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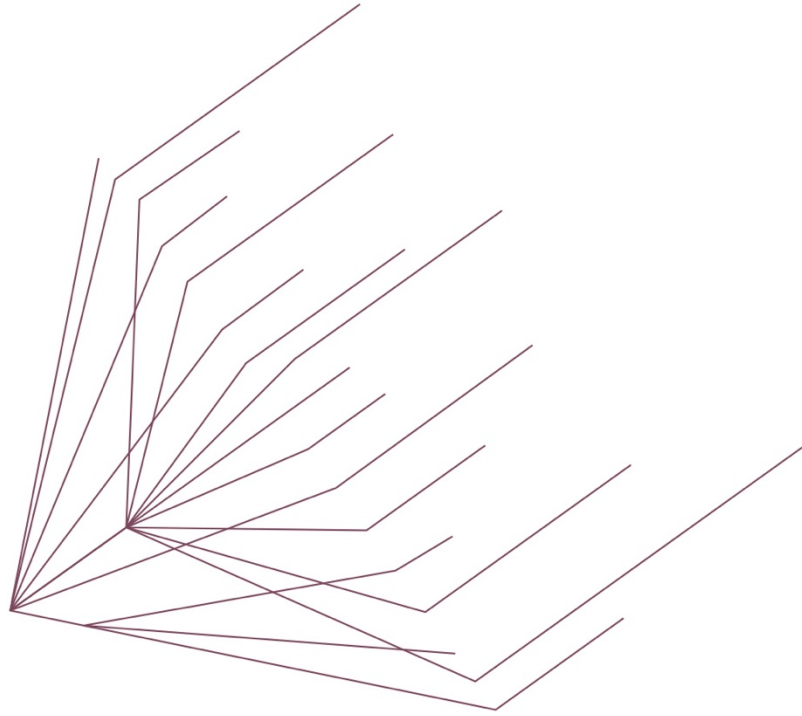


**RESEARCH PROJECT NOTE**

# **DECENTRING DURABILITY**

**PLURAL IDEAS AND ACTIONS OF LONG LASTING CLOTHES**

**KATE FLETCHER AND ANNA FITZPATRICK**



ISBN 978-1-906908-77-5

Research Project Note

Decentring Durability: Plural Ideas and Actions of Long Lasting Clothes

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Published by Centre for Sustainable Fashion, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, 20 John Princes Street, London, W1G 0BJ, UK.

Illustrations by June Stockins

Decentring Durability is part of the LASTING project and funded by the Norwegian Research Council

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## Introduction

Enhancing the durability of consumer products including clothes is a mainstay of environmental impact reduction strategies in Europe and North America (PLATE conference, 2021; Cooper, 2010) and typically includes a near total focus on these geographical contexts and durability knowledges. This project note reports the findings of the *Decentring Durability* research to examine non-western perspectives, ideas and practices of clothing durability that take place outside of the global north. Decentring Durability was conducted as part of the LASTING project and funded by the Norwegian Research Council. It was carried out by Kate Fletcher and Anna Fitzpatrick from the Centre for Sustainable Fashion, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, UK.

Most clothing durability strategies, like fashion and sustainability strategies in general, emerge from and align with western ways of producing knowledge. As such they tend to deploy understandings of the world that are based upon and perpetuate certain ideas about what it means to know about fashion, sustainability and durability; what can be done with that knowledge; and what is deemed valuable. Despite the recognition that the reproduction of dominant ideas represses alternatives and contributes to the socio-ecological crisis (Williams, 2010), this process is often overlooked. Stepping into this space, Decentring Durability works to 'pluralise' knowledge production of durability. It provides an alternative to representations of fashion and sustainability that universalise knowledge, that make it abstract, that devalue or conceal diversity or that prioritise solutions that fit within the market and the market's purpose. Its starting point is that clothing durability is diverse, heterogeneous and exists in all contexts.

Working intersectionally, Decentring Durability brings together the decarbonising and the decolonising agendas by combining diverse, resourceful practices with the breaking apart of dominant ideas and approaches in order to show difference. It offers plural ideas of clothing durability interconnection and multiple threads of thinking and practice, including, among others: different durability cosmologies, diverse practical actions and many-tentacled durability relationships, like those with bodies, things, land and time. Here plural durability ideas and actions reframe conventional representations of long-lasting clothes. They also become worked examples of decentring practices in both fashion and sustainable design.

A note on terminology: where the term 'we' is used in this document, it refers to we, the researchers, unless otherwise stated.

