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## What Goes Around Comes Around?: The Sustainability Paradox of Second-Hand Clothing Marketplaces in a Cross-Cultural Context

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### Keywords:

*Sustainability,  
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Circular Economy,  
Greenwashing,  
Anthropocene,  
Mitumba,  
e-Marketplace.*

Humanity living far beyond its planetary boundaries has galvanised a desperate scramble toward sustainability, in all its socio-economic-ecological complexity. In increasingly fragmented global(ised) arenas, however, the sustainable growth trajectories of second-hand clothing production/consumption systems have proven non-linear, disjunctive and paradox-laden. The present thesis carves out epistemic space for exploring how these exacting paradoxes are both productive of and produced by circular fashion economies. Through a place-attuned, multi-scalar and relational lens, my investigatory scope is framed by two understudied geographies of second-hand apparel trade - the mitumba industry in East Africa, and e-marketplace platforms in the Global North context. Interweaving the analytic threads of political ecology, decolonial theory and feminist reflexivity, I undertake a cross-case comparative analysis to consider: between the global, national and local, how does the notion of second-handedness refract the lifeworld of differently-located and differently-embodied actors? Navigating the complex discursive terrain of greenwashing, I first de/reconstruct self-congratulatory corporate rhetoric which deliberately conflates 'circularity' with 'sustainability'. By repoliticising human/environment encounters against the grain of technocratic dogma, the viscerally embodied realities of mainstream development interventions are explicated and enlivened - rather than elided and erased. In the spirit of reflexivity, my questioning framework also attends to (im)possible moments of alterity, agency and alliance-building instantiated in/through second-hand clothing marketplaces. In juxtaposing hegemonically-framed developmentalist discourses with personal counter-narratives emerging from the ground, the resulting picture is nuanced, messy and contextually-situated. The succeeding conclusion I draw is thus demonstrative and generative of such nuance. Sustainable fashion development need not be considered an end-in-itself, but instead an enduring means to an end - however imperfect and challenging. Scholars, practitioners and activists must collectively resist apocalyptic imaginaries, which prematurely foreclose political horizons for (co-)constructing alternative Anthropocene futures.

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## INTRODUCTION

*"All second-hand shops are not created equal"*  
(Bunten, 2023: 20).

Sustainability is an intersectional, intersectoral and intergenerational commitment - a precondition for habitability in the age of the Anthropocene and its discontents. Whilst theoretically appealing, 'doing' sustainability in our globalised epoch calls for a demanding balancing act between the social, the economic and the ecological. Mainstream developmentalist efforts to reconcile this vexing trilemma so often fall short, materialising into a discomfiting ambivalence that extant literature has coined the 'sustainability paradox'. This confounding attitude-behaviour gap in 'green' decision-making has been generally scrutinised, but scantily in the context of sustainable *fashion* development (SFD) - this thesis is, therefore, an attempt to demystify and disentangle the multiple facets of paradox entrenched in the global apparel industry. Through the conduit of fashion, the complex dialectic between sustainable thinking and sustainable praxis has produced asymmetric outcomes which merit further investigatory efforts from scholars, practitioners and activists alike. Seeking to provide an all-encompassing, exhaustive reading of SFD - in its many socialities, scalarities and spatialities - would be beyond the scope of this inquiry. For clarity of exposition, I opt for a telescopic look into a particular manifestation of paradox in global fashion ecosystems - namely the conflicting socio-economic-ecological trade-offs in second-

hand clothing (SHC) marketplaces. Remapping hegemonic worldviews of fashion, I contemplate: *between the global, national and local, how does the notion of second-handedness refract the lifeworlds of differently-located and differently-embodied actors?* Undertaking these formative ideas as a critical entry-point, the conceptual contours of the present study take shape in the following manner:

I begin by performing a systematic review and thematic synthesis of published literature, pertaining to the curious paradox that is SFD. To build conceptual linkages between a growing yet still fragmented body of knowledge, I have inductively organised this chapter into three sub-sections. 'Talking Green, Doing Greed' explores the well-documented phenomenon of corporate greenwashing, particularly its embeddedness in capitalist-driven fast fashion supply chains. In 'Is Circular the New Linear?', I draw attention to a globally growing impetus for transitioning toward a resource-efficient circular economy (CE). Development discourse and its solutionist temperament heralds CEs as the universal cure for healing social-economic-ecological wounds - however, this uncritical position protecting dominant logics of order warrants further theoretical and empirical testing. Finally, 'A Tale of Two Circular Economies' offers a preamble which contextualises CE practices in two case studies of interest - mitumba trade in East Africa, and SHC e-marketplaces (shorthand for second-hand clothing online resale platforms) in the Global North context. Whilst different on the

operational front, these reuse-based textile supply chains form part of a complexly emerging global CE that is in fact implicated in the sustainability paradox. Anticipating to fill existing knowledge gaps, I adopt a multi-scalar, case-study approach to interrogate the presumed conduciveness of ‘circularity’ to ‘sustainability’ in such geographically diverse SHC marketplaces. ‘Methodology & Theoretical Framework’ locates my methodological approach in political-ecological, decolonial and feminist epistemologies. Seeking to build upon - *and go beyond* - hegemonic horizons of analysis, bringing these critically-inflected lenses together offers a segue into exploring dynamics intimate to the Anthropocene.

With recourse to the theoretical groundings above, ‘Who Sustains Whose Development?: Mitumba Trade and SHC e-Marketplaces’ offers an exposition into the visceral, on-the-ground realities of SFD invisibilised by circular ‘solutions’. Behind green-tinted spectacles, greenwashing in its many different shades is writ-large in locally-situated, context-specific and embodied forms of human/environment conflict. In the same breath however, this thesis expresses disillusionment over excessively reductionist preoccupations with the ‘woes’ of sustainable development - ‘Green Cloud, Silver Lining?: Opportunities for Empowerment in SHC Networks’ necessitates the need for an *alternative* posturing. Valorising intimate conversations over distanced observations, personal narratives provide a phenomenological (counter)frame for detecting micro-moments of resistance, agency and alliance-building. The (re)circulation of used garments, in and through SHC trade networks, thus emerges as an unlikely counterweight to oppressor/oppressed, coloniser/colonised and insider/outsider dyads. Succeeding my analysis, ‘The Perils and Possibilities of (Un)sustainable Fashion’ discusses the double-sided character of SFD as both empowering *and* disempowering, enabling *and* disabling. Ultimately the following thesis highlights that the sustainability paradox - and its conceptual triad of social-economic-ecological

challenges - is not easily remediable in theory, let alone in practice. However, sustainability is an iterative and relentless process that will *endure as long as humanity does*. The sub-section ‘Fashioning Green(er) Futures: Navigating Conditions of Paradox’ therefore begs a concluding question - *how can one rework such paradoxes in productive ways to speculate alternative Anthropocene futures?*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Talking Green, Doing Greed

The operative definition of ‘paradox’ in its broadest sense refers to “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persists over time” (Cunha & Putnam, 2019: 95). Metastasising into an existential threat, consumption-driven patterns of ecological breakdown have garnered considerable attention from paradox scholars. To this end, the ‘sustainability paradox’ encapsulates the trilemma tension between opposing environmental (the maintenance and flourishing of diverse ecosystems), social (building liveable, egalitarian communities) and economic (optimising market competitiveness and long-term financial stability) goals underlying the Anthropocene (Karlsson & Ramasar, 2020). When made and realised as commodities, material objects are “simultaneously active in more than one network such that it assembles multiple realities” (Jenkins *et al*, 2014: 3) - such entangled, enigmatic realities are rendered perceptible through a *political ecological* perspective.

Coined by environmental activist Jay Westerveld in 1986, corporate greenwashing refers to the claims-making of pro-environmental behaviours without the evidence necessary to substantiate such proclamations (Chen & Chang, 2013). With a penchant for sustainable optics, companies vaguely communicate with unstandardised buzzwords like ‘eco-friendly’, ‘green’, ‘organic’ and ‘climate-neutral’ to aggrandise their moral reputation in the public sphere (Denisova, 2021). The vagueness demonstrated here is just one of ‘Seven Sins of Greenwashing’ - a

comprehensive, taxonomic guide developed by marketing firm TerraChoice (2010). The Greenwashing Sins are: 1) hidden trade-offs; 2) no proof; 3) vagueness; 4) worshipping false labels; 5) irrelevance; 6) lesser of two evils; and 7) fibbing. For conceptual clarity, these different typologies, characteristics and forms of greenwashing have been tabulated in *Appendix A*. When thinly-veiled green imaginaries fail to be anchored in concrete realities, the transformative potential of environmental promises becomes diluted or even non-existent. Half-hearted claims to greenness, in their false consciousness, function as a self-defence mechanism to deflect away corporate accountability for the ecological injustice endemic to mass-production and consumption.

