

Fashion and social context in Un-Australia

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Abstract

We are programmed to exist within an economy that ostensibly relies upon steady demand and consumption in order to survive and 'grow' even while being adjured to reuse, reduce and recycle by the same government that relies on 'growth and development'. In modern consumer culture, this week's T-shirt is often next month's landfill as popular emporia offer new stock on a weekly basis encouraging spending on poorly made mass-produced garments destined for pathetically short lives. The regional differences in dress which once characterized different societies are long gone, as fashion victims leap from one ridiculous trend to the next with scant regard for the highly individual constructs of their own bodies and an almost religious fervour to conform. This paper will discuss the politics of green fashion in relation to its (un)-(Australian) context.

Keywords Sustainability, fashion, consumption, regionalism, culture

Biography

R(eco)fashion designer, costumier, researcher & writer based on a farm in rural South Australia, engaged in wool production and known for extensive work with eucalyptus dyes and for her signature eco-print technique. Her practice shimmers in the nebulous region between art, theatre and fashion. Flint exhibits internationally and lectures in Australia and overseas. Presently she is engaged in research within the School of Fashion & Textiles at RMIT University, Melbourne, reconstructing clothing for re-use using ecologically sustainable plant dyes within the context of philosophically 'green' fashion. She produces hand-worked sartorial salvage clothing under the label 'benedictus' and designs costumes for dance.

Let us begin by briefly reviewing the environment which has nurtured the thoughts expressed in this paper. I live and work on a farm in rural South Australia. The property is situated north-east of Mount Pleasant on the eastern escarpment of the Mount Lofty Ranges. At Mount Lofty itself, the mean annual rainfall is 54", at Mount Pleasant mean annual precipitation is only about 24", a little less than that of Adelaide. Our farm is nonetheless fully self-sufficient in terms of water. Stock water is harvested in dams, and also pumped from two bores by means of windmills. The domestic water supply is actively harvested from the sky and is distributed carefully through a number of tanks for storage. The property is stocked with dual-purpose sheep and beef cattle, and about 25% of it has been planted with eucalypts in a commercial tree-farming enterprise, supplemented with windbreaks comprised of a range of indigenous species. The farm supports three generations; my parents, my children and me. I am responsible for sheep and cattle management and run the shed at shearing time, classing and pressing the wool.

From this grounded foundation I work as a freelance costumier, writer and designer specialising in hand worked slow fashion, redepoying salvaged materials where possible, but also recognising the importance of utilizing renewable resources as required. I use plant dyes to colour my work, harvesting most of them from trees, shrubs and flowers grown on the farm. No toxic chemical adjuncts are used in generating or fixing colours. This background provides something of a contrast to accepted consumer culture, in which this week's T-shirt is often next month's landfill; as popular emporia offer new stock on a weekly basis encouraging spending on poorly made mass-produced garments destined for pathetically short lives.

In pondering the notion of Australian-ness and UnAustralian-ness several thoughts came to me. Where we live, out in rural Australia, is described by Prime Minister Howard as the "bush". I sometimes wonder whether he means George, Dubya or just the second bush from the left. Out here, for example, it is considered the done thing to cook a hot lunch for one's shearers. Not to do so would be Un-Australian. Does providing a hot lunch then make me Australian? On the other hand I have dual nationality, being Australian/Latvian so part of me is certainly Un-Australian. How might we recognise an (Un)Australian? What might be the visual clues? Since the accidental death of the late Mr Steve Irwin he has been described by the media as the 'quintessential Australian'. Distinguished by his predilection for khaki, Mr Irwin was certainly sartorially conspicuous. Whatever one's opinion of this gentleman's somewhat vigorous interactions with wildlife the mud-based hue he favoured does have certain practical attributes! A somewhat simplified extrapolation from that descriptor might suggest that to be recognised as Australians we too should all be wearing khaki. Instead of luridly dyed green and yellow polyester, our national sporting teams could be more appropriately attired in that splendid renewable resource: fine all-natural wool, dyed in the hues of the landscape using eucalyptus leaves. Not such a bad idea, excepting of course that this is a colour also closely aligned with the military and that is another story entirely.

