

FASHION X BORDERS



ARONSON FELLOWSHIP PROJECT RECAP
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SUMMARY

Through our research, we are exploring the relationship between the global fashion industry and border imperialism, its inherent social and ecological violences, and the alternatives people are experimenting with to build a different, more just fashion ecosystem.

Our core research questions include: 1) What is the relationship between the fashion industry and border imperialism? 2) What are the violences (historical, social, ecological) of this relationship? 3) How is the fashion industry interconnected to other global issues? 4) What are the alternatives being explored? How are people globally responding to the violences of the fashion industry?

Our research will culminate in a collectively curated small book and exhibit at the New School. This project will provide people with ways of approaching the violences of the fashion industry with expanded, open and radical perspectives.

PROCESS

So far, our research has consisted of a literature review of key work from Harsha Walia's "Border & Rule" and "Undoing Border Imperialism," as well as supplemental papers and interviews from Dominique Drakeford, Naila Kabeer, and Shikha Silliman Bhattacharjee. We met weekly to discuss the readings, connecting the dots between border imperialism and the fashion industry.

We then began interviewing a variety of organizers and scholars on our research topic, specifically centering women of color. Some interviewees so far have included [Hoda Katebi](#) of [Blue Tin Productions](#), [Nayantara Banerjee](#) of the [Garment Workers Center](#), and [Christina Moon](#), fashion studies scholar at Parsons. In conjunction with hosting interviews with communities actively experimenting with anti-imperialist fashion practices, we plan to continue building collaborative relationships with them and their organizations through field research and volunteering.

We have begun visually mapping our research findings to identify core interconnected themes that we are in the process of refining; you'll find an example of these maps in the analysis section of this report. We are now in the process of forming an initial analysis, creating an outline of the book's content, and strategizing the best methods of communication and design to disseminate our findings.

INITIAL ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

What is the Fashion Industrial Complex?

The fashion industrial complex (FIC) is a term coined by Sha'mira Covington to describe how **large fashion corporations conspire with social and political institutions to bolster an inherently exploitative profit economy at the expense of human and ecological well-being**. The FIC encompasses all aspects of the fashion industry from design to production to sales and describes how they are “dictated by capitalist, heteropatriarchal, colonialist, imperialist structures.” (Banerjee, 2022)

Current mainstream systems of production within the FIC center high-yield, high-profit models. The unsustainability of these models manifest in an abundance of social and environmental violences: wage theft, extreme working hours, verbal and physical abuse, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, forced labor, child labor, malnutrition, contaminated waterways and environments, among many others.

What is Border Imperialism?

As defined by Harsha Walia, border imperialism is the “processes by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created as well as maintained including through imperial subjugation, criminalization of migration, racialized hierarchy of citizenship, and state-mediated exploitation of labor.”

What is the relationship between the Fashion Industrial Complex & Border Imperialism?

