FUTURE VISIONS OF US FASHION: TECHNOLOGY, PROXIMITY, AND BUYING LOCAL

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ABSTRACT

While human beings have collectively created the Anthropocene age, we too must do what we can to negotiate our future. We find ourselves comprehensively reliant on cooperation of a global scale to counter or react to climate change. However, the sphere of immediate influence is often limited by proximity and community. In this age of globalization, technological reliance, and mass markets, what does it mean to be local? What does it mean to have a 'sense of place' culturally, economically, environmentally? The concept of "think globally, act locally" has been around in common parlance to describe a global economy for over fifty years, however, is used here in relation to a discussion of scale and locality of clothing manufacturing and industry. Within this developmental paper the relationship and context of local and globalization will be examined to reframe a discussion of what the future of fashion might look like. A discussion of current nascent business opportunities and community actions will be offered, in part, as a demonstration of progress towards circularity and sustainability in fashion, despite obvious shortcomings. From there, a discussion will be offered towards the goal of a different type of fashion industry which might exist that slows the pace of product while remaining profitable and which the concept of waste does not exist.

INTRODUCTION

Human hubris has resulted in the sixth mass extinction on the planet known as the Anthropocene. Aspects of post-humanism philosophy decentres the dominance of humans to consider the interconnectedness of the environment and other species as inhabitants and essential components of the planet (Daigle and Cielemęcka, 2018; Fox and Alldred, 2020; Pepperell,1995). The conversation regarding our collective future is intimately tied to conceptions of how we negotiate our present understandings of social and environmental justice to economic and industrial sustainment or growth. Rather than supposing that we can survive on "being less bad" (McDonough and Braungart, 2002) post- humanism suggests that we instead must holistically realign our priorities to consider mutual non-anthropocentric actions.

While human beings have collectively created the Anthropocene age, we too must do what we can to negotiate our future. We find ourselves comprehensively reliant on cooperation of a global scale to counter or react to climate change. However, the sphere of immediate influence is often limited by proximity and community. In this age of globalization, technological reliance, and mass markets, what does it mean to be local? What does it mean to have a 'sense of place' culturally, economically, environmentally? The concept of "think globally, act locally" has been around in common parlance to describe a global economy for over fifty years, however, is used here in relation to a discus-

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The fashion industry is part of a global community which uses technology to communicate, transact, market, and place product in a consumer's hands. Our digital and globalized age has blended any traditional aesthetic or culturally identifiable style to redefine the fashion marketplace (Martinez, et al. 2022). We can access style, culture, entertainment, fabric, and fashion product from any place in the world and during any time afforded by the internet. The infinite resources of global aesthetics and product however are contrasted sharply by a damaged and diminishing set of natural and human resources. The 21st century, or the 'fast-fashion age', has seen a vast expansion of cheaply made clothing that are so homogenous and ceaselessly repetitive as to become timeless. Therefore, time and place are redefined by the omnipresent internet, and the fashion industry only serves a linear take-make-waste model, which is inherently short-sighted as we strain to quickly provide essentially the very same product that we just discarded in the landfill (McNeil and Moore, 2015). This global model is reliant on constant growth to survive while destroying the very environmental and human resources we depend on (Scheffer, 2013). This focus on constant growth begs the question: At what point is being universal too big?

The UN Sustainable Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focus on initiatives geared to uplift populations affected by the climate crisis by developing policies associated with environmentalism, social justice, and international economic reciprocity. This is undoubtedly a laudatory set of goals however are still arguably rooted in a humanist construct of constant growth (Fox and Alldred, 2020). Specific to the fashion industry, a sustainable future within the 2030 Agenda would entail a redefinition of where supply and value chains exist globally. Research and discussions of technological and economic development have focused on possible opportunities in near and onshoring in both Europe and the US (Desai, Nassar, and Chertow, 2012; Clarke-Sather and Cobb, 2019). Opportunities cited for near and onshoring are a greater level of environmental and social oversight, lessening of GHG emissions and pollution, and localized economic development. There has been a great deal of attention paid to the policy and subsequent laws proposed by the European Commission which encourages clear development of infrastructure to support a circular economy (Vogler and Stephen, 2007). Additionally, several case studies and research based in the European Union (EU) and Britain focused on micro-factories, entrepreneurship, and localized craftsmanship (Elf, Werner and Black, 2021; McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli, 2023; Gwilt, Payne and Anicet Rüthschilling, 2013). Broadly speaking these case studies are marked by a relatively close geography and a recognition of the potential for economic and cultural development by the governments of those countries (McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli, 2023). Asia, the EU, and Britain have rich histories of skilled labour or creative communities which are directly tied to external characterizations which can be utilized for marketing purposes. McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli have focused on the concept of "milieu of labour" to suggest the positioning of a space, neighbourhood, city, or community around the creative activity that comes from independent and entrepreneurial development (2023).

