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Photography by Jake Axler.
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The Creative Co-Op for
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Viv Eades-Miller & Tim Arscott
at Central Saint Martins library.

Canon

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Conversation (2025)

Elizabeth Kutesko: I think of the canon as a kind of dirty word. I often wonder if we all know what it is that we're alluding to. It suggests the bastion of white, Anglo-Eurocentric male privilege. Yet we talk about the canon so casually. Is the canon the same for you as it is for me? Surely not. To me it refers to the foundational texts that I studied when I was on my BA and MA at the Courtauld.

Dal Chodha: I'm really interested in this idea of the canon as something that's fixed in time, not changed or moved. But also something we should all know. Let's say you are studying cinema, or you want to be a film director, it is the idea that you must have seen all of Hitchcock's films and all of Fellini's. If you are engaging in fashion studies, do you have to have knowledge of these texts?

Caroline Stevenson: I didn't study fashion so for me to be able to teach it, I needed to have a grasp on these particular texts to understand the ones that hit up against them.

Elizabeth: I'm recalling Joanne Eicher's definition of dress as being 'all body modifications and/or supplements'... we use this categorisation very assertively within our field, as though its implications are immediately apparent to everyone outside of it. I find how Caroline Evans thinks with, and through theory, inspirational too. The canon being attached to a period in time is important. There is something here in the idea of knowledge as something that we go back to, and pull into our time. That suggests the canon in fact moves in time, coming in and out of fashion.

Dal: There are many newer theories that we've not put into this list because as an image, it would not articulate the work being done to try and diversify and expand upon the notion of a canon of knowledge. If you went to school in the UK at a certain period in time for example, and you did English or Art A-Level you'd share the references - the poets, the writers, the painters - with most of the people across the country. I guess what I am interested in is exploring who stays on those lists... and why. Adding someone to a reading list is a big deal - we are committing people to a kind of canon constantly.

Caroline: There have been a lot of theories that have influenced the theory of fashion, but I wouldn't place them into the canon of fashion theory, but like Walter Benjamin or Jean Baudrillard aren't on this list.

Dal: Other thinkers spring from all these texts; so, there is a vast network here even if the book spines suggest a singular author is in charge. What do you think about Liz's point about the canon - particularly in 2025 - as something representative of an Anglo-Eurocentric bastion of white privilege?

Caroline: Understandably, it is a controversial term and really, we don't want to talk about canons. We want to talk about exploding canons or rewriting them. Perhaps not even starting with one.

Elizabeth: On the MA Re-imagining Fashion Histories module at CSM, we said that we were going to explode the canon by introducing underrepresented designers, practitioners and thinkers whom we would then assemble into a new canon of unheard voices. And then my colleague Christin Yu made the pertinent point that

this individualistic approach of centring the ego was simply repeating the anthropocentric, modernist idea of singular characters driving the historical action. So instead, we made the course about polyphonic voices, creating a plurality to the protagonist, and thinking about relations and interactions over time and space. It felt more communal.

Caroline: I think it would be a mistake to take all of these books and just wipe them out of circulation but mapping them or thinking about them as parts of a greater network is a better way to approach them. I think it's the labour of reading something in a linear way which suggests that you build your knowledge as you go through line by line, that feels slightly outdated to me. I think it's more interesting to imagine what, say, *The Fashioned Body* could link to and how it can sit within a constellation of references?

Dal: What are the challenges facing Fashion Studies at the moment when it comes to these foundational ideas and texts?

Caroline: Because the field is quite small it can be very self-referential. I think it is moving in different directions now and including more voices and more diverse kinds of writing, but I think it still needs to pay more attention to the practice of making fashion.

Dal: There's also this idea of where history and theory collide and also where they don't happily meet. Is that something that comes up a lot? Do you have to know the history in order to build the theory?

Caroline: I don't think so, no, because the thing with fashion studies is that a lot of people came to writing about fashion from other disciplines. That's the genesis of it - sociologists writing about fashion, anthropologists writing about fashion. All of a sudden, those texts started to come together to create this field. It is not like art theory, which came out of art.

Elizabeth: This list would feel quite contemporary to some historians of fashion. Fashion History emerged from Art History, sometimes with a reticence towards using theory amongst some of the more traditional scholars, whereas Fashion Studies is building something more interdisciplinary, that moves across fields and uses theory to interrogate preconceived ideas. I think we have arrived at an exciting point in time.

Caroline: Something that our students don't understand is that we don't teach fashion as a chronology, because that just seems very limiting. We teach it thematically and look at how fashion history is made relevant in the present, how we understand history through our own times.

Dal: The reason this poster has happened is because we're all engaged - or invested - in theory, rather than just history. I love misinterpretation too. The idea that somebody could wax lyrical about white shirts found in a photograph from 1890 and be able to take me somewhere through that even though it is all subjective. Fashion theory is not about a scientific truth.

Caroline: It is about demystifying. It's about asking why. It explains why something is the way it is.

Elizabeth: Theory is the scaffolding you hang your ideas on.