

“All about Love”: How would bell hooks teach fashion design?

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This paper introduces a PhD project which draws on theories from Black and Women of Colour feminists to develop anti-racist fashion design pedagogies. These pedagogical experiments demonstrate the value of Black and Women of Colour feminist scholarship for fashion design education through its call for the decolonization of pedagogy. Feminist scholarship emphasises the role of everyday life and ordinary experiences which can have the potential to disrupt hegemonic thinking. Such experiences could help shape new fashion design pedagogies and culture. I will suggest how using bell hook’s conception of “love” could also be taken up by fashion design educators to encourage students to explore points of connection and disconnection between different cultures, histories and experiences. hook’s notion could, I will also suggest, foster students’ active awareness of how local and global cultures and histories might be more creatively interwoven to create a design process that resists stereotyping, appropriation and racist forms of representation.

feminism; fashion design; design pedagogy, decolonization

1 Introduction

Over the many hours I have poured over the writings of my favourite Black and Women of Colour feminist authors, I have often wondered how they would teach fashion design, a subject that I have taught for over fifteen years in the U.K. What do these authors even think of fashion design and its relationship to a fashion industry which today stands accused of reinforcing “racism, sexism, gender stereotypes, class and unequal power relations” (Hoskins, 2014, p.149)? Given the opportunity, I would ask bell hooks, “how would *you* teach fashion design”? Using this question as a starting point, this paper will look at how fashion design in the global North needs be decolonized in order to engage with wider global fashion narratives in a more culturally diverse way. This drive for more plural narratives that engage with the dynamics of different forms of fashion design responds to academic studies that highlight the need to address the perception that fashion is primarily a Western phenomenon; and that, more precisely, the West has fashion, modernity and progress and the non-West does not (or at least, where it does, that it originates elsewhere) (Niessen, 2003).

This paper will do two things. First, it will discuss the ways in which racial hierarchies are constructed in fashion design; and, second, it aims to test how to re-think undergraduate fashion design pedagogies in the UK in order to de-centre the dominance of Eurocentric approaches. This paper



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draws on literature written by Black and Women of Colour feminists that debate how the education system plays a role in maintaining racial and gender inequalities (Mirza, 1997; hooks, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; Theuri, 2014). These contributions discuss the role of racism in pedagogical processes in art and design higher education.

To date, the small, but growing body of academic work undertaken on fashion design pedagogies focuses on creative strategies such as mood boards and drawings in fashion design processes (Gillham & McGilp, 2002; Dirix, 2013). However, research undertaken on socio-cultural contexts of fashion design are less developed (McRobbie, 1998). Instead, the majority of academic research that investigates the role that racial and cultural bias plays in art and design remains focused on art pedagogies (Hatton, 2015). This paper will demonstrate how the gaps in existing academic research on fashion design education and racial hierarchies need to be addressed for at least two reasons. Firstly, education systems continue to play an important role in reproducing racial inequalities from their selection processes to curricula, teaching and assessment methods (Gillborn, 2008; Gabriel, 2013). So, there is a challenge to better understand how design activities in fashion design education (student's work and curricula) encourage practices that marginalize and 'Other' different racial groups (Puwar & Bhatia, 2003; Kondo 1997; Geczy, 2013). Secondly, pedagogical interventions have been encouraged as a powerful way to disrupt hegemonic thinking and to achieve the aims of social justice and equality (hooks, 1994; hooks, 2000; Giroux 2005).

To critically engage with these topics, this paper is divided in three parts. Firstly, it will reflect on fashion design education today to identify how racial bias is constructed in the fashion design process. This section will also present a discussion about what these practices reveal about fashion design pedagogies in the U.K. Secondly, the paper will discuss the Eurocentric bias in undergraduate fashion design pedagogies in the U.K by examining resources that are used to teach fashion design. The third and final part of this paper explores how the concept of decolonial fashion could help introduce a workshop based on bell hooks concept of 'love' to offer an alternative to dominant Eurocentric thinking in fashion design education. Theories of decolonization problematize and interrogate the different ways in which Western colonialism exerts its global power (Mignolo, 2012 [2000]).

The aim of this practice-based PhD project is to develop new strategies and resources to support fashion design educators who are looking to challenge racial inequalities. The project aims to intervene into and disrupt hegemonic thinking in fashion design education through the development of social justice-oriented forms of fashion design pedagogy which could contribute to greater societal equality, with a particular focus on race (hooks, 1994; Giroux 2005).

