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Chapter 2

Ethno-racial capitalism in contemporary fashion Forced labour and the Uyghur crisis

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Introduction

Just as the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic games start in the midst of polemics and a diplomatic boycott, details about the treatment of Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in China, and in particular the Uyghurs, are reaching the general public. At first sight, the level of proximity Westerners may have with certain abuses seems obscure. However, evidence provided by NGOs, researchers, investigative journalists (ASPI 2020; Zenz 2019; Human Rights Watch 2021; Murphy et al. 2021; Tobin et al. 2021), and intergovernmental institutions (United Nations 2022) allows one to retrace the long and tortuous journey that from the cotton fields of China's north-western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR),1 home to the Uyghurs, unravels on a global scale. The Uyghur crisis needs, in fact, to be understood within both the Chinese national context and also in relation to the global scenario and operation of international corporations. China's embracing of a market economy, since the reforms of the late 1970s, has notoriously led to its remarkable economic growth, with the state playing a central role in economic, political, and social matters (Hsu and Hasmath 2012). As the liberalisation of global markets intensifies both transnational and local inequalities, across race, ethnicity, class, and gender lines (Treitler and Boatcă 2016), the repression and exploitation of the Uyghurs seem to be particularly 'convenient': indeed, not only do they reflect the Chinese government's internal strategic priorities, but they allow international corporations to make even greater profits. The case of XUAR, which has only lately surfaced to international attention, is one of the many examples in the long history of labour exploitation within the textile and garment industry. Being relatively unexplored, at least from the perspective of fashion studies, it represents a new instance of colonial-capitalist expansion, which sheds light on complex and institutionalised forms of labour exploitation within fashion. It also represents a rather unique case, due to the particular intersection of state power, private corporations, and digital surveillance in the production of 'a permanent underclass of ethno-racial minority workers' (Byler 2022, 33). This contribution critically analyses the strategic role of XUAR for fashion's global supply chains and the repression of the Uyghur minority within the broader theoretical context of 'racial capitalism' (Robinson [1983] 2000; Vergès 2017; [2019] 2021), where the colony is 'consubstantial' with capital. In exploring coercive labour practices subjecting Uyghurs, the study focuses on key aspects such as cultural assimilation, gender-based violence, and the systematic

dehumanisation of ethnic minority workers. Rather than engaging in direct interviews with formerly detained Uyghurs, which would require background experience in listening to and understanding trauma, also from a culturally informed perspective, I rely on firstperson testimonies as part of publications, reports, and the media, and personally shared by human rights advocates.2 Drawing from the notion of 'sacrifice zone', elaborated by anthropologist Sandra Niessen (2020), I interpret XUAR as fashion's latest 'sacrifice zone', where cultural assimilation goals and logic of profit conveniently intertwine with each other. The case of XUAR, I argue, is particularly emblematic since it addresses, with a certain urgency, power dynamics within the capitalist-nationalist world order, the social impact of the global fashion industry, as well as the role of media, NGOs, governments, and civil society in the whole picture. As my contribution concludes, it also allows us to draw broader considerations on sustainability, and the convergence of social, racial, and environmental justice, hence highlighting the need for a cultural change, where transparency and accountability can ultimately challenge the neoliberal morality typical of our market society.

