

The Origins of Fast Fashion

An investigation of our relationship with the environment and clothing

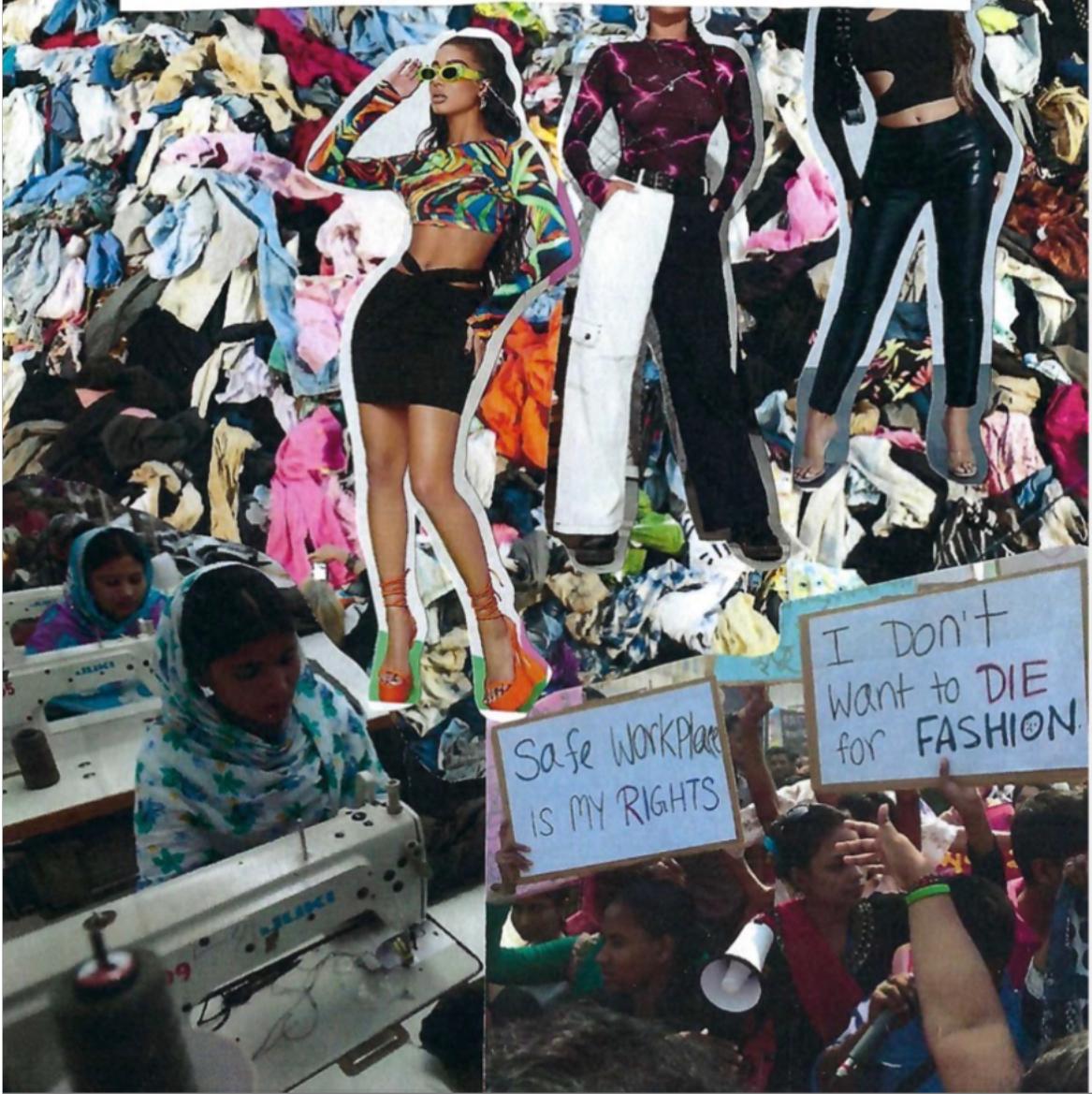
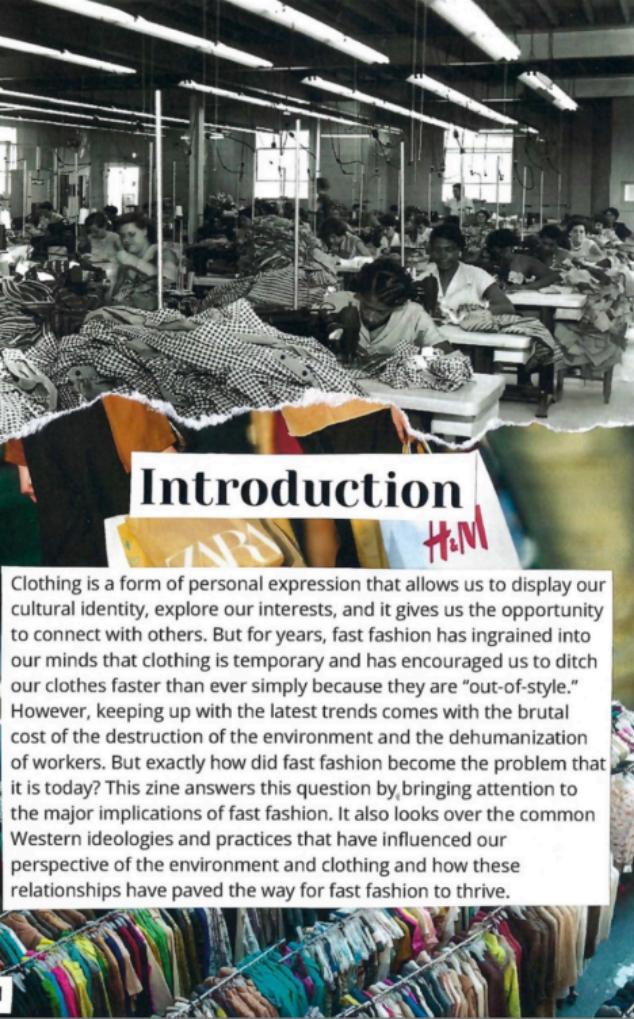