## Positionality statement

The Decentring Durability project is conducted by Kate Fletcher and Anna Fitzpatrick. We, Anna and Kate, identify as White-British

women, who write and speak only in English, which we recognise 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, from working-class communities and we both have worked in the university in which we are based while we are conducting this research for over 10 years. We recognise 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 recognise this at the start of this work as we also recognise that we will benefit personally and institutionally from this work. 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 favour 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 Honourable Harvest (Kimmerer, 2013: 183) and the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning framework (8 Ways, 2021).

## Research question

Decentring Durability is a strand of work of the larger research project *LASTING*, the aim of which is to examine how lifetimes of consumer products can be increased. Within this, Decentring Durability's research question examines:

*How is the notion of durability in clothing understood in the global South and what insights it may offer into the practices of the global North?*

During the course of this research process we rewrote this research question numerous times as the project evolved, seeking to interrogate its nuance and implications including as: *how can plural knowledge influence western understandings of clothing durability?*

## Research process

Throughout the research process, great attention was paid to the ways in which the research was conducted, given that on what and where emphasis is placed changes the type of knowledges that are created. The Decentring Durability project emphasised plurality and sought to recognise dominant narratives and the processes by which they are constantly re-produced, including within the research process itself. At its crux was an attempt to break apart and 'pluralise' ideas about clothing durability and about knowledge creation (Figure 1).

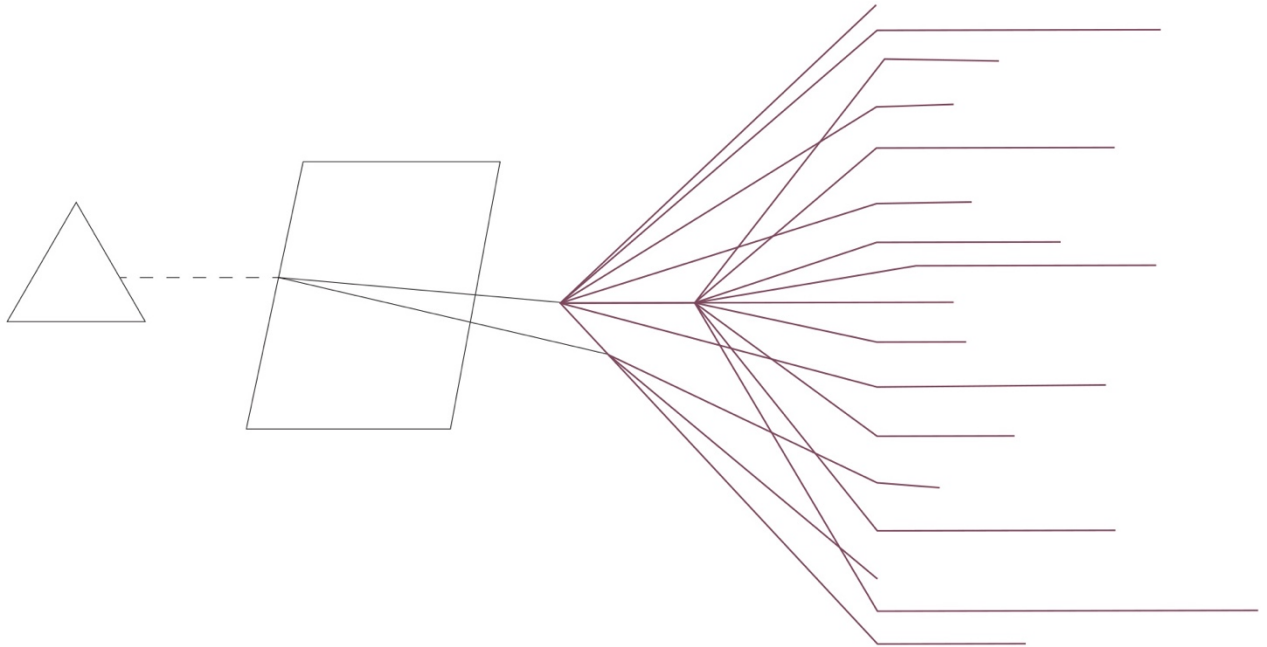


Figure 1 – Breaking apart durability knowledges

The result was a deeply reflective approach to the research design with emphasis placed on:

*Care* – Throughout the project we took care over how we went about the work and explored care-full practices of research. 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 centre our thoughts about care, work, research, movement, the body, stepping away from the screen and noticing the particularities of where we are. Other aspects of care we practised included:

- Holding the principles of the Honourable Harvest (Kimmerer, 2013: 183) and the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning\* (8 Ways, 2021), to check-in, be respectful and to guide to our process;
- Spending time presenting ourselves to project participants and sharing our positionality;
- Being open to reciprocity of time or support (where possible) or returning time, e.g. one of us gave a lecture to a group in Mexico as an exchange;
- Being punctual and respectful of our time and others time;
- Visibility of children/other caring commitments in our lives, honouring the whole person as researcher.

