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Reimagining Fashion Education for a Just Future Inspired by Ben Barry's Vision and Voice

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Fashion, at its core, is not only a material practice but a profound expression of identity, politics, and cultural belonging. It is simultaneously a site of exclusion and a site of possibility. In the context of contemporary fashion education, few voices have articulated this duality and the urgency of transformation as powerfully as Dr. Ben Barry. As Dean of the School of Fashion at Parsons School of Design in New York, Barry brings to his academic leadership a distinctive and compelling trajectory as a fashion researcher, educator, activist, and inclusive modeling agency founder. He declares: "I strive to intervene into the fashion system and redesign it to centre inclusion and decolonization — creating a future in which bodies that are currently stigmatized and excluded are instead valued and desired".[1] This ambition is not merely rhetorical; it informs a systemic, pedagogical, and political intervention that reorients fashion education away from replication of the status quo and toward a transformative, justice-centered model.

Barry's work emerges at the intersection of critical fashion studies, embodied pedagogy, and activist scholarship. His scholarship and leadership are grounded in the lived realities and epistemologies of those long excluded from fashion's mainstream: Disabled, fat, trans, queer, and gender non-conforming individuals. His approach insists that fashion is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by and helps perpetuate complex systems of power — colonialism, ableism, cisnormativity, fatphobia, white supremacy, and capitalist extraction. Barry sees fashion education as either complicit in these systems or as a powerful tool to dismantle and reimagine them. His intervention calls for a "radical redesign," an epistemic shift that does not simply update the curriculum, but reconstitutes the foundational values, processes, and social contracts of fashion pedagogy itself.

The urgency of this redesign is amplified by contemporary global conditions. As Barry warns, fashion education "is in a state of emergency." This emergency is both ethical and political: it reflects a disconnect between the dominant industry's exclusionary ideals and the urgent need for an inclusive, decolonial,

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1. Toronto Metropolitan University website: https://www.torontomu.ca/phd-media-design-innovation/faculty/ben-barry/.

and sustainable fashion future. Despite progress made in certain areas — such as racial justice, anti-colonial curricula, and gender inclusion — Barry notes that the integration of fat and disability justice remains severely marginalized. Compounding this is the resurgence of regressive socio-political ideologies, the commodification of thinness via medicalized weight-loss regimes, and the mainstreaming of post-pandemic "wellness" narratives. These forces, Barry contends, have emboldened institutions and policy-makers to resist progressive change, threatening the very capacity of educators to act with inclusivity and care.

Against this backdrop, Barry articulates a powerful vision for what he terms the "systemic revolution" in fashion education. Drawing on the intellectual traditions of Black feminist theory, Indigenous knowledge systems, and decolonial scholarship, he and co-editor Deborah Christel make the case that the classroom must be reimagined as a site of resistance and reconstruction. Their book, *Fashion Education: The Systemic Revolution*, chronicles this reimagining through the lived experience of educators engaged in transformative pedagogies. These educators are not content with symbolic gestures; they challenge the logics of domination in their syllabi, their classroom cultures, and their institutional infrastructures. They teach not only "about" social justice, but through it. For Barry, this means co-creating knowledge with students, designing flexible and responsive curricula, honoring the multiplicity of bodyminds, and embedding social justice into both content and practice.

At the heart of this reimagining is a pedagogical model that challenges the "banking moldel of education" — Paulo Freire's critique of hierarchical knowledge transfer — and replaces it with a relational, co-creative model grounded in humility, vulnerability, and mutual care. In Barry's classrooms, students are not passive recipients of expertise; they are agents of their own learning, whose lived experiences and embodied knowledges are actively affirmed and incorporated. Pedagogical practices such as flexible assignment formats, collaborative rubric design, and access-centered classroom norms signal a deliberate refusal of ableist, colonial, and normative academic structures. These practices do not dilute academic rigor but redefine it in ways that affirm multiplicity, accessibility, and care.