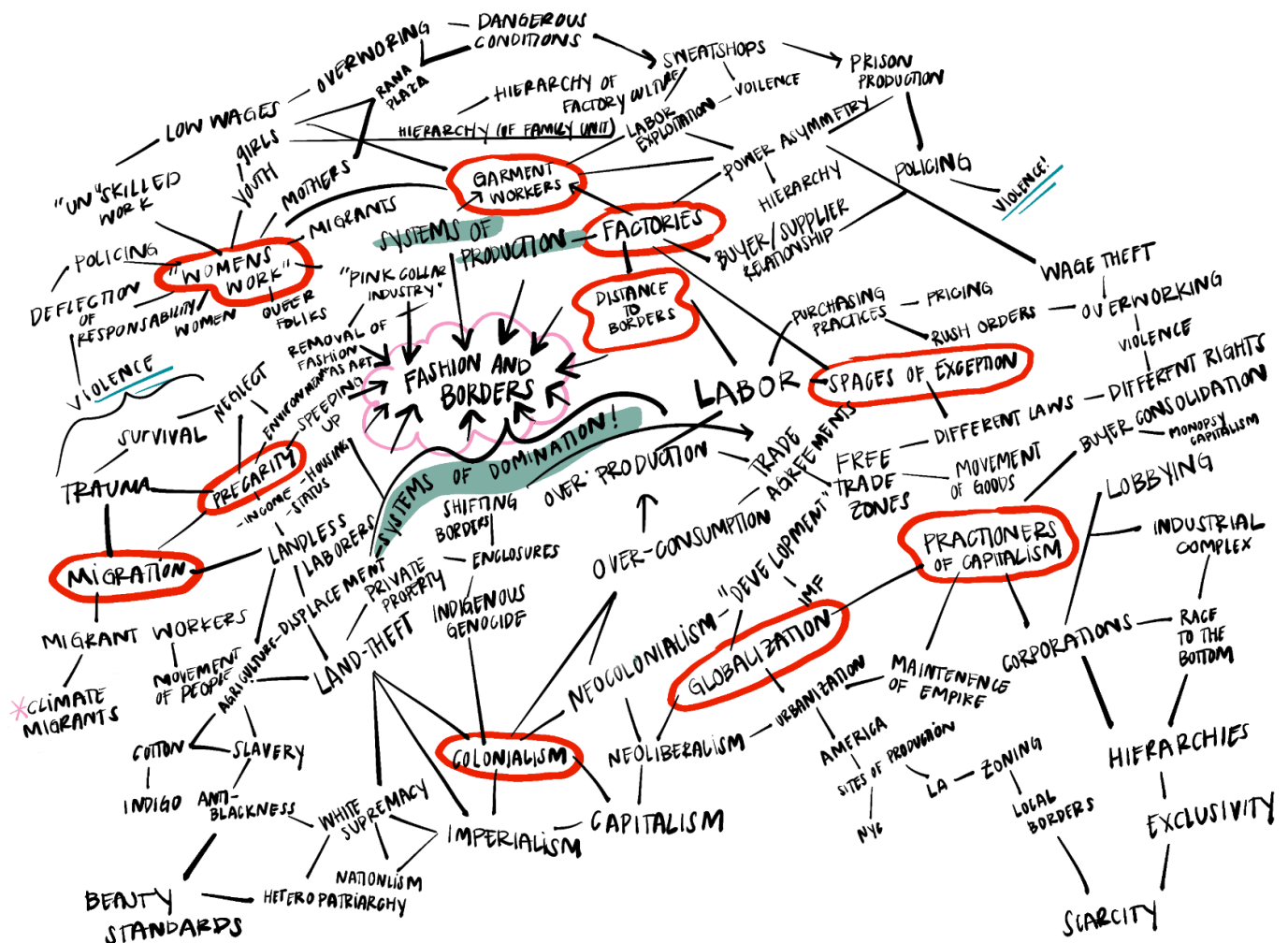
The FIC exploits, perpetuates, and helps carve out the spaces of exception created by border imperialism to secure its profits. These spaces of exception are not just the physical spaces where people and ecologies are invisibilized, excluded, and exploited, but the categorization of people to justify their invisibilization, exclusion, and exploitation, based on migration status, gender, race, caste, class, incarceration, and geographic location. **Migrant women and girls of color and incarcerated people, who carry out the majority of garment production, represent those most marginalized under these categories of exception that are collaboratively crafted and perpetuated by borders and the FIC.**

At the same time, **the fashion industry, as one of the most environmentally polluting industries in the world, has a direct role in causing climate injustice-induced displacement and migration** of millions of people internally from rural to urban centers and externally across nation-state borders. Rather than taking accountability and repairing harm, the fashion industry compounds these violences by exploiting the people forced to migrate.

