

Chapter 15: **Re-imagining Fashion Histories: Enacting Decolonial**

Commitments in Institutional Spaces

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Abstract

This chapter explores how decolonial commitments are enacted and contested in institutional spaces, and the possibilities and tensions this can generate. It examines as a case study the 'Re-imagining Fashion Histories: Tracing Parallel Cosmologies' module co-taught at Central Saint Martins, London on the MA Fashion Communication course in 2024/25. This module foregrounded the otherwise in fashion historiography to animate and interrogate 'imagining' as a practice that constitutes and reinforces coloniality but simultaneously forges decolonial potentialities. 'Imagining' acts to define the suppositions, assumptions and representations that have shaped the canon of fashion history, but simultaneously to re-imagine alternative fashion futures beyond an Anglo-Eurocentric and anthropocentric bias. We employ time as a theoretical entry point into discussions concerning power and coloniality. Our contention is that to *re*-imagine is not to go backwards, but to radically undo, unravel and delink from the worlds and beings forged through colonial imaginings, and actively build alternative futurities and otherwise cosmologies from decolonial voices and methods. By tracing the resistant fashion practices and empathetic pedagogies that shaped our decolonial praxis in action, as well as the challenges we encountered in the classroom, we situate our re-

imagining curricula within a broader reflection of ethical responsibility, global crises, positionality and institutional power.

Keywords: Decolonial Praxis, Otherwise Fashion Histories, Time, Alternative Futures, Empathetic Pedagogies, Ethical Responsibility.

Introduction: Imagining and Re-imagining

The verb 'imagine' denotes the process of forming a mental image of oneself or a people or place. It is supposition, assumption, representation. For Edward Said, the imaginary was constitutive of reality as he theorised the Orient as 'almost a European invention', forged through the slippages of imaginative renderings from European culture turned to ontological and epistemological distinction, which reinforced ideological beliefs about the Other (2003 [1978], pp. 1–2). Fashion history is grounded in a similar type of essentialised imagining: one of the earliest texts in its historiography, Cesare Vecellio's *Habiti Antichi, et moderni di tutto il mondo* (1590 and 1598) has an immense global coverage. Vivid descriptions and illustrative woodcuts of dress and bodily adornment in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, prepared for the vicarious armchair traveller, employ stereotypical caricatures (see for example, Fig. 15.1, of an Armenian aristocrat) that are amplified by fabric, gesture and pose. Produced by Venetian painter and engraver Cesare Vecellio (1521–1601) and organised chronologically from ancient Rome to Peru, the text emerged from a broader European curiosity with what lay beyond its borders and increasing mercantile trade with Asia and North Africa. This historical context is crucial in identifying the exoticism and Othering that underpinned Vecellio's imaginings through fashion. Subsequent fashion histories have imagined the world in

comparable ways (Veblen, 1899; Simmel, 1903): as a universalising, chronological narrative of progress placing Western Europe and North America at its core.

[insert figure here]

Fig.15.1 Cesare Vecellio, 'Armenian aristocrat', page from *De gli habiti antichi et moderni di diversi parti del mondo*, libri due, 1590, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,

Yet there are seeds of potentiality in these processes of forming images. Particularly if such imaginings are foundations for other ways of thinking and being. Whilst 'imagining' must be interrogated as practices that constitute and reinforce coloniality, it simultaneously forges decolonial possibilities. Fashion has been a tool for essentialising and Othering, but it is also a space and practice for fable, fiction and worldmaking, which contains agency and empowerment. In the ruptures between and beyond the fixed spatial and temporal measures defined by coloniality/modernity, there are spacetimes that are brimming with the possibilities of becoming. 'Imagining' inspired 'Re-Imagining Fashion Histories: Tracing Parallel Cosmologies', a cross-pathway MA Fashion Communication (MAFC) module co-taught at Central Saint Martins (CSM) by Elizabeth Kutesko and Christin Yu, which mobilised resistant fashion practices and enacted decolonial values through the otherwise. Scholars Laura A. Meek and Julia Alejandra Morales Fontanilla describe otherwise as 'a method, an analytics, a concept, and an ethico-onto-political commitment' (Meek and Fontanilla, 2022, p. 275) drawn from feminist theory. Decolonial scholars employ this term as pluriversal thinking (see Abdulla, 2025;

Tachine and Nicolazzo, 2022; Cheang et. al, 2023). ‘Otherwise’ and ‘pluriversality’ are concepts of other and multiple co-existing worlds, which our use of ‘parallel cosmologies’ highlights. The cosmos denotes the universe, with cosmologies actioned by decolonial thinking through pluralities: pluriversalities. To *re-imagine* is not to go backwards, but to radically undo, unravel and delink from worlds and beings forged through colonial imaginings; the process requires alternative futurities and otherwise co-existing cosmologies drawn from decolonial voices and methods.

