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INTRODUCTION

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B(l)ending research methods: Reimagining a theoretical turn in fashion scholarship

ABSTRACT

Aiming to disrupt the way fashion studies is developed – often from a Eurocentric approach and within rigid disciplinary, methodological and social boundaries – this Special Issue invites different scholars to present their own way of studying and exploring fashion, but also to make their familiar methods strange, re-assessing what fashion means and what it means to do fashion research in the first place. Promoting an interdisciplinary dialogue, the articles in this Special Issue show how fashion studies would benefit from ‘bending’ existing methodological boundaries and blending cross-disciplinary methodologies, conceptual orientations, objects, ideas, forms, subjects and questions in their epistemological approach. We hope that the curation, organization and general assemblage of the texts give rise to the intellectual alchemy of unpredictable encounters: conversations, clashes and

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methodologies of fashion studies
epistemology
Eurocentrism
discipline-centrism
wardrobe studies
patchwork
ethnography
psychoanalysis
crip methodology

contradictions. From article to article, readers will encounter different ways of doing research on and through fashion and be inspired to imagine more divergent epistemologies of fashion.

The ways of studying fashion are just as varied as its forms, meanings, effects and affects (e.g. Almila and Inglis 2017; Crepax 2018; Jenss 2016; Riello 2011; Robinson 2021; Sikarskie 2020; van Tienhoven and Smelik 2021). Although fashion studies consist of an interdisciplinary and eclectic field, genuine cross-disciplinary dialogues in researching fashion remain rare. While fashion scholars often cull from a variety of theoretical domains, inspirations and praxes, the disciplinary biases and resistances against 'other' perspectives often stand strong. Angela Jansen (2020) has noted, for instance, that the histories and theorizations of fashion are predicated on a Eurocentric perspective and intertwined with the western understanding of modernity: they are exported to the rest of the world via globalization and imperialism (Jansen 2020: 816). We argue that such theoretical and epistemological biases are also perpetuated through the methodologies of fashion studies (Medrado 2023).

This Special Issue aims to disrupt discipline-centred methodological borders by reimagining a field where scholars are sensitive to the merits of divergent ways of producing fashion knowledge and exercising critical awareness of their own methodological limits and social boundaries (Kawamura 2020). New openings and intellectual exchanges can emerge from connecting with the porosity of such restraints. The objective is thus to make permeable, transparent or reflective, the conceptual scaffolding that separates one article from the next. Such a shift in methodological thinking has significant theoretical implications and allow novel, inductive approaches to enrich the interplay between theory and method in fashion scholarship, serving the ultimate goal of this Special Issue.

Through the humbling process of confronting, rethinking and 'b(l)ending' their own ways of studying fashion, scholars are here given a chance to make their familiar methods strange, re-assessing what fashion means and what it means to do fashion research in the first place. Such a stance renders the epistemological ground rife with the urge to discover fresh research questions, subjects, objects, approaches and relationships. We hope that the curation, organization and general assemblage of the texts give rise to the intellectual alchemy of unpredictable encounters: conversations, clashes and contradictions. Fertile apertures might arise, then, not in settling for one methodology instead of another, but in hybridization, constant movement – and collaboration. One of the most consequential benefits of presenting the work as a collection stems precisely from the inadvertent openings that emerge from the order in which the articles appear or happen to be read.

We invited scholars with a multiplicity of methodological backgrounds, conceptual orientations and objects of analysis, to push lines of authority, agency and discipline, which are often hardened by western-centric ways of thinking and doing, along with a tendency to gravitate towards the safe vicinity of the canonical. We encouraged contributions that proposed alternative modes of knowledge production or that juxtaposed research methods in innovative ways. Each author explored the great versatility that multi-method fashion research offers, posing questions such as: what are the epistemological biases of respective fashion research methodologies? What are the limits of

interviews? What are the potentials of wardrobe study in theorizing sustainable fashion practices and consumer agency? Do existing fashion methodologies neglect, marginalize or even silence certain social groups? How can archival studies, ethnography and semiotic analysis complement one another in studying fashion advertisements and marketplaces? Why is psychoanalysis relevant in explicating one's affective encounters with fashion? How might trans-ness be mobilized into a critical lens for re-thinking the transgressive potentiality of the sartorial?

