The Liberatory Potential of Fashion

David Billie Suoth

University of New Hampshire

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The Liberatory Potential of Fashion

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David Suoth

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INTRODUCTION

Fashion has the potential to be liberatory and this can be seen in the ways fashion has been targeted by systems of oppression. Fashion is the use of clothes as a vessel to create a greater social meaning. According to Edward Sapir, the meaning of fashion “while it is primarily applied to dress and the exhibition of the human body is not essentially concerned with the fact of dress or ornament, but with its symbolism” (Barnard, 2007, p. 65). Fashion with the symbolism behind it is able to show the sentiments and attitudes of civilization at different points in history and is tied intimately with the ego (Barnard, 2007). It has the ability to represent time periods, self-identity, and cultures through the medium of clothing. The erasure of traditional dress and practices have been purposeful for the control of Indigenous and marginalized groups. It is purposeful that fashion has been bound to its relation with capitalism and consumerism. But the frivolous narrative that fashion has been given can not overshadow the historical significance that fashion has. Fashion has been used by colonial powers as means to oppress, control, and uphold capitalism, but it has also been used to unify groups of people and to provide solidarity among them.

Fashion can be used as a tool of oppression and this has been seen through residential schools in Canada and through the use of uniforms by militaries (Ottmann, 2020). The power of fashion is suppressed and minimized so people do not utilize it to their advantage. Though fashion has been used as a tool for oppression, it is crucial to not lose sight of how it can be used to combat it. Fashion and dress are more than just what we see in the media. It is a composition of eras, identities, and cultures. It can be used to liberate on many various scales. Liberation is when people that are physically or internally oppressed, under their own volition, release themselves from the control and domination of an oppressive group to regain physical and internal
autonomy over themselves (Ruth, 1988). To overlook fashion is to overlook the significant role it plays within contemporary society as well as historical events. Fashion and cultural dress are important in retaining stories, way of life, and individuality. It liberates people by providing people with the opportunity to express themselves unforgivingly and also through the unification of people. Fashion is more than just trends and high prices. It can be used in many ways, especially in liberation.

LIBERATION

Like languages, liberation still has basic structures that are recognizable even to those that aren’t well-versed in it. This is important to realize because even though liberation can be recognizable to people, different forms of liberation use different ways to liberate themselves that are characteristically unique. The liberatory potential of fashion can use different methods for liberation compared to the liberatory potential of music for example. You could recognize a certain language without being able to speak it. I recognize languages such as Spanish or French even though I don’t speak them. Or I can see Arabic roots within Bahasa Indonesia even though I don’t speak Arabic. The languages and roots are still recognizable, and the same applies to liberation. Even though all liberations don’t have the same qualities or roots, they can still be recognizable. For example, some basic forms of liberation can include organizing, knowledge, and solidarity amongst a dominated group (Ruth, 1988). For example, liberations of groups will likely need organizing of people to go against their oppressors. But when talking about self-liberation, organizing people may not be necessary. Not all liberations have utilized all of these qualities, and this is important to note in order to understand the different forms liberation can take, especially through fashion.

FASHION AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INTIMATE
It is easy to see fashion as a function rather than a vessel for culture and self-expression. We hear the expression “no shoes no service” often and relate dressing as a way to fit into society. But fashion is a part of society rather than a requirement of it. Fashion can also be an extension of ourselves if we remove it from the vacuum of capital and consumption. The thin layers of fabric that we put on ourselves are the only things that separate our bodies from others. Clothes are what separates what is intimate from what is public. Clothes paired with different hairstyles, jewelry, tattoos, and other bodily adornments are what we present to others. Not only can dress be a reflection of our minds representing our moods and emotions through color and silhouettes, but it can also be a way to show self-expression of our identities. Dress is a way to get as intimate as possible without revealing everything all at once. Being nude can be liberatory in itself not through the removal of fashion, but through the removal of clothes. Being nude is liberatory through the acceptance of the natural body rather than the stripping of fashion. Dress and bodily adornments, whether literally through tattoos or figuratively through the perceptions of the self, are writings on our bodies. It can tell a story or a history about us and the way we live (Barnard, 2007). It can show our interests, our culture, and our values. Through many mediums of bodily adornments, dress can be a powerful representation of many things without having to explicitly say anything.

**FASHION’S TIES WITH LUXURY AND EXCLUSIVITY**

In order for something to be in fashion, something has to be out of it. Fashion is nothing without context. Edward Sapir explained how “It is utterly vain, for instance, to explain particular forms of dress or types of cosmetics or methods of wearing the hair without a preliminary historical critique” (Barnard, 2007, p. 61). Fashion is dependent on context in order to give it meaning. The context that makes fashion meaningful is the importance that it plays in
culture and self-expression. It is meaningful because it tells stories of the history of civilizations and the experiences people have had. And when this meaning is then replaced with the purpose of luxury and exclusivity, it is not fashion anymore, rather, the commodification of clothes.

When the media creates a grandiose narrative of fashion that portrays a lifestyle that is unattainable to most, it is easy to pin it as frivolous. It becomes something that people either get disinterested in because it is advertised as something that is not for them, or it becomes a goal for people to reach in order to be a part of the exclusive elite (Shukla & Khalifa, 2021). By making people disinterested, people become less interested in fashion and what it can do for an individual and a collective of people. The benefits of fashion become lost, and the importance of fashion fades away. Fashion is then degraded of its meaning and treated only as a way to be a part of an exclusive group. And when people on the other hand become infatuated with this high fashion lifestyle, they only feed more into the narrative that fashion is exclusive and only for the luxurious because those are the things that people want. It becomes about status and a sense of superiority rather than the meaning that clothes can bring.

FASHION BEYOND FRIVOLOUSNESS

What is lost in the frivolousness of fashion is its power to display and represent time periods, self-expression, and cultures. At its core, fashion is a celebration of what is going on in our lifetimes, ourselves, and our community (Barnard, 2007). With all the noise around fashion, it is hard to see the importance and potential that it holds. For instance, we may not recognize that when we dress ourselves every day, we are piece by piece adding to the visual framework of our culture and era. The purpose of explaining fashion’s ability to encapsulate a period of time is to give credit to the power and importance of fashion. It is hard to recognize this because we are living in our period and may not recognize a culture any different than a few years back, but if
someone walked into a room with slicked-back hair, a black leather jacket, a tucked-in white tee, cuffed blue jeans, and black leather oxford shoes, you would think they were from the 1950s in America. It is easy for us to recognize other time periods before us through fashion, but difficult for us to realize that the process of us getting dressed is doing the same thing - defining a frame in time. This recognition relies on context, and when the context of current-day fashion is trend after trend, it will be hard to differentiate the strongest fashionable features that will stand most prominent in the coming years (Baynard, 2007).

It is an everyday art that documents our lives through the medium of clothing and bodily adornment. We interact with fashion every day, and yet we have minimized it to an industry that is for the luxurious and elite. Fashion is more than an industry consisting of a conglomerate of lavish brands and runway shows that boast products at high market prices. It is an embodiment of our lives, and extension of our minds, and a representation of our environment.