The regional differences in clothing which characterized different societies in past centuries have become blurred, as fashion victims in so-called western societies leap from one ridiculous trend to the next with scant regard for the highly individual constructs of their own bodies and an almost religious fervour to conform to the fashions of the day. Today's citizens variously sprout swelling muffin tops and knee level trouser crutches, morphing en mass into groups of Mc Pirates and strange overdressed gypsies as they chase blindly after the next new thing. While people have always demonstrated their affiliations by means of the clothes they wear, the messages we are receiving in modern times are not always clear. As a clothing designer (and sheep farmer) living and working in Australia, making a living whilst value-adding to the farm product (wool) I negotiate an uneasy dance along an uncertain path. This paper will discuss the politics of green fashion in relation to its (Australian) context.

Contemporary Australian society deals in a morass of contradictions. On the one hand we are programmed to exist within an economy that ostensibly relies upon steady demand and consumption

in order to survive and 'grow'. On the other we are being adjured to reuse, reduce and recycle by the same government that relies on that 'growth and development'. Politicians bleat about the use of oil and the price of fuel, whilst at the same time encouraging the wasteful transportation of goods around the globe.

Oranges irrigated with valuable water from the River Murray in the South Australian Riverland are fed to sheep or simply picked and dumped in landfills while supermarket shelves are loaded with similar product from the United States. Fruit juices are reconstituted from internationally sourced product. Cherries are flown to Adelaide from California and offered at prices which when the cost of a human airfare for the equivalent weight is deducted would leave the farm gate price in the negative. We import bottled water from Switzerland and France. Instead of eating locally grown food in season, Australian consumers demand strawberries and tomatoes all year round. I'm not suggesting a return to the 1950's when the choice of fruits available at the greengrocers was limited to two varieties of apple and the occasional orange but I do think it is time to pause and think awhile and perhaps return to a more rational approach to food.

Similarly the clothing industry requires some serious thought. Let us look back a little in history, and then return to the present for some comparisons. Dress in rural Latvia before the Soviet Occupation of 1944-1992 was not only often hand-made from locally sourced product such as home-grown flax, it also expressed certain information about the wearer. Embroidery on the shirt, for instance, would generally include patterns handed down through generations, which were melded with other patterns as families made new connections through marriage.

Mittens knitted from hand spun wool featured colours from plant dyes that varied depending on the locality as well as complex patterns that could be traced to individual makers. Similarly, the bodies of drowned British fishermen could be traced to their home port from the style and construction of gansey and the mixture and juxtaposition of stitches in the closely knitted wool design. First Nation Americans, the Inuit of the north and the Kikuyu of Africa to name but a few all wore garments appropriate to their local climate and constructed from materials harvested in their region.

Wool from Australia brings small returns to the grower, is shipped overseas for processing and returns to us cut, dyed, stitched and ready to hang. Not only does this generate costs to the environment (as process wastes may not necessarily be managed appropriately and the transport impact is considerable) , it also means that we clothe ourselves in uniformity designed for us by others.

In Australia today, while there are evidently multiple sub-groups whose dress-codes set them apart these sub-groups appear by and large to belong to globally represented groups. Goths (serious code black), Emos (asymmetrical haircuts and a drooping attitude), and Teenyboppers (wearing excessively pink garments augmented by thickly layered lip gloss) all have their counterparts overseas. These visual languages transcend national identity as well as masking individuality even while the wearer's intent might be the projection of individual difference.