*Different ways of knowing* - In the work and with interview participants we sought to make space for many ways of knowing,

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\* Initially this protocol/framework was unnamed, as a way of preventing it becoming a commercial product.

including from experience, concepts, skilful 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 organising 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 content of documents, trying to avoid privileging certain ideas over others in order to honour all the insights shared by our participants. We also scrutinised the words we used, turning away from the language and therefore the research processes of hierarchy and categorisation to those of relationships. It is a work-in-progress.

## Methods

The project's fieldwork was conducted using semi-structured interviews, with participants selected for diversity 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, three with respondents in Africa (Sudan, Zimbabwe, South Africa), three in Latin America (Brazil and two from Mexico), two with members of Aotearoa's Maori community and two from India, one of whom now lives in Indonesia. The work took a grounded theory approach to data review and identification of emergent themes and relationships. The fieldwork was conducted between April and June 2021. This work was possible only because of the participants. To honour their contribution and to maintain their presence in this research, we list those participants who chose to have their name included. In alphabetical order they are: Manuhia Barcham, Joanne Bloch, Jeannine Diego, Gitika Goyal, Vinit Jain, Ilena Jalil Kentros, Rudo Nondo, Hadeel Osman, Yamê Reis.

## Findings

Decentring Durability introduces 14 features of clothing durability as aspects of decentred action and understanding of long-lasting clothes (Figure 2). The 14 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 place, 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. We offer them here, presented not in any order but as a network of interrelated durability practices.

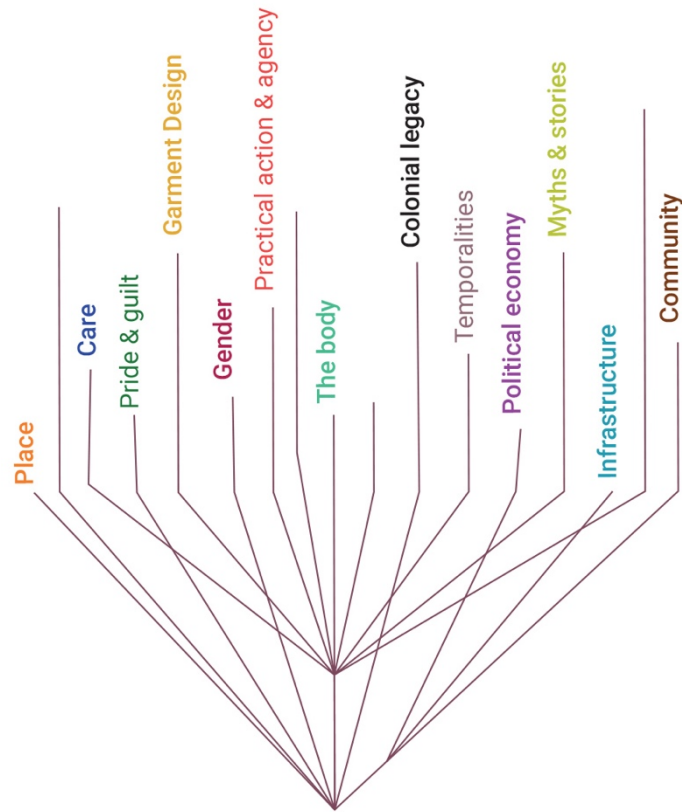


Figure 2 - 14 features of clothing durability

## 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 behaviours 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)*

*“I think that in Mexico in particular, there's a lot of passing on going on, but it's a little bit like out of sight out of mind where people will hand their things over to...” -- Mexico (participant B)*

*“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)*

*“...because it's very different in the US and in Europe where you have Oxfam and Salvation Army and Goodwill and these ... Here, the pipeline is very intimate and personal. There are charities. For example there's one that's close to my house and it's linked to a church but it's very small scale, so I think it does happen on a very intimate level more than on an organised scale.” -- Mexico (participant B)*

### *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.

### *Companion features*

Durability and; Place; Pride and guilt; Community; Colonial legacies.