2 Fashion Design Education Today

Since I began to teach fashion design in the year 2000, in further and higher education in London, there has been an exponential growth in fashion design education, both in the UK and globally. In the UK an estimated 16, 300 fashion design students graduate annually from over 326 fashion degree programmes (Eagle, 2013). An increasing number of these students are international and BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) home students, particularly in London. Therefore, in this context there is a need to create more opportunities to integrate diverse perspectives and knowledge into fashion design pedagogies. However, current provision of undergraduate fashion design in the U.K tends to underplay issues related to cultural diversity (www.allwalks.org). The question of how to educate fashion design students in this environment is becoming an increasingly pressing one yet remains under-theorised and under-researched. Many fashion design degree programmes do successfully reflect debates around wider ethical issues concerned with sustainability, production and consumption (Fletcher & Grose, 2012). Yet, there are calls for sustainable fashion design debates to better engage with a broader range of issues linked to social responsibility, ethics and politics (Busch, 2008). For example, how might issues of social justice in fashion design education

address European colonialism and imperialism, economic exploitation and racial hierarchies related to dominance and control?

To understand more about the relationship between social justice and education, David Gillborn's book *Racism and Education* gives valuable insights. Gillborn argues that Western education systems are in fact structured in ways that reproduce racial inequalities through what he calls 'non-accidental' forms of unintended racism, such as in the design of curricula, assessment systems, the teaching of history or the ways different students are advised (Gillborn, 2008). How might such "non-accidental" forms of unintended racism manifest themselves in fashion design pedagogies? The investigation of this question lies at the root of this PhD project. Many fashion design projects briefly actively encourage engagement with cultural difference. As cultural diversity itself becomes increasingly fashionable, how should progressive forms of fashion design be taught?

To address the co-option of counter cultural critiques, such as cultural diversity, a number of scholars warn that a new critical awareness or a 'meta-critique' (McRobbie, 2016, p. 8) needs to be adopted; especially, in a context where subcultures themselves become commodified and eventually de-politicized (Ponzanese, 2014). Further concerns over the tokenistic nature of cultural difference can again mean that the structural nature of oppression can remain hidden (Ahmed, 2012). These problems are discussed by Sylvia Theuri who critiques approaches that seek to raise awareness of BAME artists and designers through art spaces such as INIVA (Institute of International Visual Arts) and New Art Exchange and the exhibitions *africa 95* and *africa05* (Theuri, 2015, p.67). Theuri argues these initiatives which showcase BAME artists and designers, rather than more directly address racial inequalities can only further marginalize BAME groups, excluding them from mainstream institutions (Theuri, 2015, p.67). Such concerns are further developed in the work of Sara Ahmed who contends that institutional policies which aim to promote diversity have little impact on racial equality (Ahmed, 2012).

Recognising these concerns is important because the tokenistic strategies that are often conveniently used in educational contexts form part of the discussions here. Racist processes in education result in: issues of inequality in art and design education, such as the difference in attainment for degree marks between BAME and white home students (Richards & Finnigan, 2015, p.5.); Eurocentric bias in curricula and resources (see 'Why is my curriculum White?'); low level of BAME staff (Equality Challenge Unit 2014 in Richards & Finnigan, 2015, p.4); and, an environment where it can be very challenging for BAME students to gain entry to Higher Education courses (Burke & McManus, 2011). So, in what ways does racial bias manifest itself in fashion design and fashion design pedagogies? To address this question requires confronting issues of 'cultural appropriation', the use of exoticism, the 'Oriental Other' and varieties of racial stereotyping and micro-aggression in fashion design and image making. To further understand these issues, it therefore becomes increasingly important to understand how cultural hierarchies have, over many years, become embedded in fashion design cultures.