This redefinition extends to Barry's institutional leadership at Parsons. Since assuming the role of Dean in 2021, he has led the School of Fashion through a far-reaching cultural and curricular transformation. The adoption of a community-generated vision statement — centering access, inclusion, equity, and sustainability — has served as a compass for faculty hiring, course development, and student support initiatives. Notably, Barry's leadership has enabled the integration of courses such as Fat Fashion, Sensory Design, and Land-Based Fashion, which prioritize marginalized perspectives and knowledge systems often excluded from dominant fashion narratives. Programs like the Parsons Disabled Fashion Student Program not only provide scholarships and mentorship, but also seek to redefine the designer as someone who may, for example, work from a bed or navigate public space with a mobility device. In doing so, Barry challenges ableist assumptions about creativity, productivity, and fashion labor itself.

The future of fashion education, in Barry's vision, depends on its capacity to cultivate just, embodied, and ecologically attuned forms of knowledge. Fashion education must inspire students not only to critique oppressive systems, but to build new ones — through practices rooted in care, collective imagination, and structural accountability. This work is incremental, often messy, and always situated in the local contexts and positionalities of educators and students. Yet it is also revolutionary, precisely because it insists that small, deliberate acts — such as a revised syllabus or a co-designed fashion show — can ripple outward to remake the system.

In a moment when fashion education, and higher education more broadly, face intensified political scrutiny and social regression, Barry's voice offers a courageous and generative response. He reminds us that fashion is not merely about garments; it is a cultural force that shapes how we see ourselves, each other, and the possible futures we might yet wear into being. His work challenges educators, students, and institutions alike to move beyond symbolic diversity and into a deep engagement with the structures, histories, and futures of justice. Through theory, practice, and transformative pedagogy, Barry's vision opens a path forward: one in which fashion does not simply reflect the world as it is, but designs the world as it could be.

I'm deeply honoured to have had the chance to pose crucial questions to Dr Ben Barry, and I'm very thankful for this valuable opportunity.

Ben Barry (BB): Thank you for inviting me into this conversation. I'm grateful to be in dialogue with you.

Mariella Lorusso (ML): Why do you think that "fashion education is in a state of emergency" and needs radical redesign?

BB: I wrote that "fashion education is in a state of emergency" back in 2021. At the time, fashion education closely mirrored the mainstream fashion industry and upheld the values of the dominant social order. Even with the best intentions, many programs inadvertently reinforced systems of ableism, transphobia, fatphobia, and other forms of oppression. Often, this stemmed from a well-meaning desire to help students succeed within the industry as it currently exists. But the industry as it exists is unjust. Fashion education shouldn't serve as a pipeline into that system; it must be a catalyst for transforming it. Our role as educators is not to replicate the industry but to prepare students to imagine and build the fashion world as it should be. That requires a radical redesign to equip students with critical perspectives and creative practices to build a more ethical, more inclusive, and more just fashion industry and world. Since 2021, many fashion programs have made meaningful progress toward this goal, especially in integrating racial justice, anti-colonialism, and gender inclusion. However, fat fashion and disability fashion remain significantly marginalized, often sidelined by a resurgent cultural investment in leanness and muscularity as aspirational ideals. This backlash is fueled by post-pandemic health discourses, the mainstreaming of fitness culture online, and the rapid normalization of weight-loss drugs like Ozempic. These forces, compounded by a broader right-wing turn, have made it even more difficult to center fat and Disabled bodies in fashion curricula and practice. At the same time, the rise of far-right authoritarianism in the U.S. and globally has placed renewed pressure on schools and faculty to roll back progress in racial justice, decolonization, and gender diversity. Educators are being forced to narrow the scope of what, and who, is allowed in fashion education. In this context, a radical redesign of fashion education isn't just important. It's imperative.

ML: According to your enlightening book *Fashion Education, The Systemic Revolution*, what are the key aspects of the systemic revolution in fashion education?