The editing team embodies the methodological diversity of fashion scholarship that it aims to uncover in that it is comprised of a sociologist specialized in East Asia, a cultural historian with a focus on textile labour and cosmopolitanism, and a Lacanian gender theorist with a penchant for self-ethnography. The project's very genesis, then, inhabited a place of impossibilities and untranslatabilities we deemed fecund. The fact that we all came to our endeavour with such different academic histories, theoretical toolkits and understandings of fashion research made space for propositions of new directions and intersections that we could not pre-emptively have agreed on or accounted for.

As we try to shape the contributors' texts into a body of sorts in the editing process it becomes clear that these interventions are cohesive in their incohesiveness. The contributions amount to a chimeric body with too many orifices, desires and sensibilities for them to fit into one single frame. As such, we cannot speak of a snapshot of a fashion scholarship turn aimed at a specific direction or destination, but one animated by the sheer queerness of paradoxes, simultaneities and shape-shifting variance. The truth is that to consider such varieties of a fashion *parti pris* is to be faced with the disarming realization that even the most successful outcome of a methodology will always be partial. Which is why methodologies begin again anew, at every iteration, at once excelling and failing, forever ongoing. If we are really interested in new ways of knowing (through) fashion, we must then be committed to inhabiting, and even provoking, the fissures in the certainties that our methodologies presuppose – and embracing their alterity. For this to happen, researchers must dare to come into proximity with ways of thinking that do not stoke academic egos but challenge them, rendering them vulnerable to what the other may know.

This Special Issue comprises in total nine full-length research articles and a short Open Space commentary. In 'Fashioning DIY digital archives: Unsettling academic research to centre garment workers' voices', Mary Hanlon, Martina Karels and Niamh Moore respond to the recent calls for decentring Eurocentric frameworks across fashion studies (Cheang et al. 2022; Jansen 2020) and propose an interventional idea of creating open access digital archives, pushing fashion scholars to rethink the logic of academic knowledge production and its taken-for-granted practices of data collection, analysis and management. These include: primarily serving the (western) academic communities; publishing through esteemed, profit-making university and commercial presses; prioritizing the 'insiders' who have tenure positions, speaking (near-) native English, being affiliated with prestigious institutions in the Global North, being well-versed in academic jargon and having access to published work through university libraries; or collecting and exploiting data from powerless research participants. While fashion studies is inherently interdisciplinary and methodologically hybrid, the 'DIY academic archiving', as Hanlon, Karels and Moore argue, has a significant potential for further

remaking fashion research: it empowers the garment workers to tell their own stories, and how they are used, as a critical step in reimagining fashion scholarship. As the authors explain, '[DIY Academic Archiving] is not merely the use of technology to deposit or hold data and materials; instead we view it as critical practice that further functions as a "technology of knowing" (Stokes 2021) and fertile meeting points of collaboration' (190 in this issue).

Similarly, in 'Against abstract universalisms in fashion theory: For a dialogical process of interpretation and translation', Christine Delhaye acknowledges the Eurocentric character of fashion (studies) as a concept and as an academic discipline over the past four decades. Its growing entanglement with globalization studies and post/decolonial theories accelerated an 'epistemological turn', fostering new empirical research that challenges the disciplinary theoretical framework of fashion studies. For instance, fashion studies is often conceptually confined by 'modern' western fashion as its research object, while side-lining, even erasing, other 'traditional' sartorial systems. To redress the Eurocentric, exclusionary character of fashion theory, the concept of fashion has been redefined with an all-inclusive term, 'universalism', to encompass all sartorial practices stretched across time and space. However, Delhaye argues that it is insufficient to merely redefine fashion as a universalism as it is only another way of re-inscribing fashion scholarship in the hegemonic western 'modern/colonial' way of knowledge production; its epistemological and methodological approaches need to be further 'decolonized'. The author proposes a hermeneutic-dialogical process of interpretation and translation as an epistemological and ethical tool: through fashion scholars' more in-depth understanding of the characteristics of 'other' non-western ways of wearing, making, feeling, thinking and living through clothes, and to 'acknowledge the need for "localizing" our conceptual tools'.