The module completed its third iteration in 2024/25, with the past two years co-convened by us. In this chapter, we trace the praxis of building and convening the course, using this module as a case study to reflect on ethical responsibility, global crises, positionality and institutional power. We explore how decolonial commitments are upheld and contested in institutional spaces, and the possibilities and tensions this can generate. Our research questions ask: what does committing to enacting decolonial values mean to us pedagogically? How have collaboration and empathy been employed in teaching, learning, and writing? What are the possibilities, difficulties, and actualities of decolonial practices within institutional spaces? What were some of the transformational aspects? How do we imagine its future iterations? Michalinos Zembylas’ critical pedagogy of empathy (2018) recognises that feelings, thoughts and situations experienced by others are crucial to invoke ‘action-orientated empathy and solidarity relationships’, enabling us to test decolonial values in the educational institution without succumbing to ‘naïve multiculturalism or liberal cosmopolitanism’ (p. 415). This framework enriches our own reflections in the experiences of conflict that we encountered with the January to March 2025 cohort as racialised identities intersected with national histories and cultural differences, pointing towards the polarising tensions of contemporary geopolitics as they met with

decolonial praxis. We argue that pedagogy is a crucial site for testing decolonial values. By cultivating decolonial empathy through collective working, our module taught students the conditions and histories that gave rise to global inequalities, labour exploitation and environmental crises (Zembaylas, 2018). It also provided opportunities for affective solidarities for re-thinking fashion's histories and theories to forge alternative fashion systems within the curriculum design. Action-based outcomes empowered students to enact decolonial values in group presentations, by imagining otherwise worlds that troubled colonial chronology. Simultaneously, our students built affective knowledge in collaboration with their peers that, we hope, lives beyond the course.

Our own positionalities have been central to articulating and moderating classroom dynamics: Christin is a Canadian-British scholar from the Korean diaspora, and a former designer who specialises in global feminisms and decolonial theory. Elizabeth is a white British-Polish scholar, whose research examines how Latin American fashion and photography can be integrated in historical practice as a tool to understand colonialism's complex webs of global exchange and unequal power relations. In the shadow of fires burning in Los Angeles, the ongoing destruction of Palestine and the Ukraine, and Trump 2.0, we take pause to reflect upon what it meant to teach this course at this moment in time. Drawing from decolonial and postcolonial theories as methodology, we developed a reframed module which aimed to empower our students to imagine otherwise.

Literature Review: decolonial values in the neoliberal academy

CSM is an art and design college located in London, a constituent of the University of the Arts London (UAL), whose fashion alumni includes Grace Wales

Bonner, Hussein Chalayan, Stella McCartney, IB Kamara, and Simone Rocha. It sits at the crossroads of one of the busiest transport stations, Kings Cross-St Pancras, next to the luxury shopping complex Coal Drop's Yard, in a former grain warehouse in an area that has undergone gentrification, displacing original residents with the likes of Google, the Guardian and Universal Music. As institutions, universities have never been neutral spaces, since their radical agendas often lie in tension with their establishment status. The CSM BA and MA Fashion graduate degree fashion shows draw a host of celebrities, foregrounding the cult of the individual designer, whilst generating a huge amount of material waste, despite the school's commitment to sustainability (see UAL, 2002). Importantly, the programme is a lucrative part of the knowledge economy with the forthcoming 2025/26 intake of MA students required to pay £15,300 (Home) and £33,870 (International) in fees. UAL's agenda for 'Decolonising the Arts Curriculum: Perspectives in Higher Education', jointly launched in 2018 by the Arts Student Union and Teaching, Learning and Employability Exchange, contextualises the re-development of our module. This ongoing initiative seeks to 'address disparities in experience and attainment for International students and students of colour' (UAL, 2018), constituting an important platform to raise awareness and open conversations. Based on Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) attainment and exclusion from senior leadership, quantitative data has become a critical metric for the school's ongoing assessment of social justice reform. UAL's 'Anti-Racism Action Plan', published in April 2021, included objectives to recruit more BAME visiting lecturers and students, alongside decolonising the curriculum (UAL, 2021). Minoritised scholars are already outsiders in academic publishing (Settles et. al., 2021), thus meaningful diversity in academic publishing requires minoritised scholars to have access to secure, full-time roles with protected

