

Review

The Role of Fashion and Art in First Nations Healing, Decolonisation, and Cultural Practice

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Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of art, fashion, and decolonisation within First Nations communities, focusing on how clothing and adornment are powerful tools for healing, cultural survival, and resistance. Through art programs, fashion workshops, and community-based projects, First Nations peoples reconnect with culture, land, and history, fostering identity and continuity while addressing the traumas of colonisation. This paper examines how First Nations artists and designers engage with traditional garments, such as kangaroo skin cloaks and shell necklaces, to reclaim ancestral practices and challenge colonial traumas. By reinterpreting colonial clothes and creating new forms of fashion, artists engage in truth-telling, amplify resilience, and promote reconciliation. This paper highlights the role of art and fashion as an aesthetic expression and a strategy for cultural survival and resistance. It concludes by offering recommendations for policies and programs that support First Nations fashion initiatives, fostering economic opportunities, social well-being, and intergenerational healing. Ultimately, this paper advocates for the transformative power of art and fashion as pathways to decolonisation and empowerment for First Nations communities.

Keywords: First Nations; Australia; art; fashion; decolonisation; well-being

1. Introduction

Art is a dynamic and multifaceted expression that transcends visual aesthetics to engage deeply with culture, identity, and emotion. For First Nations peoples, art is a crucial medium for storytelling, exploring the past, present, and future while conveying culture and challenging Eurocentric narratives (Hutchens 2017; McKinnon 2020). This dynamic is particularly evident within First Nations art representing clothing, adornment, and fashion, which offer insights into everyday life, cultural revitalisation, and critiques of Western attire.

Since time immemorial, First Nations clothing has been depicted in art. In so-called Australia, paintings and sketches in the nineteenth century represented life from First Nations perspectives through William Barak, Timothy, Mickey of Ulladulla, Tommy McRae, Captain Harrison, and Oscar (Clark 2010; Edmonds and Clarke 2009; The National Museum of Australia n.d.b). These artists often depicted traditional garments, including animal skin cloaks used in ceremonial and daily contexts. For contemporary Australian First Nations artists, the representation of traditional clothing and adornment has evolved into various artistic forms like textiles, sculpture, and photography. In reinterpreting Western clothing, Australian First Nations artists often juxtapose colonial clothing, reimagining items like breastplates, mission or reservation dresses, and military coats. These fashion within art forms of work also celebrate Australian First Nations protest wear and the creation of



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futuristic attire. Together, they are powerful forms of decolonisation that critique colonial histories and assert cultural identity.

This artistic practice often involves textiles and fibre art yet transcends these categories and defies such binaries. Kleinert (2010b) characterises this approach as contemporary art that integrates “both traditional Indigenous dress and European dress as subject matter.” This artistic space incorporates diverse mediums while maintaining clothing and adornment as central themes. For instance, the artist Coffinbirth explores interactive engagement through digital print paper dolls, inviting audiences to design outfits that reflect First Nations identities and cultural narratives (Coffinbirth 2024).

Using clothing as an artistic medium is described through various terms and perspectives. The concept of garmenting refers to creative works that incorporate or reference clothing and adornment, often extending to sculptural or installation art rather than two-dimensional mediums like illustrations (Schwartz 2022). Fashion designers also contribute to this realm, frequently blurring the boundaries between fashion and art. Their work is often associated with conceptual or critical fashion and wearable art or art clothing (Clark 2013; Geczy and Karaminas 2017; Maynard 2013). These practices represent the ongoing evolution of fashion as an artistic medium, especially for First Nations communities. Through this intersection of fashion, art, and identity, First Nations artists and designers continue challenging dominant histories, redefining cultural representation, and celebrating resilience (Clark and McNeil 2023; Kleinert 2010b; Sporn 2024).

This paper does not aim to define First Nations art; it underscores how the intersection of art and fashion is vital to cultural practice and well-being and offers new perspectives on health, identity, and decolonisation. Through traditional, colonial, and futuristic representations of clothing in painting, sculpture, installation, and digital media, First Nations artists reveal the true history of so-called Australia while asserting cultural identities and contributing to healing. Ultimately, this article highlights the importance of this practice that bridges art and fashion to sustain cultural expression, foster resilience, and inspire well-being in First Nations communities. It offers a valuable framework for developing policies and programs that recognise the profound impact of art and fashion on cultural and social sustainability.

