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Decentering Durability: Decarbonizing and Decolonizing Ideas and Practices of Long-Lasting Clothes

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Abstract

Durability is widely recognized as a key feature of materially resourceful, lower-carbon clothing lives. Yet most of what is known about long-lasting garments is rooted in Euro-American ways of thinking, and reproduces its structures, priorities, values and resulting actions. This paper brings a decolonial concern to understandings of clothing durability to enlarge the conceptual boundaries around it, including those that break apart dominant ideas and approaches to clothing durability in order to show difference. It presents both the “workings” and the “findings” of a small research project, ‘Decentering Durability’, examining both how research is conducted as well as what is uncovered at the

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intersection of decolonizing and resource-efficient, decarbonizing agendas for fashion.

KEYWORDS: durability, decolonizing, sustainability, fashion, diversity

Introduction

The pursuit of product durability is a cornerstone idea and strategy for environmental impact reduction. This is for good reason: extending the useful life of a product—like a garment—can lead to resource savings if the same product is maintained in active use for longer and an additional or replacement purchase is delayed. Indeed, durability is often viewed as an obvious, logical approach to lessen environmental impacts of products and is a widely accepted guiding principle of resourceful practices. Its contribution lies in creating scenarios where the resource drawdown and impacts generated by a product in manufacturing are shared out across a longer and more intensively used product life. Durability is a substantial and growing field of study with scientific, technological, design, industrial strategy, policy and behavioral dimensions. Businesses and the media subscribe to durability's assumptions and conventions and governments and state bodies favor it as a part of a suite of measures for carbon reduction (e.g., European Commission 2022), even issuing research grants—like the one that made this work possible—to explore it further.

Yet the typical approach to product durability is also almost exclusively bound up with Euro-American ways of producing knowledge and ideas about what is valuable, with an apparent total focus on these geographical contexts and durability knowledge (PLATE 2021; Cooper 2010). Rooted in a specific set of ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological assumptions, this typical approach deploys Western understandings of the world, dominated by capitalism, and produces durability ideas accordingly. It frames and represents durability in a uniform way that foregrounds and thus values certain activities and makes others less visible. It tends toward totalized conceptualisations of durability assumed to be both universally applicable and of universal value; and neither acknowledges the limits and power hierarchies implicit in this framing or makes space for diverse ways of knowing, valuing or doing that exceed Western understanding and ways of living. The dominant approach to clothing durability is therefore partial. It is also usually unaware of its own partiality.

In this paper, we seek to approach clothing durability differently. Situated at the intersection of the decarbonizing (understood in this article as a synonym of sustainability) and decolonizing agendas, we explore long-lasting clothes as sites for diverse, multiple fashion practices, not bound by Eurocentric environmental theorizing but nevertheless

part of a more ecologically resourceful approach to dress. In this paper, we extend and reflect on the findings of a small research project ‘Decentering Durability: plural ideas and practices of long-lasting clothes’ (Fletcher and Fitzpatrick 2021), a work package of the larger project *LASTING: Sustainable Prosperity through Product Durability* funded by the Norwegian Research Council. By engaging with diverse clothing durabilities as open empirical questions, we hope to enlarge the boundaries of ideas around clothing durability, including those that break apart dominant sustainability ideas and approaches to clothing durability, in order to show a difference. In addition to presenting our findings, including some decentered features of clothing durabilities, we also describe our “workings.” For us, the workings of this project are critical. Given that this research sought to open up durability territories beyond those usually favored, this required that we open up our minds as researchers too, questioning not only what we are investigating, but also our methods and approaches, that is, how we proceed.

A note on terminology: in this article, we have purposefully elected to write in the first person plural, “we.” Where “we” is used, it refers to we, the researchers, unless otherwise stated.

Colonial legacies in clothing durability, sustainable development and research

Colonial legacies—the impact of their logic, power hierarchies, systems of value—are often overlooked in understandings of clothing durability as well as in fashion, design and sustainability more broadly and also in universities, the place where this work was conducted. Actions like the enclosure of indigenous land; the creation of racialized identities as the basis of discrimination and exploitation; extractive approaches to people and natural resources; the simultaneous embedding of Western ideology, including modernity and capitalism, as *the* single and dominant story of progress and change, are produced and reproduced within present-day environmental strategies, continuing to perpetuate colonialist power relationships.

Indeed sustainable development itself—a term first coined at the UN World Council on Environment and Development meeting in 1986—and defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1986, 43)—is rooted within western paradigms (Ferreira 2017). These paradigms, forged largely in the Enlightenment, oversaw a fundamental distinction between human society and the rest of the living world (Merchant 1980). The resulting dualist split, in which humans are framed as separate to—and above—nature; rationalism above bodily and spiritual knowing; men above women; white people above people of color; reproduces patterns of disconnection, control and exploitation (Worthy 2013). Such patterns typify modernity and—perhaps

inevitably—the understandings and practices of sustainable development that have arisen from within it. This is despite these patterns being seen as responsible, at a deep level, for the ecological crisis (Plumwood 1998). In the fashion and clothing context, as in many others, dualist and capitalist forms of sustainability initiatives dominate the discourse, offering the overt promise of sustainability change while covertly reinforcing the principles of production, property, competition and power over others that profoundly undermine the outward message (Matthews 2021, 95).