On racial capitalism and the 'Racial Capitalocene' within fashion

Marx and, even earlier, Engels have addressed the essential role of a readily available and disposable 'reserve army' of labour to the survival and deployment of capitalism (Marx [1867] 1990; Engels [1845] 2010). While this concept is crucial for a critical analysis of contemporary fashion production, the complex web of racialised and gendered inequalities, knitted together within global capitalism, requires a rethinking of classic Marxism that captures the intersection of race, gender, and class within the capitalist exploitation of labour. The necessity of rethinking the tenets of Marxist analysis becomes evident in the face of casualties that surface in the headlines, such as the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2013. Tragic incidents like that offer an occasional window on diffused unethical practices, and extremely unsafe working conditions tainting the global supply chains. However, widespread and consolidated exploitative practices are firmly protected by those 'mysteries' and 'secrets' (Marx [1867] 1990; Mezzadri 2016) that characterise the 'hidden abode of production' (Marx [1867] 1990, 123). For a discussion of contemporary cases of exploitation within the global fashion production, such as forced labour, the role of racial capitalism in the organisation of a 'cheap', racialised, gendered workforce as constant capital, cannot be emphasised enough. Black Marxism and Marxist feminism have addressed the impact of racism, sexism, and nationalism on the organisation of labour under capitalism; in doing so, they put into question a Eurocentric reading of Marx, and the adoption of the white metropolitan industrial worker as the main standard in understanding historical forms of production. As pointed out by Mezzadri (2016, 6), capitalism needs in fact to be read not as a 'homogenising force but rather as a harshly dividing one, driven by and always reconstituting multiple forms of inequality', which ultimately leads to a variety of forms of exploitation, spanning from free to unfree, from waged to unpaid labour. Cedric Robinson's seminal analysis of racial capitalism, as the process of extracting economic and cultural value from individuals and communities of different racial and ethnic identity, has taught us that race is capitalism's 'epistemology, ordering principle, organising structure, moral authority, economy of justice, commerce and power' (Robinson [1983] 2000, ii). Drawing from Robinson's perspective, and more recent contributions by decolonial feminist Françoise Vergès (2017, [2019] 2021) and sociologist Jason Moore (2014a, 2016), I contend that for an analysis of inequalities and exploitative practices within contemporary fashion, social, racial, and environmental justice need to be explored in their interconnectedness. Their interrelation is best captured, I believe, by the concept of 'Racial

Capitalocene' proposed by Vergès (2017), as a further elaboration of Moore's notion of 'Capitalocene', which addresses 'the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature' as a dialectical unity (Moore 2014a, 287). Within this perspective, society and nature are not separate entities, but rather a web of intricate relations, where labour is always labour 'in' and 'with' nature (ibid.). Capitalism, explains Moore (2014a, 2014b, 2016), would not be able to survive a day without dimensions of inequality that allow the appropriation of human unpaid labour, and the extractivist appropriation of the labour of nature. In putting emphasis on the role of race, the Racial Capitalocene highlights the complexities of the age of the capital and underscores the connection between the global organisation of a disposable, racialised, and gendered 'reserve army' of labour and a conception of nature as 'cheap'. The Racial Capitalocene emerges hence as a valuable epistemic tool with relevant implications for a critical analysis of global fashion, whether we talk about production, sustainability, or even systems of representation within fashion. Within this investigation on forced labour and the Uyghur crisis, the concept of Racial Capitalocene stands to name asymmetries of power and structures that reproduce patterns of inequality as essential to the deployment of global capitalism, that is, the systematic, racialised, and gendered production of unpaid work. It is a proposition that, rather than elevating itself above historical variations,3 proceeds through the inevitable 'dialectics of accumulation and destruction of labour-power', which is at the very core of capitalism (Federici 2004, 10). The Racial Capitalocene challenges, in this sense, the rhetoric of individual responsibility and ethical consumption, addressing instead the responsibility of the system producing those inequalities. Moreover, it helps deconstruct oversimplifications and fixes offered, for instance, by green capitalism as well as 'green' initiatives adopted by fashion brands or corporations, which are often rooted in marketing and advertising. Made in slavery:4 The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region as fashion's latest 'sacrifice zone' An emblematic and complex case that can only be fully grasped when viewed through the epistemic lens of the Racial Capitalocene and racial capitalism is currently epitomised by XUAR, a region rich in cotton, oil, gas, and fossil fuel reserves, and home to the Uyghur ethnic minority, a population of over 12 million people. XUAR can be considered one of the many so-called 'sacrifice zones' of fashion, 'the resource-rich lands, generally associated with minority communities that are considered dispensable and exploited for economic gain', as theorised by Niessen (2020, 864–865). As a major cotton producer, providing over 80% of Chinese cotton (Murphy et al. 2021), XUAR is a strategic area for global fashion production. The cotton produced in XUAR fuels in fact global supply chains involving fast fashion brands, sportswear giants, and luxury groups like Kering, which owns Gucci, Saint Laurent, and Balenciaga. In recent years, several corporations, such as Kering (2020), have been promoting initiatives implementing 'sustainable' and regenerative cotton farming in XUAR. Despite the gradual emergence of investigations denouncing Uyghurs' forced labour, these initiatives have unsurprisingly focused on environmental issues, without addressing the Uyghur crisis, the social impact of production practices, human rights, or transparency of the supply chains. Even more recently, the commitment to sustainability, professed by another international organisation, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), has resulted at odds with its refusal to discuss due diligence about forced labour in connection with the production of athletes' uniforms and Olympic-branded merchandise for the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games (End Uyghur Forced Labour 2022; Texintel 2022). At a time when details about the reality of forced labour of the Uyghur people are surfacing, the neutrality of international corporations and the logic of profit are still overriding calls to due diligence, and commitments to corporate responsibility and transparency. In this sense, the complex case of XUAR, besides addressing transparency as a prerequisite of sustainability, urges us to reflect on power dynamics within the capitalist-nationalist world order, exploitative practices, and the social impact of the global fashion industry. As Niessen (2021) reminds us, the sacrifice zones are easily ignored, forgotten, or erased, also because it is difficult to obtain information and connect the dots, which is particularly true of the authoritarian regime deployed by the Chinese government in XUAR,

