

# Future fashion: new and ancient systems at the intersection of anthropology, ecology and innovation

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## Abstract

This research offers an analysis of an emergent subculture of resistance to the fashion status quo that embraces natural, indigenous textiles in contemporary clothing. It shows how three small luxury designers employ radical indigenism (Watson 2019), soil to skin (Burgess 2019), natural fibres, slow and conscious processes, and aesthetic sustainability (Harper 2022), to offer a persuasive counter narrative to the incumbency thinking that perpetuates the prevailing fashion system. Case studies of Noir Mud Silk, Monad London, and Oma Space have been formed from semi-structured interviews and the analysis of their products and processes. Key to this research has been defining the values that inform these designers' praxis, such as the importance of craft, the rejection of growth-logic (Fletcher and Tham 2019) and the desire to promote human, environmental and even spiritual wellbeing through work that reflects a sophisticated intersection of anthropology, ecology and innovation. Research outcomes suggest the importance of reframing indigenous technologies as innovative rather than primitive and of learning - with humility - that traditional knowledge systems have much to offer our future by teaching us how to live within planetary boundaries (Watson 2019, Nakashima 2010, Magni 2017, WCED 1987). Although designer-artisan collaborations are common within the existing fashion system, a focus on the ability of material systems to reconnect us with the whole earth community, holding us within Nature's limits, has received less attention (Watson 2019, Berry 1990). When radically indigenous materials are suggested for fashion, questions of scale-ability quickly arise, as the impulse to commercialise and grow is privileged over relational modes of knowing, being and doing (Escobar 2018: xi). This research therefore, shows ways to collaborate with traditional textile knowledge systems to re-imagine, produce, value, use, and ultimately discard clothing while affirming natural and restorative systems, demonstrating a simultaneously new and very ancient paradigm of fashion.

## Author keywords

Radical indigenism, slow luxury, textiles knowledge systems, fashion and nature, ecological design.

## Introduction

The fashion industry is closely tied to a system of extractive globalization that contributes to the degradation of our plan-

et and its peoples through its use of fossil fuels, over-production and mass-consumption, waste, exploitation, and human rights abuses in the supply chain (Fletcher and Tham, 2019; Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017). Since the early 1990s, fashion industry growth has escalated around the world, but business models focused on growth are irresponsible when the imminently finite nature of the earth's resources and the impacts of climate change are no longer deniable. A reduction of 75-95% of material resource use is needed, but this is self-evidently impossible in an industry that was forecast to grow by a further 81% by 2030, at least prior to Covid-19 (Fletcher and Tham, 2020; Global Fashion Agenda, 2022).

We have now less than a decade left to prevent irreversible climate damage (Global Fashion Agenda, 2022): the fashion system must change radically and so too must our relationship with clothes. Many fashion designers now acknowledge that a change of pace and scale is needed: indeed, Giorgio Armani spoke passionately about this in an open letter published in WWD in April, 2020 (Armani, 2020), where he described the acceleration of production cycles, increased volumes and frenetic fashion seasons as 'criminal'. How we transition to postgrowth fashion is unclear, however, although it is obvious that we need to produce less, produce more slowly and consciously, and produce clothing that will last both physically and emotionally: clothing that is untied from seasonal trends and more reflective of personal values (Edelkoort, 2020; Armani, 2020; Harper, 2022). Therefore, a complete reset is needed in the systems, materials, designs and relationships embodied in and articulated by our clothing, so that we may transition to live in a "mutually enhancing relationship" with the whole earth community (Berry, 1990:53; Escobar, 2018). But where do we begin?

*We have plenty to be sorrowful about, and are not emerging into a golden age. We need a gentle approach, a non-violent spirit, and small is beautiful. (Schumacher, 1973:129).*

Fashion, as we now conceive it, has exceeded the carrying capacity of the Earth. Instead, we need an ecology of small, diverse and conscious expressions of clothing to meet the challenges of the Anthropocene. The future must be small: smaller labels have an autonomy to make decisions about their operations that larger brands don't, are without ac-



countability to shareholders, and are able seamlessly to reflect their values and beliefs about fashion, the world, and even the cosmos in their operational models (Schumacher, 1973; Kibbe, 2015; McRobbie et al, 2016; Moulton et al, 2019). Luxury is an area of fashion that – although arguably undemocratic – is highly influential. Characteristics of true luxury products are quality, craftsmanship, exclusivity, heritage, aesthetic sustainability and creative innovation, all of which support sustainability (Danziger, 2016). This research examines the practices and values of three small, independent, luxury fashion labels that offer fresh approaches to fashion conception and realisation that embody ancient knowledge, natural systems and skilled craft traditions, and which operate within planetary boundaries, in case studies of Noir Mud Silk, Monad London, and Oma Space.

