# Reproduction and Authenticity: A Case Study on Cultural Sustainability in Museums

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## Abstract

This essay explores the politics of authenticity and reproduction through 'mimesis', the use of replicas, in the museum arena as it pertains to the year-long exhibition *Knowing Cotton Otherwise* at the *Fashion for Good Museum* in Amsterdam, from October 2022 – October 2023. Sustainability practices are explored with a specific focus on cultural sustainability. In this essay, Fashion for Good Museum is highlighted as an example to discuss the topics of cultural sustainability, reproduction, mimesis, authenticity and cultural appropriation in museology. Cultural appropriation and reproduction are an increasingly prevalent occurrence within fashion and consumer culture, which has only accelerated in recent years due to the pervasiveness of the digital age (Wani et al. 2024). By incorporating a sociological approach, evidence compiled from personal conversations with collaborators from the exhibition, observations of installations and a theoretical framework exploring theories of mimesis and cultural sustainability, this essay interrogates two case studies arguing how reproduction can encourage younger generations in the context of Amsterdam to reflect on their own consumer behaviours as future stakeholders in the fashion industry. Furthermore, it explores the methods for this, through the educational programme and toolkit *Classroom of the Future: The Stories Behind Cotton* and the installation by Dr Professor Sha'mira Covington, *Curative, Confronting and Healing the Fashion-Industrial Complex.*

## Introduction

*The Double-edged Sword of Reproduction in the Fashion Industry – What Impact Does It Have?*

When reflecting on the fashion industry and its relationship to the concept of reproduction, what instantly comes to mind is the prevalence of the counterfeit industry and appropriation. In this case, 'reproduction' is the action or process of copying something ('Reproduction' 2024) and 'appropriation' is the act of taking something for your own use, usually without permission ('Appropriation' 2024). As the global demand for luxury goods rises yearly, fashion houses lose billions in revenue yearly to counterfeit products (Communri; International Chamber of Commerce; and Homes, qtd. in Amaral & Loken 2016). Considering this, it is rather ironic to then realise that many of these brands, losing profits to imitation products entering the market, have arguably been appropriating mercilessly from different cultures for a consumer-focused market for years (Sádaba, LaFata and Torres 2020). When the roles are reversed, and profits are at stake, only then does the problem of reproduction seem to grab the attention of mainstream culture. If we consider fashion the other way round – less as a product, and more as a cross-generational tool for communication, necessity and identity – we can begin to understand the true impact garments have and continue to have globally, and why context is largely important for understanding the power of fashion. Next to this, the rise of digital and online culture has only increased the rate at which trends are consumed by younger generations. With all of this in place, one question stands out: how can we begin to shift this mode of thinking in the face of a global overconsumption crisis? Especially when fashion education streams have often facilitated a space which seeks to *uphold* the system as opposed to being critical of it. Museum education can offer a possible method for combating these structures, utilising museological display methods of reproductions to critique appropriation in the fashion industry as an extension of the classroom.

This essay amplifies and examines fashion's link to cultural sustainability and how museum education can play a pivotal role in critically challenging a broken and toxic system such as the fashion system which often commodifies 'cultural capital'. In terms of sustainable development, or sustainability, cultural sustainability refers to preserving cultural practices, beliefs, and heritage. It also addresses the issue of whether a particular culture will endure into the future and preserve culture as a whole (Soini and Birkeland 2014). Dr Professor Sha'Mira Covington, an interdisciplin-

ary scholar, artist and Assistant Professor in Fashion at The University of Georgia, refers to cultural sustainability as "*a companion to the environmental, social, and economic pillars of sustainability. Its focus is to maintain, preserve, and sustain traditional, indigenous, and non-western cultures in the face of globalisation and capitalism*" (2023). In the following essay, the museum's relationship within the context of Amsterdam is examined, and how facilitating installations and accompanying educational programmes which centre awareness for consumer behaviour, can facilitate discourse on how authenticity and reproduction influence us as contemporary consumers in and of the city.