and international corporations turning a blind eye towards Uyghur forced labour. The systematic appropriation and devaluation of Uyghur labour, the dehumanisation of workers, and the mechanisms in place to make them 'invisible' reflect a specific political and nationalist intention, which only benefits from the peculiar tension between the tendency of capitalism to strengthen the nation-state and its own transnational imperatives (Hall [1993] 2005). Indeed, shadowed by opaque supply chains, the Chinese government's control, and the lack of adequate transnational mandatory standards, Uyghurs and other ethnic minority workers have for years represented a 'reserve army' of labour, exploited in the dark and reduced to silence. The dispossession of the Uyghur ethnic minority: A silenced 'reserve army' of labour In recent years, details of the dramatic changes informing XUAR, and the fragile position of the Uyghur people, have been gradually emerging, portraying a situation where ethnic minority repression and the logic of profit intersect inextricably. Since 2017, when the Chinese government started a social re-engineering campaign against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in China, several NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, investigative journalists, and academic researchers have provided extensive evidence of the increasing repression of ethnic and religious minorities, involving the internment in secretive detention camps, and the use of forced labour under a state-sponsored labour transfer scheme. The coercive Sinicisation enacted by the Chinese government in the name of ethnic unity – the prime goal of the 2017 XUAR Regulations on 'de-extremification' (China Law Translate 2017; World Uyghur Congress 2018a; United Nations 2022) – has been described by activists, researchers, government officials, and the US government as 'ethnocide' and cultural 'genocide' (Zand 2019; Sheperd 2019; Finnegan 2020; House of Commons of Canada 2020; United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2020; Gordon 2021; Alecci 2020). The crackdown on ethnic minorities has been widely documented also by leaked papers published by The New York Times (Ramzy and Buckley 2019), which shared more than 400 pages of internal Chinese governments documents disclosing an unprecedented insight into the strategy that led to over one million Uyghurs being held within an expanding network of detention camps (World Uyghur Congress 2021). In 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) published the report 'Uyghurs for Sale: Re-education, forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang' (ASPI 2020), demonstrating that, from 2017 to 2019, more than 80,000 Uyghurs have been relocated from their native XUAR to work in factories across China, under a central government policy known as 'Xinjiang Aid'. Officially, this is presented as a poverty eradication scheme aiming to lift poor households out of poverty (Ling 2019), with 'poverty alleviation' being however 'a euphemism for the entire re-education system' (Byler 2019): resisting to be alleviated from poverty is in fact treated by Chinese authorities as a sign of extremism, with dire consequences for refractory individuals. Indeed, a significant number of Uyghurs working in factories across China are directly transferred from 'vocational skills education and training centres', de facto internment camps, where they are detained without legal process and subjected to political indoctrination.

The labour transfer programmes targeting Uyghurs, as reported by ASPI (2020), subsidise factories that are part of supply chains involving at least 82 well-known global brands within electronics (e.g. Apple), the automotive sector (e.g. Jaguar, Mercedes Benz), and textiles and clothing, such as Abercrombie & Fitch, Adidas, Calvin Klein, Fila, Gap, H&M, Haier, Lacoste, Nike, Polo Ralph Lauren, Puma, Tommy Hilfiger, Victoria's Secret, Zara, Zegna, and many others. Even though not all brands have the same level of exposure to Uyghur forced labour, substantial evidence (Murphy et al. 2021; Tobin et al. 2021; ASPI 2020) indicates that some finished products are directly manufactured within a context of coercive training and labour, while others go through complex supply chains involving many levels of sub-contracting, which makes the task of retracing the whole chains very complex, if not impossible. Involuntary labour-intensive factory work in state-controlled environments takes different forms, such as internment camp workshops, with factories being placed inside or adjacent to the camps; large