Much is claimed about the potential of new technologies to solve fashion's sustainability problems, perhaps in the hope that current, mainstream business practices focused on efficiency, profit and growth may somehow be maintained (Deeley, 2022; Manal et al, 2022; Shoab, 2022). However, this research explains how an alternative vision for luxury fashion is grounded in the belief that the knowledge we need about how to live well on the Earth already exists, that it does not need to be invented but rather rediscovered (Orr, 2004; Berry, 1990).

### Looking back to move forward: anthropology, ecology and innovation

A growing body of independent fashion and design thinkers are advocating looking back in order to navigate a better way forward, applying anthropological research and ecological systems thinking to how they locate, understand and source materials, techniques and processes, in the design of products, and the end of life of those products. In an interview for the Royal College of Art, John Thackara emphasised the importance of learning from other cultures that have historically specific, less damaging ways of making things; he suggested that we have reached "peak-digital" and that the materiality of craft is now "at the centre of where design is coming from" (Thackara, 2020). Li Edelkoort, in an interview for Bloom Brasil in May 2020, described a move towards "less and better, minimal and exceptional, sustainable and intuitive" and "the future is handmade". She foresees much stronger links between farms, fibre houses, textiles houses, fashion houses and retail – that they would belong to each other, invest in and help each other in a more relational, transparent system (Edelkoort, 2020). This model relates closely to the Fibershed movement – local and regional networks of fibre producers, 'from soil to skin' (Burgess, 2019) – which allows us not only to know who made our clothes, but exactly where and how the fibre was grown, how it was dyed, spun, knitted or woven, cut and sewn and by whom, as part of a new – but also very ancient – holistic, transparent and relational system (Burgess, 2019). In many ways, this echoes the fibre and textile production systems still found in some indigenous communities but which are at risk of being lost forever. These systems demonstrate a sophisticated and harmonious relationship between people and their local environment.

### Radical indigenism

*Radical indigenism* is a term defined by Princeton professor and citizen of the Cherokee Nation Eva Marie Garroutte and discussed specifically in relation to design by architect Julia

Watson (Watson, 2020). Reflecting the Latin origins of 'radical' – *radix*, meaning *root* – radical indigenism asserts the need to re-examine the traditional wisdom rooted in the cultures of many global communities that may rebuild our understanding of how to work in collaboration with natural systems (Garroutte, 2003; Watson, 2020). Indigenous knowledge is passed down through generations within a community, and encompasses the "understanding, skills and philosophies that span the interface between ecological and social systems" (Nakashima, 2010: 1-2) – as such it forms part of their intangible cultural heritage. Making requires local, organic materials so that connection to the surrounding environment is reinforced and production may naturally be constrained by season or by other essential activities. Material resources are considered precious, so little waste occurs: everything produced may be repaired, repurposed and will naturally biodegrade to nourish the soil. This approach is now crucial to revive if we are serious about the transformation required in how we produce and use the things we wear.

### Craft as sustainable process and resistance

Craft and design have historically "reveal[ed] themselves as the forces of anti-Mammon" (Greenhalgh, 2002: 9) in times of excessive consumption. Craft is central to the textile practices of indigenous makers who use slow techniques that have sustainably been refined over time. Long supply chains and anonymous producers have disconnected consumers from those who make their clothes, obscuring the human and environmental cost of how they are made. The radical transparency of relational sourcing strategies that know and name specific indigenous makers may not only support cultural sustainability but also promote aesthetic and environmental sustainability.

