

The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast

Transforming Fashion Education | Ben Barry

Event held on April 5, 2024 and edited for this podcast in October 2025.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

[UPBEAT MUSIC CONTINUES]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

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[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

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[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

It's now my pleasure to introduce Ben Barry, who is dean of the School of Fashion at Parsons School of Design and was named to *Vogue Business's* Inaugural 100 Innovators in 2022. He's leading the Parsons fashion community, and today he's going to be talking about transforming fashion education: possibilities and limits of equity, inclusion and decolonization. Please join me in welcoming Ben Barry.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[BEN BARRY]

Thank you so much. I'm very excited to be here. I'm a white man who has short, brown hair on my head and shorter brown hair on my face. My brown eyes are framed by black rimmed glasses, and I'm wearing black pants, a white shirt, and this floor length black cape. The cape is covered in black ribbon and has black feathers on the shoulders.

It was designed by Jonaty Kahm, a Plains Cree student in the MFA Fashion Design and Society Program at Parsons. I acknowledge that The Museum at FIT is located on the traditional

territories of the Lenape people, on which many fashion scholars, educators, designers and wearers, and of course, fashion enthusiasts live and work. And New York City has the largest urban indigenous population in the US.

Transforming fashion education must begin with these acknowledgments. The first, the visual description, helps to foster a space that is accessible for the different ways our minds and bodies know the world. The second, the land acknowledgment recognizes the original stewards of the land on which we're on. Our obligations to indigenous communities and to providing access are two priorities in the work to transform fashion education. Equity, inclusion and decolonization have recently become fashionable in fashion education. Over the past few years, these words have emerged as imperatives in the mission statements of fashion programs in schools across North America and Europe. Central Saint Martins and London College of Fashion proclaim their commitment to climate, social, and racial justice. The Amsterdam Fashion Institute declares inclusive fashion is a focus of their curriculum. Decolonization, inclusion and sustainability are the guiding principles driving the fashion department at Toronto Metropolitan University and Poly Moda proclaims to empower fashion students to create fully inclusive designs.

Now, what has led to this harmony among these statements? In fashion schools, equity gained urgency in 2020. The resurgence of Black Lives Matter, the rise of anti-Asian violence and questions about whose bodies mattered most during the height of the pandemic. This reckoning forced fashion schools to react by issuing statements of solidarity on their social media channels. But these statements were met with hurt and rightful skepticism.

Students, alumni and staff demanded that schools awaken to the harmful practices and the changes needed to correct them. After all, the modern Western fashion industry and as an offspring of it, modern Western fashion education, is informed by the transatlantic slave trade and European colonization. And these legacies have entrenched a white supremacist hetero, patriarchal, ableist and fat-phobic worldview in much of fashion education's curriculum and culture.

Now, research about fashion education has primarily examined teaching and learning as a site of transformation. And while we can absolutely harness the fashion classroom to activate change, we also have to recognize that our classrooms are located within larger universities. In her fashion theory article "Radical Pedagogies," Caroline Stevenson recognizes this dilemma, and she writes, "Well, my own and indeed other institutions of fashion education, place value on the teaching of social responsibility and action. Their internal structures of accountability often work against any real effort to produce the kinds of radical knowledge required to achieve their aims."

So my talk today will focus on this larger context. How can fashion schools institutionally cultivate justice in support of, and to accelerate, many of the changes already happening in the classroom? I'm going to ask, what does equity, inclusion, and decolonization do in fashion schools? And importantly, what does it obscure?

I'm going to answer this question by primarily drawing on the scholarship of Sarah Ahmed and Dori Tunstall, and I'm also going to use my own experience as dean of the School of Fashion at Parsons as a case study.

I was appointed as Dean in July 2021, following a job talk I called “Justice in Fashion.” This talk presented a framework of how I would work with the community to embed social justice in the school's curriculum and culture. Now, of course, social justice was not new to Parsons. Many faculty had grounded their work in these values, but my approach was unique from the past. It aimed to advance social justice through institutional structural change and the commitment of the Dean's office.

Methodologically, I'm going to position my talk to you today as phenomenology and practice led research in fashion studies. Ahmed frames academic leadership, and specifically diversity work, as a phenomenological practice. Because diversity work does not simply generate knowledge about institutions, it generates knowledge of institutions in the process of attempting to transform them. So inhabiting the role of Dean has allowed me to consider the university as a site of knowledge and then to generate knowledge about the work of transforming it.

My talk today builds on my manifesto “How to Transform Fashion Education,” published in the International Journal of Fashion Studies in 2021. It was a hopeful vision of what fashion education could be and how to get there. Today, I'll reflect on this manifesto in practice, revealing how joy and struggle coexist when transforming fashion, education. But I'm also cautious about my enthusiasm towards this topic.