In 'Skimming fashion, or how to read skin-deep', Misha Kavka begins to map several theoretical and methodological turns of 'reading fashion' from the perspective of cultural studies: the semiological turn (1950s–70s), the materialist turn (1980s), the queer turn (1990s) and the affective turn (2000s). This is followed by her provocatively reading fashion 'skin-deep', or 'skimming' fashion – as *both* theory and method.

By extending the history of semiotic spectacle into a feminist phenomenology sensitive to gender, race and sexuality [...] [the author] suggests a way to see fashion as not being on but *of* the body [but] as an unfolding of the body into kaleidoscopic surface(s) [...] to grasp the process by which *fashion turns the body into skin* and skin thereby operates as a medium.

(30 in this issue, emphasis added)

Taking the media screen as a kind of membrane through which fashion consumers see and feel the alluring effects of skimming, Kavka contends that the skin of fashion is not just a fabric to drape, mould or display the body; rather, it stretches across the entire *mise en scène* and production practices of the photo op. The effect/affect of mediated skin coalesces fashion subjects and objects, creating gradients of accessorized bodies *and* embodied accessories. Using illustrative cases of the Kardashian family (and the 'variability of their skin aesthetics') as well as Kanye West and Demna Gvasalia at the 2019 and 2021 Met Gala, Kavka showcases how the dresses, sequins, feathers, hair products, body make-up and white as well as black skins create a

kaleidoscopic surface on which couture, celebrity and (self) commodification coalesce into fashion.

Moving from these discussions of epistemological and methodological turns, the following three articles offer close analyses of the traits and complementarity of specific existing (or new) methodological approaches. Sophie Wood's 'Reflections on blending garment analysis with wardrobe interviews' zooms in on the respective methodological limits of object analysis, garment analysis, wardrobe audit and interviews (e.g. without giving its wearer a voice; without giving the garments a voice as non-human actant), highlighting the potential merits of adopting wardrobe studies. She also explains that not all fashion scholars completely follow Klepp and Bjerk's (2014) comprehensive approach, whereas some of them – including herself – advance new ways of applying wardrobe studies methods and how it can be blended with other research methods (in her case, garment analysis) and epistemological approaches, such as affect theory (Almila and Zeilig 2021; Petersson McIntyre 2021), memory studies, thing theory and actor-network theory (ANT) (Tse and von Pezold 2023). Discussing these cases and engaging them with the broader questions of epistemology in fashion studies offer 'alternative modes of knowledge creation, transcending the dominance of language as the primary medium, and places emphasis on other senses as avenues of understanding' (57 in this issue). As Wood explains,

By incorporating techniques commonly employed in dress history, the inclusion of garment analysis becomes an extension of the wardrobe interview method [...] the object of study is not merely a passive presence but an active subject of engagement between both the participant and the researcher [...] we listen to the wearer's voice, enabling us to analyse their interaction with the garment.

(57 in this issue)

Based on an ethnographic study conducted between 2019 and 2021 on the trade and retailing of Chinese-made clothing and textiles in Mozambique, Johanna von Pezold's article 'Patching sites, patching data: Patchwork ethnography on fashion in and beyond pandemic times' addresses the benefits, but also the limitations, of applying 'patchwork ethnography' to fashion. Patchwork ethnography presents itself as a contemporary alternative to traditional ethnography, responding to the need to decolonize the field of fashion studies. Günel (2020) first forged the concept of patchwork ethnography as 'ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data', paying full attention to 'how changing living and working conditions profoundly and irrevocably alter knowledge production'. Developed at the time of the coronavirus pandemic and conceived for the post-pandemic future, according to Günel, this renewed ethnographic approach offers a new way of considering how the lives of researchers, in all their complexity, shape knowledge production. Von Pezold further explains how the pandemic forced her to rethink her research and method, and to use patchwork ethnography to turn constraints into opportunities for new insights, combining several short fieldworks stays with analysis of digital collections.