OPPRESSION OF IDENTITY THROUGH CRITIQUE OF FASHION

Fashion is intertwined with how people present themselves. Fashion being an outward and visible expression, it contributes greatly to an outward demonstration of one’s identity. Designer Sequoia Sierra boils down the philosophy of fashion to “[a] way of expressing an inner truth or belief about an idea, oneself or the world through the medium of clothing” (Sierra, 2016, para. 3) Fashion is integral to how people perceive you and how you want to be perceived. The strength of fashion and the creation of solidarity through clothing and appearance poses a threat to the systems that oppress them. This leads to the systems targeting the medium of clothing and fashion to smother their efforts in building stronger ties with each other.

The perception of fashion affects how people see the potential that it has. Fashion has been perceived as pretentious for so long that we oftentimes forget all that it brings us and the
potential that it has. We interact with fashion every day and underestimate its ability to affect our presentation, our mood, our emotions, and our connection to others. When this becomes realized, fashion can be turned back into something that is bigger than exclusive runways and it can be known for what it does at its core - unite, liberate, and retain cultures. These abilities that fashion possesses have been forgotten, and the traditional ways of dress have been either erased or replaced. Fashion has the potential to be liberatory by reviving these traditions to revolt against Western imposition.

**OPPRESSION OF IDENTITY - SOCIALIZATION AND INTERNALIZATION**

Oppression in this context is the use of fashion to control or discriminate against a certain group. This takes autonomy away from a group creating inequality and authority over a now “lesser” group. This prevents them from being or looking how the way they want to, ultimately taking away parts of their self-identity or adding to it against their will and the way they want to be perceived. The sociological theory of *The Looking Glass Self*, created by American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley in 1902, describes the process in which we define our self-worth, values, behavior, and actions based on how we think others perceive them (Lemert, 2010). It’s a socialization process in which we evaluate ourselves by looking in a hypothetical mirror and internalizing the reflected appraisals we perceive others have of us (Lemert, 2010, p. 189). Following this theory, if you cannot present yourself the way you feel is best, you will not be able to have an accurate or beneficial perception of yourself. Not only does oppression in the context of fashion blur the image of yourself to others, but it also takes away your ability to truly see yourself in the world in which you live and interact. The process of internalization is when we accept the ideas we are being told (Lizardon, 2021). An example could be when we cut or alter our hair as a result of accepting that it is “bad hair” or hair that doesn’t meet the oftentimes
white standard. The process is the acceptance of negative reinforcements such as their hair doesn’t meet a certain standard, their image isn’t civilized, or that we are worthless due to our phenotype.

An example of internalization is when Black people, women, in particular, feel they need to straighten their hair. According to Chanel Donaldson (2022), this is rooted in slavery, racism, and white supremacy. Slave masters instilled that African features weren’t valued and that they did not fit the beauty standards that were based on eurocentric features. As a result, slave masters created a hierarchy of desirable features among the slaves: lighter skin, straighter features, and straighter hair (Donaldson, 2022). This process of internalization among slaves continues to affect beauty standards today. By accepting a white standard of femininity of white pale skin and straight long hair, it creates an impossible task of attaining the ideal of femininity imposed by white people for Black women. It is also common for Black women to “relax” their hair which is the process of adding sodium-hydroxide chemicals, which can be uncomfortable or painful to the scalp, to one’s hair which makes hair less curly (Donaldson, 2022). Straight hair can also be attained through the use of heated tools like hair straighteners. Although it is impossible to attain this ideal whiteness, straightening hair gives Black women the perception that they are getting closer to this white standard of beauty and femininity (Donaldson, 2022). According to Donaldson (2022), this is not to say that the act of straightening one’s hair is an act of self-hatred or wanting to be white. Rather, it is an effort in trying to work within the realm of internalized eurocentric beauty standards to attain a piece of what society deems beautiful. While straightening or relaxing one’s hair can be a result of internalization, it is also important to note that there are many reasons why Black women straighten hair: media, advertisement, and ease of maintenance and styling (Donaldson, 2022).
PROFESSIONALISM AND ITS ROOTS IN COLONIALISM

These standards of beauty and what is defined as “civilized” plague the lives of those who don’t fit the “professional” guidelines of society (Gray, 2019). This standard of what is acceptable in many spaces is defined as professionalism, “or the systemic, institutionalized centering of whiteness” (Gray, 2019, para. 1). According to American grassroots organizers and scholars Tema Okun and Keith Jones, the standards of professionalism are rooted in white supremacy (Gray, 2019). Anything that doesn’t fit the white Western standard including dress is considered “unprofessional” which is a term that is used by other people within the workplace, education settings, and any other white-dominated or influenced space. The altering of natural hair to seem more “presentable” in the workplace is just one example of how white supremacist ideology has been taken as the standard. The danger of accepting and implementing professionalism is it would be interpreted as an unbiased and objective standard. This others any cultural dress or style that isn’t within the white Western sphere. This standard of “professionalism” can be seen even within meetings of the United Nations with the standard dress code being Westernized suits, or where many countries have banned hijabs, burqas, and veils (Jones, 2021). Professionalism within college campuses can be seen through the elitism within them. Being a current student at the University of New Hampshire, many honors program events encourage suits or “professional” dress to impress the largely old white male demographic of donors to the universities (UNH, 2022). On a larger scale, many workplaces have frowned upon natural or protective curly hairstyles deeming them as unprofessional (Gray, 2019). Now, these very hairstyles that people lost jobs over are being appropriated and worn by white people because it is trendy. To state that they are “just hairstyles” is disregarding the history behind the oppression of these styles and the lives that professionalism has affected.
FASHION IN COLONIALISM

Though fashion is oftentimes underestimated in terms of its impact on culture, it cannot be overlooked in its role in colonialism. Colonizers have used fashion as a tool for domination of marginalized groups and erasure of culture (Joy, 2021). Colonialism is when a group takes over the land and the people indigenous to it to exploit them for the colonizers’ own political or economic gain (Joy, 2021). The goal is to gain full control over the land and the people that belong to it. This control is used to exploit the people and land for economic and political purposes. A part of dominating a whole indigenous demographic is to strip them of their identity and erase the attachments they had to their homes, cultures, and ways of life (Ottmann, 2020). A way to do this is to take away the cultural images that represented them before colonialism.

CANADIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND THE ERASURE OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY THROUGH THE STRIPPING OF CULTURAL DRESS

Canada’s colonialism reflects this erasure of cultural image and dress to colonize the indigenous people and their land. In 1876, Canada enacted the Indian Act which was an act that had methods of forced assimilation which included the creation of residential schools and the mandatory requirement for Indigenous Children to attend such schools. If they did not attend, fines and jail sentences were given to the parents that refused to put their children in these schools (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006). These residential schools were a key to cultural genocide by stripping the children that attended of their cultural dress that was replaced with a foreign uniform (Ottmann, 2020). On top of being forcibly taken away from their families to attend these residential schools, these children were stripped of the things that reminded them of their culture.
Although according to Ottmann (2020), there was no source containing a fully developed dress theory, looking at Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies gives a good idea of their relationship with dress. The creation of dress within the domain of women in Indigenous communities was not only for the purpose of dressing their families but to “maintain balance with the natural world” (Ottmann, 2020, para. 11). Making clothing well was a sign of respect and “dress was even more important in providing for the community in that respectful adornment helped to maintain relations with the natural world, which would result in a successful hunt” (Ottmann 2022, para. 11). It was believed that a transfer of energy from the animal to dress occurred. Clothing and dress were not the occurrences of a human interacting with their environment and others while wearing inanimate clothing, but rather dress is another environment that the wearer interacts with. It was believed that “[c]lothing is not just presenting an identity, but encourages living in a good and respectful way” (Ottmann, 2020, para. 12). The connection that Ottmann (2020) made to the stripping of the dress of Indigenous children was, “if culture is located on the body through dress and Indigenous culture is fundamentally linked to land, then the land is also located on the body. Taking clothing, as was done to children entering residential schools, means taking the connection to the land. Taking clothing means taking a connection to the balance that was being created. Replacing this with unfamiliar clothing is forcing a new way of life beyond body techniques, introducing a new worldview that is vastly contradictory to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing” (Ottmann, 2020, para. 13). This effectively erases their linkage to the land and their culture and functionally assimilates them into the domination under colonialism. By taking away the dress of a people and replacing it with foreign garments, colonizers have been able to demonize cultural dress and have been able to place their own dress as the norm. This connection and value that fashion has with culture have
been recognized and targeted by the oppressors because they recognize the power that fashion has in unifying people. Colonizing a people through erasure in dress and outward representation leads to the ability to punish those that try to maintain their roots. Therefore, dressing out of line could lead to punishment for the colonized (Lemay, 2017). Not only is fashion a way to represent a culture, but it can also very well be used to extinguish it.

**PUNISHMENT IN THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND THE DEGRADATION OF INDIGENOUS DRESS**

Any violations within the residential schools often resulted in whippings, displays of embarrassment in front of their peers, and if their heads weren’t shaved upon arrival, shaving one’s long hair was an act of punishment (Lemay, 2017). In Indigenous cultures, hair resembled an extension of the person’s mind and the strengths and beauty of them (Ottmann, 2020). Hair length and style were also used to distinguish between different Indigenous nations, and the cutting of it by an enemy was seen as an act of embarrassment and submission (Eshet, 2015). Wearing westernized uniforms was punishment in itself because of their lacking quality (Ottmann, 2020). When parents gave their children beautiful handmade clothing, they did not know that it would be discarded or even burned upon the arrival of their children at the residential school. There have been stories shared where a child was able to rip their shirt off because of how poor the materials were (Lemay, 2017). There are also accounts where embarrassment from former students because they were forced to wear uniforms that were so poor in quality. Not only were there physical and emotional consequences from the requirement of uniforms but there were cultural consequences as well. The requirement of uniforms was a part of a propaganda scheme to show that residential schools were succeeding in making Indigenous people more “civilized.” Jenny Lemay (2017) of the Shingwauk Residential Schools
Centre explained how “[b]efore and after photos are common throughout Residential School history and sometimes show a mishmash of clothing from multiple different cultures, rather than an accurate representation. Indigenous clothing was widely mocked by the settler community and seen as a sign of savagery. Later, it was greatly misappropriated and treated as a costume devoid of meaning.” Uniforms and the removal of traditional clothing left a greater impact on the perception of Indigenous people in society. It destroyed their image, dehumanized them, and erased meaning in their clothing.

Eshet, D. (2015) [Student Thomas Moore Keesick at the Regina Indian Industrial School c. early 1890s].

Facing History & Ourselves.

The effects of uniforms and the erasure of traditional clothing are still seen today with many high schools having mascots that appropriate and mock Indigenous people. An example is Spaulding High School in Rochester, NH. The “Red Raiders” are what the school uses for their mascot and even had a picture of an Indigenous person’s head on the middle of the basketball court with red skin until a few years ago (Stucker & Pike, 2020).
Regardless of pushback from locals on the racism of the mascot, Spaulding and the city of Rochester insists that the mascot is a symbol of honor and history despite proof of genocide, war, and cultural erasure within the area of the Pennacook tribe that consisted of around 12,000 people (New England Anti-Mascot Coalition, n.d). The Pennacook tribe was killed off through disease, war with white settlers, and genocide. Despite this history, the hand-over-mouth chants that mock Indigenous war cries are often heard in sports events, and it's common for a group of students to put on “native” costumes that directly appropriate Indigenous dress (Manning, 2016).

These displays of modern appropriation and degradation of Indigenous culture show how the use of dress and false narratives have contributed to the erasure of Indigenous culture. This allows for the continuation of the general public to accept cultural appropriation as cultural appreciation and do so without penalty. From before and after pictures of Indigenous children in traditional dress, oftentimes shown to be inaccurate with the mixing of different Indigenous tribes’ clothing, to the Western uniforms they were given, their dress was demeaned and mocked. The power and meaning behind Indigenous dress were removed for the sake of propaganda and what is now modern-day professionalism.

DISPLAYS OF POWER THROUGH THE USE OF FASHION

Traditions and stories can be passed down through clothes. But when all of it is stripped away and replaced with a monotonous uniform, an important visual aspect of power or culture is gone. This was also recognized by colonial powers, and this is why uniforms can be so destructive (Ottmann, 2020). But on the other side of this oppression of dress, rank and even
status have been represented through clothing (Segran, 2020). On one side where a homogenous way of dress can be dehumanizing, it can also represent domination and power. This can be seen through the use of military and police uniforms. These uniforms make it clear to civilians and opposing forces who and what they represent. It is purposeful that people can distinguish the U.S military from the Russian military. And it is also purposeful that it is easy to distinguish the police from civilians. This difference is to create a power difference and imbalance between the police, military, and the people (Segran, 2020).

Uniforms display power and oftentimes create fear around those that wear them. Michael Birzer, professor at the school of criminal justice at Wichita State, commented on the role of police uniforms during the protests for George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota and said, “[t]he police want to project a show of force and one way you do it is just by your sheer presence in uniform” (Segran, 2020, para. 3). Though the motto of the U.S police force is to serve and protect, their display of them oftentimes creates tension and feelings of terror. Robert Mauro, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon, alludes to the idea that when uniforms make it hard for people to identify the people wearing the uniform, disindividuation occurs which is where the wearer becomes disconnected from their own identity, including their past and future (Segran, 2020). Mauro also says that the wearers are “more susceptible to situational pressure. Military uniforms disinhibit moral behavior, pulling [them] toward violence. Mauro says “anthropologists have found tribes that use more war paint that obscures their faces and bodies are more likely to act violently” (Segran, 2020, para. 7). The uniform for these forces also expresses loyalty to the government they serve, and with that, these uniforms represent the ideologies of the government which attributes to the tension that occurs when people see the police or the military. The uniforms display the government’s interests rather than the general
population. This way of dressing not only creates a sense of power but also causes everyone who wears it to accept and enforce the government’s intentions and plans without any regard for their own morals and inhibitions.