newly built industrial parks, hosting a mix of detainees and so-called 'rural surplus labourers';5 and finally village-based satellite factories, close to the workers' hometown, supplemented by full-time daycare and educational facilities, which relieve women from childcare duties, allowing them to be productive (Zenz 2019). When analysing the Uyghur crisis within the global economy and fashion production, we cannot underestimate the strategic importance that XUAR holds for the Chinese economy, being a core region of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),6 and producing over 80% of Chinese cotton, which amounts to 30% of world's cotton (Murphy et al. 2021). The appealing resourcefulness of XUAR, combined with Beijing's ethnic unity and social stability goals through a grand scheme of 'poverty alleviation', has resulted in the whole region attracting tremendous investment and construction initiatives from textile and garment-related companies from eastern China. Taking advantage of the cheap 'reserve army' of labour represented by ethnic minority workers, and significant financial and tax incentives provided by the government (Tobin et al. 2021, 21), local factories and corporations can generate enormous profits. Not by chance, as reported by Byler (2019), already in 2018, the development ministry for XUAR declared that the 'vocational skills education and training centres' had become a 'carrier' (zàitǐ) of the Chinese economy. Despite officially contributing to poverty eradication, the labour and transfer schemes involving minority workers paint a very different reality, where Uyghurs are systematically 'dispossessed', that is, subjected to 'labour expropriation through devaluation and technopolitical enclosure' (Byler 2022, 101). Enjoying only restricted or no mobility at all, Uyghurs are either unpaid or receive a fraction of the salary gained by Han workers in the same factory (Ling 2019). Lower wages are usually justified by employers with detractions to cover expenses for workers' food, costly transfers, and training, which often leave the workers with very minimal or no earnings at all (Tobin et al. 2021; Murphy et al. 2021). Moreover, reports and testimonies of former detainees demonstrate that many workers involved in the labour and transfer schemes were not originally unemployed and are instead professionals forced into 'improved' (i.e. approved) farming or those 'labourintensive' industries that conveniently require only a limited amount of training, such as textiles and garment manufacturing (Tobin et al. 2021; Zenz 2019). The treatment of an ethnic minority as a 'reserve army' of labour, formed by arguably under-employed and unemployed individuals, reflects in fact specific ethno-racial capitalist and biopolitical goals. As highlighted by recent research (ASPI 2020; Zenz 2019), the 'poverty alleviation' scheme is compulsory and 'fine grained', that is, involves every single citizen: all ethnic minority individuals in XUAR are to be in a state-approved place, such as care/education, training, work, or on state subsidies if unable to work. A capillary mesh of political control, made of coercion, political indoctrination, surveillance, and threats of detention, firmly secures individuals to the productive system, making it almost impossible for ethnic minority citizens to evade government-sponsored work assignments. The peculiar intrusiveness of the 'poverty alleviation scheme', encompassing the life of all ethnic minority citizens, seems an expression not only of contemporary ethno-racial capitalism but also of the intrinsic relationship between biopolitics and labour power.

Biopolitics and labour power: The ethno-racist heteropatriarchal exploitation of Uyghur women

As addressed by Marxist feminist Silvia Federici (2004) and philosopher Paolo Virno (2004), biopolitics needs to be understood in its unity with labour power, and in relation to the capitalist concern with the accumulation of labour power. Regarding in particular the accumulation of Uyghur labour power, the racialised discrimination is an essential feature of the capitalist regime to which workers are forced