Moreover, authenticity and reproduction in the museum arena will be explored as they pertain to the year-long exhibition *Knowing Cotton Otherwise* at the Fashion for Good Museum in Amsterdam from October 2022 to October 2023. 'Authenticity' is referred to as the quality of being real or true ('Authenticity' 2024). Fashion for Good Museum is used as an example to discuss the above-mentioned topics. Before closing its doors permanently in June 2024, Fashion for Good Museum was a museum in Amsterdam for narratives on sustainable fashion and innovation with a mission dedicated to empowering, educating and inspiring its visitors on the topic of sustainability in the fashion industry. Creating space to set the record straight when it comes to the definition of what sustainability means, and the origin of various sustainable practices, was one of our biggest goals for exhibitions and programming. The museum tackled this mission in a multiplicity of ways through exhibitions as well as educational and public programmes. Activation and learning were at the centre of the museum's approach, as it also welcomed an unusually young audience in comparison to other museums, between the ages of 18 and 35 with 20 percent of all museum visitors being students (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2022).

Museums – born from the Western colonial desire for perpetual accumulation – are spaces which have evolved to a point where they hold the ability to operate both in and outside time, awarding them a unique position for reflecting on the times that we live in (Foucault & Miskowiec 1986). Not only that, museums are also spaces that foster and bring together expertise and knowledge, as well as operate as places to imagine the world differently by bringing together various worlds. More recently, as new museology theory suggests, museums have moved increasingly away from their overpowering architecture and displays to embrace a more 'inclusive' and egalitarian approach, which caters more democratically to audiences (Vergo et al. 1989). New museology also suggests that objects hold not just a singular meaning but a multitude of meanings which are also dependent

on the viewer and their own individual context. In this sense, increasingly incorporating the role of the viewer in the process has also opened up the playing field for more cross-disciplinary approaches and the use of newer forms of media, which assist in engaging with a wider audience and making these interactions visible, sometimes even part of displays. As museological discourse over the years suggests, this can pose questions when it comes to the authenticity of the histories displayed if there is less negotiation on what is or is not shown. However, as Kidd suggests, an assumption that traditional museological approaches - which present a less immersive and democratic approach with audiences - also lacks in presenting a sound and complete example of histories (2007). As a result of the expansion of new museology, a trend has emerged in museums, which, as Kidd describes, attempts to 'fill the gaps' in history more fluidly and dynamically (2007). This movement is self-reflexive, acknowledging that museums, as historical tastemakers, have often displayed narratives and histories in which we have since seen fault. Public and educational programming in museums can play well into this approach of 'filling the gaps' in an informed way, turning the museum into a laboratory, where objects are analysed and called into question. In the context of the exhibition *Knowing Cotton Otherwise*, the case study for this essay, the objects in the exhibition acted as the starting point for students studying fashion and textile studies in the Netherlands, to imagine a more sustainable approach to fashion as well as gain understanding of the narratives around cotton and textile as a medium.

As depicted in figure 1, the Fashion for Good Museum provided the perfect place to collectively imagine the fashion industry and education differently in collaboration with teachers and students from four different schools across the Netherlands (Zadkine, MBO Rijnland, HKU and Saxion), as well as offer students a professional experience to enter the next chapters of their careers with purpose and criticality. During the depicted workshop with artists Farida Sedoc and Bonnie Ogilvie, the final results of the students' work from the HKU and Zadkine were displayed on the wall in context with the exhibition, as an immediate response to the objects they used as a starting point for their process. This is an example of how an exhibition can prompt interdisciplinary engagement between varying external educational institutions, and museums further expanding on this more democratic approach to display.

Figure 1: *Amsterdam-based artists Farida Sedoc and Bonnie Ogilvie welcome students to their workshop*: May 2023. Photograph by: Elzo Bonam.