Addressing the role of hierarchies in fashion has resulted in an increasing recognition of the problematic nature of dominant fashion narratives that maintain that the West has fashion and the non-West does not (Niessen, 2003; Hoskins 2014). In the field of fashion studies, there has been a growing focus on the ways in which fashion produces racism; such as, through designs that culturally appropriate different cultures; the exclusion of non-white bodies in the fashion media and catwalk shows; and, the global dominance of European and America fashion design (Fung, 2006; Garconniere, 2010; Hoskins, 2014). Fashion scholars have specifically analysed structures of racism in fashion (Niessen, 2003; Cheang, 2014; Hoskins, 2014). Studies have begun to emerge, for example, which link key writings on fashion by early scholars to racist thinking (Gaugele & Titton, 2014; Sircar, 2014). Gaugele and Titton argue that some of the early influential work on fashion by Georg Simmel in 1904 is dominated by a 'colonial-racist theorization' which has established a, colonially biased, modern fashion theory. For example, Georg Simmel's contemporary understanding of fashion was that it was limited to the higher levels of society, meaning Western civilisation. Based

on a colonial-racist thinking, Simmel used terms such as “savages”, “primitive races”, and “primitive conditions of life” to describe colonized people, suggesting that such marginalized groups would be afraid of “anything new” (Gaugele & Tilton 2014, p.165).

This work, from over a century ago, links fashion with modernity, progress and the West. Describing fashion as a ‘Western regime’, Gaugele and Tilton investigate existing work on the history of fashion and textiles in India, historical alternative product cultures in the 1970s, government policies and representations of whiteness in fashion media imagery and art images. The authors conclude that a new understanding of fashion is needed to reflect the expansion of the global fashion supply chain and the increase of global retail outlets and media platforms. Sandra Niessen adds to this debate about how racial hierarchies structure fashion by focusing her analysis on non-Western fashion from Asia (Niessen, 2003). Niessen claims that non-Western fashion and clothing styles have been subject to fashion colonialist thinking which continues to affect both Western and non-Western designers.

This claim is supported by an academic study undertaken by Lisa Skov which argues that fashion designers in Hong Kong continue to feel that in order to gain success they need to produce fashion designs which draw on ‘traditional Chinese’ motifs instead of developing their own signature styles (Skov, 2003). Niessen suggests that such deeply entrenched cultural ideas of what does and does not constitute fashion represent the dilemmas in fashion design cultures today: how the non-West attempts to claim legitimate participation in fashion and how Western fashion attempts to appropriate non-Western cultural symbols. This dominant conception of fashion as a Western construct raises a number of important issues and challenges for contemporary fashion design education, some of which will be further explored as part of this PhD project. There is a need, for example, to identify how Eurocentric narratives dominate in fashion design project briefs and the need to examine the extent to which fashion resources used in the fashion design process reproduce these racial hierarchies. The next section will address some of the issues raised here by turning to the role that fashion design resources play in the design process. Drawing on my own experiences of teaching undergraduate fashion design in the U.K I will analyse the role of pattern cutting blocks in fashion design practice.

3 Eurocentric Bias in Fashion Design Resources

Issues relating to the prevalence of Eurocentric thinking are evident in the many resources employed in undergraduate fashion design education in the U.K. Some of these issues were encountered in a fashion project I have run several times on swimwear. The main resource and technique used in this context was a swimwear pattern block (figure 1). These blocks are used as a basic pattern from which variations of pattern designs can then be developed. In commercial production, patterns are made to fit standard body sizes and the usual procedure in the fashion industry is to work to a standard size 8 or 10.

Several issues were encountered during the design process in this swimwear fashion design project. Firstly, the swimwear blocks that were used only provide a pattern for one piece or two-piece swimwear garments and originate from European pattern blocks from the 1930s. These pattern blocks normalise standard body sizes in ways that exacerbate normative values around body image. Had a student wanted to design another type of swimwear, for example a burkhini or veilkini this resource would have been of little use (figure 2). How could these blocks support designs for people living in non-Western contexts where body-covering is the norm?

The veilkini or burkhini have become more mainstream in both the U.K and around the world. Indeed, the new Nike Pro hijab has been recently nominated for Beazley Design of the Year Award 2017 in the U.K. So, how could teaching resources have been more effectively deployed to offer alternatives to the normative values that are prevalent in such European pattern blocks? Did the lesson plan consider how some fashion design students, especially those from non-Western backgrounds, might respond to a brief requiring them to design swimwear that promotes aesthetics of the body that they may disagree with? Echoing such concerns with the exclusionary aesthetics of