to contribute. The business of 'buying' and 'selling' Uyghur labour is in fact very profitable, with local governments and commercial brokers being financially and politically supported in the organisation of labour assignments. Recent reports (ASPI 2020, 16–17; Tobin et al. 2021, 21) document in fact disturbing online advertisements 'selling' batches of government-sponsored XUAR workers for shipment to other provinces, praising the docile and hardworking nature of Uyghurs, and detailing suitable management styles as well as benefits of using these workers. For instance, an advert published in Baidu HR Forum in 2019, and titled '1000 ethnic minorities awaiting online booking', reads: 'the advantages of using Xinjiang labour are: semi-military style management, can withstand hardship, no loss of personnel … Minimum order 100 workers!' (ASPI 2020, 16, trans. from Chinese by ASPI). Reports, first-hand accounts by former detainees, photos, and satellite data (Zhang 2019) show emblematic techniques of biopolitical security (Foucault 2007), with many of the factories being surrounded by razor-wire fences, watchtowers, and iron gates, equipped with cameras, and monitored by police or security guards. The para-military management and tight control of the workforce, enacted by a complex web of high-tech surveillance, digital profiling, guards, police, teachers, and the practice of confiscating identification documents, ensure that the interned labourers cannot liaise with each other and organise themselves as a rights-bearing working class. The extremely scrutinised and extrajudicial factory environment occupies indeed a special place, that is, a 'liminal space between labour camps and private industry, proletarianisation and social elimination' (Byler 2019, n.p.). Turning ethnic minority citizens into a productive yet docile workforce is the prime biopolitical goal of the exploitative state-sponsored labour schemes. The rare testimonies by camp survivors highlight the harrowing conditions in the camps; the overcrowded cells; the lack of adequate hygiene, food, or water; the surveillance; and the systematic dehumanisation of detainees. Erzhan Qurban, a middle-aged Kazakh man from XUAR released from a camp and sent to work in a glove factory in Ghulja (XUAR), describes the conditions of detention, which are very similar through the stories told by other ex-detainees, and their psychological impact on prisoners (Byler 2022, 56):

> The toilet was a bucket by the window, there was no running water. In the daytime, we were sitting in rows on our plastic stools. The food was handed to us through an opening in the door. At 7 am, we had to sing the Chinese national anthem, and then we had three minutes for breakfast. Afterwards, we learned Chinese until 9 pm. Our teachers were Kazakhs or Uyghurs. We were watched by four cameras in our room, which ensured that we didn't talk to each other. Those who spoke anyway were handcuffed and had to stand by the wall. 'You don't have the right to talk, because you are not humans', said the guards. *'If you were humans, you wouldn't be here' … The first two months, I thought of my wife Maynur and my three children. Some time later, I only thought about food* (emphasis mine).

Despite the official rhetoric presenting the labour schemes as 'vocational', extensive evidence reveals disturbing state-subsidised labour practices consistent with the International Labour Organization's definitions of forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking (ILO n.d.; Xinjiang Victims Database n.d.; United Nations – Human Rights 2021). Internment and forced labour are part of a wider campaign designed to culturally assimilate targeted ethnic minorities (Amnesty International 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021; Tobin et al. 2021). The cultural assimilation intents are confirmed by several examples of interconnected practices of linguistic, cultural, and religious erasure, involuntary family separations, and the increasing number of orphanages and boarding schools7 to prevent inter-generational cultural transmission (van Schaak et al. 2021). The destruction of family ties is in fact typical of family policies especially aimed at racialised minorities (Vergès [2019] 2021). While across

China authorities are encouraging women to have more children in response to a demographic crisis, Uyghur women are being deprived of control on their reproductive rights, and often subjected to invasive birth control procedures, which have resulted in XUAR's plunging birth rates (The Associate Press 2020). After all, as Federici (2004, 2021) remarks, destroying women's control on their reproductive function has been, historically, a rather common strategy, instrumental to the consolidation of a patriarchal order and the exploitation of female labour. Within the authoritarian context deployed by the current Chinese government, the state's biopolitical intentions are manifest also through widespread initiatives aimed at allegedly modernising Uyghur women and their appearance, such as outlawing head coverings, and introducing new dress codes and standards of beauty (Grose 2021). The anti-Muslim tropes (China Daily 2021) used in promoting the adoption of a new lifestyle are just the counterpoint of the labour and transfer programmes, which are presented as emancipating women, thus following those common places occurring within 'civilisational' feminism (Vergès [2019] 2021), or settler colonial discourse (Byler 2022), or more broadly in the 'megarhetoric of developmental modernisation' (Appadurai 1996, 10). The disciplining and appropriation of the Uyghur female body enacted by the state, outside and inside the work environment, reminds us, time and time again, how women's bodies have historically been, and still are, the 'main targets, the privileged sites, for the deployment of power-techniques and power relations' (Federici 2004, 7). Within the coercive labour and transfer programmes targeting Uyghurs, and affecting the global supply chains, the role of women is indeed absolutely crucial. It is precisely thanks to Uyghur women, who have survived the 'vocational' re-education centres, that we gain a further insight into life in the centres, and the overall process of cultural assimilation perpetrated at the expense of Uyghurs, with the complicity of the global industry. Human rights advocate Eleonora Mongelli explains that women are 'the first victims of this brutal repression, and at the same time the first fighters for Uyghur freedom … besides sharing their experiences publicly, [they] have also used their professions and art to create a movement of nonviolent resistance' (Loscialpo and Mongelli 2021, n.p.). A detailed and much-referenced testimony is provided, for instance, by Gülbahar Jalilova, an Uyghur clothes retailer from Kazakhstan, now residing in France, who spent 15 months (2016–2017) in a detention camp in Ürümchi (XUAR) and, despite the threats from Chinese authorities, shared her story. Her account also confirms the widespread use of psychiatric drugs and, in the case of women, medication that would stop the menstrual cycle. Talking about her experience she recalls (World Uyghur Congress 2018b; Byler 2018):

