

STATE OF THE FIELD IN CONVERSATION

Dr. Liudmila Aliabieva & Professor Hazel Clark

Special Issue:
State of the Field
Issue 1
Interview 2
Article 9

[doi.org/10.38055/
SOF010109](https://doi.org/10.38055/SOF010109)

Keywords

Fashion history
Fashion practice
Fashion studies
*Russian Fashion
Theory*
Fashion
education

Abstract

In this conversation, Liudmila Aliabieva, Head of the PhD Programme in Art and Design at the Higher School of Economics Research University, Moscow and Editor-in-Chief of *Russian Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* and Hazel Clark, Professor of Design Studies and Fashion Studies, and current director of the MA Fashion Studies program at Parsons School of Design, The New School, New York discuss their individual career trajectories as authors, editors, educators, and theorists to address key moments in the development of the fashion studies discipline from their respective geographic locations. The study of fashion and its attendant subjects has significantly expanded since the field's nascent stages thirty years ago to become the focus of engaging interdisciplinary scholarship, ambitious exhibitions, and numerous academic and popular journals, among other outlets. Aliabieva and Clark reflect on a range of topics including the challenges of pioneering a new arena of research in the humanities to developing critical and transdisciplinary praxes for designers. From the impact of globalization in the 1990s to the critical importance of decolonial approaches today, Clark and Aliabieva perceptively discuss the present state of fashion studies, however, "slippery" locating the field may be.

**LIUDA**

Let's start by talking about how we came to our career paths. I don't know your background, but it might be of interest — I, for instance, have nothing to do with fashion in my background—my initial studies were as a philologist.

HAZEL

So how did you get into fashion?

LIUDA

That's an interesting story. It began when I was doing my PhD, advised by Olga Vainshtein, on copyright in literature. This got me interested in interdisciplinary subjects like literary clubs, intellectual property debates, coffee houses, and the gendering of coffee and tea drinking. Before long, my research areas expanded and I moved into women's studies and researched sports, cycling in particular, and dress reform. At that point, Olga proposed that we launch a fashion research journal. There was obviously a lot of interest in the subject, even though there was no field of fashion studies at that time. We pitched the idea to Irina Prokhorova, the head of New Literary Observer Publishing House. Boldly yet shrewdly, she took the journal on board and agreed to publish *Russian Fashion Theory*.

HAZEL

When was that?

LIUDA

In 2006. The research field was somewhat limited back then. There were a few people who wrote about fashion from a popular perspective, as there was obviously a growing interest among the general public. As for academia, I am afraid just like anywhere else at that time, in Russia fashion was not considered a serious subject of research. When we entered the space there was no discipline and no research community, we basically had to build the field from scratch. Of course, there was a long-standing and well-established tradition of dress history research, but not fashion studies. This lack of fashion research can be attributed to the denigration of fashion in the Soviet period, when it was seen as a bourgeois phenomenon far less important than the more urgent task of building a new country. All this led to a fundamental absence of a Russian fashion industry in the post-Soviet era and into the 2000s.

When we launched the journal (which is a partner of *Fashion Theory* edited by Valerie Steele), most of the articles were translated from English. So, initially, it had the feel of something borrowed and imported — which it was not. The work we did at the time sought to build a framework for our research based on the translation of key texts. It was crucial for the journal to introduce the key concepts to the Russian audience, to form a critical language for the discipline of fashion studies that would simultaneously resonate with the Russian context, and connect Russia to the international research field. What about your entry into fashion studies?



HAZEL

It was very different from yours. I started in fine arts, that was my first degree. I was very interested in textiles, and I began using the canvas that other students were painting on as a cheap and accessible material to make sculptures. When I completed my degree, in my hometown of Sunderland in the north of England, I got the chance to study for a year on a new graduate certificate in art and design history, which was focused on people like myself who had been to art school and wanted to develop their knowledge of history and theory. It was significant that the courses included architecture and design history; the latter was emerging as an area of study, alongside the more established art history. In the UK, new curriculum was being seeded by scholars such as the late Gillian Naylor, who began developing design history courses for design majors who had previously only been taught art history. The new UK Open University was also foundational with its teaching of the history of architecture and design in the modern period, especially thanks to the efforts of Charlotte and Tim Benton and their colleagues.

My graduate program developed my historical knowledge of textiles, especially what was being mass-produced in Britain from the Industrial Revolution. So, I think like you, I was more interested in cheaper, everyday textiles, and their impact on fashion. I was lucky to be employed as a Research Assistant in the History of Design at Brighton Polytechnic (now Brighton University), which enabled me to register for a PhD, and assist with the development of a new undergraduate degree program. Based on my previous work, I started to research printed textiles in Britain before William Morris (the earliest of Nikolaus Pevsner's influential *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1961) — one of our key texts). I sought out anonymous designers, working in industry — which, little did I realize, was to be foundational to my curiosity in everyday fashion and its history.