In the case of clothing durability, the dominant story emphasizes instrumental thinking largely within economic practices and relationships ascribed to capitalism. Here the individual product, conceived of separate from the reality of its use and the collective fashion sector-as-system, is a site for design and technical mastery of materials and construction to deliver product life extension while also generating sales. In this story, an item of clothing is mobilized to alter future wearer behavior—and specifically to keep the same piece active for longer—and thus to increase the efficiency of materials and energy embodied in that product and reduce its carbon and environmental impact. This “ideal” narrative plays out irrespective of and unconnected with total system impact. Critically, however, collective impact of the whole fashion system is the ecological indicator that matters, as it is the collective effect that causes total ecological harm (Boehnert 2018). Despite this, individual product improvement strategies (such as those which seek to enhance durability) continue to predominate even though product-level changes been shown to be a weak force in influencing a user’s future actions (Fletcher 2012; Chapman 2010); and they do little to address the systemic nature of the sustainability challenge in fashion (Maldini 2019). A continuous increase in the volume of fashion goods sold (including of durable pieces) leads to an inevitable increase in environmental burden that no number of garments, however long they last, can ever mitigate (Fletcher and Tham 2019). Despite this, individual product improvement continues to dominate durability practices in fashion perhaps because it leaves fashion industry priorities and capitalistic structures unopposed. The result is that existing power hierarchies and systems of value remain unchallenged and durability actions, consciously or otherwise, adopt the priorities of the system they are working within. Durability then becomes a commodity rendering the relationships, practices and actions outside of this invisible, including the fashion sector’s structural reliance on economic growth.

Where decolonizing work meets fashion, an embryonic space of scholarship and practice is emerging that diverges from the predominant conceptual framework within which fashion operates. Angela Jansen (2020, 817) puts it this way, “Decolonial fashion discourse proposes a radical redefinition of fashion by delinking it from modernity—the very core of its constitution—and therefore from coloniality by redefining it

as a multitude of possibilities—in and outside of modernity—rather than a normative framework falsely claiming universality.” By extension, decolonial and decarbonizing fashion-sustainability discourse also radically redefines fashion different to a universal framework.

In the research project *Decentering Durability*, we set out to break apart a universalizing framework of durability-related decarbonizing fashion knowledge that dominates in the global North. Through this process, we came to understand the role that research and knowledge production play in shaping ideas. We adopted Tuhiwai Smith’s description of decolonization in research as concerned with, “a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices” (1999, 1) and sought to hold this criticality close in the research process, employing research methods in an approach sensitive to coloniality, making space for diverse perspectives outside of the dominant durability discourse and being alert to how power and knowledge inter-relate in the research process. This focus extended to the very place where we were conducting this research: a Western university and to the relationship between knowledge, power, colonialism and the university and how to mitigate problematic aspects of the research process from a decolonial perspective. For instance, as a small research team we acknowledged the need for more voices in this work and discussed what this might mean for us, such as giving up our roles and platform. We discussed the ways in which the people participating the project could benefit within the confines of funding structures, research ethics and budgets. We sought to create more space for these concerns and included an emphasis on care and positionality as part of our methodology. We offered a reciprocity of knowledge and time, in the spirit of sharing within the confines of the project and also employed the “and-and” approach highlighted by Cheang and Suterwalla (2020) which offers another way of moving toward plurality and challenges the either-or approach of binary and linear thinking.

We saw such steps as existing within a process that works toward the type of decolonial research that Zanotti et al. (2020, 46) describe: “not just about giving communities equal decision-making and power-sharing roles as researchers. It is also about using the research project to change dominant rationalities and practices, especially Western scientific paradigms and institutions, including the home institutions of research teams.” Certainly, in this project we were a long way off from practising decolonizing methodology and achieving either the sharing of research power with communities or changing our institutions. Yet as we turned our investigation toward decolonial concerns, we confronted a series of challenges within the confines of the Western university that clearly underscored the need for deep transformation. Inflexible funding structures for research projects and budgeting within projects, for instance, influenced who could receive payment, what sorts of work could be reimbursed and how much time could be spent on it, with the

effect of reasserting dominant ideas and practices, even when a project seeks to work otherwise.

Positionality

In this research, we sought to open up knowledge on clothing durabilities. We started by opening up ourselves, and specifically, by exploring our own positionality. We wished to understand something of how we are shaped by the world, how we understand the world and how this in turn shapes ideas about clothing-durability practices. We used it as a way to make ourselves the objects of analysis too, offering space for self-reflexive practice. Our understanding of this was shaped by our engagement with the 8 Ways protocol (2021).

We identify as White-British women, who write and speak only in English, which we recognize as having limitations for deep decolonial work. There are some similarities between us: we are both mothers, we are both from the north of England, we are both from working-class communities, we both have worked in the university in which we were based while we are conducting this research for over 10 years. Although the focus of our individual research differs, there is much in common between our approaches and worldviews. We have a shared commitment to changing the dominant approaches to fashion and sustainability, moving them away from a preference for market driven solutions and away from a relationship with nature that is reductive and instrumental. We do not seek to merge identities or to make the world uniform or unifying in terms of approach and ideas. Rather we wish to come together interdependently to seek connections and correlations between ourselves and others (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 2).

Our goal in this research project was to work toward greater sustainability change. Decolonial practices are central to a more environmentally just and safe world. Challenging the binary between nature/human also means challenging the notion of *the other*. Othering is aligned to the extractive practices of racial capitalism. We seek to challenge the idea that *we are not like them*, be that between people and the more-than-human world as a way to challenge the extractive basis of capitalism. Building a new world is about fostering local understanding and sustainable ecosystems that will replace the oppressive systems we have now. We recognize our privilege in this space. Our whiteness, our womanhood and our membership of a Western education institution. Here we enjoy the privileges of the colonial divide. We recognize this at the start of this work as we also recognize that we will benefit personally and institutionally from it. We hope to be conscious of how power relations and our privileges will shape this research. We also acknowledge that the cultural structures that we work within favor individualism over interdependence and unconsciously we carry this with us within our research. As part of our recognition of our position and its

implication, we seek to humbly learn from other ways of being, knowing, doing and valuing such as the Honorable Harvest (Kimmerer 2013, 183) and the 8 Ways Framework (2021).¹

The decentering durability project “workings”

Research is performative—it brings into being that which it explores. Gibson-Graham and Dombroski (2020, 7) explain it this way: “by the very act of focusing on certain objects or relations, by developing language with which to identify and distinguish these objects or relations ... Research can have the effect of demarcating what is reasonable, possible, legitimate and modern ... Such a conception of knowledge production acts as a salutary warning to researchers to consciously examine what effects (objects, relations) they are participating in making ‘more real’.” With this in mind, we framed our research design as care.

