



The Brief

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

By LAUREN R. KORN



Jeska Grue. Photo courtesy of Alyson Hardwick.

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 extremely wearable cotton, silk, and 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.

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 Grue, 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 wreaking 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. Incinerating clothes releases 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 now 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.weth.er, a Fredericton vintage and consignment shop, posted to its Instagram “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 environmental pollution; it exploits garment workers and has claimed 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 both from the ecological sources of the clothing 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 labour.

“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 spare room in a house they rent, and who is working out of a 10,000 square foot warehouse with several dozen employees? I am routinely 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 valuable 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 gravity. It’s the very subtle last step.” 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 some very cool stuff going on regarding production models, ownership models, and types of materials used. Regionally, there is 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 I 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 irreparably destroyed in 1989 by a factory fire. The factory “operated 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 impishly 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-wage economies, arguably with the advent of the Industrial

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

By STACEY GOMEZ

Since last month’s mass shooting in El Paso, Latinxs throughout the US say they no longer feel safe. The shooting, which killed 22 people and injured another 24, was driven by racism and xenophobia 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 ushering 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 also appointed the country’s first Minister of “Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction,” associating migration with criminality.

Not surprisingly, the Liberal party has maintained near-silence amid the escalating situation in the US. Moreover, 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/K’jipuktuk and active in the Latin American solidarity movement.



Stacey Gomez is a migrant justice organizer with No One Is Illegal – Halifax/K’jipuktuk 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 production reorganization within global commodity chains in the early ‘90s, production shifted to newly-industrialized countries. Supplies in these countries are less expensive, 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 textiles and clothing in place from 1974 through 2004. It imposed quotas on the amount of clothing and textile exports from developing countries to developed countries. When the MFA ceased to exist, retailers were able to make, buy, 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 force factories in countries like Bangladesh and India to compete against each other for contracts. Because the manufacturers want the business, they agree to low rates for their employees’ work. It shouldn’t come as any surprise that the people who lose out most are the factory workers, 85% of whom are women.

In 2013, Maritime artist Peggy Woolsey created a series of paintings that thematically explored the throw-away culture of clothing. Part of the exhibition, titled “Worn,” was an “altered book,” a painted-over Joe Fresh catalog. Woolsey’s work was a reaction to the conditions of clothing factory workers and a fire in a Bangladesh factory that supplied clothing and fabric to Canada’s Joe Fresh.

Fashion—and the processes that increase and expedite its production and distribution—is a *big* business. “The fashion industry allegedly employs more than a billion people,” reports Grue, “From agriculture, fibre processing, fabric production, garment manufacturing, design, retail, etc. How do all our best consumer intentions add up next to the sheer scale of this fashion system? What’s needed is action. Why is this [fast] fashion system allowed to exist? How can we put it in the recycling bin of time?”

Lauren R. Korn is a research assistant for the RAVEN project Summer Institute and an M.A. student of Creative Writing at the University of New Brunswick.

Water in New Brunswick: rights and the environment versus big business

By ABRAM LUTES

Protesters at Standing Rock, North Dakota, popularized the protest slogan “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 used by anti-fracking movements.

In a survey conducted by Louise Comeau and the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, freshwater was named by respondents as the second most important natural resource of the province, only behind forestry, and protecting freshwater quality and water access is a priority for many New Brunswickers.

But, government policy seems to lag behind public priorities. Provincial and federal governments have tolerated or approved several private projects which have

Poetry for climate action

By CHRISTINE WU

*How can something this big be invisible?
The ozone is everywhere and yet it isn’t visible
Maybe if we saw it we would see it’s not invincible
and have to take responsibility as individuals.*

—Verses from the spoken word poem “Movie Stars” by IN-Q



Students, faculty and community members filled the University of New Brunswick quad lawn on Sept. 20, 2019 to hear poets on the climate crisis. Photo by the Conservation Council of New Brunswick.

Last month my partner and I attended the New Brunswick Summer Music Festival in Fredericton. We had been gifted passes by a kind friend and supporter of the arts who joked that we would likely be the youngest in the audience. Sure enough, as we found our seats and surveyed the crowd, a sea of white hair reflected back at us. We thought about the people around us as we contemplated the draw of classical music in modern times. What had drawn this particular crowd to this particular concert?

Friday evening began with “Light of Day,” composed by Matthew Whittall and performed by violinist Nadia Francavilla and pianist Peter Allen. Serenely poised on the stage, Francavilla offered some context to the dissonant piece about to be performed.

Francavilla read from Whittall’s notes on the piece: “During a period of particular despair, a faraway friend commented to me, ‘I guess these are exactly the kind of times we need art for – when the reality is difficult to bear.’ From thi 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 grows toxic from fear and cynicism. Creating becomes an act of defiance against ignorance and uncaring, and a way of resisting the impulse toward withdrawal.”

Whittall’s thoughts on the creation 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 IN-Q makes a compelling, lyrical argument to take

or may contaminate freshwater in the province. For example, the federal government approved a tailings dam for the controversial Sisson mine in two fish-bearing brooks that feed the Nashwaak River watershed. Greater awareness of water quality issues arising from waste dumping and water sources have entered the public discourse since Irving Pulp and Paper Ltd. was added to the federal list of environmental offenders.