Furthermore, in this case study, the theory of 'mimesis' is employed as a way of describing how art and material culture – in this case, garments and textiles – draw from and mimic the world around us according to context (Bol & Spary 2023). Plato describes 'mimesis', the Greek word for imitation, in the creation of art as the re-presentation of nature ('Mimesis' 2011). In the context of museology, mimesis is a methodology and theory that has been a source of discussion since the 1990s (Cantwell 2000; Denison Robb 1995). Especially when it comes to the possibilities it affords to expanding a multi-narrative approach to storytelling which communicates and perpetuates culture throughout creative practice. In the case of *Knowing Cotton Otherwise*, mimesis was employed through replicas, both two-dimensional and three-dimensional, that were used to embody the fashion industrial complex. Not only that, but the Fashion for Good Museum building did not provide the necessary climate conditions for borrowing from other museums or non-private archive collections. Therefore the use of replicas and imagery, copies of the original, were necessary for exploring the many dimensions of a given storyline. During the exhibition, replica fabric swatches amongst other objects were displayed, as well as imagery and videos as a way of compensating and 'filling in the gaps' of important narratives around cultural sustainability.

In the right context, mimesis can be a powerful tool to explore fashion narratives in a polyphonic way, also opening the conversation on cultural appropriation and authenticity important to this criticality. 'Cultural appropriation' means the act of appropriating or using items from a culture you do not own, particularly when you do so without demonstrating your understanding of or respect for that culture ('Cultural appropriation' 2024). According to Geismar, mimesis through both digital and analogue forms of display "*allows us to theorise objects not just in terms of their material qualities but in terms of the social relations and political hierarchies that structure engagement with them*" (2018, 106). Moreover, speaking about a topic through the multiple modes of communication such as digital representation, physical objects and, in our case, programming, can present the perfect breeding ground for more indepth critical discussion on the immaterial impact which material culture has on us as a society.

To address these topics, personal conversations and reflections with collaborators from the exhibition are examined. These conversations and reflections were recorded for our podcast during the development of our educational toolkit, which was launched in March 2024 (Classroom of the Future: The Stories Behind Cotton). This took place in the museum building throughout the duration of the exhibition. It was through the educational programme and accompanying public programme series *Salon Talks,* that we truly were able to create the most impact locally. The most interesting results were uncovered through these programmes; specifically where the blind spots or *gaps* were within Dutch fashion education when it came to a broader holistic approach to learning and breaking the loop in facilitating an unsustainable system; as well as the reaction of students when given the opportunity to collectively contribute to what they considered to be the classroom of the future.

**Fashion, Education and Sustainability (Interwoven Histories of Sustainability)**

Considering the increased focus on clothes as a product instead of a carrier of cultural history and narratives, it is no wonder that we have lost track of the true origin and purpose of garments and their raw materials. Fashion education plays a huge role in this, as it sets the tone for future generations of practitioners entering the job market who contribute collectively to this future. As Laura Gardner and Daphne Mohajer va Pesaran point out in their book *Radical Fashion Exercises: A Workbook*, it has been the norm that these courses often prioritise the industry standard and technical approach as opposed to creating space for students to approach fashion critically and with urgency (2023). Due to this prioritisation, it becomes a self-fulfilling

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prophecy – where students instead continue to contribute to this system, unless teachers take the position of choosing to step outside these norms and encourage criticality with their approach.

Recently, these practices have started to change, with several educational institutions beginning to prioritise a more holistic approach to fashion which interweave the four pillars of sustainability into their curriculums. According to RMIT University, the four pillars of sustainability are cultural, social, economic and environmental sustainability (2017). If you work and teach in the fashion and textile industry, the impact that overconsumption has on our planet can no longer be ignored. Although the root of these problems mostly affects the global majority, it is the West who has been the instigator of this textile climate crisis, to begin with (Covington 2023):

> *"The garments we make and wear – from the ubiquitous white t-shirt to cutting-edge runway fashion – have become potent symbols of extraction and exploitation. In its wake, fashion leaves behind contamination, injustice, and waste" (Gardner & Mohajer va Pesaran 2023).*

These are ramifications closely tied to Western choices which are embedded in a colonial attitude towards disconnecting products from their intention and meaning, for the purpose of profits. What Covington, Gardner and Mohajer va Pesaran share here is a realisation that a radical approach to fashion education needs to be employed so we can become more aware of the lineage that clothing has in our lives, and the responsibility and impact we have as a society when it comes to clothing and fashion.