Ahmed observes that white leaders' enthusiasm towards anti-racism initiatives can obscure ongoing inequities. What are they trying to convince us of? “Enthusiasm can be oppressive,” she writes. “Enthusiasm can demand a debt owed from structurally marginalized communities. Enthusiasm can silence those who have not had inclusion extended to them, advancing equity, inclusion and decolonization is not always or often enthusiastic.”

Professor Peter Morin discusses decolonization as practice, and he writes, “Decolonization becomes an active interrogation and a dismantling of the privileges and powers that you receive as a result of colonization. But keep in mind, if it doesn't hurt, then you're not doing it right.” The process of decolonization on Turtle Island, what's often called North America, must begin by positioning ourselves in the colonial project of fashion education.

In how to transform fashion education I ask readers, “How have you felt through your own journey in fashion education?” I see my body as a vessel. I'm conscious of how I move through fashion, education, how I am seen, heard and advanced because of my body. And as someone with low vision, I'm also conscious of the ways I misfit in fashion education. My body allows me to move. My body forces me to consider access, and my body reminds me that I need to share and reallocate power.

I'm going to share three examples from my work as Dean. These examples highlight strategies to institutionally embed equity, inclusion and decolonization into the very structure of Parsons fashion. And in particular, I'm going to focus on how these strategies confront the concealment and thus the extension of exclusion that's often hidden within institutional diversity work. And I want to note that these three examples represent only a fraction of the initiatives underway to make institutional change at Parsons Fashion. And the work I'm going to share here is not mine alone. The credit belongs to the Parsons students, staff, and faculty who bring these changes to life every day.

Now, fashion schools give form to their values through their program or mission statements. Ahmed explains that these statements are a form of doing—of action. Mission statements can be used by a community to hold their institutions accountable, especially when their institutions do not follow through on what they proclaim.

At Parsons fashion, our first action was to develop a renewed mission statement. Now, Parsons is home to one of the oldest fashion design degrees in the U.S. and today, the School of Fashion houses six programs in fashion design, management, textiles and communications. We've always been driven by the mission of delivering excellent fashion education. But what does excellence mean today? In September 2021, we began a yearlong process to create a collective vision for the School of Fashion.

The context for this work began the year before, when our school curriculum committee developed a school-wide equity inclusion and social justice statement. The statement acknowledged the school's ongoing practices of exclusion and committed to remedy them. We launched our process to create a school wide mission with a message to the community, and I want to highlight two points about the language in this message.

First, the message recognizes the historic nature of injustices and their specific roots on the land that Parsons inhabits. Acknowledging the attempted cultural genocide of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Black people. Second, the message recognizes that the goal of a new mission is to redress this harm. We created a working group of students from each program, staff, full time faculty and part time faculty, and this group led out a survey and focus groups to the community to understand how they want the Parsons fashion mission to be defined.

In September 2022, we launched a new mission, and it reads, “Parsons School of Fashion leads the industry into a future where access, inclusion, equity and sustainability are the standard.” And our mission goes on to say “Our students, faculty, and staff are committed to bring about lasting change by supporting Indigenous resurgence, honoring the beauty of all bodies and living in harmony with animals and the earth.”

So this mission, our mission, marks out our political commitments, and specifically it centers experiences that have been excluded in fashion education, and it differs from those of other schools that often sanitize politics by using non-confrontational language such as social

responsibility and diversity. However, I'm mindful again about attaching too much enthusiasm to this mission. Ahmed reminds us that diversity missions can create feel good politics where their circulation is associated with positive affective value. And moreover, she underscores that these statements obscure material inequities. In our context, access to and within fashion education.

The result is that mission statements often become about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations. At Parsons, we needed to be careful here because there's a perception that many students in our community have significant privilege. The result of being at a costly tuition dependent university in an expensive city. And moreover, our full time faculty base was predominantly white, presenting access privilege and learned about fashion in dominant educational contexts.

So to ensure our mission wasn't a hopeful performance, it was imperative that we followed up with action to hold ourselves accountable. This action began with hiring full time faculty whose experience in it has been excluded from fashion education. Tunstall writes that hiring initiatives are very important because they can really change the structure and focus of an institution. New hires create bridges to external communities, confront histories of systemic exclusion from paid employment, and provide capacity to help make different decisions and curriculum, student mentorship, and research. However, job postings need to be intentional because universities tend to recruit in their own image.

To diversify our faculty, the School of Fashion launched a series of searches over the past two years, and to date, these searches of resulting have resulted in hiring nine full time faculty who are indigenous, Black, Latinx, South Asian, and East Asian women, and who have a range of other embodied experiences that have been excluded from fashion education. They've launched new courses on topics including fast fashion, multi-sensory design and indigenous fashion. And we're in the process of searching for five additional full time fashion faculty. I'll describe how we developed our job postings to recruit candidates whose experiences had been excluded from these positions.