> They gave pills to every inmate. We all sat quietly. It (and the lack of food) made us subdued. You cannot even think about your children or your parents. You go in and out of consciousness. You can think of nothing. It is as if you've spent your whole life in prison. *It is as if you were born there. No thoughts come into your head* (emphasis mine).

Jalilova and other survivors, who gave very rare first-hand accounts, have disclosed insights into the treatment of women during detention, with their stories echoing those of hundreds of thousands of Uyghur women experiencing torture, gender-based violence, rape, forced labour, forced sterilisation, use of psychiatric drugs, degrading treatment, and dehumanisation. As documented by the media and within several reports (ASPI 2020; Murphy et al. 2021; Tobin et al. 2021), their testimonies address a disturbing intersecting of violence and discrimination, due to their ethnicity and gender. Jalilova, who experienced sexual attacks during her detention, explains: 'we were humiliated and made to feel ashamed about our body as Muslims' (Mitsui 2021). A BBC report (Hill et al. 2021), featuring interviews with former detainees and a guard, shows that the women's re-education camps have in place a system of organised rape and torture, with details very rarely emerging due to the victims' fear of repercussions on family members and 'notions of personal, family and even national shame and

humiliation' (Tobin et al. 2021, 39). Within the accumulation of Uyghur labour power and cultural assimilation efforts, women pay a very high price, with their bodies, lives, and labour; yet their insightful, brave testimonies help shed light on multiple aspects of the repression targeting the Uyghur minority, which has taken place with the complicity of global industries and the late capitalist economic order. Considering the dramatic surge, in recent years, of labour schemes and transfers, government investments, and presence of private corporations in XUAR, the very 'political and economic stakes of Uyghur colonisation' (Byler 2022) can be understood as an ever-expanding frontier of global capitalism where multimilliondollar profits and ethno-racism are inextricably intertwined.

Unravelling the logic of profit: towards transparency and accountability

Racial capitalism needs inequalities to function, and 'sacrifice zones' that allow economic players to profit from extractivism and labour exploitation. The repression and dispossession of Uyghurs bear similarities with other instances in the long history of exploitation on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, and class. Byler (2022) draws, for instance, interesting parallels with the mass incarceration of Black Americans, which creates unfree labourers and significant profits while damaging family ties and social reproduction. On the other hand, the case of XUAR is characterised by a peculiar intersection of state power, interests of private corporations, and digital surveillance, which makes any form of contestation almost impossible. A feature of the 'sacrifice zones', Niessen (2021) reminds us, consists in their being easily ignored, forgotten, or conveniently erased, which is particularly true of XUAR, due to the control exerted by the Chinese government, the fear of repercussions, and – for what concerns more specifically fashion production – opaque supply chains fuelled by raw materials and labourers from the region. The involvement of Chinese corporations in labour transfer programmes and vocational training is partly obscured by the complexity of their supply chains, which from XUAR's cotton fields extend to mainland factories, then often to intermediary manufacturers either in China or abroad, and finally to international brands such as Adidas, Abercrombie & Fitch, H&M, Lacoste, Levi's, Nike, Patagonia, Primark, Puma, Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, and Zara (Murphy et al. 2021; ASPI 2020; Zenz 2019). After the publication of 'Uyghurs for sale' (ASPI 2020), and especially when human rights abuses in XUAR started attracting significant media attention, brands voicing concerns about reports of forced labour, such as Nike and H&M, initially faced a fierce backlash and boycott in China, with the backing of state media. Any criticism of, and interference with, China's policies comes in fact at a very high price. In response to the concerns expressed by Western brands about unethical practices tainting the cotton supply chain, the Communist Youth League, the youth wing of China's ruling party, eloquently summarised the situation in a post on Weibo: 'Spreading rumours to boycott Xinjiang cotton, while also wanting to make money in China? Wishful thinking!' (Reuters 2021, n.p., transl. from Chinese by Reuters). Caught on the frontline of detrimental tensions with the Chinese superpower, brands inevitably find themselves at a crossroads, having to choose between protecting human rights or their profits from the Chinese market. Bending to the logic of profit, Nike removed from their website any reference to the Uyghur crisis, with CEO John Donahoe stating: 'we take a very long-term view with China, we're continuing to invest in China, and we'll continue to invest in China while also operating a very responsible global supply chain' (CNBC 2020, n.p.). Similarly, H&M, after the original statement about phasing out its relationship with a Chinese supplier accused of forced labour, declared their commitment to 'regaining the trust and confidence' of Chinese customers and business partners and to addressing issues related to material sourcing (H&M Group 2021, n.p.). While branding themselves as progressive apostles of social and environmental responsibility, companies