In the *Knowing Cotton Otherwise* exhibition, we specifically focused on the amplification of lesser-known narratives surrounding the story of cotton, to show the multifaceted nature of this well-known and converted fabric. Creative director of the exhibition, Janice Deul, reflects on the intention behind the exhibition by saying in a podcast interview for our educational toolkit:

> *"We all know cotton as this fundamental material in our lives, however, we do not concentrate enough on the enormous price which people, the planet and the climate have [paid] and continue to pay throughout the years to make this fabric so accessible" (Ignacia & Westwood 2023).*

*Knowing Cotton Otherwise* unfolded in three chapters over a year, each one zooming in on another topic and adding to the base narrative on cotton. For the second chapter of the exhibition, titled *Bodies of Work,* we invited Dr Professor Sha'Mira Covington, a scholar and artist with a focus on Black liberation studies within the fashion-industrial complex. Covington, who teaches fashion sustainability through Black and Indigenous lenses, curated an installation which drew on archival documentation and objects exploring cotton's relationship to 'the body' and the body as an archive. Figure 2 shows Covington's installation *Curative, Confronting and Healing the Fashion-Industrial Complex*, where she brought together both historical objects from the archive of the University of Georgia in the United States and objects from private collections, as well as fabric swatches, to explore cotton's relationship to the fashion and textile industry. The cotton industry is a better-known historical chronology that connects the history of the fashion industry to the development of our contemporary capitalist society as a whole. This relationship between the fashion/slave trade, the cotton boom and industrial revolution is well explained by Dominique Drakeford, thought-leader and entrepreneur focussing on sustainability, Black American identity and colonialism (qtd. in Barber 2022). When asked what the first thing was that came to her mind when she heard the word cotton, it was not the fabric but more so the spiritual properties associated with the plant:

> *"I think of it from two perspectives, I think of nature and the medicinal properties as a plant and how it's associated with female medicine, also the spiritual properties of it; my grandmother would say that it attracts positive energy and it can help us be spiritually pure by absorbing negative energy, on the other hand, I think of the transatlantic slave trade" (Ignacia, Westwood and Covington 2023).*

The raw material cotton, illustrated in figure 3, is a perfect example to explain how history is interwoven with the present and future in an influential way. Dr Sha'Mira Covington relays in her text for the publication, *Cotton's Legacy, the Anthropocene, and Sustainability in the Fashion-Industrial Complex,* that the development of early capitalism is already deeply rooted in injustice from its essence with the deployment of enslaved peoples during the transatlantic slave trade particularly in the case of cotton, still one of the most ubiquitous raw materials to ever exist (Bailey qtd. in Covington 2023). Not only this, but the prioritisation that industry agricultural prac-


Figure 2: *Installation view Curative, Confronting and Healing the Fashion-Industrial Complex*, Sha'Mira Covington: 2023. Photograph by: Elzo Bonam.

Figure 3: *Small silver locket enclosing a cotton sample from the 1960s. This was often used as a good luck charm to absorb negative energy*. Installation, Sha'Mira Covington: 2023. Photograph by: Elzo Bonam.

tices have had on cotton as a *product* as opposed to its ramifications on the land, has led to immense ecological consequences (Merchant qtd. in Covington 2023). This is a prime example of how an industry, built primarily on profits and not in harmony with the land, can have a huge effect not only socially and culturally but also environmentally. As exemplified in figure 2 and 3, Covington's installation also brings together a combination of both archival objects and mimesis, through fabric reproductions and technical drawings, to 'fill in the gaps' of the narrative for the visitor. Also, through the choice to display industry-copied fabric swatches, Covington opens a discussion on reproduction in the fashion industry and the ethics around this when it comes to traditional practices as 'cultural capital'.