research time (Begum and Saini, 2019). By compartmentalising anti-racism and diversity as separate or add-on concerns, everyday expressions of racism can continue to exist when such issues are treated as extraneous to the system rather than integral to it (Ahmed, 2012). Likewise, decolonising within the institution at times seems a rebrand of diversity initiatives, often divorced from wider institutional goals, which are increasingly aligned to the neoliberal treatment of time and resources for capitalist gains.

In the classroom itself, decolonial theories can impact people in different ways. On the one hand, it can empower students to imagine their own emancipation, constructing possibilities and spacetimes to exist within and beyond this heteropatriarchal Anglo-Eurocentric present world order. On the other hand, it can elicit grief and mourning that may not always feel safe or comfortable in the classroom. For others still, decolonising remains an abstract concept that is not recognisable in one's lived experience, despite theoretical insistence that we are all entangled in these relations and histories. Another reaction may be a denial or lack of accountability for one's privilege and perhaps violence, making for difficult and tense relations. With the threat of being cancelled or doxed from social or academic spaces, it is sometimes difficult to engage in dynamic and complicated discussions for fear of being misinterpreted. These varied reactions (which include many more possibilities) demonstrate that engagement in the classroom is not a uniform experience. Despite Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives in UK universities, the UAL demographic remains a majority White, able-bodied, heterosexual, secular makeup (UAL, 2025, p. 8). Sometimes the expressions of free speech can trigger the lived lives of marginalised individuals in everyday and classroom contexts. These possible encounters complicate decolonial commitments in the university classroom.

It is precisely these institutional challenges that inspired us to take an open and necessary view informed by decolonial theory, one that believes in alternative ways of being and knowing in the classroom.

The historically taught component of the MAFC programme was once largely centred around canonical pedagogies of fashion history, underpinned by key theoretical contributions, such as: Baudelaire's perspective on fashion's transient and fleeting qualities (1863); Veblen's account on conspicuous consumption (1899); Simmel on metropolitan individuality (1903); Benjamin's reflection on commodity culture (1969); and Lipovetsky's views on modern democracy (1987). The module, delivered across MA courses in Fashion Image, Fashion Journalism or Fashion Histories and Theories, provides the academic backbone to the CSM MA provision. Major themes previously addressed fashion's connection to the external stimuli and tempo of the city, and its preoccupation with the 'zeitgeist', newness and speed. The standardisation of clock time in 1884, with the implementation of 24-hour zones based on Greenwich meridian, is a prime example of how time, as an imperial tool of synchronisation, benefitted the fashion industry on a transnational scale (Ogle, 2015). Yet scant attention was given to the fact that fashion time is not neutral. Rather, as a signifier of Anglo-Eurocentric modernity, fashion's ever-accelerating rate of production, consumption and disposal has served specific technological, economic and political agendas (Nanni, 2012). Fashion history has since taken a global turn (Eicher, 1995; Niessen, et. al 2003; Riello and McNeil, 2010) and, more recently, a decolonial one (Jansen, 2020; Cheang et. al, 2021; Cheang et. al, 2022). Early conversations of revising the module turned to decolonial concepts and praxis: delinking (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.125-30) – separating from Eurocentric discourses; relationality (Vázquez, 2012) – creating alternative constellations of