Here is an excerpt from our 2021 job description for an assistant professor of Fashion Design and Social Justice, and the description reads, "We seek candidates who can help us lead a new era of fashion education by decentering whiteness, fostering body inclusion, and advancing equity in social justice." From the position title to the description of the school mission shape the second call and intentionally invited faculty with knowledges that had been excluded. But we need to ask, "What does it mean to be invited into fashion education when your experiences and knowledges have been excluded?"

Ahmed introduces the logic of welcoming that is premised on a distinction between the institution as host and the potential new faculty member as guest. She warns that welcoming can reproduce existing power structures because to be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home. The trick here is that—the risk here is that new faculty are often pressured to assimilate into dominant school culture, to be self-erasing in order to fit in and be accepted. To move beyond welcoming, Tunstall suggests hiring faculty in critical mass. Doing so cultivates

the conditions for them to live their cultures freely and have this space serve as a base for wider institutional transformation.

At Parsons fashion, all of our searches were for multiple positions in order to create a critical mass of new faculty members. Fundamental to these searches was advancing the process of decolonization, which here on Turtle Island must prioritize the repatriation of indigenous land and life. In fashion education, we must enter Indigenous knowledges and practices in our teaching as part of this process. A fashion student wouldn't study in France without learning about French fashion, history, culture and practices. Similarly, a fashion student must learn about the ongoing histories, cultures and practices of indigenous fashion if they're to study fashion in the U.S.

However at Parsons we had not previously engaged in this approach. So in January 2024, we launched a Parsons wide cluster search for six faculty with experiences in Indigenous knowledges and practices in art and design. The job description was explicit in stating that we wanted to address the underrepresentation of indigenous knowledges at Parsons. Tunstall advises, "If you've neglected specific communities, be explicit about what you have failed to do in the past because this acknowledgment emphasizes that you are ready to do the right thing now."

Hiring to advance decolonization also required us to challenge... Hiring for decolonization also required us to challenge the colonial boundaries and hierarchies of how knowledge is acquired and valued in fashion. We had to recognize how qualifications for faculty positions often reproduce these hierarchies, while also failing to account for systemic barriers to meeting these dominant qualifications. Without changing qualifications, fashion schools will only ever hire structurally marginalized faculty who, to use Tunstall's term, are "super tokens." A super token is an individual from a marginalized group whose talents are so desired by institutions that they're able to overcome their innate aversion to the individual's identities in order to have access to those talents. Now, a super token might originally break down barriers, but they can also be used to enact new ones. Organizations can use them as a standard and subsequently block other structurally marginalized people from access and promotion.

So to counter this super token, we redefined faculty qualifications. For our indigenous cluster search in fashion design, we recognized professional or community experience as equivalent to a graduate degree. We required and valued lived experience and ongoing relationships with Indigenous communities, and we recognized community and secondary school teaching as equivalent to university teaching. Through these equivalencies, we hope to recognize the multiplicity of ways people flourish outside of the colonial fashion industry and educational system.

However, what these job descriptions obscure is the challenging process of executing these searches and the continued changes that must occur to ensure the new faculty, once hired, can thrive rather than get pushed out. Tunstall reminds us a lot of self preparation is needed to

become useful in co-creating conditions for indigenous sovereignty. If you're not ready to do the work of self preparation, your efforts will fail.

At Parsons Fashion, we launched the search with some preparation. We offered three courses in Indigenous fashion developed by Professor Soraya Park. We also financially support the Indigenous student group on campus Indigenous Rising, but the Indigenous cluster search process has brought to the fore different levels of understanding and conflicting understanding about Indigeneity, the history of Turtle Island and the meaning of decolonization on it. The work requires us to hold space for the forward momentum of advancing these hires, while also not obscuring how discrepancies and understanding can reproduce ongoing Indigenous erasure.

Embedding equity, inclusion and decolonization into fashion education requires us to ask who does not have access to our programs. Now, in many ways, it might seem that the fashion industry is becoming more inclusive of disability. There's a rise in fashion products designed for disabled wearers—what the industry calls “adaptive fashion” and brands often claim that these products have been designed with disabled people. In my own research, looking at the relationship between disability, fashion and masculinity, curbing masculinity, the project ethically engaged disabled wearers in designing clothing, fashion exhibitions and fashion shows. Now, these various efforts might suggest that disabled people are actively engaged in the fashion industry. However, their roles as participants, testers and co-designers obscure the fact that there are not sustainable pathways for employment for disabled people in fashion, to build careers to pay the rent, to buy food and support their advancement.