The use of uniforms in prisons also reflects the ways fashion can be used to control people. In the Stanford Experiment where Philip Zimbardo, a professor at Stanford University, and his colleagues were interested in finding out whether brutality among prison guards in America was due to the sadistic personalities of the guards or the prison environment, it was clear the ways uniforms separated those with power from those without power (McLeod, 2020). Dress was used to distinguish roles and what you could and could not do. Dress, in addition to the layout and design of prisons, contributed to the environment where guards felt they could abuse the prisoners - a phenomenon that occurs in prisons and jails across the nation. It wasn’t about what the prisoners did in the past or present, but rather they simply could and had the power to.

In prisons across the nation, people are stripped of their own clothing, have their bodies checked in the nude, and are given a uniform like every other prisoner with a number on them to not only strip them of their clothes but their very names. Prison uniforms intend to dehumanize the people within the prisons and make the guards feel as though the people within the prison deserve the abuse and treatment that they receive in the prison (McLeod, 2020). There are even instances where pink prison uniforms are used as a punishment to prisoners in efforts to emasculate them in front of their fellow inmates (Glaister, 2006). Also, whenever anyone is seen in a prison uniform, they are deemed a criminal based on the ideas and meaning behind a prison uniform. People in prison uniforms are deemed as lesser than humans and when mugshots of the imprisoned are released, it is almost accepted by the public that they deserved whatever
punishment they are receiving in prison. Uniforms and dress can not only display signs of power, but they can display hierarchies of perceived subordination (McLeod, 2020).

**EFFECTS OF HOMOGENOUS DRESS ON CULTURE**

Creating a homogenous way of dress eliminates room for diversity of outward expressions of identity. It is also an effective way to erase culture due to dress being a way to represent and distinguish cultures. Dress can be an extension of a person’s personality, and through its removal, it erases this part of themself and their identity. This removal of identity was seen in the residential schools and was also seen in the uniforms of government forces. It eliminates the ability to display individuality and act on separate morals. Colonialism and its use of attire to oppress or mobilize a group is often overlooked and purposely covered up. The discussion of residential schools or even the mentioning of them in American education is nonexistent and America’s education surrounding the genocide of Indigenous people is subpar and severely inadequate (Boone, 2018). There are other methods of colonialism that have been used to oppress indigenous groups, but fashion has been an undeniable and important tool in colonialism that should not be forgotten.

**FASHION AND CAPITALISM**

The capitalist side of fashion may be better known to most people. It is no secret that the fashion industry plays a large part in consumer culture and the exploitation of the Global South (Barenblat & Mayer, 2020). In instances of colonialism, cultural dress was erased, but the commodification of cultural dress and the appropriation of it for the sake of profit also occurs through capitalism. Cultural appropriation is when a piece of a minority culture is used in a disrespectful and exploitative way. Instances of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry can be seen through Comme Des Garçon using wigs that resembled traditional Egyptian hairstyles on
white models, or when Urban Outfitters appropriated Navajo prints and capitalized off of the name “Navajo” for their products (Lee, 2020).


The fashion industry can be destructive by portraying impossible body images, overpricing products, and performing cultural appropriation. But a large part of capitalism and its role within the fashion industry is what Karl Marx called alienation (Tucker et al., 1978). This theory explained the intentional separation of the production of products to the consumer. This way, when the capitalist exploits their workers to gain more profit, the consumers are blind to what is happening and continue to consume. This intentional structuring to maintain exploiting people for their labor is the most troubling part of the fashion industry. The companies can then rely on cheap and exploitative labor of people in the Global South, places where their situations are rarely talked about on the other side of the globe.

ALIENATION IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY
Our experience in buying fashion products consists of seeing the clothes in stores or online. The process and representation of the workers who are responsible for making the very products are not presented. This purposeful phenomenon explained by Marx erases the connection between the buyer and the creator. This leaves no room for the buyer to see the exploitative working conditions that garment workers are in. This ignorance further promotes mass production since nothing is stopping the consumer from buying. Because we are detached from the process of how clothes are made and how textiles are created, we see clothes as products that are solely for our consumption rather than products that were created by human beings. What is left out in consumer culture is the exploitation of people in the Global South and countries in South East Asia, Latin America, and Africa. We miss the severing of fingers for the sake of profit, endless workdays, weeks, and months, and the lack of ethics and care towards the workers (Barenblat & Mayer, 2020).

CAPITALISM, COLONIALISM, AND SLAVERY

The origins of the process of creating clothing in America were built off the labor of the colonized, exploited, and enslaved. As Céline Semaan points out in her article *Understanding Sustainability Means Talking About Colonialism* (2018), “the world trade routes being used today to exchange labor, resources, and goods are largely the same as they were a century and a half ago” (Semaan, 2018, para. 3). The tragedies of colonialism continue in everyday trade and are backed by capitalism with “most of these resources [being] extracted precisely in nations destabilized from colonial violence” (Barenblat & Mayer, 2020, para. 8). Though colonialism may not look the same as it did hundreds of years ago, the effects are still seen in the systems that we use today.
To further analyze the ways the United States made or received its products, the creation of clothing before the Civil War was largely dependent on slavery. According to Helen Bradley Foster’s (1997) book titled *New Raiments of Self: African American Clothing in the Antebellum South*, America depended on slave labor for the process of creating their clothes. Enslaved labor was used to grow cotton, linen, and hemp which were all used to make cloth and textiles. These fibers were then used by other slaves to make the textiles or shipped to northern industrial centers where poor whites were exploited for their work. These exploited workers would make the textiles and sew them to be shipped elsewhere to be cut and resewn into pieces of clothing. The process of fashion in the United States is deeply rooted in slavery and exploitation. The use of slaves and the exploitative work conditions of poor whites would then be outlawed, but the United States continues to exploit workers in a colonial way - this time on a global scale.

**COVID AND THE FURTHER EXPLOITATION OF TEXTILE WORKERS GLOBALLY**

The world of fashion and its ties with capitalism creates a dark and unspoken realm of workers whose lives are consumed with creating textiles to continue the consumer’s lifestyle. People’s lives on the other side of the globe are exploited for the sake of current and new fashion trends for lower costs. With the fashion industry and media promoting trend after trend, the desire for more clothes never ends, in turn, giving garment workers no break. Even during COVID-19 when in-person shopping went down and an invisible airborne virus was global, garment workers were still expected to work. And not only were they expected to work, but they also worked without pay (Barenblat & Mayer, 2020).