BB: The systemic revolution in fashion education follows the liberatory and justice-driven work of Black feminist, Indigenous, and decolonial scholars by recognizing that the classroom is not neutral, but a site where power, oppression, and possibility are constantly negotiated. Fashion education can uphold the structures that exclude and exploit, or it can work to transform them. As educators, we shape the pattern. We choose whether to replicate the system as it is, or to remake it — based on our context and our privileges — into something more just. The book, co-edited with Dr. Deborah Christel, brings together fashion educators who are radically rethinking the foundations of what and how we teach, and who are actively putting those perspectives into practice in their classrooms. The revolution we call for is about dismantling the white supremacist, colonial, fatphobic, ableist, and cis-heteropatriarchal logics that have shaped both the fashion industry and fashion education. It is about building in their place pedagogies rooted in equity, inclusion, and justice, pedagogies that have existed since time immemorial and are especially informed by the lived experiences of those marginalized by the dominant social order. We draw inspiration from Adrienne Maree Brown's concept of emergent strategy to show how small-scale actions — what happens in a single classroom — can ripple outward to shift entire systems. In other words, fashion educators can help students imagine and enact alternative fashion systems through just one intentionally designed course. At the same time, this revolution recognizes the contradictions of trying to dismantle colonial and oppressive systems from within them. A key part of the work, then, is holding space for this messiness and recognizing that incremental reforms which introduce liberatory fashion ideas and practices, sustained over time, can lay the groundwork for revolutionary change. Or, to invoke the wisdom of Audre Lorde, they can begin to lay the foundation for a new house.

ML: How does your book emphasize the need for sustainability and ethical practices in the fashion industry and how should these be incorporated into fashion education?

BB: Each of the book's seventeen chapters offers a fashion educator's in-depth, personal account of designing and teaching a course that centers social justice. Authors reflect on how their course was imagined, developed, and taught; what worked, what didn't; what tensions arose in confronting dominant pedagogical cultures; and what forms of institutional resistance they faced and navigated. Some describe relatively smooth paths; for others, the process was fraught and deeply challenging. Many chapters end with a call to action and offer practical guidance for fellow educators hoping to create similar courses. In some cases, the chapters are co-written with students who share their own reflections on participating in the course. While the courses span areas such as fashion history, design, and communication, the central message of the book is clear: social justice must be integrated into the curriculum through sustained reflection on how positionality, humility, vulnerability, place, and institutional context shape the practice of fashion education. There is no singular path or fixed method for bringing social justice into the fashion classroom. The only common thread is a deep and ongoing commitment to being explicitly anti-racist, anti-fatphobic, anti-ableist, and anti-colonial in both content and practice.

ML: How can we inspire our students to uphold profound human values and acquire crucial skills for driving change, despite the pervasive dominance of oppressive structures? In dismantling the historically entrenched colonial system within educational institutions, how do we actively cultivate a future that is liberated from colonialistic ideologies?

BB: For me, the first step might sound familiar and overused, but it truly is the foundation to cultivating a future liberated from colonial ideologies. As educators, we must intentionally work to undo what Paulo Freire called the "banking model of education," the idea that the educator is the sole holder of knowledge, and instead embrace our role as facilitators of exchange, learning, and care. Many of us came through university systems where professors taught from a place of authority, even emotional detachment. That model then became the blueprint for how to teach in higher education. But teaching for social justice asks something radically different. It asks us to show up with humility, with vulnerability, and with the recognition that our work is always unfinished. That means co-creating spaces of shared learning with students where we are open to not knowing, to shifting our perspectives, and to unlearning habits shaped by colonial models of education. It also means naming our positionalities, embracing our whole selves and embodiments in the classroom and those of our students, and recognizing lived experience and embodiment as forms of knowledge.

For example, flexible learning and scheduling are critical in my teaching practice. They reflect my belief that our bodyminds work differently, and that students carry different pressures outside the classroom. Rather than assuming a singular ideal learner, I invite open dialogue about assignments, deadlines, and how learning outcomes can be met in ways that reflect each student's reality. In my fashion theory course, I offer students the option to propose their own final project format, whether that's a traditional paper, a zine, a visual essay, a video, a podcast, or a garment prototype, so long as it meaningfully addresses the course's core questions. We co-create rubrics together, discussing what "rigor" looks like across different mediums, and revisiting those rubrics mid-semester to ensure they still feel relevant. This approach honors multiple forms of knowledge production, and it invites students to bring their full selves into the work, including their access needs, creative impulses, and cultural frameworks. These kinds of practices might seem minor, but they begin to chip away at the rigid, colonial hierarchies embedded in traditional academic structures. They help build a classroom where students feel genuinely valued, and where learning becomes a collaborative, relational process. When we model that kind of openness and humanity for our students, we begin to dismantle the colonial dynamic of teacher-as-authority and student-as-passive recipient. We learn together and in that process, we cultivate more relational, just, and human ways of being in fashion education.