Greenwashing can be read as a discursive product of the enduring dissonance “between symbolic and substantive actions” (Siano *et al.*, 2017: 27) in the global textile and apparel industry. In a market-transformed global body politic geared toward capital(ist) accumulation, ‘take-make-waste’ production/consumption networks are predicated upon resource depletion and scarcity. Profit-hungry fast fashion corporations, fed by these linear supply chains, pump out low-priced and low-quality garments that are inevitably discarded by consumers after approximately seven or eight wears (Wakes *et al.*, 2020). This politics of disposability is driven by the fickleness of clothing micro-trends on social media, engendering the shortening of textile lifespans (Burdall, 2019). A report by McKinsey & Company (2016) demonstrates that fast fashion exists at a critical juncture where resource demand aggressively outstrips supply. Retailer giant Zara offers inexpensive ‘knock-offs’ of the latest runway styles 24 times in a single year.

However, fast fashion conglomerates have consistently failed to “match their sales gains with commensurate improvements in environmental and social performance” (McKinsey & Company, 2016: 4). Encouraging chemical-intensive processes, nearly 11.3 million tonnes of synthetic fibres found themselves in incinerators or landfills as municipal waste in 2018 (Shedlock &

Feldstein, 2023: 9). Despite the ubiquity of statistics, these “polluting behemoth[s]” (Shedlock & Feldstein, 2023: 5) are well-acquainted with making greenwashed promises which overstate their commitment to sustainability. For Shein - the Chinese ‘ultra-fast’ fashion giant - greenwashing has been “perfected like an art, with vague sustainability claims and selective messaging to create an eco-friendly image” (Fujio, 2023:1). Between a flurry of promotional codes, Shein’s website contains performative statements like ‘sustainable practice’, ‘we do things small’, ‘material with little impact on the environment’ and ‘factories conform to safety standards’ (Kenk, 2022). However, the dark underbelly of Shein reveals itself in mass-producing thousands of new designs daily, whilst “using between 100 and 150 litres of water for every kilogram of fibre used for garments” (Boles, 2022: 1).

### Is Circular the New Linear?

As the self-proclaimed ‘antithesis’ of fast fashion and its insurmountable wastefulness (Valverde & Avilés-Palacios, 2021: 10), a *circular* agenda has been brewing over the past decade. Designed to counter the extractivist impulses of linear systems, CE or ‘slow fashion’ is an alternative production/consumption model which prioritises resource conservation by closing loops of material flow. In the anthropology of exchange, circulation is a reactionary, recursive and regenerative force at the nexus between materiality and meaning (Hetherington, 2004). Discarded ‘things’ “create and negotiate sociality” (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2015: 147) by rupturing the linear temporal passage of commodities from birth to (after) death. By inverting dominant regimes of value, these “thickly inscribed objects-in-motion” (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2015: 162) are constitutively propelled in non-linear, contradictory and disjunctive directions among diverse geographic contexts.

Annual data from thredUP’s Resale Report (2023) has revealed the unwavering momentum of CE business models - global SHC marketplaces



are projected to reach \$350 million by 2027, outpacing the growth trajectory of linear production systems *threefold*. Often upheld uncritically as the panacea for today's throwaway culture and corporate waste streams, CE research, policies and practices emerge relatively unscathed from inflamed debates compared to the tarnished image of fast fashion. In actuality however, the celebrated shift from linear to circular thinking is implicated in the multiple, bundled up tensions it seeks to untangle - namely the hypocrisy of greenwash. Corvellec *et al* (2021) deconstruct the fashion fairy-tale of CEs and their utopian promises of socio-economic-ecological 'win-win-wins'. Approbatory and non-reflective accounts, propagated by technocratic policy-makers, may result in circularity becoming mainstreamed with little reflexive space for contemplating its epistemological, methodological and practical predicaments. Competing "conceptions about sustainability are all too often black and white rhetorically" (Bunten, 2023: 73) - the crude reality is that the current socio-economic-ecological moment is a conglomerated *grey* area.

### A Tale of Two Circular Economies

Translating to 'bundles' in Swahili, *mitumba* refers to the circulation and trade of SHC in the East African littoral. Excess garment donations from Western charity organisations are exported and repackaged into plastic-wrapped bales by Sub-Saharan reclamation merchants (Chalhoub, 2012; Mitumba Institute & Research Centre, 2022). Internationally-sourced goods are then transported in-land to the market stalls of street vendors, expanding the scale and scope of informal economy networks. In 2019, 185,000 tonnes of pre-owned garments were exported to the Swahili coast and repurposed into sellable commodities (Baraka, 2021). In a turbulent economic context, these informal sector activities constitute "creative responses" (Kinyanjui, 2006: 3) to the rampant privatisation of state-owned enterprises in the 1980s and 90s. Approximately 2 million informal Kenyan workers, alienated by their differential access to financial, social and

political resources, turn to large open-air markets for subsistence (Mitumba Institute & Research Centre, 2022). Income-generating opportunities are subsequently hinged on face-to-face communication between local mitumba traders and customers. In contrast, the latest frontier of SHC trade in Western markets takes a *digital* form. Technological uptake and innovation have enabled the experiential shrinking of the fashion industry, birthing fertile conditions for e-commerce success (Harris, 2022). Alongside donating, *reselling* pre-worn garments in the digital economy forges an additional profitable pathway to circularity.

Whilst mitumba networks are tightly held together by multiple intermediaries, "the adoption of e-commerce helps producers sell directly to consumers" (United Nations COMTRADE: 2021: 4) without passing through several wholesalers and brokers. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a pressing need for web-based shopping beyond conventional, in-store means (Harris, 2022). Customer-to-customer resale platforms such as Depop (headquartered in London) and Poshmark (headquartered in California) thus saw exponential engagement and growth in the face of social distancing (Sandler, 2021). Digitised consumption spaces and practices in a post-pandemic present remain regionally concentrated in the Global North - for instance, shopping app Vinted ships 'globally' insofar as North America and Western Europe are concerned. In contrast, the stretching out of the mitumba industry across transnational borders constitutes "an essential link connecting developed and developing countries" (Sumo *et al*, 2023:1), where waste from the former is revalued and repurposed by the latter. These distinct cases have been scarcely examined in literature on their own, and *never* analysed side-by-side.

In summary, this literature review has dealt principally with well-documented sustainability-related tensions, as well as addressed growing concerns toward the phenomenon of greenwashing in the global fashion industry. However, blatant knowledge gaps attest to "an

[increasing] need to both map empirically and discuss theoretically how commodities are re-made through secondary processes of production” (Brooks, 2013: 12). More specifically, absent from extant literature is an inductive, case-study approach which compares and contrasts the (un)sustainability of physical and virtual SHC marketplaces in a cross-cultural context. This novel piece not only seeks to complicate one-dimensional framings of CEs as *decidedly* eco-friendly but also discover understudied and uncomfortable geographies of the apparel trade that are deserving of closer analysis.

## METHODOLOGY & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The sustainability paradox is once flexible and fragile and must be methodologically approached as such within this thesis and in future research. Invoking a place-based and multi-scalar analysis, the thesis at hand foregrounds two case studies - the mitumba industry in East Africa, and Western-based second-hand e-marketplaces. In the spirit of second-handedness itself, my methodology will draw exclusively upon *secondary* sources rather than primary ones - reusing, recycling and repurposing datasets beyond their original context allows for the reproduction of new knowledge structures with “differing degrees of granularity” (Law, 2005: 6). Whilst remaining cognisant of source credibility, secondary data collection will synthesise ethnographic, sociological, geographic and economic materials. Though this thesis is not explicitly an empirical endeavour, it draws heavily on empirical research and pictures with context specificity to tease out cross-cultural case comparisons. Additionally, the use of multidisciplinary analytics in this thesis can “contribute to [forming] “bridges” between the area of consumption research and other fields of knowledge” (Zampier, 2019: 3127). I have therefore aligned my conceptual apparatus with political-ecological, decolonial and feminist perspectives - these norm-critical analyses of power aim to *destabilise* the epistemic core of hegemonic knowledge-production:

## Political Ecology

*“I am sympathetic with those who may hurriedly wish to get on with the “next thing” as well as those who are still not sure what political ecology is, let alone whether it has a purchase on a special kind of explanation. And yet if political ecology is no longer relevant, no one bothered to tell the world” (Robbins, 2012: vii).*

Emerging in the 1970s, political ecology (PE) is an “epistemologically plural field of social scientific research” (Tetreault, 2017: 1) which *locates the political*, and *politicises the locational*. Tetreault (2017) maps the intellectual genealogy of PE thought as a neo-Marxist structural approach to global environmental management. PE introduces a form of problematisation which (re)conceptualises “our terrestrial existence as an entangled living-together” (Congdon, 2019: 4), where contestations between distant and diverse locales mediate nature-society relations at different scales (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2021). The oeuvre of post-development thinker Arturo Escobar (1984), a seminal figure in anthropology and PE, builds a conceptual apparatus for disrupting essentialist and universalist ‘truths’ in the neoliberal capitalist age. A product of developmentalism and its canonical insularity, the axiom of ‘underdevelopment’ serves to “manage and control and, in many ways, even create the Third World politically, economically, sociologically and culturally” (Escobar, 1984: 384). Ecological crusading in the Global South thus functions as a geopolitical tool of control in the ever-expanding machinations of Western colonial-capitalism. Following Escobar’s analytic thread, this thesis contributes to an ongoing pedagogic project to overcome the depoliticised and decontextualised dogmatism of orthodox development theory. Fashion, as a material-discursive construct, is doubly productive of and produced by human/environment encounters. To develop a critical awareness of SFC and its socio-economic-ecological stakes, I employ a “relational multi-scalar analysis” (Çağlar & Schiller, 2021: 206) which theorises global processes and lived

experiences as *co-constitutive* and *co-constructed*, rather than as exhaustive binaries of humanity.

### Decolonial Theory

*“We must now confront the following question: On the other side of the international division of labor from socialised capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text: can the subaltern speak?”* (Spivak, 2004: 16).

The attending theoretical framework will also unfold with recourse to decolonial ethics, to situate the “formative non-presence [of coloniality] in the structures of embodied, present, here-now realities” (Congdon, 2019: 1). Empire’s spectral logics of domination reproduce subjects with marked Otherness across space and time (Medak-Saltzman, 2015). Decolonial subtexts seek to de/reconstruct the “totalising meta-texts of colonial knowledge” (Mutua & Swadener, 2004:1) floating in the epistemological vacuum of Western solipsism. Beyond white horizons of analysis, the ‘presencing’ of “unessentialisable knowledge that is produced at the ex-centric site of neo/post/colonial resistance” (Mutua & Swadener, 2004: 1) resists the occularcentrism of Eurocentric vignettes. There is theoretic synergy between decolonial theory and PE, where colonial edifices of power, difference and being (Quijano, 2000) serve as the constituting crux of exploitation in its neoliberal incarnation today. Belonging to the decolonial debate, Sultana (2022) conceptualises the ennui of climate coloniality as “politically galvanising force [afflicting] formerly colonised and brutalised racialised communities in the developing world” (Sultana, 2022 :2). Transmogrifying subalternatised lands and bodies into sacrifice zones for colonial excesses, so-called ‘development’ interventions reproduce hierarchical world orders. The thesis at hand adds momentum to the burgeoning literature on decolonial *fashion* discourse by locating the toxification of ecosystems, territorial

encroachment and resource scarcities within an uninterrupted continuum of coloniality/modernity (Quijano, 2000). Accordingly, analysis will be grounded in phenomenologically real and viscerally lived experiences of those rendered invisible, ignorable and unintelligible.

### Feminist Reflexivity

“When our lived experience of theorising is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other” (Hooks, 1991: 2).

Finally, this thesis enacts feminist reflexivity as an incisive reading tool for contemplating the sustainability paradox and its broader theoretical implications. To ‘do’ reflexivity from a feminist standpoint is to engage in a “conscientized qualitative practice [which contemplates how] research may have touched, affected and possibly transformed us, as professionals, as researchers and as persons” (Palaganas *et al*, 2017: 430). By encouraging a culture of introspection, third-wave feminism in the early 1990s shifted away from the epistemological myopia of bourgeois liberal feminists lacking a reflexive critical eye. As a result, feminist reflexive practices are “a commitment to inquiry about how we inquire” (Ackerly & True, 2008: 695) where knowledge production is (re)approached as an iterative, dialogical process between researcher and research object. In recognising the positionality and biography of the self, feminist scholars not only resist diagnostic framings of reality as universalised truths but strategize how to *unlearn* such ‘truths’. Epistemic excursions within this reflexive terrain can offer blueprints for transformative, theory-based action “if utilised accordingly by policy-makers and development implementers” (Reay, 2007: 611). I as a feminist must remain cognisant against uncritically reproducing the reductive, hegemonic biases I seek to dismantle - whether intended or not. This calls for navigating cross-cultural contexts with a

self-reflective sensitivity, and in turn moving *beyond* tired dichotomies which polarise global dynamics along North-South fault lines.

## ANALYSIS

### Who Sustains Whose Development?: Mitumba Trade and SHC e-Marketplaces

Technocratically-inflected development projects often work in silos, producing an insular knowledge economy that favours observable market dynamics at the expense of socio-ecological phenomena. Constructing a counter-frame, however, situating SHC trade within the materiality, sociality and spatiality of everyday life calls into question its own sustainability. When analysed side-by-side, mitumba trade and SHC e-marketplaces expose the multiple manifestations and scales of the sustainability paradox *beyond* narrow econometric dimensions. The forthcoming, case-based examples capture the productive tensions between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ SFD in complexly greenwashed spaces:

#### *Mitumba Trade: Fashionably Late Colonialism*

Mitumba supply chains unfold in geographically uneven and unequal ways, bringing into sharp relief the ongoing coloniality of global commodity markets. According to the 2021 United Nations COMTRADE database, nearly 150 million SHC items valued at \$26 million were exported to Kenya from high-income European countries. High-grade bales can be sold for as much as €400–1,000 per tonne (Chandran *et al*, 2020) - despite appearing like a lucrative opportunity for socio-economically marginalised communities, official trade data in its statistical robustness often fails to capture the embodied *messiness* of international development in a neocolonial context. On-the-ground investigations are better positioned to interrogate the heavily advertised sustainability of CEs - recent fieldwork conducted by grassroots organisations Changing Markets Foundation, Wildlight and Clean Up Kenya (2023) demonstrates their heuristic value and utility. In-depth interviews with mitumba vendors in Nairobi’s Gikomba market revealed that an

estimated 20-50% of bales are “unusable, culturally or climatically unsuitable, size inappropriate, unsellable, soiled or damaged beyond repair” (Changing Markets Foundation *et al*, 2023: 30). Beneath celebrated models of circularity, Gikomba functions as a pressure-release valve for the excesses of Western production/consumption. Developing country importers have minimal negotiating power against EU/UK brokers over the endlessly variable and unpredictable conditions of charity donations, yet are nonetheless sustained by asymmetrically traded commodities for economic survival.

According to the Communist Party of Kenya (Mghanga, 2021), this crippling dependency produces ‘second-hand citizens’ whose material outcomes are mediated by capitalist-colonial greed. Commodity-dependent countries are thus kept on a geopolitical leash by historically-exploitative industrialised nations, (re)fashioning the ‘Other’ across space and time. In a similar vein, Shivji (2007) critiques the role of NGOs and charities in Nairobi as “the ideological and organisational foot soldiers of imperialism” (Shivji, 2007: 12). Ladened with white saviourism and virtue signalling, interventionist humanitarian discourses occlude the pervasive expansion of colonial-capitalist power in the fashion industry. (Neo)colony subjects, situated inequitably within this charitable paradigm as beneficiaries of Western benevolence, are thus driven into indebtedness and servitude to Global North interventions. Greenwashing practices enable the rebranding of long-standing commodity dependence traps as ‘sustainable development’ projects, allowing key players to escape culpability for exacerbating North/South polarity (Sultana, 2022).