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BY
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Introduction

H&M

Clothing is a form of personal expression that allows us to display our cultural identity, explore our interests, and it gives us the opportunity to connect with others. But for years, fast fashion has ingrained into our minds that clothing is temporary and has encouraged us to ditch our clothes faster than ever simply because they are "out-of-style." However, keeping up with the latest trends comes with the brutal cost of the destruction of the environment and the dehumanization of workers. But exactly how did fast fashion become the problem that it is today? This zine answers this question by bringing attention to the major implications of fast fashion. It also looks over the common Western ideologies and practices that have influenced our perspective of the environment and clothing and how these relationships have paved the way for fast fashion to thrive.

What is Fast Fashion?

You may have heard the term "fast fashion" come up during conversation or while scrolling through social media, but if you haven't, no worries! The term fast fashion is fairly straightforward, meaning exactly what it says. Much like fast food, which involves the quick preparation of food sold at relatively low prices, making it easily accessible to the masses, fast fashion is exactly this but with clothing. Textile industries quickly produce garments to keep up with the demand of fast fashion companies causing tremendous amounts of overproduction and waste. These garments are produced with low-quality material using cheap labor and conveniently sold at low prices, making it easy for consumers to have access to the latest trends.¹

History of Fast Fashion

Before the 1800s people made their clothes out of necessity. They had to obtain their own materials, and families would work together, spinning wool provided by the sheep they raised.² Then, during the mid-1800s, the Industrial Revolution introduced the invention of the sewing machine and the emergence of department stores.³ Suddenly, people were buying clothes for style instead of necessity. Sweatshops then became very prominent during the 1960s and 70s as companies were more cognizant of the popular trends and started to produce more clothing that was often low quality.⁴ Later on in the 2000s, online shopping took over the market, and consumers could have access to the newest trends at the touch of a button.⁵

What are clothes made of?