Subcultures form in resistance to the symbolic order of a culture and "contradict the myth of consensus" (Hebdige, 1979:18). The three critical fashion practitioners selected for this study are part of a growing movement that is creating clothing and accessories in alternative ways to the mainstream, trend-led fashion system. Their approaches involve personal, aesthetically sustainable design strategies and slow, meditative, craft-led techniques and processes that embody a harmonious relationship between peoples and planet. This may seem romantic, but these idealists offer hope. "The world does not need to be remade but rather revealed" (Orr, 2004:32) and this small group of independents is "rediscovering old and forgotten things" (Orr, 2004:32) drawing on ancient knowledge systems that are important to maintain.

### Methods

In order to understand not just what, where and how, but also why, qualitative research methods were used to construct case studies of Marcella Echavarria (Noir Mud Silk), Daniel Olatunji (Monad London), and Oma (OMA Space). Semi-structured interviews were conducted through zoom between July and October 2020 to delve deeper into their individual approaches and the values and beliefs that inspire these. The interviews asked the same questions of all participants, but offered scope for follow up questions on information that arose organically through conversation. Their collections were analysed – through their websites, through social media, through journal articles, and through physical examination in the case of Monad London – to define the distinctive material and aes-

thetic characteristics of their work and how these might promote sustained relationships with between consumers and their clothing.

### Case Study 1 - Marcella Echavarria

*When you have certain pillars that define your life, then your work is not a separate thing (Echavarria, 2020).*

#### Sourcing and cloth

Marcella Echavarria, currently based in Spain, describes a profound sense of gratitude for everything she has personally: for nature, for family and for the beauty in the world that informs her practice. Although reluctant to describe herself as a designer, Marcella's entire career has involved her working closely with artisans to develop luxury, artisanal products - respecting people who "work with their hands and their hearts". She is co-founder of the XTANT textiles festival that takes place in Mallorca each year. She describes the fabrics she uses as "embodiments of nature" and is committed to sustaining indigenous knowledge systems.

Marcella started Noir Mud Silk as a way of honouring and promoting Chinese mud silk, which has been designated part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. She first came across the silk in Beijing, attracted by the distinctive, almost musical sound it makes when worn and by its unique texture. She began to research the cloth, to learn more about its 2,500-year history, as part of the material culture of the Hakka people of Guangdong Province, and its tangible and intangible properties. Naturally 'white' silk fabric is dipped in a solution containing the juice of a species of yam to mordant the cloth, transferring its medicinal properties and improving its durability while also dyeing it a rich red-brown. The cloth is laid out to dry on the ground in the sunshine and may be dipped and dried many more times, before coating on one side only with iron-rich mud from the Pearl River to create a unique surface: shiny, black - sometimes looking like leather, like paper, like parchment "so many textures in one". The finished cloth is stronger and more water resistant than other silks, washable and comfortable to wear in humid summer conditions.



Figure 1 & 2. Ancestral shapes in mud silk by Noir Mud Silk.

The production of the cloth is closely tied to natural, seasonal rhythms, constrained by the drying season from March to November and in conjunction with the artisans' other activities, such as farming. It represents an ecologically sound model of textile production.

#### The design strategy

Marcella's designs draw consciously on "ancestral shapes" that are based on indigenous Asian cutting techniques, working sympathetically within the physical properties of the cloth such as width, available length and drape, rejecting season, size and gender to create timeless limited "editions" rather than seasonal collections, and responding to the naturally constrained availability of the fabric (Figures 1 and 2). Because Marcella appreciates the fabric so much no scraps are wasted, so many items contain elements of patchwork: "I don't call it upcycling or recycling: I call it appreciating". This is reflective of the ways that many indigenous communities in the world (and indeed most communities, historically) work resourcefully with the materials available to them. The designs consciously embrace any imperfections and inconsistencies in the cloth and how this wears over time. Noir Mud Silk has a following of customer-collectors, who understand that the garments and materials not only look beautiful but also feel beautiful on the body. Many Chinese customers have come to appreciate Marcella's interpretation of their cultural cloth, suggesting that "someone has to put value into something of your own for you to value it". She describes herself as honouring something that already exists: first of all - and foremost - respecting the fabric, of looking back in order to move forward. She has no plans to grow her business, but rather organically to be limited by what is possible to produce within Nature's systems and timeframes.

