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Digital Threads, Interwoven Scenes: An Ethnography of Sustainable Fashion Production in Ghana and Finland

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Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, dear members of the audience,

When I started to think about the title of my dissertation, a colleague of mine suggested including a play on the word 'vogue', referencing the world-renowned, iconic fashion magazine. However, my initial reaction was 'absolutely not', since it would have almost felt like a betrayal of the Finnish sustainable fashion designers taking part in this research.

These designers wanted to create clothes that were not only fashionable but carried something of lasting value—because, to them, true 'sustainability' referred to something outside the cyclical fashion calendar, and its constantly changing trends and magazine covers, and the ever-increasing global consumption patterns. By contrast, some of the Ghanaian fashion designers I was in contact with had actually appeared on the pages of *Vogue* and had been pulled into a global fashion marketplace that craved authentically created sustainable clothing.

In Ghana, locals had to deal with the consequences of the exploding consumption of fast fashion in the West, filling local landfills, beaches, and sewage systems with an endless influx of poor-quality, second-hand clothing. In fact, 15 million pieces of second-hand clothing are shipped to Ghana every week, of which approximately 40% is categorised as unusable waste (The Or Foundation 2022).

Whereas Finnish sustainable designers were hoping to tackle the global environmental and social problems caused by fashion, by creating new options for the Finnish market, the Ghanaian designers hoped to carry the torch of Ghanaian, and more generally African-made, fashion, with the ultimate intention of shifting the power structures within an unequal global fashion market.

When I began planning this project, I initially wanted to explore notions of sustainability, through the meanings fashion designers attached to the concept, in different marketplaces. However, due to unforeseeable changes, I altered and expanded the scope of my study to consider the digitally connected marketplace, and how we all participate in the discourses that shape and define complex and often paradoxical concepts.

This is of particular interest when considering terms that determine global responsibilities and local consequences, and vice versa, such as sustainability. In this way, the term is both formed by and influences phenomenon across an immense scale, from the highly local, such as a single market street in Accra, to the almost limitless reach of the World Wide Web.

In my dissertation, titled *Digital Threads, Interwoven Scenes: An Ethnography of Sustainable*

Fashion Production in Ghana and Finland, I focus on Finnish and Ghanaian sustainable fashion brands and independent designers that use artisanal techniques, all of whom aim to source their textile materials and produce their clothing as locally as possible.

In the text, I bring in the voices of many interlocutors, meaning the designers and other individuals participating in this research, and focus on four main characters, so to speak. Through the eyes of Benny and Sunshine from Ghana, and Sofia and Mai from Finland, we learn what it means to produce ethical and ecologically sustainable fashion in a world that, basically, does not need any new clothing.

Many of these brands also navigate a global marketplace and cater to a cosmopolitan clientele, willing to pay higher prices for pieces of clothing that tell a sustainable story. These two countries, Finland and Ghana, provide two drastically different cultural and socio-economic contexts. But, the fashion brands in both countries promote themselves with similar themes of authenticity and locality, and are intertwined, in different ways, through the logics of social media algorithms and the dynamics of global fashion trends.

As an anthropologist, my initial plan was to do a year's worth of on-site fieldwork in Ghana. As I embarked on this journey in the beginning of December 2019, the city of Accra was filled with hustle and bustle, especially due to the Year of Return campaign that marked 400 years since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Jamestown, Virginia. Rumours swirled that 400 000 tourist visas had been approved for December alone, mostly for, as the Ghanaian organisers liked to call it, the 'global African family'.

The state was looking for international investors, preferably people who had an ancestral tie to the country or the African continent in general. Locals were busy producing items to sell, renovating hotels and restaurants, and organising all sorts of events with both local and international celebrities as performers or guests. For example, supermodel Naomi Campbell and rapper Cardi B both made appearances.

Little did we know that all of our lives would be so drastically changed within a few short months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Ghana decided to close its national borders, I had to return home, and, after some months of contemplating my next moves, I decided to continue my fieldwork in Finland, this time with Finnish fashion designers who used similar artisanal production methods and branding tactics as my interlocutors in Ghana.

The contrast to the busy city land- and soundscape of Accra could not have been bigger, as most indoor public spaces were closed in Helsinki, due to pandemic-related restrictions. In addition, as many if not all of us here experienced during lockdown, more and more of our lives were taking place via screens.

Following the groundbreaking work of Tom Boellstorff (2016) and my honoured opponent Daniel Miller (Horst and Miller 2012), anthropologists have long understood that the physical, or the so-called 'real' world, and the digital world are not separate spheres, but rather co-constitute our lived-in realities, the sense of ourselves, and the formation of social relations. Through my research, I wish to show how the fluidity between the digital and the physical worlds manifests itself within the global fashion marketplace.

