

## Fashion—Precarity—Labor

The Fashion Praxis Collective

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**Abstract:** In February 2016 the Fashion Praxis Lab, a loosely connected research lab of scholars across The New School, Parsons, and beyond, began work on a flag to draw attention to the plight of garment workers in developing economies. The flag references one that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) used to fly from their Fifth Avenue window in the 1920s and 1930s each time the news broke that a man had been lynched, reading “A Man Was Lynched Yesterday.” The NAACP had their office a block north of where Parsons is today, and on a famous photo of the flag, the central buildings of Parsons can be clearly seen in the background. Several faculty and students from The New School contributed to the flag during spring 2016. **Keywords:** fashion, labor, precarity, praxis, book sprint

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In May 2016, the Fashion Praxis Lab took on another project and organized a “book sprint,” a five-day-long, intense collaborative writing session. The topic was fashion and labor, with the aim of expanding the analysis on the many forms of labor involved in the production of fashion. The book sprint was a format that tried to challenge some of the troubles of individual-focused academic research and creative practice. As a format of collaborative writing (writing together in a Google doc under the name of the “Fashion Praxis Collective”), the sprint tried to revive the pleasure of writing where the process was as much a creative and associative endeavor as it was academically correct (with references and such). In its micro-utopian gesture, it also tried to level out some of the traps of precarity in academic collaborations, such as those between tenured professors—or teachers—and students, using techniques like collaborative writing, exquisite corpse, drawings, and (nonhierarchical) writing in a Google doc.

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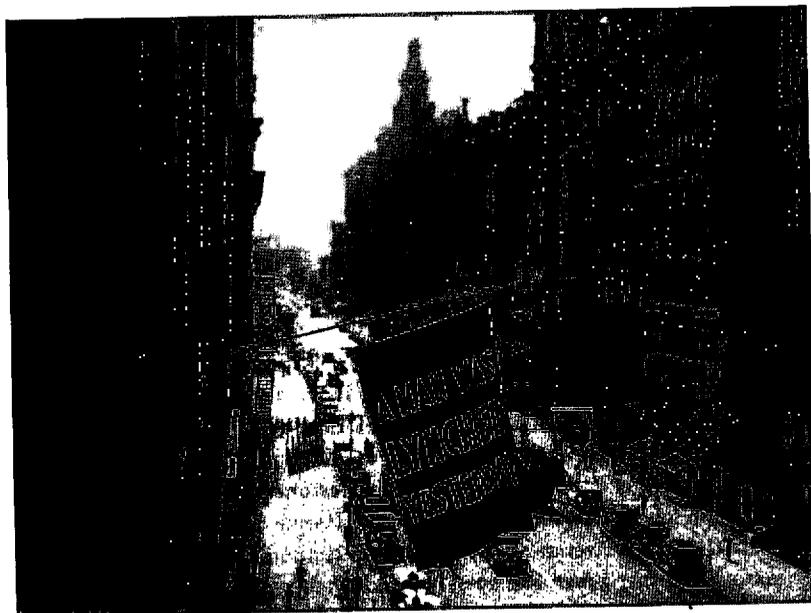


Fig. 1. The NAACP's flag flies on Fifth Avenue, in 1936. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

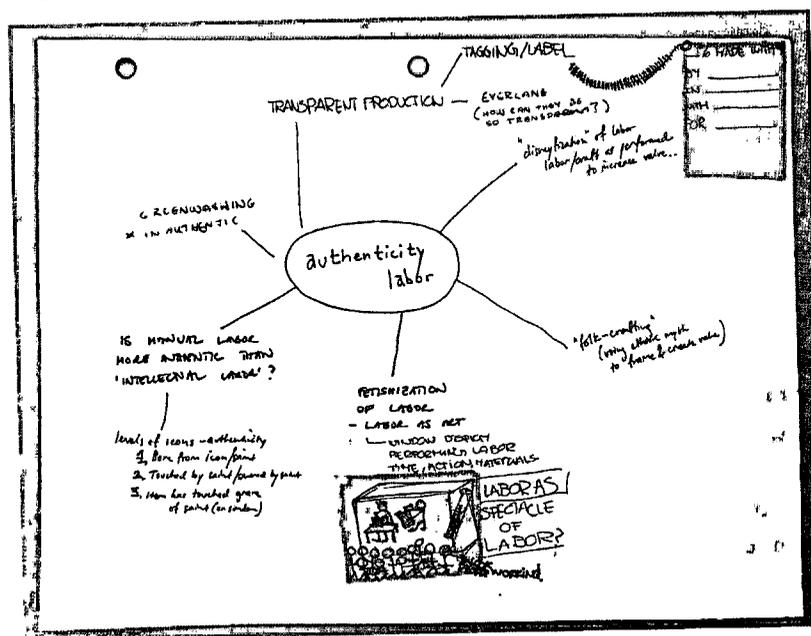


Fig. 2. Mindmap from book sprint on Fashion and Labor, May 2016. Photo by Fashion Praxis Collective.

