La Mode des Milles Collines: gathering critical perspectives on the globalized fashion industry from Kigali's design scene following the nationwide secondhand clothing ban

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ABSTRACT

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Alexandre Prince

Each year, ships filled with tons of discarded secondhand clothes from Europe and America arrive to the coast of East Africa to be sold, often ending up in colossal landfills due to the poor condition in which they arrive. The government of Rwanda, following its policy guidelines of *agaciro*, or autonomy, decided to ban the importation of all secondhand clothing in 2018, with the objective of developing the local fashion industry. This considerably transformed the fashion landscape in Rwanda, and although this initial objective of stimulating production for local consumption did not succeed, it did contribute in propelling Kigali-based designers to new heights in the international fashion scene. This thesis analyzes this Kigali fashion scene as a way to garner critical insights from its designers on the way that the industry works, and on ways in which they break free from the power dynamics imposed by colonization and globalization.

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Introduction: Turning Away from the Runway: why Kigali's fashion scene matters

It's not just about wearing nice clothes and fashion. It's about our dignity.
We should be proud to say "Look, I'm not wearing anything from abroad."
Sonia Mugabo, pioneer of Rwanda's fashion industry (Gambino, 2017)

The African continent is the world's largest destination for the importation of second-hand clothes. However, due to the constantly decreasing quality of garments produced in the current fashion ecosystem, fewer and fewer of these clothes arrive in usable condition and end up contributing to the landfills that are piling up across the continent (Sumo et al., 2023, p.4701). These huge sprawling landfills are symbols of African countries' unfavorable position in the fashion geography, especially in the East of the continent, which is mainly considered at the start of the supply chain, by providing cheap labour, and at the end, for the discard of unused clothes. In 2016, a joint attempt by East African countries to extract themselves from this dynamic by banning the importation of second-hand clothing to encourage domestic production was shut down by trade sanctions imposed by the United States' government, resulting in what some media outlets called a "falling out" or a trade dispute" (John, 2018; Gambino, 2017). Out of the five countries which planned to phase out importations, only one actually enacted its ban on the importation of second-hand clothing in 2018: Rwanda. From the get-go, this bold decision garnered the interest of both journalists and fashion researchers, who saw in it the perfect context to observe a country's attempt to attain its autonomy and extract itself from the firmly rooted power dynamics of the fashion industry.

Already existing work that investigated Rwanda's unique sartorial situation, has included fieldwork (Fashion Revolution, 2021) and interviews with specific actors from the local fashion scene (Kagayo, 2022). The publications that emerged from such research offer interesting perspectives on the economic reality of Rwanda's fashion industry in the years following the important ban. However, the scope of the present thesis is not to address these questions, since I do not have access to the same means and methods as the aforementioned researchers. What interest me is how events, practices and discourses that emerge in the Rwandan fashion context travel across borders. In an age of globalization

where "the accelerated transnational movement of people, goods, capital and information necessitates that the ideas of cultures and communities are less and less bound to actual locations" (Haehnel, 2017, p.172; Appadurai, 1996), what matters is how critical perspectives that emerge in the periphery of the fashion industry are able to carry weight despite the extremely strict geographical hierarchy on which the fashion industry rests (Crewe, 2018). Before, when the means of communication weren't as numerous and accessible as they are now, fashion communication was dependent on major actors such as the fashion press and as such was mostly unilateral, from the major cities to the various corners of the world. Now, a country like Rwanda gets to have more and more presence on the international scene due to the outreach of individual designers and actors, whose presence online or work in international projects permits them to be in conversation with the well-established powerhouses of France, Italy and the likes.

As such, the objective of this research is to find out what are the critical perspectives on the fashion industry that emerge from the Rwandan context. These perspectives manifest themselves in numerous different sectors, in policy and in the arts. The first part of this thesis will serve map out the power dynamics of the global fashion industry, and situate Rwanda within this geography, as these dynamics are essential to understanding flows of garment production and discard. The second part will then take a deeper dive into the Rwandan context by exploring and analyzing Kigali's fashion scene through existing publications and news articles, to see if the discourse that shapes this fashion scene offers critical perspectives on the way the contemporary fashion industry operates, for example in relation to its waste generation, unequal distribution of value or its treatment of workers, or if it reinforces already existing norms and structures. The objective of this section is to see if a more sustainable model of clothing production can be found in Rwanda after the country attempted to delink itself from the dominant globalized network of garment production and discard. As such, it consists of an exploration of the tensions and possibilities of the Rwandan model, in terms of decolonization and delinking, as well as how it fits into the context of the globalized fashion industry. The third and last part will follow the path of two prominent designers from Kigali whose work extends beyond borders, which are useful case studies to observe the interaction of locally based designers

with the global fashion industry through numerous communication channels, such as social media, news outlets or exhibitions. These designers were selected due to their relatively strong international presence, but also because they harbour a very distinct relationship to the fashion industry, since the first is a commercial designer and the second is an artist whose work aims to criticize the industry : Moses Turahirwa of *Moshions* and conceptual artist and costume designer Cedric Mizero.

Fashion Studies and its Critique: developing a postcolonial lens on fashion

By gathering these critical perspectives, I hope to situate this study within the broader field of postcolonial thinking around fashion studies. This field of inquiry developed significantly in the last 10 years, as a response to existing biases and inadequacies in fashion studies as a field, which many saw as being complicit with, or at least not critical enough of, the contemporary fashion industry and its excesses.

The roots of what was to become fashion studies can be found in the 1980s, when pioneering historians such as Daniel Roche and the aptly named John Styles turned their analytical lens towards clothing and dress in order to observe the practices of daily life in 18th century Europe (Taylor, 2013, p.15). In the years that followed, theoretical encounters with students of "textile conservation, design or museum collections" as well as professionals in "cultural studies, sociology or social anthropology with training in semiotics and symbolic analysis" led to the inception of new interdisciplinary fields of study centred around dress (Taylor, 2013, p.8). Many publications followed suit such as *Costume, Cloth and Culture, Textile History,* the *Winterthur Portfolio*, the *Journal of Design and Studies in the Decorative Arts*, the *Material Cultural Journal* (Taylor, 2013, p.8).

Yet, it took one daring publication to centre the conversation around a word that academics were pretty set on avoiding up until that point: *Fashion Theory*. Drawing from critical theory and applying it to the world of fashion, this journal (launched by the renowned historian and curator Valerie Steele, whose 1985 publication *Fashion and Eroticism* was a

landmark work in the field (Steele, 1985)) paved the way for the various *fashion studies* departments that can now be found around the world (Taylor, 2013, p.9). This short genealogy of *fashion studies*, as presented by historian Lou Taylor, who was herself instrumental to the development of the discipline, is the widely accepted narrative of the birth of this field of study.

In parallel to this (very British) genealogy, North American cultural studies scholars also showed a great deal of enthusiasm in the 1980s and 90s towards the critical study of fashion. These two decades saw the advent of decisive works like *Seeing Through Clothes* (Hollander, 1978), *Fashion N Passion* (Myers, 1982), *Adorned in Dreams* (Wilson, 1985) and *Fashion and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernity* (Faurschou, 1987).

In both traditions, studies and critique of fashion were mainly happening in a national context or through a Western lens, with the exception of pioneering postcolonial fashion studies such as in the work of Julia Emberley (Emberley 1987, 1998) and Chantal Nadeau (Nadeau, 2005). For this reason, recent years saw an increased focus on exploring the colonial underpinnings of the discipline, with scholars initially affiliated with this field starting to call into question some assumptions upon which the structure of *fashion studies* rests. To do so, one of the first and most central questions that they had to ask was: what is fashion?

Since *fashion studies* emerged from the historical study of European dress, does this mean that fashion is an exclusively European phenomenon, as some early twentieth century thinkers such as Henri Bergson and Adolf Loos believed? (Gaugele & Titton, 2019, p.16) One of the earliest researchers to try and answer the question was Canadian anthropologist Sandra Niessen, who firmly believed that "contemporary fashion cannot understand itself without the negation of a conceptual other; it depends on the concept of "not-fashion" to define itself." (Niessen, 2003). This necessary negation of the Other is a colonial underpinning that Western thought inscribed into fashion in the 19th and early 20th century. This idea is notably present in the work of psychanalyst John Carl Flügel, who is still widely read in fashion studies as one of the first authors to study fashion through the lens

of psychology. According to Flügel, Western dress was "modish", subject to constant changes as a product of dynamism, while the rest of the world wore "fixed" dress, reflecting societies anchored in traditional values (Flügel, 1950, p.129-30). Although the falseness of these assertions has been proven numerous times since then, some key texts in *fashion studies* maintain this dichotomy between "fashion" and "anti-fashion" by borrowing from Flügel's theories (Polhemus & Procter, 1978, p.15).

This biased conception of fashion is extremely significant, and its impact goes way beyond theoretical consideration, for as anthropologist Angela Jansen said:

> the way fashion, as a noun, is being defined according to a temporality (contemporaneity), a system (of power) and an industry (of capitalism) particular to modernity, coloniality is inherent to its definition (Jansen, 2020, p.816)

Therefore, by reinforcing this current definition of fashion, scholars in *fashion studies* can end up contributing to the extremely destructive practices that are perpetuated by the system of power and the industry, such as systemic racism, worker rights violations and the constant production of a ludicrous amount of waste[1] (Millet, 2021).

These postcolonial critiques of fashion studies highlight the destructive aspect of the contemporary fashion industry, whose historical roots at the crossroads of capitalism and colonialism in the mid 19th century will be explored in the first section of this thesis. While this complex history and its effects are often addressed by postcolonial fashion scholars, few venture into the practical by looking at alternative systems to reform our relationship to garments. One of the greatest weaknesses of contemporary fashion studies is that it tends to neglect the materiality of clothing, focusing instead on aesthetics. Materiality is mainly covered by scholars who have a clear focus on sustainability and choose to explore garments throughout their whole life in the consumer chain, often through a design or

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[1] A 2018 report by the United Nations Economics Commission for Europe showed that 85% of textiles end up in landfills, amounting to an astonishing 21 billion tons of waste every year, while garment production is responsible for 20% of global water waste as well as more than 10% of all global carbon emissions (UNECE, 2018).

political economy lens (Fletcher, 2014; Fletcher & Tham, 2016; Millet, 2021). This has led to fundamental publications on the horrific and exploitive conditions of fashion production, including sweatshops and modern slavery (Millet, 2023). However, much research remains to be done on the other end of the production chain, by looking at the patterns of discard. To understand fashion in all of its complexity, one has to look at it all the way down the line: from its conditions of production all the way through to its discard cycles, at its least glamorous : the dumping ground.