ML: How can fashion education contribute to promoting equity, inclusion, social justice, and eco-justice? What are some initial steps to begin this process?

BB: I think this begins with ourselves as educators, in our classrooms, and within the contexts in which we teach. Our capacity to take these steps will differ depending on our level of safety, security, and privilege within an institution. Precarious and junior faculty often face very real risks in enacting change that more permanent and senior faculty are protected from. That said, the classroom remains a vital starting point. For many of us, the first and most tangible place to begin is with our course syllabi and our pedagogical practices, what and how we teach. And we must approach that work with humility, grace, and kindness toward ourselves. Embedding social justice into our teaching is not something that happens in a single semester, or frankly, something that is ever complete. It is an ongoing process of course development, continual feedback, and constant learning, reflection, and revision, regardless of the political pressures or cultural climate of the moment. There is no perfect social justice syllabus, no one right way, but only an unwavering commitment to move toward justice with care and intention.

Beyond the classroom, we need to consider how our universities themselves are, or are not, taking up this work. In my own experience, I've seen how essential it is for fashion schools to explicitly name equity, inclusion, and justice as core institutional values. That includes boldly committing to being anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-fatphobic, anti-ableist, anti-transphobic, and anti-homophobic. A mission statement is never just words on a website. It is a compass that guides and justifies every decision, from curriculum design to faculty hiring, from budgeting priorities to the reshaping of institutional culture. Of course, not every institution is ready or willing to do this work. Change at the institutional level depends on many factors, including the school leadership, political and cultural context, and the historical values that a school carries. But when possible, these declarations can serve as a north star for faculty, staff, and students to align around and build toward. In my roles as department chair and dean, creating this kind of clarity has been crucial. When a fashion school clearly names what it values and wants to achieve, it makes space for everyone within it to act with purpose and consistency in how we work, teach, and lead. And when broader institutional change isn't yet possible, the classroom remains our most immediate and powerful space for transformation.

ML: What strategies can fashion educators employ to overcome lack of support, distrust, and dismissal from their colleagues and institutions, in order to effectively promote sustainability and work towards a more sustainable fashion industry?

BB: This is a reality that so many fashion educators face, especially those doing social justice work within institutions that have not yet committed to it. It is important to name that this kind of resistance is not just frustrating; it can be demoralizing and isolating, particularly for faculty who are marginalized or in precarious positions. One essential strategy is building community. That has been critical for me, both as an educator and as a dean. I have learned, and continue to learn, through communities of practice. Cultivating relationships with other fashion educators who are embedding social justice into their teaching, and with other deans who are working to advance social justice at an institutional level, has sustained me and has helped me feel less alone. This commitment to community is also one of the key reasons why Deb and I edited *Fashion Education*. We wanted to make sure that fashion educators, especially those who feel isolated in their institutions, know they are not alone in the work. In the introduction, Deb and I share our very different experiences of working to embed social justice into our teaching. I was fortunate to be part of a department where a majority of faculty wanted to pursue institutional change towards inclusion, decolonization, and justice. Deb, on the other hand, was the only person in her department developing anti-fatphobic, body-inclusive curriculum. That contrast felt important to name because so many educators are in fashion schools along that spectrum. Our hope was that the book would be its own community of practice, a contact list of people readers can email, direct message, and build together with.

ML: How can fashion serve as a powerful catalyst for societal change? What has fashion taught you? And what do you want to teach to the fashion world?