connecting; and pluriversality (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) – imagining multiple co-existing worlds and realities. We also discussed other ways to build knowledge, such as employing emotions and positionality, as Sarah Cheang and Shehnaz Suterwalla (2020) encourage, while highlighting the importance of lived experience as testimony. Critically, in our commitment to ethical values and decolonial approaches (Cheang et. al, 2021; Cheang et. al, 2022) to fashion studies, we sought to employ empathy in the classroom through these alternative pedagogical methods.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, the Black Lives Matter movements and global calls to recognise and dismantle the structures of colonialism, we recognised in 2021 that it was imperative to shift these narratives beyond Anglo-Eurocentric ideas and voices. This required troubling the knowledge systems and hierarches constituted by coloniality, as well as the hegemonic temporal standards that underpin them. This is what Vilashini Cooppan names Eurochronology, 'that fateful, fatal tethering of teleological progress to centrifugal modernity' (2019, p. 396). Our revised course sought to delink from Eurocentric understandings of fashion by foregrounding overlooked and underrepresented historical narratives, using time as a tool to challenge models of coloniality/modernity. Rather than simply diversifying the curriculum or canon, we sought to interrogate history, and archives as institutional memory, whilst foregrounding alternative cosmologies and worldbuilding beyond the geographical and epistemological frontiers of the Anglo-Eurocentric world.

Barbara Adam argues, 'any new perspective on the world entails a reconceptualization of the temporal relations involved' (2004, p. 23), thus time became the structuring thread of our module. Time may be an abstract concept, but it is also omnipresent: we measure and control its passing through calendars and clocks, and it comes into sharp focus both in terms of what we teach, and how we

teach it. As academics working in the UK, we continually battle the invasive culture of speed that is cultivated within the corporate and neoliberalised environment of Higher Education (HE), which stresses employability over exploration. Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeler articulate this clearly, arguing that academics must advocate for ‘deliberation over acceleration. We need time to think, and so do our students’ (Berg and Seeler 2016, p. x). Unfortunately, a course taught over five weeks has a particular set of demands in a competing curriculum, which also coincides with the industry’s fashion weeks. Time has a pertinent relation to our subject too, since it has been crystallised in the distinct forms of Eurochronology as modernity associated with fashion. This serves political, economic, technological and imperial purposes that uphold the Anglo-European fashion calendar while disregarding the complexity of global fashion practices, which are seen as static and fixed (Fabian, 2014; Rovine, 2020). Through decolonial imaginings of temporality and fashion, we also used time to interrogate the teaching and writing of fashion history as a linear chronology, considering alternative systems and worldviews.

Methodology. Reflecting backwards: observing past iterations

The initial version of the module (2022/23) was centred on fashion history’s underrepresented protagonists within fashion’s histories. The series included the sewing machine, the parasol, Indian designers Sabyasachi Mukherjee and Rahul Mishra, Brazilian designer Zuzu Angel, the colour Shocking Pink, and queer New York photographer Alice Austin’s camera, which sought to illuminate the transnational networks of exchange and influence that shaped an industry predicated on exploiting people, resources, and the environment. Ariella Azoulay’s critique of history as an imperial discipline (2019) became the theoretical basis to think about

colonial violence at its intersection with fashion and modernity. For Azoulay, unlearning imperialism necessarily troubles the specific temporality that consigns it to the historical past, rather than revealing its ongoing presence and recurrent manifestations within the documents, the archive, the museum, the university, and the discipline of history itself.

Reflecting on this 2022/23 iteration, we conversed about how the penchant to privilege the individual actor seemed to reify modernity's idealisations of the singular agent, and we imagined our worlds constructed through collective practices drawn from the feminist, postcolonial, decolonial, diasporic, and queer scholars that came before us. Spacetime became central to our initial conversations on how Eurochronology has been shaped by a European imaginary, and violent histories of empires lie beneath its order (Cooppan, 2019). Rather than remapping these geographies and histories of colonial spacetime, we discussed what it would mean to move and think in other ways and, importantly, how we could conceptualise and enact these movements.