If you take a look at the tags on your clothes, you are most likely going to come across polyester or cotton. Around 90% of clothes sold in the U.S. are made of polyester and cotton,⁶ which come with severe health and environmental costs as polyester is derived from oil, and cotton requires enormous amounts of water to produce. Low-cost synthetic materials like polyester make up the majority of clothes in the fast fashion industry, and because of this, the lifespan of these clothes continues to shrink as they end up in the trash only after a few wears. There's also a vast array of up to about 2000 different chemicals used in the production of clothing, like bleach, formaldehyde, and heavy metals.⁷ Overall, fast fashion is an incredibly wasteful process that is detrimental to our health and the environment.

Environmental Impacts

As the use of synthetic fibers continues to rise, so do the damages done to the environment, putting the health of the ecosystem at risk. Some of the most devastating impacts include the effect of microfibers, water pollution, air pollution, and the creation of unsuitable habitats for wildlife and plants.

Microfibers

Microfibers end up in the ocean through the washing of textiles made up of synthetic materials like polyester and nylon,⁸ which can release as many as 700,000 fibers in a single 6kg wash cycle⁹ and around half a million tonnes of microfibers are released into the ocean annually. If this continues, the number of microfibers released into the ocean between 2015 and 2050 can amount to more than 22 million tonnes,¹⁰ and by 2050, there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish.¹¹

Water Pollution

The textile and clothing industry is responsible for producing 20% of global industrial water pollution due to the dyeing and treatment process of producing textiles.¹² It's also the second largest consumer of water in the world,¹³ consuming around 79 trillion liters of water each year.¹⁴ Textile production produces massive amounts of wastewater as well, which contains hazardous chemicals like sulfur and nitrates and heavy metals like copper and lead.¹⁵ In China, the textile industry produces about 2.5 billion tons of wastewater each year, polluting about 32% of the country's water.¹⁶



Air Pollution

In 2015, it was estimated that textile industries emitted 1.2 billion tonnes of CO₂,¹⁷ which results from processes like spinning, weaving, and dyeing.¹⁸ Additionally, most of the clothing we dispose of winds up in landfills, which also contributes to air pollution and exacerbates global warming. And in 2015, roughly 48 million tonnes of clothing was produced, with 73% ending up in landfills and a small portion of it being incinerated.¹⁹



Wildlife & Plants

As much as 8 million tons of fertilizers and 200,000 tons of pesticides are used solely for the production of cotton.²⁰ This excessive use of fertilizers leads to eutrophication, causing severe algal blooms and the depletion of oxygen, creating unsuitable habitats for marine life.²¹ Pesticide use is just as damaging, causing massive fish kills²² and the development of swimming abnormalities, decreasing their survival rates.²³ The effluent produced from textile factories also releases heavy metals into surface waters,²⁴ causing the mortality of aquatic life,²⁵ and is also high in temperature and pH,²⁶ which can potentially cause spinal deformity and damage the gills of fish.²⁷



Social Impacts

Unfortunately, fast fashion's negative effect on the environment is just the beginning. Around 74 million people—the majority of whom are women of color²⁸—are risking their lives every day working in garment factories, churning out 100 million garments every year, only for 92 million tonnes of these garments to end up in landfills.²⁹ Not only do they risk their lives, but they also face severe abuse and harassment from employers.³⁰ Our current neoliberal economy also traps these workers in this continuous cycle of poverty as corporations continue demanding lower prices, driving down wages,³¹ often leading to deadly protests and attacks on unions.³² Systemic racism and colonial practices are additionally prevalent in fast fashion³³ as corporations continue to outsource their products and workers predominantly from countries in the global south³⁴ like Bangladesh and Cambodia, where devastating accidents and protests have occurred, respectively.³⁵