### Case Study 2 - Daniel Olatunji

*...the Fulani tribesmen that are growing the cotton I work with are very much limited to what they can grow...they can only produce a certain amount, handwoven, and it kind of works hand in hand with nature, so you're not over-producing anything. (Olatunji, 2020)*

#### Sourcing and cloth

Daniel Olatunji, based in the United Kingdom, emphasises the importance of slow craft traditions in every aspect of his menswear business Monad London. Central to Daniel's business model is sourcing materials directly from small, indigenous producers, emphasising the benefits of the relational and of "meeting people with really interesting stories". He identifies James Rebanks' *The Shepherd's Life* (2015) as a major inspiration for him, in revealing the value of the local and specific place of origin, leading him to seek out rare wool weavers and ultimately to work with one of the few remaining handweavers of Donegal Tweed, Eddie Doherty. Traditionally, Donegal tweed represented a perfect, ecologically-sound symbiosis between animal, land and people: using wool from local sheep, dyed with local lichen, berries and moss, as part of a small cottage industry that supplemented income from subsistence farming (Hoad, 1987).

In addition to Donegal tweed, Daniel sources the cotton he uses from Fulani tribesmen in northern Nigeria, who grow it in certain quantities and at certain times of the year, around other crops and activities (Figures 3 and 4). This, and the amount of



Figure 3 & 4. Handloom, indigo dyed cotton, wabi-sabi aesthetics by Monad London.

time it takes to pick, spin and strip-weave the cotton by hand, places natural limits on fabric production to operate within planetary boundaries and results in irregularly textured fabrics that powerfully communicate the maker's hand. The community also comprises indigo dyers that continue a 600-year-old tradition passed down from father to son for centuries. Daniel buys this fabric for specific orders, never asking for more than can be produced slowly and consciously.

### The design strategy

Craft is where Daniel draws his inspiration from and how he develops and produces garments for his customers, primarily in the UK and Japan. His philosophy of making embraces the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, of finding beauty in the imperfect, which can accommodate and even celebrate irregularities in surface and weave. The deceptively raw edges on his garments are impeccably finished inside to ensure their durability (Figure 4). He is also inspired by the way that garments take on characteristics of their wearer over time, for example, how sleeves may start to fold in distinctive ways, or become distressed in a manner that is both beautiful and personal. The precious fabric scraps from cutting are incorporated in new garments. Monad's editions are small – never more than four of a specific piece – working within the availability of slow, traditionally-made natural materials. It is this specialness – Daniel's craft, the craft of the makers behind the exquisite, timeless garments, and the knowledge that these embody – that his customers appreciate most (Figures 3 and 4). He plans to grow slowly and organically, only in response to demand, but maintaining his values as a slow, artisanal brand and working within the boundaries of what may be produced without compromise. He hopes to educate and inspire others to work with unique, artisanal fibres and indigenous materials, to keep these skills alive, and that this will lead people to ask about who made their clothes, where and how.

### Case Study 3 - Oma Space

*Something made with an awake mind and with good spirit in it is real luxury. (Oma, 2020).*

#### Sourcing and cloth

Oma Space is a small, independent fashion and textile studio in South Korea whose design practice is materials-led,



Figure 5 & 6. Handwoven, textural garments by Oma Space

working solely with natural, biodegradable fibres and the innovative application of traditional processes to which Oma attaches a spiritual dimension: “to dress the body and soul”. The fibres used are hand spun and include wild silk, cotton, linen, ramie, hemp, wool, and Korean Hanji paper, naturally dyed with plant matter including fermented ebony fruit that changes shade over time, or with indigo to “detoxify the bad energy accumulated in the body” with its natural, antibacterial properties. Hemp, in particular, is beneficial to soil health, growing well without use of fertiliser or pesticide. Oma works closely with weavers in northern-eastern Thailand, who grow indigenous species of cotton that they spin and weave themselves, and who are very receptive to the collaboration because their skills and knowledge are otherwise at risk. Central to Oma's work is a desire to prevent handcrafted, traditional textiles from disappearing: keeping them alive by keeping them worn, rather than preserved in a museum.