Care

Care, as outlined by Fisher and Tronto (1990, 41) can be understood as an ecological practice: “On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” In this work, we embraced an ethic of care as a recognition of the inevitability of our interdependence, including with clothing. To care about something is to create a relation (Bellacasa 2017). These relations can extend the boundaries of research focus into multiple other spheres. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (in Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020, 16) writes, “such diversity should be valorized” because “the understanding of the world far exceeds the Western understanding of the world.” Thus an ethic of care in shaping research also acts to counter universalizing tendencies—there is no single experience of care—favoring instead types of understanding derived from inter-relatedness, attentiveness and vulnerability. For Ben-Porath, “care is grounded in those practices of human life that are reflective of our dependence on each other” (Ben-Porath 2008, 65), this includes practices of clothing durability.

Thinking through care within a decolonial framework also means challenging the hierarchical nature of caring relationships. It led us to also discuss inequality, paternalism, colonialism, and how the past shapes the present and will go on to shape the future. Our care-full practices were embodied in a regular, monthly walk where we paid attention to our relationship as colleagues and people and sought to center our thoughts about care, work, research, movement, the body, stepping away from the screen and noticing the particularities of where we

are. We took note of the ways in which instinctive knowledge around care is unspoken and sought to develop a methodology that could be informed by knowing, being and valuing care from the outset. Other aspects of care we practised included: adopting the guidelines for the Honorable Harvest (Kimmerer 2013, 183) (Table 1) and the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning (2021) to check-in, be respectful and to guide our process; making sure to present ourselves to project participants and share our positionality so we were more known to those with whom we were speaking; being open to reciprocity of time or support (where possible) or returning time; being punctual and respectful of others time and our time; allowing children/other caring commitments to be visible in our lives, honoring the whole person as researcher; honoring those who had participated.

The guidelines for the Honorable Harvest and the 8ways protocol emphasize both gratitude and reciprocity. For us this resulted in giving around six hours of pro bono lectures and facilitation to research participants and their groups who, unprompted, made requests after the interviews were complete. Indeed if, as the Honorable Harvest guidelines suggest, that when gathering (plants, data, etc.) we must, “be accountable,” this raises important questions about what it means to research when we have to be responsible and explain our actions; and for instance, what sample sizes are practically possible to handle when, as researchers, we give back to participants as a reciprocal exchange within the research process. We also asked ourselves—without any real conclusions—what it means to conduct fieldwork and interviews when we: “Take only that which is given” and, “Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.” How, for instance, to honor all that a participant shares?

Table 1. Guidelines for the Honorable Harvest originally devised for the collection of plants (Kimmerer 2013, 183) and used in this research to guide practices of respectful gathering of data.

Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.
Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.
Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.
Never take the first. Never take the last.
Take only what you need.
Take only that which is given.
Never take more than half. Leave some for others.
Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.
Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.
Share.
Give thanks for what you have been given.
Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.
Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.

As we used the 8ways protocol as our guide, we considered how we could give back to the frameworks and knowledge that we have drawn from, including how to bring forward an agenda for action and knowledge in clothing and sustainability that recognizes structures, histories, colonialism, power and othering. We offer this paper as part of our response. We also saw the ways in which land-based cultures inform more rooted approaches to existential questions whereas consumption-based cultures tend toward more decontextualized and individualized approaches.

Different ways of knowing

In the work and also with interview participants we sought to make space for many ways of knowing, ranging from curiosity, need, experience, concepts, skillful practice, through artful means including storytelling and through emotional and instinctive knowing. As Sara Ahmed notes, “a gut feeling has its own intelligence” (2017, 22).

Practical aspects

While handling and organizing project data and examining themes, we tried to find alternatives to the linear nature of written documents including by presenting the data visually. When we were working with written material, we repeatedly re-ordered the contents of documents, trying to avoid privileging certain ideas over others in order to honor all the insights shared by our participants. We also scrutinized the words we used, turning away from the language, and therefore the research processes, of hierarchy and categorization to those which favor relationships. It is a work in progress.

Methods

The project used semi-structured interviews as its data collection method, with participants selected for diversity in a purposive sampling method from outside Euro-American contexts. The participants were found through the international network of the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion. Ten interviews were conducted online between April and June 2021, three with respondents in Africa (Sudan, Zimbabwe, South Africa), three in Latin America (Brazil and two from Mexico), two with members of Aotearoa New Zealand’s Māori community, one now based in the USA and two from India, one of whom now lives in Indonesia. [Table 2](#) provides more details about the respondents. The work took a grounded theory approach to data review and identification of emergent themes and relationships. To honor the contribution of the participants and to maintain their presence in this research, we list those who chose to have their name included. In alphabetical order they are: Manuhua Barcham, Joanne Bloch, Jeannine Diego, Gitika

Table 2. Details of contributors to the project.

Participant code	Age group	Gender	Location	Occupation
A	25–39	F	Khartoum, Sudan	Fashion Designer
B	20–55	F	Mexico City, Mexico	Lecturer
C	25–39	F	Harare, Zimbabwe	Fashion designer
D	40–55	F	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	Lecturer
E	25–39	F	Mexico City, Mexico	Fashion Academic
F	40–55	F	Bangalore, India	Fashion designer
G	40–55	M	Indian currently living in Jakarta, Indonesia	Textile engineer
H	40–55	F	Cape Town, South Africa	Academic researcher
I	40–55	M	Māori currently living in Seattle, USA	Designer
J	25–39	F	Māori, Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand	Fashion designer

Goyal, Vinit Jain, Ilena Jalil Kentros, Rudo Nondo, Hadeel Osman, Yamê Reis. The contributors' voices in the form of direct quotes are present throughout the findings of this research and in eight short videos that were made by and feature three contributors discussing clothing durability from their contexts.²

This project attempted to challenge the universality of assumptions and values underpinning durability by offering insights and practices about long lasting clothing from a range of locations. Yet we were alert to the need to continually challenge binaries, including our own way of describing durability: Euro-American/Non-Euro-American. The research process is a series of decisions. We grouped our respondents as Non-Euro-American not to generalize the specific experience of individuals or reduce difference but to add weight to challenge the lack of effectiveness of dominant ideas about durability. We recognize the tension in the process of joining individual voices from different geographies together as a single group, however in this work we seek to platform these insights not as one homogenous voice, but as constituents of plural expressions of durability.