Garment Factory Accidents

One of the most infamous garment factory collapses was in 2013 with the collapse of the eight-story Rana Plaza factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This accident is known as one of the deadliest industrial accidents in history, killing at least 1,132 people and injuring more than 2,500. According to the International Labour Organization, at least 109 accidents have occurred since, and 35 were textile-related incidents, injuring 491 workers and leading to the death of 27 workers.³⁶ It has also been revealed in an inspection of 1,600 garment factories that there were more than 130,000 safety hazards like unsafe fire exits, electrical issues, and structural integrity problems.³⁷ As these accidents continue to become more prevalent it brings attention to the need for increased regulation, monitoring, and upkeep of garment factories.



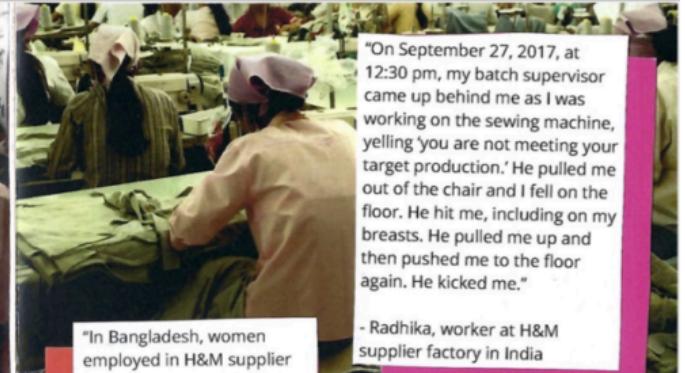
Protests

Several protests led by garment factory workers have also taken place. In 2013, the streets of Phnom Penh, Cambodia were filled with thousands of garment workers protesting against unfair working conditions and demanding a raise in wages from U.S. \$100 to \$160 a month.³⁸ These workers were met by police and military forces who opened fire on the crowd, leading to the deaths of 4 people.³⁹ In more recent news, protests also arose in Haiti, where a walkout was held as workers protested against being forced to work 9 hours a day with a meager wage of \$4 per day. Once again, these protesters were met with police aggression.⁴⁰ This highlights the systemic racism and colonial practices that are the clear drivers of fast fashion as these protests continue to be violently suppressed.



Working Conditions

Although we may not see it, each fiber of our clothing is laced with the blood, sweat, and tears of garment workers. From long hours, minimal breaks, long periods of standing, and sexual and physical harassment and abuse, garment workers have been through it all.⁴¹ These horrendous and inhumane working conditions are examples of modern-day slavery and modern-day colonial practices in action as corporations unfairly exploit workers for massive amounts of profit at the expense of their well-being and safety.⁴² However, this doesn't even begin to touch the surface of what workers have to go through. Here are some of their experiences:



"On September 27, 2017, at 12:30 pm, my batch supervisor came up behind me as I was working on the sewing machine, yelling 'you are not meeting your target production.' He pulled me out of the chair and I fell on the floor. He hit me, including on my breasts. He pulled me up and then pushed me to the floor again. He kicked me."

- Radhika, worker at H&M supplier factory in India

"In Bangladesh, women employed in H&M supplier factories reported that it is common for supervisors and managers to pursue sexual relationships with women workers by offering benefits including salary increases, promotions, and better positions. Women who refuse these offers face retaliation, including being fired from the workplace."



"Women workers at H&M supplier factory, Roo Hsing, reported working 60 hours per week on average. One worker at Roo Hsing explained: Workers are forced to do overtime when demands are high. If they don't do it they are threatened to have their contracts terminated. If workers ask to take leave they are threatened with termination."

Source: Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. "Full Report: 'Gender Based Violence in the H&M Garment Supply Chain.'" Accessed November 7, 2022. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/full-report-gender-based-violence-in-the-hm-garment-supply-chain/>

How Did These Problems Form?