I always knew how important social media was for the makers of fashion, particularly given the significance of Instagram. But, it was the Black Lives Matter movement that really made me understand—in ethnographic terms—the connectedness of digitally mediated trends, personal politics, and their effects on the

formation of identities, as well as the definition and production of sustainable goods.

The Black Lives Matter movement is a political and social movement that seeks to highlight the racial inequalities experienced by Black people, with a primary interest in police brutality and racially motivated violence. After the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, many thousands of people gathered in front of this very building[1] to show support for global Black liberation.

Digitally, while the fashion designers in Ghana benefitted from the increased visibility on social media apps, especially through the several Black-owned lists that often were put together by activists and other online users in the US and the European Union, Finnish fashion designers were posting informative content on how to support the global solidarity movement and to tackle racism not only in the fashion world but also in society in general.

Thus, in the end, my research became a multi-sited ethnography in Ghana, in Finland, and on social media. All in all, I gathered data intermittently for 2 years. I followed not only fashion designers, but also fashion activists and sustainable fashion brands from all over the world to provide a fuller context of the worlds in which my interlocutors operated. Some anthropologists like to call this, quite fittingly, patchwork ethnography (Günel and Watanabe 2024).

For a long time, I thought this would become a comparative study of Finland and Ghana. Instead, it shifted to the flows and disconnections between these two locations, which are formed in a seemingly unbounded and digital world. As well as the pandemic crisis, the social uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement created recognisable and shareable 'global moments' for people in a multitude of locations.

Intertwined with discourses on identity politics, these globally recognised and locally experienced events created new, ethical considerations for the fashion designers and activists in both Ghana and Finland. These global moments were amplified through widely recognised memes and other types of social media content, and were shaped by a variety of perspectives that were made visible in democratic online spaces.

At the same time, it also felt like identities, political stances, and even opinions had become obstacles to navigate in an otherwise borderless social media landscape, with a heightened awareness of the power of new and sometimes divisive identity politics. Physical barriers were also created in the global supply chains, which faced severe friction caused by the pandemic, and the inflation of prices that followed, making it more difficult to acquire textile materials from the global market.

Thus, I argue that sustainability in fashion is a site of negotiation and contestation in which regulatory bodies, large fashion corporations, activists, small-scale producers, and consumers, engage in efforts to define—from their various perspectives—how to tackle the environmental and social devastation caused by the global fashion system.

To uncover the multi-layered meanings of sustainability, I have brought works from different fields of study into conversation to address topical debates connected with fashion production and the effects of social media platforms on artisan fashion designers and their branding activities.

Drawing heavily on anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's work (2004), I introduce 'scenes', or '*skene*' in Finnish, as fluid and digitally stretched spaces, where my interlocutors actively discussed the nuanced perspectives on sustainability, fashion, cosmopolitanism, and

authenticity. Scenes, which were particularly visible through social media, had the potential to link individuals as well as groups of people from faraway places through commonly shared and recognised aesthetic references. This meant that the aspirational and strategic work of my interlocutors related to them wanting to sell their clothing or wanting to provide information on sustainable lifestyles in general could become intertwined with truly global discourses on sustainability and fashion.

In Finland, as the local scene for sustainable artisanal fashion was highly critical of the global fashion industry, it became important for my interlocutors to denounce certain fashion ideals. This was evident in how they, for example, wanted to stay away from images of glitz and glamour, and instead be associated with frugality and rationality. In Ghana, especially due to the Global African diaspora and the visibility brought on by the Black Lives Matter movement, my interlocutors could witness how their sales increased, but also how they could experiment with Ghanaian, and more generally African, aesthetics of pre-colonial times that intertwined 'authenticity' with their existing elaborate and luxurious designs.

Sustainable clothing is not only about material things, and their physical attributes, but also about the narratives that bring forth the societal debates that are linked to the phenomenon (Hepburn 2013). Generally, these narratives oppose mass-manufacturing and faceless fashion corporations, and, instead, champion what my interlocutors liked to call the 'good side of fashion'.

The Finnish designers were looking for 'objectively' sustainable textile materials, which often created strict categories with highly scientific and rigid definitions of material qualities. Conversely, my Ghanaian interlocutors considered material sustainability in a more flexible way. To them, sustainability had always been practiced on the African continent, and supporting local weaving communities that produced high-quality, handwoven material or purchasing other types of fabrics from the local markets were just a few examples of these well-entrenched and long-standing practices.

Whereas, in Finland, polyester made from oil is regarded as a top offender in terms of environmental damage. In Ghana, as long as the fabric was bought from a family-owned, local market stall, the journey and story behind a polyester item could give it sustainable status. Interestingly, when used in African designs promoted to a Western audience, the fashion media, such as the Italian *Vogue*, labelled these polyester creations as sustainably sourced.