When I went to work in Hong Kong in the 1990s, I became intrigued by the relationship between design and fashion and cultural contexts. It was just before the handover of the British colony to China, and local people and creatives, such as writers, artists, designers, and film makers, were wanting to recognize Hong Kong's cultural history and legacy. This started to frame my work and teaching by deepening my interest in design and local culture. I researched the cheongsam, as a female garment characteristic of Hong Kong. I also started to work on the anthology *Old Clothes New Looks: Second Hand Fashion* (2000) with Alexandra Palmer.

As a design historian in the UK in the 1980s and 90s, I had been drawn to the broader design studies approach being championed at that time in the United States by the late Victor Margolin. It provided a platform for my own approaches to fashion, which have continued to include history and theory.

By the time I left Hong Kong 2000 and came to the US, fashion studies had started to develop as a field, marked for me by Valerie Steele's launch of *Fashion Theory* in 1997. Valerie had invited me to contribute an essay to *China Chic: East Meets West* (1999), the book to accompany the exhibition of the same name at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). She is to be credited as a seminal figure in establishing fashion curation and exhibitions as a space for fashion studies and investigation. Likewise, Judith Clark with her gallery in North London in the 1990s. Her *Malign Muses: When Fashion Turns Back* (September 2004–January 2005, Mode Museum, Antwerp), renamed as *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*, for its showing at the V&A in London (February–May 2005) broke new ground in fashion curation. The exhibitions were informed by the scholarship of Caroline Evans, most notably her 2003 publication *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness*. They broke with linear depictions of fashion history (and, as a result, broke some fashion historians out into a sweat!). I did not see these shows unfortunately, but they have proved key in freeing fashion exhibitions from the museum vitrine, and in effectively “troubling” perspectives on history, which have become enfolded into fashion studies.

To return to my move to the US and to Parsons School of Design in 2002, it was to develop a design studies curriculum for the undergraduates and, to cut a long story short, along the way we developed a Master's degree in Design Studies. The Master's in Fashion Studies also emerged to meet the needs of the students and to respond to developments in the fashion studies field. Design studies was foundational in the broader, interconnected, more transdisciplinary approach — as you said — to the *study* of

both design and fashion. I also drew on my background knowledge of the history of fashion, textiles, and design, which benefitted from my study of art history and my having had a fine arts practice. So, my response to fashion studies has benefited from the broader strategies of design studies, and its relationships to theory, practice, history, and to valuing critical voices.

LIUDA

How exciting! As you were speaking about your path, and how you moved from design history and the materiality of fashion... I realized that in my case, it was different, and more through the lens of language, which I think had to do with my background and training as a philologist. A few years after the journal was launched, together with some colleagues who also happened to be among its most regular contributors, I started to prepare an MA program in Fashion Studies to train fashion researchers. This was also seen as a milestone in the establishment of fashion theory within academia. The Master's program was launched in 2014, originally at the Russian State University for the Humanities (my alma mater). Later, it relocated to the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. We had to adjust our program to meet the expectations of our prospective students, who had completely polar opposite aspirations. Those who are drawn to the glamour of fashion very often leave the program prior to completion, while others are more willing and prepared to work hard and dig deep. Students lured by the spectacle of fashion who join the fashion design program are often disappointed to realize that being a designer mostly means constant pressure, sweat and tears. This tension between the perception and the reality of fashion is also present among the journal's readers, some of whom like it hot, while others like it real. This duality comes from the peculiarities of the fashion phenomenon, which is shrouded in a veil of mystery, luxury, and glamour.

HAZEL

I think that's really important... So, is the program taught in Russian?

LIUDA

Yes, it is. We have a few English-speaking lectures, but it is principally in Russian. The curriculum looks amazing; it includes courses in fashion theory, fashion, and performance, fashion as a semiotic system, fashion and cinema, fashion and sensory studies, fashion and storytelling, and others. When I look at the program, I always wish I had had a chance to do something like that myself twenty years ago...

HAZEL

Yes, I think it's also interesting to mention the sort of people that come to the program and their expectations. Do you want to say a little bit about that?

LIUDA

Yes, sure. Fashion studies is a wide and inclusive field which embraces theories, methods, and approaches. This is reflected not only in the diversity of fashion researchers' backgrounds, but also in the varied educational trajectories of the program's current and prospective students. Their backgrounds range from more traditional disciplines like art history or journalism, to more unexpected ones like medicine or hairdressing. Potentially, all these students can bring something valuable to the field, a new perspective, an unconventional voice. At the same time though, the diversity of the students' backgrounds, especially where theory is concerned, can create problems for the student environment and overall success of the program. This inclusivity also raises the question of the discipline's boundaries.

HAZEL

A quick further question — is your program publicly funded?

LIUDA

It depends on the year, but normally the students have to pay, although it's not that much compared to other fashion design-related programs in Russia, which are extremely expensive.

HAZEL

Our MA Fashion Studies program is also expensive because we are a private university. We don't get the range of students that you do, they tend to be in their twenties, younger than your students, from the US and internationally. In the US, the Master's degree provides a focus to the education, which is more broadly based at undergraduate level, in the Humanities at least. It reminds us how institutions and the politics around education and funding have an impact on what we can do as educators.