"There seems to be a natural human tendency to seek group identity, which depends on emphasizing differences with the 'outside' and can sometimes encourage the adoption of extreme views."¹

Bogans seem to be more localized (to Australia), at least in their choice of name which sets them apart from other check-shirted tight-jeaned youths seen elsewhere. In the last years of the twentieth century, an intriguing clothing movement emerged in the Harajuku district in Tokyo, Japan. Substantially documented by photographer Shoichi Aoki in his magazine *Fruits*, here were individuals working elements of contemporary clothing juxtaposed with vintage and salvage items to create a new look, which while completely individual expressed also an identifiable Japanese aesthetic as well as a tribal reference.

“Here, for the first time in Japan and on my very doorstep, was an example of fashion trends being initiated by the wearer (by far the most important element of fashion as far as I’m concerned). Indeed it was the wearer who superseded the designer to create a new fashion sensibility that was as daring as it was transformative. But above all this new fashion revolution was quintessentially Japanese in its innovative mixing of traditional fashion codes and signifiers.”ⁱⁱ

Observing the pedestrians in Australian cities one could well be in any major metropolis in the ‘western’ world, given the universality of certain major brands. Is it perhaps Un-Australian not to base ones dress code on what is promoted in the international media?

Fashion relies on the making and marketing of desirable objects of clothing, which then lose something of their must-have allure with the appearance and availability of the next collection, in its turn replaced by yet another set of objects, ad infinitum. Simplistically viewed, fashion is based in greed and consumption, on the acquisition of more than is necessary for basic survival, simply because in order to survive, the designer must constantly offer something new.

The ready-to-wear consumer acquires and discards clothing with seemingly little discrimination, there is mass production of goods and brand after brand appears to slavishly follow guidelines set by trend analysts. A short stroll through any shopping mall anywhere will inevitably reveal a range of ‘choices’ conforming to an overall homogeneity.

“When we consider the fact that a fashion magazine like *Cosmopolitan* is printed in twenty-eight different editions, in twelve different languages, and circulated in more than eighty countries around the globe, we could not be blamed for assuming that most of these fashion designs could have emanated from the same national or cultural context, and that they resemble each other in one way or another.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the sixty years which have elapsed since the peace was agreed on at the end of WWII, consumers in the so-called Westernised nations appear to have rejected the tenets of ‘home economy’ once promoted in homes and educational institutions. Who now has time to darn a sock, or unravel and re-knit a jumper as our grandmothers may have done?

Looking back to Latvia again, in the 1920’s, my own great-grandmother, living sustainably on a small family property of approximately 7 hectares, produced not only most of the food consumed by the family but also many of the clothes they wore. Knitwear (socks, jumpers, hats, scarves and gloves) had its origins on the back of the family sheep as had the woven cloth for skirts and pants, dyes were made from plants grown in the garden and harvested from the local forests, and domestic linen was produced from flax which she grew and processed herself. She spun the thread and wove the cloth, from which she sewed sheets, pillowcases, shirts and blouses. Clearly, given the effort involved, chances of having an annual new shirt would have been slim. Mending and darning were a regular and important occupation during the long winter nights.

It could be argued that the longevity of such textile objects was promoted not only through necessity, but also because they were made by (or personally for) the end user. The justifiable pride of the maker in their work would ensure the maintenance of the object for as long as possible to get the maximum return value for the input effort. Were the object a gift for another, respect for the effort involved would ensure the garment was valued and cared for.

The making of clothes (both knitted and sewn), once an educational prerequisite for at least one gender, is no longer a generally accepted skill in modern Australian society. Mass production and consumption together with ignorance of the making process might well contribute to a lack of respect for both object and maker. We acquire cheap goods at the expense of others and discard them without thought for the actual cost of their making.

Pressure on the environment has become a very real problem. No matter how we conduct ourselves as individuals, the refusal of Prime Minister John Howard to be seen to actively participate in responsible environmental management by being a signatory to the Kyoto protocol proclaims our national indifference to our global responsibilities. Ancient strategies of occupying a region for a time until game and other resources become exhausted can no longer be applied in our time; there is nowhere left to go.^{iv}

One way of expressing our personal dissatisfaction with the general trend would be to make clothing choices related to our political persuasions. Just as an early Greens senator in Germany distinguished himself publicly by wearing only clothes from second hand shops; so the wearing of recycled and possibly the darning of goods might well be seen as a consciously praiseworthy act in which darns are worn as badges of honour.