The presumed synonymy between ‘circularity’ and ‘sustainability’ is further complicated by the ecologically unequal exchanges in and through which mitumba trade networks thrive. Waste is intrinsically political - “acting through its unique materiality as an environmental artefact and social relic” (Verón & Cornea, 2016:1). The term ‘waste colonialism’ refers to the transboundary



movement of waste and pollutants from Global North to Global South regions (Wang *et al*, 2022). Akin to the territorially acquisitive regimes of settler-colonial rule, purportedly ‘underdeveloped’ countries are structurally positioned within the Global North-South waste trade as *disposal sites* for items deemed unsafe, unprofitable or unworthy of possession. Malik (2015) endorses an affective approach which conceptualises waste as a spectre of settler-colonialism. Embedded in concrete localities, waste demarcates the boundaries between centre/periphery, civilised/barbarian and self/other. The wasted lands *and* wasted lives of so-called former colonies are inter-discursively constructed as “the political other of value, worth, productivity, efficiency, reason, purity and cleanliness” (Malik, 2015: 1). Racialised landscapes in the Anthropocene are thus tormented by coloniality’s impulse to sanitise, tame and expunge undesirable forms of existence from the Western body politic. Within this hauntological frame, mitumba bales today carry the formidable weight of colonial baggage; rural Kenya has been subsequently transformed into a wastescape marked by topographies of excess, refuse and abandonment.

Palimpsestic greenwashing tactics are employed to efface unpalatable histories and presents of environmental injustice, where shipments of unsellable garments are strategically mislabelled as ‘recycling’ to evade regulatory scrutiny. This was exemplified by Fashion For Good’s (2021) Sorting for Circularity Campaign - a collaborative project between UK textile recycling companies and popular charities like Bernardos, British Red Cross and Marie Curie. Nathan’s Wastesavers, a stakeholder in this high-profile sustainability initiative, selectively disclosed that over 98% of the processed material is either reused or recycled. Enshrouded in seemingly impressive statistics, the harrowing picture on-the-ground renders these greenwashed claims *indefensible*. An estimated 1 in 3 SHC imports from EU/UK brokers is a form of non-biodegradable or toxic plastic waste in disguise (Changing Markets Foundation *et al*, 2023). Overflows of waste synthetic clothing are

either found sedimented in informal landfills (*Appendix B*) or strewn across the Nairobi river - a far cry from the corporate environmental responsibility these tokenistic schemes espouse. These findings are congruent with a Greenpeace International report (Cobbing *et al*, 2022) on the life-cycle of mitumba bales from donation to the dump site. The Port of Mombasa lacks adequate infrastructure to recycle or incinerate 150–200 tonnes of textile waste a day; the clogging of Global South waterways with micro-plastic fibres has deleterious effects on both environmental quality and public health. Thus, greenwashing practices tied to consumer-driven global waste politics (Wang *et al*, 2022) mask the fissures and tensions endemic to local mitumba marketplaces.

### ***SHC e-Marketplaces: Digitising the Green Dream***

Mapping the margins of fashion also renders visible the “cultural cleavages and social hierarchies [...] that fragment the social body” (Breward, 1995: 3) in the Global North, where sustainability paradoxes in the online field of green consumption must equally be interrogated. With an average of 27,000 monthly searches for ‘eco-fashion’ in 2019 (Year in Fashion Report, 2019), predominantly Western consumers are actively seeking out a ‘greener’ aesthetic vis-à-vis digital economy resources. Google searches for sustainability-coded keywords like “pre-loved” and “organically sourced” have risen 75% year on year (Year in Fashion Report, 2019). Emerging marketing literature on the online thrift boom in New Zealand has investigated this “inflated and overestimated significance of sustainability in fashion” (Bunten, 2023: 66) pertaining to curated Instagram resale pages. Overtly ambiguous buzzwords and platitudes capitalise on the cognitive dissonance of the self-proclaimed ‘ethical consumer’ as they grapple with the (un)ethical consequences of their shopping behaviours. Subscribing to the ad-hoc green marketing strategies of Instagrammers that propagate “the belief that thrifting is always sustainable; overconsumption and all” (Bunten, 2023: 67) thus absolves the self of moral guilt.

Whilst consumers find comfort in perceiving their green purchasing decisions as ethically infallible, online thrifting “exists in the same messy reality as everything else” (Bunten, 2023: 21; Nyugen, 2021) - this unavoidable messiness is also writ-large in the case of Depop. Self-defined as a “community-powered fashion ecosystem that’s kinder on the planet and kinder to people” (Sook Speaks, 2022), the London-headquartered fashion resale app has attracted a growing climate-conscious demographic through its rhetorically flourished mission statements.

Against the grain of greenwashed claims, Lonergan (2021) reimagines Depop a performance space which critically stages “the tension between consumerism and sustainability [which] are also embedded in and compete in a capitalist system” (Lonergan, 2021: 1). Depop merchants have become increasingly implicated in drop shipping scandals, where SHC consumers intending to make environmentally-friendly purchases are inescapably bound up in fast fashion supply chains (Chandler, 2021; Dore, 2021). ‘Dropshipping’ refers to the procurement and redistribution of fast fashion garments in bulk from third-party Chinese websites like Shein and Aliexpress (*Appendix C*). Whilst officially banned in 2020, an underground dropshipping culture is transforming Depop into “yet another capitalised space [...] regardless of the ethical and environmental effects it may have” (Cannon, 2021: 1). With a language of nurturance, low-quality items are greenwashed as ‘one-of-a-kind’, ‘pre-loved treasures’ or ‘ethically sourced’ to pander toward an eco-conscious clientele base. Buyers are ironically funnelling money back into the pockets of very profiteers they reprimand, exacerbating the attitude-behaviour inconsistencies evident in green consumption statistics (ElHaffar *et al*, 2020). Online resellers subconsciously imitate the market-oriented shrewdness of fast fashion giants, co-opting the language of sustainability as a buffer against defamatory greenwashing accusations.

Further widening this attitude-behaviour gap, the notion of *contamination* also hinders the realisation of a truly circular fashion system in Global North digital economies. A proponent of the symbolic interactionist approach, Goffman (1971) describes contamination as the encroachment or defilement of one’s bodily territories via visual, haptic, aural, olfactory and other channels of sensuous experience. Interpersonal disgust associated with negatively contaminated objects serves the purpose of maintaining social divisiveness and moral hierarchies in everyday life. Applying a Goffmanian-informed framework to CE dynamics, user-object interactions with second-hand goods constitute both a physically and symbolically contaminative act. Intimate corporeal exposure or proximity to “body markings on used clothes such as perspiration stains or odour [...] from the previous owner” (Roux, 2006: 1) threatens to undermine the territorial integrity of the self. Whether real or imagined, this palpable fear of contagion attributed to the social biography of SHC imposes a psychophysical barrier to circular material flows. Relativising the stigma of second-handedness in the online context, Zampier (2019) exposes how so-called ‘luxury’ fashion e-commerce platforms strive to distance themselves from the depreciated image of charitably-donated clothing as ragged, unhygienic and impoverished. Product descriptions like ‘semi-new’, ‘flawless’, ‘highly sought after’ and ‘authentic’ project an orderly, safe and sanitised vision of consumption onto the materiality of used items (Zampier, 2019). Evoking a ‘feel good’ response from potential buyers, these lexical-grammatical choices “reflect less contact with the self of the former owner, lessening the fear of contamination present in the consumer imagination” (Zampier, 2019: 3134). The ritualisation of online thrifting in the ‘luxury’ segment thus functions as a “reference of elite distinction” (Zampier, 2019: 3136) insofar as the garments in question meet or exceed an acceptable aesthetic standard.

## Green Cloud, Silver Lining?: Opportunities for Empowerment in SHC Networks

Whilst such insights invite critical reflection on the problematics of the sustainability paradox, fashion as a globalising medium “both exploits and empower, sometimes through the very same practices” (Dawisha, 2016: 3). In pursuit of such nuance, the epistemic hegemony enjoyed by orthodox economists and mainstream developmentalists will be especially probed in this sub-section. Reducing citizens to mere consumers, historical grand-narratives evince that globalisation is a homogenising, unchecked juggernaut - one which absorbs peripheral regions into a Western-dominated monoculture of consumption. Development theory's normative preoccupation with an ‘overdeveloped North’ and an ‘underdeveloped South’ offers prescriptive diagnoses of global inequality in terms of false dichotomies (Liebes & Kats, 1990). Exploitation coursing through and from the international fashion industry is, and often rightly so, attributed to the *de facto* triumphalism of colonial-capitalist expansion. However, the contradictions and dialectics of sustainability politics are too-often collapsed into an ideological tug-of-war between the ‘rich’ and ‘poor’. Precluded by these cultural imperialist discourses are micro-moments of multiplicity, alterity and uncertainty which transpire “in the complex global interconnectedness” (Özekin & Ariöz, 2014: 189; Tomlinson, 1999) of everyday life. The great globalisation debate need not be tangentially argued as a unidirectional imposition from the ‘West to the rest’ - the phenomenon is better understood as a co-constructive, interpretive encounter between distant and diverse localities (Giddens, 1990).