The largest companies in the world refused to pay the garment workers when sales were down both online and in stores. As a result, billions of dollars weren’t paid to the garment workers, leaving millions without severance, medical expenses, and food security (Barenblat &
Mayer, 2020). Workers in countries such as Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Myanmar were left without pay despite the labor already being done. Accounts from garment workers explain how the reaction of the Western world to COVID-19 will be unforgettable due to their treatment of laborers in places such as Pakistan and Bangladesh (Barenblat & Mayer, 2020). Critiques of the West trying to be “sustainable” are a part of popular debate while at the same time U.S companies not paying billions of dollars to garment workers during COVID isn’t gaining any traction in mainstream media. Protests began against companies like Urban Outfitters and Wal-Mart, and unrest from the workers continued. Through the control of media, no headlines featured the struggles of the people who have made the very fabric that we see in local stores. Garment workers' wages dropped 21% during the pandemic while the top 20 most profitable fashion brands increased by 11% (Joy, 2021).

This shows that the fashion industry is largely about profit rather than the well-being of human beings. The people that make the fashion industry possible and keep it running in the first place are paid no mind. Rather than focusing on what fashion can do positively, the fashion industry revolves around capital rather than the creative and beneficial outlets that it provides. It takes away the cultural benefits that fashion can and has had and has adopted a capitalistic ideology.

CONTROL AND THE CONNECTION BETWEEN COLONIALISM AND CAPITALISM

European colonialism and its intent to exploit a people and its land to generate economic profit and political gain is inherently tied to the rise of modern-day capitalism (Ince, 2018). Within the process of colonialism and enacting capitalism, a sense of control has to be established by the state to prevent the oppressed and exploited populations from revolting and rising up. In Marx’s analysis of capitalism, he views the state as the means by which a capitalist
ruling class maintains its position of dominance. Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, separates Marx’s definition of the state into two elements or “apparatuses” which are the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) (Felluga, 2011).

**REPRESSIVE STATE APPARATUS**

According to Althusser, the RSA maintains the capitalist ruling class’ dominance by force or the threat of it (Felluga, 2011). Althusser says that the RSA consists of the police, the courts, and the army. When they need to, these groups will use violence to repress the working class (Felluga, 2011). The aforementioned use of fashion by the police and the military to display power has a relationship within the RSA. By giving uniforms to the police and the army, it legitimizes the group and externally gives the police and army power. This legitimization adds to the reasoning behind the continuance of violence from the police and army to their country’s civilians. This public perception of power from the police and military through their dress creates a narrative whenever public acts of violence are spread. It allows people to validate their actions simply because they are the police or military and that they can and are allowed to perform such acts.

**IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS**

This brings the conversation to the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The ISA maintains the capitalist ruling class’s dominance by controlling people’s ideas, values, and beliefs (Felluga, 2011). Althusser says that the ISA consists of religion, the media, and the education system. Through police propaganda and the spread of the idea that police serve and protect people on top of preventing crime, a certain belief, and faith in police are created (Felluga, 2011). This belief and faith gives a perception that whatever the police do, they are doing to serve and protect the people. This falsity and misinformation allows for the constant violence and repression from the
police and military to maintain the dominance of the capitalist ruling class. Displaying police in uniform in shows, movies, and ads where they are helping the community is an example of where fashion is used to uphold capitalism and dominance over the working class. Making the act of impersonating a police officer or military person illegal gives power and status to those that wear these uniforms. And through the ISA, it allows those who wear the uniform to commit acts of violence publicly.

Colonialism and capitalism both require control over people. Colonialism used and continues to use fashion as another means to control people. It strips people of their identities to make their bond with their people and community weaker. It destroys identity and takes away culture to turn them into something more malleable. The fashion industry is an example that purposefully tries to hide the way it controls and exploits people. An innate trait of the capitalist industry is the ability to control people and their time. We may see work and various types of work as necessary when in reality, this is a concept created, supported, and advertised by capitalism to continue to uphold capitalist systems.

A focus on the way fashion is used to control puts emphasis on the importance and power of fashion. By colonizers and oppressors using fashion as a means of control, this admits that fashion has power. Slaves were denied an education because education is powerful and it was recognized that through education, more opportunities for escape and revolt would follow (Williams, 2005). Oppressed groups were and are denied the ability to unify and express themselves through fashion because it is recognized that fashion is powerful and has the ability to go against their oppressors. Fashion’s power to oppress and exploit also can liberate and empower especially those with intersectional identities.
Oppressors have used fashion as a tool to oppress the oppressed. This phenomenon is not exempt from modern day politics and attempts to control the oppressed. Through the works of Ben Barry and Daniel Drak (2019), both faculty at the Parsons School of Design at the New School, they discuss how politics in Ontario, Canada have restricted queer and trans folks from presenting themselves through dress. Barry and Drak (2019) discuss the situation in Ontario, Canada where there is a right-wing movement through the election of a social conservative Premier that repealed a progressive sexual education curriculum teaching about the relationship between queer and trans folks and bodies. This election took place within broader neoliberal capitalist and settler homonationalist context of Canada which further oppresses queer and trans youth in Ontario. Barry and Drak (2019) use David Harvey’s (2007) definition of neoliberal capitalism and explains it as a “form of deregulated capitalism that “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade”” (Barry & Drak, 2019, p. 682). This form of capitalism emphasizes individual agency, which in turn, lets the state decide what a “preferred” citizen looks like through the evaluation of who is successful, wealthy, and productive (Barry & Drak, 2019). This also allows the state to “regulate… bodies through neoliberal criteria” and decide who is expendable and who can be excluded (Barry & Drak, 2019, p. 683). Homonationalism according to Paur (2017) is “the dominant form of “national homosexuality”—often created and perpetuated by rightwing populist governments—which “operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual
“subjects” (Paur, 2017, p. 2). Barry and Drak (2019) explain how Canada’s uses homonationalism to “protect queers that it deems respectable while excluding sexual-racial subjects and continuing colonization” (Barry and Drak, 2019, p. 683). Canada is able to boast about its inclusion of queers within their borders while also controlling who in the queer community is acceptable and what they are supposed to look like.

In Judith Butler’s book, *Gender Trouble* (1999), her concept of performativity explains how gender “ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” and goes on to say that” and continues to say how gender is “a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1999, p. 179). In other words, through repetitive actions throughout time, the identity of gender is created through the social acceptance that these repetitive acts are normal and characteristic to the people that perform them. Performativity explains how gender is only real if it continues to be performed. This is not to say that gender does not have a cultural importance in society and creates real feelings of normalcy. But due to this feeling of normalcy in gender and the affirmation it gets in society, the people that do not perform these repetitive acts in the ways that society expects are the ones that are labeled as deviant and excluded.