One of the ways that decolonial ethics seek to overcome Anglo-Eurocentric epistemologies is to privilege verbs over nouns (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 59, 76, 88; Vázquez, 2012). These acts of doing (and undoing) privilege movement and dynamism over fixed states. It therefore became imperative to think about fashion itself as a verb, rather than a noun. Through this action-oriented approach, inspired by theories of pluriversalities and the otherwise (Fanon, 2021 [1952], 2001 [1961]; Hartman, 2019), we restructured the module around methodological frameworks informed by postcolonial theory (Fanon, 2021 [1952], 2001 [1961]; Bhabha, 1994) and decolonial studies (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), to create constellations of aims, strategies and empathetic practices of resistance. The course was also an

opportunity to draw upon collective knowledge, inviting scholars whose research expanded spacetime in decolonial and pluriversal dimensions. The 2023/24 iteration of the module featured invited speakers: Serkan Delice (UAL) who introduced the life and work of Frantz Fanon, his Third World, and the transnational circuits of labour that underpin the fashion industry; Jason Cyrus (University of Warwick), who explored India's haute couture industry, troubling the Western-centric historiography of fashion history, and focused on Indian material culture and labour practices Adjoa Armah (an artist and PhD candidate at Oxford) and Christin Yu (UAL) discussed alternative temporalities—such as the loop and the spiral—and the archive as both memory and practice. Together, these frameworks were presented as radical forms of worldbuilding for alternative epistemologies, offering powerful counter-memories to nationalist and colonial histories. The final class culminated in group presentations that shared visions of decolonial fashion futures and alternative worlds. Inspired by Amy Twigger Holroyd's *Fashion Fictions* project (2020), we encouraged students to explore entanglements between sustainability initiatives and decolonial agendas, particularly as they attended to the ongoing exploitations of contemporary fashion systems.

The assignments from the 2023/24 cohort were varied, but remarkably apathetic toward the radical possibilities of otherwise fashion worlds or alternative futures, suggesting that our students were not inspired by the potential of rebuilding or were not empathetic to exploited communities. Several presentations employed AI as an uncritical tool of creative generativity. As a result, we recognised that we needed to exemplify possibilities of worldbuilding in 2024/25 and we did so through several reference points: artists of the Black Fantastic, including Nick Cave and Hew Locke; theories of techno-Orientalism (Roh, et. al 2015); the futuristic designs of

Pierre Cardin; and the storytelling practices of artists Cannupa Hanska Luger and Lap-See Lam. Importantly, while the Fashion Fictions project asked its participants 'to imagine contemporary realities in parallel worlds' (Aspinall and Twigger Holroyd, 2025, p. 28) encouraging a positive and enticing world focused on 'individual satisfaction, social justice and sustainability' (Aspinall and Twigger Holroyd, 2025, p. 28), our assignment asked groups to build speculative futures or alternative worlds without a directive towards the positive, thus resulting in varied dystopian realities. In our review of the 2023/24 cohort, we discerned the need to offer: a clear project brief that emphasised collective possibilities for enacting decolonial values; more opportunities to work collaboratively; alternative methodological frameworks; and an emphasis on building 'a critical politics and discourse of empathy' (Zembylas 2018, p. 412).

Findings and Discussion. Affective knowledge: curriculum re-design through reflective analysis

Our 2024/25 postgraduate MAFC class comprised 50 students from Ukraine, Russia, Lebanon, Brazil, Taiwan, China, India, Colombia, the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), France, Italy, Spain, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Up from 43 students the previous year, it was an international cohort, with its growth serving as a hallmark of neoliberal agendas. Alongside cultural and geographic differences, the students were also diverse in their skillsets and lived experiences, which facilitated collective possibilities (and inevitable tensions) for re-imagining fashion's histories. This classroom truly constituted a 'contact zone': 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with one another often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as

they lived out in many parts of the world today' (Pratt, 1991, p. 33). In grappling within this social space where power is continually negotiated, between lecturer and student – as well as student and student – our aim was to explore postcolonial and decolonial discourses through practical and speculative methods, by encouraging a framework of empathy and collective working which could overcome that sense of apathy. For Zembylas (2018), cultivating empathy is not a simple solution to resolve complex socio-political-economic problems, but requires us to interrogate what its diverse manifestations might tell us about the polarising world we live, as well as how to build solidarity and action-orientated outcomes. In this section, we map out the modifications we implemented to enact actionable change for the 2024/25 cohort, outlining our continued emphasis on the decolonial praxis of delinking, relationality and pluriversalities.