These are also important topics which Covington introduces in her curriculum as an educator. She chooses to take an approach to teaching which encourages students to be critical of the industry and its focus on decolonizing and abolition pedagogies. Remarking on this she says:

> *"I recognise that the [fashion] industry doesn't necessarily align with decolonization or abolition, because it's so profit-driven, but my aim as an educator is to challenge traditional fashion ways of knowing and focus on educated critique of those ways of knowing. Fashion is frankly a business-driven complex, and I approach it by restoring things like humanity and freedom as opposed to oppression" (Covington 2023).*

**Museums Objects and Cultural Appropriation**

Circling back to the idea of reproduction, and the disconnection between garment, product and cultural sustainability, it was very interesting to then conduct a pilot educational programme that attempted to bring these elements back into contact with one another. When it comes to education, Sandra Jackson-Dumont, director of the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art in Los Angeles, expresses that museums have the potential to be 'learning centres' for people of all ages (Jackson-Dumont qtd. in Szántó 2020). Especially newly developed museums that offer a space unencumbered by the problematic collections of larger historical museums with national collections (Jackson-Dumont qtd. in Szántó 2020). Museums and the fashion industry hold a multifaceted connection to one another when it comes to the concept of reproduction and history. Both spaces contribute to an ongoing discourse surrounding the politics of reproduction and appropriation, in both negative and positive ways. On the one hand, museums are houses of material culture, spaces which amplify more hidden narratives

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of society. On the other hand, they are also large fortresses, parading and historically glorifying an attitude towards capitalising on the very cultures they also seek to protect and create space for. It is no wonder they have often been referred to as theme parks, lending a hand to the experience economy (Belting 2006). On the other hand, both museums and fashion often lend themselves to current trends, as both are reflectors of popular culture.

Reproduction, although acting as a common method for display in museology throughout history – has turned in recent years towards a conversation in museum theory which focusses increasingly on the ethics of these practices (Bol & Spary 2023; Geisma 2018). On the one hand, reproduction as a method provides many possibilities for the telling of otherwise hidden or lost narratives, but it also presents other issues when it comes to the history of appropriation or capitalising on culture. This is the same for fashion: when it is not accompanied by correct contextual information, it can quickly get swept up into the trend whirlwind, disconnecting from its true origins and meaning. The ethical implications of reproduction, or what can also be referred to in some cases as mimesis in museology, as Bol and Spary explain, can be determined by a specific set of circumstances: local, social, political and intellectual (2023).

Historian, high school teacher and activist Naomi Nagtegaal, seen in figure 4, explains that: "*History is actually just the study of people*" (2023) - i.e., all materials and objects are just evidence of the connections between people.. Museums function as spaces to explore these stories, and through the pilot educational programme *Classroom of the Future: The Stories Behind Cotton*, we also aimed at positioning the museum as an extension of the classroom, a space which was able to function almost parallel to the limitations that encumber the current Dutch education system and teachers. The project spanned a year and a half and was a collaborative effort, bringing together teachers and students from vocational (MBO) and higher education schools (HBO) with a focus on textiles and fashion across the Netherlands. The pilot consisted of four phases: a teacher meeting, two phases of practical workshops with local artists and designers where students focused on materials and narratives, and ultimately, a showcase for students to exhibit their final work in a professional setting.

It became apparent that one of the biggest topics that teachers struggled with, was not just how to weave and prioritise topics like sustainability into their curriculums, but also how to instigate topics and facilitate 'difficult' conversations in the classroom. As referred to above in this essay, the topic of cotton is not without its links to our collective colonial consciousness, forced labour and economic disbalance. As one of the curators of the

Figure 4: *Naomi Nagtegaal during her workshop referring to the fabric swatches in Sha'Mira Covington's installation*: April 2023. Photograph by: Elzo Bonam.

exhibition, Sophie Jager-van Duren, states in a podcast interview for our educational toolkit: "*There is always someone that pays the price because we all have a desire for cheap products*" (Jager-van Duren 2023). In another sense, all our choices as both consumers and practitioners are connected, and we aimed to create awareness of this. Through undertaking the pilot and workshops it appeared that although schools in the Netherlands teach about sustainability in their curriculums, they mostly focused on the environmental implications as opposed to historical or cultural links and ramifications. Inviting local Dutch artists and designers to give workshops, based on their own design practice and narratives, also opened the possibility for students to have a wider understanding of what a design process entails as well as a connection to Amsterdam's professional landscape within this field (see figure 5). One result of this was a student going on to conduct an internship at one of the collaborating brands. Returning to the topic of mimesis, in the case of Sha'Mira Covington's installation, personal archival objects presenting the spiritual significance of cotton were paired with a set of fabric swatches that were mass-produced yet depicting patterns of significance to textile history, such as 'Malian Mud Cloth' and 'Ghanaian Kente Cloth'. Next to this, photographic prints of a cotton plantation ledger as well as early drawings of plans for the 'cotton gin', a machine used for separating the fibres of the cotton plant from the seeds ('Cotton gin' 2024), represented a historical timeline mapping out the parallel narrative

between both the cultural and spiritual significance of cotton juxtaposed with the commodification of cotton as an industry.