The sharpness of the development theorist's critical edge is blunted by his unwillingness to explore both the disabling *and* enabling effects of globalisation. SHC supply chains both disarticulate and renegotiate multidirectional flows of goods, capital, people and ideas; co-constitutive layers of value and meaning are inscribed onto commodities as they get dis/re/embedded in everyday contexts of (re)use.

CE activities are imbued with a certain generative potential in both the mitumba and SHC e-marketplace contexts, where “the linear narrative that equates the West with modernity” (Krishna, 2009: 154) becomes increasingly prone to *slippages*. With recourse to feminist pedagogical practices of *active listening*, microscopic attention will be paid to women's personal narratives emerging from the ground - these fragmented sources of phenomenological knowledge remain dynamic and oppositional to the dictates of neoliberal hegemony. Shedding light on the possibilities that survive and thrive in paradoxes challenges the “inward-looking neoliberal foreclosure of our political possibilities” (Mavelli, 2019: 17), to which this thesis contributes.

## Economic Empowerment: The Making of Female Micro-Entrepreneurs

### Mitumba Trade

For mitumba actors, CE platforms function as a tool for mobilisation in an age of economic instability, political apathy and state fragility. Income-insecure East Africans are confronted by deep-seated structural inequalities in accessing material resources and opportunities. Whilst examining the effectiveness of structural adjustment economic reforms is beyond the scope of this paper, corruption remains deeply entrenched in the kleptocratic and illicit power structures of sub-Saharan Africa (Chalhoub, 2012). Informal sector enterprises, however, constitute a “life chance institution that underprivileged women and men have created to provide them with income and employment” (Kinyanjui, 2006: 7). Local players resist graduation into formal employment as a reactionary move against neoliberal state interventionism. Run by the masses rather than the elite, “the entrepreneurial energy and resourcefulness of the African people” (Rivoli, 2005: 201) has a constitutively *democratising* effect. In the secondary towns of Eldoret and Nakuru in Kenya, female traders are sectorally concentrated in informal employment due to culturally-constructed gendered norms “which have made it difficult for women to find jobs in

the formal sector” (Chalhoub, 2012: 3; Rono, 1999). Through a feminist economic lens, CEs tap into the entrepreneurial potential of women with historically limited resources. The two excerpts below have been taken from different interviews with prolific female traders in the mitumba scene:

*“I worked in the procurement department but I did not feel like I was growing. It felt like I was caught up in a time warp. There was no challenge. [...] I felt wasted. I felt I could do more with all those hours as I hate wasting time”* (Christine, 2019).

Catherine Muringo and Christine Wanjiru, nicknamed the ‘Queens of Mitumba’ by Nation Media Group (Kanake, 2019), detail the trajectory of their joint business from its beginning roots. Christine experienced career stagnation at a parastatal as a procurement officer, as evidenced by the quote above. Recognising what no longer served her following a life-threatening spinal injury, she and her close friend Catherine ventured into Nairobi’s Gikomba market in search of promising market opportunities. The sectoral transition from formality to informality precipitates an alternative empowerment pathway for economic independence - one that is all-too-often obscured by the gendered norms, practices and values of corporate patriarchal structures (Kabeer, 2008).

*“The second-hand clothing sector [...] employs so many people. In our country where unemployment is a challenge that we have, in this informal sector, we are able to accommodate all kinds of people [...]. Having very few or fewer opportunities...majority of them you find here, especially uneducated women. The society - mostly the economic side, the political side - they just see the big picture”* (Mary, 2023).

In a recent documentary titled ‘Mitumba: An Industry for Everyone’ (2023), experienced trader Mary relays the lived experiences of vulnerability among socio-economically marginalised Others. Working in the mitumba industry since 2016, Mary illuminates the profoundly political nature

of SHC ecosystems and the gendered/classed dimensions which coalesce in their production. The differentiated positionalities and abilities of actors to accrue capital are not only generative of disparity, but that disparity helps in turn to (re)structure employment patterns in Kenya. Income-earning activities in these seemingly marginal spaces are grassroots efforts to achieve an open and level playing field. Underestimating the growing size and tenacity of mitumba marketplaces, large-scale development efforts to ‘formalise the informal’ are met with opposition from small-scale entrepreneurs. Complementing Mary’s narrative, Chalhoub’s (2012) participant observation with Gikomba brokers captures the vibrant competition landscape of the Nairobi textile economy. A fundamental lack of governmental support establishes, exploits and exacerbates a “widening gap between citizens and the state” (Chalhoub, 2012: 16); mitumba thus serves as a transformative instrument for helping ‘all kinds of people’ cultivate transferrable entrepreneurial skills.

### SHC e-Marketplaces

SHC e-marketplaces like Depop and Vinted are emblematic of a new frontier of employment, well-suited to the dynamic and digitised lives of the UK’s youth (Richards, 2020). As outlined previously, the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery spurred an exponential increase in cashless transactions (Sandler, 2021). However, new opportunities for working, shopping and communicating have emerged concomitantly with new constraints - pandemic-related market aftershocks have been compounded by an ongoing cost-of-living crisis (COLC). Inflationary pressures have hit Britons with varying velocity, where the increasing inaccessibility of everyday essentials has given rise to overlapping and intersecting crises of inequality (Fitzpatrick, 2022). Sparke and Williams (2022) argue that this ‘co-pathogenesis’ of COVID-19 and the COLC is symptomatic of a deadly neoliberal disease mutating across the global body politic. Constructed, buttressed and underwritten by Conservative politics, state apathy toward “people who are teetering on the edge of destitution”



(Fitzpatrick, 2022: 18) has led to the creation of household survival mechanisms. In this vein, SHC e-marketplaces provide an extra-state avenue of financial support in a co-pathogenically infected Britain (Sparke & William, 2022). The following two extracts illuminate the activation of entrepreneurial subjectivities among those at the forefront of neoliberal-driven development:

*“As the cost of living rises, thanks to soaring energy bills and everyday items going up in price at the supermarket, I’ m so glad I’ ve got this extra income. [...] I realised I wasn’ t going to be able to [...] pay the bills. One day as I opened my wardrobe, it hit me. I had so many clothes I’ d bought when I was pregnant that were hanging there barely used. Everything, even the maternity bras, was in great condition. [...] We’ ve all benefited from my selling [...]”* (Roberts, 2022).

Kerensa Roberts and their ten-year-old daughter Delphi established their lucrative businesses on Vinted, Depop and Facebook Marketplace amidst spectacular increases in living costs. Kerensa’s article in *The Sun* (2022) reveals an uneasy amalgam of austerity, responsibilization and income poverty which the COLC has crystallised. In the same breath, Kerensa draws attention to the kinship-based affective dimensions of online SHC trade. In rearticulating intimate items like used maternity bras and socks as tradable commodities, the Essex-based family resist being played as mere political pawns in the neoliberal game. The Roberts’ business has particularly benefited from Vinted’s ‘zero selling fee’ policy - a commission-free service which protects sellers’ direct earnings from being staked by the platform itself.

*“The £15 I earned for some of Isabel’ s old shorts meant I could fill the fridge without worrying too much. It’ s gut-wrenching having to choose between food and fuel. But if its sink or swim, I’ m determined to swim. Well, doggy paddle until the crisis is over. But who knows when that will be? [...] So these selling sites have become a lifeline”* (Clare, 2023)

With inflation testing the tensile strength of already-tightened purse strings, resale platforms like Vinted, Facebook Marketplace and Gumtree have forged ‘lifelines’ for mother-of-two Clare Berrett (2023). Through the prism of single motherhood, feminist sociology conceptualises welfare retrenchment “a virulent contagion where patriarchy and poverty enmesh” (Cohen & Samzelius, 2020: 129; Koch, 2018). Punitive workfare policies, ideologically underpinned by neoliberal ethics of market fundamentalism and competitive individualism, have “historically failed to integrate the needs of parents or indeed motherhood into the equation” (Cohen & Samzelius, 2020: 129). Especially vulnerable to intersecting vectors of misogyny and classism, single mothers are presented with the constrained choices of either reconstituting themselves into ‘responsibilised’ economic agents, or falling through the cracks of productivity-standardised employment models (Kabeer, 2008) - to “sink or swim” according to Clare. What is both heartbreaking and inspiring in Clare’s account is her desperation to make ends meet via alternative economies of consumption. The exclusion of marginalised groups living within austerity Britain is thus simultaneously constitutive of inclusive, entrepreneurial opportunities for those excluded.