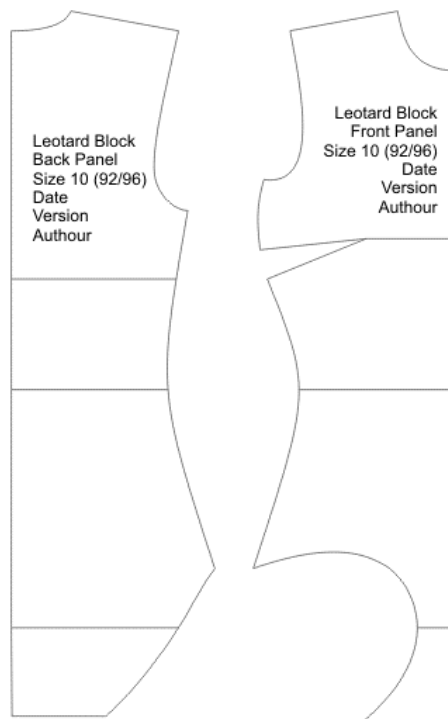


Figure 1 The 'leotard' block used in swimwear design. source www.pinterest.com.



Figure 2 An example of a veilkhini. source: www.aliexpress.com.

dominant fashion design, the fashion 'hijabi blogger' Dina Torkia recently reported that she took the decision not to study fashion design at university, "because I wore a scarf and that would be weird, I'd stick out" (Cochrane, 2015).

This example highlights just one of many possible ways that the fashion design process constructs and re-inscribes the normative values of Eurocentric culture. Paul Gilroy's important book 'After Empire' helps to open up this idea by showing how the legacies of colonial histories continue to exert influence in wider culture. Gilroy discusses the continued relevance of colonial history, asserting that, "ambiguities and defects of past colonial relations persist" and "amplify many current problems" (Gilroy, 2004:2). Therefore, does the use of pattern cutting blocks in fashion design programmes of study support the perpetuation of these historical power relations? Literature in this area of fashion design practice remains limited. Therefore, it is necessary to further challenge asymmetrical power imbalances at work in the fashion design education process through the development of new research and new curricula. The next section turns to how contributions from Black and Women of Colour feminist theories drawn from everyday experiences could open new possibilities to re-think fashion design pedagogies.

4 Decolonising Fashion Design

One approach to challenging racial inequalities that has been taken up by many Black and Women of Colour feminists including bell hooks (1994), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), Heidi Safia Mirza (Mirza & Joseph 2013) and others, calls for the decolonization of "our minds and our imaginations" (hooks 1994, p.202). Theories of *decolonization* emerged from critiques of colonialism written by scholars including Frantz Fanon (1959), Chinua Achebe (1958) and Edward Said (1978). These theories problematize and interrogate the different ways in which Western colonialism exerts its global power both today and in the past; despite the end of economic and political Western colonialism, projects of coloniality endure through the continued production of hierarchies of culture and knowledge (Mignolo, 2012 [2000]; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Therefore, by exposing historical power structures, processes of decolonization attempt to revive and expose hidden epistemologies.

hook's calls for decolonialization is rooted in a long tradition of feminist scholarship that argues how political issues cannot be addressed separately from the personal. In particular, debates in the fields of Marxist feminism (Carpenter & Mojab, 2017), care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) and science and technology studies (Haraway, 1988) offer feminist critiques of patriarchal structures in society. While such feminist perspectives are undoubtedly important, the emphasis in this paper to challenge structural racism and cultural hierarchies stresses the value of Black and Women of Colour feminisms. Thus, hooks' decolonial approach has the potential to establish a politics of diverse representation which could both critique and integrate aesthetic ideals informed by racist standards, a system of valuation that would embrace a diversity of Black looks' (hooks, 1994, p.202).

To challenge racial hierarchies, Black and Women of Colour feminists including bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Heidi Safia Mirza, Sara Ahmed and Chandra Mohanty open up new possibilities because they foreground issues of race within biographical narratives (Mohanty, 2003; Lorde, 2007 [1984]; Mirza, 2013; Ahmed, 2017). These intersectional feminist writings have given legitimacy to me drawing on my own family biography in a fashion design context, reflecting on objects owned by my family, including family photographs, personal memories, narratives and garments. It has been especially useful for me to look at clothing that different members of my family who originate from India have worn. My family often discuss their memories of growing up in India and clothing has a deeply significant role. Feminist theory has helped me better understand how hierarchical orders continue to be applied in fashion cultures.