In 'Multi-sensory methods: Towards a crip methodology in fashion studies', Ben Barry, Philippa Nesbitt and Megan Strickfaden address one of the most consistent failures of fashion studies: namely, its unwillingness to

consider its praxes, logics, objects and questions outside of an ableist gaze. The article describes a multi-dimensional four-year project where fifty collaborators with diverse sexualities, races, social classes and disabilities participated in wardrobe studies and shared their everyday experiences with their clothing, engaged in fashion-hacking with design students and produced an exhibition to communicate their stories about masculinity, disability and fashion. The authors explain the ‘crip methodology’ underpinning the project, connecting it to multi-sensory methods to develop a framework for thinking, making and embodying fashion that is not just aware of disability but learns from and leans on it. Disabilities become a disarming lens, a denaturalizing attitude, a paradigm-shifting mode of making and thinking – or thinking through making – fashion. Following the work of Chen (2014) and Johnson and McRuer (2014), the article explains a fashion ethos that refuses the usual, and always already colonial, routes of academic knowledge, rooted in social networking, conference chatter and naturalized investments in identification and typology, instead favouring – and honouring – the experience of disability with all that it can debunk, complicate, denounce, create and queer. Barry, Nesbitt and Strickfaden’s approach revolves around the accounts of what it feels like to actually wear, desire, make and re-make clothes in accordance to disabled subjects’ needs and pleasures, exposing ableist fashion as a violent redundancy.

Positioning fashion within *cultural analysis* (which is distinct from cultural studies), drawing in particular on the work of cultural theorist Mieke Bal (1999), Marie-Aude Baronian developed her article ‘Fashion as a cultural analysis object’ around three case studies: a short film by Alexander van Slobbe, a Dutch fashion designer (2010); a 1919 wardrobe suitcase, and the pandemic mask (2020). Characterized by its intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, close analysis and ‘temporality of presence’, cultural analysis, according to Bal, ‘grasps the various objects taken from the cultural world [...] in terms of their existence in culture’ (1999: 6). By giving the object a primary role, Baronian shows, following Riello’s (2011) material approach to fashion, that objects can be considered as a prism to understand what written or visual sources cannot interpret or analyse. Using clothes-analysis, Baronian reads fashion (or the ‘textile-object’) as singular material objects that produce and generate theoretical ideas (116 in this issue). Furthermore, the article argues the object as able to capture a plurality of meanings and dimensions, reflecting the plurality of fashion itself. Baronian advocates for a creative critical fashion research that accepts the meandering of doing research and not always being able to predict or totalize our objects of research.

In ‘The body as archive: A study of the Calvin Klein One/Be “Altered States” perfume campaign (1995) from the Somatheque model’, Francisco-José García-Ramos, Daniel de las Heras Romano and Álvaro Navarro Gaviño propose a conceptual framework via Paul B. Preciado where the body itself is a hybrid, fraught and ever-moving terrain of contradicting elements traversed by ideology, discourse, multi-media and porno-pharmacology. In many ways, the article embodies the Special Issue in its most basic ethos in that it presents the body of fashion as always already rife with the possibility of undoing itself: its dichotomies and binaries. Let us declare once and for all that material and immaterial elements are not as disparate as that, if at all.

Fashion scholarship should be so unstable, so unseizable, because that is the condition of fashion’s very subjects and bodies. García-Ramos, de las Heras and Navarro Gaviño tap into Preciado and Foucault to think the sartorial as

a technique that operates directly into, and *as*, the presumed morphology of the body and its possibility of action. Fashion becomes a series of regulating fictions and verification devices that, like gender, is made up of iterations bound to break down. Fashion's body is never just one thing, even at the individual level, but crisscrossed by praxes of power at even the biological level – perfume being a key article in this normativising system that is inevitably hanging by a thread, or a note.