In the United States, the largest sites of production have historically been located near sites of immigration. From 1880 to 1940 the center of the American garment production industry was New York City. Strategically located near Ellis Island, the fashion industry had access to thousands of immigrant workers seeking employment. Slowly but surely, the American garment production hub has largely shifted to Los Angeles, just 136 miles north of the Mexico-US border, employing over 40,000 workers, more than a quarter of whom are undocumented or on guest worker visas. Many factories leverage these workers' legalized vulnerability to force them to accept exploitative practices through threats of deportation or detention. In countries in the global South, where most global garment production takes place, most factories are located in urban centers, capitalizing on the labor made available by the influx of migrants from rural to urban spaces. **The proximity of factories to borders and sites of migration allow for the fashion industry to exploit vulnerable migrant populations into laboring for low wages, unsafe, and abusive working conditions.**

Borders and the FIC are both carceral systems that selectively curtail the free movement of people to create categories of precarious racialized laborers they can extract from for profit. Globalization and its free trade agreements allow for the movement of clothing and capital across global supply chains and borders, but limit the movement of the people producing those goods to maintain their precarity.

Borders and the FIC are both legacies of the white supremacist colonial imperialist capitalist patriarchal project.



What alternatives are being explored? How are people responding to the violences of the fashion industry?

Within this context of layered exploitation, a rich culture of grassroots organizing and resistance has emerged. The fight is being led by the people who have been impacted most - working class women of color. They are boldly imagining what fashion rooted in care can look like without the current foundation of industrial violence, and putting it into practice in varied innovative ways. Below are just two of the many examples of this.

Blue Tin Production

"Blue Tin Production is the embodied practice of envisioning and building the world we want, on our terms: we are flipping the script in fashion supply chains. We are calling for the abolition of sweatshops and building garment worker power in its place. We are built by & for our communities. We are playing by our rules & our vision for the future."

-Blue Tin Production

Blue Tin Production is a garment manufacturing cooperative and design firm in Chicago that is radically shifting industry-standard production practices. Blue Tin is garment worker owned and operated where all members are involved in internal organizing and decision-making processes. Members collectively set salaries and evenly split profits every quarter. Blue Tin has eliminated the use of subcontractors and works exclusively in direct partnership with brands, to ensure that all products are made in line with their standards.

Blue Tin is addressing the wastefulness of the fashion industry by intentionally selecting clients who prioritize sustainability in their design processes. They work with design teams to strategically reduce fabric waste and produce new goods from the scraps left from cutting fabric. Blue Tin's new **63rd House** hub will provide public sewing and skill workshops to the predominantly Black and Brown youth in the community. Not only does this allow for after-school enrichment but it can potentially act as a pipeline into higher education fashion programs - a space where Black and Brown creatives are notoriously underrepresented.

Garment Worker Center

"Garment Worker Center is a worker rights organization leading an anti-sweatshop movement to improve conditions for tens of thousands of Los Angeles garment workers. Through direct organizing, GWC develops leaders who demand enforcement of strong labor laws and accountability from factory owners, manufacturers, and fashion brands. We center immigrant workers, women of color, and their families who are impacted by exploitation in the fashion industry."

-Garment Worker Center

Garment Work Center (GWC) politically organizes garment workers themselves for garment worker rights in and around Los Angeles. One of their most public campaigns which resulted in the passing of the Garment Worker Protection Act in California called for the end of wage theft and the piece rate pay system and established precedent-setting brand liability for wages owed to garment workers. Apart from shaping policy to create a more just system of garment production, GWC engages garment workers through committee spaces, which cultivate leadership, strategic thinking, and collective decision making skills, and empower workers to see their role in this industry beyond the traditional scope of their work. In doing so, GWC, and Blue Tin alike, allow for an open-ended community of design that can imagine and embody emancipatory solutions in the fashion industry.

Fashion habitually appropriates the work of diffused designers creating on the periphery of the industry and the FIC profits off of their innovations - giving little to no credit or compensation to these designers. It would be a great mistake to undertake the transformation of fashion without centering the perspectives, ideas, and leadership of those most affected by the violences of the FIC. Both Blue Tin Production and the Garment Worker Center understand the importance of centering garment workers in realizing alternative fashion systems and rebalancing the symmetry of power through collective mutual relationships.