Designers attempting to establish environmentally sustainable practices, using recycled materials are however likely to find that the cost (both economic and temporal) of the actual physical energy expended on sourcing, processing and recycling such (suitable) materials is high. In addition, selling goods made from redeployed fabrics can be challenging. Those consumers who are already in the habit of wearing second-hand clothing frequently do so from economic necessity and are unlikely to be able to afford to pay the actual costs attached to the hand re-working of old into new.

Conversely, the sector of society accustomed to paying large sums of money for items of clothing may well consider itself above the wearing of recycled clothing (with the possible exception of vintage designer outfits). In order for recycled goods to gain acceptance in society it is necessary to accept the marks of time with grace and to wear darns and patches with pride rather than the shame with which they were once associated, when the wearing of hand-me-downs was a clear indicator of low economic status.

The energy and time expended sourcing, scouring, processing and redeploying pre-used textiles is considerable, and may not necessarily be feasible at industrial production levels. However in a philosophically green framework, reacting against globalization and mass production and viewing sustainability in terms of the economic viability of a small independent label, reusable materials will have both pecuniary and cultural value as well as ongoing ecological benefits. A return to owning less items of clothing while making them last longer would be environmentally ideal. Whether this philosophy can be reconciled with a prospering fashion industry is another matter.

What is needed now is not simply the slow cultural drift towards 'green thinking' that simply gets by with the purchase of a green bag at the shopping centre each time they forget the shopping bag, but a radical cultural shift.^v Collective cultural shifts, however, depend upon the cumulative effects of individual actions.

Vernacular architecture in Australia exhibits the same disregard for ethical and environmental concerns as does the fast fashion industry. In South Australia, new housing developments are gradually encrusting the last remaining acres of fertile high rainfall land, creeping cancerously over the countryside and radically reducing areas for food production. Near Mount Barker, for example, the houses are built cheek by jowl on tiny blocks, without verandas or rainwater tanks and too frequently with the fashionable black metal roof. Each of these dwellings has an air-conditioner attached limpet-like to a wall. The dark roof acts as a heat sink, necessitating mechanical cooling. In a high rainfall area the run-offs become quite spectacular, leading to regular flooding in the district. Roads become ever more congested and more bleating demands for increased services are heard.

Similarly popular seaside regions are becoming infested with concrete bunkers embellished with oversized ornamental columns which demonstrate that Tuscany has finally *Gone with the Wind!* Architecture and fashion are inextricably interrelated, a simplified view being that the latter is a more intimate incarnation of the former, albeit usually in softer materials. Buildings and clothing can both be said to form boundaries between public and private spaces. Designer Yeohlee Teng juxtaposes the “micro-shelter provided by a garment and the macro-shelter of architecture and technologized spaces”^{vi}.

We now reach the point in this story at which a few threads need to be gently tugged in order that this argument can be brought cohesively together. Let us look across the Tasman, briefly skimming the prevailing politics, acknowledge that here is a government that is indeed willing to take steps to protect the environment and see if there is a parallel to be drawn. Some years ago New Zealand, instead of blindly following where the United States demands, rejected the visits of U.S. nuclear powered navy vessels. Instead of sinking into oblivion as many then predicted, NZ successfully spawned the three films in the Lord of the Rings epic giving their nation world-wide promotion and a ‘clean-and-green’ image, and has subsequently gone from strength to strength. Wind farms are being installed to harvest electricity. They have found a use for the possum, an introduced pest, blending possum fibre with merino to make the softest of yarns for knitwear. I’m not for a moment suggesting this small island nation always conducts itself impeccably nor that the following statement is necessarily true, rather that they have through various well-publicised activities managed to project an image of themselves as being a proud country with a wealth of creative people who have shown by their practice that they are concerned for their environment. The New Zealand fashion industry while fostering individual designers has developed what is considered to be a distinctive style admired around the globe. Labels such as Helen Talbot, Zambesi, World and NomD appear to have a certain integrity in their design decision-making and are less easily compartmentalized in terms of the ubiquitous global trend guides than most of their colleagues across the Tasman.