Fashion's reliance on aesthetics underpinned by racist currents means that a decolonial approach potentially offers a broader agenda that exposes structural inequalities and also ways of resisting them. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, drawing on the seminal work on Franz Fanon, details the decolonization project as involving "profound transformations of the self, community and governance structures" (Mohanty, 2003, p.241). Therefore, decolonizing fashion requires not only students and educators to re-think fashion design but also wider society and the ways in which fashion is produced and consumed. Mohanty calls on those practicing decolonization to actively withdraw and resist structures of "psychic and social domination" through "self-reflexive collective practice" (Mohanty, 2003, p.241). How might fashion design educators develop self-reflexive approaches in fashion design pedagogies? Is this what decolonial fashion might look like?

In my own work on this issue I have drawn particular inspiration from the seminal work *All About Love* by bell hooks. Written at the beginning of the new millennium in the year 2000, this book has especially resonated with me because it emphasises alternative and more equitable ways for how human beings can relate to one another. hooks suggests this requires using love as a 'transformative power' (hooks, 2000, p. xxix). How might re-imagining human relationships and the role of love contribute to new forms of fashion design pedagogies? Could such an approach help create more inclusive fashion design practice that withdraws from Eurocentrism?

In the book *All about Love*, hooks calls for a re-definition of love which presents it as a profound emotion deeply rooted in both politics and society. According to hooks, love is defined as consisting of "care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge" (hooks, 2000, p.94). This definition gives agency to the concept of love, giving it an active role to play. Therefore, understanding the full dimensions of love shows it in contrast to a more popular perception in society that associates love as romantic, heterosexual and passive with a focus on individualism. A narrow understanding of love therefore prevents people in society from fully realising their full potential and ability to make one another happier through solidarity. hook's key argument is that her re-definition of love should be seen as an agent for social justice to help end "dominance and oppression" in society (hooks, 2000, p. 76). hook's concept of love therefore offers hope and possibilities for alternative ways to challenge societal inequalities through positivity and optimism.

hook's notion of love also has the potential to be utilised to foster students' active awareness of how local and global cultures and histories might be more creatively interwoven, to create a design process that resists stereotyping, appropriation and racist forms of representation. Adopting this approach in fashion design education, instead of abstract ahistorical approaches, orients educational experiences on historical and biographical specificities and differences. This approach could therefore provide points of disconnect between communities as wells as connections.

Developing this notion of solidarity in pedagogy, Mohanty proposes a pedagogical strategy called 'The Feminist Solidarity or Comparative Studies Model' (Mohanty, 2003). This strategy, I suggest, has the potential to be taken up by fashion educators to help encourage students to explore points of connection and disconnection between different cultures and histories. This approach could, for example, help educators challenge the uncritical spaces currently being produced as a result of the disengagement from socio-cultural contexts in fashion design education. Adopting this kind of decolonial approach therefore has the potential to encourage a new fashion design process. The aim is to enable fashion educators and students to understand that fashion is not a politically neutral process. This final part of this paper will now outline a workshop that used these theories to re-think the fashion design process in undergraduate fashion design education: "All About Love": Fashion designing for someone you love.

To begin the fashion workshop, I asked students to think about five people they loved. Drawing on hook's concept of "love", I asked students to think about love in the broadest sense to challenge dominant and narrow hetero-normative concepts. Students were asked to consider people they had loved from their family, such as parents and extended members to lovers and friends. I shared five

images of people who I loved, including my Great grandparents (who I have never met as they had died before I was born), my mother, and my friend's baby. Therefore, I was presenting the bodies of the elderly, the very young and a woman in a hijab (my mother); bodies that do not necessarily subscribe to Western normative ideas of fashion culture. I also highlighted how my Great grandfather wore the lunghi and my great grandmother wore a sari all her life to challenge the domination of Western clothing in undergraduate fashion.

Next, students were led into a discussion about the types of bodies that they design for as part of their undergraduate fashion education. All replied that their classes thus far had predominantly focused on designing for standard sized female mannequins. A few students remarked that they had indeed designed garments for friends and family, but that this had never been as part of their fashion design education. Instead, the domination of the mannequin in fashion design education means that the design process is dominated by female bodies that are sized 8 or 10. I then asked students if they had ever designed garments for any of the people they had listed as people they "loved"? A few students replied that they did indeed think about a lover or a sister when designing, but the majority fell silent remarking that they had never considered designing for a grandparent or a younger family member. Why, I asked, are they then mostly designing for an imaginary sized 8 female? The room once more feel silent.