Despite remaining relatively understudied in fashion studies, waste is a fundamental concept when it comes to fashion, since it is a direct byproduct of the way fashion operates. Pioneering fashion scholar Joanne Entwistle demonstrated in *The Aesthetic Economy of Fashion* that "fashionability, by its very definition, is about the incessant search and construction of the 'new'" (Entwistle, 2009, p.160). This incessant search results in an incessant stream of waste as a by-product, since, as Payne adds, "Once fashion trends move on, the aesthetic value of a garment declines. It becomes waste." (Payne, 2012, p.205). It is also important to acknowledge that in addition to the discarding of garments, which is the most substantial part of fashion waste and the one that is the most often covered by literature, there is also a significant amount of pre-consumer waste generated by the garment industry which often remains unaccounted for :

> "It is believed that 15% of fabric intended for clothing in the global apparel industry ends up on the cutting room floor (EDGE, 2019), and that of the 400 billion m^2 of textiles made annually, 60 billion m^2 becomes manufacturing waste (Fashion Revolution, 2015)" (Crang. et al, 2022, p.544)

In their very insightful article that follows how pre-consumer textile waste is used as a combustible by brick kiln operators in Cambodia, which results in severe respiratory problems for the kiln workers and the people living in the surroundings, Crang et al. call for a greater attention to these forms of fashion waste that appear even before the garments hit the shelves, and which remain important yet "less visible and less documented geography of preconsumer waste that are an important part of fashion's discardscape." (Crang et al., 2022, p.544). I believe that this perspective from sustainability studies and from critical geography must become a necessary and integral part of every study on

garments, especially as we have now entered an era that is now dictated by the industrial activity of humans (Haraway, 2015; Yusoff, 2018).

The urgency of this situation requires a significant paradigm shift, to allow *fashion studies* scholars to oppose rather than encourage this destructive system. Some of them are already leading the charge, like the aforementioned Sandra Niessen, who proposed in 2020 the concept of "fashion sacrifice zones" to better take the measure of the destruction caused by the Western-led hegemonic fashion system:

> "I propose that the vicinities/cultures classified as having "non-fashion,", a construct of colonial and capitalist fashion, be recognized as "fashion sacrifice zones." […] fashion sacrifice zones are dress traditions, and their makers, associated with fashion's Other half, that are destroyed for and by the expansion of industrial fashion. These zones facilitate industrial expansion because they are a source of cheap labour and also indigenous design (commonly appropriated) important for style change. They also serve as markets when indigenous dress is replaced with industrially produced dress. And finally, they are the major sites of waste disposal, including secondhand clothing." (Niessen, 2020, p.865)

Niessen drew this conception of sacrifice zones from her own research as an anthropologist alongside the Batak living in North Sumatra, Indonesia, where local dress and weaving traditions are endangered as weavers are hired to work in textile plants for the globalized fashion industry, which leave them with too little time or money to develop and use their craft (Niessen, 2009). Sacrifice zones are often paired with human rights violations, as is the case in China's north-western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, whose integration into fashion's global supply chains and the subsequent treatment of the Uyghur minority has made it "fashion's latest sacrifice zone" according to London College of Fashion professor Flavia Loscialpo (Loscialpo, 2023).

These "sacrifice zones", however, are not passive entities merely awaiting their destruction by the invisible hand of the market. They can be rich and complex site of struggles, in which meaning is being made and un-made according to various cultural and economic

pressures. East Africa is home to many of these sacrifice zones, from the often-photographed Dandora landfill of Kenya to the "Garment Industry's New Frontier" in the industrial textile mills of Ethiopia, where the local government advertises to foreign investors with brochures proudly offering "Cheap and skilled labour: 1/7 of China and ½ of Bangladesh" (Barrett & Baumann-Pauly, 2019, p.9). In such a region that often suffers greatly from the international pressure of the fashion industry, Rwanda is a very unique site. As a country, it shares some characteristics with these sacrifice zones, such as very low wages and issues with waste disposal, while also shaping itself an enviable spot in international fashion circles thanks to some star designers and the patronage of certain American and European celebrities that allow Rwandan designs and patterns to be recognized and shine around the world. This thesis aims to take a deep dive in this ambiguous and unique context, which can be interpreted both as a "sacrifice zone" and as a site of resistance.

Transnational Fashion Research in the digital age: the importance of mixed methods

Due to the complexity and plurality of the current topic, a diversity of methods is required. Informed by my own background as an historian who studied the fashion press, discourse analysis of news coverage will play a key role in this thesis. Despite being a recent phenomenon, the Rwandan fashion scene has received considerable attention from both local and international press. Media spotlights on Rwanda's fashion scene have focused on various topics, from political issues such as the frictions that the secondhand clothing ban caused with the US (Agence France Presse, 2018: John, 2018) all the way to "people press" scoops such as the presence of Prince Charles and Duchess Camila at the front row of the local fashion week, which gathered international attention on Kigali's fashion scene (Chiorando, 2022). This constitutes an interesting corpus from which I can develop an understanding of the positioning and representations of Kigali's scene in the global geography of fashion. Secondhand studies, such as Fashion Revolution's thorough report on the clothing ban, also provide very rich assessments of the situation which is why they have to be integrated into the research (Fashion Revolution, 2021).

Although this corpus is vast and plural, it is important to keep in mind that all of its components were produced in very specific and distinct contexts, whether these texts come from academia, local press, international press, fashion sustainability NGOs, and so on. These are documents that discuss existing power dynamics between actors or nations, yet are themselves entangled in such dynamics. As such, to conduct research effectively, I have to identify and factor in the various positioning, as well as my own, of these elements of "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988, p.587). I will be employing three cultural study methods: political economy, visual analysis and textual analysis. Political economy is defined as such by media professor Aeron Davis as the way in which

> "cultural production is investigated on the macro level as an industry. Here it is assumed that the conditions of production shape cultural content. The researcher therefore attempts to link cultural outputs to the economic, industrial and political factors that shape the organizations and industries which then produce culture." (Davis, 2008, p.53)

In the context of the present research, "culture" is a broad term that encompasses many things. Naturally, it includes both the material and symbolic nature of garments, as they are produced, circulated and discarded around the world following the unique geography of the globalized fashion industry. But it also includes people's attitudes around dress, garment production and discard, which also plays a strong role in structuring these flows. Since this cultural production constantly circulates through the activities of cultural intermediaries such as design, marketing and advertising, which are an integral part of the fashion system, the contemporary fashion industry constitutes a prime example of a "circuit of culture" (du Gay, 1997). Clothing, fashion and style as a specific circuit of culture have been closely entangled with visual media, through fashion photography and film since the inception of these technologies and evolved alongside them (Lascity, 2021, p.120).

The advent of digital and social media constitutes both an extension of this phenomenon by greatly increasing the reach of mass media, and a small revolution in that it represents a large democratization where cultural production is no longer limited to brand or institutions (Lascity, 2021, p.7). This is very significant in relation to the fashion geography, since although historical leaders in fashion media such as *Vogue* also employ

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these new media, they now have to share this space with emerging, and sometimes critical, voices from all around the world. Due to these links, the circuit of fashion is constantly generating and disseminating images, which, like the aforementioned knowledge, are also shaped by the contexts in which they emerge and in which they are received. As such, visual analysis is a necessary element in order to study the message embedded in these circulating images of garments.

As is the case for knowledge, images are embedded in the power relations inherent to the context in which they are created, which is why they are best studied using a critical visual methodology, which Gillian Rose defines as "an approach that thinks about the visual in terms of the power relations that produce, are articulated through, and can be challenged by different ways of seeing and imagining." (Rose, 2023, p.5). Following Rose's methodology, I will not only be paying attention to the images themselves, but also to their sites of production and circulation. It is important to specify that the attention here will not be exclusively on fashion advertising and runway shows, as has often been the case in fashion studies, but also on circulating images that directly address the materiality of fashion, such as the highly mediatized photographs of dumping grounds in Kenya or in Ghana. Even images from a science fiction film can carry a strong political message against certain politics, such as in the groundbreaking Americano-Rwandan afrofuturist musical *Neptune Frost*. It is only through this broad constellation of diverse images and viewpoints that we can reach a real picture of the fashion industry in its globality, beyond the carefully curated veneer crafted by fashion photographers and advertising agencies.

In the same way that images are generated and disseminated through the cultural circuit of fashion, so does the texts that equally contribute to the construction and dissemination of fashion. Roland Barthes was the first to explore fashion as a semiotic system, by analyzing how fashion magazines used language to inscribe and associate specific characteristics to garments (Barthes, 1967). The fact that Barthes was able to successfully together a complex theory on fashion by working exclusively from texts that described garments shows how the fashion industry manages to successfully divorce the idea of clothes from their materiality. And although this research aims to bring the focus back towards the materiality

of the garments, text must be accounted for, since the various testimonies of the fashion context in Rwanda, whether they come from news sources or NGOs, are mostly text-based and require a critical approach.

In summary, to be able to research such a complex research object, I decided to use a multimodal method, divided in three main sections. The first will be a media analysis of fashion in Rwanda, drawing from the numerous publicly-available news article released in both English and French by the international press. Naturally, my lack of ability with the Kinyarwandan language limits my corpus and may also create a bias where the designers that acquire the most international visibility are the ones who are highly represented in English-language media. The second will be a policy analysis of Rwanda's secondhand clothing ban, informed by political economy and a critical reading of both the policy documents and public information about the policy decisions, and an analysis of a report published by Fashion Revolution emitting policy recommendations. The third will be a comparative case study of two designers, Moses Turahirwa and Cedric Mizero, who are two internationally renowned Kigali-based designer whom I selected for this thesis due to the critical weight carried by their work. For a larger project, it would have been interesting to explore more voices, as many other designers contribute to painting the rich environment of Kigali's fashion scene, but I believe that having these two constitutes a strong anchor point for the scope of this master's thesis.

Now that all of the necessary epistemological and methodological considerations have been laid out, it is time to delve into the heart of the subject by first observing how the historical trajectory of the fashion industry in the West has shaped the conditions for Rwanda's contemporary fashion context.

Chapter 1 : Capital, Empire and Waste: the birth and globalization of the contemporary fashion system

By banning the importation of secondhand clothing in 2018, the government of Rwanda made a significant rupture with the historical patterns of resource distribution associated with the fashion industry. In order to understand the significance of this rupture, and therefore its worth as an object of study, it is necessary to first take a look at the way in which this industry operates at a global level, including the power dynamics between European fashion capitals and African countries.