Australia on the other hand has tagged along in the wake of the United States, allowing this nation to be seen as the handbag in a number of unsavoury military interventions, putting her farmers in difficult positions through unfavourable free trade agreements and generally displaying all the initiative of an obedient lapdog. Clothing available in chain stores is indistinguishable from that across the Pacific pond and with few (but to my mind notably Asian influenced) exceptions the general output of most Australian designers is hardly distinguishable from their American counterparts.

This is certainly a change from the situation in the early 1960's when during my primary school years I recall being made to colour in maps with pink pencil to highlight the 'Empire', writing essays about the 'Mother Country' and learning to recite lists of the Kings and Queens of England. Our indigenous people were not counted in the census nor could they vote. In those days, our suburban neighbours when planning a journey to the U.K. spoke about 'going home' even though they were third generation Australians who had never been out of the country before. Women of a certain age modelled their dress and hairstyles on that of Mrs Windsor and expressions such as 'in the ball park' and 'line call' were unheard of.

In conclusion I would suggest that it is time for Australia to grow up, say goodbye to the various foster parents who have formed us and recognise that while our nation was created by the violent invasion of this country by the British there is a possible way forward from this point. We have a wealth of renewable and sustainable energy resources available to us in the form of solar and wind power. We have the opportunity as an island nation to reject genetically modified crops. We need to make decisions about sensible management of limited resources such as water: I submit that the growing of cotton and rice for example, whether organic or otherwise, ultimately forms an irresponsible exporting of water from the driest continent in the world. We need to stop deforestation for crops and houses and actively replant trees. The climatic extremes the world has been experiencing in recent years may have as much to do with radical de-forestation as with carbon dioxide emissions. Eminent meteorologist Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger speaking on ABC radio in South Australia pointed out that more water falls on Adelaide in the form of rain than that city actually requires to function, yet used water from a rapidly depleting Murray River is still pumped to its reservoirs^{vii}. It would make good economic and environmental sense to harvest this water rather than simply letting it wash out to sea in large concrete drains (which is what presently occurs). These are but a few opportunities to implement change for the better. This brings me back to fashion and clothing, which is where this argument began.

When sheep are managed carefully, without the excessive application of chemicals and with due respect for the land; wool is a sustainable renewable resource. When processed properly, wool need no longer be the itchy cloth of torture I was forced to wear as a box-pleat uniform in the 1960's. Dyes for wool in colours ranging from green through brown and gold to red can be sourced from eucalypts, many of which are now commercially grown in tree farms, making harvesting of leaves relatively easy.

The eucalypts are an evergreen hardwood genus endemic to the Australasian region embracing over 1200 species and sub-species. Eucalypts are represented across the Australian continent in all but the harshest of the arid interior regions, although they can be found in desert areas marking the positions of soaks and watercourses. Their range extends to 9° N (Philippines) and as far south as 44° in Tasmania^{viii} with the greatest variety of species concentrated in the temperate zones^{ix}. Eucalypts have successfully colonised many other parts of the world including southern Europe, Asia and west coast U.S.A.