As we mentioned earlier, it is crucial to consider the various methodological artefacts presented in the Special Issue in the way one text may embroider itself into the next. Not unlike the feelings produced by a cinematic scene that continues to haunt us, and thus shape our experience, long after that scene is gone, and another one has taken its place. As such, it must be with the memory of the body as a nomadic archive, laid out by García-Ramos, de las Heras and Navarro Gaviño, that we read further into how fashion gestates the possibility for naturalizing and de-naturalizing difference – and so much more.

By deliberately choosing a poetic self-narrative of a T-girl's experience of utilizing fashion for the articulation of gender difference, Diego Semerene challenges the very nature of academic writing in 'The trans gender subject of fashion'. Semerene's article shows how the methodology they use – an auto-theoretical psychoanalytic inquiry – can contribute to a new way of approaching both fashion and transgender studies. Focusing on an under-theorized trans-feminine subject, the author captures the T-girl in relation to her lovers (Semerene analyses the sartorial language found in messages regarding/requesting clothing sent by cisgender men) and the objects of desire between them: wigs, bras, panties, rubber stockings, leather skirts, pink shoes and sheer thongs. The T-girl chooses and wears clothes that enable her to negotiate her desire with the other, or for the other. It just so happens that this other, too, has deep investments in feminine garb, which may be at odds with the T-girl's fantasy. Clothes, understood both as materiality and language, are thus seen as canvas or signifiers, vector of the T-girl's trans-ness and, at times, also the transness of her paradoxically cisgender lovers.

Whereas the media or fashion design form an apparatus of verification of hegemonic narratives in García-Ramos, de las Heras and Navarro Gaviño's piece, these narratives are embodied, in Semerene's work, by the sexual other who oscillates between trans and cis thanks to fashion's awesome powers of re-signification. Here, fashion specifically brings the T-girl and her lovers together through difference and then drives them apart through sameness – or semblance.

In Vésma Kontere McQuillan's article fashion is a question of language, as architectural literacy allows her to investigate increasingly digital fashion spaces through linguistic description. 'Rethinking fashion review with architectural fashion analysis method' employs architectural principles to theorize the fashion show not for its garments but the designed space in which they are presented. The hypothesis, as McQuillan claims, 'posits that the space is inherently imbued with a narrative capacity through prior interactions between the architect and fashion designer, allowing it to communicate its distinct message' (162 in this issue).

A crucial dimension of McQuillan's intervention is the difference in shaping fashion versus architectural narratives. If the external discourse of fashion, or its verbal component, is produced by journalists and commentators, architectural discourse is much more internal, as architects themselves

are often the authors of commentary on their praxes, logics and artefacts. Another important layer of McQuillan's self-reflective argument is woven around the concept of 'metaspace', a missing dimension in trying to bridge fashion and architectural discourses described as 'the imagined space, enabled by digitalization and enhanced via interactions on social media' (167 in this issue). McQuillan's hypothesis is that fashion's digital realm can be better understood through the specificity, and nuances, of architectural writing.

As the reader will notice, the diversity of scholarship is made evident in the way authors mobilize a language that can be traced back to either the social sciences or the humanities, but also in the very interpretation of the Special Issue's reason for being. Some scholars chose a vividly pedagogical approach, where the question of methodology was explicated as if outside of the epistemological labour that the article set out to do. Here, the conceptual and technical processes driving the work were consciously highlighted in terms of data, findings and a rendering transparent of the mechanisms of analysis. Other scholars outsourced the pedagogical dimension to the act of writing itself, enacting the methodological attitude before the reader's eyes. Here the methodological is in the very staging, or performance, of the writing. We hope that the frictions these strange encounters produce can inaugurate new languages for fashion and new modes of listening, more radical methods and more inhabitable worlds.

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