1.1. The interwoven trajectories of fashion, empire and capital

There is no doubt that *fashion*, both as a concept and as an industry, was an instrument of colonial power. A quote by Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), Louis XVI's First Minister of State, is often invoked by historians to highlight how important this industry was to the economic development of France: "fashions were to France what the mines of Peru were to Spain" (Chrisman-Campbell, 2015). And in the same way that the exploitation of the mines of the Potosí was entirely reliant on enslaved labour, so were the textile crop necessary to constantly supply France's ever-changing fashions (Beckert, 2015). Such a process would not occur only in French colonies, but in all territories occupied by European powers, where entire ecosystems could be reshaped according to the metropolis' economic needs. This is what the *British Cotton Growing Association* did in Nigeria during its colonial period, by encouraging the monoculture of cotton destined for export at the detriment of crops beneficial to the local population, while actively supressing the development of a local textile industry (Onyeiwu, 1998, p.234).

In addition to the material plunder of resources, there was also a constant appropriation and assimilation of symbols, patterns, techniques and styles. Indeed, fashion was promoted by imperial powers as a way to showcase their degree of "civilization" and sophistication. It was touted as an instrument to civilize, and imperial powers would often violently impose

their style of dress on subjects, as was the case in unveiling campaigns by the French in Algeria or with indigenous children in Canadian residential schools (Fanon, 1959; Mernissi, 1987; Ottman, 2020). But it would also extract and collect elements from those same people to integrate into their own fashion production, which was then displayed as an instrument of prestige for other European powers to see during world fairs. In her in-depth study of the 1925 and 1931 Paris World Fairs, Michelle Tolini Finamore highlights the way in which fashion and dress were used to both exacerbate the *otherness* of colonial subjects and strengthen the prestige of the colonizer, through a lavish display of exotic materials and styles taken from colonized cultures (Tolini Finamore, 2003, p.346). During the 1931 World Fair in particular, fashion magazines of the times such as *Femina* hailed the dawn of a new style dubbed *colonial modern*, which was presented as a "collaboration rather than appropriation and a fusion of two cultures rather than hegemonic exploitation" (Tolini Finamore, 2003, p.355) while ignoring the power dynamics of who gets to produce the clothing and who benefits from its sales. This type of thinking remains very prevalent to this day, with famous designers such as John Galliano invoking this "fusion of two cultures" to present collections rooted in orientalism and the exoticization that strongly maintains this cultural binary between the West and non-West (Reinach, 2012, p.62). Although they have transformed over the ages, these links have structured the way in which the fashion industry operates today. Oslo-based fashion historian Audrey Millet, in her book *Le livre noir de la mode*, demonstrates the centuries-old process of destroying the various know-hows and professions related to garment-making by the ever-increasing pressure of mass production and profit generation as capitalism gained traction from the 17th century onwards (Millet, 2021, p.53).

These dynamics of accumulation in certain areas and destruction in others, which accompany the historical construction of the fashion industry, has shaped the way in which this industry currently extends its global presence. In her significant monograph on *The Geographies of Fashion*, Louise Crewe has presented how the fashion industry rests on a form of commodity fetishism that depends on "forms of geographical association and dissociation," which "has enabled the fashion industry to bring certain spaces and places into high relief while masking the global inequalities, abuses of labour standards,

ecological damage, and environmental catastrophes that underpin the industry." (Crewe, 2018, p.59). Fashion brands thrive through association with glamour and beauty, by curating their image through photoshoots, luxurious storefronts and celebrity deals, while externalizing all of the human and material exploitation associated with a garment's pre- and post-consumer life. These dissociated spaces of exploitation constitute what Crewe dubs the "dark underbelly" of fashion (Crewe, 2018, p.9). However, as this underbelly is becoming increasingly harder to hide due to highly mediatized events, such as the collapse of the Rana Plaza or the pictures of the Dandora landfill in Kenya, a new form of dissociation is also happening: luxury fashion brands blame *fast fashion* brands as the sole actors responsible for this unethical conduct. And while it is true that fast fashion companies are extremely exploitative and that they use the global division of labour to drive down costs, Crewe demonstrates that

> luxury firms are in the midst of a significant wave of vertical global acquisition activity in order to control the value chain more effectively and thus to manage and protect both their reputation capital and, most critically, their most ethically and environmentally damaging activities. Vertical integration and the acquisition of global tanneries and animal factories ensure that firms can protect their carefully crafted brand identity from the prying eyes of the market (Crewe, 2018, p.60).

Although this preoccupation with brand image and respectability is the recent product of an increasing demand for accountability by the public, the exploitive dynamic that it is trying to mask is the product of long lasting and still ongoing colonial relations. It is therefore important to note that the globalized fashion industry's exploitative relationship with African countries, which will be discussed in this thesis, is present at every level, from mass market production to high end boutiques.

1.2. Globalization of fashion production: a short history

As the previous section attests, international dynamics have been at the centre of European fashion production since even before industrialization, although they have gained considerable traction during the colonial period due to strong and unequal economic ties that united colonies and metropolises. These ties act as direct historical antecedents to the

contemporary phenomenon of globalization since it is a product of what historian Peter Osborne identifies as "the spatial unification of the globe through European colonialism", a unification that is "the geopolitical condition for the development of the concept of modernity: the marker not just of a new historical present, but a new temporalization of history itself." (Osborne, 2011, p.19). It is around this concept of modernity that the discourse of European exceptionalism shaped itself, and many influential European writers wrote about the importance of adopting "modern" styles of dress as a marker of success and civilization, the Austrian writer Adolf Loos using the contrasting examples of 19th century China and Japan as an example (Kravagna , 2019, p.45).

For historian David Gilbert, fashion has always been tied to the flows of capital and media, which were based on the historical imperial ties mentioned earlier in this section. Invoking Paris' longstanding status as the display window of modernity and the fashion capital of the world, Gilbert mentions that "Fashion was used as a means of expressing the superiority of certain places in the world order" (Gilbert, 2013, p.16). This position was the exclusive prerogative of Paris from the mid-19th century which saw the birth of *haute couture* and remained the seat of every major fashion houses until the 1960s, where the rise of youth culture allowed for London, Milan and New York to obtain a similar standing on the global stage, in the same way that development in social media today is allowing further decentralization and the emergence of other cities like Antwerp and Shanghai (Jin, 2020, p.601).

Gilbert recognizes from the start that the privileged status enjoyed by a city, which he designates by the title of "world city" in another of his books, is not fixed and does change according to the fluctuating power dynamics in the global economy. Gilbert demonstrates this by dedicating a chapter of his book on fashion's world cities to the rising place occupied by Shanghai, which at the time of writing his book was ongoing a huge manufacturing boom comparable to that of Milan in the 1970s and 1980s (Breward & Gilbert, 2006, p.32). This prediction proved itself to be correct and Shanghai's new status as a world city resulted in a relative boom of interest among fashion studies scholars for contemporary Chinese fashion (Jin, 2020, p.598). University of Bologna professor Simona

Segre Reinach, who explored how China's new fashion identity transformed its relationship to the West by transcending orientalism, calls this emergence a form of *emancipation*:

> emancipation, on the other hand, is more directly connected with the process of decolonization of the many countries to struggle out from European and Western dominion, […] Emancipation is also the fashion rise of many different countries and cities from the dominance of France and Paris fashion (Reinach 2012, p.58).

This brings the question of observing if such a phenomenon of emancipation is dependent on a significant influx of capital and a radical transformation of the economy, as is what happened in China or South Korea in the previous decades, or if emancipation can occur in different contexts, which share a history of Western domination but have not seen comparable economic growth. This is one of the pressing questions for the decolonization of fashion studies, which is why many fashion scholars are turning towards the world's biggest continent to look for answers. But it is interesting to question the premise itself, because Reinach's proposed concept of "emancipation" may contribute to painting a false picture of global fashion. As we have seen previously, already existing world cities are the product of immense influxes of capital and power. These influxes were either due to preexisting colonial relationship, such as was the case with Paris and London which benefitted from their colonies for resources and labour, or appeared as manifestations of the United States' economic power in the post-War world order, in New York and in Milan whose fashion scene is a direct product of American investments. For a new city to attain the same level of international standing would presuppose similar means. Shanghai's status as a fashion capital is dependent on various networks of exploitation, both domestic (as is the exploitation of Uyghur workers in the textile field (Loscialpo, 2023)), and international (as with China increasingly delocalizing its production to East Africa, which includes Rwanda but most notoriously Ethiopia (Barrett & Baumann-Pauly, 2019)), whose unique and unfavorable situation will be discussed later. Therefore, to label Shanghai's accession to the status of "fashion capital" as a process of "emancipation" would sweep under the rug the crushing human impacts of such a process.

I believe that a more productive definition of emancipation should focus on a country's attempt at de-linking itself or disconnecting from the globalized fashion industry, rather than fighting for one of the top spots, which feeds into the paradigm of competition that is already central to classical capitalist discourse (Shaikh, 2016, p.259). This key view is at the root of my interest in Rwanda's fashion scene, since its emergence follows a national secondhand clothing ban that is a powerful attempt at de-linking Rwanda from the highly wasteful networks of secondhand clothes that goes from Western capitals to East African shores every year. Taking this step back to focus on domestic production offers, as in the Rwandan example, offers an interesting case of this type of fashion emancipation, that appears more sustainable than Reinach's concept of emancipation. Of course, this may be a utopian stance, as we live in a world that is always increasingly connected and globalized. To wish for de-linking would be to take steps in the opposite direction of the one that humanity has been following for at least 200 years. However, what is undeniable is that the current fashion power geography, where vast networks of peripheral regions feed the growth of a few selected world-cities, is unsustainable because it leads to the proliferation of spaces of destruction: sacrifice zones and discardscapes.

1.3. *Sacrifice zones, discardscapes* **and the destructive legacy of fashion history**

The aforementioned historical processes of appropriation and destruction, of know-hows and resource extraction shaped the contemporary fashion system and the way it operates. The significant loss of culture in the form of the disappearance of dress traditions, of styles, know-how and artisans' livelihoods constitute the *sacrifice zones* identified by Sandra Niessen (Niessen, 2020). As for the environmental effects of the disastrous resource management of the fashion industry, it also becomes apparent in the form of *discardscapes*, which "are a type of scene in which storytelling is about recovering the geographies bracketed out by prevailing narratives about waste as an externality to, rather than a fundamentally constitutive element, of industrial ways of life" (Lepawsky, 2018, p.132). In other words, *discardscapes* are the apparent elements of Crewe's aforementioned "dark underbelly" of fashion. More often than not, the commercial fashion imaginary and imagery are centred around glamorous photoshoots of beautiful people lounging about in Paris and Milan, a totalizing dominant narrative that says nothing about how the clothes

themselves are made or where they end up when they go out of style. *Discardscapes* offer a conceptual framework to pose questions that are not being asked. Giant dumping grounds in Africa or garment-burning kilns in Cambodia offer a very different outlook of that same industry, and allow critical perspectives to emerge.