NEXT STEPS

We are thrilled to be continuing this project with the support of a New School Student Research Award. From here, we will revisit our research questions to evaluate what's been left unanswered and identify what new questions have arisen. We feel our research thus far lacks the environmental aspect of the fashion-border relationship and are in the process of ideally organizing another batch of interviews with Dominique Drakford of Sustainable Brooklyn, Harsha Walia, and Shikha Silliman Bhattacharjee to help us explore this intersection within the ecological domain.

We have recently been inspired by the Network Based Rights Mobilization & Pragmatic Solidarity Method research approach taken by Shikha Silliman Bhattacharjee and her co-researchers, in which research is co-constructed with movements on the ground to ensure it is meeting their needs throughout the process. We are interested in building long-term relationships and exploring how our work might be more mutually beneficial to the interviewees and organizations we've worked with thus far.

With the support of our Student Research Award faculty mentor, Dr. Ben Barry, this summer we will compile our findings into a small book to distribute across the New School campus, mobile libraries, coffee shops, and other community spaces in New York City, as well as digitally for wider global online distribution. Lastly, we will organize a multi-disciplinary exhibition at The New School to open in Spring 2023 that is collectively curated through an open call for creative works engaging with fashion and borders. We plan to incorporate our research findings and small book into the exhibition.

INTERVIEWS

Highlights from our conversations with organizers and scholars.

What comes to your mind when we say “Fashion Industrial Complex”?

Hoda Katebi: I think that term can be very helpful when we think about the role of fashion within the larger world and how expansive fashion really is and sort of all of its tentacles that can look like different things. And then I can also see it within supply chains itself, like how does up and down the fashion supply chain, how do each of those layers actually intimately rely on colonization? How are they enforced by policing? How are there sort of all of these extra overlapping ways that the system is connected both within the supply chain and outside of it? To me, that term kind of thinks about all of those holistically and simultaneously?

Nayantara Banerjee: ...It's **the relationship of the movement of goods, materials, and people through structures that are currently dictated by capitalist, heteropatriarchal, colonialist, imperialist structures.** Which **doesn't fully actually get to the reality of the lived experience of the people who are involved** in this - and we are all involved in it right? I think we are complicit in it, as we are consumers of it - and because it is everything, it is such a massive industry, and it goes back in time historically in America, at least from a Western perspective, [the fashion industrial complex] is **inextricably tied to slavery** and that's a part of why we have all these problems with devaluation of labor.

Christina Moon: The first thing that comes to mind for me is nation building. It has traditionally been an industry that countries have used...to create new markets and economies to grow their GDP. And I think of, for instance, what's called [a] newly industrial country, countries such as Taiwan and Korea, and others across Asia that during a post-war period or post-colonial period, when these countries and nations were incredibly impoverished, used the fashion and garment industrial complex to create exports and create garments that could be sold in other countries. And the main ways in which they were able to do that was through mostly cheap female labor and oppression, a patriarchal factory system that would bring in young workers without any kinds of human rights, put them to work, to create goods and products...so when I think of that, I think of it as a broad industry, it's a nation building kind of state project. But it relies heavily on female uncompensated labor.

What comes to your mind when we say “Border Imperialism”?

Hoda Katebi: Honestly, that term feels a little redundant for me. I think all borders are imperialist. It's to some extent, I think borders are inherently violence. They're inherently exclusive. And that is a mechanism of imperialism. So I think **all imperialism requires borders and all borders preclude sort of imperialism.** So I think they're kind of one in the same in my mind, at least.

What do you see as the relationship between fashion and border imperialism?