### ***Social Empowerment: SHC and its Place in Collective Solidarity***

Failing to move mainstream knowledge paradigms in a nuanced direction, economic preoccupations with a market-transformed globalism continue to reduce ‘empowerment’ to synecdoches of material access and poverty alleviation. Facile, instrumentalist explanations geared toward individual success fall short of conceptualising labour markets as *microcosms* of non-market social relations. Deploying a feminist decolonial lens, dominant logics of empowerment “modelled on hegemonic Western norms of neoliberal individualism [obscure how] local communalism” (Adolfsson & Moss, 2021: 624) informs the very understanding of the self. Departing from these economic essentialisms,

decolonial feminist theorising invokes a malleable definition of empowerment as an irreducibly plural process of grassroots transformation from the bottom-up. Encapsulating both individual *and* collective dimensions of power, such nuance “accounts for conceptual and experiential planes that [hierarchical] epistemology has been blind to” (Istratii, 2017: 7). The shorter length of this sub-section is an embodiment of the relatively understudied social life of CEs, where secondary analysis inevitably will be compounded by a lack of ethnographic experimentation in the hegemonic development canon. Nonetheless, attention will be given to shared cross-cultural patterns of social empowerment emerging in the case studies at hand:

### **Mitumba Trade**

Disillusioned with the rhetoric that global trade expansion must “abandon affect” (Ogawa, 2005: 206) in favour of modern economic rationality, Ogawa (2005) investigates how SHC supply-chain linkages are woven inextricably into the social fabric of Mwanza City, Tanzania. Informal market activities are intimately tied to informal livelihoods, where mitumba workers subversively reposition themselves vis-à-vis community-based arrangements “to satisfy both profits and affection” (Ogawa, 2005: 206). Close group memberships are forged between street traders and middlemen, creating tight-knit communities of not only entrepreneurs but also *friends*. Stable credit relationships are horizontal, not hierarchical - everyday moments of “newly [created] urban group solidarity” (Ogawa, 2005: 211) allow the informal actor to forgo a defaulting counterpart in climates of market volatility. In harnessing local networks to accrue both financial and social capital, alternative livelihood opportunities based upon reciprocal community life are creatively negotiated for the working poor. The intimate, affective experiences of mitumba entrepreneurs undercut the one-sided dialogues that dominate international development circles.

### **SHC e-Marketplaces**

The affective life of SHC reselling is also pertinent in the Global North context, where e-

commerce platforms offer a critical community-building tool for non-normatively bodied users. Globalisation’s technological affordances have given rise to alternative frontiers of engagement and experience, where “queer media ontologies and practices” (Shaw & Sender, 2016: 1) resist the gravitational pull of (cis-hetero) normativity and its mediated spatialities and temporalities. The ‘queering’ of contemporary mediascapes like Depop challenges the binary social world’s impulse to demarcate non-conforming identities and (hi)stories within the boundaries of unintelligibility. An article by media platform Refinery29 (Huber, 2020) illuminates how Depop has opened its digital doors for gender-variant and sexually-diverse bodies. Inside Depop’s burgeoning queer-inclusive community, fashion is a self-discovery project where “identifiers like clothing help the queer community stand in solidarity with each other, without having to say much or nothing at all” (Huber, 2020: 1). Both offline and online, queer aesthetic is a provocative blend of self-expression, shared identity and inverted sartorial norms (Isherwood, 2020). In a similar vein, avant-garde fashion resellers offer a safe and affirming environment for LGBTQIA+ creatives. “Rather than a site simply for commerce” (Duffy, 2021: 1), the proliferation of ‘archival’ Depop and Instagram fashion accounts makes (counter-)space for the artisanal, the experimental and the unconventional. The political art of *fashioning oneself* in gender-bending SHC is a source of collective empowerment, particularly for abjected selves grappling with dysphoria.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Perils and Possibilities of (Un)sustainable Fashion**

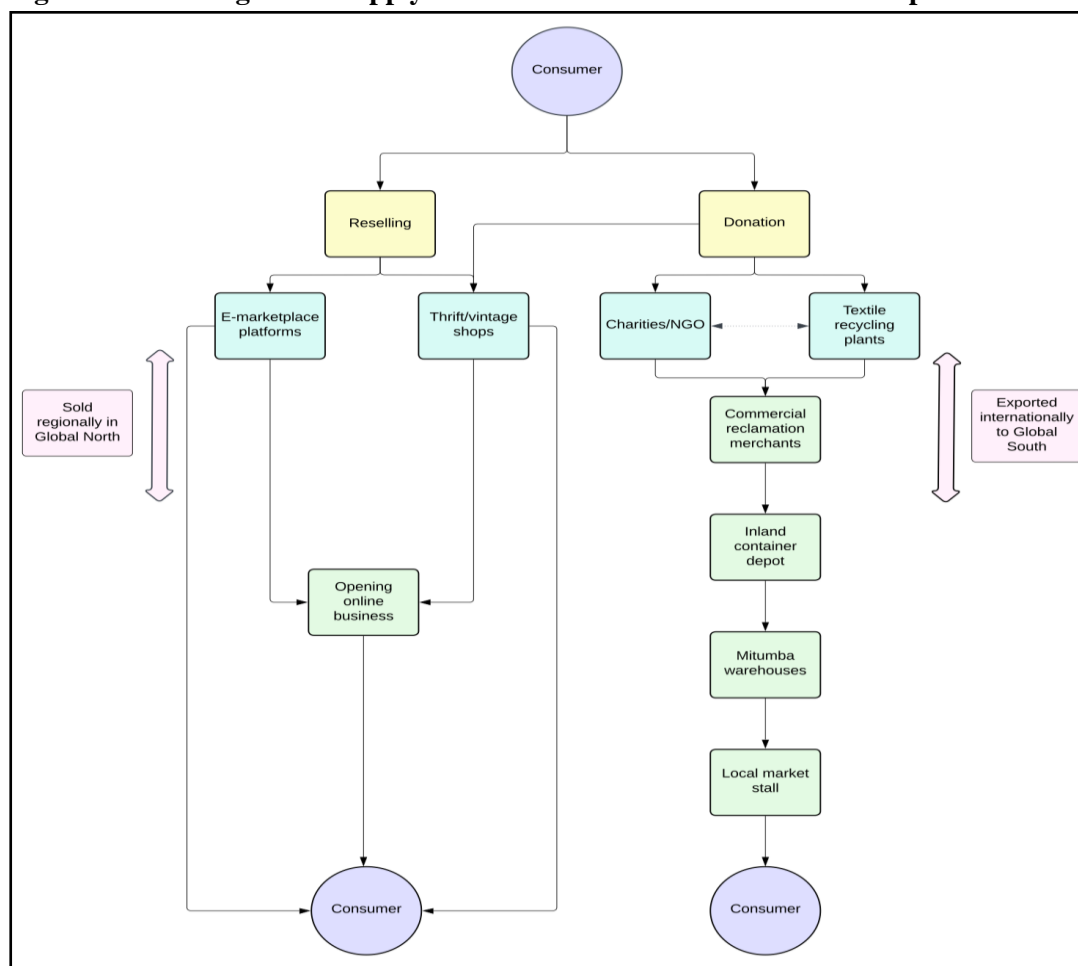
#### ***Capturing a Comparative Snapshot: Cross-Cased Clothing***

As outlined previously, CE literature tends to examine physical or online SHC marketplaces separately but never simultaneously. In particular, the limited research that exists has yet to display these two distinct supply chains in diverse

geographical contexts in a *single* visual representation. For pedagogical purposes, I have attempted to create a tree diagram (*Figure 1*) which delineates the “organisationally and geographically complex webs” (Hess & Coe, 2006: 1207) of SHC trade. This diagram below not only illustrates the multiplicity in a material object’s social life (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2015) but invites us to consider the embeddedness of *consumers* within market-driven networks in the Global North and South. Both business models are largely dependent on consumers harnessing their purchasing power to procure SHC, or engaging in

reuse-based practices like donating to prolong garment life-cycles. However, the limits of diagrammatic representations are such that they are static, idealistic and one-dimensional. Sustainable growth trajectories - in their lags and inertia - instead serve as a proxy for the uneven geographies that condition their possibility. Moving from theory to practice “to bring about [these] perfect circles of slow material flows” (Corvellec, 2022: 421) pictured in such diagrams requires coordinated efforts between global, regional and local stakeholders - a task that proves arduous in a geopolitically splintered world.