The concept of *discardscapes* was put forth by discard geographer Josh Lewpasky, inspired by the work of his co-author Max Liboiron. A pioneering scholar, one of the most groundbreaking aspects of Liboiron's work is the necessary reconceptualization of waste as a key component of capitalism rather than an externality. When one thinks of waste, the first images that pop in our mind are usually heaps of discarded consumer products, garments, electronics and so on. However, Liboiron reminds us that these elements usually constitute only a small fraction of the products that are discarded in the environment. Using the US as a case study, Liboiron mentions that municipal domestic waste accounts for only 3% of waste produced in the country today, while the remaining 97% percent is industrial waste (Liboiron, 2013, p.9). Yet we seldom think about or study industrial waste, for we mainly associate waste with post-consumer products, such as packaging or what awaits an item after his usage. This is because the vast majority of representations, and even studies, on waste feed into the narrative that waste constitute an externality to our current modes of production, rather than one of its constitutive elements (Liboiron, 2013, p.11). It is therefore important to remember that waste happens all along the fashion chain, even though what has gotten the most attention in the media is the waste of discarded clothing, because it is visually striking. Although this ever-increasing attention paid to discarded clothes raises awareness on issues of waste and overconsumption, one must keep in mind that this focus also renders invisible the extraction of resources at the production stage[2].

Unlike *sacrifice zones*, which mostly remain invisible to the general public and are of interest to anthropologists, *discardscapes* are becoming ever increasingly visible in discourses on fashion. They can be at the forefront of stories in very prominent media. For

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[2] Keith Slater published an insightful book on the environmental impact of textile production which does a great job at showcasing the invisible cost of fashion production (Slater, 2003). However, it would be interesting and pertinent for further research to explore how this cost is unequally distributed and affects disproportionnaly certain regions of the world.

example, in 2022-2023, CBC Radio-Canada release two highly detailed news stories taking place in the Dandora landfill in Kenya. While the first one is mainly an account of the harsh realities of the children growing up in this environment and does not really explore the international dynamics leading to the existence of this landfill (Bélanger, 2022), the second one has a more critical perspective and directly addresses the fashion industry's role in creating and maintaining such an environment in Kenya, even mentioning the major role that Canada plays in the export of secondhand clothing, or *mitumba*, to Nairobi. Although the reporter gives voice to local volunteer initiatives about waste management, the report concludes by stressing that the bulk of the weight regarding Kenya still rests on Western citizens' consumption habits: "En d'autres termes, pour sauver la planète, il va falloir consommer moins, consommer mieux" (Bélanger, 2023).

I remember finding this report very striking when I read it for the first time, as it seems to indicate a paradigm shift in the way agency and accountability are mentioned when talking about the unequal environmental impact of the fashion industry. The CBC reports name and introduces many citizens of Dandora, highlight local initiatives, but never shy away from the responsibility played by Western countries, including the country who commissioned this news story. Dandora as a *discardscape* then becomes a point of conversation and an element of critique of capitalism as a system and its operations on a global scale. This is in stark contrast to the usual pattern of image production of the Anthropocene, which Iyko Day sums up as follows: "the visual culture of the Anthropocene bears the antipolitical and dissociative trace of racial capitalism, which represses the economies of environmental violence experienced by racialized and colonized peoples" (Day, 2021, p.126). This is visible in the usual discourse around the Anthropocene, which usually predicts apocalyptic scenarios in a near future that are bound to affect "us", understood as people living in Western countries, while ignoring the current and pressing effects that human actions have on populations living in the global south.

This narrative line can be found in the bulk of images that are produced around environmental issues that pertain to the Anthropocene, where they come from a commercial or artistic intent. It is spread through two main manners, and both of these

processes have been used since the colonial period. The first is through erasure and absence, as is the case in the huge, empty industrial landscapes of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, which results in an aestheticization of extraction rather than a critique, resulting in "beautiful monuments to alienation without any inquiry into the processes of their production" (Day, 2021, p.130). It should be noted that Burtynsky published a book of his photographs in 2023 titled *African Studies*, in which he presents his vision of sub-Saharan Africa as "globalism's final stop" (Ackerberg, 2023). In contrast to the CBC Report, which names its photographic subjects and allows them to have a voice in the report, the people in Burtynsky's photographs of the Dandora landfill remain anonymous and act as another piece of the apocalyptic landscape that is being presented, in a book that Burtynsky himself presents as "a cautionary tale" (Ackerberg, 2023). Looking at the two photographs side by side gives a good idea of the power dynamics at play when artists or media outlets address the topic of fashion waste in Africa, and whose voice is put forward [See Annex 1, Figure 1 and 2]. In the CBC photograph, the landfill serves as a backdrop to introduce Brian Gisore Nyabuti, founder of the "Slums Going Green" NGO which is being interviewed in the article. Both the image and the article relays Nyabuti's mission and the action he undertakes to mitigate the effects brought forth by the excessive dumping that, as we mentioned earlier, is a "constitutive element, of industrial ways of life" (Lepawsky, 2018, p.132). By contrast, in Burtynsky's photographs, the people remain nameless and voiceless, and they are treated as regular aesthetic elements that are a part of the photograph's composition. The result and experience are purely visual, and the spectator has no means of interacting with or understanding the people that are present in the photograph.

This is a testimony that erasure can happen even without physically removing the people in the picture, it can also happen through silencing. The past equivalent of this process of erasure in art, in a Canadian context, would be the paintings of the Group of the Seven which created depictions of the country as a vast, wild and most of all uninhabited land to be taken (Cimellaro, 2022).

The second manner is the one in which fashion, as a concept, an industry and even a field of study, has been historically complicit in the colonial process of *othering*. This process

was especially active and violent in late 19th and early 20th century Africa, where colonial administrators used the developments in photographic technologies to establish a clear hierarchy between "those that filmed and those that were filmed" (Bancel & Blanchard, 1997, p.111). Photography and image production in Africa was a carefully curated project that erased all the history and ties of African kingdoms to fit in with the myth, en vogue at the time, of an Africa frozen in time and separated from the rest of the world. (Bancel & Blanchard, 1997, p.104). This process of othering and dehumanization allowed colonial powers to frame Africa as a site for labour and resource appropriation on one hand, and waste and discard on the other.

In the second half of the 20th century, the work of contemporary West African portrait photographers such as Malick Sidibé, Seydou Keïda, Mama Cassett and Cornelius Augustt Azaglo (Nimis, 2005, p.157) allowed African photographic subjects to reclaim agency and to destroy myths and stereotypes about the continent. This first wave of aesthetic resistance to afro-pessimism set the stage for a revival and a celebration of African fashion, and many contemporary designers or artists' work can be found in the aesthetic and sometimes political continuity of the work of these photographers.

As these photographs were mainly presented in the West through art exhibitions, they had a less widespread audience than other media that perpetuated the afro-pessimistic gaze. Most notably, there is a core element of *Othering* that has permeated for a long time in photojournalistic news stories of popular magazines such as National Geographic and Life. By focusing on shock value or exoticism, such magazines have contributed to an erasure of the complexity, diversity and international ties of the world's biggest continent to instead depict it as a "desert of the strange and scandalous" (Enwezor, 2006, p.13). Up until recently, many *discardscapes* were feeding into this exact narrative, with Burtynsky's book being the latest example of this.

1.4. *Agaciro* as a tool to navigate fluctuating fashion power geographies in a globalized context

Both *sacrifice zones* and *discardscapes* are constituents and products of broader flows across the global economy, which Birgit Haehnel dubbed *fashionscapes* (Haehnel, 2019).

Like *discardscapes*, this concept is inspired by the "five scapes of globalization" identified by Arjun Appadurai in his key text *Modernity at Large,* which aimed to map out how transnational flows of people, technology, capital, media and ideology circulate across cultural boundaries (Appadurai, 1996). According to Appadurai, the scapes can never be objective and are always the byproduct of social values and norms.

This is where Haehnel sees value in the concept of *fashionscapes*, because it includes the plurality of gazes and discourses that exist when discussing fashion. Naturally, there is a totalizing white gaze that emerged alongside the European colonial order and its institutions, but democratization through online media has challenged its hegemony. As Haehnel points out, "today, through media dissemination, virtual fashionscapes enter rhizomatic relationships […]. The colonial patterns continue to be written primarily from a European perspective even though the transnational shift is calling for different constructions of meaning for newly imagined communities." (Haehnel, 2019, p.173). Manifestations of this transnational shift include the rising influence of China as a fashion powerhouse and as the main market for luxury goods, with the accession of Shanghai as an international fashion capital, but also the increasingly apparent issue of waste disposal and discard, whose weight is placed in countries in the global south. This issue of waste, along with that of inequality and exploitation in fashion production, raises issues of regional governance for the countries that are in an unfavorable position in this economical order. This is especially true in Africa, the world's biggest destination for discarded clothes, where challenges to autonomy become apparent when we see how the United States have trampled local governments' attempt to prohibit the importation of used clothes. By being the only country that went forward and applied the ban regardless, Rwanda stands out as a very interesting case study of how such policy decisions can help a country resituate itself in this aforementioned transnational shift.

Another interesting element of the Rwandan context is that it directly fits in Haehnel's category of "newly imagined communities", since Rwandans had to redefine their national identity in the post-genocide context, a task for which the government had mobilized both heritage and symbols (Bolin, 2021, p.486). Another key tenet of this new national identity

is the quest for *agaciro*. This original Rwandan concept, which has been at the forefront of much of the policy initiatives in the country in its reconstruction, has been summarized as such by a civil servant of the country:

> at times *outward* oriented (sovereignty, autonomy), *inward* (legitimate expectation of a new social contract, cf. poverty alleviation policies within universal health care, education, etc.) and *individual* (a newly found self-worth identity linked to pride in the future that is being built today. (Rutazibwa, 2014, p.298)

In the light of this quest for *agaciro*, the Rwandan government's decision to ban the importation of secondhand clothing in an effort to boost domestic production appears as a strong step to secure the country's autonomy and redefine its place in the globalized economy. It is important to note that this was initially part of a regional effort with other countries in the East African Community, who pledged to take a shared stance to favorize local production and reduce the negative impact of secondhand clothes, but that all of the other countries withdrew from the program due to economic sanctions imposed by the United States. What initially started as a regional effort then turned into a national effort for Rwanda, who found itself the sole bearer of this project.