BB: Fashion is a powerful catalyst for societal change because, as so many in fashion studies have demonstrated, it is an economic, social, political, cultural, environmental, and embodied force. It has the capacity to affirm identities, challenge norms, and create worlds, but it can also reinforce systems of oppression. The question is not whether fashion has power, but how we, as fashion educators, choose to wield that power. What fashion has taught me is that it lives everywhere. It does not only exist on runways or retail shops, but in our closets and within community spaces, especially with those on the margins who have always used fashion as a means of resistance, creativity, care, and survival. I remember a moment from my *Cripping Masculinity* research project when one of the Disabled collaborators was working with a research team member and myself to hack a garment. As we talked through how they wanted to rework the piece, they were fashioning themselves with immense brilliance and intentionality. Their design decisions were rooted in their queer, trans, Disabled embodiment. That moment affirmed for me that some of the most important fashion knowledge is held by people whose everyday acts of dressing are rooted in survival, resistance, and joy. I also have learned this through my own daily experiences of getting dressed and moving through the world. As a queer, Disabled fashion educator in an academic leadership role, I have often felt the pressure to conform to narrow expectations of professional dress, especially in meetings with other deans and senior university leadership. Despite working in a field rooted in creativity, there are still strong normative codes around "professional dress" expectations in these contexts. But I make the choice to dress in colorful, textured, highly tactile clothing to express my queerness and gender politics, and to help my body be more visible to other people as I move about public space as a person with low vision, especially on the busy streets of New York. I hope, through this practice, to use my privilege to start conversations about the values of professional dress and to open space for others to dress in ways that are meaningful to and support access for them. What I want to teach the fashion world is that the most exciting fashion often happens in places the industry or media overlooks: in bedrooms, access hacks, and communities. I want us to expand who we understand as fashion designers, where we search for fashion knowledge, and how we define fashion. If we do that, fashion can help us imagine and build a more just world.

ML: What progress has been made in your new school vision for fashion education in terms of inclusion, decolonization, and sustainability since you started?

BB: When I began as Dean of the School of Fashion at Parsons in July 2021, equity and inclusion were present, but largely peripheral. Much of the work was happening in a few elective courses, often led by faculty who were pushing against dominant norms without meaningful support from the Dean's Office. Social justice wasn't embedded in the school's core structures, nor was it championed from the center. In my job talk, I made a public commitment to shift that. I pledged to work collaboratively with the community to place equity, access, justice, and Indigeneity at the heart of the school's curriculum and culture. I outlined four key strategies to realize that vision, and when I was hired, I began implementing them in partnership with faculty, staff, and students. The first strategy was to clarify our shared purpose as a fashion school. In my first year, I worked with faculty, staff, students, and alumni to co-create a new vision statement and guiding principles. That work culminated in the public launch of our new mission: Parsons' School of Fashion leads the industry into a future where access, inclusion, equity, and sustainability are the standard. This statement gave us both a mandate and a framework to guide changes in curriculum and culture. Second, we launched a series of faculty cluster searches focused on knowledges and practices that had long been excluded from fashion education. Over the past four years, we have hired more than a dozen full-time faculty whose expertise, and lived experiences, span areas such as fat fashion, disability fashion, and Indigenous fashion. Most recently, we completed a Parsons-wide Indigenous cluster hire focused on Indigenous art and design on Turtle Island, bringing two new Indigenous faculty members into the School of Fashion. With this growing community of new faculty — alongside the deep expertise of our existing colleagues — we've been able to revise existing courses and launch new ones that embed equity, justice, and Indigeneity into their learning outcomes. These include courses such as Fat Fashion, Sensory Design, Indigenous Fashion, and Land-Based Fashion. Our

goal has been to ensure that social justice is woven throughout the core curriculum and elective offerings, not siloed or treated as optional. The fourth strategy focused on student support and culture. We set out to create a school where students from historically excluded communities could not only survive but flourish within a system that has long been hostile to their presence and ways of knowing. This commitment led to initiatives such as the Parsons Disabled Fashion Student Program, a recruitment, scholarship, and mentorship initiative designed for Disabled and neurodivergent fashion students. In partnership with Titling the Lens, and supported by H&M, Capri Holdings, and the Ford Foundation, the program aims to build a pipeline of Disabled designers into the fashion industry. It seeks to shift the paradigm about Diasbled people and fashion by moving beyond framing Disabled people solely as "users" or "participants" in co-design processes, toward recognizing, paying, and crediting them as professional fashion designers in their own right. I'm proud of the progress we've made, but even more so, I'm grateful for the community that made it possible. This work happened because faculty, students, and staff believed in this vision and brought it to life. It's been one of the great honors of my career to be part of that.