Fashion, ephemeral and precarious, is at the heart of conspicuous consumption and styled obsolescence. It turns every good into waste, and it also treats its workers the same. Fashion is everywhere across contemporary cultures, and even if synthetics, such as polyester, become ever more popular, most garments are still made from cotton. We drape our bodies in cotton, we work in it, celebrate in it, sleep in it. We are born into cotton, swaddled in it, and we are swathed and buried in cotton. It is everywhere and it is almost invisible, yet as it veils all social forms, it also hides the many forms of labor which define modern capitalism, and it makes fashion work at the heart of capitalist culture. Fabrics cover and deceive: we rarely see what is underneath. Similarly, labor in fashion is always hidden or veiled: it is always at work under cover. Hidden labor in fashion does not mean it is simply a matter of ignorance from the consumer side. No, the hiding of labor in garment production, and in the wider fashion system, is not merely a lack of media coverage or interest from consumers but is also a culturally and systemically induced ignorance.

As highlighted by Sven Beckert (2014), cotton may act as a key to understanding the roots of capitalism and a material to trace the many processes of exploitation cotton passes through. From the cotton fields of the American South to the mills of Manchester and today's overseas sweatshops, the production of textiles has been at the frontiers of the development of capitalism; cotton fibers also bind this history to the deadly consequences of textile labor, from child labor in the cotton fields of Uzbekistan to the collapse of Rana Plaza. Even if we joke about consumers being "slaves to fashion," fashion is a phenomenon built on slavery of so many sorts: from the historical enslavement on the fields and the child labor in the factories to the models and interns and the whole flora of appropriational techniques that feed every new trend. It may not be untrue to speak of fashion itself as veiled slavery.

Fashion is dominated by many forms of precarious women's labor, stretching from the unseen and devalued domestic crafts of embroiderers in rural India to the indebted and unpaid interns at fashion studios in New York. For the group of teachers joining the book sprint, fashion teaching and scholarship, however privileged, is also a struggle over precarious working conditions. Working within a culture of fear cultivated under a reign of short contracts or tenure reviews skewed toward historical (and explicitly male) forms of academic assessment, it is as if fashion is cursed by precarity within its very being.

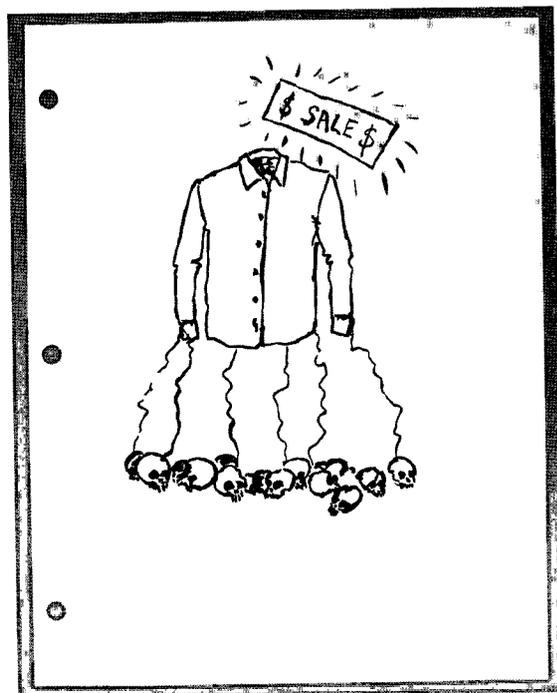


Fig. 3. Illustration from book sprint on Fashion and Labor, May 2016. Photo by Fashion Praxis Collective.

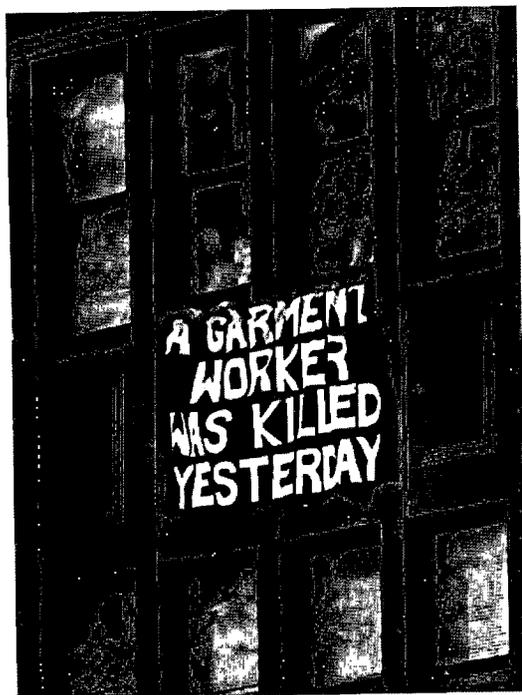


Fig. 4. The Fashion Praxis flag flies on Fifth Avenue, in 2016. Photo by Fashion Praxis Collective.

*On the third day of working on the collaborative book, the cruel reality of fashion made itself known. News came from China and Bangladesh of two factory fires that killed several workers the previous day (such “accidents” rarely make it to the news). Our hope in February was to never fly the flag, as it reads “A Garment Worker Was Killed Yesterday.” However, the need to do so arose during the writing of the book, a reminder of the intersections of the many forms of precarity inherent in the everyday phenomenon of fashion. In the end, our PDF-book was an alliance of friendships forged by collaborative thinking and writing, but perhaps even more by sewing a flag. With the flag, the process of writing became an explicit reminder of fashion’s precarious relationship to text and matter, labor and life.*

The **Fashion Praxis Collective** is a temporary alliance of fashion practitioners, researchers, and activists whose membership shifts over time. The collective strives to take a political perspective to fashion, adding a critical approach to the study and design of fashion. Visit Fashion Praxis Collective at [www.fashionpraxis.wordpress.com](http://www.fashionpraxis.wordpress.com).

#### Works Cited

Beckert, Sven. 2014. *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism*. New York: Knopf.