LIUDA

Exactly, and what we cannot do. Keeping in mind the diversity of our readership, which I mentioned earlier, we experimented with the journal's format and genres including essays, interviews, work in progress, trying to organically merge theories and practices and combine hardcore academic texts with more accessible formats.

HAZEL

You're in a different context of course because your readership is determined by language — which is something that the field of fashion studies is trying to deal with currently. The *International Journal of Fashion Studies* has been important in aiming to publish authors with a variety of first languages. We should also acknowledge the conversations that are happening around decoloniality. I've welcomed the recent online seminars held by the Research Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion (RCDF), directed by Angela Jansen and colleagues, which is providing an important focus as we attempt to encompass more voices and ideas about fashion.

LIUDA

Yes, I think we probably attended the same conference, which was organized by LCF, probably the recent one.

HAZEL

Yes. I was also curious as to whether you characterize your work as transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary. But based on what we're saying, this work and our field of fashion studies is transdisciplinary, in other words it's actually building something new, not simply encompassing approaches from a range of disciplines... But locating the field remains a very slippery thing...

LIUDA

Exactly!

HAZEL

I think that those points that we raised about language and audience are actually very important and the distinctions therein.

LIUDA

Yes, I think so. I prefer to see myself as traveling very quickly between layers. Just a couple of days ago, I attended a summer school in northern Russia. I met young people who are designers and who are trying to develop projects on the northern identity. You speak to all these young people with very different backgrounds, and you try to connect what they're doing with what is being done in Moscow, but also with what is being done in Europe and in the world. I feel this way all the time, when I try to be in different places at the same time.

HAZEL

Yes, I agree with the importance of the faculty to make such connections. That comes with being an educator, but also with perspectives gained over time. I appreciate the value of being able to make connections for students based on my knowledge and experience, and research and writing. So, looking at the question of where we locate ourselves adjacent to the field, it has been important to me to pull the threads of my experience together and to take advantage of working more internationally, more globally (as we have also been able to do as a scholarly community during the pandemic). Case in point, is that you and I first met and we didn't see each other for about ten years and then we met again when you unexpectedly attended a symposium I organized at Parsons on fashion curation in November 2013. But now we're finding more ways of forcing those connections. The connections are very important on all sorts of levels, with students, and with colleagues.

LIUDA

Yes, indeed. I remember as soon as borders began to close, we started to organize things every day so that we didn't lose touch and those connections. I agree with what you said about the power of personal connections, and how sometimes you look a little from the outside, or from above, so you can help connect the dots, because very often the students are so focused on their work that they need someone who can offer some useful perspective. And also connecting practitioners and theorists is really important, so they can work on the same projects. Of course, there are colleagues all over the world and, as you mentioned, decolonial studies have shown the need to involve new contexts and territories, to readjust our lens, so we are looking for colleagues in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa — just trying to see what's happening there.

HAZEL

That's interesting because it leads us to the next question as to how our scholarly professions have been shaped by factors like geography? It has for me for sure, as I have developed my research relative to places where I've lived and worked, in the UK, in Hong Kong, and now in the United States. I think we are both saying that where we are located geographically, culturally, politically has an impact on what we do. I was conscious in Hong Kong of how much the cultural and political situation was impacting the subjects I was working on and my approaches to them. I think it's really interesting how that focus is emerging through our conversation — including the point around language, which is really quite significant, not least in who gets access to whom and particularly for younger generations as well.

LIUDA

Absolutely. I've never lived for a long time anywhere other than Moscow. So Moscow has always been the most dominant geographical point in my life. But yes, just traveling, attending conferences, and going on research trips, of course, on the one hand you do look into the local culture, but at the same time you do so through optics informed by one's education and upbringing. It's good that you mentioned language: in my case, ever since the start of my career English has played a role, and I often feel like a translator. It's all about communication, it's about facilitating a dialogue. But on this question about geography, agenda, and social economic positions — yes of course, how can you make decisions without being yourself?

HAZEL

Going back to what you were originally saying about how you moved into this field and through the everyday and women's work, etc. It is also notable that we are still in a very gendered field and despite important work by men, and for example in queer studies, it still is a field that is defined by women — by women scholars, by women practitioners ...In the academic institutions that can be to its detriment in terms of being taken seriously. We're in quite a privileged position at Parsons, we have had an MA in Fashion Studies, for over ten years, with four of us teaching full time on the program, but we don't offer PhDs. The institution has not supported us doing so, even though we have the capacity.

LIUDA

You don't have PhDs?

HAZEL

No, not at Parsons (elsewhere in our university, The New School, PhDs exist). Our alumni who want to go on to PhDs, which some do, have got to go to other places, other countries. I think that although Parsons has a big fashion school, ironically fashion often feels looked down on and not understood. Design has become more valued and acknowledged in our university in recent years. Recalling Valerie Steele's "F" word article, in the 1980s, fashion still suffered institutionally from being considered feminine, and thus facile...