So going back to the question I had originally posed at the beginning, which was, "How did we arrive at this relationship with fast fashion?" This section mainly covers the key factors that have influenced our relationship with the environment. Here, I will particularly focus on how religious ideologies, colonization and its effect on indigenous groups, and the impact of Greek Philosophers like Plato and Socrates have influenced our view on the environment. In the next few pages, I will also look into the effects of capitalism and consumerism on our relationship with clothing.

Religion

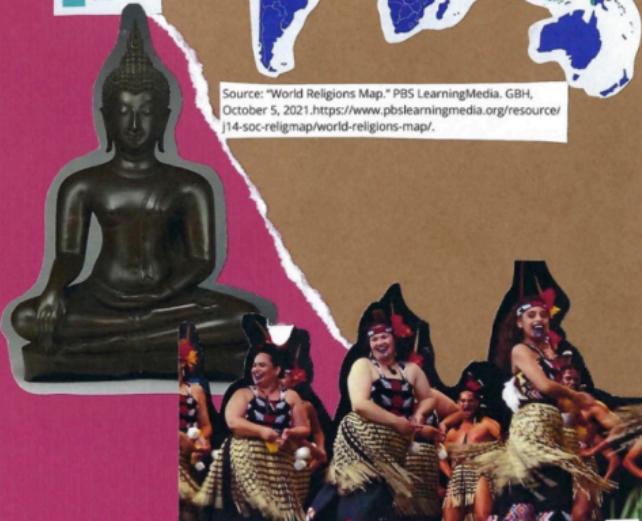
Over 85% of the world's population identifies with a religion, with Christianity being the most popular at 31.1%.⁴³ Religion is an important factor in shaping our relationship with the environment because many of these ideologies influence how we should treat nature. For example, it has been argued by historians like Lynn White Jr. that the anthropocentric nature of Christianity is one of the leading factors of environmental degradation.⁴⁴ He cites passages from religious works like Genesis, which he believes promotes human dominion over the earth, allowing humans to exploit its resources.⁴⁵ This is harmful when it comes to problems like fast fashion because when we see the earth as merely a resource for human benefit, it allows people to justify the destruction of nature. And because some of the environmental impacts of fast fashion are not always visible, like the release of microfibers into the ocean or air pollution, it makes this exploitative act seem even more harmless. However, even when this information is known, it is ignored by those who believe addressing these problems is hopeless, which is a common way of thinking among conservative Christians.⁴⁶ I should also mention that this is just one category of Christians who hold these viewpoints, and there are more moderate or liberal Christians who are more concerned about the environment.⁴⁷ There are also other religions like Buddhism, which believe that we must treat nature with respect and that humans and nature have a mutual relation,⁴⁸ in which they both rely on each



other.⁴⁸ As shown in the map below, the world lacks these nature-based religions like Buddhism and Indigenous religions, which showcases this clear disconnect between humans and the environment.



Source: "World Religions Map." PBS LearningMedia. GBH, October 5, 2021. <https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/j14-soc-religmap/world-religions-map/>.



Maori people of New Zealand

Colonialism

Our twisted history on which the grounds of this nation have been built is another factor that has altered our relationship with the environment. The arrival of European settlers to America in search of land and resources brought disease, genocide, forced evictions, and the loss of identity and culture among numerous indigenous groups. Before their arrival, historians estimated that there were around 10 million Native Americans, and by the 1900s, there were only 300,000 left. Many of these deaths can be attributed to disease epidemics brought by Europeans like smallpox.⁴⁹ There are also devastating genocide events, including the Sand Creek Massacre and the Mankato executions. Along with this were forced removals, as seen with the Indian Removal Act and the removal of Choctaw, Creek, and Cherokee indigenous groups from the east to make room for building homes and growing crops.⁵⁰ Indigenous groups were also imposed by the beliefs of Christianity, in which European missionaries saw indigenous groups as having no culture or religion and viewed themselves as doing indigenous communities a service by "saving their souls."⁵¹ This history of removing indigenous groups is still prevalent today, as seen in Tanzania, where 70,000 Maasai are at risk of being displaced due to the conversion of land into safari, trophy hunting, and conservation areas.⁵²