2. Art and Fashion as Vehicles for Cultural Revival and Well-Being

2.1. Art and Cultural Practices as Pathways to Healing

The impact of colonisation has significantly affected the well-being of First Nations peoples and communities (Salmon et al. 2019). In Australia, this is evidenced by the lasting trauma from displacement, dispossession, cultural genocide, and the forcible removal of children, which continue to shape individuals, families, and communities' health and social and emotional well-being (Salmon et al. 2019). Healing involves various holistic factors, including the vital role of cultural practices (Salmon et al. 2019). Culture is a broad and multifaceted concept, encompassing connections to land, community, family, language, spirituality, and individuality. It also includes elements of self-determination and resistance (Salmon et al. 2019).

For many Australian First Nations peoples, these cultural connections form the foundation of their identity and well-being. As a result, well-being strategies often incorporate cultural ceremonies, engaging with Elders, storytelling, reclaiming histories, art and performance, and language revitalisation (Salmon et al. 2019). Engaging in the arts fosters stronger cultural and community connections. There is growing recognition that arts and cultural practice play a vital role in supporting the well-being of Australian First Nations peoples and addressing the social determinants of health (Australia Council for the Arts 2022; Bourke et al. 2022; Creative Australia 2023; Kleinert 2010b; Productivity

[Commission 2022](#); [Salmon et al. 2019](#)). Art-making and art-viewing also hold transformative potential for mental and emotional well-being ([Holt 2018](#); [Jensen and Bonde 2018](#); [Mastandrea et al. 2019](#)).

The experience of art—through its many forms—can evoke emotional and cognitive responses that promote health ([Mastandrea et al. 2019](#)) and mental health ([Jensen and Bonde 2018](#)). For Australian First Nations peoples, this relationship between art and well-being is deeply intertwined with cultural practices asserting identity, reclaiming history and fostering connection to land and community. First Nations art centres provide safe and supportive cultural spaces to nurture this intersection. These centres serve as hubs for creativity and cultural practice, allowing Australian First Nations people a space to engage with art, storytelling, social cohesion, and economic opportunity ([Salmon et al. 2019](#)).

There are powerful examples of the role of arts centres or groups that encourage and facilitate creative workshops. [St John \(2022\)](#) found that using art via visual communication within the community of Ntaria improves storytelling, relationships, and cultural knowledge. The development of Ntaria Design, a student-led enterprise created through a design and enterprise education program at Ntaria School, explored digital design and how it can represent, connect, and generate student employment opportunities. Ntaria Design highlights how design education can foster entrepreneurial skills and empower youth to pursue commercial opportunities aligned with their cultural practices and values and contribute to the well-being of their communities ([St John 2022](#)).

The UNSW Biyani program, led by Associate Professor Fabri Blacklock, focused on the positive effects of cultural practices—like art, yarning, and deep listening—on the well-being of Australian First Nations women ([UNSW 2024](#)). Through a participatory research approach, the program supported Australian First Nations women in practising, documenting, and exhibiting their cultural knowledge. Bringing together women from across New South Wales, Biyani offered On-Country events and workshops in Sydney, where they received training in textiles, fashion, and adornment making and emphasised economic empowerment by helping participants develop business skills to share their culture through art ([UNSW 2024](#)).

The influence of art and culture is increasingly recognised as essential for the well-being of Australian First Nations peoples. Improving well-being within First Nations communities is a comprehensive approach that involves various sectors, including health, education, arts, and tertiary ([Australia Council for the Arts 2022](#); [Bourke et al. 2022](#)). By fostering collaboration across these sectors, specific well-being challenges faced by First Nations peoples can be better addressed, and a holistic approach and a deeper understanding of the role of art and cultural practice in enhancing well-being can be considered. This approach is particularly valuable in understanding the role of fashion within well-being frameworks and how and what type of fashion experiences are effective and meaningful.

2.2. Fashion as a Channel for Identity and Well-Being

First Nations clothing and adornment are powerful expressions of cultural tradition, self-determination, protest, and identity, symbolising survival and serving as personal and communal healing channels ([Clark 2024b](#)). These expressions are evident in traditional clothing and adornment practices, such as cloak and jewellery making and wearing ([Couzens 2017](#); [Riley 2016](#)). The making and wearing of cloaks is part of a broader cultural practice revival and an essential healing component for many Australian First Nations people ([Clark 2024b](#)). Fashion design, in particular, is a growing area of focus for achieving socio-economic goals for First Nations communities, primarily through the design and sale of creations ([Cook 2022](#); [St John 2022](#)).

