectives’, examines the ways in which Canadian fashion retail can be redesigned to be trans* inclusive in a market economy based on the socially constructed gender binary, which to this day largely excludes trans* people and cisgender (cis) people who are gender non-conforming in dress. Moreover, Carbone argues that the current trans* representation in fashion is minimal and problematic, with issues of tokenism and essentialized stereotypes. She focuses on a trans* inclusive pop-up shop in Toronto. Through interviews and analysis, she addresses key issues, including trans* discrimination, unisex fashion and transness in popular culture, as well as the reaction of sales associates and fellow shoppers, the lack of both a good fit and style, as well as over-stimulating environments.

The second article is by a group of Toronto-based fashion researchers, including Sandra Tullio-Pow, Anna Yaworski and Magdalena Kincaid, entitled ‘Transgender fashion: Fit challenges and dressing strategies’ in which they tackle the challenges presented by fashion scholarship that relies on the umbrella term ‘LGTBQ+’ without distinguishing between the diverse groups of individuals whose needs are different, and examine the clothing experiences and wardrobe building for transgender people undergoing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and the accompanying design challenges. Their research relies on a qualitative, human-centred approach, utilizing at-home wardrobe interviews with participants, as well as data analysis centred on anatomy, clothing choices, styling strategies and how the right clothing made participants feel.

Julia Petrov’s article entitled ‘The new Phrygian cap: Pussy hats, feminism and anti-fashion’ examines the international wave of Women’s Marches in 2017 (and subsequent years), when following the instigation of craftivists in California, women around the world donned pink knitted hats with points resembling cat ears, which became known as ‘pussy hats’. This article uses examples collected as rapid response after the marches in Edmonton and Calgary (Alberta, Canada) for the Royal Alberta Museum to argue that the pussy hat is an example of anti-fashion in its embrace of anti-consumption, and its role to promote political accountability.
Kibamba Nimon and her team conducted market research on ethical fashion consumption in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, which she documented in her article ‘Ethical fashion consumption: Market research and fashion sustainability in Canada and beyond’ and found that despite an increasing interest in ethical fashion, particularly among millennials, there is a real gap between what consumers say and do. The challenge, both for ethical fashion designers and for fashion researchers, is thus to explore the main hindrances that ‘green consumers’ encounter, and to juxtapose them with the industry practices and branding strategies of ethical fashion brands that want to establish themselves as real competitors to fast fashion.

Aidan Moir’s article ‘Fracking, fashion and the environmental activism of Vivienne Westwood’ connects the recent Canadian fracking and pipeline scandal in British Columbia with the creative work of the environmentally conscious British designer Vivienne Westwood, who frequently attends antifracking protests and who, in September 2015, gained news attention for driving a tank across former British prime minister David Cameron’s lawn. Moir addresses the counter-hegemonic potential of Westwood’s design activism, her runway as a platform for critical debate to promote social and environmental change, and the possibilities of fashion activism at large.

Jessica Montgomery’s article, ‘Coming apart at the seams: How the theatrical within fashion makes space for empowerment’ examines the relationships between fashion and theatricality that opens up spaces of fantasy in which new ways of being can be imagined. Drawing upon Steven Meisel’s photography editorial for Italian Vogue, ‘Water & Oil’ (August 2010), this article investigates the ways in which fashion’s excessiveness can be reimagined as an argument for the essentialness of pleasure, and that pleasure is not synonymous with waste.

Berea Antaki and Katalin Medvedev’s article entitled ‘Bolivian textile crafts and the subversion of institutionalized sustainability’, examines the tensions between institutionalized and grassroots forms of sustainability, and their subsequent effects on textile artisans in La Paz, Bolivia. Through extensive participant observation and in-depth interviews, the authors look closely at Suma Qamaña, an Indigenous expression of the harmonious and respectful coexistence of humans with nature, which entails communal values and reciprocal resource management principles, and connect it with practical, grassroots solutions that encourage economic and environmental sustainability for textile cooperatives in Bolivia.

The last article in this volume is co-authored by several fashion scholars at the Ryerson the School of Fashion in Toronto, including Sandra Tullio-Pow, Kirsten Schaefer, Ben Barry, Chad Story and Samantha Abel, entitled ‘Empowering women wearing plus-size clothing through co-design’, which documents a study and workshop that used body mapping, body scanning and co-design activities with sixteen women to unpack their ideas about plus-size clothing in a body-positive space to foster confidence, strength and autonomy in engaging with apparel and the fashion industry. The co-design event provided participants with collective resilience to an industry and world that marginalizes them because style options remain extremely limited for Canadian women in the plus-size category (sizes 14W–32W), as most retailers in Canada carry only up to size 22. The findings of this study are important to those in the apparel industry as well as fashion educators.
CONCLUSION

All the articles included in this Special Issue engage with the various fashion paradoxes in constructive and solution-based ways. Through research, surveys and critical analysis of representations of more diverse, inclusive, ethical and empowering fashion practices, the articles collected here help us shift the perception of what fashion is and can be. By engaging with the power of paradoxes as a transformative spark and inspiration for both desire and change, these contributions provide glimpses into how fashion can be the site of social change. Finally, this Special Issue of Clothing Cultures is also an invitation to expand on and continue these conversations of ethics and empowerment, in order to shift the fashion discourse and fashion’s paradoxical energies from replicating old, exploitative or colonial paradigms, towards new ways of thinking, designing, producing, consuming, curating and educating the next generation of fashion professionals and fashion scholars.

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**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Since 2019, Dr Katrina Sark has redeveloped the fashion studies stream of the design culture programme in the Department of Design and Communication at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU). Her career already boasts a long list of publications (including the co-authored Urban Chic book series – with an upcoming volume titled *Copenhagen Chic*). Since completing her Ph.D. at Montreal’s McGill University in literatures, languages and cultures in 2015, she has taught many media, cultural and gender studies courses in various departments at the University of Victoria in Canada. While finishing her doctoral dissertation, entitled ‘Branding Berlin’ (forthcoming with Routledge), she published *Berliner Chic: A Locational History of Berlin Fashion* (Intellect, 2011) and *Montréal Chic: A Locational History of Montreal Fashion* (Intellect, 2016) and founded the Canadian Fashion Scholars Network, which she has been running since 2014. Since moving to Denmark in 2019, she has organized a series of workshops on decolonizing fashion history and fashion studies in Denmark and Germany and began building the European Fashion Scholars Network (based on the Canadian network she created). She also launched *Chic Podcast* and joined the international Steering Committee of Research Collective for Decolonizing Fashion.

Contact: University of Southern Denmark, Universitetsparken 1, 6000, Kolding, Denmark.

E-mail: ksark@sdu.dk

[https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2994-6639](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2994-6639)