Dyes from the genus are substantive on protein fibres (eg wool, silk), meaning that colour can be fixed without the use of additive chemical mordants. Dramatic colour shifts can be induced by pre-mordanting with other plant material, the addition of scrap metals to the dye bath or the use of dye vessel as mordant. The genus shares an interesting feature with a

number of other dye plant families (ie *Isatis*, *Indigofera* and *Polygonum*) in that the potential dye colours are not immediately apparent upon visual inspection of the plant. *Eucalyptus cinerea*, for example, bears blue grey leaves. Upon immersion in hot water these almost immediately become emerald in colour, after ten minutes simmering they turn khaki and begin to release visible colour into the solution. It should be noted however, that the colour of the dye bath prepared from fresh leaves (which appears to be gold brown in colour) does not necessarily indicate the colour of the dyed textile, which ranges from green (after 5min immersion) through gold and orange (about 25 min) and eventually deep chestnut red (45 min steeping in the dye bath)^x. Leaves from eucalypts will give different colours depending on whether they are used fresh (i.e. picked green), used dried (picked and dried) or collected from the ground beneath the tree (here again there will be different results depending on the residual colour in the leaf). Leaves picked from different sides of the same tree can sometimes give different results.

Material processed from species grown in different geographic locations may also offer dramatically different dye results. Additional variables may be created through the choice of dye processes. The traditional approach is to extract the dye by boiling the leaves in water, straining off the liquor, and then heating the textile in the solution. The most intense and clear colours are obtained by restricting processing of plant material to one hour prior to dyeing the textile. Longer cooking facilitates the release of kino from the leaves, inhibiting the dye process and shifting colours toward sticky brown, however this can profitably be used to extend the range of shades. Another option is 'solar dyeing'. The plant material and the textile to be dyed are placed in close contact (with added water) in an airtight container, and left in a sunny spot for at least four weeks (and sometimes months).

The by-product, simply cooked leaves, can be returned to the plantation as mulch. The aqueous carrier for the dye (water) can be used over and over again. Heat for the dye process could be sourced from the sun, using parabolic mirrors to focus the sun's rays to heat the dye bath. The opportunity exists for a truly antipodean clothing product to be developed, symbolic of environmental concerns, comfortable and practical to wear, coloured in the hues of our distinctive landscape and able to be returned to the environment as a slow-release fertilizer when it finally wears out. The fibre is highly versatile and able to be produced in a range of weights and styles including woven, felted and knitted so the product would not be restricted to becoming a national uniform in the style of communist China. Admittedly this is not a perfect solution for a textiles supply, but it's a possible one and should be taken seriously.

ⁱ BALL, P.2005. *Critical Mass – how one thing leads to another*. London: Arrow Books p 427

ⁱⁱ SHOICHI Aoki. 2005. *Freshfruits*. London : Phaidon Press Limited p 1

ⁱⁱⁱ SALO, E.2006. *The Gains and the Challenges of Globalization for Young Dress Designers*. Generation Mode. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz p 41

^{iv} DIAMOND,J. 2005. *Collapse – How Societies choose to fail or collapse*. London : Allen Lane

^v In a country that has so far managed to largely ignore the unsavoury activities in which the government has been an active participant this may not be easy. The very same quality of ignorance practiced in Germany in the 1930s is alive and well in Australia today. Refugees are locked away sometimes for years on end (primarily because they are different from us and therefore perceived to be threatening) and, we turn (but for a brave few) a collective blind eye. Is this how it was in the suburbs around Dachau, near München, Germany during the Third Reich? Imagine the fridge magnet “be alert, not alarmed dial 1300 345 987 in the event of sighting a Gypsy or a Jew”.

^{vi} QUINN, B.2003. *The Fashion of Architecture*. Oxford, U.K.:Berg P 113

^{vii} ABC 891 Adelaide, October 16th 2006, at 10.15am

^{viii} DOUGHTY, R. 2000. *The Eucalypts – A Natural and Commercial History of the Gum Tree*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London.

^{ix} BROOKER M.I.H.& KLEINIG D.A. 1999. *Field Guide to Eucalypts, Vol 1*. Bloomings Books, Hawthorn, Australia

^x Curiously, the discoverer of this species, Baron Ferdinand von Mueller (noted eucalyptologist and erstwhile Director of the Royal Melbourne Botanic Gardens) overlooked this species when preparing dye samples from indigenous species for the 1866 Intercolonial Exhibition.