**Figure 1: Tree diagram of supply chains in mitumba and SHC e-marketplace contexts**



**Source:** (Author, 2023)

SFD is thus not solely an economic dilemma, but an epistemological conundrum, a socio-ecological challenge and the root of existential suffering for minoritised groups. Mitumba and SHC e-marketplaces are inter-discursively connected by promoting ecologically exultant discourses,

where the regulatory capture of ‘circularity’ in the hands of technocratic expertise depoliticises ongoing, situated conflicts. However, conditions of paradox in each case materialise in asymmetric, heterogeneous ways that are undergirded by culture-specific worldviews. Demonstrating

synergy between PE and decolonial theory, greenwashing tactics produce self-congratulatory stories which uphold colonial-capitalist architectures in a globalised East Africa. (Neo)imperialist philanthropic superstructures, in their masqueraded piousness, seek to entrench themselves in contemporary geo-social relations to reify a “specific universe of intersubjective relations of domination under a global Eurocentred capitalism” (Quijano, 2000: 343). Post-consumer textile waste functions as a topographic marker of a zombified settler-colonial (non)presence, where paternalistic donor/donee relationships revitalise imperialist subject-production across spatio-temporal dimensions. Circling back to decolonial sensibilities, Bhabha’s (1994) concept of ‘time-lag’ creates a counter-space for exposing indexical traces of colonial time in the contemporary moment. Recognising temporal caesuras and continuities in Western historiographies of linear progress challenges (neo)colonial discursive domination, invoking “the return of the subject as agent” (Bhabha, 1994: 185). In this vein, the philanthropic ‘wishful thinking’ of SHC charity-giving is productive of and produced by a Western fascination with “African inferior otherness” (Bonsu, 2009: 1) - a spectral of universal suffrage beneath a god-like humanitarian gaze. Constructing this moral economy of guilt thus absolves development ‘experts’ of accountability for prioritising the technical over the political, the orthodox over the heterodox, and the formal over the substantive.

Whilst greenwashed discourses of ethical infallibility emphasise the purportedly ‘charitable’ dimensions of mitumba trade, SHC e-marketplaces in the Global North seek to distance their public image from constructs of charitableness and sympathy *entirely*. Wearing used garments constitutes a modality of territorial encroachment into the space of the self, where the notion of second-handedness is pejorative, slovenly and intimately linked to contamination politics (Goffman, 1971). Grappling with the neo-Marxist theoretical underpinnings of PE (Tetreault, 2017), consumption values and

practices in online thrifting spaces are structured along class-based axes of polarisation. There are elitist and pretentious overtones in taking the moralistic high-ground by vehemently opposing fast fashion, yet exclusively wearing ‘pre-loved’ items that are perceived hygienic and fashionable enough for consumption. Foregrounded by the case studies above, the paradoxical trappings of sustainability exist unapologetically in the rhythms of the everyday. The solutionist impulse of policy stakeholders to explain away deeply structural problems with simplistic quick-fixes obscures the inherent difficulties of triangulating clashing economic, social and environmental demands. Unreflexive contributions to CE literature inevitably stumble in the darkness of political naïveté, to the detriment of “local actor-spaces in environmental conflict” (Murdoch & Marsden, 1995: 368).

Allowing for greater conceptual rigorousness, reapproaching pedagogy with reflexive risk-taking entails recognising the value of the researcher self’s situatedness in the politics of hegemonic knowledge (co)production (Johnson, 2009). I am cognisant of my own axis of identity as a student - and product - of Western/Anglophone higher-education, in its deep-seated entanglements with “colonial imagery [...] reproduced in the social sciences and philosophy” (Castro-Gomez, 2002: 276). To prevent parading the appearance of a new theoretical edge whilst inadvertently reproducing “problematic canonical structures of knowledge [in] education” (Welch, 2011: 4), this thesis offers a counter-reading of SFD its lived concreteness. Hegemonic framings of globalisation must not grow so abstract that they reduce complex phenomena into a seesaw-like dialogic between the Global North and South - a seesaw that is perpetually tilting *Northwards*. Across different cultural contexts, SHC trade may in fact constitute a vital mechanism “to survive and possibly thrive in the face of uncertainty, perturbations, and shocks” (Mavelli, 2019: 1). Undercutting Eurocentric historiographies, mitumba has the capacity to reconfigure traditional divisions of labour/mobility for so-called ‘Third World



women' with historically low purchasing power. Applying a feminist decolonial lens, informal female entrepreneurs competitively exploit the "structural hole" (Burt, 1992) on the constitutive outside of formal economies to disrupt culturally-inflected virtues of femininity. In a similar vein, the markedly gendered character of austerity politics in a COLC Britain is met with resistance by (im)possible personal narratives from SHC entrepreneurs in the digital market. Recasting women as *knowledge-producing* actors - rather than as passive objects of study - amplifies the strained voices of those silenced, inferiorised or ventriloquised by Western androcentric thought (Spivak, 1988).

Adding further resonance to Spivak's seminal oeuvre, the communitarian dimensions of SHC marketplaces unearth conditions for counter movements to emerge and re-articulate hegemonic social orders. Teasing out the textured intersections between fashion consumption practices and alliance politics, emancipative forms of collective solidarity can be excavated from "the silent, silenced center of the circuit marked out by epistemic violence" (Spivak, 2004: 25). Recognising the intersubjective and interpersonal consciousness of the subaltern, livelihood support systems offer affective resources "for those who must learn to find new possibilities for themselves and the world" (Isherwood, 2020: 230). Bearing only limited resemblance to dichotomous framings of Global South traders as oppressed and Global North traders as unscrupulous, winners and losers within/beyond these global cohorts are *only* tentatively sketched. These messy realities of SHC trade are thus a testament to the charisma of globalisation, and its shifting realignments between *peril* and *possibility*.

### **Fashioning Green(er) Futures: Navigating Conditions of Paradox**

Albeit demanding, materialising idealised visions of a 'zero waste' society into realistic projects necessitates ameliorating the attitude-behaviour gap hindering environmental, economic and social transformation. Discussion thus far has

contemplated how the notion of second-handedness refracts the lifeworlds of differently-located and differently-embodied actors. Upon investigation, the sustainability paradox in its multi-scalar manifestations has proven itself a vexing challenge - one that is beyond the scope of this piece to resolve (or escape). In what follows, I focus more explicitly on the nature of paradox, and more importantly, how to *navigate* paradoxes creatively to facilitate transformative change. Maintaining the definition outlined earlier - "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persists over time" (Cunha & Putnam, 2019: 95) - paradoxes in their conceptual looseness and multiplicity allow for the drawing of multi-layered, open-ended conclusions. Regrettably however, determinist, inevitablist and defeatist logics which conflate paradox with *paralysis* fall short of speculating "all the mutually exclusive outcomes that comprise the outcome space" (Norton, 2021: 1). The normative impasse of cynical paradox scholars in "choosing one pole over the other ('either/or'), denying the tensions or engaging in defensive mechanisms" (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017: 337) leads to an *a priori* acceptance of bleak, dystopian prognoses for our future. As Cunha and Putnam (2019) explicate:

*"When scholars treat paradoxes as "things" to be solved or controlled, they ignore the instability and duality embedded in them (Farjoun, 2010). In this way, paradox loses its processual edge and its dynamic, time-sensitive, and path-dependent properties [...] Paradoxes are local, embedded, and sensitive to time and history, and, therefore, aligned with particular circumstances. Scholars need to capture these circumstances in developing practical recommendations for responding to paradoxes" (Cunha & Putnam, 2019: 100).*

Applying this refreshing perspective to the context of sustainability, unburying foreclosed possibilities for alternative (post-)Anthropocene futures requires strategising how to live meaningfully within - not without - conditions of paradox. More productively, making sense of

paradoxes in their vast plurality calls for a ‘both/and’ approach which embraces and vacillates between *all* poles (Knight, 2015). Reapproaching alarmist sustainability discourses with reality-shifting, conceptual flexibility enables the “border crossing from academe to activist worlds and all the marginal places in between” (Harcourt *et al*, 2015: 159). Whilst this thesis resists discussing a breadth of recommendations in the interests of conciseness, I shall briefly demonstrate the utility of widening one’s gaze with a ‘both/and’ mindset that triangulates *multiple* expertises:

### ***The Global***

Fashion-focused contemporary online activism prevails at “the fold of the political, the personal and the aesthetic” (Geczy & Miller, 2015: 42). The existing and emergent climate catastrophe has “open[ed] the door to political avant-gardism” (Scheuerman, 2022: 791) beyond traditional, in-person activist spaces. Conceptualising digital identity as an extrapolation of physical identity, Street (2022) advances that social media platforms constitute a critical locus of discursive political consumerism. If everyday communicative efforts in the digital economy dictate the fashionability of clothing trends, then by virtue of technological design, these very platforms and their social capital can be harnessed to forge *transnational* advocacy networks. For instance, the global non-profit movement Fashion Revolution (2020) is animated by Instagram’s “formative element of sharing” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 760). Fashion Revolution’s viral ‘#whomademyclothes’ campaign scrutinises both greenwashed propaganda and structural labour injustices rife in the apparel industry. Encouraging ethically-motivated, concerted consumptive practices like ‘boycotting’ (the punishment-oriented avoidance of irresponsible companies) and ‘buycotting’ (the reward-oriented purchasing from responsible companies) fosters a global politics of accountability (Fashion Revolution, 2020; Street, 2022). Thus, leveraging the transformative potential of frontiers like Instagram in the contemporary digital toolkit can

render both *collective* and *connective* action more accessible to a geographically dispersed audience.

