



ual: london college
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centre for
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RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY

DECENTRING DURABILITY

PLURAL IDEAS AND ACTIONS OF LONG LASTING CLOTHES

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The pursuit of clothing durability – the goal of which is to extend a product’s useful life, delay its replacement and so increase both product and system resource efficiency – is an established part of environmental impact reduction efforts in the fashion sector.

Decentring Durability diverges from the typical understandings of durability and the ways in which they are framed. Its starting point is that clothing durability is diverse, heterogeneous and constantly changing. It offers plural ideas of clothing durability interconnection and multiple threads of thinking and practice, including, among others: different durability cosmologies, diverse practical actions and many-tentacled durability relationships, like those with bodies, things, land and time.

Most clothing durability strategies, like fashion and sustainability strategies in general, emerge from and align with western ways of producing knowledge. As such they tend to deploy understandings of the world that are totalised, context-independent, hierarchical and

miss the opportunity to make space for other ways of knowing, valuing or doing that exceed western understanding. These assumptions and associated power structures are deeply implicated in the ecological crisis. *Decentring Durability* offers an alternative to representations of fashion and sustainability that universalise knowledge, that make it abstract, that devalue or conceal diversity or that prioritise solutions that fit within the market and the market's purpose. Working intersectionally, *Decentring Durability* brings together the decarbonising and the decolonising agendas by combining diverse, resourceful practices with the breaking apart of dominant ideas and approaches in order to show difference. Here plural durability ideas and actions reframe conventional representations of long-lasting clothes. They also become worked examples of decentring practices in both fashion and sustainable design.

Process

Paying attention to the processes of research is important because, 'it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories' (Haraway, 2016: 12). On what and where emphasis is placed changes the type of knowledges that are created. In the *Decentring Durability* project, emphasis was placed on plurality and recognising dominant narratives and the processes by which they are constantly re-produced, including within the research process itself (Figure 1).

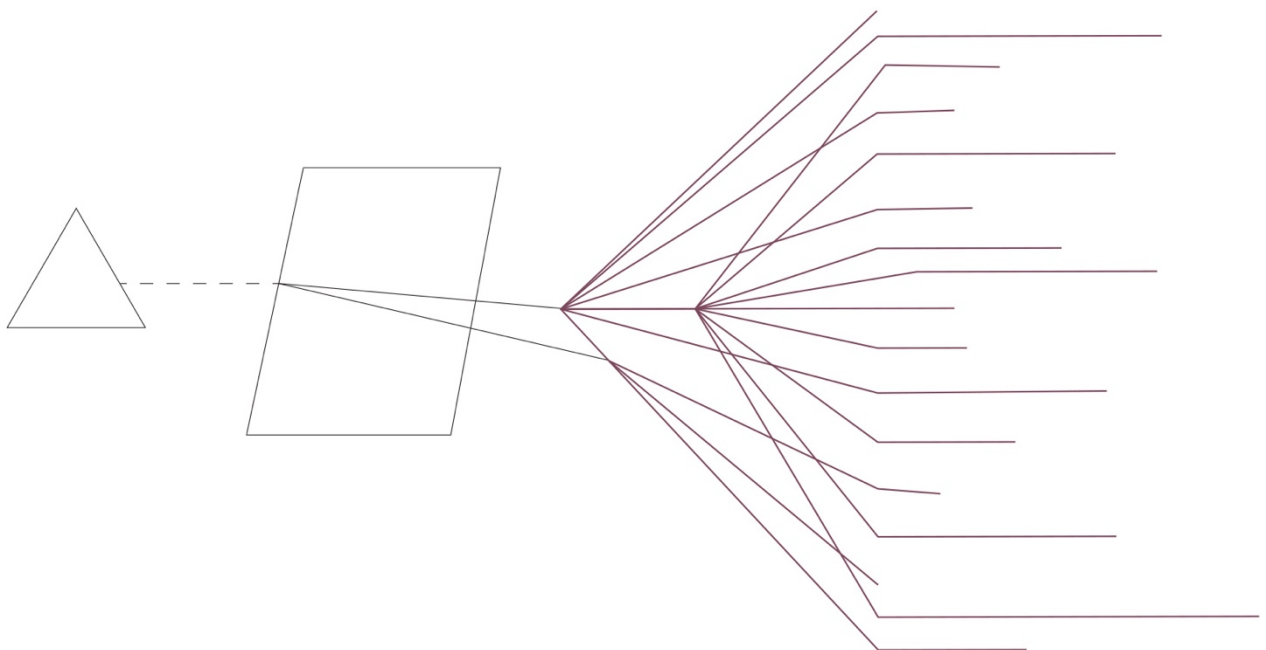


Figure 1 – Breaking apart durability knowledges

We, the researchers, also paid particular attention to:

Care – Throughout the project we took care over how we went about the work and explored care-full practices of research. Our care-full practices were embodied in a regular, monthly walk where we paid attention to our relationship as colleagues and people and sought to centre our thoughts about care, work, research, movement, the body, stepping away from the screen and noticing the particularities of where we are. Other aspects of care we practised included:

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

Different ways of knowing - In the work and with interview participants we sought to make space for many ways of knowing, including from experience, concepts, skilful practice, through artful means including storytelling and through emotional and instinctive knowing. As Sara Ahmed notes, 'a gut feeling has its own intelligence' (2017: 22).