Interesting parallels can be made between Rwanda's garment industry strategy and the "Import Substitution Industrialization" (ISI) model which was adopted by many Latin American countries during their industrialization in the 1950s and 1960s (Baer, 1972, p.95). This model has been widely studied by contemporary economists following the key groundwork laid by Werner Baer (Baer, 1972; Primo Braga, 2010). Baer's analysis testifies that ISI is not only political, but that it constitutes a natural occurrence in the industrial development of every country, as he proposes that "all countries which industrialized after Great Britain, went through a stage of ISI; that is, all passed through a stage where the larger part of investment in industries was undertaken to replace imports […] [in which] governments played an active role in encouraging and protecting the development of infant industries" (Baer, 1972, p.95-96). However, such processes were often fuelled by foreign capital and the accumulation of massive amounts of debt, which led to the very complex entanglement of macroeconomic and trade policies and agreements between nations that were already industrialized and nations ongoing this

process (Primo Braga, 2010, p.36). In a globalized economy, no policy decision ever happens in a vacuum, and a country's desire for more autonomy often means realigning itself in the world order.

This is what happened with Rwanda's decision to reposition its *fashionscape* by restricting imports of secondhand clothing to bolster its local production, first by severing ties with the United States, which retaliated by imposing sanctions on the country (Wolff, 2021, p.1308), and secondly by opening the doors for partnerships in the textile sector with China (Wolff, 2021, p.1320). This change is actually in line with the current repositioning of the centres of powers in the global geography of fashion, especially the aforementioned meteoric rise of Shanghai as a fashion city with a worldwide influence. Whereas China was previously perceived, both by Chinese and Westerns alike, solely as a manufacturing base and an outlet for Western brands, designers from this country are increasingly pushing to establish themselves as a nation renowned for design, tapping into important traditions in the country's rich history (Reinach, 2012, p.65). One of the designers at the forefront of this wave of Chinese haute couture, Guo Pei, has declared that "the Chinese government has at last understood that fashion changes one's images in the world" (Reinach, 2011, p.271). By imposing itself as a reference for other countries to aspire to, whether in the areas of mass production or high fashion, China gains a vantage point from which it can influence other countries whose fashion industry is emerging, including Rwanda.

In the same way that the US historically contributed to the development of the fashion industry in Italy during its post-war reconstruction period (Merlo & Polese, 2006), China appears set to play a major role in the development of fashion industries in Eastern African countries in its sphere of influence, although this is not without its challenges. A paper published by Janet Eom in 2018 takes an optimistic tone when taking a look at C&H Garments, a Chinese manufacturing company that moved its operations to Rwanda with the promise of training the local workforce and encouraging the development of the local industry (Eom, 2018). However, an article by the BBC reveals that C&H Garments closed its factory in Rwanda when the US imposed its 30% tariffs on Rwandan clothing following the secondhand clothing ban by the government, ironically in the same year that Eom's

paper was published (Dijkstra, 2020). This event also proves that despites the tensions between the United States and China, the former remains a central market for products manufactured by the latter, and these economic considerations trump any potential desire to assist the fashion industry in Rwanda.

Another important element to note is that clothes with the "Made in Rwanda" label remain prohibitively expensive for the average Rwandan[3]. The Fashion Revolution report highlights that, following the secondhand clothing ban, the majority of Rwandans did not turn to locally made garments as planned but instead started buying cheap imported clothes from China. (Fashion Revolution, 2021, p.8). As such, the secondhand clothing ban instituted a shift where Chinese importations replaced US importations, but it did not succeed in its objective to stop dependency on foreign countries (Kagayo, 2022, p.6). It also does not offer a meaningful improvement in the realm of sustainability, since the clothes directly imported from China often end up in the same dumping grounds as the secondhand Western clothes, which tend to also be manufactured in or by China.

Those economic links between Rwanda and China also brought significant scholarly attention to the Rwandan fashion scene, with many scholars seeing it as an ideal site to observe the economic influence of China in East Africa (Eom, 2018; Behuria, 2019; Bolin, 2021; Kagayo, 2022). Fortunately, there remains an emerging body of work that looks at African fashion scenes themselves and their interactions at a continental level, rather than as a site of dispute between the US and China. An overview of this body of literature is necessary in order to observe its strengths, but also what it lacks, which is an exploration of the transnational links and effects between the African fashion scenes and the rest of the world. This is where this thesis aims to contribute, after which we can centre our perspective on Rwanda specifically.

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[3] This also applies to regular, Rwandan produced clothing and not only to the high fashion pieces created by the designers that are showcased at the forefront of Rwanda's fashion scene, which are mainly geared towards a public that pays using foreign currency and are out of reach for the overwhelming majority of the population.

The present chapter presented how the historical trajectory of the fashion industry, intertwined with the history of European colonialism, has shaped the economic ties and power dynamics that shape today's fashion geography. It has served to set the stage and context for what I hope to discuss next, which is Rwanda's attempt to reposition itself in this fashion geography, by severing some of these international ties and forging new ones.

Chapter 2: Fashioning Rwanda a new spot on the global stage
Despite the secondhand clothing ban being a unique feature of Rwanda's economic policy, the burgeoning of Kigali's fashion scene does not happen in a vacuum: it feeds into a broader "boom" of contemporary African fashion, where garments and styles rooted in the continent's cultures and materials are exported around the world, both materially and through images on social media. Using various strategies, African countries reposition themselves in the fashion geography, sometimes by delinking themselves from certain circuits, realigning with others (as is the case with increased collaborations with China) or simply by following the already existing model and hoping to achieve recognition through creativity, branding or partnership with powerful fashion houses. This expansion represents a very rich field of inquiry for fashion researchers interested in decoloniality and transnational relations. The work accomplished by these researchers in recent years is fundamental to set out the broader African context, in which we can then situate and analyze Kigali's fashion scene.

2.1. A rising academic interest in African fashion
The 2016 exhibit *Fashion Cities Africa*, presented at the Brighton Museum and archived through its richly illustrated catalogue, presented to the world the dynamism of fashion cities in four corners of the continent: Nairobi, Lagos, Casablanca and Johannesburg (Pool, 2016). This much-needed publication helped to decentre fashion by looking away from its traditional capital, providing a brilliant showcase for local styles and local designers, and underlining the plurality and diversity of so many different creators that are too often erased by the too-encompassing notion of "African fashion". From the introduction, the author specifies that this "celebration of the contemporary fashion scenes of four key cities […]

is not an academic text or an exhibition catalogue, nor is it a definitive guide to "African fashion" […] but I hope it provides a glorious snapshot of four very different African fashion landscapes." (Pool, 2016, p.12). As such, this book succeeds at what it does, but it does not explore how African cities' specific positionalities allow for interesting critical insights into the way that the fashion system operates. This is not a fault, but it expresses the need for more research around that topic, especially since most publications on African fashion seem to follow this model.

It is interesting to note that, although recent years have seen an explosion of publications around African fashion, they are mainly coffee table books or art books that put an emphasis on aesthetics, highlighting the creativity and genius of designers and artists in the continent (Gott & Loughran, 2010; Pool, 2016; Checinska, 2022). They do succeed in their mission to "challenge the stereotypes about what constitutes "African" fashion and to change the visual narrative of the "African aesthetic", (Pool, 2016, p.14) by allowing African artists, designers and photographers to offer a counter narrative to the exoticizing gaze that has been historically tied to coffee table books about the continent such as the very famous *African ceremonies* books by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher (Beckwith & Fisher, 1999). However, this counter-discourse is not new, and one of the first and most important occurrence was published a year before the publication of *African ceremonies*, a landmark publication directed by art historians Els van der Plas and Marlous Willemsen for the Prince Claus Fund called *The Art of African Fashion.* This book allowed authors from all over the continent to showcase the importance and style of contemporary fashion design in Africa and provided a compelling snapshot of life in Africa in the 1990s (Prince Claus Fund, 1998). This body of literature that stems from the *Art of African Fashion* all the way to Christine Checinska's *African Fashion* published by the Victoria & Albert Museum (Checinska, 2022) is rich and successfully secured a spot for African fashion in art history circles. However, such publications are very often published in association with major funding bodies, museums or similar institutions that have held an active role in or have historically benefitted from colonialism, and is today being maintained thanks to donations, which in the case of fashion museums tend to be affiliated with fashion houses or private fortunes made in this industry. In 2000, when the *Armani* foundation launched

its retrospective exhibition in the Guggenheim following a $15 million donation to the institution, there was a commotion in the press about the transformation of museums into spaces for advertisements, but fashion exhibits have since them become commonplace and are often some of the most heavily attended shows (Breward, 2003).

This means that the exhibition catalogues and fashion-centred coffee table books, even when they highlight African perspectives, seldom address the actual political and economic ties between African countries and their Western and Eastern partners.

On the other hand, research conducted through a political economy lens that analyzes the garment industry in East Africa often discusses the commodity aspect of garments, and spends very little time discussing their symbolic and cultural aspects, which is also a central aspect of studying fashion (Eom, 2018; Behuria, 2019; He, 2020; Wolff, 2021). I believe that it is fundamental to bridge these two research angles, since economic or political decisions do influence and are influenced by style and aesthetics.

In an African context, this is especially true when it comes to questions of attaining and asserting independence. For example, historian Abena Dove Osseo-Asare observed how Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah's sartorial choices changed accordingly with his politics: while he was an enthusiast of English suits in the beginning of his political career, after the declaration of independence he instead choose to dress in garments that acted as direct symbols of local culture, such as *batakari*, or smocks, or the symbolic *kente* cloth of Ghana (Osseo-Asare, 2021, p.623). In the context of Rwanda, the quest for autonomy is centred around the aforementioned fundamental concept of agaciro, a quest for material and symbolic autonomy from other countries which have historically exerted their influence on the local population.

These links go beyond the historical violence of colonialism and extend into the post-colony, through current economic links but also when it comes to the Western scholars' treatment of the country. Political scientist Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa has drawn parallels between current knowledge production on Rwanda in Western universities with the paternalistic gaze of US President Woodrow Wilson's international policy in the early

20th century, which is why she qualifies such studies on Rwanda as "Wilsonian interventions". She defines such interventions in the following way : "a Wilsonian intervention in the post-colony: paternalistically well-intended at the service of the peace, democracy and free trade liberal triad, while at the same time silencing, self-contradictory and potentially counterproductive." (Rutazibwa, 2014, p.291). The silencing aspect is especially important, as it marks a significant loss of agency and trust accorded to Rwandan subjects : "Rwanda is silenced, in the sense that the experts are invariably of Western origin – even if they have not been allowed into the country in the last decade or more. When Rwandan sources are included – usually as informants rather than authors – they tend to be either cast as victims, corroborating the experts' analysis, or as partisans, too closely linked to the current regime to be trusted for objective information." (Rutazibwa, 2014, p.292). As I am myself a researcher of Western origin who has never set foot in Rwanda, quoting such a statement might seem ironic, but it was a wake-up call in the research process for this thesis, and explains why I will try to give a voice as much as possible to Rwandan researchers and artists in an effort to go against this dynamic of silencing. It also explains why *agaciro* is the way in which Rwandans strive for dignity, against the scholarly (but also the economic) paternalism of Western powers.