### The design strategy

Oma believes that a radical change in production systems is needed, that we must make things consciously, avoiding trends. She suggests that another word for fashion is now required: one that reflects an alternative paradigm – not clothing, not garments, but something different. She is mindful of the consequences – and indeed the responsibility – of making anything at all now: that it must be able to disappear [biodegrade] very naturally, as everything comes back on us, so carefully considers the ecological impact of her decisions and processes. She begins by playing with a fabric for a few days, to touch, smell and feel it, trying to “hear how the fabric wants to be expressed”; only then does she begin to draw. Oma's limited editions of slow, handcrafted clothing can be worn for any occasion, using shapes that are simultaneously timeless and modern, local and transnational (Figures 5 and 6) supporting their aesthetic sustainability.

Customers predominantly are based in London, Amsterdam, Tokyo and Seoul and share Oma's appreciation for the craftsmanship and unique properties of artisanal materials. The irregular surfaces and natural colours convey the spirit of the makers' hand and the natural world, reflecting Oma's Buddhist beliefs and embracing natural imperfections (Figure 6). Process is promoted: Oma's atelier in Seoul includes videos and images of the artisan's techniques and a loom to reinforce the fact that the fabric is the results of slow skill. In addition to

Table 1. Summary of research findings

Measure	Noir Handmade	Monad London	OMA Space
Values	Gratitude, appreciation; artisanal craft; respect for makers; preserving nature and indigenous textile knowledge. Fabric first.	Slow craft, perfectly imperfect, relationship with makers, preserving local, rare, indigenous textile knowledge. Fabric first.	Preserving nature and indigenous textile knowledge by keeping it worn and used; responsibility; promoting conscious practices. Fabric first.
Sourcing	Directly from artisans in Guangdong Pearl River Delta region, China.	Directly from artisans in Northern Nigeria and Ireland; collaborations with artists.	Directly from artisans in Northern-Western Thailand, Laos, Japan and in South Korea.
Names makers/groups	Groups	Yes	Groups
Indigenous textile knowledge system	2500-year-old tradition, using local, natural resources; scale limited by seasonal nature of production due to weather and other activities; at risk due to laborious production processes, climate change affecting the drying season and water pollution affecting iron content in local river.	Kano, Nigeria – traditional hand spun, strip-loom woven indigenous cotton species; supplementary income for indigenous communities; naturally dyed in 600-year-old indigo dye pits; knowledge at risk as younger generation seek other employment; handwoven Donegal tweed from one of the last remaining handweavers – at risk due to labour intensive nature of work deterring apprentice weavers.	Traditional hand-spinning and weaving, natural dyeing systems; supplementary income for indigenous communities; at risk as new markets are needed for their work and older artisans are dying out; Korean hemp traditions were almost eradicated after the war but now are being revitalised.
Fibres	Silk	Indigenous species of cotton, wool, silk	Hemp, wild silk, indigenous species of cotton, wool, ramie, Hanji paper.
Fabrics	Traditional mud dyed silk. Plain or crepe weave.	Handwoven strip-loom cotton; wool tweed.	Handwoven; felted, textural, tonal.
Dye	<i>Dioscorea cirrhosa</i> with iron-rich mud; indigo. Dyes that carry beneficial properties.	Indigo carries beneficial properties; tweed dyed with local plant matter from Donegal, such as lichen.	Indigo; ebony fruit; always natural. Dyes with beneficial properties to body and soul.
Waste strategy	All scraps are kept and reused, patched together to make more garments.	Scraps are kept and reused in other clothing products.	All materials are fully compostable, can safely be returned to the earth.
Aesthetic qualities	"Ancestral shapes" traditional, simple and timeless styles. Exceptional quality. Aesthetic sustainability.	Timeless garments that adopt a wabi sabi approach – the aesthetics of wear. Exceptional quality. Aesthetic sustainability.	Simple, timeless, traditional shapes; highly textural; aesthetics of the hand made. Exceptional quality. Aesthetic sustainability.
Collections	Editions – new pieces added depending on the availability of the fabric. Natural constraints due to seasonal availability.	Editions – never more than 4 made of any garment. Naturally constrained by the availability of the cloth.	Editions – new pieces added depending on current collaborations with artisan groups. Also creates on textile art installations and combines tradition with new technologies.
Showcase	Exhibitions; showrooms; events; online.	Showroom; Hostem in London, other stockists in Japan.	Own studio in Seoul; galleries; specialist stockists, such as Livingstone Studio in London; online.
Position on growth	No desire to grow.	Would like slow, organic growth – without compromise.	No desire to grow.

