

## **Digital Multilogue on Fashion Education 2021**

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### **Transitioning fashion design education towards post-fossil fuel worlds**

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#### Abstract

This presentation revisits the author's 2017 manifesto for fashion design education, now taking an explicit position that fashion must intentionally transition away from petrochemical-based materials and colours towards biologically safe systems. Such transitions have specific implications for fashion design education. How do we as educators facilitate transitions holistically and pluralistically? For example, how do we address the emotional responses that inevitably arise as an entire worldview and all that it has made possible is rejected? What are our strengths and our deficits in guiding students towards being designers-in-transitions? This presentation outlines some urgent questions that educators collectively must address.

Keywords: fashion design education, climate change, transition design, material ecologies

### Acknowledgment of Country

I begin by acknowledging the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands I live and work. I would like to pay my respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands. Sovereignty has never been ceded. This always was and always will be, Aboriginal land. I support the Uluru Statement from the Heart to achieve justice, recognition and respect for First Nations people and a referendum to enshrine a First Nations Voice in the Australian Constitution.

### Introduction

In 2017 I wrote a manifesto for fashion design education published in *Utopian Studies* (Rissanen 2017). The manifesto positioned imagination as a potent resource to deal with the challenges we face, a resource whose use must extend beyond technical solutions to imagining new systems and new ways of being. The manifesto argued that activities within the fashion system could be reimagined as existing primarily to fulfill fundamental human needs (Max-Neef, 1992) instead of seemingly existing to fulfill an economic imperative of profit and growth. On reflection, I would include the needs of all living things in reimagining activities within the fashion system. This paper briefly reviews the many developments in the four years since the article was published, and focuses on some implications for fashion education of transitions to post-fossil fuel worlds. Reflecting on the manifesto in preparing this paper, and reflecting on the works on Arturo Escobar and others, I am now cautious of the universal, placeless tone of the manifesto. To be clear: this paper arises on Gadigal land, in the so-called Sydney, written by an immigrant settler. Place shapes thinking; the two are intertwined. I acknowledge that the thinking in this paper may have less relevance in other places.

### Developments 2017-21

Since writing the manifesto, a number of critical developments have occurred. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has published two influential reports on climate change, in 2018 and in 2021. The 2018 interim report makes plain the drastic changes needed by 2030 to avert the most catastrophic impacts of climate breakdown; the 2021 report's tone is even more urgent. The 2019 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem (IPBES) report on biodiversity loss is similarly sobering. The half-century leading up to the report, much of it coinciding with my own lifetime, has

resulted in a devastating loss in non-domesticated (wild) biomass and an overwhelming number of species is threatened with extinction as a direct result of human activity.

During the same time, the overproduction of fashion seems to have accelerated. In 2018 Burberry's practice of incinerating goods came to light (BBC, 2018), as did H&M's \$4.3 billion worth of unsold inventory (Kent & Crump, 2019). Today, the volumes of styles and lower-than-ever prices from brands like Shein, Boohoo and Pretty Little Thing make the original fast fashion giants H&M and Zara look quaint in comparison. As Niinimäki et al (2020) make clear, the growth in fashion production is not connected with the growth in human population. The pace of growth of the former overtook the pace of growth of the latter around the year 2000. The growth logic of the economic system drives this acceleration.

In 2019, Kate Fletcher, Mathilda Tham, Lynda Grose and I founded the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion, a global organisation that has grown to more than 250 members. Fletcher & Tham (2019) published the Earth Logic research plan later that year, building on the urgency of the 2018 IPCC report and more than three decades of research on fashion and sustainability, calling for an earth logic to underpin the fashion system. The start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 resulted in cancellations of billions of dollars worth of orders by brands in the global north, with devastating consequences for garment workers in the global south. The PayUp campaign led by Remake, the Clean Clothes Campaign and others, has resulted in some recovery of income to workers, bringing further attention to an unjust system of extraction. To sum, significant developments have taken place in four years, all with implications for fashion design education.

This paper takes the position that in light of the climate crisis and the irreversible damage caused to earth's ecosystems by extractive industries, the fossil fuel industry must be brought to a close as rapidly as possible. The fashion industry cannot remain a pipeline for it, as has been made clear by reports from Changing Markets (2021) and the Biomimicry Institute (2020). The fashion system relies on fossil fuels as an energy source, as a source for more than half of the fibre it uses, and as a source for many of its chemical dyes. While hypothetically all of these can eventually be replaced with energy, materials and substances that are compatible with biological systems, we do not know if that replacement can be done at the scale and pace of the current industry output. It seems unlikely.

What does this rejection of the fossil fuel industry mean for fashion design education? This paper does not focus on the technical solutions for this rejection, namely material and substance substitutions, but rather, on what fossil fuels have made possible in terms of the mindset in fashion and in fashion design education. Fossil fuels make possible an illusion of limitless choice that is disconnected from place and from the cycles of time of the biosphere, the thermal and biological seasons. We, as fashion designers, fashion design educators and fashion design students, expect that any fibre is available in any colour we desire at any time of the year. We take this choice for granted, and in our daily work we rarely question what makes that (illusion of) limitless choice possible. When we fail to do so in education, my concern is that we pass the expectation of that illusion of choice to the next generation of industry practitioners.