At Parsons fashion, we wanted to create pathways for disabled students to enter fashion, education and then enter the fashion industry. But to do this work, we needed to begin with research. And so I began by interviewing thirty-five disabled students enrolled in fashion programs across the US to understand their experiences in fashion education. The interviews with students revealed three primary sites that impact their experience.

First, students shared the university policies around accommodation that govern their access specifically by upholding reasonable accommodations that are guaranteed by the Americans with Disabilities Act. In the book *Academic Ableism*, Jay Dolmage critiques academic accommodation. He notes that accommodations are typically transactional and standardized, despite the different formats of classes and different student access needs. He notes that accommodations only offer temporary modification for one student and for one class, and he notes that accommodations place labor on students who have to advocate for their access needs, often leading to a wearing out from this constant self advocacy.

My student interviews brought these critiques of accommodation to life. Students explained how the accommodations offered by the university were disconnected from many of their fashion classes. As one student shared, I think there's a little bit of a gap between the accommodations office and the faculty when it comes to fashion programs. A lot of our classes are six hour studios. It's not a lecture situation. It's great that I get a note taker, but I never needed one.

Accommodations in their current form appear to offer inclusion, but do not address the unique context of fashion design courses, keeping inequity for disabled fashion design students intact.

Second, students shared that their fashion programs often mirrored the fast paced, competitive and exclusive nature of the fashion industry. One student explained, “It’s always... but that’s how the industry is. And I just think if you’re such a large institution in fashion and you have such an impact, why do you keep imitating the industry? Why don’t we teach in a more accessible way?”

University accommodation policies require students to disclose their disabilities to faculty to have their access needs met. Many students shared that they formed close relationships with individual faculty who are deeply understanding and accommodating. However, most fashion faculty were just not educated about disability, leaving students to feel anxious about disclosing their needs and to worry that they’d be perceived as faking it when asking for accommodation.

Third, students found that fashion courses were limited in their inclusion of disability content. When disability was addressed, as it was often done so by the students themselves who brought it up in their own project or their contributions to class discussions. The few courses that included content about disability often framed it through a medicalized lens. Disability was positioned as a problem that needed to be solved through functional fashion design rather than a layer of fashion identity and an opening for creative design. One student offered an example of how disability could be a creative opening, “I’m really happy that now size is becoming part of the curriculum, but the body doesn’t stop at what the body looks like. It’s much more about feel. It’s more about touch.” Students also discuss the lack of accessible studios and equipment they need to make their own adjustments and typically at their own expense.

Due to the lack of institutional support, disabled students develop their own strategies and informal support systems to navigate their fashion programs. But this labor shouldn’t fall on students. Fashion programs in schools must cultivate a culture where all students feel comfortable knowing their access needs will be supported and the disability is understood as integral. This past December, we launched the Parsons Disabled Fashion Student Program in partnership with Sinéad Burke, an accessibility consultant and most recently the guest editor and one of the cover models for the disability issue of *British Vogue*.

The Parsons Disabled Fashion Student Program addresses the ways in which current strategies to provide access for students have reinforced exclusion. Students accepted into the program will receive funding for tuition living and for their access costs. They’ll be paired with a faculty member to help them navigate their academic experience and provide space to talk through accessibility, offering access based on relationships, or what Mia Mingus calls “Access Intimacy.” And they’ll take part in mentorship circles with other disabled fashion students and professionals to build community and support networks. And the program will host regular events to support the larger Parsons community to learn about disability and cultivate disability culture. And we’ve just accepted our first cohort of students who will begin in fall 2024.

I hope the academic and structural changes created through this program will open up access for future students. Ensuring that disability isn't simply integrated into fashion education, but becomes integral to it. The three initiatives I've shared aim to transform fashion education by laying the blocks for equity, inclusion, and decolonization and ultimately, building a new house. I understand my role as Dean as not simply an administrative appointment. It's an opportunity to engage in practice based research about the institutional process of changing fashion education. But this institutional change is emotional and physical labor. The constant resistance can feel like a hammering. A chip, chip, chip against your being, so that eventually you begin to feel smaller. Hammering is hammered down, and this is especially the case for indigenous Black Latinxs, Asian and Middle Eastern folks who've been put into these positions to bring about diversity, inclusion, equity and decolonization.

"No one tells you how painful this work is," Tunstall writes.

"I have the privilege to take on this labor because of the body I inhabit," I agree with Ahmed. Privilege is an energy saving device. Less effort is required to be or to do. I hope to leverage my privilege to shift power and then to step away. To do that, I hope to turn the chip, chip, chip that I experience the resistance into a hammer and use it to chip away at the old block. As Ahmed writes, "Who knows? Eventually, it might come right off." A break can be what we were aiming for, a break that will transform the very institution of fashion education, our curriculum assessments, policies, faculty, culture and leaders. A break that can release a block. A block to help rebuild the house of fashion education.

Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]