ML: The program offerings at ZoneModa, University of Bologna — Rimini campus, have an inclination towards a predominantly theoretical and culturally-oriented pedagogical approach, which distinctly sets us apart from other fashion programs provided by Italian academic institutions that tend to emphasize practicality. In light of this distinction, what's your perspective on the application of decolonizing methodologies and theoretical frameworks?

BB: I deeply believe that the work of social justice must happen through both theory and practice to transform fashion education. But for me, I don't see a division between the two. I was educated not as a maker or designer, but through theoretical and social science approaches to fashion. In my first faculty role at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), I was part of a fashion department that brought together an extraordinary range of expertise, from fashion designers to fashion historians and curators to fashion management and cultural studies scholars. What this did was expand my understanding of what fashion is as a plural and expansive way of knowing and sharing knowledge, and it led me to bring theory and practice together in my own teaching and research. One of my first research projects as a faculty member, *Refashioning Masculinity*, asked how masculinities are produced, navigated, and reimagined through fashion. I began with wardrobe interviews, exploring people's relationships to clothing and dress through fashion studies and gender theories. But I also understood that gender, especially as produced through fashion, is embodied, sensory, and affective. I co-created a fashion show with the research participants to explore, challenge, and reimagine narrow definitions of masculinity. That show became both a site of theoretical inquiry and a form of community-based, sensory, and affective knowledge production. I was able to do that because of the influence of my colleagues at TMU. The conversations we had while developing curriculum and discussing our research projects encouraged me to move across theory and practice, to understand them as interconnected. As a predominantly theory-oriented program, ZoneModa is especially well positioned to challenge the divide between theory and practice and continue to build more inclusive and decolonial ways of teaching and learning fashion. I encourage us all to expand how and where theory happens. This means asking how students can develop theoretical insight through practice. For example, how might assignments move students into community spaces or into dialogue with materials, even if they're not trained as makers? How might they curate exhibitions, organize fashion shows, co-create podcasts, or facilitate public conversations that make theory embodied, sensory, and affective? These kinds of practices not only deepen theoretical understanding; they also dismantle colonial hierarchies that have long separated intellectual and embodied ways of knowing. The book *Radical Fashion Exercises* offers some excellent examples to support faculty in predominantly theoretical or culturally oriented programs in integrating practice-based activities into their teaching.

ML: Is low fees alone a sufficient criterion for ensuring inclusivity, or can institutions with higher fees like Parsons, still be considered inclusive compared to our institution? Who demonstrates greater inclusivity: you or us?

Are scholarships adequately covering the high fees at your university, or do students still face financial challenges?

BB: This is such an important and complex question. I want to begin by saying clearly that low fees are absolutely a critical component of inclusive education. Affordability opens doors for students who might otherwise be excluded due to financial barriers, especially those from working-class, racialized, Disabled, and/or other marginalized communities. Institutions with lower tuition are doing vital work in enabling access to fashion education. That said, low fees alone do not guarantee inclusion, just as high fees do not automatically preclude it. Inclusion is not only about who is able to enter an institution, but what happens once they arrive — whether their identities are affirmed, whether their knowledge is valued, and whether they are supported to thrive. It includes curriculum, faculty representation, learning culture, and the supports offered throughout a fashion student's journey. It is also about how the institution transforms in response to student and faculty needs. At Parsons, tuition is undeniably high. This reflects broader systemic issues in U.S. higher education. My colleagues and I have worked to make our programs more financially accessible by expanding scholarship funding, including the launch of programs such as the Parsons Disabled Fashion Student Program. Scholarships help, but they also do not erase the structural burden of high tuition, living costs, visa fees, and housing insecurity. We are constantly working to do more. But rather than seeing this as a question of who is "more inclusive," I think we must recognize that we are working within very different national, political, and economic systems. Institutions like yours, with low fees and strong public support, offer a powerful model of financial access to education. Institutions like mine, with higher fees, must work harder, and more creatively, to mitigate the structural inequities that come with that. Ultimately, however, I believe that inclusion is a practice that we must continually strive toward. For me, the question is how each of us, within our own contexts, can build educational systems rooted in belonging, care, and justice for the fashion students we learn alongside.

ML: In your opinion, what are the benefits and limitations of internships and industry partnerships for fashion education?