## 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 globalisation 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 knowledges are promoted.

*“The material... the garment has proper reinforcements in places like pocket or the zipper quality is good ... the way the button is done... the shank” -- India/ Indonesia (participant G)*

*“[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 globalisation of trade.

### *Companion features*

Colonial legacies; Durability and; Practical action & agency; The body.

## 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, totalising experience. Durability is passing garments between generations. Durability is a garment lasting four 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 centres 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 materialisation 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)*

*“I teach right now at one of the most expensive schools of design in Mexico, so they do buy and dispose fast, really fast, and they're very young. So I see their relationship with clothing really fast and they're really not attached. While when I started at the public school, there was a different relationship due to not having the opportunity to continue shopping, you have to keep in mind the preservation of what you have. So it was the necessity that made you think of durability, and this seems like an emancipation from durability due to a possibility to consume more.” -- Mexico (participant E)*

*“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)*

*“Durability is not something that people seek because they want to change, they want something new”-- Mexico (participant B)*

### *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.

### *Companion features*

Care; Myths and stories; The body.

## 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 think nobody really wants to waste, I think intrinsically people don't really want to waste, so if they have an excuse for throwing something out they would feel less guilty about it." -- India (participant F)*

*"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.

### *Companion features*

Gender; The body; Care.

## PRACTICAL ACTION & 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 minimise 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 willness - 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)*

*"It's called mole. It's a brown meal that is very dark. It's made of several spices and it has oil, very thick, and once it falls it will stay there forever. It may last longer than the clothing." -- Mexico (participant E)*

*"not overwashing... I can soak for a time with a little bit of soap or something like that, coconut soap or something, and I soap this and then I wash a little bit and I hang it to dry" -- Brazil (participant D)*

*"So, alterations are very, very big in India, you can increase the length, decrease the length, open out the waist, whatever, and you have tailors around the corner everywhere... Darning is another very big thing." -- India (participant F)*

### *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.

### *Companion features*

Infrastructure; Place; Durability and; Garment design; The body; Care.

## 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 behaviours. 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 standardised ideas about clothing durability and the behaviours 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)*

*"if we start washing like a laundry basket full of clothes, we can start washing at 7:00, leave out to dry by 8:00, and actually be ironing them by midday. So usually by 2:00, a whole laundry basket including linen, including clothes that have been worn during the week, are already dry, ironed and ready to hang." -- Zimbabwe (participant C)*

### *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.

### *Companion features*

Durability and; Practical action & agency; Care; Infrastructure.

## 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 skilful work, requiring attention, problem-solving, hands-on manipulation of cloth, time, multi-phase physical labour, 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.

*“...care comes into the mix. My parents again, they’ve got stuff from when I was a kid, and I see the way that they care, they’re much more careful than I am with my clothes. And I’ve known people, not in my generation, who have got like naphthalene balls and they really take care of their stuff” -- Mexico (participant B)*

*“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 started reading about it, talking to my mum [about] how do I care [for] clothes because she knows much more than me, she’s very careful with everything she has. So my mum used to teach me a lot about this until now. Even in the pandemic where we started washing our clothes because you know that in Brazil we have domestic workers, so we don’t even make anything in the house.” -- Brazil (participant D)*

*“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 decentralises 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.

### *Companion features*

Gender; Practical action & agency; Temporalities; Myths and stories; Pride and guilt.

## 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 towards 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' - fusing 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)*

*"We have a wearing and re-wearing culture but there is a new push for people to look different - especially women. You have to own brand new things, you need to look different to get men's attention. There's an inner conflict - durable clothing when culture pushes you to always look different... how can you get rid of something - an inner conflict. Attention spans and global trends. Pushed to get bored of something. Staple pieces - you have to get rid of it, then you're compromising... cultural and inner conflict." -- 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.

### *Companion features*

Gender; Care; Garment design; Durability and; Practical action & agency.



## POLITICAL ECONOMY

How do we organise our common life? In what ways are resources in society organised? 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 organisation 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.

