“The garment needs gravity”: Sackville’s Jeska Grue opposes fast fashion ideologies

By LAUREN R. KORN

Jeska Grue is “a made-to-order fashion studio operating next to a giant marsh” in Sackville, New Brunswick. Jeska Grue is both the name of the studio and the name of the seamstress behind the operation. The former is defined by high-quality garments without the waste and exploitation customary of fast fashion brands.

Fast fashion, including brands like Zara, H&M, Joe Fresh, and Uniqlo, is defined by its planned obsolescence. It is a quick and cheap approach to designing, creating, and marketing clothing.

According to the article, the “average Canadian purchases 72 new clothing items a year while sending 80 pounds of textile waste to landfill, of which 85% could be diverted to recycling or second-hand clothing streams for reuse.”

As fashion cycles have become more fast-paced, fast fashion manufacturers have adopted increasingly unsustainable production techniques to keep up with demand and increase profit margins.

Earlier this year, Fast Company published an article online titled: “We have to fix fashion if we want to survive the next century.” The article was renamed, and renamed again: “Your H&M addiction is wrecking havoc on the environment. Here’s how to break it.” Its author, Elizabeth Segran, writes, “Enough is enough. Stop making me think it is normal to shop all the time, not just when I need something. You make flimsy dresses in cheap factories, and I snap them up.”

According to the article, the fashion industry is the planet’s second largest polluter, second only to the oil industry. The fashion industry currently relies on 98 million tons of oil to make synthetic fibres, toxic dyes contribute to 20% of the world’s water pollution, and the textile industry generates 1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gases. In 2015, clothing-related emissions were 2.988 pounds of carbon dioxide per megawatt hour, which exceeds that of burning coal (2,249 pounds per megawatt hour) and natural gas (1,135 pounds per megawatt hour). In some cases, it’s actually cheaper to dispose of unwanted garments than to wash them. Clothing purchases far exceed the pace at which fabric is able to break down. With the rise of fast (and cheap) fashion, the demand for second-hand clothing has declined in the global north—clothes are not meant to last very long—forcing nations in the global south to find new ways to deal with post-consumer textile waste. In response, second-hand, vintage, and consignment clothing retailers are beginning to turn their backs on fast fashion.

In March, after receiving an overwhelming number of fast fashion throw-aways, bell.wether, a Fredericton vintage and consignment, showed its store’s Instagram to “6 Reasons to Ditch Fast Fashion,” a list released by the Sustainable Fashion Forum. Laurel Green, the Fredericton shop’s owner, wrote the following to caption the list: “Someone asked me the other day, ‘Why aren’t you accepting certain brands?’ Great question! We are steering away from accepting ‘fast fashion’ brands and garments for many reasons—mainly those listed here: it’s cheaply made and designed to fall apart; it leads to a huge amount of textile waste and emits enormous amounts of chemical waste; it systematically claims the lives of many; it’s often harmful, and in many cases deadly, to animals; fast fashion giants are notorious for copying [independent] designers; and it creates a throw-away mentality that makes us believe we need to constantly buy more.”

Consumers are not only buying more but also becoming farther removed from both the ecological sources of the clothes they buy and wear and from the human labour that mediates each garment’s changing form. Each t-shirt bought on impulse is the equivalent of 700 gallons of water, gallons of chemical waste and physical and emotional human labor. “I often feel perpetually behind the ‘design cycle’ and ‘product release schedule,’” says Grue. “Sometimes the pace at which things considered ‘slow fashion’ are still expected to move—new design, new fabric, new photography—is dizzying. I think some of the pressure comes from larger ‘slow fashion’ companies marketing themselves as not very different from single-person craft operations. On Instagram, it can become confusing—who is making clothes out of a space room in a house they rent, and who is working out of a 10,000 square foot warehouse with several dozen employees? I am not so compared to companies who are literally 25 times the size of my own. It can be stressful.”

Designers and seamstresses like Grue, who use the make-to-order model, have valued insight into the intensive labour that goes into each piece of clothing. “I get to see the garment as a non-garment first,” says Grue, “part of a bolt of cloth. Then, as cut pieces—cut from paper pattern pieces I previously drafted and graded into sizes. And then, through sewing, it moves into its final, wearable three-dimensional form. When you first finish sewing a garment and hang it on a rack, it hangs a bit differently. The garment ‘needs’ it.”

Grue’s customers can rest assured knowing that their linen “marsh pants” and silk “anyday tank” are sustainably made and their materials ethically sourced.

“There is so little fabric being produced outside of very large, automated weaving mills (that produce thousands of meters per hour),” says Grue. “But there is also very cool stuff going on regarding production models, ownership models, and types of materials used. Regionally, there is a prime example of the power in collective action. The Dominion Chair Company in Bass River was irreparably damaged by Hurricane Sandy, and fund-raising efforts have included a fibre-shed project in Nova Scotia growing flax and producing linen yarn—this is a singular undertaking in Canada and the U.S. The closest linen being woven right now is the mill order from in Ireland (which operates on a few old looms).”

Grue attributes the success of her small business to an Employment Insurance (EI) self-employment program, but also to her childhood in rural Bass River, Nova Scotia, and the necessary autonomy instilled in her by living in a community with a dire job market.

The Dominion Chair Company in Bass River was irrevocably destroyed in 1999 by a firestorm. The factory “opened with very old machinery,” says Grue, “and about three-quarters of the adults living in Bass River had unionized employment there. Thirty years later, it’s still a difficult conversation in the community. There are next to no jobs.”

Because her small business is self-directed, Grue has been able to establish her studio an hour from Bass River, in Sackville. Hers is a future she could not have imagined for herself. “I am implicitly delighted to be doing (Jeska Grue) at all, let alone far away from any fashion center.”