I discuss Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and the exclusion of folks that do not fit the norm as applied to gender because, with the case of Ontario, Canada, the people that do not fit the “respectable” notions of queer folks are ultimately excluded in the ways Butler predicted. The acceptance of queer folks in Ontario extended only to the “one-dimensional understandings of queerness through homonationalism… Queer liberation [only] benefited cisgender gay white
men because they fit within and are privileged by the colonialist and capitalist system” (Barry & Drak, 2019, p. 684). Through this definition of who in the queer community is accepted, it largely leaves out much of the queer and trans community, especially those who are disabled, racialized, or low-income. Being both queer or trans and are disabled, racialized, or low-income is called having intersectional identities, or having multiple identities that can be discriminated against (Crenshaw, 1989). Butler also said “[t]he effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1999, p. 179). Therefore, if queer and trans folks, especially those with intersectional identities, do not fit the style, bodily presentation, and presumably fashion of those that are accepted, they are further excluded and removed from society. They are rejected the privileges of those that do fit into these accepted norms. The removal of queer and trans curriculum paired with the performativity of gender further oppressess queer and transgender folks through the invalidation of the way they dress and style themselves according to what Ontario deems as acceptable.

The one-dimensional understanding of queerness through homonationalism is seen in the ways capitalism commodifies queerness. Barry and Drak (2019) use Sara Radin’s (2019) explanation of the capitalist use of fashion through the commodification of the rainbow and its colors in order to falsely portray support the LGBTQ2S+ ([lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and two-spirited, +) community. Radin calls this “rainbow capitalism” and is often seen only seen in limited times throughout the year. Barry and Drak (2019) continue to say “[w]hile these efforts create visibility, they dilute queer narratives, privilege those with disposable income and center neoliberal capitalism through individual acts of consumerism as the solution to queer
oppression” (Barry & Drak, 2019, p. 706). Through the use of clothes sold in malls in Ontario, people are shown who are the acceptable queer folks and who they should be celebrating. In doing so, they profit off the othering of the rest of the queer and trans community while also further oppressing them.

**CONTROLLING CREATIVES**

Control is an integral tool to prevent revolution utilized by oppressive groups. It is the historical use of mechanisms in which a privileged group applies pressure, rules, punishment, restraint, or force to a group seen as deviant or lesser than the privileged. French Philosopher Gilles Deleuze talks about how society continually changes its ways of controlling its people. Deleuze’s work is important because it helps recognize when a group is being controlled (Ceika, 2019). It also helps identify when control is being utilized to distinguish genuine human progression towards justice, or if it is another device to have the masses control each other. To explain, he draws from Michel Foucault’s analysis of sovereign and disciplinary states (Ceika, 2019). The switch from a king-ruled land to a land that is ruled by discipline made it harder for people to pinpoint who was doing the controlling and ruling, thus making it harder to revolt against a common enemy (Ceika, 2019). Foucault explained how in a sovereign state, the king was the common enemy, so it was easier to overthrow power because there was a direct line as to who was the oppressor. But in a disciplinary state, it is built in such a way that people self-regulate and monitor each other so someone like a king doesn’t have to. Blame is not put on one ruler, but rather on others within the community (Ceika, 2019). This creates a society where it is hard to find a common enemy to revolt against. Without a clear ruler, it seems that we have more freedom to do as we please over people in a sovereign state. But in reality, the perception of freedom only strengthens the power institutions have over the people in it.
With fashion, it seems that people regulate trends, a certain styler, or action that is quickly mimicked and copied until another aesthetic is favored over the previous. They are the ones that seemingly choose what is in and what is not. Trendsetters such as the artist and designer Ye West were among the people that created such trends as wearing polos, leather pants, and long tee shirts (Hughes, 2022). But when West tried to create the products and build his fashion line to challenge the very brands that he was sporting before, the self-regulation of the system took action and prevented him from doing so. With West having the power of his own in creating the clothes that he, and ultimately what the consumers, would wear, the other corporations saw this as competition. What little influence Mr. West had at the beginning of setting a trend was quickly extinguished for the sake of others making more money off his influence (Woolf, 2015). This is an example of control within the fashion industry and how this disciplinary action can be seen even in fashion. Brands that he was in collaboration with such as Louis Vuitton and Gap both marginalized Mr. West when he asked for creative freedom and royalties off products he designed (Audacy News, 2014). Ye is quoted in an interview explaining the thought process of said industries, “Don’t never let the people, the culture, the voice of hip-hop come together, really rise up and say we need a spot” (Woolf, 2015). Mr. West is trying to explain the power that the people have and how big corporations recognize this. The industry doesn’t mind, and in fact, encourages you to market their brand for free advertisement and exposure. But as soon as you want a piece of the profit and challenge their authority, not only does the company go against you, but the media does as well. After Mr. West’s first launch of his fashion line “Yeezy”, he got reviews such as “Kanye West, Designer (Yawn)” - NY Times and “Good thing Kanye West has a day job,” - The Wall Street Journal (Anderson, 2016).
It is important to mention in the example of Kanye West that he is now a billionaire with his fashion line “Yeezy” and his brand deal with Adidas (TFL, 2017). His seemingly meteoric rise to the top of streetwear brands dethroning the likes of his former brand deal Nike and other titans of the industry such as Jordan Brand was touted as an artist successfully gone designer. When in reality, this narrative was only written when Mr. West was finally seen as someone who can make a profit for a company. Companies use Black culture and artistry to sell their products, but when they are challenged by the very same people, they are pushed back until the corporations find a way to commodify their resistance.

**FASHION AND THE POTENTIAL TO BE LIBERATORY**

Beyond the idea that fashion has power, it also has the potential to be liberatory. It is more than an expression of the self. It represents the minds of the people as much as it represents individuality. Fashion has the ability to promote community, culture, and solidarity while also
giving room to express yourself and present yourself openly and honestly. It is an everyday art that brings meaning to others and yourself. In Indonesia, student activists are able to identify each other “[t]hrough their performative appearances, the visual techniques of their protest, and the engaging and repeatable textures and surfaces of their bodies” (Lee, 2016, ch. 5).

Daniel Rudi Haryanto (1999). The Demonstrator [Drawing]

To go back to the aforementioned ability that fashion has to promote solidarity and togetherness, it also holds the potential to be a part liberations on larger scales in addition to personal liberation (Barnard, 2007). It has been found that slaves in South America braided their hair to act as maps of escape (Boakye, 2018). This use of fashion and hairstyle is a direct way how fashion was used to physically liberate people. Historically, the recognition of its power and influence has been recognized by colonial powers and oppressive groups. This in turn gives recognition to the threat that fashion holds against groups that dominate minority groups. By recognizing how fashion has
power and can disrupt the plans of dominant oppressive groups, it in succession gives recognition that it can be revolutionary as well for the groups that are being oppressed.

Another example of using fashion as a means for liberation after dress was oppressed was June 19th, 1865. June 19th is a date that is celebrated annually to commemorate the day, June 19th, 1865, African Americans heard the news of the Emancipation Proclamation which was enacted on January 1st, 1863 stating all people being held as slaves to be free (Todd, 2021). Freed African Americans upon hearing the news were recorded to throw their slave clothes into creeks and rivers to wear the clothes of their masters that they took from the plantations. The symbolism in this act is rooted in the laws that were enacted that prevented slaves from wearing anything other than cloth that was labeled as “slave cloth” (Todd, 2021). Though it was required that slave masters clothe slaves, the clothing was inadequate for weather, was minimal in amount, and uncomfortable. Some laws in the South prohibited slaves from wearing clothes that were too fancy for them (Todd, 2021). This is why when the word of the emancipation proclamation reached the ears of African American slaves, it was liberating to strip their clothes that were “badges of slavery” to show that they were free (Todd, 2021). It was not just a personal act of liberation, but it was a physical liberation from dress that labeled them as slaves. Where once there were clothes for freed and enslaved people, African Americans would now only wear clothes that symbolized themselves - free. Though the effects of the Atlantic Slave Trade remain today, the traditions of Juneteenth where people often dress their best to commemorate slaves gaining freedom is an important act of unity amongst African Americans.