Hoda Katebi: Everything, everything...Borders are absolutely necessary as sort of the maintenance of Empire and the maintenance of population control in a very intimate way that is directly connected to fashion. So in the very obvious way the majority of garment workers are migrant workers. Borders are used as a mechanism for fashion production because they allow workers who have either undocumented status or complicated paperwork-mixed status, to actually have that as a tool of enforcement of sweatshops. So **borders are actually required for sweatshops, and so long as borders exist, sweatshops will always exist. Without borders, cheap labor will not exist within the fashion industry.** Borders are like a very, very obvious mechanism of control...On top of that, the uniforms of border enforcement agencies are made in sweatshops...So sweatshops are also involved on a very intimate level about how even the border enforcement agents are dressed.

Nayantara Banerjee: I think about the sites of manufacturing throughout the world. Especially right here, I'm speaking to you as a representative **garment worker center** here in Los Angeles...**garment producing areas have historically been places where there are a lot of migrants or immigrants coming in.** Initially New York is where the garment industry was...and now the largest garment manufacturing part of the United States is here in Los Angeles, the second largest concentration of garment manufacturing is in Texas in El Paso, right on the border there as well....like we know that migrant workers are like the number one garment workers so it makes sense and it just sort of solidifies that relationship visually.

Christina Moon: When you think of the story of China...becoming the the global production basket for the rest of the world, in terms of clothing and garments for the last 30 years - that has everything to do with drawing on different borders and different kinds of contact zones, export processing zones (EPZ), creation of borders and the passage of migrant bodies through borders, that allow for the making of something that can be made cheaply. Export processing zones are where these new **zones of extralegality** are being created. And if you've ever walked into one of these industrial complex EPZ zones, it's really fascinating cuz it's usually a region with a gate and a checkpoint. It's a border. You cross into that border, the laws change. One moment you have rights, the next moment, there are no rights. There's a suspension of taxes for companies. There's no chance to organize for a labor union. But why do people work there? Because it depends on a migrant population...you can find work in these **spaces of exception**, these contact zones and these industrial complexes that are located within these export processing zones.

What do you imagine fashion to look like in a completely ideal world? In your opinion, what are the solutions we need?

Hoda Katebi: I think in an ideal world, there would be no labor that would be necessary. <laughs> I mean, I think in a realistic closer world, maybe I think **fashion is able to return to its sort of more artistic expression-based medium of communication**, like painting or design. And I think also, assuming that we don't live in a world where everything would just be automatized and there are still garment workers, I think there would be more – to use a very capitalist word – vertically integrated spaces where **garment workers would also be collaborating with designers and there wouldn't be**

this 10 layers of hierarchy, but the sort of flattened space where collaboration can happen to be able to create beautiful things that we're excited to just wear, and is accessible to everyone and is shaped for people's bodies rather than forcing people's bodies to shape into clothes.

Nayantara Banerjee: Hyper-localized. In an ideal world we have fiber sheds right where we're producing garments that are appropriate for that specific place, using materials and practices that are also connected to that place, and we're creating fewer things of higher quality that last a lot longer. In an ideal world fashion is care and repair and alterations and tailoring...and still there's art in it and still there's creativity in it. I think it just has to be fewer garments made ethically that do not threaten the garment workforce; they can work at a very different pace...

Christina Moon: During the time of COVID I was reading a lot of work by Thich Nhat Hanh...and there's a concept in there he writes a lot about – it's called **inter-being**. It's about how, when you put food in your mouth, as you are chewing it, **you think about where did this food come from? Who grew it? Why is it here? Where did I get it from?**...He develops a practice of a kind of mindfulness of understanding how we're all interconnected. I feel the same way actually about clothing and fashion too. On one hand, we put it on, it gives us a sense of expression, identity, freedom, playfulness...It can be anything, all kinds of creative possibilities. And at the same time, as we feel those creative possibilities, we also **understand how it's a real map of the world that we're actually wearing. It connects us to many communities of people**....I think with any material object...we ought to see how we are interconnected with these many dimensions...I think it gives us a kind of consciousness in a new, profound sort of way of responsibility to take care, you know? So I actually think it's very powerful and transformative. I think it leaves us feeling agentic in our critical understanding of fashion.