2.2. Rwanda's quest for *agaciro*, or the challenges of attaining autonomy in a globalized economy

It is important to underline that *agaciro* does not refer to a purely philosophical concept, as it has been integrated as a central policy element of the current Rwandan government. As understood by the government, *agaciro* manifests itself in a quest to provide the material conditions to allow the Rwandan people autonomy and dignity without the need of foreign aid. For example, due to repeated threats to cut donations by international donors, the Rwandan government decided to launch in 2012 the *Agaciro Development Fund*, a sovereign development fund fuelled by citizens' voluntary donations.

The fund was created with the goal of reaching a state in which the country becomes fully independent from donations. Foreign aid has been a constant in the country's history, representing 5% of Rwanda's gross national income in the 1970s, growing to 22% by 1990 (Mawejje & Odhiambo, 2020, p.80). At the time of the launch of the *Agaciro Development*

Fund in 2012, it is estimated that around 40% of the country's economy was funded by foreign donations (Rutazibwa, 2014, p.297). South African economists Mawejje and Odhiambo, who extensively studied fiscal deficits in that region, note that a dependency on donor aid and grants leads to inflationary episodes as well as a development of the external sector, this is the case in Rwanda as well as in neighbouring East African Countries of Uganda, Burundi, Kenya and Tanzania (Mawejje & Odhiambo, 2020, p.95). It is therefore no wonder that in 2012, when Rwanda launched its *Agaciro Development Fund*, this was part of a broader initiative, joint with other East African countries, to stimulate local economies and move away from a dependency on the external sector. It is this policy initiative that, after many transformations and following the decision to carry on despite all the other East African countries backing out of the initiative, finally resulted in isolating Rwanda from the US textile market through its second-hand clothing ban, setting the unique Kigali fashion scene in motion.

The African continent is the world's largest destination for secondhand clothes, sometimes designated in East Africa by the Swahili term *mitumba*, which are often a central constituent of very vast informal networks of distribution, repair, and upcycling which provide access to clothing for citizens with a lower income. Researchers noted that in recent years, due to the sharp decline in the quality of fast fashion garments, many mitumba arrive on the continent completely unusable and go directly into landfills, generating a large influx of imported waste for countries in the region to manage (Sumo et al., 2023, p.4701). This led the leadership of East African countries to attempt to break out of these links, as they imply dependency on Western countries for supplying clothes and the responsibility of having to deal with the excessive amount of waste they produce.

For this reason, in 2012, the East African Community (EAC) shared with the world its Industrialization Strategy, aiming to better the economies of its members by adopting historical measures that were applied in other countries, including the Import Substitution Industrialization model discussed earlier. The adoption of this industrialization strategy the EAC leaders to publish a Joint Communiqué four years later, in which representatives of Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Burundi pledged that their country would phase

out the importation of used clothing and footwear within three years (EAC, 2016; Wolff, 2021, p.1309).

The communiqué explained this decision as a means of "promoting vertically integrated industries in the textile and leather sector (EAC, 2016, point 16). This initiative was firmly condemned by the US government, which vowed to apply trade sanctions to countries applying the import ban: as a result, by 2018, Rwanda was the only East African country to go forward with its decision to ban secondhand clothing importations (Wolff, 2021, p.1309). By doing so, the government Rwanda created a very unique context, which quickly garnered the interest of fashion scholars with an interest in decoloniality.

2.3. Looking for critical perspectives in the studies on Kigali's fashion scene

In the five years that passed since the implementation of the ban, numerous analyses of its effects on Rwanda's socioeconomical context have been conducted and published, to see if it achieved its aforementioned aim of "promoting vertically integrated industries in the textile and leather sector" and to compare the trajectory that Rwanda's garment industry took in comparison to its neighbours that decided not to implement the ban, such as Kenya and Uganda. Literature examining the effects of the secondhand clothing ban can be found in the form of articles (Behuria, 2019; Wolff, 2021), a Masters' Thesis in Sustainable Development (Kagayo, 2022) or a thorough policy evaluation conducted by the Fashion Revolution Policy Dialogue project in partnership with the British Council (Fashion Revolution, 2021). Due to the significant space occupied by Fashion Revolution in the world of sustainable fashion, and because it is the most cited of the aforementioned studies, it is interesting to take a critical look at it.

Described as an "international activist movement", *Fashion Revolution* was created by British designer Carry Somers after the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on April 2013, which resulted in 1,138 deaths and more than 2500 injuries. The movement "aims to make the production chain more transparent to the eyes of the consumers and with that, ensure that a tragedy like the one that happened in Rana Plaza never happens again". (Fernandes et al., 2020, p.52) It is important to note that despite the huge public outcry that

followed the collapse, very little effective measures have been undertaken, either by companies or by governments. An in-depth study by Koenig and Poncet reveals that the companies implied in the scandal simply reallocated their production to neighbouring countries that were under less media spotlight, and that there was no noticeable effect on their sales (Koenig & Poncet, 2022, p.23). But it did lead to significant mobilization by giving birth to Fashion Revolution, which is one of the major think tanks in fashion today. From 2017 to 2020, Fashion Revolution partnered with the British Council "to develop a set of toolkits, methodologies, approaches and formats which could be adapted and replicated in projects, activities and events around the world" (Fashion Revolution, 2020). Among these toolkits was the "Policy Dialogue Toolkit" which was piloted in four countries: Philippines, India, Kenya and Rwanda, resulting in specific policy research reports on the local fashion industries and containing "tangible policy recommendations generated through evidence-based and stakeholder-led research and dialogue methodologies." (Fashion Revolution, 2020).

This report draws heavily from firsthand sources, most notably the reports by the Rwandan Ministry of Trade and Industry. This historical part is interesting and provides an interesting and accessible overlook of the textile policy decisions conducted in Rwanda for the years 2018 and 2019. The rest of the report draws from testimonies collected during one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions and an insight-sharing workshop between September and November 2019 (Fashion Revolution, 2021, p.12). Fashion Revolution interviewed "stakeholders", an umbrella term that they used to include fashion designers, artisans, retailers and textile and garment manufacturers, although the focus group also included "a sample of 20 consumers and industry observers", as such this report offers first and foremost an insider perspective of people from within the industry. It also draws heavily from the literature that existed in 2019, which remained fairly limited, the report acknowledging that "existing literature has been more general, looking at the fashion industry in the East African region […] without a Rwandan specific focus" and that "there has not been a conclusive scoping study or surveys among players in the sector to determine the major bottlenecks, potential solutions, and opportunities." (Fashion Revolution, 2021, p.12).

When looking at this report with a decolonial lens, something that becomes very apparent is the ubiquity of managerial language that shapes it, involving "stakeholders" and "associates", focusing on the "adjustments" required to get the most out of "opportunities". These terms have their historical roots in management practices that emerged to govern factory labour during the Industrial Revolution and are closely intertwined with the dominant ideologies at the time of capitalism and positivism, which is why they are so ubiquitous in today's neoliberal economy. (Andrijasevic et al., 2021). They are signifiers of an ideology that focuses on the optimization of production, which in the present day can be analyzed in the automobile industry, such as in the historical case of Fordism or in Marc Steinberg's remarkable analysis of "toyotism" in *Media and Management* (Andrijasevic et al., 2021), but also carry a lot of weight in the fashion industry, where fashion management is an entire area of study, with dedicated study programs and its own literature that is often published within the same publishing houses as books on critical fashion studies (Dillon, 2018; Golizia, 2021). It is therefore interesting to see these concepts as central in a publication by *Fashion Revolution*, whose premise and mission claim to be revolutionary, because it operates entirely within a very classical neoliberal framework. The recommendations that are issued by the report are generic and framed around particular standardized lines that work into traditional neoliberal regulatory frameworks, which runs counter to Rwanda's desire for autonomy. In fact, Rwandan concepts that have been instrumental to the government's strategy for the development of its local fashion industry, such as *agaciro*, are completely absent from the report. And although there are a limited number of quotes from the interviews in the report, they are always anonymized and impossible to attribute to a specific designer or other stakeholder of the Rwandan fashion milieu. In that sense, Fashion Revolution's report, which comes out of good intention and constantly highlights the potential of the region's creative sector, fails to properly give voice to the Rwandan's fashion scene, and instead provides managerial recommendations on how to optimize its industry while using the same language and means of operation as standard capitalist enterprises found in the West. As a matter of fact, it encapsulates very well the type of "Wilsonian intervention" that Rutazibwa has identified as being so prevalent when Western experts turn their eye on Rwanda (Rutazibwa, 2014). Although

Fashion Revolution is an organization that is critical of the way in which the fashion industry operates, this report itself does not draw any critical perspectives from the Rwandan experience, and it does not challenge in any way the unequal power relations with countries in the Global North. Instead, what it does is provide recommendations in order to more effectively compete within the already existing framework.

Many of these recommendations have a benevolent objective, such as the implementation of minimum wage legislation and social protections for informal workers or the development of workers' technical and non-technical skills through training and mentorship (Fashion Revolution, 2021, p.60). The report also draws a comparison with the situation in Ethiopia, which is often cited as the garment industry's new frontier of low-wage employment (Barrett & Baumann-Pauly, 2019). Fashion Revolution concludes that

> Rwanda should not aim to compete with other low-priced competitors such as Ethiopia and rather focus on quality, sustainability, while protecting workers' wages. This can provide competitiveness given that the market for sustainability and quality products is growing internationally. Integrating sustainability, energy efficiency, social protections and quality from the beginning will provide an advantage, compared to existing industries who will need to retrofit and fix existing issues. (Fashion Revolution, 2021, p.60)

While this text is hopeful for the future of Rwanda's fashion industry, that it sees in a good position in relation to the current trends in the international market, it very much operates within a capitalist framework, centred around values such as competitiveness and growth. The main actors for change identified by the report are Small and Medium Enterprises, which once again perpetuates this idea that the aforementioned capitalist values are compatible with an eco-friendly and sustainable approach.

This idea is not new, as Hartmut Berghoff and Adam Rome have shown how many attempts by capitalist enterprises to preserve nature and support environmental reforms have been made (and failed) since the 1960s and 1970s (Berghoff & Rome, 2017). A major explanation for that is due to capitalism's competitive nature in which one must always

seek to reduce costs to optimize profits : in such a system, "companies that voluntarily adopt higher environmental standards experience higher costs, placing themselves at a disadvantage relative to nonadopters" (p.43). There is a direct opposition between a societal desire for a "green capitalism" and capitalism's innate drive for profits, which is why the authors discuss the necessity of regulations (p.135). Even the notorious "six-pack rings," today a strong symbol of marine litter and plastic pollution, was inaugurated as a solution to reduce the environmental impact of packaging, a sad tale that proves that attempts to reduce pollution can unexpectedly result in the production of new forms of waste that were unknown before (p.130). The failure of the solutions echoes back to the reality that was discussed earlier with the work of Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky: waste and pollution are not externalities produced by capitalism, they are central components of this system (Lepawsky, 2018, p.132). Once one acknowledges this, "green capitalism" becomes an oxymoron because it attempts to bestow upon capitalism a characteristic that is against its very nature and its modus operandi.