Delinking (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) was a critical imperative as we sought not only to diversify the scholarly voices, but also, and crucially, to expand the methods and strategies of research, such as employing collective knowledge practices (DeRocher, 2018). Our observations of apathy made us recognise that we needed to emphasise the collective nature of worldbuilding and inspirational examples of imagining otherwise. Drawing upon Saidiya Hartman (2019), whose work is theoretically and methodologically grounded in Black feminist approaches to the archive, we highlighted her affective interventions within archival narratives of transatlantic slavery through critical fabulation. For Hartman (2019), affective storytelling brings the emotional and embodied lives of unknown, marginalised, and discounted people from the past to life, in a way that does not just cultivate empathy, but interrogates the very power structures that underpin the archive. One new activity employed her methodology, asking our students to re-consider one key

historical event: the detonation of two atomic bombs by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 6 and 9 August 1945, through Ishiuchi Miyako's photographs of clothing belonging to unknown victims at the Hiroshima Memorial Museum. The haunting, albeit potentially aestheticizing images provided prompts for our students to consider the individual lives of historical subjects silenced by the narratives of nation-states at war. We asked our students to consider authorised accounts of the event by questioning: what are the basic elements of the story? What is its sequence of events? Who are the main actors? Whose points of view have been erased, forgotten, or lost, and why? Finally, we asked the students how the authorised account of the event might be jeopardised, displaced and complicated, by foregrounding alternative stories?

We then revised our project brief to encourage groups to imagine their existence *collectively* through relationality. Drawing from Ursula K. Le Guin (1986), who urges us to place gathering, collecting and sharing at the apex of human relations – as well as humans' relationship to the world they inhabit – this reframing emphasized interdependence over individualism. Simultaneously, we sought to legitimise the knowledge of lived experiences, and particularly those that have largely been excluded from the Western canon. Autoethnography was revisited as a methodology largely indebted to postcolonial and Black feminist scholars, which reacts to the increasing 'disenchantment with the dominant Cartesian paradigm of rationality' (Ettorre, 2017) by recording the narratives, stories, and memories of the underrepresented of ourselves as primary evidence for understanding social relations. Working through a series writing exercises, the discomfort and difficulty of this method were complicated by discussions of narcissism, which one student drew upon to explain the seeming irrelevance for goals of writing fashion history and

theory. But the self has always been present – particularly the researcher’s life history through the ideologies and belief systems that they have inherited – and understanding our individual experiences, as Zembylas emphasises, creates ‘realistic opportunities for affective solidarity’ with others (2018, p. 416).

[insert figure here]

Fig. 15.2 ‘Ace and Nadya near Nablus as part of *AREA A*, a multimedia project for ADISH SS19’, Photographed by Ryan O’Toole Collett with words by Sonya Carassik Ratty.

Finally, we foregrounded the imperative for pluriversalities in our revised course by illuminating ‘coexisting temporalities kept hostage by the Western idea of time and the belief that there is one single temporality’ (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 3). A crucial contribution in this direction was a session taught by textile artist, curator and researcher at King’s College London, Rim Irscheid, who explored Palestinian dressmaking and contemporary textile art and practices from Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon, focusing on material culture as alternative forms of memory-making and archival interventions in the diaspora and homeland. She highlighted the artworks of Jordan Nassar, Leila Abdelrazaq, and the work of Israeli-Palestinian fashion label, ADISH (Fig. 15.2)¹, amongst others. While universities have mandated curriculum calls to decolonise the curriculum and institution, the naming and discussion of Palestine has become a dangerous ground, fraught with censorship and erasure. Since October 2023, institutions, including UAL, have

¹ This image was created by Ryan O’Toole Collett (with words by Sonya Carassik Ratty) and permitted to use after a lengthy discussion with O’Toole Collett about the complicated power dynamics of working with ADISH and reconsidering the images under the unfolding violence in Palestine.

released statements about balancing free speech with campus safety (see UAL, 2024); however, evidence (Badaan and Mogli, 2025) reflects the growing punitive actions that have been taken against academics and students speaking against genocide. Under Articles 10/11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (2021), which UK universities must adhere to under the Human Rights Act (1998), students and staff are protected by law to freedom of peaceful assembly and protest, even if it is disruptive or deemed offensive to some (King and Mead, 2024).