In the global marketplace, sustainability is often viewed as a singular quality of its own, which can be objectively calculated and traced through standardised materials, certificates, and production methods. These types of standards were, however, often out of reach for my interlocutors in both Ghana and in Finland. Instead, they relied on personal experiences and trust within the supply chain. In this discussion, I engaged with anthropologists Robert J. Foster (2008) and Brad Weiss (2016), whose works on both global and local supply chains helped me to understand how the fashion designers had to balance the local and subjective qualities of their fashion making with the logics of the global trade and the qualifying powers of the market.

Here, I mean that the qualities of sustainability the designers themselves wanted to underline could gain new meanings in the marketplace. Applying the work of anthropologist Webb Keane (2003), I argue that sustainability, as both an embodied value and material category, should be analysed as a bundle in which individual qualities gain relevance and irrelevance in relation to each other depending

on the context in which sustainability is being evaluated.

Lastly, social media, especially Instagram and TikTok, has become essential to sustainable fashion design, not only due to its branding and marketing abilities, but also in its ability to authenticate and verify the sustainability claims.

Indeed, posting content on making clothes and the everyday lives of being entrepreneurs acted as proof for the claims my interlocutors made regarding sustainability. Through this type of 'authentic' content, my interlocutors could show how and why their clothes were more ethical and sustainable than others. Through more intimate and personal content, online posts opened the doors into the lives of the designers, and acted in a similar way to face-to-face encounters in the marketplace, thereby reinforcing feelings of trust.

Building on the work of anthropologist William Mazzarella (2003), my interlocutors engaged in the creation of 'commodity images', which, through explanations of clothing production, aimed to counter their audiences' alienation from the detrimental effects of fashion, while simultaneously generating a desire to buy their clothing. However, the inescapable digitality and the neoliberal tendencies of social media platforms were also a source of much tension. The feeling of necessity entailed a lot of balancing between not seeming too eager for attention while still utilising visual tropes that followers could recognise. This often referred to remaining 'authentically' oneself, whilst still curating a stylistically cohesive and visually pleasing feed.

Many also had to anticipate how the algorithms would treat their content, since online visibility directly correlated with their sales. In Finland specifically, my interlocutors felt like they were constantly being assessed by their increasingly critical audiences regarding how to be a 'perfectly' sustainable brand—sometimes fearing the dreaded 'cancel culture'.

My Ghanaian interlocutors were clearly more optimistic about the possibilities that social media provided since the platforms offered a space for a supportive, global community that rooted for claims of African authenticity, enhanced by new forms of digital activism that championed their brands, and gained them followers from all over the world.

In conclusion, my research draws attention to some fundamental paradoxes of our time: how ideological and politicised topics are shaped by scientific categorisations on the one hand, and highly subjective narratives on the other. In addition, my research touches upon how the participation and engagement of individuals and scenes give meaning to these paradoxes, ranging from the production and consumption of material goods to the contradictive, market-driven undertones of social media platforms.

In a world where seemingly everything, and anything, can basically be labelled as sustainable, and where everything seems to be somewhat connected through the unparalleled influence of social media, my interlocutors wanted to bring forth qualities of goodness and fairness, whilst simultaneously competing with other designers to increase their audience and sales.

As I have hopefully shown in this lectio, navigating these worlds—the physical, the material, and the digital—was not always a straightforward matter. Marilyn Strathern (2004) explains the organisation and formation of meaning in the contemporary world through the notion of fractals. Whilst a challenging concept, fractals are perhaps best explained by using the imagery of a single snowflake, formed within the clouds, which can themselves be studied as an entity in their own right. Multiple

snowflakes then fall from these clouds, and create similar looking patterns, layered on the ground.

It is only when we zoom in that we can see that each individual snowflake consists of a unique and intricate pattern. With this in mind, although the fashion designers in both Ghana and Finland seemed to engage with a singular version of 'sustainability', zooming into the specific local and individual levels revealed a multiplicity of perceptions and definitions, some used concurrently, catering to customers and digital audiences which had their own perceptions of what true sustainability looked like. Indeed, often, when I talk about this dissertation, people share their frustrations, questioning why being sustainable or why dressing sustainably is so difficult. Many people seem stressed about the climate crisis and try to find meaning and community through social media, and the endless 'threads about threads'.

To make matters more complex, large fashion companies are often accused of using misleading terminology, or greenwashing, rather than prioritising transparent steps to reduce the environmental impact of the fashion and textile industries—the second largest polluters in the world. But, beyond individual preferences for 'good clothes', sustainability as a movement requires consensus and cooperation, to include acknowledgement and action from big transnational entities and to create changes within systems and regulatory bodies. When strengthened through pressure from consumers, and the power of social and political movements to amplify voices through digitisation, it is possible to imagine new directions from policymakers and the fashion industry working together.

In exploring the vague and varied definitions of sustainability, my dissertation has shed new light on the multiple ways we—as consumers and political actors—can make more informed decisions, and how we can find communities of like-minded individuals, even on the other side of the planet.

Honoured Opponent, I now call upon you to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

NOTES

1 The Main Building of the University of Helsinki.

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