Practical aspects - While handling and organising project data and examining themes, we tried to find alternatives to the linear nature of written documents including by presenting the data visually. When we were working with written material, we repeatedly re-ordered the content of documents, trying to avoid privileging certain ideas over others in order to honour all the insights shared by our participants. We also scrutinised the words we used, turning away from the language and therefore the research processes of hierarchy and categorisation to those of relationships. It is a work-in-progress.

Methods - The project's fieldwork was conducted using semi-structured interviews, with participants selected for diversity from outside Euro-American contexts. The work took a grounded theory approach to data review and identification of emergent themes and relationships. The fieldwork was conducted between April and June 2021.

[‡] Initially this protocol/framework was unnamed, as a way of preventing it becoming a commercial product.

Findings

Decentring Durability introduces 14 features of clothing durability as aspects of decentred action and understanding of long-lasting clothes (Figure 2). The 14 include some elements that are often found in Euro-American literature on durability, like, for instance, a focus on garment design, infrastructure and political economy, although their presence here often includes distinctive non-western inflections. Other features like, the body; myths and stories; colonial legacies; and place, diversify ways of thinking about, valuing and doing durability. The 14 features are not definitive or exhaustive. Rather they reflect diverse cultures, skill sets, temporalities, values, histories, economies, tastes, methods of co-operation and experiences of durability in specific places, today. We offer them here, presented not in any order but as a network of interrelated durability practices.

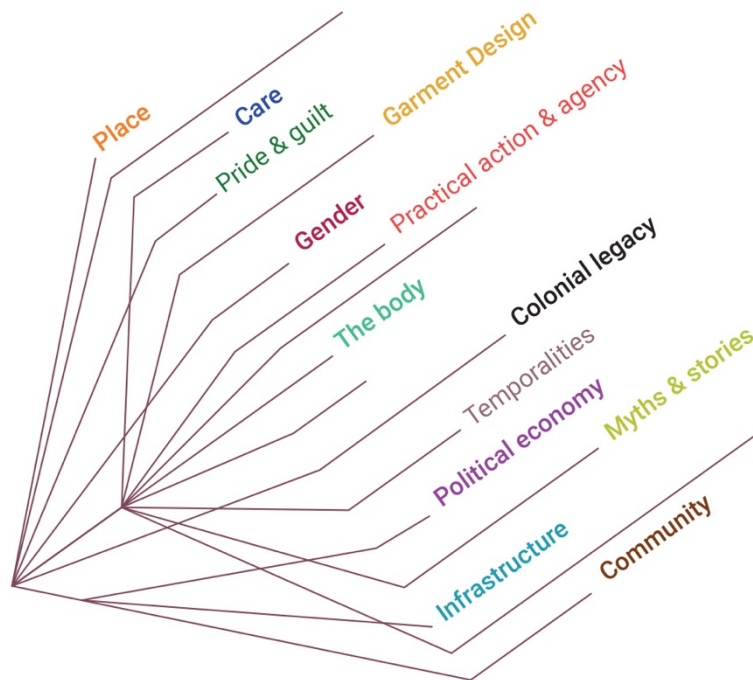


Figure 2 - 14 features of clothing durability

14 features of decentring durability:

INFRASTRUCTURE - Clothing durability adapts to available infrastructures and exists outside them, revealing durability actions as not universally the same. Clothing durabilities are often informal and personal.

GARMENT DESIGN - A tailored silhouette and western styles of dress have specific implications for clothing durability especially regarding fit and garment fixings. These implications have been spread through colonialism and the globalisation of trade.

TEMPORALITIES - Concepts of time change between cultures and over a person's lifetime. Time alters relationships to garments, the capacity for taking care and understanding of what is required of them and their wearers.

PRIDE AND GUILT - Emotions, including pride and guilt, play a critical role in decision making about clothing durability. These emotions are socially and culturally situated and intrinsically related to people's personal values.

PRACTICAL ACTION & AGENCY - Durability is furthered by hands-on material knowledge, maintenance and associated skills of repair. It is also enabled by non-material aspects such as the ways in which garments are worn. Durability is associated with the capacity to act independently of a fashion system and its consumerist priorities.