Nevertheless, a joint report by Liberty Investigates (2025) and Sky News (2025) found that there were 'as many as 113 students and staff' who faced disciplinary action across at least 28 universities in the UK in connection with pro-Palestinian activism since October 2023 (Walawalkar and Clugston 2025). This is but a minor reflection of the disciplinary action under the Trump 2.0 administration and curtailments in Germany, where Irscheid grew up, which serve as an ominous warning for academic freedom globally. This context was central to discussions about displaying Palestinian cartographies, and symbols or patterns associated with global Palestinian solidarity movements as Irscheid expressed feeling increasingly anxious about her own settled status in relation to her teachings and research.

Decolonising the university raises questions that were fraught throughout the module: who bears the emotional and physical burden and labour of teaching and learning decolonial fashion history? Who endures potential consequences? How can we protect those still precarious under coloniality? Universities are crucial spaces in enacting decolonial ethics, part of which involves discussing genocide and settler violence, as well as Palestinian (fashion) history, without fear of being silenced by political pressure. Unfortunately, these ideals are not always mirrored or protected

under institutional actions, thus our practices sought to prioritise empathy and care in our classroom over extractive gains.

The final students' presentations offered an opportunity to reconfigure our current world through the decolonial praxis of delinking, relationality and pluriversality – to hope, dream, and create otherwise by drawing upon theoretical research. By reconfiguring relational possibilities of power, the students were asked to re-imagine the world as a collaborative and collective rendering, idealising a spacetime for those currently marginalised by profiles of race, gender, sexuality, disability and class. We empowered the students to think about hope as a horizon in their praxis, following Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009) and his re-imagining of queerness. We also encouraged interventions and protest, not only to the group's world, but to the assignment itself. This was an art school after all, and we were open to creative action that would raise broader questions of what decolonial values demand of educational policies, and in this case, assessment.

We close by reflecting on an escalating behaviour and reflexive moment on the 2024/25 course that challenged our reactions and desire to maintain discussion, underlining how decolonial praxis in action can test institutional spaces. One particularly outspoken student questioned an example of cultural appropriation that featured Balenciaga's F/W 2021 'sagging' sweatpants, expressing their fatigue of having to censor themselves, a racialised subject, from drawing from Black cultures. It was a seemingly misguided point, demonstrating the student's lack of engagement with the module's theory, but it was also an expression of North American racial dynamics unfolding in a UK classroom. The interlocking history of racialised struggle and collective resistance between Asian and Black communities in North America – often understood as culminating in the civil rights movements of the 1960s – has

since largely fragmented into tensions between racialised groups, with power increasingly operating to divide and splinter collective action (Ho and Mullen, 2008). One narrative of division is perpetuated by the model minority myth (Walton and Truong, 2023), which emerged in the US postwar period as an ideology of cultural assimilation foregrounding the values of 'hard work, thrift, and morality' amongst Asian-American communities to overcome racist structural barriers (Walton and Truong, 2023, p.393). This insidious tactic aimed to divide and control, creating and reinforcing racial violence and tensions amongst marginalised groups. These divisions were further accentuated through competition over resources, such as institutional funding, property, and other merits of the American Dream. That the student would express such dismissive comments about Black culture derived from histories of violence was not shocking, but an expression of these politics.

These divisive viewpoints became a focal point in the final session of the term, where the outspoken student's group presented a world beyond cultural appropriation, embracing creative practices devoid of history and ownership. Despite rich debates existing in the fashion studies field (Ziff and Rao, 1997; Pham, 2014; Cherid, 2021), their presentation drew upon personal opinions which ignited palpable emotional reactions. Heated questions were directed toward the problematic nature of their materials, which included a failed display of a clip of ethnic-cosplay, as the group stood under their cohort's gazes and scrutiny. They were mostly perplexed about the misunderstanding between their intentions and perceived practices. One student informed us after the session that they were from a country that censored these conversations from taking place, and while they recognised that their practices did not deliver the results they had sought as a group, discussion was their hope. Another student wished we had stopped the conversation sooner, asking why these

debates had to overwhelm and distress marginalised people. The presentation was poorly researched – with no theory to support the aims, nor research of cultural appropriation itself, but it was a flashpoint that provided one of the most valuable learning experiences as educators. As a stark contrast from the apathetic malaise of the previous year, our goal to present embodied and lived experiences as crucial to rebuilding knowledge and empathetic being through decolonial praxis seemed to unfold with as many questions as answers. The racialised student expressed in a previous class that their own endurance of racism was not that significant. This reflection may be symptomatic of racial melancholia, where racialised subjects not only internalise the white national ideal, but are disciplined by it, subsequently enacting this ideal outwardly through processes of acculturation. Racialised injury is not only absorbed and internalised, but lingers and echoes as the subject attempts to identify with normative values (Cheng, 2001). In this alignment, racialised people can both be oppressed and oppress others. It would have been helpful to contextualise some of these reactions in this broader history of race and colonial violence, but our decolonial aims were troubled by neoliberal (lack of) time.

