

**FASHION'S TRANSNATIONAL INEQUALITIES:
SOCIO-POLITICAL, ECONOMIC,
AND ENVIRONMENTAL**

(A Review of the Book of Anna-Mari Almila and Serkan Delice
(Eds.), *Fashion's Transnational Inequalities: Socio-Political,
Economic, and Environmental*, London: Routledge, 2024, 200 pp.)

Fashion's Transnational Inequalities: Socio-Political, Economic, and Environmental, edited by Anna-Mari Almila and Sekan Delice, brings together new scholarship on fashion's structural entanglements with transnational inequalities. The nine chapters of the volume analyse pressing issues such as decolonisation, labour exploitation, cultural appropriation and climate justice concerning fashion, making a much-needed and timely contribution to a growing body of critical fashion research.

For sociologists, the Weberian "Entzauberung", the exciting process through which we learn how to demystify a field's inner laws, its power dynamics, its collective narratives and common denials, is part of our discipline's epistemological framework and it is usually one of the reasons that keep many of us motivated to stick by academia. However, the inter-disciplinary field of fashion studies, which has grown out of art history, cultural studies, costume history, sociology, and anthropology in the past forty years, has struggled to move beyond the analysis of representations, an analytical focus inherited by the traditions of a mainly descriptive art and costume history. This review is not alone to claim that fashion studies as a field of knowledge are largely characterised by a denial of the material conditions that structure the fashion industry and therefore also all the fields it relates to. Scholars of fashion studies are still reluctant to acknowledge in an analytically productive way the fact that fashion is structured as a complex, globalising, commodity-based industry and that as such, its social and cultural impact cannot be grasped without an understanding of

the dynamics of the global economy. The need to come to terms with the political economy of fashion becomes particularly evident in the face of the destructive environmental and detrimental social impact of the fashion industry.

The editors of the volume under review are aware that their book contributes to closing lacunae in the literature on fashion. They write in the introduction that "areas remain, such as different forms of aesthetic and material inequality, ethical problems of production, labour exploitation, and environmental issues, to which fashion studies could pay more, or different kind of, attention. In this volume, we speak of some of them, while also seeking to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debates about fashion's nature as a deeply interconnected transnational, transregional, and global phenomenon" (p. 2). Almila and Delice propose to theorise the fashion industry with recourse to Sklair's concept of a transnational capitalist class as the distinctive institutional form of political and economic transnational practices in the global economy and to discuss fashion's spatial, economic and geopolitical organisation from a world-systems perspective. The contributions collected in the volume *Fashion's Transnational Inequalities* were written in 2023, at the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic and about three years after the global uproar of the Black Lives Matter movement. In this review, I will focus on the three chapters that I have already integrated into the syllabus for two of my courses (in the short time after receiving the inspection copy for this review!) as they address topics that my undergraduate fashion design students are most concerned with.

The volume's opening chapter "Ethno-racial Capitalism in Contemporary Fashion: Forced Labour and the Uyghur Crisis" by Flavia Loscialpo critically analyses the strategic role of China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in fashion's global supply chains and explores the coercive labour practices subjected to Uyghurs, focusing on aspects such as cultural assimilation, gender-based violence, and the systematic dehumanisation of ethnic minority workers. Loscialpo's rigorous examination of the exploitation and human rights violations of the Uyghur workers demonstrates that the fashion industry systematically relies on the existence of different classes of racialised, gendered labour and on wider social structures of oppression within the garment industry that Mezzadri has termed the "global garment sweatshop"¹. Loscialpo reminds her readers that the complex case of XUAR "not only invites us to dissect more thoroughly the social impact of the global fashion industry and current labour exploitation based on race/ethnicity, gender, and class; it also demonstrates that a genuinely revolutionary politics of sustainability needs to work on the convergence of social, racial, and environmental justice, and denounce the erosion of several cultures and traditions within the capitalist world order" (p. 41).

In the past decade, we have also been witnessing the quest for the decolonisation of Eurocentric knowledge in institutions such as museums and universities, and scholars and educators are faced with the challenge to update, deepen and broaden their course syllabi and expand their research libraries. Among the most thought-provoking chapters is Rimi Khan's "The Sociality of Decolonisation: Making Fashion, Heritage and Cultural Sustainability in Vietnam". In her contribution, Khan explores the concept of cultural sustainability in the context of fashion, highlighting the interdependencies between past, present and future in cross-cultural contexts and emphasising culture as dynamic and adaptive, thus making space for opportunities for Indigenous participation in fashion. The paper focuses on the Vietnamese luxury fashion label "Kilomet109" and examines its collaborations with indigenous artisans. Khan theorises the "sociality of decolonisation" as unfolding in forms of adaptive, inter-cultural interdependence and exchanges between indigenous and non-indigenous artisans and en-

trepreneurs. These collaborations, Khan writes, "reflect a lived hybridity and involve practical negotiations between the local, global, past, present, and future, which are a necessary basis for any effective decolonisation and sustainability work" (p. 70).

Serkan Delice's paper "Where is living labour in fashion and cultural appropriation debates?" draws on one of the buzzwords that circulate widely in social media, and that in my experience as a faculty member in an art university has contributed to a hitherto unprecedented sensibilisation of fashion design students to how the fashion industry in the Global North interacts with the Global South. Delice argues that the category of cultural appropriation is used by people and communities worldwide to respond to power hierarchies influenced by contemporary capital accumulation. He laments that most of the social media advocacy and academic discussions on cultural appropriation fail "to address the fundamental question of whose living labour produces and reproduces that culture" (p. 49). After an insightful discussion of three exemplary cases of cultural appropriation complaints, Delice concludes that in the context of fashion, cultural appropriation often involves capital accumulation by dispossession, and the depriving of original producers of their agency and their means of production.

Efrén Sandoval's chapter "From *Paca* to Vintage Clothing: Inequality and Border among Resellers in Monterrey, Mexico" is built on a solid empirical base of ethnographic research and looks at the phenomenon of vintage fashion sellers in Monterrey. His chapter gives fascinating insights into the social stratification of vintage fashion salespeople and the symbolic mechanisms and power struggles that structure this social world.

Anna-Mari Almila's concluding chapter "Pandemic fashions or the historical inequality of it all" explores the relationship between diseases, epidemics, and pandemics and their impact on fashion history, emphasising the unequal effects of the Eurasian-African Black Death of the 14th century, the Cocoliztli in Central America of the 16th century, the global Spanish Flu pandemic of the early 20th century and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the volume does not feature any illustrations, which in the case of Almila's chapter in particular, would have been

greatly appreciated by this reviewer. Almila insists that fashion scholars “must increasingly look behind the glamour and the beauty, recognising all sorts of fundamental problems in how fashion systems operate” (p. 174). Her paper indeed offers an insightful and centuries-spanning historical analysis of fashion through the prism of crisis, a key theme that runs as a red thread throughout this noteworthy volume.

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Notes

- 1 Mezzadri, A. 2017. *The Sweatshop Regime: Labouring Bodies, Exploitation, and Garments Made in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.