Students reacted unexpectedly during the educational programme. When asked to explore and create a design for a fabric inspired by these narratives from their own perspectives, many produced creative results that did however verge on appropriation. It was therefore surprising to us that many did not understand the concept of 'cultural appropriation' at all and had little to no knowledge of how this was linked to their future work in the field, both locally in the Netherlands and as future contributors to the fashion system in a wider sense. Also, many had little understanding of the link between the plant cotton and historical and modern slavery, and the link that human labour has to raw materials, resulting in the fabrics which they are familiar with. Dominique Drakeford states that people from the African continent were sought after for their advanced skills in textiles, including the cultivation of cotton plantations in America, the Caribbean, and South America, which used the expertise (forced labour) of Africans who were the sustainability experts of both agriculture and textiles; however, it was a cornerstone of the transatlantic slave trade, one of the hidden commodities that fuelled the European colonial empire (Drakeford qtd. in Barber 2022). This demonstrates how the mimetic value of a reproduction paired with a historically significant object in a museum setting can instigate collective learning as an accompaniment to general education streams. Nagtegaal reflects on this realisation:

> *"I think that it's very important in a course, if you're going to start working with a specific raw material, and [if] you are going to make this your career, that you understand what the history is, and I have discovered that most of the students from these courses do not have this knowledge at all" (Nagtegaal, 2023).*

Figure 5: *Students working on their individual pieces during the workshop by The New Optimist*: May 2023. Photograph by: Elzo Bonam.

**Conclusion**

It is difficult to pinpoint one reason why this is exactly, but education, as Nagtegaal frames it, is *"very slow"* (2023); there are of course exceptions to this. Furthermore, the rate at which the education system as a wider sector develops and evolves is slow, with a large variety of extraneous variables. This is where the power of the museum can come in, as explained earlier through the ideas of Jackson-Dumont (Jackson-Dumont qtd. in Szántó 2020). As an increasingly flexible and dynamic space, similar to a school's facilitatory space for learning and ideas – it has the potential to operate more experimentally. Through this pilot, we were also able to bring students of different levels together to learn from one another, as well as from across the country. Of course, the educational system is very focused on preparing students to have the right skill set to influence the future of an already functioning industry, which is highly focused on the commodification of garments as opposed to the environmental and social implications. This is how success is measured, seeing as education itself is also quickly becoming an industry (Kumar 2024). What this essay has aimed to address is the necessity for reconsideration of the industries and processes which we take for granted in our society when pertaining to the fashion and textile industries and how reproduction can assist as a tool to 'fill in the gaps' left by tellings of certain histories. Museums have the capability of assisting us in this, as reflectors of our collective consciousness and material culture.

Reproductions and cultural sustainability, when applied with care, can be very powerful tools to address these issues when reacquainted with physical vessels such as museum objects. The role of education in this is radical and important, and comes with a responsibility. Educational institutions such as universities, schools and museums have a prolific power to rupture systems as they offer the possibility to divert the course of the industry and society through the hands of future generations.

Reproduction as a theme has a nuanced and particularly sensitive connotation when it comes to fashion and the industry which it perpetuates. The main reason for this is the capitalising on culture due to the prominence of cultural appropriation and the counterfeit industry. However, given the right context, reproduction can in fact counteract this, acting as a method for reflecting on these very practices as exemplified in this essay. The museum context provides this opportunity, as a mediated space, with a history in practice embedded in critique. Although the conscience of museum history is heavy with its traditional single-minded approach to displaying history, the emergence of an increasingly democratic turn in methodology has greatly expanded the societal impact of museums. As such, this paves the way to not only change how we understand and interpret objects but also assist in how other organisations and societal systems, such as educational institutions, support and shape future generations.

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