continue to pursue profit without accountability, with their attitudes towards social justice and human rights being mainly dependent on the extent of media attention and consumer behaviour. In December 2021, the US Congress passed the 'Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act', requiring enterprises to prove that goods imported from XUAR are not produced with forced labour. This immediately alarmed companies with considerable business interests in the region. Nike, Apple, and Coca-Cola not only criticised the ban but actively lobbied against it (Swanson 2020) – a clear indication of the hypocrisy running through those social responsibility claims professed by Nike. For this reason, the responsibility of taking conscious decisions cannot be left to the willingness of companies, nor can entirely fall back on the consumers. As Mongelli explains (Loscialpo and Mongelli 2021, n.p.), 'without legislation with extraterritorial effects, many companies will inevitably choose profit over workers' rights, and those acting responsibly will be at a severe competitive disadvantage'. Exploitative practices, such as forced labour, can proliferate also thanks to legal discrepancies between countries, and loopholes existing within particular policies. Current due diligence legislations, and social auditing procedures, are in fact still inadequate to address complex labour practices, such as state-sponsored forced labour, and cannot hold states, companies, and individuals accountable for human rights violations within different tiers of the supply chains (Murphy et al. 2021, 55–56). Even the first policy explicitly addressing the issue of forced labour and business relationships with XUAR, adopted by the Canadian government, contains a significant flaw, symptomatic of a severe lack of transparency in the fashion supply chains. The 'Integrity Declaration on Doing Business with Xinjiang Entities' (Government of Canada 2020), which aims to prohibit the importation of goods produced wholly or in part by forced labour, requires in fact Canadian companies to declare that they operate lawfully to 'their knowledge', which is a crucial issue considering the difficulty of holding independent audits in XUAR. In this respect, the President of the World Uyghur Congress, Dolkun Isa (Fashion Transparency Index 2021, 73) argues:

> the genocide in East Turkestan [XUAR] makes it impossible for brands to conduct due diligence in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The heightened surveillance means that companies or auditors have no reliable means to get credible information about conditions in their supply chains. The implications of this lack of transparency are clearly profound, as accountability depends on traceability and transparency in the supply chains, without which 'brands cannot be aware of the effect of their business practices on human rights and neither on the environment' (Loscialpo and Mongelli 2021, n.p.).

In other words, transparency is clearly a prerequisite for sustainability. The Fashion Transparency Index (2021), published by Fashion Revolution, documents that a lack of transparency can be observed especially at the raw material level, with the majority of global fashion brands having yet to disclose information about suppliers of raw materials, and share findings from their audits, involving farms, processing facilities, and factories. For what concerns in particular XUAR, the situation is almost impenetrable, due to government-subsidised corporations operating in the area and controlling the entire cotton production, which renders any fact-finding mission almost 'futile' (Zenz 2019). Considering the 'increasingly untenable operating environment' in XUAR (End Uyghur Forced Labour 2021, n.p.), in 2020 Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), the largest cotton sustainability programme, withdrew from the region, suspending also its licensing for XUAR cotton. In response to Western criticism and BCI revoking its licencing, commercial and legal means are being deployed to serve the nation's interests within the global and domestic markets; for instance, the strategic launch of China's own sustainable cotton certification – the 'Cotton China Sustainable Development Programme' (China