### Fashion Design Education and the Disconnection from Place

As well as an illusion of endless choice, fossil fuels create a sense of placelessness in fashion, an abstraction of place. We mostly do not ask whether the carbon in a polyester blouse originated in the Athabasca oil sands in Canada or below the North Sea in the Atlantic. We mostly do not ask whether the azure blue of the blouse was derived from coal from the Hunter Valley in Australia or from the Appalachia in the United States. I argue that we should ask these questions. This abstraction of place masks the abject reality behind fashion's most common materials and colours. We are complicit in mountain top removal, we are complicit in increased deaths from respiratory illness near coal mines, we are complicit in Standing Rock. Yet the material anonymity of a polyester blouse gives the illusion that in a material sense it comes from no place other than the factory in which the garment was sewn and the mill at which the fabric was woven. Fossil fuel fashion has terrible origins inseparable from permanent destruction of land and water. This is not to say that the production of natural fibres is innocent: of course it is not. With natural fibres, however, the possibility of ethical and regenerative practice exists, and a concrete sense of place could be restored. The same cannot be argued for fossil fuel-based materials.

Fashion design curriculum ought to centre locally specific colour, connected to local seasons, climate, botany, soil, and water. In her master's thesis Lantry (2015) notes how in parts of India textiles are only dyed during the monsoon when water is plentiful, yet in fashion we expect that water is always plentiful to create the hue we desire at a particular

moment, when in fact water scarcity is becoming more common as climate breakdown progresses. Place is embedded within the molecules of plant- and animal-based dyes: they come from the soil of a specific place on Earth. Something is lost when we anonymise a place. With fossil fuels a sense of placelessness is critical, because actually confronting the reality of the Athabasca oil sands or the Hunter Valley or any other place of extraction would be to collectively confront horror. As we close the era of extractive, non-renewable, colonial, toxic colours in fashion and textiles, glimpses of near-futures of imaginative, flourishing, regenerative colour emerge.

### Fashion Design Education as Transition Design

Terry Irwin at Carnegie Mellon University has led the development of Transition Design as a futuring strategy for some time (Irwin 2015). In the manifesto (Rissanen 2017) I referenced Irwin's work on transitions, and since then its criticality for fashion design education has become clearer. Irwin (2015) notes that "Transition Design solutions have their origins in long-term thinking, are lifestyle-oriented and place-based, and always acknowledge the natural world as the greater context for all design solutions." This aligns with Fletcher & Tham's (2019) Earth Logic, which explicitly situates fashion within the biosphere of earth, including earth's biophysical limits now known as planetary boundaries (Rockström et al, 2009).

Transition design calls for a "posture of humility" (Irwin 2015). What might this mean for fashion education? In part it means taking the stance that we fashion educators do not know everything about fashion, that we are not an authority on everything in fashion. Practicing humility with intention opens up lines of inquiry that might otherwise remain invisible to us; standing in humility we are able to authentically ask rich questions about fashion and what we do not know about it.

Teaching fashion design in transitional times can be a challenge. More than once I have had students ask me: are we an experiment? My response is, no, while quietly thinking to myself, isn't all teaching ultimately an experiment? A teaching strategy that works seamlessly with one group of students produces no results with another. Effective teaching is always reflexive; it is alive. Calling teaching experimental is admittedly a risky proposal in light of astronomic tuition with high living and material costs of study. Nonetheless, experiment we must. Irwin (2015) states: "Transition Designers look for "emergent possibilities" within

problem contexts, as opposed to imposing preplanned and resolved solutions upon a situation.” We educators ought to perhaps consider ourselves transition designers, and we ought to pay attention to the emergence of possibilities, aligned with transitions, in our work continuously. Glimpses of new worlds are present in our students’ thinking, but they are easy to miss.

What is rejection of a worldview like as an experience in fashion design education, collectively and individually? It can be very painful. In the case of rejecting fossil fuels in fashion design education, entire modules, courses, and subjects may become redundant. It may make instructors feel irrelevant and attacked. The framing of this rejection is therefore critical. While the work is urgent, time needs to be given to conversations: individuals need to be given the time and space to express their emotional response to these permanent changes. For some, the reaction may be grief: it must not be ignored or minimised. For others, the response may be joy and relief. A positive reaction is equally but no more valid than a negative one.

### Conclusion

As universities continue to divest from fossil fuels it might seem an easy proposition to divest fashion design education from fossil fuels, too. It is not. Fossil fuels have enabled an illusion of endless choice, in material and in colour, disconnected from time and place. In time the same level of availability and choice may become possible as research into biologically compatible materials and dyes expands, but it is unlikely to exist at the current scale or pace of output. In 2017 I called for educators to be “guardians of the possibility of possibility”. Four years later that is even more urgent. Following Escobar (2018), we ought to guard the possibility of a pluriverse of fashion. Endless possibilities of new worlds exist in our students’ thinking, speaking and creation. We must pay attention to and we must hold space for those possibilities.

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