This dynamic is not limited to Australia; First Nations communities worldwide also utilise art and fashion workshops for empowerment and cultural expression (Ansloos et al. 2022; Mills 2018). Mills, a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta, highlights an example of an Elder who used fashion to narrate the history of traditional Blackfoot clothing. By recreating her grandmother's garments in historical photographs, the Elder blended tradition and innovation, reimagining styles ranging from buckskin outfits to contemporary satin dresses (Mills 2018). This example underscores the transformative power of fashion and clothing, demonstrating how viewing, wearing, or creating garments can positively impact well-being.

Possum and kangaroo skin cloaks, once everyday garments that now primarily serve ceremonial and artistic purposes, carry immense cultural significance. Research by (Keeray Woorroong Gunditjmarra) Vicki Couzens (2017) on cloak-making practices in southeastern Australia highlights the profound impact of this tradition. Her research shows how participating in cloak-making workshops fosters physical and emotional healing, underlining the importance of cultural practices in maintaining health and identity in Australian First Nations communities (Couzens 2017). Multiple studies show that participation in cloak-making workshops improves social networks, deepens connections to Country, and renews cultural traditions. Riley (2016) expresses that making traditional Australian First Nations garments like kangaroo skin cloaks (and feather headdresses and possum skin blankets) is crucial for cultural revitalisation, symbolising Australian First Nations people's resilience and survival despite government assimilation efforts (Riley 2016). These traditional practices also help foster cultural awareness and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Riley 2016).

First Nations fashion brands often aim to contribute to First Nations' well-being by sharing cultural knowledge and messages of resilience in their work (Clark 2024b). Some First Nations fashion designers also articulate their creations as being therapeutic (Clark 2024a; Karagic 2024). Australian First Nations fashion design has substantial benefits, particularly for First Nations youth, who, by engaging in artistic practices, can develop essential skills, strengthen their cultural identity, and foster a sense of belonging, all contributing to broader social and emotional well-being (Cook 2022). The Ntaria study also demonstrates fashion engagement on the well-being of the students. In their design work, the students transferred their art onto t-shirts, with one student expressing, "It makes me feel proud. I can put my culture on my t-shirt" (St John 2022, p. 501). This production of T-shirts played an important role in improving program engagement, generating income, and fostering pride in the individual and communal wearing of their designs (St John 2022).

Australian First Nations clothing and adornment are profound expressions of cultural practice, resilience against colonisation, self-determination, protest, and identity. From traditional craft to contemporary fashion designs, these practices embody survival and are powerful means for personal and collective healing, storytelling, and identity. Fashion design is a source of healing and offers a platform for youth to express their cultural identities while building skills that lead to financially sustainable futures. Australian First Nations artists are at the forefront of this powerful cultural revival, using clothing and adornment as vehicles for storytelling, identity, well-being, resistance, and sovereignty.

3. Fashion Within First Nations Art

3.1. Replicating Traditional Clothing and Adornment

Australian First Nations peoples have a deep connection to their ancestral lands, known as Country, which embodies knowledge deeply tied to First Nations people's identity and spirituality (Kinnane 2005; Weir et al. 2011). In respecting and celebrating Country, First Nations people utilised a rich produce of natural materials to form clothing

and adornment (see Figure 1). These items, such as animal skins, shells, plants, or clay, were traded between First Nations groups and crafted into cloaks, shoes, head ornaments, jewellery, belts, and bags (Jones 2010). Body modifications varied, including painting, scarring, and piercing for ceremonial, celebratory, and decorative purposes (Jones 2010). The impact of invasion and colonisation resulted in a sustained effort to eradicate and dispossess First Nations people from their cultural practices, including the use of their clothing and adornment. However, First Nations people are resilient, and their cultural practices have continued, albeit at times in covert ways.



Figure 1. Kerry & Co and Fred Kruger. Group outside a bark shelter with possum skin cloaks, Box 6: Australian Indigenous Ministries pictorial material: various historical photographs, ca. 1860–1909. Photograph [out of copyright; use courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales].