LIUDA

Absolutely. When we started it was the same, very often these days people don't really understand fashion theory... "Theory of what? Are you sure it's fashion?" I remember when I had the launch of some issue of *Russian Fashion Theory* and I came to speak at a very respected academic institution, and the colleague who introduced me said I would tell the audience about the recent fashion trends. I don't know if this was the way to break the ice before the talk or the way to question or humiliate the discipline I represented, but...

You're right of course, our field is still very gendered, and it's seen as women's work. It's still looked down on. Well, we do have PhDs in Fashion Theory, at least at the Higher School of Economics, the PhD School of Art and Design, we do have a few PhD students who do Fashion Studies, which looks promising. Again, about the geographical contexts, I think fashion studies has traditionally been dominated by western European and American agendas. It's interesting that when we started *Fashion Theory* in Russia, there was this conversation about Moscow as the fashion capital, and we thought that even if Moscow isn't the fashion capital, it could become the fashion theory capital at some point! These days, looking at other publications and theory journals, we can see how scholars from different contexts, geographies, and backgrounds are bringing new material to the discussion.

HAZEL

I think that the role your journal is playing for fashion theory will be recognized much more going forward, because there is now an attention to diversity of voices. There was always the hurdle of translation and language. I also think that the notion of the fashion capital has also disappeared probably — it's a late twentieth century concept made more obsolete because of the internet and social media. I don't think that's necessarily seen as a viable or desirable fashion notion anymore.

LIUDA

Absolutely. These days we're dealing with new geographies of fashion, which have changed dramatically. Something like the concept of a fashion capital, which was so present in the discourse let's say two decades ago, just seems absolutely irrelevant these days.

HAZEL

How has your pedagogy changed as a result?

LIUDA

That might be relevant to me since I teach both practitioners and theorists; so it's about the balance between the two.

HAZEL

That's really important. I don't do that, so much... we do have some practitioners in the class... but I do think that that's an important distinction to make.

LIUDA

Yeah, and just to see the presence of both and having to adjust methods and the way I distribute the types of classes we have depending on who I'm talking to. But recently I've noticed that fashion design students are more willing to engage with theory. And on the other hand fashion theory students are becoming more interested in the practical aspects of the discipline. You can see this interesting — not mix yet — but some exciting projects that combine theory and practice together and I think it might be the sign of some new times in fashion studies.

HAZEL

Do you teach them together?

LIUDA

No, not really. But in some projects, I do have some students who come from different programs and who have different backgrounds. So I can see the potential in the way practitioners and theorists work together. They make really interesting research groups.

HAZEL

I agree. Our program had its tenth year of graduates in 2021. We've graduated more than 250 students now, and I think it's probably going to be a good time for us to reflect on the program. The program hasn't changed structurally, it's changed in terms of content. A few years ago, we introduced what we call pathways, which are completely optional, where students can take a couple of courses in Fashion Curation and then another little pathway in what we originally called Fashion Journalism and recently changed to Fashion Writing, which is more encompassing. It's a very good time to reflect on the program, and I would say that in terms of program content; to encompass more and varied fashions, politics, and more racial and ethical perspectives.

With our electives, we try to reflect student interests as well as how the field is developing, retaining a core structure where students are introduced to fashion theory, history, and writing towards their own theses (including questions of whose theory and history). Our students have always been from relatively diverse backgrounds, a lot from the US, some from Europe, some from China and East Asia (fewer at present due to the pandemic). I think for us in New York, there's always going to be the attraction of New York, and Parsons' reputation for fashion education. We have students from different academic backgrounds, particularly in the Humanities. But obviously because fashion studies hardly exists as an undergraduate program, their fashion backgrounds and knowledge can vary considerably.

LIUDA

Interesting. Our program is also approaching its tenth anniversary because we started at one university and then moved to another. Obviously the program hasn't remained the same since its launch as we are trying to follow changes happening in the field: new topics emerge, new discussions develop. For example, recently we started to introduce more courses on sustainability, trying to make some of them more practice-oriented to engage our students in the discussions on the most pressing matters within and around the fashion industry.

As for the numbers, unfortunately they're not that healthy, so this is one of the reasons we have paused the program for one year. We are now rethinking and reconsidering some of the courses to change the program slightly so that it attracts more students. If we look at those who normally enroll, they come from different academic backgrounds, but we do have quite a lot of students who come from a design background. So this is good and bad at the same time, because of course it's good when you know how to physically make things, but on the other hand, of course these students don't have enough knowledge to dive into theoretical concepts. So they need to somehow catch up. Conversely, if we look at the student cohorts, they sometimes form very interesting combinations that could be very productive, though this isn't always the case. I feel that this could lead us to some really interesting collaborations theory-wise. I've been thinking about this recently because we're talking very actively about practice as a research methodology here. It's not as developed as it is in Europe or the United States, but we are exploring it a lot. For example, I've been thinking about a course that I could develop collaboratively with my colleague who's a fashion and textile designer. I thought about this idea of connecting theory and practice in the framework of a course. And now we're thinking about

a “text and textile” course, which would connect practices and theories. I think there’s potential for these kinds of collaborations that could really be productive for both practitioners and theorists alike. And it seems like fashion theory is now looking in that direction as there are more and more publications these days that are practice-based. For instance, I recently read this fantastic monograph by Ellen Sampson entitled *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear* (2020), which is one of the examples we can think of that illustrates where this can lead us.