Findings

In their work on diverse economies, Gibson-Graham and Dombroski (2020) contrast two theoretical approaches, strong and weak theory. Strong theory is closely associated with the dominant discourse and knows where power lies and is organized. "Research conducted in this mode appears to be bold and innovative because it quickly identifies the new, but merely rolls out cookie cutter analysis folding the new into a familiar embrace" (2020, 8). This is juxtaposed with weak theory which uses "thick" descriptions to break apart dominant ideas and approaches and show the ways in which they contain difference (Figure 1). The result is greater heterogeneity and an enlarged scope of imagined and possible action. We followed this latter mode, populating plural ideas and actions of long-lasting clothes with what is at hand and acknowledging many types of durabilities work and actions.

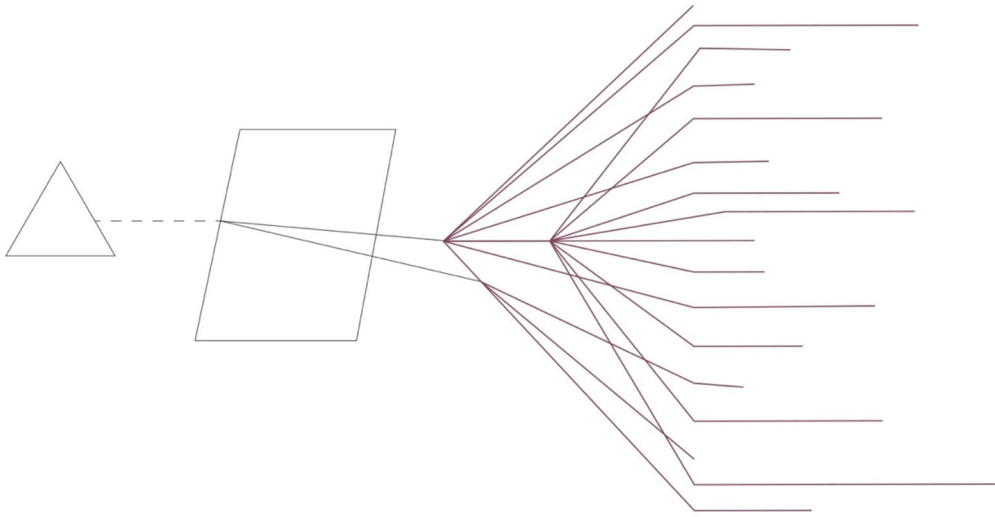


Figure 1
Breaking apart durability knowledge.

The Decentering Durability findings (Fletcher and Fitzpatrick 2021) introduce features of clothing durabilities as aspects of decentered action and understanding of long-lasting clothes (Figure 2) that emerged from the interview data. These emergent themes or features are then unpacked in our words. They include some elements that are often found in Euro-American literature on durability, like, for instance, a focus on garment design, infrastructure and political economy, although their presence here often includes distinctive non-western inflections. Other features like the body; myths and stories; colonial legacies; and places, diversify ways of thinking about, valuing and doing durability. The 14 features are not definitive or exhaustive. Rather they reflect diverse cultures, skill sets, temporalities, values, histories, economies, tastes, methods of co-operation and experiences of durability in specific places, today. A full description of these features is already in the public domain (*ibid*), we offer an edited version of them here, presented not in any order but as a network of interrelated durabilities' practices.

Fourteen features of Decentered Durability.

Temporalities

Clothing durability is complicated by its relationships with time. Ideas about time, its passing and the way it is valued, vary between cultures. Durability is a time-based phenomenon, typically defined in years, the goal being an extended, useful life. Yet life and the passing of time are both subjective and culturally conditioned and they trouble attempts to reduce durability to a single, totalizing experience. Durability is passing garments between generations. Durability is a garment lasting four

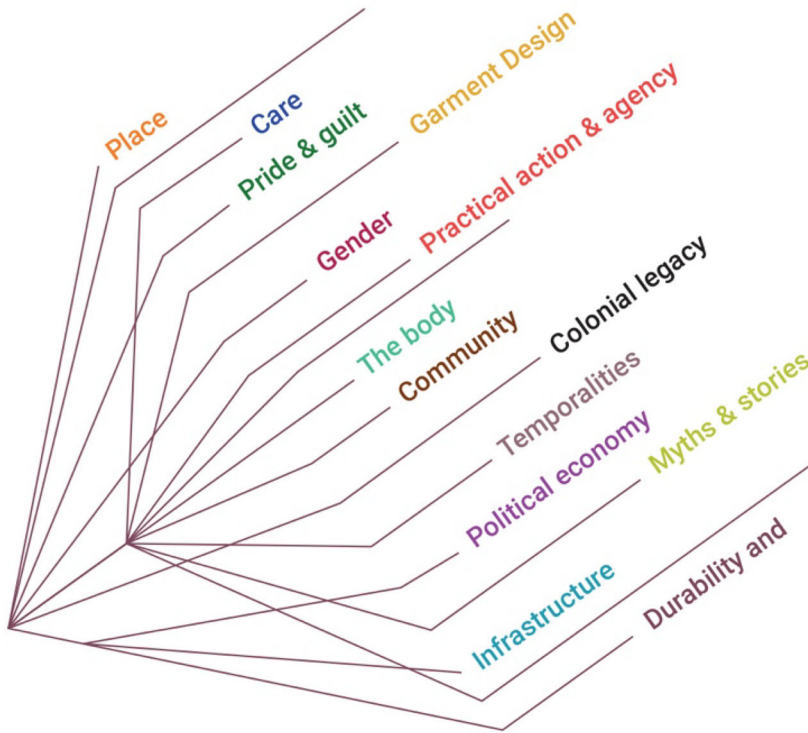


Figure 2
Decentered features of clothing durabilities.

years. Durability is land and ancestors, not clothes. Durability is also something that is seen to have been better practised by parents or grandparents, perhaps reflecting the different societal conditions and more limited and costly material goods of earlier generations. The skills and knowledge of making clothes last held by these earlier generations is seen as shareable and learnable by those that follow.