Yet, by looking back at the report produced by Fashion Revolution, there is no mention of pollution, and the only time that waste is mentioned is to make the recommendation that concentrating leather manufactures in a single area can allow for the implementation of a shared treatment regime to reduce unspecified "environmental risks" (Fashion Revolution, 2021, p.5). By avoiding such a central topic, the report treats waste as an externality to capitalism, with so little details that it is practically a footnote, it fails to acknowledge the significant health and environmental risks tied to the growth of a local garment industry in a small landlocked country such as Rwanda, and as such fails to provide useful and applicable recommendations. It fails to account for Rwanda's position in the global economy: facing tariffs for refusing to be a dumping ground for the global north, being unable to benefit in a meaningful manner from international arrangements, and being criticized for being unable to implement strategies built for sustainable fashion on a European or North American model. As a matter of fact, all of the recommendations are made with the intent of aiding small and medium enterprises: the only regulations mentioned are the establishment of quality standards for a "Made in Rwanda" certification and the creation of legislation for minimum wage in the textile industry and protection for

informal workers, every other recommendation works on the basis of incentives to encourage stakeholders to work together or to develop their enterprise in a certain direction, without questioning the idea that the growth of private enterprises may not be aligned with the environmental well-being of the country. Sustainability is set as a goal only in the sense that it provides a competitive advantage on the international market, rather than as an end in and of itself (Fashion Revolution, 2021, p.60). This is a capitalist conception of "sustainability" that is devised on a model of the Global North, which is itself dependent on the exploitation of resources and labour and the exportation of waste in the Global South, which is the exact situation from which the Rwandan government tried to escape by devising the second-hand clothing ban. This report is much more about implanting and perfecting the ongoing dominant system in a Rwandan setting than it is about using Rwanda's unique situation to develop an alternative relationship to garments and garment production. The only "Revolution" to be found here is in the name of the organization.

To get a better understanding of the policy landscape of Rwanda, it is pertinent to go beyond the thematic of clothing to see examine the roles played by Agaciro as a concept and the Agaciro Development Fund. According to Pritish Behuria, The Agaciro Development Fund's role is primarily symbolic and is a political instrument in favour of nationalism, as it is Rwanda's first sovereign fund. He mentions that:

> Agaciro gradually became a buzzword or a rhetorical commonplace, […] The word was used widely – as a name ofr basketball tournaments, football tournaments and music concerts. Powerful imagery was developed, with some young RPF supporters likening the concept of Agaciro to the philosophies of Kwame Nkrumah and Thomas Sankara. It was crucial in building a sense of nationalism among younger RPF cadres, supporters and senior cadres. (Behuria, 2016 p.443)

At the time of Behuria's article in 2016, the Agaciro Development Fund totalled 31.2 billion RwF[4], still far from its stated objective of receiving contributions to the height of 500 millions USD by 2024. The latest annual report that is publicly available online is the 2020 one, in which the fund totalled 233.7 billion RwF, which is a considerable

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[4] Around 22,4 millions USD as of today, december 30th 2024.

augmentation from 4 years before (Agaciro Development Fund, 2020, p.30) . This can lead one to think that the fund is growing well, unfortunately there is no more up-to-date report and public documents emitted by the fund in the last 2 years are almost nonexistent. Furthermore, in her interviews with fashion entrepreneurs working in the Rwandan context, Maria Joana Kagayo noted that many of them were not aware of the incentives and advantages that the government could offer to them in alignment with the Made in Rwanda policy, citing that "not all information is being shared between business owners within the industry." (Kagayo, 2022, p.27). Although further study needs to be conducted, as of now the publicly available information seem to indicate that the Agaciro Development Fund is highly symbolic and focused in the world of capital investments, and remain more or less disconnected from the policy efforts to encourage Rwandan textile production. As such, the main voices to emerge out of Kigali's fashion scene, of which two are going to be studied more in depth in the last section of this thesis, are the product of individual actors and efforts and not of focused policy initiative. With that being said, although they are not a direct part of the political program led by the government, they are affected by the concept of *agaciro* due to the symbolic weight it holds in the Rwandan context. They are also affected by other significant aspects of the country's political landscape, for example the ever-increasing proximity with the United Kingdom.

A good indicator of that can be found in the cover page as well as the content of the 2020 report of the Agaciro Development Fund, which mentions that the fund is part of the International Forum of sovereign Wealth Funds (IFSWF), which is a UK-based international forum (Agaciro Development Fund, 2020). This was noted by Behuria, who mentions the fund's admission to the forum in 2016 as part of tightening relations between Rwandan and the UK (Behuria, 2016, p.444).
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It is to note that both this publication, directly emitted by the team of the Agaciro Development Fund, and a Third Party publication like the Fashion Revolution report, which is one of the most extensive that was produced on the contemporary fashion context in Rwanda, are the fruit of partnership with the UK or with UK-based NGOs. It is a very important element to keep in mind when looking at this Fashion Revolution report is that

it was funded by and conducted in partnership with the British Council. As such, in order to contextualize these collaborations, it is important to look at the recent but complex ties between Rwanda and the United Kingdom, and how the relationship between both countries are being structured in the Commonwealth.

2.4. Rwanda, the Commonwealth, and Global Visibility

Although the first half of this section discussed the importance of lasting colonial ties in the post-colony, Rwanda was never a British Colony. Its territory was in fact colonized by Germany until the end of World War I, when the Versailles Treaty ceded its mandate to Belgium under the Charter of the League of Nations (Záhořík, 2017). It is under the Belgian rule that a distinction and hierarchy were set between the indigenous groups of Rwanda, mainly Hutus and Tutsis, generating strong tensions between the two groups, until the Hutu revolution in which over 300 000 Tutsis had to flee to neighbouring countries as Rwanda was declared a Republic on July 1, 1962 (Muhammad & Hutami, 2021, p.2). In October of the same year, President Grégoire Kayibanda and President Charles de Gaulle signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation, inaugurating a period of strong ties with France, where French was used as the language of higher education, administration, public services and official documentation, sharing the status of official language with Kinyarwanda (Nyirindekwe, 1999, Muhammad & Hutami, 2021, p.4). This changed drastically following the genocide tragedy in 1994, after which the task of rebuilding the country was taken over by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a political party created in Uganda by exiled Tutsis. The last 30 years saw a clear shift in Rwanda's choice of international allies, with the country dissociating itself from France to align itself with the United Kingdom (Beloff, 2023).

The first reason for the RPF's decision to turn away from France is that since a lot of members of the FPR grew up in the former British colonies of Uganda and Tanzania, they adopted the language, values and customs of these countries, which are more aligned with the United Kingdom (Muhammad & Hutami, 2021, p.6).

The second reason is the complicity of the French state during the genocide, which is undeniable according to scholars who specialized in this question (Krošlák, 2007; Cameron, 2015). When the appointed French judge Jean-Louis Bruiguière accused in 2006 the Rwanda Patriotic Front for the assassination of Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana, the event most often invoked as the starting point of the genocide, the Rwandan government was outraged and reacted by deporting the French ambassador to Rwanda and completely severing ties between the two countries (Muhammad & Hutami, 2021, p.6). Three years after the France-Rwanda rupture, in 2009, Rwanda was finally accepted as a member of the Commonwealth, completing the complete shift from France's sphere of influence to the United Kingdom's[5]. (Muhammad & Hutami, 2021, p.9).

The reason that the Commonwealth is relevant to Rwanda's fashion situation is the launch of the Commonwealth Fashion Council, a Commonwealth organization with the goal of promoting "sustainable development, education, trade, youth and gender empowerment through diverse programmes, all created in alignment with the Commonwealth Charter" (CFC, 2024). One of its main tasks is the organization of Fashion Weeks around the world, therefore exporting the European model of fashion weeks as a seasonal showcase for garments. It is interesting to note that many of the characteristics of the contemporary European fashion house, such as the biannual presentation of seasonal collections, the use of live models for shows and the curation of an image of a genius couturier that Christopher Breward dubs a "male style dictator" were all invented by the British designer Charles Frederick Worth at the end of the 19th century (Breward, 2000, p.352). These norms and practices were established by Worth in fin-de-siècle Paris, during the European powers' scramble for Africa, at a time where colonial ventures shaped all of the cultural practices,

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[5] At the time at which I am writing this paper, which is the year 2024, Rwanda's place in the Commonwealth is almost only discussed in the media in reference to the British government's "UK and Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership", more commonly referred to as the "Rwanda asylum plan", a five-year agreement during which some asylum seekers arriving in the UK would be sent to Rwanda, with no limit on numbers. This highly controversial proposal has been contested by the UK Supreme Court, and the first flight of asylum seekers to Rwanda, which was planned to debut in June 2022, was cancelled (BBC, 30 January 2024). Although the plan has not been implemented, its bizarre design itself warrants attention to the asymmetrical relationship between the United Kingdom and Rwanda. It is important for future research to look deeper into the asylum plan and how this reveals how colonial dynamics subsist in the Commonwealth of Nations, but since this is not the focus of this thesis, I prefer to leave this topic to more qualified scholars of migration or international law.

including arts and fashion, as was discussed in the previous section of this thesis. By setting these historically situated European norms as a universal standard and by pushing them in the various areas defined in its mandate[6], especially in those whose past and present were defined by colonialism, the Commonwealth Fashion Council does not operate in a way that gives voice and agency to local creativity and industry. It reinforces existing power structures under the guise of benevolence and universalism, once again fitting the bill for Rutazibwa's conception of a "Wilsonian intervention", which explains why the same caveats are present in the industry report that Fashion Revolution produced for the Commonwealth Fashion Council. This in turn pressures garment creators in Rwanda to comply with complex environmental and labour norms to create model industry practices, but in a way that is completely disconnected from the reality of the average Rwandan person. One of the main takeaways of Marie Joana Kagayo's exploratory study of the Rwandan Fashion and Textile Industry is that although the country succeeded in developing Made in Rwanda garments, said garments remain unaffordable for much of the population. As a consequence, Rwandans who previously relied on secondhand clothes turn towards Chinese manufactured clothes, which are more affordable, rather than buying the locally produced clothing that was encouraged by the policy initiatives (Kagayo, 2022, p.34). The environmental impact and economical flows therefore remain almost the same, as in both cases the clothes are imported from a foreign power (US or China) to be sold at a very low price, and often end up in landfills due to the poor quality of the garment.

