

Fashion at the intersection of anthropology, ecology and innovation

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Structured Abstract

Background scientific research: The fashion industry is a key actor in extractive globalization; its contribution to the degradation of our planet and its peoples through use of fossil fuels, over-production and mass-consumption, waste, exploitation and human rights abuses in the supply chain is well documented (Fletcher and Tham 2020, Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017). Fashion requires a new, biocentric language: a vocabulary of materials, techniques, processes and forms that articulate ways in which humans may live in a “mutually enhancing relationship” with the whole earth community (Berry 1990:53, Escobar 2018): a language that speaks into being the health and wellbeing of people and planet and enables us to tread more lightly on the Earth. Another world is possible, but not without systemic change.

This research adopts the vocabulary of radical indigenism (Watson 2019), of soil to skin (Burgess 2019), of extreme natural fibres, of slow and conscious processes and of aesthetic sustainability (Harper 2017), to offer a counter narrative to the incumbency thinking that perpetuates current systems. It argues the importance of reframing indigenous technologies as innovative rather than primitive and of learning - with humility - that other knowledge systems have much to offer the future (Watson 2019, Nakashima 2010, Magni 2017, WCED 1987). There are profound lessons to be learned from traditional textile practices about how we might better collaborate with nature - including associated land stewardship, sustainable fibre and production processes, inter-human relationships, care, and the local, cultural significance of processes that have sustainably been performed for centuries - that might re-orientate us towards a future where we all may thrive.

Research issue to be addressed: Although designer-artisan collaborations are common within the existing fashion system, focus on the ability of materials to reconnect us with the whole earth community has received less attention (Watson 2019, Berry 1990). When radically indigenous materials are suggested for fashion, questions of scale-ability quickly arise, as the impulse to commercialise and grow is privileged over relational modes of knowing, being and

doing (Escobar 2018: xi). This research explores ways to collaborate with indigenous textile knowledge systems in order to re-imagine, produce, value, use, repair and ultimately discard clothing while affirming natural and restorative systems.

Methodology used: Interviews were conducted to investigate fashion design praxis that have emerged through collaboration with indigenous knowledge systems, including Daniel Olatunji's *Monad London* and Marcella Echavarria's *Noir*, as examples of innovative, non-conformist strategies that promote human, environmental, and even spiritual wellbeing. An analysis of other small labels sharing similar values – such as *Oma Space*, *Rika Shimimitsu*, *Tabrik* and *Adiv* was drawn from secondary sources. In addition, the research draws upon my own recent fieldwork in Uganda, where local, cultural textile practice; associated land use; agro-forestry strategies; and ethnobotany – as well as the threat to this mutually enhancing dynamic from the increasing destruction of ancient rainforests; the impact of imported mass-produced goods; and the exodus of youth from rural areas - were revealed through interviews with artisans, community groups and local environmentalists.

It also is informed by my own practice, as a method of sense-making and of externally processing my thoughts, thinking through making (Ingold 2013) in dialogue with radically indigenous materials (tree bark) and in symbiosis with distant friends and ecosystems. As such, it is part of a growing movement of “design at the intersection of anthropology, ecology, and innovation” (Watson 2019: 26).

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: This research offers an analysis of an emergent subculture of resistance to the fashion status quo that embraces extreme, natural, indigenous textiles in contemporary clothing. It demonstrates that such materials embody values and aesthetics crucial to an alternative fashion system that works in partnership with nature, rather than in opposition. It highlights the significant benefits of such interactions for a future where fashion might enable people and planet to truly thrive. In response, a series of propositional garments have been created in a radically indigenous cloth: slow, meditative utterances that speak into being a holistic and collaborative design strategy that enhances human-nature wellbeing, reconnecting us with the forest and with distant communities.

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