Fashion, particularly fast fashion, trades in quickness and centers a desire for new items or items seen as “on-trend.” Durability is not typically associated with these narratives; indeed, it can go against them. This includes other fast fashion priorities such as access, disposability and the materialization of knowledge of what in contemporary culture is changing and how.

Age is also a factor which influences clothing durability practices. As people grow older, relationships with time and using clothes to express identity tend to change as do ideas about what constitutes a long life. There are suggestions that the older someone is—the less time they have left—the more accepting they are of clothes being durable. In some segments of society across different continents, time, understood as age, can be seen to have a linear relationship with a preference for clothing durability.

Mexico in particular is a very young country, there's a huge chunk of people that are under 30. So I think that their sense of time is very different. Their sense of history is very different... I do think that the younger generation's sense of durability is completely different than mine, and probably mine is different than my parents for sure. Mexico (participant B)

Anything durable means a grandfather buys and a grandson uses. If a thing is durable... then that's worth buying. So anything that you buy, you should buy [so] your grandchildren can use it. India/Indonesia (participant G)

Learning: Concepts of time change between cultures and over a person's lifetime. Time alters relationships to garments, the capacity for taking care and understanding of what is required of them and their wearers.

Community

Communities may be geographically-determined and/or part of a person's history and heritage. Clothing durability is influenced by the culture and values of the communities to which wearers belong. Feeling part of and connected to a community can affect ideas about responsibility, care—including of clothing—and our relationship to foundational and enduring aspects of communities, like the land. Other features, like the behaviors that are expected in, or imposed on a community from outside, may act to determine how long clothes last. A lived sense of community is sometimes described as a strong basis or culture which may support or negate other actions, like clothing consumption. The close proximity of people and resources in geographical communities enables gifting or exchange of goods in a larger cycle of reciprocity, making clothing durability a functional outcome of community interconnections.

The biggest action that keeps clothes going for longer is community. It's belonging to something... I know that when I am deeper connected to my culture, to my language, to my people, to my ways of being, I don't have this need for all of these things to fill the void. It's the void that I'm trying to fill with clothing, so when I feel a part of the community, when I am connected, when I have that relationship with the land, and to me land is part of my community, you know. Aotearoa (participant J)

When I'm connected to my land and when I know my place in this world I also know my responsibility. And being connected in that way makes you responsible to others. It makes you responsible to those in your community. It makes you responsible to the land. And when you feel that connection and that intimate

bond with others around you with the land, the way you show up is different. Aotearoa (participant J)

Learning: Belonging to something larger, like a community, can offer a strong foundation for material, relational and traditional cultural understandings of clothing durability.

Infrastructure

Utility infrastructures of clothing care and maintenance are not universally present nor are these a necessary requirement for durable clothing. Access to electricity supplies, fresh water, running water, commercially-produced detergent, washing machines, the internet etc, is not a given and clothing wear and maintenance behaviors adapt accordingly; with implications for how long clothes last.

Infrastructure that affects the durability of garments also includes that for clothing reuse and disposal. This varies between communities and is often informal and ad hoc, relying on personal contacts, family networks and local connections in order to move clothes around. As such the act of passing clothes on is influenced by who we know as well as by culture, including a cultural preference for new pieces and distaste for waste. Power hierarchies are also at play; those with wealth and clothing resources sometimes make decisions about the clothing lives of those with less—like when clothes are passed on to employees, such as domestic workers. This offering is typically about perceived rather than actual needs.

The passing on of clothing can assuage feelings of guilt around discard and replacement, which may benefit the giver as much as the receiver and perpetuate class and racial inequalities. Outside of the Euro-American context, the formal collection of clothing, by for example, charity groups, is complicated by the global political economy of production and by colonial histories controlling what is collected and sold, where and by whom.

We hand wash a lot with naturally made detergent. Because of our situation, we don't have much or electricity - like now. We sell soap handmade by community. It's soft on hands and clothes. They don't get damaged while they get cleaned. Sudan (participant A)

First I pass it to my family, into my family. My daughters, I have two daughters which I can give some pieces. Then close friends that I think of when I have to give some piece. And then in Brazil we used to pass to our domestic workers because they have big families, they don't have money to buy whatever they want. So we try to pass for them and they are always women so it's easier to. And if it doesn't fit her, she will have a nephew or a daughter or someone to have it that can keep it. Brazil (participant D)

Learning: Clothing durability adapts to available infrastructures and exists outside them, revealing durability actions as not universally the same. Clothing durabilities are often informal and personal.

The body

Clothes are worn on the body and bodies change. As they do, so do our relationships with them, with implications for how long clothes last. Indeed the inevitability of a body altering over time is central to our relationship with and need for clothing and is an important consideration for durability. Feelings and expectations about bodies, including how they change and how we accept these shifts, are personal, gendered and shaped by cultural values and beliefs. Similarly personal are the sensory experiences of dressing, of how things feel on the body and what actions and movements that a dressed body, wearing a garment over and again, can then go on to do. Bodies are sites where clothing durabilities are played out and challenged.

The shift toward the body (as opposed to the mind) as the knowing subject brings forth an embodied, experiential knowledge of durability. Clothing durabilities in relation to the body resolves the false dichotomy of the Cartesian separation between intellect and body—between “mind knowing” and “bodily knowing”—fuzing the two.

