**International Journal of Fashion Studies**

**Special Issue on Decolonizing Fashion as Process**

**Name:** Tanveer Ahmed

**Institution:** The Open University

**Title:** **What is an education in fashion?: Reflecting on the *coloniality of design* in the fashion design educational process.**

As a fashion design educator attempting to disrupt and decentre the dominant neoliberal, linear, progressive, individualistic, competitive and success driven fashion design education process, it has been crucial for me to critically question the norms that underpin the fashion design skills that I teach. I have been investigating how key fashion design activities (mood boards, trends, fashion illustrations) and fashion design tools (measuring tapes, mannequins, pattern blocks) are embedded within hierarchical classification systems, and the relationship between these systems and the ‘modernity/coloniality’ paradigm (Quijano 1993). Understanding Eurocentrism in terms of power, Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano’s joining of two concepts – modernity and coloniality - in one framework, relates to how both concepts are connected to European histories of colonialism, the production of knowledge and classifying processes (Bhambra 2017). To explore ways to decolonise the fashion design process, it has therefore been critical for me to question what the ‘fashion’ is – and what it is not - that I am teaching undergradate fashion design students in the UK. While debates around ‘what is an education in fashion?’ are not new (see McRobbie 1998, p. 43), less attention has been paid to the socio-cultural and historical contexts of the ‘fashion’ skills in the fashion design process that I teach.

Ongoing calls to expose the Eurocentric narratives that dominate fashion history and fashion theory is key to decolonising fashion education, however, emerging debates in the field of decolonising design theory (Schultz e**t** al 2018) stress the urgency for more research into decolonising design practices (Taboada et.al. 2020). This also includes design pedagogies, rather than current dominant theory-led debates. How might exposing colonial logic in fashion design processes make a practical contribution to alternative decolonial and more equitable forms of fashion design?

One approach to re-direct fashion education towards more social-justice oriented forms of fashion that I have explored has been to expose how the mechanics of the fashion design process contribute to ‘the coloniality of design’ (Tlostanova 2017), a term coined by postcolonial theorist Marina Tlostanova to explain how colonial structures continue to remain entrenched within design practices and theories (Tlostanova 2017). Tlostanova’s work echoes recent moves towards a ‘decolonial turn’ and ongoing calls to address systemic racism (Maldonado-Torres, 2011). The ‘decolonial turn’ is a complex concept and in the context of fashion design education it has helped me to recognise the value of *how*, ‘the larger task of the very decolonisation of knowledge, power, and being, including institutions such as the university’ might be undertaken (Maldonado-Torres 2011, p. 1). Exploring the power relations at play in the fashion design process in undergraduate fashion design and how it reinforces Eurcentric norms has underpinned projects that I have written to explore non-European fashions and expand Eurocentric definaitons of fashion design.

By paying close attention to the historical period, geographical place and local cultural contexts of the tools and activities deployed in fashion pedagogies, it might be possible to show the relationship between systemic racist structures in fashion design pedagogies with everyday fashion practices in the ‘westernized university’ (Cupples and Grosfoguel 2019).

Therefore, focusing on the role of coloniality in fashion design can help fashion design educators locate and work against the racialized and gendered dimensions of power prevalent in design theories and practices. Moreover, analysing the ‘coloniality of design’ itself can help to expose the role of Western bias in hegemonic fashion design and the ways in which fashion design pedagogies may contribute to structural inequalities, thereby identifying ways to also challenge this (Sloane 2019). Tlostanova argues that coloniality should be viewed – instead of being overlooked- as the root cause of why design continues to be unethical, arguing that,

‘Coloniality of design is a control and disciplining of our perception and interpretation of the world, of other human and nonhuman beings and things according to certain legitimized principles. It is a set of specific ontological, epistemic and axiological notions imposed forcefully onto the whole world, including its peripheral and semiperipheral spaces in which alternative versions of life, social structures, environmental models or aesthetic principles have been invariably dismissed.’ (Tlostanova 2017, p.7)

Here Tlostanova is pointing to, not only, how longstanding the roots of western bias are in design, but also how far reaching they are too. Taking Tlostanova’s claim further, it is possible to see the complexities of any attempt to challenge coloniality in design, given how entrenched it is throughout society, as well as in the education systems and the tools and resources used to teach fashion design.