**LIBERATION OF IDENTITY FROM SOCIALIZATION AND INTERNALIZATION**

The process of internalization and socialization explains the reasoning behind the power of reclaiming things that were once oppressed. Internalization is where we take negative
reinforcements of beliefs, ideas, feelings, or attitudes from others as their own (Lizardon, 2021). When this is finally noticed, people can come into their true selves and can form healthier and genuine ideas of themselves. A similar process happens with socialization. When it is discovered that society is largely responsible for our actions and can cause us to reject our culture and traditional dress, it can be powerful to act on our own autonomy rather than society’s jurisdiction (Cole, 2020). Realizing that our beliefs and actions were a result of a false narrative imposed by our oppressors can be radicalizing, and reclaiming the very things that were suppressed in an effort to erase culture is revolutionary. This is why it is common for Black people to wear their natural curl patterns or wear traditional and protective hairstyles rather than trying to fit the eurocentric standards of beauty enacted through centuries of slavery and racism (Donaldson, 2022). According to Romina Brown, CEO and President of Strategic Solutions, “in 2009, chemical relaxers accounted for 60 percent of the multi-cultural hair category. In 2019, that market share only grazed five percent” (Simeon, 2021, para. 23). This shows that there is a progressing movement toward embracing Black culture and Black hair. Liberation from false narratives imposed by slavery is a continuing process, but it is happening and it is on a large scale. This process of reclaiming is an act of liberation from white standards and a proclamation of embracing the self. Fashion and different styles can be liberating not only for identity but also culturally.

LIBERATION FROM COLONIAL OPPRESSION IN FASHION AND RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS CULTURE

Indigenous dress holds meaning and significance to Indigenous tribes and people. Dress showed connections to specific tribes, and even to family. A testimony from Piita Irniq recalled their clothing being made by their mother using the materials such as caribou and sealskin that
were hunted by his father, and later himself (Ottmann, 2020). Indigenous dress and styles had a familial connection, and also a cultural one. To reclaim this culture and reject the colonial imposition that was once forced on Indigenous people liberates them from the control of their oppressors. There is a movement in Alaska doing just this through reclaiming a Native practice of tattooing that dates back 10,000 years (Allaire, 2022). Through colonization and boarding schools in the 19th and 20th centuries, bans were imposed on Indigenous traditions that included dress and styles such as tattooing (Allaire, 2022). It wasn’t until recently where Indigenous people in Alaska started to revive the tradition of tattooing called Yidįįłtoo which appears as three distinctive lines on the chin as well as lines on the cheeks or the corners of the eyes. The lines resemble a rite of passage and are often a symbol of coming of age for women.


https://www.vogue.com/article/in-alaska-indigenous-women-are-reclaiming-traditional-face-tattoos
At the age of 14, The Hän Gwich’in and Oglala Lakota model Quannah Chasinghorse decided she wanted the traditional tattoos after discovering the Yidįįłtoo tradition practiced by her ancestors (Allaire, 2022). In the same way Indigenous clothing had ties with family, Chasinghorse’s tattoos also had ties with her family with her wanting her mother, Jody Potts-Joseph, if she would be the one to tattoo her in the traditional stick and poke fashion. Getting the tattoo is now ceremonious for many indigenous women in Alaska. Jody Potts-Joseph tattoos others after getting the Yidįįłtoo herself. She says “there’s a cultural revolution going on, where we’re reclaiming our identity and our culture” and speaks on how “Taking ink beneath the skin helps erase the historical damage of betrayal and pain inflicted by others, because it is a form of permanent medicine” (Allaire, 2022).

Like clothing, the Yidįįłtoo tattoos can resemble what group they come from with different widths of the lines resembling their association with a group. Instead of using fashion and styles to display power and fear, it is used to distinguish someone from the experiences they have in life. Like the Yidįįłtoo tradition, the Māori people, who are the Indigenous Polynesian people to the mainland of New Zealand, have similar traditions called Tā moko (100% Pure New Zealand, n.d). Tā moko is a unique expression of culture and heritage through tattoos and is used to symbolize many things such as nobility, leadership, and abilities. It is also used to separate people from one another in a way that doesn’t create a destructive hierarchy that allows for exploitation and dominance. Instead, differentiating tattoos can resemble one’s life journey, ancestry, and personal history. As with the Yidįįłtoo tradition, the tradition of Tā moko was also disrupted by colonization but is being revived today.

FASHION-HACKING AND THE LIBERATORY POTENTIAL FOR QUEER AND TRANS FOLKS
In reaction to Ontario, Canada’s shift to right-wing politics and the removal of queer and trans curriculum, fashion-hacking is seen to have a potential to resist the erasure of the queer and trans community. In doing so, fashion is seen to have the ability to also resist the heteronormative, white, patriarchal, and ableist discourse and policies enacted by the right-wing party. Fashion hacking “redistributes power from the fashion system to previously passive consumers by sharing skills and transferring knowledge about the creation of fashion” (Barry & Drak, 2019, p. 685). Recognizing the potentials of fashion-hacking, Barry and Drak put on “hackathons” in the Ontario area. In these hackathons, “the queer and trans youth deconstructed and reconstructed existing fashion media, clothing and fashion shows to express their experiences, identities and desired futures” (Barry & Drak, 2019, p. 681). The purpose of this for the queer and trans youth who were mostly, Black, Indigenous, people of color, disabled and/or working class, was not necessarily to resist right-wing movements, but it was to give them an opportunity and the skills to create a community for queer and trans folks. Theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) called this “queer world-making” but Barry and Drak extend this definition to include how queer injustices are tied with racism, ableism, colonialism, capitalism, and other systems of oppression (Barry & Drak, 2019). This version of queer world-making through the use of fashion hacking allowed the participants of the hackathon to deconstruct the capitalist fashion system through the making of their own clothes, building community and “designing themselves into the world on their own terms” (Barry & Drak, 2019, p. 686).

By allowing queer and trans folks the opportunity to create a world where their existence is accepted through their own terms through fashion allows opportunity for the destruction of oppressive systems and replacing them with something better. In Madison Moore’s (2018) book,
Fabulous: The Power of Style and the Rise of Beautiful Eccentrics, they discuss how queer and trans people, and particularly those of color, create their own looks out of imagination rather than for monetary gain. The purpose is for happiness, pleasure, and the desire to be seen in their own spaces and in public to counteract white supremacy, racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Through queer world-making using the medium of fashion, it begins to eliminate systems such as homonationalism and neoliberal capitalism as seen in Ontario, Canada. It reimagines our world that is not based on capital and the exclusion of identities.