You don't keep the same wardrobe forever. Your body changes all the time. Brazil (participant D)

People like to look good, take care of what have. Sudan (participant A)

Learning: How a person dresses their body and how a person feels about and moves in the dressed body becomes another way of understanding what durability is and can be. The changing body is a site for convening experiential practices of durability.

Pride and guilt

Making things last is often seen as rational. Yet clothing durability is not only a product of the logical mind. It is also influenced by multiple and legitimate ways of knowing about the world including through emotions, such as pride and guilt. These can both shape how long clothes last and reproduce class expectations and hierarchies.

Guilt about wasting or discarding items shapes relationships with garments in both positive and negative ways. Guilt encourages a person to hold onto items, even if they are no longer in active use and facilitates the discarding of clothes through the alleviation of negative feelings associated with waste and excess. Simultaneously, there is pride in maintaining pieces of clothing for a long time, passing them on in good

condition or in still being able to fit into items bought decades before. Pride and guilt are case studies in understanding the role of emotional levers in influencing clothing durability.

I was a 30 inch waist and I still am. Mexico (participant B)

I guess in my view, there being strict rules around certain ways of being can have negative consequences, like I think sometimes the dogma around durability or sustainability can feel very heavy and whole a lot of guilt. Aotearoa (participant J)

Learning: Emotions, including pride and guilt, play a critical role in decision making about clothing durability. These emotions are socially and culturally situated and intrinsically related to people's personal values.

Practical action and agency

Durability can be seen as a problem to solve, often by practical intervention. It can also be seen as an opportunity to take action against the interests of the dominant system and those who benefit from it.

Clothing durability solutions typically seek to maintain the newness of a garment or act to protect it from wear. These include a suite of maintenance tasks such as: periodically refolding stored fabric to minimize damage at creases; airing clothes regularly to keep them fresh and ready to wear; regularly resting them between periods of use; sewing buttons back on with the most appropriate technique; laundering clothing with the right combination of time, elbow grease, heat and soap; the willingness to re-dye a faded piece.

Practical action extends to include garment practices, i.e., how pieces are worn. In addition, it can involve preventative actions, such as knowing how gauge a fabric's robustness at point of purchase—and then choosing differently; avoiding eating a particular food to prevent a fabric becoming permanently stained; or moving differently around a space so as to avoid sharp edges and so prevent damage to a garment.

Durability on the part of the user is sometimes described as wiliness—knowledge of how and where a system can be subverted to further the useful life of clothing for the benefit of everyday users. It is a domain where the agency of wearers of clothes is evident.

Don't wash clothes immediately - we hang it and air it out and then wear it again. Give our clothes a break. Sudan (participant A)

Just the other day I was in the workspace and there was a random machine and we kept saying, "Don't let your clothes hook on to that." Zimbabwe (participant C)

Learning: Durability is furthered by hands-on material knowledge, maintenance and associated skills of repair. It is also enabled by non-material aspects such as the ways in which garments are worn. Durability is associated with the capacity to act independently of a fashion system and its consumerist priorities.

Place

Place and its ecological and climate conditions influence clothing practices including those which impact how long clothes last. The most abundant and/or available local resources—often those that are free or cheap—typically become an intrinsic part of wearing and maintenance behaviors. This reveals a changing portfolio of place-specific and adapted clothing practices and durabilities, ranging from soap to sun to wind to diet. This breaks apart standardized ideas about clothing durability and the behaviors upon which it is dependent into a plurality, reflecting the multifarious nature of place.

I think it's in the care. I've been lucky in that we don't generally have washing machines where I come from ... So I've seen clothes washed by hand, I wash clothes by hand, we hang them out to dry but then also don't keep them out for too long. So I've seen clothes living and I think that's why I find my clothes last for so long because they are hand washed, they are not washed all the time, they are not worn all the time. Zimbabwe (participant C)

The other thing with Indians ... sunning, you had to dry clothes in the sun. It's really important that the clothes dry in the sun. There's a certain obsession with that. India (participant F)

Learning: Using what is to hand together with place variation of climate, resources and culture evolves different practices of use and care and evolves distributed ideas of clothing durability practices.

Care

Clothing durability involves work, care and commitment. The time and effort involved in maintaining clothing is not counted in a material rendering of clothing durability. Yet taking care, including of garments, is an ongoing relational act. It is a cycle of investment, attention, and responsibility and confirms homes—and not just industry—as key domains of durability knowledge.

The ongoing maintenance and repair of garments takes place both inside and outside the home. Care of clothes is skillful work, requiring attention, problem-solving, hands-on manipulation of cloth, time, multi-phase physical labor, access to and deployment of resources, the ability to navigate social and cultural norms of acceptance, and specialist skills

such as tailoring, fine darning or over-dyeing. Despite this, the cost and status of maintaining clothes is low.

Care and the commitment to care for clothes is work that falls largely within the non-money economy. In the home, clothes care is mostly done by women, including within broader family networks where repair tasks are, for instance, sometimes handled by aunts or grandmothers. Indeed knowledge of and access to networks of who can care for garments is part of the work of care and is a critical enabler of durability. As such enduring dress practices become independent of economic drivers for clothing durability.

Yes, it's just how we are brought up basically, how we are taught to wash clothes, how we're taught to take care of clothes. Zimbabwe (participant C)

I didn't know this was sustainability, just thought it was how we behaved and take care of things. Everything is an investment that's the way you take care of it, have gratefulness for it. And you pass this on. Sudan (participant A)

Learning: Durability in clothing relies on care and a commitment to care. A focus on care decentralizes expert knowledge of durability from professionals and industry to homes and often to women. It also makes durability relational and as an ongoing, changing outcome of clothing, people and world interactions.

Garment design

A garment's design impacts its wear characteristics and the durability potential of clothing. These include garment cut, fabric selection, construction, use, position and quality of fasteners etc; with a user's knowledge of these features affecting their clothing decisions at the point of purchase, use, or as a garment is repaired.