clothing, Oma Space creates experiential textile installations that promote artisanal processes and improved consciousness, sometimes introducing digital technologies. Oma Space has no intention to grow their business, but rather is happy to stay the same size year on year.

### Conclusion

This research is significant in showing how a subculture of independent, luxury fashion labels has developed small, distinctive, and successful practices while refusing to be complicit in a problematic system (Table 1). Marcella Echavarria, Daniel Olatunji and Oma share a strong appreciation for unique, locally specific, natural, indigenous materials, sourced directly from artisans who use slow, traditional, craft processes conducted in symbiosis with natural systems in ways that have sustainably been performed for many centuries. They show us how these materials may be used to create limited editions of clothing that is physically, aesthetically, and environmentally responsible. Their clothing primarily is installed in gallery spaces, exhibitions, showrooms and online platforms, rather than in conventional fashion stores. This has the potential to change perceptions of the garments, by framing them as artefacts to be examined, understood and valued in ways that promote responsible consumption, rather than as disposable commodities, and which provides opportunity for information to be shared about the indigenous people and systems that formed them (Geczy and Karaminas, 2019). While the price points of their clothing reflect the investment of time and skilled craft knowledge which positions their

work as exclusive, and therefore inaccessible to many fashion consumers, these labels do provide role models to some young designers who wish to produce luxurious clothing in meaningful and sustainable ways. Their approach contrasts dramatically with that of major global luxury brands that have similar price points, but which produce unsustainably. As such, they form part of an ecology of diverse fashion practices that contribute ideas for a responsible future. If, like many indigenous communities, we are to live in synchronicity with natural systems rather than in opposition, this diversity is key: too much of one species is detrimental to local ecology. There is no single solution or business model that by itself will solve the problems created by a global fashion industry that has exceeded the carrying capacity of the Earth. The transformation of the fashion industry to become truly sustainable requires a radical, whole-systems approach involving multiple stakeholders – including governments with the vision, integrity, and courage to commit to, support and incentivise meaningful change through policy and legislation. The three case studies demonstrate one possible approach; further research is needed to explore the transferability of this to other markets and contexts.

Important to this research has been defining the values that inspire these designers' approaches, which include their rejection of the orthodoxy of growth, having a strong sense of sufficiency and their desire to promote human, environmental and even spiritual wellbeing through clothing. Their business models are naturally constrained by their use of indigenous textiles that are closely identified with specific peoples, places, materials, and techniques – and which are part of ancient knowledge systems that reflect natural limits to growth. These systems demonstrate a harmonious relationship between human creativity and nature, using local, natural resources wisely, preserving culture and knowledge, and supporting artisans' livelihoods and dignity. Marcella, Daniel, and Oma demonstrate that it is possible to have small, successful fashion businesses that are not growth-focused, sharing a mission to draw attention to, preserve and learn from indigenous textiles knowledge systems that are at risk of dying out.

However, when radically indigenous materials are suggested for clothing, questions of scale-ability quickly arise as the impulse to commercialise and grow is privileged over the relational modes of knowing, being and doing that these embody (Escobar, 2018: xi). If we are ever to transition fashion to be produced and consumed within planetary boundaries, then scalability is the wrong focus: small is beautiful. The research underlines the importance of reframing indigenous technologies as innovative rather than primitive, in operating within planetary boundaries. These traditional knowledge systems now have a crucial role to play in re-orientating fashion towards a future where we all may thrive (Watson, 2019; Nakashima, 2010; Magni, 2017; WCED, 1987; Berry, 1990). We must look back – before it is too late – to navigate a way forward.

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- Figure 5. Oma Space. <https://omaspace.com/garments/couture/>
- Figure 6. Oma Space. <https://omaspace.com/garments/couture/>