For First Nations artists, connecting with traditional garments is a source of healing and an opportunity to share their cultural knowledge (Edmonds and Clarke 2009). While some communities have successfully preserved their cultural adornment practices in various forms, others have faced challenges that necessitated the revival of cultural dress practices from archived collections or through cultural sharing (Edmonds and Clarke 2009; Hayes 2019; Museum of Contemporary Art 2024; The National Museum of Australia n.d.a). Recently, there has been a substantial revitalisation of traditional and cultural wearable dresses and items displayed in galleries and museums. Many First Nations people and artists have recently been crafting clothing and adornment using traditional methods or replicating cultural wear in contemporary forms.

Andrew Gall (pakana) replicates Tasmanian shell necklaces from porcelain (Moran 2023). Gall's work represents a significant innovation in cultural practices in creating the first traditional kanalaritja shell necklace using 3D-printed porcelain. Gall's work indicates that rising ocean temperatures around lutruwita may lead to increased acidity, causing sea shells to become thinner and more fragile and potentially harming the kelp ecosystems

that support shell growth (Moran 2023). Gall's shell necklaces and their connection to climate change are part of a broader healing process that merges environmental activism with cultural preservation. By blending traditional techniques with modern materials and technology, Gall creates wearable art honouring ancestral traditions and promoting personal and communal healing. Gall's piece demonstrates enduring cultural connections through garments, contributing to the well-being of First Nations people by providing a vital link to ancestors and Country (Moran 2023).

Despite the colonial attempts of cultural genocide, First Nations people have shown remarkable resilience, continuing these traditions both openly and covertly. For many First Nations artists, creating pieces tied to cultural dress and adornment is an inherent act and desire. Through the reinterpretation of traditional garments, First Nations artists preserve and adapt cultural symbols for contemporary contexts, reaffirming the resilience of First Nations culture and connecting the past with the present. By engaging in these cultural practices, artists and viewers are experiencing decolonisation and healing through the removal of forced Western policies and ideas.

3.2. Confronting Invasion and Colonisation

During the invasion and colonisation of Australia, there was a sustained effort to eradicate First Nations cultural practices, including clothing and adornment. However, some First Nations people resisted and continued wearing their garments, which were sometimes covert but most often subtle, or used Western wear strategically. At the beginning of British occupation in the late 1700s in Sydney, First Nations men occasionally wore military jackets and red coats to rebel and resist (see Figure 2). In the mid-1800s, Tasmanian First Nations women were described wearing their cultural necklaces, constructed of iridescent shells, with their Western Victorian-era dresses (Bellanta 2023). In the same period, a group from Coranderrk Reserve attended a Governor's reception in Melbourne wearing possum skin cloaks draped over their finest Western garments (Clark 2014; Kleinert 2010a). However, for many First Nations peoples, the reality involved the forced use of blankets, stemming from a ban on cloak-making and a shortage of animal skins and serving as a tool of control and cultural genocide (Maynard 2002; Riley 2021; Riley 2005).

Today, First Nations artists are confronting colonial garments through replications or alternative versions. These works embody red coats and military wear, blankets and the critique of cloak banning, the colonial practice of breastplates, and the forced wearing of Western garments. For artists, their use of fashion critiques of colonisation's impacts promotes truth-telling and healing, encouraging broader societal acknowledgment of historical injustices and inspiring reconciliation efforts. Andrea Fisher's (Birri Gubba) piece *Worn Breastplate—Series 1* (2009) responds to the colonial breastplates given to senior First Nations people to create division and assert control over communities (Stewart 2018). Fisher was motivated to complete this work after delving into the history and collection of breastplates at the Queensland Museum. Through this series, Fisher aimed to reclaim First Nation history and address the gaps where First Nations narratives had been misrepresented or excluded, such as the knowledge of bullet holes in some breastplates (Stewart 2018).

Fisher's work in decolonising colonial trauma and asserting Indigeneity is seen through the words "sista" and "brotha" engraved on the brass breastplates to reclaim and assert First Nations identity. The use of colour signifies both women's and men's business, their roles, and how they are vital components of First Nations culture, united by understanding and respect (Stewart 2018). For Fisher, the use of garments such as breastplates symbolises colonial dominance and control, channelling ancestral strength to counter the forced assimilation of the colonial era.