The fashion industry’s manufacturing sector began in high-quality linen separates. Grue is one of many fashion entrepreneurs actively fighting against the fashion industry’s increasingly unsustainable production practices by designing and creating high-quality garments without the waste and exploitation customary of fast fashion brands.

Lessons from El Paso: Racist attacks highlight the urgency of standing up to divisive politics

By STACEY GOMEZ

Since last month’s mass shooting in El Paso, Latinx throughout the US say they no longer feel safe. The shooting, which killed 22 people and injured another 24, was one of the deadliest hate crimes against the Latinx community. The shooting speaks to a troubling resurgence of white supremacist violence in the US, fueled by US President Trump. In Canada, we need to be on high alert as well, particularly as elections draw near.

Trump’s hateful rhetoric and policies have long targeted Latin American immigrants and asylum-seekers. His constant vilification of this community has been used to justify violent and dehumanizing policies. This includes massive raids against undocumented workers and the separation of Central American refugee families, as well as their detainment in modern-day concentration camps. These are precursors to the El Paso massacre. How does Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau compare?

Despite his Liberal rhetoric of multiculturalism, Trudeau has sought to win political points by underlining in a number of anti-immigrant reforms, which disproportionately impact racialized people. This has included raising the deportation target to 10,000 people per year, an increase of up to 35 percent. Trudeau has ignored calls by the UN to step up resettlement of the most vulnerable Central American refugees while moving to tighten the Canada-US border.

What happened in El Paso highlights the urgency of recognizing and rooting out racism and xenophobia on all fronts, including political discourse and state policies, be they from someone like Trump or Trudeau.

Indeed, we’ve seen the deadly consequences of far-right, racist and xenophobic violence with the 2017 Quebec mosque shooting.

As campaigning for the federal elections kicks off, Canadians must remain vigilant and speak out against divisive politics aimed at garnering votes. The pressure from Haligonians and Canadians that led to the removal of xenophobic billboards supporting Maxime Bernier is a prime example of the power in collective action.

In the lead up to the election, No One is Illegal calls upon community members to take the Migrant Rights Network pledge to not let politicians use racism to divide us.

One month on, the community of El Paso is on the mend. In September, a solidarity event in Halifax was held to honour the victims and raise our voices against white supremacy, as well as xenophobia in the US and here at home.

Stacey Gomez is a migrant justice organizer with No One is Illegal – Halifax/Kjípúk’uk and active in the Latin American solidarity movement.

Stacey Gomez is a migrant justice organizer with No One is Illegal – Halifax/Kjípúk’uk and active in the Latin American solidarity movement. Photo submitted.
The garment needs gravity
Revolution and its accompanying ‘mass production.’ But due to the increased pressure to match product and consumer demand, and due to productive organization within global commodity chains in the early ’90s, production shifted to new-industrialized countries. Supplies in these countries are basic necessities, and unskilled labour can be easily matched to apparel assembly operations.

The shift can also be attributed to the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), lifted in January of 2005, which resulted in low-wage competition in the fashion industry overseas. The MFA was an international trade agreement on textile and clothing in place from 1974 through 2004. It imposed quotas on the amount of clothing and textiles exports from developing countries to developed countries. When the MFA ceased to exist, retailers were able to buy, make, and ship garments at much lower prices from these newly-industrialized countries.

In order to keep their costs as low as possible and to maximize profits, many fast fashion companies [have] to deliver services while reducing costs by involving private companies at the expense of drinking water access, or may contaminate freshwater in the province. For example, in the province, now both operate their municipal drinking water service on behalf of the municipal government.

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Water in New Brunswick: rights and the environment versus big business
By ABRAM LUTES
Protestors at Standing Rock, North Dakota, popularized the phrase “water is life” when they stood down an oil pipeline development threatening their lakes and rivers. The slogan has become popular among Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmental and water rights activists in Canada, including in New Brunswick where it has been taken up by anti-fracking movements.

In a piece about summer Campfire, pianist Peter Allen. Serenely poised on the stage, Francavilla offered some context to the disjointed piece about to be performed.

Francavilla read from Whittall’s notebook on the poem: “During a period of particular despair, a faraway friend commented to me, ‘I guess these are exactly the kind of* moments we need an art to speak of. From the exchange, the idea emerged of art as a kind of light in dark times, when minds and hearts close, simple disagreement turn into irrational enmity, and discourse becomes an act of defiance against ignorance and uncaring, and a way of resisting the impulse toward further division. Art’s rights on the question of art struck a deep chord in me, as murmurs of agreement rose from the crowd. Art has the ability to be a light in the darkness, a balm for both audience and artist. As a poet, I often think about the value and purpose of my work—other than an outlet for me to make sense of my experiences of the world, what does poetry bring to our world?”

In the poem “Movie Stars,” spoken word artist Natah Whittall says about art: “During a period of particular despair, a faraway friend commented to me, ‘I guess these are exactly the kind of moments we need an art to speak of.’ From the exchange, the idea emerged of art as a kind of light in dark times, when minds and hearts close, simple disagreement turn into irrational enmity, and discourse becomes an act of defiance against ignorance and uncaring, and a way of resisting the impulse toward further division. Art’s rights on the question of art struck a deep chord in me, as murmurs of agreement rose from the crowd. Art has the ability to be a light in the darkness, a balm for both audience and artist. As a poet, I often think about the value and purpose of my work—other than an outlet for me to make sense of my experiences of the world, what does poetry bring to our world?”

Chloe F (*)Mentioned in a previous section.

Christine Wu is a poet and librarian in Fredericton.