HAZEL

I think that Ellen’s work is a very good example. It’s drawing a lot of attention to objects. Sophie Woodward’s work on wardrobe studies initiated a change too. There has certainly been a “material turn” in fashion studies.

We have an elective course, called Fashion Practices, started a few years ago by Pascal Gatzén, a conceptual fashion designer who taught at Parsons and has since returned to the Netherlands. I think it’s quite a fundamental course for our program as it is one of the few courses that really engages with fashion as a design practice. Students read some serious theory, but they also have the chance to do some sewing and some mending. The course is trying to address those relationships. It is currently run by Alla Eizenberg, who is part-time faculty in the School of Fashion, a designer who has run her own business, an alumni of MA Fashion Studies, and a PhD student at Aalto University — a “perfect” background for the course!

Another colleague in Parsons School of Fashion took the program a couple years ago and several faculty are interested in registering for PhDs in fashion studies. For some this may be to do with career advancement, but for others it’s reflective of an interest from a younger generation of fashion designers to engage with theory. I think that the value of theory and fashion studies is gaining some recognition in the fashion industry, for instance linked with diversity and inclusion. Our alumna Kimberly Jenkins who started the Fashion and Race Database and has done a lot to advance and engage in these issues and until recently was a full-time faculty member in fashion studies at Toronto Metropolitan University in Canada. She has been invited to consult for Gucci and recently contributed to *Riveted*, a documentary on denim for the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS). So I do think that, in the fashion industry and the public domain, there is some evidence of interest in a theoretically and historically informed fashion discourse.

I don't think the fashion industry can necessarily solve some of these problems on its own. It needs informed and different voices to bring broader perspectives — both intellectually and collaboratively — similar to how design practitioners have realized the value of working alongside anthropologists or ethnographers.

LIUDA

So are you saying that there is more recognition of the importance of fashion studies from practitioners and the industry?

HAZEL

I think that there is having to be — although how it's being addressed or whether it's being addressed may be in question. But there are just more voices, which I think the industry has to acknowledge. A good example might be Orsola de Castro of Fashion Revolution (<https://www.fashion-revolution.org/>) and her recent book *Loved Clothes Last* (2021). Fashion Revolution started after the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, although Orsola was already active in London with Estethica, an alternative sustainable fashion initiative as part of British Fashion Week. More voices are existing to push the fashion industry to address issues, including those relevant to consumers and users. I think it is part of the shift where understanding theory is going to be important to move us forward.

LIUDA

Yes, to get us through at least. This is something that we normally say at open events for the program: strong theory goes hand in hand with strong practice. They actually need each other, and as you said about those voices regarding bigger issues and challenges that fashion has to deal with, of course more knowledge and information are needed. Actually, if we look at the new generation of designers and the students currently studying, they are asking different questions. We can see it already; we can see that there's a new promising direction.

HAZEL

Yeah, I mean that's what we are hopeful for. I think more generally, it's interesting just moving on to that new generation who will be critical and inquiring. I also feel that the role of history is becoming greater. In the United States, for example, a focus on revising History of Fashion courses curricula reveals a general need to include e.g. the previously overlooked contributions in the history of cotton of the role of enslaved people in the South. History provides depth, nuance, and perspective on where we find

ourselves, as we know. I recently contributed to the co-edited anthology by Sarah Cheang (UK), Erica de Greef (South Africa), and Yoko Takagi (Japan), *Rethinking Fashion Globalization*, an important contribution to global perspectives on fashion. I am also working on an anthology with Lauren Downing Peters, stemming from a symposium we held in Chicago, provisionally titled, *Fashion in American Life*, which builds on my work, Lauren's and those of our contributors on fashion and everyday life. I feel it is a really interesting moment when history is claiming its territory again, because it has to in order to address the times and where we find ourselves. I don't know whether that's got the same impact for you, Liuda?

LIUDA

I'm intrigued because I used to think completely the opposite. Fashion used to be so preoccupied with the present and the contemporary, but recently we've seen this shift towards memory studies. For example, I was recently involved with a collection of essays looking at the nineties, a very particular period in our country. This time is often labeled raging or horrible, the "doomed nineties," but actually it was also a period when so many new things appeared, and of course so much was connected with clothing and bodily practices. Most of the authors based their articles on personal archives, recollections, and interviews. They are so powerful! These days, we see quite a lot of projects, not necessarily research papers, but exhibitions, which are based on the same method. I totally agree with you that to understand the present it's important to know history. And this is exactly a point when it's important to be really careful, because history has been strongly manipulated. In Russia, we deal with this all the time. History textbooks are written and rewritten depending on the political situation. So it's interesting that in their work, in their collections, more and more designers are literally going back to their grandmas' closets and trying to combine contemporary methods and instruments with the memories and with this materiality of the past, sometimes literally taking grandma's dresses or fur coats and working with them. I recently had a few collections at one of the design schools where there was work that was based on interviewing and talking to a grandmother and going through her wardrobe that survived from the Soviet Union.