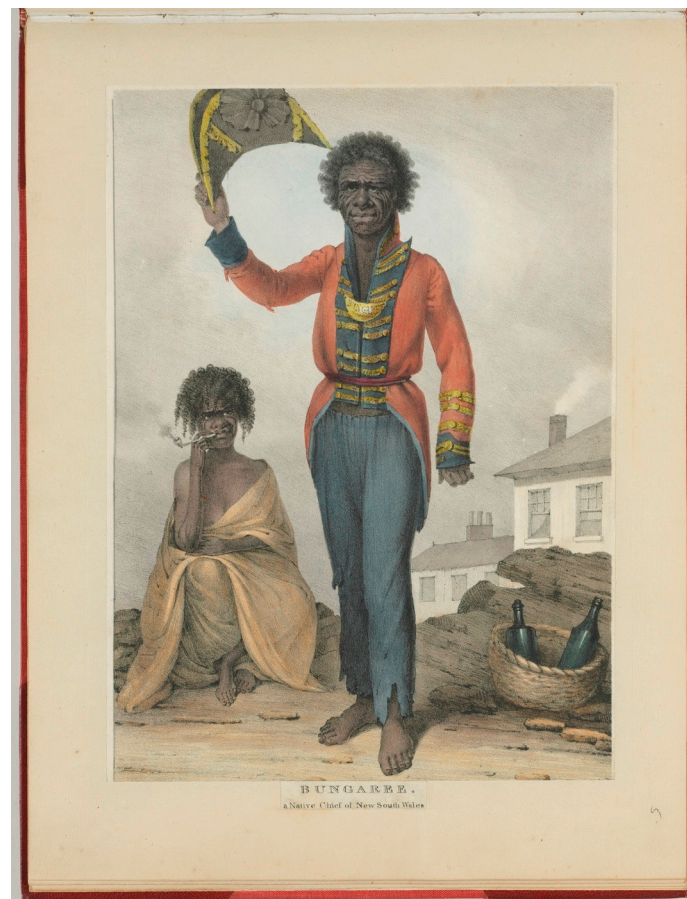


Figure 2. Augustus Earle. Bungaree, Views in New South Wales and Van Diemens Land: Australian scrap book 1830. Print [out of copyright; use courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales].

For First Nations artists, these types of works challenge colonial narratives that have long sought to diminish or erase First Nations traditions by confronting the direct link between invasion and colonisation. By restaging or reimagining historical First Nations experiences, First Nations artists challenge understandings of colonisation and advocate engaging in truth-telling and healing. These forms of work do more than retell history; they reshape it by reclaiming First Nations perspectives and blending the past's painful memories with acts of resilience and cultural pride. By creating works that tell the brutal history of Australia, they engage the artist and the viewer to heal by emotionally experiencing the piece and reimagining an Indigenised version of a colonial artefact.

3.3. Truth-Telling Displacement and Dispossession

The policies of segregation, protection, and assimilation directed the removal of First Nations people from their Countries and places of cultural practice. These policies relocated First Nations peoples to reserves, missions, stations, or the outskirts of towns, where varying institutions imposed distinct forms of governance and experiences ([Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2022b](#)). For instance, missions were predominately established by churches or religious affiliations to convert First Nations people to Christianity and prepare them for labour jobs ([Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2022b](#)). Within these institutions, clothing often served as a form of payment, with movement restricted based on how well First Nations people maintained their attire (see Figure 3) ([Martínez 2007](#); [Maynard 2002](#)). Some First Nations people requested more clothing ([Nelson et al. 2002](#)), while in other cases, they were responsible for making clothes for others or tourist displays ([Clark 2024b](#); [Scrimgeour 2006](#)). For

the young First Nations women and men in these institutions, they were frequently taken from their communities to serve in white settler homes or stockwork needs (Huggins 1995).



Figure 3. Photographer unknown. Warangesda mission, Riverina, ca. 1886–1900. Photograph [out of copyright; use courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales].

The experiences and policies of displacement and dispossession reflected through dress are often restaged or reclaimed by First Nations artists. For many First Nations artists, their use of Western attire symbolises the endurance and resistance of First Nations people within institutions, connecting their family histories to collective narratives and experiences. In doing so, they amplify voices that have been marginalised, asserting the strength of First Nations peoples and facilitating truth-telling and healing across generations.