*"Everything around us is new, new apartments and new clothes and new cars... here everyone's got a new car. It's insane. And I think it has to do with, what I mentioned earlier, what happened in the early to mid '90s which was the lifting of protectionist, commercial policies that all of a sudden meant that people had access to a lot of things that they before had to import or could only have if they travelled abroad. So that means they were part of, like, the 1%. But now anyone can have a new car because you have credit and you have these kinds of things that just didn't happen before." -- Mexico (participant B)*

*"So sharing and reusing was a very normal part of lifestyle. I'm sorry to say that but I think it's more of this American dream or the western lifestyle is what has influenced or made it sound like all that is not cool, all that is not good. What happens in West is good or is cool. It's a common myth which I see is now" -- Indonesia/India (participant G)*

*"I would say that India also the newer generation, they are more focused on what is in trend, what is in fashion and how ... So reusing clothes is not something which is a preferred choice. They want newness every few days." -- India (participant F)*

*I'm in a community where we're more trying to save money... it's about the duration -- Zimbabwe (participant C)*

*"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.

### *Companion features*

Colonial legacies; Myths and stories; Community; Durability and.

## DURABILITY AND

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 colour. 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 very solid fabric, one that will withstand you washing, one that can stand anything." -- Zimbabwe (participant C)*

*"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.

### *Companion features*

Place; Infrastructure; Garment design; Practical action & agency.

## COLONIAL LEGACIES

Colonial legacies have distorted perspectives on durability, centring 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 behaviours which don't centre material or technical aspects durability as a practice, but favour, 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 colonised 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 prioritise 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)*

*"In a cultural context, to me, that's what durability is, this garment that is treasured and is considered sacred and is very cared for and loved for and has a place and has a cultural significance. For me that cultural sense is what durability is still. And I don't think that's changed, perhaps it's even more so than it was in past generations because we are trying to preserve our culture still, because our culture is still at risk of dying out. So in that sense it's probably even more special than it was in this generation for us." -- Aotearoa (participant J)*

*"In the Anglo-colonial world [prudence] was very much a virtue... almost to the point of painfully virtuous around prudence. My grandmother, lovely woman but, no ... [Laughter] But yes, very prudent" -- 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 knowledges are valued and for how long clothes last.

### *Companion features*

Political economy; Temporalities; Garment design; Community.

## 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)*

*"Clothes would be imbued with the nature of the person who wore them. For example if it was a chief, someone with much mana [honour], after their death for example, their clothes would become tapu [sacred]... For example, when people died, there'd be something about not wearing their clothes, you know, "We need to get rid of these things now." -- 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 I)*

*"A famous chief in our past was named Tia and when he first sited some unusually coloured cliffs he thought they resembled his rain cloak so he called the area Taupō-nui-a-Tia. Taupō is the type of cloak - a travelling rain coat - and the name of the place literally translates as the Great (rain) cloak of Tia." -- Aotearoa (participant I)*

### *Learning*

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

### *Companion features*

Colonial legacies; Temporalities; Care; Community.

## 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)*

*"Inside of the families many women know how to repair them to make them last. So there are many women I know that have their sewing machine or they know how to mend by hand or embroidery, and it's a family thing. It's not open.... even in college, they don't teach you that, they teach you to make new, not to repair, or not to make them last. So it's more of a family thing, it's a private thing when they're not with the tailors. It's something you do in your house,*

*especially the women of the house. It's them who repair the clothes to make them long lasting for the members of the family. Men are usually not trained in that, but they demand for the service because it's actually very good."* -- Mexico (participant E)

*"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)

*"So I do worry about that intersection where it's no longer about clothing durability thanks to Instagram and all the other things, it's now, "I can't be seen wearing the same thing twice." So durability does mean something very different, and we are at a very scary intersection where there is a small cluster that is holding on and still holding on to that."* -- Zimbabwe (participant C)

### *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.

### *Companion features*

The body; Care; Garment design; Pride and guilt; Practical action & agency.

## 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 behaviours 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)*

*"We're all desiring to be a part of something significant. So by participating – because we have been taught that the way to buy into things is all around, it's surrounds the economy, and we've outsourced our community, we've outsourced everything. So in order to, like, as modern citizens for most of us growing up in the West, in order to participate in community we often feel as if we have to buy our way in. So buying an aspirational piece is a way to feel as if I'm being a part of something significant as if I'm being a part of the community that cares about things that are deeper than just, I don't know, surface level ..." -- 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.

### *Companion features*

Infrastructure; Place; Colonial legacies.

## Discussion

This research examines clothing durability through non-western perspectives, ideas and practices. It does this by exploring the plurality of ways in which durability is thought about and practised by drawing on insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with participants from outside the global north. The findings show emerging diverse perspectives that reflect other ways of knowing, valuing or doing durability that go beyond established clothing durability understandings.