HAZEL

Yes, it is similar here. The chapter that I co-wrote for the book I just mentioned, *Rethinking Fashion Globalization*, with my colleague Alla Eizenberg about the Chinese designer Ma Ke and the Russian designer Gosha Rubchinskiy highlights the impact of different actors in fashion design. At the virtual launch for the book Sarah Cheang, who teaches at the

Royal College of Art in London, mentioned being very conscious of who is present in the classroom. As students and their backgrounds change, there is commonality through the subject of study, but increasing differences in the classroom, too. It will be interesting to see how this unfolds and how it challenges and opens up what and how we teach.

LIUDA

Yes, I also recently went to the north of Russia and took part in a summer school along with theorists and practitioners. The goal was to bring forward global theoretical trends and to work with the local community — its crafts and culture, while focusing on the history of Northern Russia, which has been quite troubled and traumatic.

HAZEL

Was it effective?

LIUDA

Yes, the results of the school were a number of projects the students created, and one of them was a clothing collection. It was interesting because the designer who curated the clothing track of the school in the frame of her own design and research practice spent one month living in the village in the North to become more familiar with the local lifestyle and creative practices. At the school she spoke about her experience and shared some of the results of her research, which motivated the participants of the school.

HAZEL

That's interesting methodologically, that sense of the designer as anthropologist. Especially as the shift in theory and decolonial attitudes towards practice is recognizing the agency of the makers and traditions, and the fact that Indigenous people are not fixed in the past. It's crucial to bring theory and practice together through the experiential — the practice of the people and the relationship to their clothing and how they live.

LIUDA

Yes, indeed. Theory helps balance things so you don't go down that route of just words, you know, turning crafts and local peoples into so-called "souvenirs" for the westerners. So somehow balancing and keeping a critical distance...

HAZEL

Yes, Theory doesn't have to be imposed by intellectuals, we can work from local knowledge and Indigenous oral traditions, and consider ways of thinking and being in the world. So I think there are a lot of possibilities coming up now as we think about the world more broadly, but also more locally, and try to be more encompassing.

LIUDA

You know, with knowledge, it's interesting because together with my PhD students and some fellow researchers we're starting a project which has the word "mend" in its title (Mendit Research Lab) and we look at mending through the optics of interdisciplinarity. We try to see beyond clothing as we can mend not only a dress but relationships, bodies etc.

The Lab operates in a variety of formats ranging from traditional academic forms such as seminars and discussion groups to practice-based workshops working both within and outside academia. We look at repair as an act of care and attachment, as form of resistance and problem-solving, as a therapeutical and creative gesture, as form of sharing and coping with crisis.

HAZEL

The Orsola de Castro book that I mentioned refers to mending clothes and practices of repair in a very lively and accessible way. I think what's being recognized in this country is that education needs to be more diverse and encompassing, at the level of faculty and students as well as what is taught. Basically the *systems* of fashion and of education have to change. It leads us to think about professionalization as systemic, and how professionalizing can create exclusion. I'm actually interested in how fashion can serve as a form of agency for everybody.

LIUDA

That's actually a very complicated thing, because one of the issues we've been facing with this MA program is, what happens to those who graduate. Where do they go, how do they make their living? It seems like there is a need for such specialists, but then you look around and you don't really see that many positions or prospects opening up. And I'm afraid this mirrors what's happening in the fashion industry, because we have all these fashion design students who are trained to be fashion designers, and who are very often trained in a very outdated way to be individual star designers who are believed to lead glamorous lifestyle. Unfortunately, fashion has this highly stereotypical and reproduced image, which has very little to do

with behind its scene tough reality. When fashion students graduate, they find themselves out in a world that they are not prepared for. And we see how there is an urgent need for change in fashion design education which is still haunted by a bunch of outdated concepts, and fashion designer as an individual genius creator is one of those concepts which appeared in the nineteenth century and doesn't really seem valid these days. Nowadays there are more and more design groups, collectives rather than individual designers. It's easier to survive when you're in a team. I recently asked my fashion design students to come up with a manifesto, and I received exciting, extremely inspiring and motivated documents where the key words were responsibility, sustainability, transparency, collaboration, solidarity... This was a real surprise to me, because if I had given the same assignment five years ago, I would have received texts of a completely different "I am gonna be big" content.

So it seems like now we're living in a different context, which is why I think, in terms of education, there is a need for a big change.