PLACE - Using what is to hand together with place variation of climate, resources and culture evolves different practices of use and care and evolves distributed ideas of clothing durability practices.

CARE - Durability in clothing relies on care and a commitment to care. A focus on care decentralises expert knowledge of durability from professionals and industry to homes and often to women. It also makes durability relational and as an ongoing, changing outcome of clothing, people and world interactions.

THE BODY - How a person dresses their body and how a person feels about and moves in the dressed body becomes another way of understanding what durability is and can be. The changing body is a site for convening experiential practices of durability.

POLITICAL ECONOMY - Durable clothing pieces are found in many different contexts, yet the motivating drivers of durability practices vary widely. Many of these drivers are rooted in the political economy context of a society, which determines what is possible and likely durability actions.

DURABILITY AND - Durability ideas and characteristics work relationally. They are not reducible to single components or in isolation from the clothing-as-system.

COLONIAL LEGACIES - Viewing durability through a non-Western lens highlights how different and plural durabilities co-exist. Histories and relationships of power play an important role in shaping different worldviews with implications for the way a range of knowledges are valued and for how long clothes last.

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

GENDER - Cultural and personal expectations related to gender impact actions and approaches to durability. Durability can be seen in many ways including as a demonstration of home-making, something to be liberated from, as aspirational and a barrier to personal attractiveness. Assumptions about the female responsibility for and care of clothing is implicit.

COMMUNITY - Belonging to something larger, like a community, can offer a strong foundation for material, relational and traditional cultural understandings of clothing durability.

Impact

Decentring Durability offers features of clothing durability that:

- Diversify durability practices in order to break apart the dominant approaches and assumptions that drive social and ecological harms;
- Offer plural points of departure for durability investigations that unfold in directions different to technological and/or market-driven starting points and which specifically recognise and give space to difference as powerful but overlooked drivers for environmental change;
- Describe a more plural, evolving – though incomplete – durability framework to support learning and action;
- Show how a decolonial approach may be applied to sustainability practice and to fashion.

Who is conducting the work?

The *Decentring Durability* project is conducted by Kate Fletcher and Anna Fitzpatrick. We, Anna and Kate, identify as White-British women, who write and speak only in English, which we recognise as having limitations for deep decolonial work. There are some similarities between us: we are both mothers, we are both from the North of England, from working-class communities and we both have worked in the university in which we are based while we are conducting this research for over 10 years. We recognise our privilege in this space - our whiteness, our womanhood and our membership of a Western education institution. Here we enjoy the privileges of the colonial divide. We recognise this at the start of this work as we also recognise that we will benefit personally and institutionally from this work. We hope to be conscious of how power relations and our privileges will shape this research. We also acknowledge that the cultural structures that we work within favour individualism over interdependence and unconsciously we carry this with us within our research. As part of our recognition of our position and its implication, we seek to humbly learn from other ways of being, knowing, doing and valuing such as the Honourable Harvest (Kimmerer, 2013: 183) and the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning framework.

References

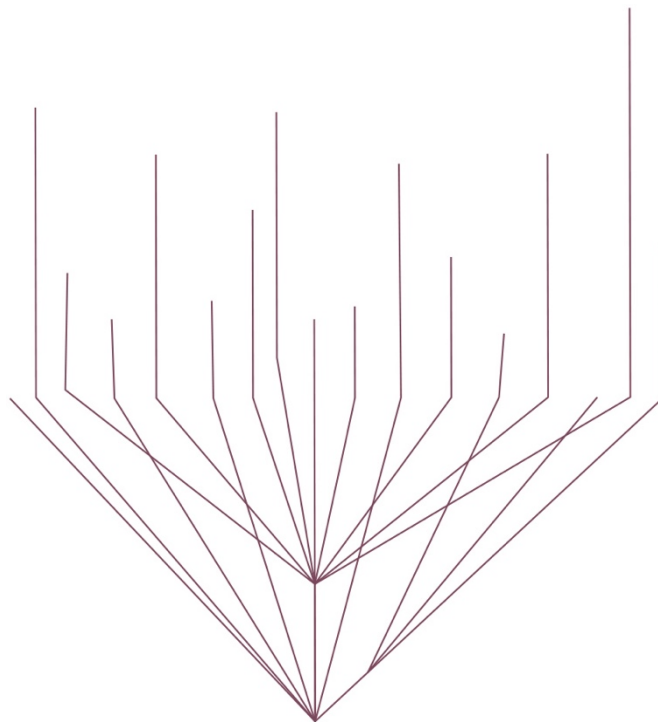
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Further information

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

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This summary was first published in October 2021.



[†] <https://lasting.world/>

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