Cotton 2021) – reflects the nationalist aim to reduce reliance on Western standards, and to consolidate domestic and international standing within cotton production. In its unicity, what is happening in XUAR provides the opportunity to reflect on the mutual relationship between global constructions and the production of locality and to observe, more specifically, the modes of localisation congenial to a certain nation-state (Appadurai 1996). In our seemingly 'deterritorialised' world (Appadurai 1996; Deleuze and Guattari 1987), unveiling forms of exploitation requires a focus on locality, and on that process of colonisation inherent in its production. It hence asks for an exploration of expanding capitalist and colonial frontiers, which goes beyond the corporate staging of social responsibility and sustainability or, in other words, beyond the spectacle of 'change without change' (Niessen 2020, 872). Since change will not stem from the economic, global, and national order that allows new forms of exploitation, what needs to be challenged are the 'ethno-racial hierarchies that remain a co-foundational element of both historical and contemporary forms of economy' (Byler 2022, 6) and, with them, the normalisation and institutionalisation of this exploitation. Reflecting on the ethno-racial directions and structures that reproduce inequalities and the exploitation of nature and workers allows us also to demystify, and contextualise, the rhetoric of individual responsibility and ethical consumption within a wider capitalist strategy. 'Ethical capitalism', Žižek (2010) argues, personalises guilt and responsibility, relieving individuals in more privileged nations from looking deeply into the inequities directly related to global capitalism, by offering the opportunity to buy their redemption from being consumerist. This market-embedded morality, typical of a capitalism predicated on destructive consumerism, requires precisely an ethical consumerism to negate its own destructiveness. However, as the case of XUAR shows, until the fashion's 'sacrifice zones' are eliminated, no consumer in a global capitalist system can be entirely free from an unethical footprint. Just as the 'reserve army' of Uyghur and other ethnic minority labourers keeps growing day by day, NGOs, researchers, journalists, ethical fashion associations, and activist groups are raising attention about the urgent situation in XUAR. This complex case not only invites us to dissect more thoroughly the social impact of the global fashion industry and current labour exploitation on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, and class; it also demonstrates that a genuinely revolutionary politics of sustainability needs to work on the convergence of social, racial, and environmental justice, and denounce the erosion of several cultures and traditions within the capitalist world order. This is definitely a monumental mission, which demands for a cultural change, cultural repair, solidarity, and cooperation at many levels. In the face of hierarchies and divisions created by capitalism, as Cedric Robinson reminds us in the ever-relevant conclusion to Black Marxism (1983] 2000, 318), 'for now we must be as one'.

Notes

1 Advocates for the region's independence favour, instead, other denominations such as 'East Turkestan' or 'Uyghurstan', which reflect the cultural roots of the minorities living in the area. Within this context, I adopt the official 'XUAR' denomination for clarity, and conformity with the majority of reports, sources, and documents available.

2 The work of the World Uyghur Congress, and human rights advocate Eleonora Mongelli, Vice President of the Italian Federation for Human Rights (FIDU), has been particularly valuable to this contribution.

3 According to its critics (Moore 2014; 2016; Haraway 2016; Vergès 2017), the notion of the Anthropocene, dominating popular and scientific discourses, is instead a positivist generalisation,

abstracting from the historical process, and obscuring 'the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity's strategic relations of power and production' (Moore 2014b).

4 The title is inspired by 'Made in Slavery' (Mongelli 2021), a podcast developed, in Italian, by human rights advocate Eleonora Mongelli, which denounces the reality of Uyghur forced labour, and combines international investigations with testimonies of experts as well as of Uyghur women who managed to escape the reality of forced labour.

5 As of 2020, approximately 2.6 million ethnic minority citizens, who are rural workers, are in 'surplus labour' initiatives, which relocate them to farms and factories within XUAR and across the country (Tobin et al. 2021). Since all citizens must be in a stateapproved place, rural workers can only continue with their job with the consent of their local government (e.g. be in 'approved' farming).

6 The Belt and Road Initiative, implemented in 2013 by the Chinese government, is a global investment programme aiming at the infrastructure development and economic integration of countries along the route of the historic Silk Road.

7 Academic researcher Rian Thum (Tobin et al. 2021, 25) reports that, as of 2021, approximately 880,400 primary and middle school children are in boarding schools.

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