HAZEL

Our MA Fashion Studies is not a vocational program, so there are not direct career paths for graduates. Graduates can be very innovative and very entrepreneurial in finding what they want to do. I'm a strong believer, and always have been, that higher education should be broadening and deepening, rather than strictly vocational. However, I work in an expensive private university, in an expensive city, and students want and need jobs on graduating. So we need to prepare them to be confident and to make their own opportunities where necessary and to acknowledge that they're not going to have the same job for life. It makes me recall British design education in the 1980s, which placed an emphasis on transferable skills — it remains a worthwhile objective. But also, ironically, in undergraduate fashion design education some of the technical skills such as pattern cutting and sewing have been diminished, not least as production has been offshored. I think that part of the problem that we're talking about is that hierarchies that have been established in the fashion industry no longer work. Our students are recognizing that, and the need to be adaptable and the desire to be imaginative. The industry can feel like it is behind, not just what our students are being taught, but what they are thinking and how and where they wish to work ... which I think is similar to what you are saying.

LIUDA

It seems it's not clear what the rules are, because for instance they appear in a feature in this magazine and then they take part in a show, but they don't see actual results, and they don't understand how these instruments work because they are definitely working differently, and there is a need for different tools. During the pandemic, when everything was paused, we could see how certain tools that used to work before, such as fashion shows, were not being used anymore, and designers were looking for alternative ways to promote fashion. It's interesting what they came up with, and how digital fashion boomed, and what will happen to that, because it's not going to stop, it's going to develop, and there is a recognition of this digital field these days. But again what you said about crafts and actual making, and the lack of knowledge in this field — not only among fashion students, for whom it's important to know how to professionally make things, but if we look generally, people don't know how to make things, they don't know what their things are made from, and they don't know how to mend things, how to look after them. This again takes us back to that book you mentioned, and to the complexity of the problem when we don't feel that attached to the things in our wardrobe. We are now working on a special issue of *Russian Fashion Theory* on "touch." Of course again during the pandemic, the fact that you couldn't really touch things in the way that you used to... the meaning of touch and the role of touch were highlighted because it was a synonym for humanity, being human, being able to touch... Presence was considered a luxury, and digital was seen as something very democratic — everyone could afford it — but being there, touching, not everyone could do that. So that's interesting. And there have been a few collections, student collections, connected with touch, and how some students who were isolating started to explore this and try to learn how to make things; not only design them, but make them, and they really created some interesting pieces of work.

HAZEL

In thinking about fashion studies as a field, I am interested if you have thought of any landmark moments?

LIUDA

You mean about the development of fashion studies?

HAZEL

Yes.

LIUDA

As I mentioned earlier, in Russia we often follow in the footsteps of our western colleagues who initiated the discipline, and developed its vocabulary and introduced some of the critical contexts and tools. Even though we managed to literally and metaphorically translate most of the concepts with some topics it took us a bit longer due to the specifics of the context.

I might have spoken about it before, but that happened when the English language *Fashion Theory* focused on sustainability came out. And I think that was in 2009 —

HAZEL

It was 2008.

LIUDA

For us it was a bit too early. Our readers were familiar with the sustainable paradigm but due to the specifics of the country's development we clearly needed more time to reach that level of the critique towards consumer society. The people who were traumatized by the specific Soviet experience of clothing shortages and poverty needed the critical distance necessary to fully grasp the idea of slow fashion.

Fashion studies develop as a series of turns. At the beginning of the 2000s, the bodily turn followed by the flood of works on embodiment, starting with Joanne Entwistle's *Fashioned Body*. Later, as you mentioned, we saw Sophie Woodward's seminal work *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, based on an ethnographic approach and the wardrobe method. This recent interest in the materiality of the wardrobes and the emotional attachments between wearers and their clothing seems one of such important landmarks. I would also mention the decolonial turn, which concerns fashion theory, fashion curating, and fashion education, offering a very productive and critical research optics.

HAZEL

Yes, I would completely agree with you. I think that's indicative and very interesting. One thing I did want to ask you, as a slight aside, is the impact that fashion exhibitions might have on fashion thinking, practice, and teaching from your perspective? They have been important in the United States, the UK, Europe, Australia, and beyond. They have made fashion much more accessible and popular, as well as having given space to ideas and the work of fashion curators such as Judith Clark. The fashion exhibition has become a crowd-puller, such as the hugely popular Alexander

McQueen exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute, and later at the V&A Museum in London. But it also becomes a place, depending on the venue, where ideas can be shared or exposed. I was just wondering if you felt that had happened anywhere in your vicinity? In 2019, for instance, I was in Tallinn, Estonia and saw an interesting and unexpected show of the work of Rick Owens and Tommy Cash at Kumu Art Museum, which introduced me to the fact that they were collaborators. What perspective do you have on the exhibition as a way of moving the field forward?