The decimation of indigenous groups is paramount in influencing our relationship with the environment because the very nature of these groups is rooted in the idea that humans and nature are inherently interconnected.⁵³ So when we deliberately kill, displace, and disrespect indigenous groups, we are also destroying their culture, leading us to create a world where humans are straying further away from nature. When looking at the impacts of fast fashion, we can see this blatant disregard for the environment as corporations continue to take from nature, and in return, they treat the earth as their dumping site releasing millions of tonnes of emissions and toxic chemicals into the environment, mostly affecting communities of color.⁵⁴ The increased use of synthetic fibers, toxic chemicals, and dyes showcases the colonization of many of these indigenous practices, like the use of natural dyes and regenerative agriculture to produce natural textiles.⁵⁵



Greek Philosophers

One of the most prominent Greek philosophers, Plato, who was heavily influenced by Socrates,⁵⁶ has made major contributions to Western philosophy in how humans should relate to the environment through his Theory of Forms.⁵⁷ In short, this theory proposed that there are two realms, the metaphysical and the physical.⁵⁸ The metaphysical world contains what Plato refers to as 'Forms' which exist indefinitely.⁵⁹ Things like beauty, justice, and nature are located here.⁶⁰ The physical realm is simply a copy of these Forms that are constantly changing and unreliable.⁶¹ With this view, Plato and Socrates saw true nature as only existing in heaven,⁶² which has significant implications for how we see the world. This view sees the metaphysical as superior and the physical as inferior, making nature on earth seem unimportant.⁶³ This is especially dangerous when considering the environmental impacts of fast fashion because when we see the nature around us as insignificant, this makes it easier for humans to disrespect it.⁶⁴ Plato's theory also allows us to ignore these environmental impacts because of this predetermined belief that there is this perfect version of the world waiting for us in heaven.⁶⁵ Therefore, it's pointless to worry about our actions toward the environment. This school of thought has driven the structure of our world, which is evident in how we respond to these environmental problems. Not only is this selfish view detrimental to the environment, but it's also extremely destructive to future generations as it dumps all of our problems onto them to figure out and ignores their well-being, much like what we are currently experiencing in the present.



Capitalism & Consumerism

All around us, we are constantly encouraged to consume. Whether it's the videos we watch on youtube, ads in news articles, social media, or the songs we listen to, it's clear our life is characterized by consumption. When I was younger, I would watch these clothing haul videos on Youtube with people showing all of the new clothes they bought, and I remember wishing I was them. It left me with this feeling that I needed to fill my life with clothes to feel good about myself, but even when I got these clothes, I was always left wanting more. I was never satisfied with what I already had because of the perpetual force of capitalism and consumerism, persuading me that I needed more to be happy.

The film *The True Cost* highlights how capitalism and the globalization of fast fashion have carved a path for ideas like consumerism to flourish, which privileges the idea of consuming and spending over anything else.⁶⁶ Some major brands you may have heard of that promote consumerism are fast fashion companies like H&M, Forever 21, Zara, SHIEN, and many more.⁶⁷ The consumerism and capitalist mindset of corporations breed us to ignore these social impacts of fast fashion, like the horrid working conditions and systemic racism, because it plants this idea into our mind that happiness is derived from material gain, which trumps everything else. This leads to consumers buying more clothes—which are systematically designed to wear out fast—making us poorer⁶⁸, while these mostly white male CEOs at the top of these global supply chains sit back and get richer.⁶⁹ We are merely puppets in their money-grab game who have been trained by this system into thinking that overconsumption is a natural behavior, so don't be too hard on yourself if you can't change your relationship with clothing overnight.