The circumstances within Asia, the EU, and Britain are very different in the United States (US), such as, but not limited to, the geographic proximity, support from government, skilled workforce, or type of manufacturing required for localized fashion labour. The US has a manufacturing history of Fordist-type mass production that catered to copying stylish clothing from Paris or London to be made cheaply for the mass market. The New York fashion industry profited by the proximity of wealthy clients coupled with largely unskilled immigrants needing jobs (Rantisi, 2004). As unions moved into New York City's Garment District and transportation technology and infrastructure improved, clothing manufactures moved throughout the east-coast and southern US to find cheaper sources of labour. Manhattan remained the focus of the more exclusive designer labels and sales, but by the mid-50s the city's share of manufacturing had dropped to less than one-third of all manufacturing in the United States (Rantisi, 2004). This trend of abandonment of the Garment District has continued, as all manufacturing and production is now located overseas in under-developed cheap-labour countries. NY has lost much, if not all, of its manufacturing capabilities and does little to enable new and diversified talent to exist outside of working for highly competitive corporate com-

panies due to high rents and cost of living.

Since the ascent of fast- fashion and the large-scale shift to international manufacturing in the 1990s, conversations of 'Made in America' and the 'return of jobs' has been ever-present if largely impractical. Attempts at onshoring within the United States have been slow due to a lack of skilled sewing operators, anti-immigrant legislation, and an abundance of competing low wage/ low skill jobs (Desai, Nassar, and Chertow, 2012). During the Covid19 pandemic international supply chain problems reinvigorated the larger conversations around near and onshoring (Amed and Berg, 2022). Problematic is that not enough discussion exists on how the fashion industry as we have always known it to exist no longer is relevant and indeed no longer viable in the Anthropocene Age.

This reframes the argument towards a revaluation of how and why the American fashion industry exists as it does. If there is no reason to keep the fashion industry specifically located in the tiny island of Manhattan, why aren't we closer to the localities of the consumer? Proximity to consumers suggests a greater degree of community involvement, local development, and designer responsibility (Clark, 2013). The United States has a wide variety of geographical climates and medium to large cities with universities, industrial and economic infrastructures. The use of the internet and the constant flow of digital information has superseded the requirement of specific place-bound types of specialized labour. The internet, as a repository of shared knowledge, offers disassociated conceptions of sequential time. In other words, trends are not the issue but the availability of something new and exciting. If Instagram influencers are as powerful as Vogue editors, why do we need a centralized locality for communicating new designers and their product? In a focused discussion of future localities, Clark suggests a view of "multi- local society and a 'distributed economy' where the global is comprised of a network of local systems" (2013, 111).

The following are nascent developments focused on locality, community, and reconsidered ideas of growth and expansion through the geographic lens of the United States. The concept of a 'Fibershed' was developed in central California in the early 2000s focusing on the development of agriculture, fibre development, regional manufacturing, and the connection of end-use with a bio-region (generally limited to a 250 mile/402.336 km radius) (Burgess and White, 2019). The "soil to soil" Fiber-shed encourages the constant negotiation of the rate and type of production as well as extended product responsibility. Closely associated to the concept of the 'slow food' movement the emphasis focused on who makes a consumable product, under what conditions that product was grown and made, and what happens to that product when no longer useful. The Fibershed in California is now a repository of information for similar grass-roots initiatives located throughout the country (Burgess and White, 2019). Inherent in these Fibershed groups are the variety and diversity of localized product based on the natural and human resources of the region.

Alternatively, automation within the fashion industry is inevitable as the strains of international slave labour are increasingly castigated by consumers, press, and academics in response to the fast and mass fashion framework. Sewbots are reported to be able to make a T-shirt every three seconds which would be devastating to the environment already straining at our current pace of manufacturing (Vashisht and Rami, 2020). Rather than using sew bots and technology to expand production, it should be constricted to customization and selectivity. Similarly, knit machines created by Stoll and Shimasaki allow for highly skilled programmers and machine operators to manage multiple production runs at the same time allowing for monetarily beneficial short runs of production. Kent State University is seeking to specifically encourage entrepreneurship and local manufacturing by utilising these types of knit machines. In this process we are attempting to address what the fashion industry might look like when the needs of industry and the environment are balanced.

The primary argument of this developmental paper is not about creating jobs in the United States. Rather this is an increasingly urgent acknowledgement that the fashion industry currently exists as a 20th century construct in a 21st century post-humanist age of environmental crisis. Future research will need to focus on strategies that enable adherence to the triple bottom line of people, profit, and planet yet immersed in systems thinking. Only by looking at the fashion industry through the lens of systemic reconfiguration can we hope to achieve sustainability and circularity. Key to this, is the revaluation of post- humanism as it pertains to care and attention to locality and subsequent true global environmental and social cooperation.

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