Water is governed by a complex mix of federal, provincial, municipal, and, now increasingly, First Nations regulations. Who, if anyone, owns freshwater in Canada is unclear. Yet, increasingly different levels of government in New Brunswick are signing away water access and ownership to private companies at the expense of drinking water access, sustainability, and the public service.

Moncton and Saint John, the two largest municipalities in the province, now both operate their municipal drinking water services through a Public-Private Partnership, or P3. P3s are formal partnerships between a public authority and the private sector. In the case of Moncton and Saint John, the P3 involves a joint venture of various private companies operating the municipal water service on behalf of the municipal government.

P3s are often marketed as a means for governments to deliver services while reducing costs by involving the private sector. However, recent studies say that on average P3s cost 16 per cent more than conventional contracts. In New Brunswick, the auditor-general found that outsourcing construction by P3s cost significantly more than if construction was carried out by public works. The estimated overcharge is \$200 million given out in private-sector contracts.

Furthermore, P3 water delivery raises concerns about popular control and decision-making over how New Brunswickers get their drinking water. In the Saint John

ownership and responsibility for our world. Similarly, poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner made international news as the “poet [who brought] world leaders to tears at UN Climate Summit” with her poem “Dear Matafele Peinem.”

On her blog, Jetnil-Kijiner explains her poetry comes from a desire to raise awareness around issues and threats faced by her community: nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, militarism, rising sea levels, climate change, forced migration, adaptation, and racism in America. Her piece, “Dear Matafele Peinem” is a fierce promise to her newborn daughter that she is part of a community that will fight for a better planet so that “no one else” becomes a climate change refugee. Presented to 120 state dignitaries, her piece was received with misty eyes and a standing ovation.

Closer to home, New Brunswick artists are just as active with musicians playing songs for social justice during Mayworks, local poets, musicians, and drag queens sharing their work in support of fellow writers speaking out about sexual harassment and assault, Sackville poet Marilyn Lerch unapologetically publishing political poems, and Wolastoq playwright Samaqani Cocahq (Natalie Sappier) bringing to the stage the complexities of being an Indigenous woman.

We are living on a planet where human-made climate change has already warmed the earth one degree Celsius since pre-industrial times. In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a special report with an urgent plea to the world to work toward limiting additional warming to half a degree, to a total of 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Even if we manage to keep warming under half a degree, there would still be melting ice caps, rising sea levels, and numerous deaths—just drastically fewer than if we allow the earth to warm beyond 1.5 degrees.

Despite the urgency of our current situation, it often feels as if there are just as many people who believe climate change is a hoax as there are people who bring their own travel mugs to coffee shops and fill their own containers at bulk stores in an attempt to save the planet. As a card-carrying member of the latter group, I often wrestle with feelings of inadequacy when I refuse a single plastic bag. A drop in the bucket seems inconsequential compared to torrential tides in the ocean.

Often, in those moments of despondency, I write. Sometimes creation as “an act of defiance” is all there is to continue in a dark world. As I listened to Whittall’s words, I was reminded of the power of art to bring light to the darkness and transform lives and hearts. It sounds overly lofty, perhaps, but wasn’t art exactly the medium that brought me—a young, leftist, Asian-Canadian woman from Vancouver—into a room full of people from a completely different demographic?

This, then, is the power of art and creative storytelling. It connects artist and audience with threads of human emotion. It “resists the impulse toward withdrawal” and, instead, urges connection and empathy. It moves world leaders to their feet and brings tears to their eyes. It is inter-generational, indiscriminate, and reaches out with tenuous strands of hope and compulsion.

Christine Wu is a poet and librarian in Fredericton.

partnership, for example, the private consortium of owners in the P3 agreement could change if the private providers decide to sell their stakes in the project, without any public consultation or oversight. The current composition of private companies in the Saint John partnership includes water multinational Acciona Aqua; the North America Construction company, SIMO Management Inc.; two engineering and consulting firms, AMEC Foster-Wheeler and Stantec; and two local Irving-owned companies, FCC Construction and Gulf Operators.

P3s also tend to increase user fees in order to make the operation of services profitable for private companies, and the private ownership of the water means those who do not pay their water utility bills can be cut off, presenting potential threats to the human right to clean water.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) New Brunswick have campaigned against P3s. In May 2018, Leo Melanson, President of CUPE Local 51 which represents outside workers in Moncton, wrote in the NB Media Co-op: “Based on the experience of other communities in Canada and around the world, bringing our water services into the City’s operations will save money and enhance water quality. The vast majority of water and wastewater systems in Canada are fully public. Going ‘in house’ is also one of the best ways to help our local economy. Residents and water consumers in the private and public sector all have an interest in having predictable and affordable water rates.”

A report by the Columbia Institute profiles several cities across the country where P3s have been cancelled, including in Saint John. The city canceled its P3 for waste collection after outsize costs. The move saved the city \$700,000 a year.

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