Drawing on a of series of reflections about fashion design educational resources, my aim has been to expand and pluralise fashion design epistemologies, such as through the addition of fashion design practices and histories that emerge from the global south, indigenous, queer and crip communities (Barry 2021). Further, these reflections show the value of analysing the epistemological foundations of fashion design education to question how the ‘colonial divide’ (Escobar 2020, p.88) produces Eurocentric fashion knowledge. Without this first step that problematizes and questions dualist thinking in fashion design education, such as the split between west and non-west or human and non-human, how can fashion design students and educators encourage alternative forms of social justice-oriented forms of fashion design? This approach to teaching fashion is however wrought with risk and uncertainty, raising a further fundamental question: *what* alternative tools and resources could be used to teach decolonial fashions?

**The Fashion Design Educational Process**

To address these questions I began a PhD to explore ways in which fashion design education might contribute to the larger project to decolonise fashion design. I undertook a pedagocial action research study in two higher education insitutions in London to investigate *how* and *where* the colonial logics underpinning racial hierarchies operate in the fashion design process, as part of the pattern cutting and design skills that I teach undergraduate students. These pedagogical experiments were taught in design classes to investigate how binary oppositional thinking might manifest in various tools and resources used in fashion design education, from personal sketchbooks to pattern cutting blocks. According to Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar, *all* dominant design cultures are based on dualist conceptions rooted in binary oppositional thinking that separates ideas of the body from the mind, creating distinctions such as man/woman, black/white, nature/culture and so forth; furthermore, dualist thinking determines how design is practiced through mechanisms of ‘separation, control, and appropriation’ (Escobar 2017, p.19).

Despite the huge range of higher education fashion design courses on offer across the globe, a hegemonic Eurocentric curricula model prevails reproducing notions of ‘colonial schooling’ (Thiong’o, 2012). Common to most fashion design undergraduate courses is the teaching of fashion skills introduced through curricula that prioritise creative experimentation and innovation through the making practices of sewing and pattern cutting.

**Complex Patterns/Simple Geometric Shapes**

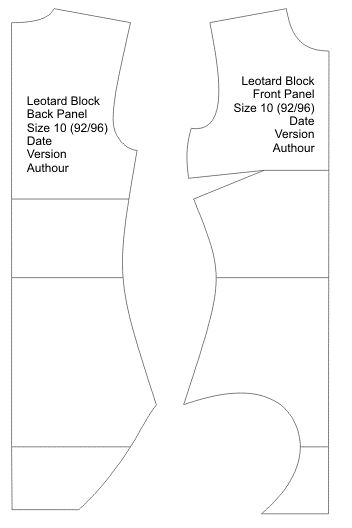
A picture containing text, envelope

Description automatically generated

**Figure 1 : Pattern Cutting in practice**

I first became aware of competing and oppositional fashion knowledges during the first classes where I taught fashion in inner city London in the early 2000s with mostly working class students in many from the Black and Asian diaspora communities. Students would often question my use of fashion resources, challenging me as to why they had to learn only one approach to fashion practice, and further that this approach was both monocultural and limiting. Most of these questions were raised during classes on pattern cutting, when I would use pattern cutting blocks which are a 2D interpretation of the human form from which variations of pattern designs can then be developed. During these classes, many students of colour would feel comfortable challenging me, perhaps because I was one of the few tutors of colour, to question why we were using a wasteful approach to pattern cutting. The pattern blocks included curves and were based on individual sizing, resulting in the need for multiple and different sizing aiding cloth waste. On one occasion a student asked me, ‘Why can’t we just make the clothes in one size instead of making various patterns?’. Further, many students would argue that they already ‘knew’ how to pattern cut because their grandmothers, aunts and sisters had taught them the skill; however, it was a different approach to the pattern cutting that I was teaching them. Consequently, many students felt angry that the standardized pattern making process taught in the curricula was positioned as superior to their experiential knowledge; was the fashion curriculum ‘wrong’? This led me to question in what ways I might be reproducing Eurocentric fashion design epistemologies.

Instead, some students would argue that using rectangular shaped blocks would allow for a more efficient and less costly lay plan, the process in which individual **patterns** for a garment are placed onto fabric. I agreed with the student’s perspective given how the purpose of **lay plans** are to ensure that there is a minimum amount of waste fabric between the **pattern pieces** and to ensure efficient and cost-effective use of the fabric.