The participants of the hackathon created pieces that allowed them to embrace their identities and experiences while making room for themselves and others that may share their identities and experiences. An example was a hat that had the acronym “P.U.S.H” on it that stood for “pray until something happens.” The participant ironed on “out homophobia” to create the saying “push out homophobia” saying how “[t]he hat was just a nice way to be like, fuck you to religion and how it controls my family’s beliefs … to push out homophobia and then I will be happy” (Barry & Drak, 2019, p. 690).

Another example was where a trans-masculine participant hacked a button up shirt by attaching a rainbow flag onto the back of it. The participant wanted to wear a suit to their prom, and their parents said they could only afford a second-hand gown. So in wanting to wear what they created at the hackathon, the participant plans on wearing the hacked suit to their prom to assert their masculine presentation and queerness (Barry & Drak, 2019).
Evidence of building a community through the hackathon was shown when participant’s friends who they met at the event offered to accompany them at their prom to offer safety, solidarity, and dance partners (Barry & Drak, 2019). Through the hacking of fashion, queer and trans youth are able to reimagine a world where they aren’t excluded by the systems of society. It liberates them from the society that puts them into states of duress, and instead gives them a new community designed by themselves. Fashion is a way for them to express their identities unapologetically, and allows them to create communities where they are seen and accepted.

REVOLTING AGAINST THE EXPLOITATION OF TEXTILE WORKERS

Organizations across the world are uniting in efforts to combat the exploitation of garment workers and the commodification of human lives. Organizations like IndustriALL, “the global union federation that supports more than 50 million workers around the globe” fight for the freedom from exploitation of industrial workers across the world (Daro, 2019, para. 1). Nina Daro (2019) accounts her time interning for IndustriALL and her travels across Southeast Asia to explore the different unions and workshops that were being run. She noted how the union members recognized that this was going to be a slow process to “make monumental change in the entire sector,” but it has to start somewhere (Dina, 2019, para. 5. These same groups across the Global South have performed successful 10-day hunger strikes in Mauritius to raise their wages and campaigns that strive for more exposure to the lives of the people that make the clothes that people wear across the country. Posters and slogans made by unions in Southeast Asia cried out for large companies like Nike and Adidas to “Care about your workers not just about your profits” (Dina, 2019, para. 6)
Workers within these unions have been able to find community and use language such as “comrades”, “brother”, and “sister” to show solidarity in experiences and their goals. Daro accounted that “[i]n a meeting between a supplier with factories throughout Southeast Asia and a union with members from the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia, every participant began his or her statements with, “thank you all for attending this meeting. It is the first of many, but I’m glad we started with process”’ (Daro, 2019, para. 5). There is a tremendous amount of empathy between countries. Shared experiences and hardships are able to transcend language barriers, and the desire for the same goals helps unify garment workers to work against the very systems that oppress them. Though unions in the Global South are relatively new, they are the organizations that are directly fighting against capitalism in hopes of a life without exploitation in the name of fashion.

There are other ways where people are hoping to combat capitalism through fashion. Jody Potts-Joseph removes the barriers capitalism imposes on practicing traditional Yidjiłtoo tattooing. Tattoos are notorious for being expensive, but Potts-Joseph charges nothing for Indigenous women wanting to get a Yidjiłtoo tattoo. She explains how it is a more sacred process and does trade rather than money. Potts-Joseph has received medicines, caribou meat, and beadwork as an exchange for her eight to nine-hour sessions. She explains how she “never want[s] money to be a barrier to getting this powerful medicine that helps with healing” (Allaire, 2022, para. 5). Capitalism can be a deterrence to those that want to pursue traditional forms of dress and style, but people like Potts-Joseph are able to provide services for the sake of tradition rather than capital.

Liberation from creative control
There was a lot to learn from the experiences of Ye West and his experiences with large corporations underselling him and commodifying his ideas without giving him any of the royalties. West now owns his “Yeezy” brand and its trademark which receives a 15% royalty on wholesale with the Adidas and Yeezy partnership. Also, despite prior fallouts with Gap, Mr. West has signed a 10-year with Gap for their “Yeezy Gap” apparel line (Hughes, 2021). West has also shown that designers can have different avenues and ways of making it within the fashion world. Many Black-owned brands today don’t have to rely on retailers to distribute their products and promote their brand. Brands such as FTP, Joe Fresh Goods, and The Good Company through the use of the internet and social media have been able to sell directly to consumers and therefore can control their margins, make a profit, and supply only what the market demands (Hughes, 2021). These companies are allowed more creative and financial control over their brands while still collaborating with the likes of New Era, Converse, and New Balance.

CONCLUSION

Liberation is an act of rebellion against an oppressive group that exploits others and their resources. These oppressive groups control and oppress people in order to benefit their economic or political position at the expense of others. Oftentimes, the people that are being controlled or oppressed are people that pose a threat to the oppressors. The oppressed have something that challenges the goals of their oppressors. In colonization, colonizers target traditions, such as dress, that unite the oppressed because a sense of community makes it harder to control a group of people. Whether the oppressed intentionally use these things against their oppressors, the oppressors will dismantle whatever has the potential to oppose their goals. The dynamic of oppression is the recognition of a potential power or threat that a group of people has that goes against the dominant group’s interests. This leads to attempts to stifle these groups of people that
possess this potential to maintain the dominant group’s plans of exploitation and personal gain. When the oppressed liberate themselves from these oppressions, they are freeing themselves from the control of an oppressive group making freedom and autonomy inherent within the definitions of liberation.

Liberation takes on many forms and can contain different qualities. Common characteristics that can be attributed to but aren’t necessarily required for the success of liberations the processes of organizing people, allocating resources, having solidarity, and possessing common grievances. The goal of this paper was to see whether fashion and dress can belong within frameworks of liberation due to its involvement with oppression.

Cultural dress and bodily adornment being erased through colonization has affected the value that fashion has today. The importance and meaning behind fashion can be undermined by the frivolousness surrounding it and the exclusivity of the fashion industry. Fashion is often defined by media through luxury brands with exorbitant prices and runway shows that are often invite-only. But fashion is more than this, and it does a disservice to it if it is minimized to only the luxurious fashion industry. This is not to say that fashion itself is a reflection of the fashion industry. The need to differentiate between dress and fashion shows how the oppressive acts of colonialism and capitalism have degraded fashion into a commodity through the implicit thoughts it evokes.
The reduction of fashion to what we see in the media makes us forget the potential that fashion has for self-liberation and to unite a group of people. Historically, fashion can be seen as a target of oppression and control in order to dominate a group of people. This recognition of the power of fashion shows that fashion also has the potential to be liberatory. Whether it be through personal liberation through the allowance of self-expression, or the use of bodily adornment to liberate a group of people from their oppression, fashion has an undeniable purpose in liberation.

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