The second part of the class then required students to work with a tutor in textiles and use a variety of materials to consider ways to design for the bodies that they identified as ones that they "loved". Working in groups, many students described feeling strong emotions as they began for the first time to design with an alternative set of design criteria, where aesthetics were no longer the most important feature to consider in their fashion designs. Many told evocative stories of the person who they were designing for whilst they were manipulating fabrics. For example, one student thoughtfully considered the effects of time on her grandparent's body and used padding to re-create the effects of an aged body (see figure 3).

Working in a group, this student's remarks prompted a conversation between participants on the physical consequences of aging on human bodies. Despite the age group of these students being less than thirty years old, all reflected and discussed people they knew whose bodies were older and even elderly. For example, one student discussed how her mother's body had changed after child birth and another mentioned how her grandmother's skin had begun to sag under multiple layers of skin. Using wadding, this group then begin to change the mannequins standardized features and add layers to represent folds of additional skin. They then used textiles to cover this 'time worn body' and develop a new fashion design. In this way the group of fashion students were beginning to consider creative ways to challenge hegemonies around body normativity in fashion. However, working on a standard sized female mannequin meant that conversations around the hierarchies of gender and body ableism were absent.

Another group of students were encouraged by one member who spoke emotionally as she experimented with ideas for a design for a member of her family disabled through illness. This student discussed how her relation was unable to fully participate in fashion due to the dominant structures of body normativity which render bodies with disabilities as absent from fashion cultures. To explore asymmetric bodies and fashion, this group of fashion students worked on each other's bodies to develop new fashion styles. With the use of wadding again, they manipulated one member's body to extend features and provide an alternative to normative body shapes and sizes. This figure was then wrapped with textiles to explore draping methods as an alternative to tightly structured and sewn garments which dominate many forms of Western garment construction.

Adopting these approaches in the context of fashion design education, opens up the possibility of re-orienting educational experiences on historical and biographical specificities, points of connection and disconnection between communities and possibilities for struggle and resistance against forms of cultural hierarchies. More work will need to be undertaken to research into other decolonial

strategies and the advantages and disadvantages of such approaches. Decolonization is an ongoing project but in the context of this research it might enable fashion educators and students to see that fashion is not politically neutral and needs to take more account of how cultural and racial bias is constructed in the design process.

Returning to hook's decolonial framework of 'love', new ideas for fashion curricula could offer opportunities to interweave different fashion histories, economies and politics in alternative ways to find commonality. I want to test whether such an approach has the potential to encourage educators and students to focus on points of connection and disconnection between the racial and cultural identifications that circulate in the design process and to therefore devise new pedagogical agendas. In this way fashion design education might offer a space to counter alternatives to the hetero-normative, gendered, racialized, and ableist normative contexts prevalent in mainstream fashion cultures.

5 Conclusion

This paper has set out to explore the potential of adopting a decolonial approach to teaching fashion design in the U.K and the extent to which this approach could offer opportunities to challenge racial bias in fashion design education. Despite the limitations of the research undertaken so far, the study has begun to deconstruct the fashion design pedagogical process. The urgent need for more social justice oriented and pluralistic fashion design education has precedents. In her recent book *Be Creative*, Angela McRobbie asserts that through the post war years, fashion design education in the UK was underpinned by social democratic and radical values, for example, through "radical political perspectives such as anti-racism, multiculturalism, feminism, anti-poverty issues etc" (McRobbie, 2016, p.161).

Drawing inspiration from these contexts, the next step in this research will now be to experiment further with hook's framework and to continue to develop strategies for a more inclusive and racially progressive form of fashion design education. The project will also need to open to the possibility of discovering other counter-racist approaches to fashion design. The possibility of cultivating such alternatives will also be further investigated in the next phase of this project which aims to create educational resources to support fashion design educators. The challenge here will be to encourage new and more equitable forms of fashion design. Approaches here could include:

- Exposing fashion design students to more diverse sets of fashion resources from non-Western sources.
- Reflecting on the "transformative potential" of interventionist strategies.

The aim here would be to show that alternative ways of teaching and learning fashion design are not just desirable but perfectly possible. Fashion theorists have only travelled so far in this journey, but many educators have in many ways already gone much further when it comes to re-imagining fashion design education beyond the limitations of dominant contemporary fashion cultures.

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Figure 3 'The Time Worn Body'.

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