The promotion of western styles of dress through colonialism and globalization can be seen to have impacted durability. A tailored silhouette for both men and women has elevated fit, or more accurately, bad to fit, to an issue that undermines continued wear and hence durability. Contrast this with looser silhouettes and with wrapped or draped clothing assembly styles where fit is achieved by adjusting fabric folds, re-tying drawstrings and manipulating tucked edges around a changing body. Here fit is eliminated as a durability factor and other types of durability knowledge are promoted.

[The] majority of Indians now wear western clothes... Earlier, Indians used to wear the Indian traditional clothes. So all of those were made in such a way that even if I'm handing it down to somebody, even if that person is a little bit thinner than me or has

a little bit more fat on his body, that person also could wear that. Because the way they were made, they had drawstring, they were loose, they were not fitted. So all those aspects, that also has changed. India (participant F)

Learning: A tailored silhouette and western styles of dress have specific implications for clothing durability especially regarding fit and garment fixings. These implications have been spread through colonialism and the globalization of trade.

Political economy

How do we organize our common life? In what ways are resources in society organized? How do public institutions maintain and enable justice, wealth, freedom and security? In what ways are goods produced and traded? These questions and their answers have a bearing on clothing durability. The current global organization of capitalist production has enabled fast fashion to flourish, altering ideas about newness and abundance and how long clothes last. Likewise, other macroeconomic and protectionist state policies such as an emphasis on full employment affects how and how much clothing is produced and sold, changing the incentives and dynamics of durability. In terms of the micro economic policies, an emphasis on the marketing of a commodity's durability traits makes price sensitivity a driver of lastingness; meanwhile the non-money economy which supports durability actions is overlooked.

Resources and wealth are spread unequally, globally and within local communities with racial inequalities common. Despite this, durability practices are found in a range of groups. The resource-poor often practise durability out of necessity, to access the utility that items like garments provide; while the resource-rich pursue it often as an ethical or lifestyle choice. Whereas the outcomes of both groups may be similar—longer lasting pieces—the two groups' different access to resources is a result of political decisions.

Things aren't made in the same way, things don't stick around anymore... The consumer mindset and fast fashion are coming into my country. There's a shift in how people take care of their things. There are so many options coming in, and options don't last for long. There's not put so much care into it. Sudan (participant A)

Durability was assumed, I think. The relationship with everything was just assumed, you bought them, you keep them, they should last. What other option was there? They have to stay there. Mexico (participant E)

Learning: Durable clothing pieces are found in many different contexts, yet the motivating drivers of durability practices vary widely.

Many of these drivers are rooted in the political economy context of a society, which determines what is possible and likely durability actions.

Colonial legacies

Colonial legacies have distorted perspectives on durability, centering them around Euro-American preferences and ways of thinking. Disrupting colonial legacies of clothing durability moves it from western-centric ideas and practices—where parties are often framed as either producers or consumers and issues as technical in nature—to the production of plural ways of knowing about durability. This may work to make visible already-existing diverse practices and cultures that are durable but perhaps do not conform to Euro-American ideas. Further, this disruption may contribute to revealing inherent underlying structural issues such as patriarchal, racial and class biases. It also may surface those behaviors which don't center material or technical aspects durability as a practice, but favor, for example, enduring ancestral relationships.

Durability takes on a different meaning when a culture is under threat from more dominant cultural ideologies; with durability typically becoming more important in the face of uncertainty or as a culture struggles to maintain its integrity. This can be seen in colonized and settler communities alike (albeit manifested differently, with different power relations and motivations), where durability, including of clothes, becomes a desire to keep and maintain items so as to preserve a way of life or cultural identity. Meanwhile other cosmologies show that durability is not always viewed as necessary or valuable. For instance, a knowledgeable and self-confident community, skilled in making new garments from plentiful nearby resources, including as part of rituals or communal activity, has little incentive to prioritize durability.

... the settler colonial concept of use ... definitely a few generations ago ... “We need to maintain what we've got. We're in this faraway place and we don't know when we're going to get more stuff.” Aotearoa (participant I)

When I think of durability I think of sustainably which is being drawn out from the West in terms of the way we're redefining sustainability and durability. But the interesting thing from our perspective is when we do find out what the West is saying about durability, sustainably, etc., for us it's a tradition. So it's things that we have always been doing... [it] is in our language, and in our methods of working, in what we do. ... when you look at it, no, we could actually teach the West on sustainability and durability because that is how we live. Zimbabwe (participant C)

Learning: Viewing durability through a non-western lens highlights how different and plural durabilities co-exist. Histories and relationships

of power play an important role in shaping different worldviews with implications for the way a range of knowledge are valued and for how long clothes last.

Myths and stories

What is it that endures? Ideas of durability, including clothing durability, may reflect origin myths, religious teachings, ideas of the sacred and traditional stories. These may or may not align with Western environmental management approaches, which often assume that resources can be owned and controlled. Myths and stories shape what is imagined, what is preferred, what is preserved, what is forbidden or taboo, what ought to be new as well as ideas about who is related to whom and what. These stories form part of the cultural conditions that go on to affect clothing durability.

Certain things are durable, so land, land is durable, but people aren't. In our genealogies, if you go back far enough it shows how we are linked to the land and its durability. Things like clothing are seen more as ephemeral. Aotearoa (participant I)

We see clothing in a traditional sense as being alive because it's come from somewhere, you had to take a life to make it, and there's a genealogy that comes with each garment. Aotearoa (participant J)

Learning: Cultural stories reveal diverse ideas about what endures and where clothing fits within plural ontologies and value systems. Recognizing the specificity of traditions, cultural teachings and stories, can guide the scope of practices around durability and tolerance for them.