**Figure 2:** Leotard Pattern Block

These challenges to teach pattern cutting began to make me question how my fashion knowledge base had been contructed, where it originated from and what possible hierarchies were embedded within it. I had learnt fashion design in three higher education institutions in the UK during the 1990s, and been taught skills based on European fashion systems. I reflected on why the fashion curricula I was teaching appeared to value complex pattern shapes over simpler garments based on geometrical shapes that do not use patterns. It was clear to me that non-fitted garments were also in many ways less wasteful of cloth as well as more inclusive because this approach can accommodate a wider range of different shaped bodies and genders.

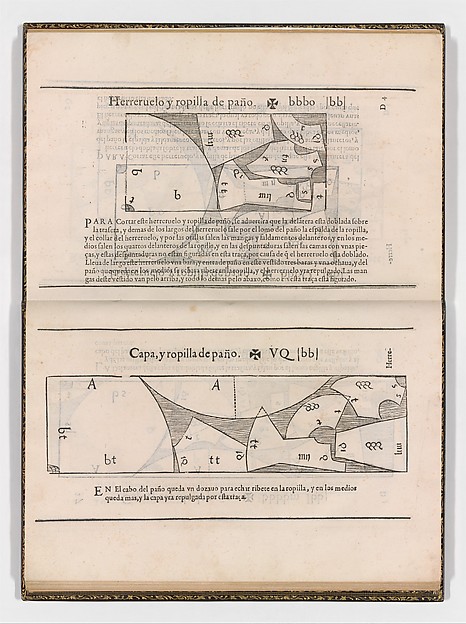
This binary between complex/simple patterns can be traced to ancient forms of fashion, for example in wraps and drapes seen in ponchos and mantles (Burnham 1973; Lindqvist 2013), and the histories of pattern cutting in European dress (Alcega 2009 [1589]) which elevate more complex European styles of pattern cutting. Indeed, recent shifts towards reassessing the contribution of ancient forms of dress have shown how pattern cutting in India based on rectangular and geometric linear cutting methods that have been in use since pre-colonial times, result in zero cloth waste in comparison to more fitted styles of patterns (Kalra and Bhandari 2015).

Further issues emerged between the relational hierarchies of the aesthetics of fashion and pattern cutting blocks when I used a leotard block in a swimwear fashion design project that I taught, a block that is fitted to the contour of a standardised female body. Firstly, the leotard blocks, used here as the main resource for producing swimwear, originate from European pattern blocks from the 1930s and only provide a pattern for one piece or two-piece swimwear garments. Consequently, these pattern blocks normalise standard body sizes in ways that exacerbate normative values around body image, such as issues about gender, size and cultural differences. How might students design a modest fashion inspired swimwear design with such pattern blocks?

To expand my fashion knowledge and counter universalist forms of pattern cutting in my teaching, I began to explore resources to teach the socio-cultural and historical contexts of European pattern cutting; to my surprise I found that this was not straightforward. Although I have seen a large numbers of technical pattern cutting books in many art and design college libraries in the UK (see Aldrich 2001;2004;2011;2013), few focused on non-European or indigenous ways to pattern cut (see Burnham 1973) or Japanese pattern cutting (Nakamichi 2010), and even fewer on the socio-cultural histories of European pattern cutting (see Moore 2021). I noticed that within the UK I was not aware of any fashion design pedagogies that taught students the histories of pattern cutting. This made me reflect on the similarity between the hierarchies of fashion knowledge I was teaching students and the fashion curricula.

I began to investigate the histories of pattern cutting in which most garments were either based on animal skins or rectangular forms of woven cloth based on the size of the loom (Burnham 1973, p.2) with straight line cutting techniques (Lindqvist 2013). Fitted garments began to emerge during the 13th and 14th centuries in Europe and the earliest literatures on clothing patterns originated in Spain during the late 15th and 16th centuries from Juaan de Alcega’s Libro de Geometric Practica y Traca in 1589, and La Rocha Burguen’s Geometrica y Traca in 1618; a significant historical period given this date intertwines with the growing expansion of Spain’s colonialism and the resulting **enrichment of Spain** (Eliiot and Pinches 2002). Looking closely at the patterns in these books (see figure 3), I was immediately struck by the shaped patterns pieces and how they created waste cloth in the lay plan.

I began to question the relationship between this conscious waste of cloth in the fashion design process and its relationship with hegemonic Eurocentric narratives built on the ‘modernity/coloniality’ paradigm which creates and sustains racial hierarchies (Quijano 1993). By using the same approach to teaching pattern cutting, was I simply reproducing Eurocentric hierarchical thinking in fashion design?