Kelly Koumalatsos (Wergaia/Wemba Wemba) combines traditional possum skin cloak-making with Western screen-printing techniques to form colonial and Western outfits that critique and heal colonisation (O’Sullivan 2024). Employing a method known as *uka ngalung wooleh* (meaning “to paint with possum”), Koumalatsos creates historically and culturally significant garments inspired by her ancestors’ experiences. In the piece *Portrait of sister in laws Wemba Wemba Great Auntie Frieda Stewart and Wergaia Great Grandmother Eleanor Stewart* (2019), Koumalatsos represents the strong and resilient women in her family who survived colonial control within Mission settings (National Gallery of Victoria n.d.). Inspired by a 1900s photograph, a nineteenth-century blouse was crafted from possum fur-printed tissue paper to symbolise her grandmother and aunt’s resilience in maintaining and celebrating their cultural practice and identity while living in colonial worlds. Koumalatsos’ innovative use of possum fur as a stamp exemplifies decolonisation and healing by uniquely

integrating First Nations materials into Western garments (O'Sullivan 2024). This approach reimagines First Nations prints on Western attire in a time when cultural practice through fashion was banned.

Clothing serves as a visual marker of history, and First Nations artists emotionally communicate the impact of colonisation. For artists, their work serves as both a decolonisation of Western fashion and a reimagining of First Nations garments during a profoundly traumatic era of displacement and dispossession. Through recreating these outfits and exploring their stories, artists and viewers engage with the traumatic experiences of the past, fostering understanding and healing. In restaging or reclaiming these experiences through dress, First Nations artists convert them into powerful reflections of cultural resilience.

3.4. Celebrating Protest and Resistance

Since colonisation, fashion has been used to protest. Early forms of protest dress were often subtle or strategic, coinciding with strict religious and societal respectable dress rules (Brock 2007; Kamies 2021). Later fashions included overt, colourful, and culturally significant clothing and adornment (Clark 2024b; Maynard 2006). In the nineteenth century, First Nations people wore their finest clothing during protest strategies such as petitions, marches, and boycotts (Attwood and Markus 2004; Dudgeon and Bray 2016; Heiss 2013; Nanni and James 2013). By the early twentieth century, protest wear became bolder and included strategic colours, such as wearing black to symbolise mourning (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2023). Starting in the 1960s, First Nations clothing had become politically and culturally loud, incorporating political art, slogans, colours, and cultural motifs. Since the 1980s, First Nations flags have become integral to contemporary cultural fashion, remaining highly significant today (see Figure 4) (Clark 2024b). Modern First Nations style often reflects ongoing campaigns for First Nations rights and is deeply intersectional, embraced by everyday people, performers, artists, and community and political leaders (Clark 2024b).

First Nations artists often create works celebrating First Nations protestors through time and place. Their pieces include sharing unknown stories of First Nations at the beginning of colonisation through garment replication or celebrating modern protest wear through illustration. These works from First Nations artists celebrate the strength of First Nations people by fostering a deeper understanding of their historical struggles and contemporary activism and inviting viewers to reflect on the ongoing struggle for rights and identity.

In the work *Our Skeletons in Your Closet* (2015), Judy Watson's (Waanyi) piece incorporated porcelain skeletons created by (Nunukul/Ngugi/Goenpul) Delvene Cockatoo-Collins onto heavy, dark woollen military coats as a homage to Anthony Martin Fernando (Colley 2015). Fernando, an Aboriginal man born in Sydney in 1864, protested and petitioned within Australia and the world. In 1928, he challenged and protested the conditions and treatment of First Nations peoples by attaching tiny toy skeletons to his cloak and chanting outside of London's Australia House. Watson notes that few Australians, including First Nations people, are aware of Fernando's story and his regular protests in London. To contextualise Fernando's story, excerpts from his diary about his experiences as an Aboriginal man in England were displayed alongside Watson's work (Colley 2015). Watson's piece actively engages with historical narratives of resistance, highlighting the legacies of those who have fought for First Nations rights. There are no known portraits of Anthony Martin Fernando; only written accounts of his experiences exist in notebooks (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2022a). This piece is not only a celebration of a strong First Nations person but also a visual voice in the form of an outfit he is known to have worn.