### ***The (Supra)national***

Without being normatively grounded in regulation however, mediascapes of civic engagement run the risk of being denigrated to acts of ‘slacktivism’ - lazily engaging in low-cost, low-risk and low-reward modes of performative activism (Yu-Hao & Hsieh, 2013). Eliciting the ‘both/and’ paradigm, a consumer-driven impetus for eco-fashion advocacy online should be supplemented with institutional pressures, practices and procedures to effectuate desired systemic transformations. In 2022, the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles put forth an all-encompassing policy framework for *building* circularity into supply chain management (Michael, 2022). Pledging a statutory commitment to sustainable resource procurement and transparency by 2030, the Commission as of late is drafting concrete mechanisms for mitigating and preventing waste flows at the supranational level; for instance, the proposed EU Digital Product Passport legislation aims to bring about greater ecological footprint traceability (Centre For Sustainability and Excellence, 2022). By compiling information on textile life-cycles into a digital database with multi-stakeholder access, informed decision-making by environmentally-conscious consumers will subsequently be *fine-tuned*.

### ***The Local***

With recourse to my earlier criticisms, bureaucratic inertia to the culturally-situated, viscerally lived realities of imposed circular ‘solutions’ ultimately proves ineffective. Legislative commitments at the EU level require tangible, on-the-ground linkages to local SHC traders and their situated knowledge (Cobbing *et al*, 2022). Macro- and micro-level approaches to SFD need not be diametrically opposed (‘either/or’), but rather synergistically embraced as two sides of the *same* coin (‘both/and’). In this light, Ghosh (2022) maintains that simply banning mitumba imports to pursue protectionist ends may inflict more harm than good on East African

locales crucially dependent on informal enterprises for subsistence. Wanduara (2018) puts forth grassroots-level recommendations which simultaneously preserve and productively assist this important source of employment. Given their abundance and diversity in Kenyan biomes, the possible commercialisation of indigenous plants into biodegradable textile commodities may alleviate resource-use pressures whilst fostering economic sustainability. The decolonial imperative to rejuvenate local textile technologies destabilises the steep decline of Afrocentric ontologies, cosmologies, axiologies, and aesthetics in (neo)colonial world-making projects (Mazama, 2001). Reclaiming Kenyan heritage textiles to champion neglected, indigenous artisanal skills thus offers a culturally-responsive counterforce - one that is both material and discursive (Rabine, 2002).

Thus, overly deterministic renderings of the (post-)Anthropocene world suffocate the epistemic space for negotiating *alternative* human/environment futures (Knight, 2015). Insofar as they structural disempower its subjects, the 'unfreedoms' of sustainability paradoxes can be *undone* by the self-cancelling, malleable conditions of paradoxes themselves. Opposing sustainability goals in SHC trade need not be considered paralysing ('either/or'); rather, such ambivalence prompts a more vigorous search for hybrid, multi-perspectival responses ('both/and'). Accordingly, reimagining SFD as a top-down/bottom-up model of structural change may yield more fruitful results that trickle-down *and* bubble-up.

## CONCLUSION

In this brief concluding remark, I would like to once again reiterate the *heterogeneity* of SHC marketplaces at both the macroscopic and microscopic scale. The aforementioned examples are uniquely tied to their respective contextual factors which continually reshape sustainability efforts and outcomes - presupposing cross-case pattern consistencies between *all* CEs would be an uncritical contribution to academe. Further exploratory case-study findings, whether

qualitative or quantitative, are imperative to bridge these pervasive knowledge gaps. Despite its lack of generalisability, the present thesis is nonetheless a testament to the demonstratively flexible, fragile and fickle nature of sustainability paradoxes. Adding to a burgeoning body of scholarship focused on broadening our understanding of SFD, the purpose of this pedagogical endeavour has been threefold:

Firstly, I have sought to capture a comparative snapshot of two relatively understudied SHC marketplaces in their place-based contexts. To interrogate normatively-inflected policy advocacies of CE business models *beyond* greenwashed discourses, the thesis has addressed the unthought-of consequences of SFD for differently-located and differently-embodied actors. Interweaving the analytical threads of PE, decolonial theory and feminist reflexivity has formed the backbone of my attendant theoretical framework. Secondly, I moved toward a more textured appreciation of paradoxical tensions by engaging in an alternative, phenomenological reading - one that is receptive to the ever-shifting reorientations between hegemony and resistance in the contemporary moment. Far from homogenising and homologating, globalisation is in fact *disruptive* and *disjunctive*. Exposing the un/remaking of power at the critical junctures of everyday life, I have identified celebratory micro-moments and opportunities in SHC networks by foregrounding counter-hegemonic personal narratives. Thirdly, I have contemplated the epistemological shortcomings of approaching sustainability paradoxes as irresolvable and intractable *gridlocks*. Excessively ruminating over apocalyptic scenarios of impending environmental doom contributes little more than *fear-mongering* to sustainability literature. The discovery of paradoxical frames may instead offer richly nuanced portraits of possibility. We must remain accepting of and energised by alternate (post-)Anthropocene possibilities, even this necessitates some reliance on speculation, imagination or optimism. To that end, I shall draw this investigation to a close with a fresh critical reflection from social populist philosopher

Charles Handy (1994) - I hope these provocative final words galvanise scholars, practitioners and activists alike to *reorient* conventional inquiries of sustainability in a more dynamic, de-hegemonised direction:

*We need a new way of thinking about our problems and our futures. If the contradictions and surprises of paradox are going to be part of those futures, we should not be dismayed. The acceptance of paradox as a feature of our life is the first step toward living with it and managing it*" (Handy, 1994: 17).

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Table displaying the ‘seven sins of greenwashing’

The Sins of Greenwashing	Explanation
Sin of the Hidden Trade-off	A claim suggesting that a product is ‘green’ based on a narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues. Paper, for example, is not necessarily environmentally-preferable just because it comes from a sustainably-harvested forest. Other important environmental issues in the paper-making process, such as greenhouse gas emissions, or chlorine use in bleaching may be equally important.
Sin of No Proof	An environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification. Common examples are facial tissues or toilet tissue products that claim various percentages of post-consumer recycled content without providing evidence.
Sin of Vagueness	A claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer. ‘All-natural’ is an example. Arsenic, uranium, mercury, and formaldehyde are all naturally occurring, and poisonous. ‘All natural’ isn’t necessarily ‘green’.
Sin of Worshiping False Labels	A product that, through either words or images, gives the impression of third-party endorsement where no such endorsement exists, fake labels, in other words.
Sin of Irrelevance	An environmental claim that may be truthful but is unimportant or unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products. ‘CFC-free’ is a common example, since it is a frequent claim despite the fact that CFCs are banned by law.
Sin of Lesser of Two Evils	A claim that may be true within the product category, but that risks distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole. Organic cigarettes could be an example of this Sin, as might the fuel-efficient sport-utility vehicle.
Sin of Fibbing	Environmental claims that are simply false. The most common examples were products falsely claiming to be Energy Star certified or registered.

## Appendix B: Post-consumer textile waste sedimented into the soil at the Kawangware dumpsite in Nairobi, Kenya



Appendix C:; The image on the left has been retrieved from third-party platform Shein, where a clothing item is being sold for £6.49. The same shirt, exemplified by the image on the right, is being dropshipped on Depop for nearly triple the price