BB: Internships and industry partnerships can offer meaningful opportunities for students to apply their learning, build networks, and gain insight into how the fashion system operates in practice. When structured equitably and supported institutionally, internships can connect education to critical mentorship, learning, and career pathways. But these opportunities are not equally accessible or beneficial to all students. One of the major limitations is the persistent lack of paid internships in fashion. Unpaid or underpaid internships replicate structural inequalities by privileging students who can afford to work for free, usually those who are already more socially and economically advantaged. For Disabled students, students of color, working-class students, students with caregiving responsibilities, and international students, unpaid internships can be exclusionary. There is also a risk that partnerships with industry can reinforce the status quo, especially if those partners are not themselves committed to equity or transformation. Too often, institutions rely on brand recognition rather than asking if a company shares our values. A company may still be on a learning journey around inclusion and equity, but what matters is a shared commitment to embedding these practices into their work. This is also where students can offer significant value. Internships are often understood as one-directional where students go to companies to learn, observe, and gain practical experience. And while that is true, internships should also be spaces of mutual exchange. Students bring expansive ways of thinking, new frameworks, and emerging practices that have the potential to transform how companies approach design, communication, and operations. When students are learning in classrooms where inclusion, anti-racism, disability justice, sustainability, and decolonization are embedded frameworks, they carry this knowledge into their internships. These frameworks can help organizations change their practices. It is also important to expand our understanding of where fashion internships can happen. Fashion education equips

students with creative thinking, methodologies and practices that are deeply transferable across sectors. Fashion also touches many industries beyond its traditional borders, including healthcare, government, finance, law, and technology. Students trained in fashion bring ways of thinking, analysis, process, and collaboration that can reshape systems and foster innovation. Fashion schools should actively cultivate partnerships that go beyond fashion brands. This not only expands career opportunities for students, but also challenges narrow definitions of who fashion serves.

ML: What do you think about Artificial Intelligence and the evolving role of technology in fashion education?

BB: It is undeniable that AI and emerging technologies are reshaping fashion education and the industry more broadly. While I am certainly not an expert in this area, I believe that we as fashion educators have a responsibility to teach our students how to collaborate with these tools both critically and creatively. That means not only learning how to use them, but also how to question them. We need to acknowledge that AI reflects and amplifies the values, assumptions, and biases of its creators and dominant culture. This can reproduce harmful body standards, gender norms, racial biases, and exclusionary beauty ideals. For example, many generative AI tools used to create fashion imagery default to slim, white, non-Disabled, cisgender models, unless explicitly prompted otherwise. The use of AI also carries significant sustainability impacts from the energy demands of data centers to the acceleration of fashion trend cycles and digital waste. Part of our role is to teach students how to interrogate these systems, understand how they produce knowledge, and consider who is represented, misrepresented, or erased. Fashion education must encourage students to question AI and ensure it aligns with the fashion system, and the world, we are working to build.

ML: Which brands today are dedicated to promoting inclusion and how?

BB: Creating a more inclusive fashion industry requires us to demand change both from within and outside the dominant system. While change from within is often slow and messy, it's necessary to reshape the center, and I believe in that work. It's what grounds my academic leadership in fashion education. But I'm also deeply inspired by the changes happening beyond the industry through activism, mutual aid, and everyday creative resistance. That's why, when I think about who is truly promoting inclusion in fashion, I don't first think of brands. I think of Disabled content creators sharing clothing hacks. I think of Fat home sewers celebrating their bodies and sharing patterns. I think of small-scale designers who have long been excluded from the mainsteam fashion system and who are now designing on their own terms. Of course, there are amazing designers and brands within the mainstream fashion industry doing meaningful work to bring about inclusion. For example, I admire the work of London-based designer Sinéad O'Dwyer who creates garments for a variety of body sizes and shapes and whose runway presentations expand access for Disabled models and audience members. But we must also name the very real limits of scale and the pressures of capitalism that can flatten or co-opt this work. We need to be honest that sometimes inclusion in mainstream fashion is reduced to marketing or a temporary expansion in sizing or adaptive collections, rather than a deep shift in authorship, aesthetics, and ongoing commitment. This calls for us to expand our focus. Rather than asking which mainstream brands are doing the work, we must also ask: who are we overlooking? Whose fashion labor goes unrecognized because it doesn't fit the colonial, capitalist mold of what counts as fashion or who counts as a designer?