Gender

Cultural expectations and lived experiences of gender shape what durability is and can be. For instance, an emphasis in some cultures on female attractiveness and heteronormative standards of beauty results in pressure on women in particular to continually present themselves in new clothing. This can be in contrast to a desire for durable pieces. Social media is seen to exacerbate these pressures, shaping how fashion and clothing knowledge is produced and disseminated and where ideas about durability are expressed and created through interactions with it. At the same time, greater access to the workplace and more disposable income has enabled current generations of women to buy more clothing than their forebears, offering potential liberation from the expectation to perform certain durability practices and the gendered work associated with them.

Gendered roles are a core theme of durability practices. The care and repair of clothing typically falls to women as a domestic responsibility and to them as holders of knowledge about durability—knowledge that is commonly shared between female relations and between women across the generations. The picture is further complicated in households employing domestic workers, who are predominantly women, to whom the job of clothing care falls. Unspoken ideas about power hierarchies and intersectionality shape clothing durability actions. Assumptions about gender mean responsibility, knowledge and care of clothing is implicit rather than explicitly stated.

I do think that as women work, their access has just increased with the knowledge that you will have money coming in, it's your own money so next month you can buy more whatever you want, clearly clothes ... South Africa (participant H)

Men can wear the same clothes, women have to make an effort. Sudan, (participant A)

Who is doing the tacking of the button back on? The mother, the sister, the wife, the maid, whoever. India (participant F)

Learning: Cultural and personal expectations related to gender impact actions and approaches to durability. Durability can be seen in many ways including as a demonstration of home-making, something to be liberated from, as aspirational and a barrier to personal attractiveness. Assumptions about the female responsibility for and care of clothing is implicit.

Durability

Clothing durability is typically experienced alongside other garment attributes, never singly or in isolation, nor is it treated as a standalone issue as is typical in mechanistic, reductionist thinking. Frequently durability is described as part of a pair of attributes, each in relationship with and modulating the other. Durability is long life plus shape. It is shape plus color. Durability is tough and nice to wear. It is robust and practical. It is regular and lasting use. It is connections to land and community. Durability becomes an emergent, relational outcome between garment characteristics, which often include price.

a strong cloth, a thick-ish cloth, a simple weave, not a twill or anything like that, and a dark colour India (participant F)

How can things be more durable? How can we be more honouring of the land? How can we feel more connected to the land? Aotearoa (participant J)

Learning: Durability ideas and characteristics work relationally. They are not reducible to single components or in isolation from the clothing-as-system.

Discussion

This paper has examined clothing durability—a strategy often employed to reduce the carbon intensity of garments by keeping them in active use for longer—through non-western perspectives. It also documents other ways of knowing, valuing or doing durability that go beyond established clothing durability understandings and which shows existing durability frameworks as incomplete.

The act of decentering influences both content and process. Our research process and reflections on it are offered as a tentative guide for how researchers and other practitioners of change might work to transform the methods of knowledge creation based on careful practices. In 1984, the celebrated poet and black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, when confronted with the way established power structures (of racism and misogyny) persist in controlling the narrative, asserted, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (1984, 110). In the context of clothing durability we have sought to apply Lorde’s same insight. Specifically, that genuine change is contingent on recognizing the controlling effects of established approaches on the ideas and practices in question; and that to affect change, different tools are required, including those that we think with. An emphasis on decentering goes some way to foreground new tools, initiating ways of knowing—and researching—different to those with which we are familiar and in which we are trained, influencing both understanding and methodologies.

The findings of the Decentering Durability project introduce 14 features of clothing durability as starting points for decentered action and understanding of long-lasting clothes. They reflect diverse cultures, skill sets, temporalities, values, economies, taste, methods of co-operation and experiences of durability in specific places, at a particular moment in time. These features’ potential lies in their offering plural points of departure for durability, and potential carbon reduction, investigations that unfold in directions different to monological, technological and/or market-driven starting points. This broadens the spectrum of durability activity that is seen as valuable and begins to populate diverse experiences of fashion and sustainability, including those that exist outside the capitalistic structures and their purpose.

The 14 features also specifically recognize and give space to difference as a powerful—but overlooked—driver for environmental change. This may include making visible those durability practices and cultures which already exist but are little recognized, perhaps because they do not fit within established views of what is valuable, such as a

commercial organization's "bottom line." It may also comprise those practices that do not need to center durability as a strategy to enhance the well-being of communities and ecosystems. As researchers we see that in starting an exploration of durability with groups or "families" of features of durability that share connections (see Table 3 for a summary of companion features), a relational approach to durability can be initiated. Moreover, that by building understanding through dynamic connection of multiple aspects of durability—which are constantly changing and being recreated—plural understandings grow.

Researchers and practitioners of durability are strongly motivated by the desire to reduce the environmental impacts including carbon emissions associated with products. Indeed the carbon reduction benefit of durable clothing behaviors compared with other "green" alternatives is clear (Levänen et al. 2021). Yet in describing a more plural and openly evolving durability framework, the 14 features of decentered durability seek to extend and diversify action in this domain and activate a deeper critique of the assumptions and structures implicit in dominant approaches. They provide multiple perspectives from which to engage with change and extended lifespans of products. They also may go some way to explaining why some well-resourced strategies fail to effect the sort of change that might be expected.

The focus on durability in this paper has a dual purpose. Most straightforwardly, our concern is to bring forth plural knowledge and practices of long-lasting clothes for shared and collective benefit within the fashion sector. However, we also sought to do this through a series of processes and methods that asked questions about power, knowledge production, and priority-setting in durability discourses specifically but also in sustainability and fashion. We find clothing durability to be both practical and specific enough to explore a decolonial approach with reference to real world choices, actual garments and the everyday clothing practices grounded in communities. Its rootedness affords a freedom to investigate overarching knowledge, structures and processes—while building solidarity to think and act in more plural ways about both fashion and sustainability.

Notes

1. Initially this protocol was unnamed, as a way of preventing it becoming a commercial product.
2. <https://lasting.world/2022/02/24/short-films-featuring-perspectives-ideas-and-practices-of-clothing-durability/>.

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