****  Figure 3:** Juan de Alcega, Libro de Geometric Practica y Traca in 1589

**Pattern Cutting/Unstitched Cloth**

These reflections led me to consider whether it would be possible to teach fashion without using pattern cutting at all and so I began to explore the potential of unstitched cloth in a fashion design context. Furthermore, unstitched cloth provides a precolonial example of a vernacular forms of fashion and in the case of the sari, originates from the global south and and perceived as a traditional garment (Banerjee and Miller 2008). In UK higher educational context it is easy to find literatures about the sari in most university and art college libraries, in the fashion design process the sari tends to be used as a form of inspiration in explicitly antihistoricist terms in my experience.

In a classroom context this was not easy given how garments based on unstitched cloth are woven to the size of the loom. Although this approach is fabric intense and results in using more fabric overall, there is, arguably, less waste of fabric in the design process.

I began to discuss these topics with students using histories of Indian saris, resulting in multiple perplexed questions as to whether a piece of unstitched fabric could in fact be assessed as a fashion design. Although many cultures over many centuries have fashions rooted in unstitched cloth, for example the Colombian *ruana* and *lihiya* from Swaziland, the use of unstitched cloth as a form of fashion is underplayed and overlooked in fashion design education in my experience in fashion institutions in the UK. In contrast, students are introduced to garment construction and pattern-making from the continent of Africa in its BFA fashion design course at Parsons (Biondi 2021), however, the dominant pedagogical models tends to prioritise and value European pattern cutting forms rooted in tailoring.

**Tape Measures/Embodied Forms of Measuring**

A picture containing indoor

Description automatically generated

**Figure 4:** Tape measures

I also noticed how the continuing practice of teaching with decontextualised tools in fashion pedagogies can also be clearly seen in how measurements are used as part of the fashion design process. As part of the fashion design process there is a need to transfer body size into fabric and the most common piece of equipment used to do this is a 150cm tape measure or a ruler (figure 4). Indeed, it is a common sight to see fashion students walking around the fashion classroom with a tape measure around their necks. However, this fashion resource is rooted in a practice that is both bounded and controlling, resulting in a standardised classification of bodies according to sizing. I had already been thinking of ways to challenge heteronormative body standardisation prevalent in mannequins and pattern blocks by instead using student’s own bodies; this embodied approach to fashion design seemed to me a way to alternative approach to creating diverse fashion forms. Yet, using a 150cm tape to measure bodies instead produced another set of body classifications that resulted in complex challenges; for example, the tape is not sufficiently long to measure around bodies that exceed the standard 150cm tape. Here students have had to attach two measuring tapes together causing embarrassment and further issues around accuracy.

During these classes I have noticed how many questions that are raised around body measurement often came from students of disapora communties, perhaps showing experiences of alternative non-Eurocentric epistemologies. Here students have suggested more tacit approaches to garment construction, such as cutting straight into cloth by eye without the need for measuring. This approach is something I too have seen being brought up in a South Asian Indian household where I have seen my mother using her hand span and elbow to hand as units of measurement. This made me begin to question the origins of standardised units of measure used as part of the fashion design process and why individualised and non-standard forms of measuring were discouraged as part of the fashion design process in higher education: what is the relationship between measuring and the capitalist modes of production underpinning fashion design forms?

To identify how systems of measurement emerged in different cultures and societies, I investigated how non-standardised forms of measurement were based on the body and included, for example, the length of the human arm or foot as units of measurement. Indeed, these units that relied on anatomy were easier to use than those dependent on mathematics, numerical units, or previous knowledge (Rowlett 1999). However, as standardisation became more prevalent from the early 19th century onwards throughout Europe and their colonies, the need for standardised units of measurement as money and goods crossed different temporal zones and spaces led to the emergence of today’s global capitalist economy (Kalpagam 1997). Although different colonial powers used their own forms of measurement, imperial units became the official standard unit across the [British Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire) in 1826. Learning about the social and historical context of measurement in the fashion design process led me to believe that how I was teaching fashion was more about teaching how to reinforce capitalism through the mechanics of design; and, reinforced yet another way that the body and fashion forms were disconnected as part of the fashion design process in fashion design education.