Fast Fashion is

~~TRENDY~~

COLONIALISM

RACISM

MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

DEHUMANIZING

WASTEFUL

POLLUTING

DEADLY

How do we Address Fast Fashion?

A report by the Ellen Macarthur foundation points out that if we want to truly redefine the textile industry, it will require us to completely transform our current linear economy into a circular economy. This includes taking actions like policymakers setting incentives for the use of recycled materials and renewable energy, which would help reduce environmental problems like microfiber release and CO₂ emissions. It's also essential to work toward creating innovations that improve the recycling of clothing and to implement the use of high-quality materials in the clothes-making process to increase the utilization of clothing. A circular economy would also lead to the redistribution of wealth within the system and thus provide better wages and working conditions for garment workers. Widespread collaboration is also essential to carry out these massive changes, and so is increased education on the circular economy model.⁷⁰ Although not mentioned in this report, dismantling the systemic racism, colonial practices, and capitalist mindset of corporations will likely be much more difficult to address. It will require working closely with these industries to ensure they understand why the system is intrinsically flawed and how to decentralize their power, but this reimagined system and the reallocation of wealth would lead to drastic changes and reduce industries from engaging in these colonial practices. It's also important to recognize indigenous practices like the use of natural dyes and regenerative agriculture⁷¹ and to work with local communities to figure out ways to implement these practices into textile industries.



Source: "A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future." Ellen Macarthur Foundation, November 28, 2017. <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/a-new-textiles-economy/>.

What Can We Do?

Given our history of exploitative behavior combined with the power corporations have over consumers, it's clear why fast fashion has dominated the world. What we truly need to focus on is completely altering the clothing industry, which will require government action and policy change. However, there are some changes we can implement in our lives right now to reestablish our power and redefine our relationship with clothing.

Borrow from a friend

Rent clothes

Crochet or knit

Take care of clothes

Buy second hand

Use front loading washers

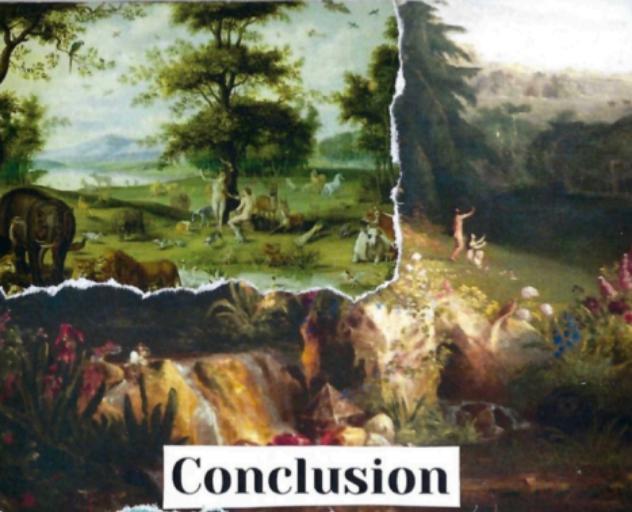
Mend clothes

Wash clothes less

30 wears test

Revamp old clothes

Source: Raisin, Rachel, (@rachelraisin). "Sustainable Fashion." Instagram, June 21, 2022. https://www.instagram.com/p/CFE7wlvlfU/utm_source=ig_web_copy_link



Conclusion

I hope this zine has made you more aware of not only the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion but also why these problems have formed into what they are today. I know our relationship with the environment and clothing is a tricky one to unpack, but I hope this has made it easier to understand the origins of these relationships and how to rebuild them into ones that establish a deeper connection with the earth and clothing. And if you're feeling overwhelmed or guilty about these issues, it's helpful to remember that we are not responsible for the irresponsible actions of people or corporations. But the best thing we can do to help is to confront these issues and work on ways to redefine our viewpoints and relationships so that everyone benefits, including the earth.

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THANKS FOR

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