Conclusion: decolonising as a cyclical action

The Decolonial aims of 'Re-imagining Fashion Histories: Tracing Parallel Cosmologies' sought to explore the pluriversalities of fashion history, not only in locational grounding, but in methods of remembering, storytelling, and worldmaking. Beyond retrieving the epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies of the colonised, and racialised, decolonising also implored us to reflect and evaluate relations within our teaching praxis. We sought to do this by building empathy through a framework of knowledge grounded in the everyday, the quotidian, and lived experiences.

Beyond diversifying the reading list, this praxis necessarily interrogated pedagogy, not only unpacking what had been canonically studied, but also how it had been studied in particular parts of the world, focusing on global crises, positionality, labour ethics and environmental concerns. We acknowledge that the persisting institutional power of the university can absorb the radical, activist aims of decoloniality, using the decolonial as a signpost for innovation and progress. However, decolonising radically requires tangible changes. This was highlighted by decolonial fashion scholar Tamara Poblete (University of Amsterdam) in a guest lecture for the MAFC programme, wherein she described the contradictory obligations that defined her activism versus her role as a lecturer. In our praxis of employing decolonial values in our classroom, we had to continually negotiate and reevaluate through empathy and care. Specific interactions highlighted how ideals can splinter from, contradict, and complicate our lived realities, particularly for those experiencing the precarity of their citizenship or humanity as defined by coloniality, all with our awareness of the performativity of institutional policies.

This chapter has mapped out the case study of our resistant fashion practices and decolonial ethics that shaped the module 'Re-imagining Fashion Histories: Tracing Parallel Cosmologies', co-taught at CSM from 2022/23 to 2024/25. It reflects on our aims and processes of re-imagining, and what we have learnt from trying to undo and delink from colonial fashion worlds as we have sought to engender alternative futures and action-orientated empathy and solidarity with our students. Pedagogical theory is not a dogma to follow religiously, but a mirror to reflect upon our experiences in the classroom, raising broader questions about what decolonial commitments require from educational institutions, us as educators, and fashion systems to amend persistent inequalities. Can decoloniality even be discussed in a

meaningful way from the classroom of an elite fashion school in a fashion capital, which attracts a privileged student body who can travel to London for education, to study in an institution whose economic and social interests reinforce capitalist aims, while others are forced to migrate or required to stay put? On reflection, grappling with time has, for us, been key to re-thinking fashion's histories and establishing decolonial values in our classroom. This engagement with time operates on two levels: addressing the constraints placed upon academics in the neoliberal university, and recognizing that reimagined fashion histories might employ different concepts of time to those defined by Anglo-Eurocentric historians, namely the cycle.

This year, the praxis revealed to us the difficulties of historical violence in some of our lived experiences, interacting with frameworks that potentially stoked and reopened wounds that were undoubtedly shaped by, and revealing of, our increasingly polarised world. Some of our students discussed how the curriculum lingered in their thoughts after the sessions, and it was difficult to switch off from the module's materials. While we remain firm advocates of decolonial discourse, the question of the emotional burden placed upon the racialised and marginalised students remains a challenge in our minds and ethical reflections. Ultimately, we want(ed) to empower the students to remain hopeful about the future. Lately, hope seems like a radical act.

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List of Images:

Fig. 1. Cesare Vecellio, page from *De gli habiti antichi et moderni di diversi parti del mondo, libri due*, 1590, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (© Public Domain)

Fig. 2. Ace and Nadya near Nablus. Photographed by Ryan O'Toole Collett as part of the "AREA A" multimedia project by Ryan O'Toole Collett in collaboration with Sonya Carassik Ratty for ADISH.

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