Figure 4. Opening of Australia’s Parliament House—two demonstrators standing beneath protest signs for Aboriginal land rights attached to the side wall of the forecourt, 1988. Photograph [use courtesy of the National Archives of Australia].

For many First Nations artists, this intersection of art, fashion, and activism reclaims narratives of resistance against colonial oppression. Celebrating these figures and people who are resilient and resistant helps to connect further with culture and inspire hope. The pride and respect for First Nations individuals who risked their lives to fight and protest is central to many First Nations artists’ work. By sharing these stories, including contemporary examples of protest, we gain insight into the resilience and determination that empower First Nations people to resist and fight back.

3.5. Asserting Contemporary and Futuristic Identities

Fashion and style are vital forms of storytelling and expression for First Nations people, providing a meaningful avenue to communicate and affirm identity (Clark 2024b). Despite colonial policies that temporarily lost some traditional attire, First Nations people have forged new methods to dress and express cultural identity. The resilience of First Nations peoples is visible in their ongoing cultural practices, where traditional and contemporary garments highlight a strong sense of identity and a commitment to self-representation. First Nations fashion is deeply intersectional and represents vibrant expressions of pride, solidarity, identity, and cultural celebration (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. The fashion show of Iltja Ntjarra Many Hands Art Centre at Country to Couture 2023. Photograph [use courtesy of Treena Clark].

First Nations artists are also creating fashions and works that explore contemporary ways of connecting to culture and identity. Several First Nations artists create works that reinterpret traditional cloaks using distinctive materials, colours, designs, and crafts. Many First Nations artists also engage in Indigenous futurism to envision a future beyond the present, challenge colonial science fiction tropes, and advocate sovereignty. Indigenous Futurisms empower creators to define themselves and their worlds independently of colonial realities and narratives ([Allaire 2024](#); [Carlson 2024](#); [Henry 2022](#)).

Dennis Golding (Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay) curates and creates hand-painted superhero capes that celebrate First Nations identity. At times, he creates capes that convey his own story and engages students in collaborative workshops, culminating in exhibitions of their work ([Stephens 2021](#)). In *The Future is Here* exhibition (2021), Golding worked with First Nations students to design capes that reflect their cultural identity and lived experiences ([Blogg 2024](#)). These superhero capes empower the young creators, critiquing contemporary social, political, and cultural representations of First Nations people while reinforcing their connection to culture and Country ([Blogg 2024](#)). In this exhibition, a cape takes on a meaning of traditional and futuristic reinterpretation, touching on First Nations peoples' understanding and traits of identity, resilience, and sovereignty. These capes represent the future and a world marked by self-determination and autonomy.

Contemporary identity and Indigenous futurism often incorporate reimagined traditional dress, adornment, and even superhero-like capes to explore themes of Indigeneity and strength. These approaches represent a vision of a world free from colonial influence

and embody the self-determined future of First Nations peoples. First Nations artists who create contemporary and futurist pieces navigate complex colonial legacies, creating contemporary expressions that honour the past and advocate for a future grounded in cultural pride and recognition. For many First Nations artists, they use garments to explore new ways of understanding cultural practice and intersectional identities.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Art and fashion are rich and varied ways of expressing themes, allowing people to connect with culture, identity, and emotions, and they have long been a means for preserving and narrating histories. Clothing is a significant form of visual description, and using garments in art can emotionally portray the effects of colonisation and the survival of culture. This intersection of art and fashion positions clothing as a transformative medium that supports healing, cultural survival, and empowerment while promoting reconciliation and resilience within First Nations communities.

Storytelling through garments bridges past and present, blending historical pain with modern expressions of strength. Fashion within artwork is not just an aesthetic practice but also a form of activism and resistance. It challenges dominant narratives while celebrating cultural sovereignty. By transforming clothing into art, creators blend functionality with symbolism, amplifying healing, empowerment, and self-determination messages.

Clothing and adornment reconnect individuals with ancestral practices, land, and community. This cultural re-engagement fosters a deep sense of identity and continuity, essential for emotional and social well-being. By reclaiming and asserting garments, artists challenge colonial erasure and symbolise survival, pride, and resilience. Their pieces serve as a medium to narrate histories of dispossession or resistance, enabling personal and collective healing. For example, recreating cloaks or jewellery allows artists and communities to honour their ancestors while addressing the traumas of colonisation.