The decentring emphasis in the project is found in both content and process. Research produces knowledge and the process by which this knowledge is created matters. The research processes adopted in this project worked to diversify durability understandings in order to break apart the dominant approaches and assumptions that drive social and

ecological harms. These processes provide a tentative guide for researchers and other practitioners of change might work to transform the processes and methods of knowledge creation.

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 seek to apply Lorde's same insight. Specifically that genuine change is contingent on recognising the controlling effects of established approaches on ideas and practices of clothing durability; and that to affect change, different tools are required, including those that we think with. An emphasis on decentring 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 Decentring Durability research introduce 14 features of clothing durability as starting points for decentred 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, today. These features' potential lies in their offering plural points of departure for durability investigations that unfold in directions different to 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 market and its purpose.

The 14 features of decentred durability also specifically recognise 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. It may also comprise those practices that do not need to centre durability as a strategy in order 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 companion features (see Table 1 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 grows.

Researchers and practitioners of durability are strongly motivated by the desire to reduce the environmental impact associated with products. Indeed the carbon reduction benefit of durable clothing behaviours compared with other 'green' alternatives is clear (Levänen et al, 2021). Yet in describing a more plural, incomplete and evolving durability framework, the 14 features of decentred durability seek to extend and diversify action in this domain. The learnings from the 14 features are summarised in Table 2. They provide multiple perspectives from which to engage with change and extended lifespans of products.



The focus on durability in this research has a dual purpose. Most straightforwardly, our concern is to bring forth plural knowledges and practices of long-lasting clothes so as to reduce environmental impact. However we are also interested in using durability as a case study to develop decolonial understandings of both sustainability practices and fashion. We find clothing durability to be both practical in application and specific enough to help work through a decolonial approach with reference to actual garments, everyday practices, real world choices and communities, testing out ideas from the ‘ground up’. The focus on durability provides a tether that affords a particular freedom to examine knowledge, structures and processes in both fashion and sustainability.

Table 1 –Summary of companion features of decentred clothing durability

	Infrastructure	Garment design	Temporalities	Pride and guilt	Practical action & agency	Place	Care	The body	Political economy	Durability and	Colonial legacies	Myths and stories	Gender	Community
Infrastructure														
Garment design														
Temporalities														
Pride and guilt														
Practical action & agency														
Place														
Care														
The body														
Political economy														
Durability and														
Colonial legacies														
Myths and stories														
Gender														
Community														

Table 2 - Features of decentred durability

<p><b>INFRASTRUCTURE</b> - 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.</p> <p><b>GARMENT DESIGN</b> - 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 globalisation of trade.</p> <p><b>TEMPORALITIES</b> - 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.</p> <p><b>PRIDE AND GUILT</b> - 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.</p> <p><b>PRACTICAL ACTION &amp; AGENCY</b> - 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.</p> <p><b>PLACE</b> - 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.</p> <p><b>CARE</b> - Durability in clothing relies on care and a commitment to care. A focus on care decentralises 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.</p>	<p><b>THE BODY</b> - 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.</p> <p><b>POLITICAL ECONOMY</b> - 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.</p> <p><b>DURABILITY AND</b> - Durability ideas and characteristics work relationally. They are not reducible to single components or in isolation from the clothing-as-system.</p> <p><b>COLONIAL LEGACIES</b> - 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 knowledges are valued and for how long clothes last.</p> <p><b>MYTHS AND STORIES</b> - Cultural stories reveal diverse ideas about what endures and where clothing fits within plural ontologies and value systems. Recognising the specificity of traditions, cultural teachings and stories can guide the scope of practices around durability and tolerance for them.</p> <p><b>GENDER</b> - 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.</p> <p><b>COMMUNITY</b> - Belonging to something larger, like a community, can offer a strong foundation for material, relational and traditional cultural understandings of clothing durability.</p>
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## Further information

*Decentring Durability* is a strand of work of the LASTING research project<sup>†</sup> carried out by researchers from the Centre for Sustainable Fashion.<sup>‡</sup> LASTING involves an international consortium of 12 organisations from academia, civil society and industry and is funded by the Norwegian Research Council.

For more information about the *Decentring Durability* work contact Kate Fletcher ([k.t.fletcher@fashion.arts.ac.uk](mailto:k.t.fletcher@fashion.arts.ac.uk)) and Anna Fitzpatrick ([a.fitzpatrick@fashion.arts.ac.uk](mailto:a.fitzpatrick@fashion.arts.ac.uk)) at the Centre for Sustainable Fashion, London College of Fashion, UAL, UK.

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<sup>†</sup> <https://lasting.world/>

<sup>‡</sup> <https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/>