For example, prior to mass produced and standardised clothing in the west, the approach to garment construction in Europe appeared to be based on an iterative process with some evidence to show that the garment maker would rely on their personal way of measuring, an approach in which ‘judging by eyesight’ was an integral skill in the design process (Bennett 2017). This embodied approach to measurement in fashion making characterizes an ontological oriented design methodology (Willis 2006), one that challenges today’s hegemonic capitalist universalist approach to creating standard sized garments that results in classifying bodies in bounded categories such as plus size and petite and various numbered sizes. How could fashion design education instead foreground nondualist ways to measure the body centred on practices built on relationality and lived experiences?

**Have I answered my question?**

As a fashion design educator questioning ‘what is a fashion design education’ (McRobbie 1998), these reflections have led me to question how fashion design tools are instrumental in reinforcing dualist notions of thinking underpinning the fashion design process. These tools are normalized through a regime of binary oppositional thinking in the fashion design process which can reproduce ‘the coloniality of design’ (Tlostanova 2017). While there are clear voices of resistance from many students to work in this way and calls for more ontological oriented forms of fashion practice, these calls remain mostly silenced and marginalized by dominant forms of fashion curricula in higher education.

What needs to be addressed if the critique of the fashion design process is not to result in tokenistic diversity is a need to expose how gendered, racialized and capitalist disciplinary forces have underpinned the tools and equipment used in the fashion classroom. To shift from a fashion practice built on reinforcing racial hierarchies requires rethinking some of the dominant assumptions of Eurocentric epistemologies, and teaching students the social, historical and cultural contexts of global economics (Escobar 1995). Such an approach would open the way for more tacit and ontological oriented forms of fashion design practice that re-centre pre-colonial fashion thinking, and global south fashion epistemologies, led collectively and collaboratively by fashion educators with students.

**References**

Alcega,J. (2009 [1569]) *Libro de geometria, práctica y traça, el cual trata de lo tocante al officio del sastre*. Editorial Maxtor, Spain

Barry,B. (2021) ‘[How to transform fashion education—A manifesto for equity, inclusion and decolonization](https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/infs/2021/00000008/00000001/art00008)’ in *International Journal of Fashion Studies,* Volume 8, Number 1, 1 April 2021, pp. 123-130(8)

Banerjee,M. and D,Miller.(2003) *The Sari*. Berg,UK.

Bennett,L. ( 2017) ‘Made to Measure: The Colonial Shop at Colonial Williamsburg’. Online: <https://sites.udel.edu/materialmatters/2017/08/02/made-to-measure-the-tailor-shop-at-colonial-williamsburg/>. Accessed [24.4.20].

Cupples and Grosfoguel,R. (2019) *Unsettling Eurocentrism in the Westernized University*. Routledge, UK.

Entwistle,J. (2015 [2000]) *The Fashioned Body: Fashion Dress and Social Theory 2nd Edition*. Polity Press, UK

Escobar,A. (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Un-Making of the Third World*. Princeton University Press, US.

Escobar,A. (2017) *Designs for the Pluriverse*. Duke University Press, UK

Escobar,A. (2020) *Pluriversal Politics*. Duke University Press, UK

Kalpagam, U.(1997) ‘Colonialism, Rational Calculations and Idea of the 'Economy'’ in *Economic and Political Weekly* , p. 25-31, 1997, Vol. 32, No. 4

Kalra,J. and Bhandari,V. (2015) *Zero Waste Fashion: A field research on Design with Chikankari Artisans*. Paper for Cumulus Conference 2015. Unpublished.

Lindgqvist,R. (2013) *On the Logic of Pattern Cutting.* PhD Thesis, University of Boras. Unpublished.

Maldonado-Torres,N. (2011) ‘Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality’. Online: caribbeanstudiesassociation.org/docs/Maldonado-Torres\_Outline\_Ten\_Theses-10.23.16.pdf. Accessed: [13.8.2016]

McRobbie,A. (1998) *Rag Trade or Image Industry*. Routledge, UK.

Rowlett, R (1999) How Many? A Dictionary of Units of Measurement, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, US.

Sloane,M. (2019) ‘On the Need for mapping design Inequalities’ in Design Issues (2019) 35 (4): 3–11.

Tlostanova, M. (2017) ‘On decolonizing design’ in *Design Philosophy Papers,*

Willis, A. (2006) ‘Ontological Designing’ in *Design Philosophy Papers*, 4:2, 69-92

Wilson,E. (1985) *Adorned in Dreams*. Bloomsbury, UK