Art programs and fashion workshops provide safe spaces for First Nations peoples to reconnect with their culture, land, and traditions. For instance, the UNSW Biyani program supports Australian First Nations women by teaching art and textile skills that integrate cultural knowledge with personal and collective healing. Such initiatives enable participants to reclaim their identities, heal from trauma, and rebuild connections to community and Country.

Programs like Ntaria Design show how art and design education can foster entrepreneurial skills and create economic opportunities, especially for youth. These projects combine cultural pride with commercial viability, demonstrating a sustainable model for community-driven economic growth. Fashion workshops, such as those teaching cloak-making or contemporary garment design, empower participants to express their identities while acquiring valuable skills. These initiatives provide pathways to economic independence, which strengthens community resilience.

The intersection of art programs, fashion workshops, and selected artworks are transformative tools that support healing and empowerment for First Nations communities. These intersections promote cultural revitalisation, foster self-expression, and build economic and social resilience.

4.1. Recommendations

As this paper has shown, art and fashion within First Nations communities are powerful tools for well-being, cultural expression, and social change. Programs and workshops that merge fashion-making with art offer unique opportunities for creativity and healing. The intersection of art and fashion is a vehicle for cultural practice and healing. Further research on this fusion could deepen its impact on community resilience.

- Invest in art and fashion programs that provide economic opportunities for youth and nurture their social and emotional well-being, reinforcing personal and community healing. These programs could be incorporated into First Nations educational curricula to foster skills, cultural knowledge, and employment pathways for youth. Cook advocates for First Nations youth to engage in fashion practices to develop essential skills, strengthen their cultural identity, and foster a sense of belonging, all contributing to broader social and emotional well-being ([St John 2022](#)). The Ntaria study demonstrates fashion engagement in the well-being of students, primarily through transferring cultural designs on t-shirts ([St John 2022](#)). Other significant work with youth includes workshops with (Whadjuk Nyoongar) Ron Gidgup, the first Aboriginal fashion designer in WA, who assisted First Nations youth in textile and clothing design ([Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention 2024](#); [Mia 2000](#)). Indigenous Design Labs (IDL) recently partnered with the Australian Defence Apparel (ADA) and young First Nations people to create uniforms. The project designs modern uniforms for ADA's crew, with phase two offering an 8-week program where IDL youth collaborate with ADA to create a clothing range from concept to production ([Indigenous Design Labs 2024](#)).
- Increase policies that promote First Nations fashion and art and provide more funding for shows and exhibition opportunities. Cook's policy paper advocates for targeted investment to grow a dynamic and sustainable First Nations fashion sector ([Cook 2022](#)), and Arts Queensland's First Nations Fashion and Textiles Plan 2024–2026 aims to support First Nations arts and cultural practitioners and communities to realise the ambition for sustainable growth of a First Nations-led fashion and textile industry in Queensland ([Arts Queensland 2024](#)).
- Increase programs that emphasise the healing impact of fashion. For example, possum skin cloaks are used in varied settings, including hospitals, prisons, schools, and First Nations healing centres ([Couzens 2017](#)), and fashion-making connects with culture and provides income for participants ([St John 2022](#); [UNSW 2024](#)).

4.2. Program and Workshop Suggestions

- Consider programs integrating fashion and art, offering workshops led by artists who use clothing as their creative medium.
- Increase programs that create art pieces or wearable items that acknowledge and reflect relationships with family members and ancestors, whether these connections are positive or complex, to promote healing and reconciliation.
- Increase programs that encourage the inclusion of materials from Country into wearable art. Ideas include mixing paint with soil, applying natural dyes derived from plants, or embellishing garments with imagery inspired by Country.

This paper has examined how First Nations people, artists, and designers use art and fashion to express resilience and healing while challenging colonial narratives and realities. Clothing and adornment are universal experiences, and these artworks resonate with First Nations and non-Indigenous audiences by reflecting daily life, decolonisation, reimagination, and fantasy. The intersection of art and fashion serves as a vital pathway to well-being and has a potential for global recognition of First Nations fashion as an art form. Fashion and art are not simply an aesthetic expression but a deliberate, strategic choice for cultural survival and resistance, holding transformative power as a tool for decolonisation and healing. Hopefully, these recommendations will encourage the growth of art and fashion practices within First Nations healing and well-being research and initiatives.

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