ML: How do inclusive fashion shows contribute to the industry and to foster change, and what has been your experience working in this field?

BB: A significant aspect of my research and teaching has been the design of inclusive and accessible fashion shows, specifically shows that center disability. While the goal is to ensure the inclusion of Disabled models, creatives, and audience members, what excites me most is that this practice radically expands how we conceptualize and experience fashion itself. It transforms fashion from something primarily visual into something truly sensory, embodied, and affective. I'm especially interested in what happens

when we start with access, not as an add-on or a matter of compliance, but as a creative and aesthetic principle. My chapter in *Fashion Education* shares my experience of co-teaching a course in which the students designed an accessible fashion show. We worked with disability arts consultants to discuss how to ethically co-author with Disabled people, and how to incorporate access into fashion as a creative force. That meant thinking critically about every element of how we could make the show accessible, from backstage to front-of-house. For example, the audio description for show was not only intended to provide inclusion for blind and low vision guests, but it also became a narrative act in the show itself. Each model wrote or co-wrote a visual description of their clothing, their body, and how the clothing moved on their body. These were read aloud as each model moved down the runway (and translated into American Sign Language). I brought this approach into my work at Parsons, collaborating with Professor Sugandha Gupta, Professor Tiffany Webber, and the MFA Fashion Design and Society team for our New York Fashion Week show in Fall 2024. Students participated in workshops to write their own audio descriptions, which were then read live at the fashion show. I remember sitting next to a journalist at the show. She who was not blind or had low vision, but she told me that she would have missed many of the details, motifs, and fabric choices if she had only seen the garments. The descriptions made her experience of the show fuller and supported her to write a richer review. The takeaway is that inclusive fashion shows are not only about showcasing a diverse range of bodies, though that is essential. They're also about who has access to participate in the creative process, whether as a model, make-up artist, or stylist, and who has access to experience the show as an audience member. When we treat access as a generative force rather than a constraint, we unlock the full potential of fashion as a multi-sensory, emotional, and embodied experience.

ML: Given the recent political developments in the USA that have worldwide implications for inclusivity and equity, as well as the setbacks faced in civil rights and social justice efforts built through long-standing struggles, it appears that the future may be quite uncertain or bleak. How do you feel about this situation?

BB: This is an intensely difficult moment. And I don't think words can capture just how devastating it is. We're witnessing the erosion of hard-won rights around gender, disability, race, class, and reproductive freedom not just in the U.S., but around the world. This emboldened, coordinated backlash against equity, inclusion, and justice has real, material consequences for people's survival. I see this firsthand. I live in the U.S. as an immigrant on a visa. And if I — as a white, cisgender, tenured academic with institutional privilege — am feeling this instability, then many of my students and colleagues, especially those with less protection, are facing far greater precarity. In this context, I believe fashion education has a critical role to play. Our classrooms are more than sites of learning; they are spaces of gathering, care, and dialogue at a time when all three are under threat. For example, every two weeks, I meet with my PhD students as a group. We share what's working and what's not. We hold space for uncertainty, for grief, for nonlinear creativity, and for community. That, to me, is what justice in fashion education can feel like. It's about being together and holding space for one another because gathering itself is a form of resistance in a world that so often seeks to isolate and divide us. At the same time, I want to name that our capacity to gather, speak, and act is shaped by positionality. I am safer doing this work at a private university in New York than someone at a public institution in a conservative state. I am safer as a tenured faculty member than as an adjunct. I am safer as a white, cisgender man than someone without those privileges. I try to use the safety I do have to hold space for and support my students, my colleagues, and others in this shared struggle. Because in the end, fashion education is about preparing students to imagine and build a more just and generous world, one we urgently need as right-wing forces work to dismantle it.

ML: Thank you Ben, for sharing such thoughtful insights. I completely agree — fashion education should empower students to envision and create a more just and generous world. In these challenging times, nurturing compassion and critical thinking through our work is more important than ever. I appreciate your perspective and the reminder of our collective responsibility to foster positive change.