LIUDA

That's a very good question. It actually made me think about how the situation developed in Russia. On the one hand, dress is very "fashionable" here. I don't think we're especially original in this, but we had a few big blockbuster traveling exhibitions like Dior and Chanel, which came to some of the major museums; however, if we look at the level of research exhibitions, conceptual exhibitions — you mentioned Judith Clark, and we can think of other curators — this doesn't really happen in Russia, because it's difficult to find venues and those who would agree to sponsor the projects that are more research-based and less show-oriented. So we can see for instance how museums are open to fashion exhibitions, but they probably see them in a very old-fashioned light — you know, a few garments on mannequins — this glamorous view, but they don't really welcome exhibitions that are highly conceptual and theoretical. So this is one of the problems. It seems that often institutions are just not ready or they have wrong expectations. We also have contemporary art museums that do not welcome fashion because they see fashion as an alien concept to contemporary art, and more as a target for criticism. By the way the idea of our program was also to teach curating practices in fashion and prepare specialists with certain knowledge and skills.

HAZEL

Of course, the best sort of fashion criticism also includes the writing of journalists, such as Judith Thurman who writes for *The New Yorker* who is an informed fashion critic and an excellent writer. The critical role of writing and exhibitions also moves us on to think about gatekeepers, which exist in all institutions. For fashion exhibitions, Judith Clark was seminal in curating her own space, The Judith Clark Costume Gallery in London. This brings us back to my earlier point about the potential of being entrepreneurial, starting small and "making things happen." Of course, the internet and social media has given students a chance to find audiences for their writing, but that hasn't come about the same way for museums or

other exhibiting venues. And it's an irony that in a big city like New York, or Hong Kong where I used to live, exhibition spaces are limited due to the price of real estate and rents. Such factors have an impact on the potential and impact for fashion studies beyond the academy.

LIUDA

Of course, institutions are a problem everywhere... There are some independent galleries that demonstrate some interest in the concept of fashion but the way they choose curators and designers is not always fully transparent. And the choice of venues is limited as well. The same can be applied to fashion design contest (whose very format is disputable and a bit outdated) and the criteria they use in the selection.

HAZEL

But it's interesting, it's a microcosm of the fashion industry that nothing is transparent...

LIUDA

That's true. Academia is broader, but remember the way fashion studies had to push its way into academia, how "academic gatekeepers" didn't want to allow fashion studies in. I remember that really well, how it was difficult to open certain doors. Just a few days ago, I was on a program posted on YouTube, and I saw some of the comments. I don't usually like to look at comments, in fact I hate it, because people just comment, they don't think about other people's feelings. So one of the comments was about the fact that I teach fashion, it said "Oh, they teach fashion at the Higher School of Economics, so stupid..." or something like that. People don't really see fashion as a discipline, they don't understand how it can be seen as a discipline, as a field. So we're still dealing with issues of legibility and acceptance, still struggling ... but it only makes us stronger as a discipline and as a community.

HAZEL

Yes, I think that's still very fundamental. Some of us are in stronger positions because of what we've done or what others have done, we are fortunate to be in a context that is supportive, or appears to be supportive, of what we do. That said, fashion studies remains in a position to be misunderstood and trivialized in the academy, if we don't make it clear what we do as scholars and students to demonstrate the dimensions of studying fashion. I still appreciate Valerie Steele's definition in *Fashion Theory* of "fashion" as "the cultural construction of embodied identity." Recognizing

also, that fashion scholarship no longer addresses only the western fashion system and activities in the global north. We are still building our field, and uncovering its many perspectives and directions, that's what makes it so fascinating and challenging.

LIUDA

It's all about fascination and surprise and fun, in fact!

HAZEL

Yes, absolutely. And though we talk about serious things, we must acknowledge the pleasure of fashion as well. How we humans take pleasure in fashion is another topic for discussion, for another time.

LIUDA

It fascinates me how fashion combines so many very often opposite things. To belong but also to stand out, to follow the crowd but also to create, liberate, emancipate, and resist. Indeed, it's such source of agency and liberation. I remember one of the recent shows I attended, I think it was a graduate fashion show at Aalto University, and before the show started I looked at that motley crowd attending the event and thought "Fascinating! For all these people fashion is an agency, an opportunity to make a statement." This inspires me all the time, and I feel privileged to be involved in this very special field.

HAZEL

That sounds like a great final line! A great way to end.

Author Bio



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ARTICLE CITATION

Clark, Hazel, and Liudmila Aliabieva. "In Conversation: Professor Hazel Clark and Dr. Liudmila Aliabieva." *State of the Field*, special issue of *Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1-26, <https://www.fashionstudies.ca/in-conversation-hazel-clark-and-liudmila-aliabieva>, <https://doi.org/10.38055/SOF010109>.

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Clark, Hazel, and Liudmila Aliabieva. "In Conversation: Professor Hazel Clark and Dr. Liudmila Aliabieva." *State of the Field*, special issue of *Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1-26, <https://www.fashionstudies.ca/in-conversation-hazel-clark-and-liudmila-aliabieva>, <https://doi.org/10.38055/SOF010109>.

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sciences humaines du Canada

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ISSN 2371-3453

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