With that being said, this political affiliation also brought a considerable amount of media attention and opportunities to its fashion industry. It showcases how Rwanda was able to enter the international fashion circuit by adopting some codes, such as the European model of fashion weeks showcasing runway shows. In the year 2022, the Kigali Fashion Week was purposely organized to happen at the same time as the Commonwealth Summit, and the collections shown shared the same themes as the summit (AfricaNews, 6 July 2022). The Rwandan runways saw the visit of the Prince of Wales Charles and the duchess of Cornwall Camila, who were hailed as the guests of honour at the event (AfricaNews, 6 July

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[6] There are five Commonwealth Fashion Councils, attributed to the five following geographical areas: the pacific, Africa, Asia, Caribbean & Americas, Europe.

2022). This event was covered in the British Press (Chiorando, 2022) and in the specialized fashion press of other African countries such as Ghana (African Fashion News, 2022).

This is a significant event, due to the entanglements between celebrity culture and the fashion industry. Pictures of celebrities at fashion events, whether taken by news journalists, fashion photographers or paparazzi, act as informal but effective advertising that can encourage readers to move from noncommercial news sites to online shopping sites (Aspers, 2014, p.225). This has allowed some Rwandan brands to gain a considerable online following, and to gain traction for their online store. With that being said, it is important to note that many of these popular brands, such as Moses Turahirwa's *Moshions* label (established in 2015) or Joselyne Umutoniwase's Rwanda Clothing label (established in 2012) predates the second-hand clothing ban, the creation of the Agaciro fund, and Rwanda's adhesion into the Commonwealth. As such, it appears that Rwanda's desire to expand its fashion industry and the visibility afforded by the commonwealth associated benefitted the pioneers or the players that were already in the industry rather than new creators. It is the already established Rwandan brands that were able to capitalize on this opportunity to showcase their collections at an event that garnered international attention. By pairing the Fashion Week with the Commonwealth Council, the organizers of the event succeeded in showcasing Rwandan style and craftmanship from its beating heat in Kigali, promoting it as a fashion city, so that the local designers do not have to take the more traditional route of partnering with European fashion houses in order to present their collection in Paris or Milan for them to gain international visibility.

With that being said, it is also important to note that visibility does not necessarily equal sales, and selling internationally remains a challenge for local designers due to high taxes and issues with online payment platforms (Aziz et al., 2019, p.94; Kagayo, 2022, p.25). It would be interesting and pertinent to conduct a study to see if and how such media coverage affects the sales, both domestic and international, of designers. What is certain, however, is that international coverage and association with celebrities is a central element to establish a brand's desirability in fashion circuits. A major example of this in Rwanda is when Junior Nyong'o, brother of famous actress Lupita Nyong'o, wore a *House of Tayo*

three-piece suit made by Kigali designer Matthew Rugamba to the Hollywood premiere of Black Panther, which resulted in a complete report on Rwandan fashion by the Agence France Press (AFP, 2021). Nyong'o also commissioned Rugamba to make the outfit for his wedding in Kenya, which allowed the designer to be mentioned in Vogue magazine (Macon, 2020), which is often dubbed "the world's most famous magazine". (Angeletti & Oliva, 2006). These transnational flows through online media show how fashion is increasingly deterritorialized and adds complexity to the fashionscapes mentioned earlier. They are a formidable driver of creativity, in which new forms take shape through the hybridization of cultures, but they may also result in tension due to cultural differences.

Chapter 3: Transnational pathways of Rwandan fashion: portraits of two designers
Mapping out the contemporary fashionscape, deterritorialized as it is by globalization and online communication through social media, is a complex venture, that is being undertaken by many angles by fashion researchers around the globe. Some researchers look at the transnational communication channels that unite different actors of the fashionscape. For example, Minh-Ha T. Pham published a key study of the importance of fashion blogging in Asia with her book *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet* (Pham, 2015), which explores the rise of new independent actors in that space, such as fashion bloggers and influencers. However, due to the fast moving and perpetually changing nature of social media and online communication, such studies have to be perpetually actualized by taking into account the new media. At the time of writing this thesis, which is 2024, blogging is a lot less prevalent now than it was in 2015. The overwhelming majority of fashion-related information circulates through visual media on the platforms Instagram and TikTok, and these mediums are currently being challenged and transformed by the popularization of AI-generated imagery, and as such it is impossible to know which form the online fashionscape will take in two or three years.

A more contemporary approach can be found it studies that periodically re-territorialize fashion by drawing attention to the material conditions in which garments are produced in a specific context, and how this context interacts with the dynamics of transnational capitalism. A joint publication edited by Anna-Mari Almila and Serkan Delice titled

Fashion's Transnational Inequalities: socio-political, economic and environmental laid important groundwork in this direction by piecing together many case studies of historical and contemporary contexts as diverse as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Vietnam, France, the Netherlands, Turkey and Mexico (Almila & Delice, 2023). Although this is a comprehensive book that pushes the research on fashion and globalization in exciting new directions, it does not pay much notice to Africa, which is why I believe that my present attempt at mapping out Rwanda's presence in the contemporary fashion environment is pertinent. Up to this point, this thesis has established how the joint lineage of colonization and globalization has generated the context in which the fashion industries operate on the African continent. This has numerous important local implications, such as environmental concerns, worker rights, and issues of dignity and autonomy as illustrated by the Rwandan's preoccupation with *agaciro*. For this last section, I wish to present how some Rwandan actors navigate this aforementioned context and manage to bring their locally anchored perspective to the rest of the world, through new media and international invitations and collaborations.

To do so, I will analyze two specific Kigali-based designers whose work has a considerable transnational presence, to showcase the power dynamics that are at play when these designers integrate or criticize, depending on their lens, the global fashion system. Although both already established themselves before the secondhand clothing ban, which did not affect them directly as they are both designers that work for an international rather than domestic clientele, they are important because they are flagship figures of Rwandan's fashion scene, which garnered more attention following that ban. These two designers have been selected for their strong mediatic presence online, the diversity of their work and approach, and their relevance to the study of the aforementioned power dynamics. This overview will introduce them as well as present the links that exist between their work and the aspects of postcolonialism and environmentalism that are relevant to this study of Rwanda's relationship with fashion.

3.1. Moses Turahirwa

A good example of the previously mentioned duality between creativity and friction is the case of Moses Turahirwa, star designer of the Kigali-based label Moshions. Turahirwa spent the years 2019 to 2021 attending the prestigious Polimoda school in Florence, Italy, which allowed him to gain an international standing by presenting at prestigious events such as the Pitti Uomo (Muret, 2022). This means that Turahirwa was out of Rwanda and producing his collections in Italy at the time of the secondhand clothing ban, which did not affect him directly. He does, however, play a major role in showcasing Rwandan fashion to the world, both with his international successes and domestically, since he counts President Paul Kagame and his family among his clientele (Lepidi, 2023).

Beyond recognition, this also fuelled the creativity and technical aspect behind Moshions clothing, by allowing its designers to combine his experience in Rwanda with Italian craft and artisanry [See Annex 1, Figure 3]. On his design process in Italy, Turahirwa says, "I found in Florence the same artisanal identity as in Africa, the same passion for these ancestral techniques, which I want to promote through my collections. So I teamed up with some Florentine artisans to make the clothes," (Muret, 2022). This in and of itself is very interesting, because it places African countries on an equal footing with Italy, which benefit from a very high standing in the fashion power geography that we previously outlined. It erases preconceived description of talent and craftmanship by highlighting how ancestral techniques and craftmanship is just as integral to the countries of the world's biggest continent than in the *Bel Paese*. The clothing he created in Florence appears as a hybrid form, described by journalist Dominique Muret in the following manner:

> His personal style mixed African references, notably through printed patterns,
> dyeing techniques like tie-dye, and draping - a real passion of Turahirwa -
> with Italian influences such as using "sartorial" cuts (Muret 2022).

The emergence of such aesthetics in a transnational context has already been studied by Birgit Haehnel, to whom we already own the concept of *fashionscapes* that is so central to our current preoccupations. She mobilizes Homi K. Bhabha's 1994 notion of "third space" to name the phenomenon in which "the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates

a tension peculiar to borderline existences. […] It spreads beyond the knowledge of ethnic or cultural binarisms and becomes a new hybrid space of cultural difference in the negotiation of colonial power relations". (Haehnel, 2019, p.176).

In the past, colonial power relations dictated the relationship between cultural influences, in which one was subordinated to the other. The typical scheme was that of the central figure of a genius western designer, drawing into an Orientalist imaginary to produce an aestheticized image of the Other. Classical examples of this phenomenon as studied by fashion scholars include Yves Saint Laurent's 1967 African collection (Loughran, 2009, p.248), John Galliano's Shanghai inspired 2008 Pirelli Calendar (Reinach, 2012, p.59) or Karl Lagerfeld's 2009 short film *Paris-Shanghai* that features a timeless, stylish and humane Coco Chanel interacting with stereotyped portrayals of 18th century Chinese (Vats & Nishime, 2013). Sometimes these representations do backfire, as was the case with a notorious dress by Karl Lagerfeld that featured a Quranic verse as an embroidery, prompting Chanel to destroy the dresses and to issue an apology to Paris' Muslim community (Washington Post, Jan. 20, 1994). But what is interesting in the work of Turahirwa is that Africa no longer serves as a background or as an inspiration as much as it becomes a central constituent of the work. This is not a new phenomenon, as it builds from creative processes that emerged in the African fashion scene in the 80s. Although it has historical antecedents, like portrait photography in West Africa (Nimis, 2005), the 80s fashion scene is the most relevant to the study of Moses Turahirwa because it mobilizes all of the codes of European high fashion such as runway shows, collections, specialized press, scandal and glamour, at the service of a post-colonial project to revalorize African craftmanship and style in the eyes of the rest of the world.

The doyen of African Fashion, Chris Seydou (1949-1994), was the landmark figure in carving this third space in fashion, when he used the holy fabric of *bogolanfini* to craft suits and skirts (Rovine, 2008; Loughran, 2009, p.257) [See Annex 1, Figure 4]. Seydou's decision to cut through fabric, and even more so through holy fabric, in order to create garments whose form was associated with Western culture, created a huge commotion and made him highly unpopular among the Dogons for whom *bogolanfini* is sacred, but also

propelled him to international stardom, becoming the first African fashion designer to achieve this status (Berloquin-Chassany, 2015, p.79). This shows how third spaces, hybrid creations and especially hybrid identities can disturb established norms or hierarchies, but also uphold other power dynamics. Like Seydou, Turahirwa's international fashion success comes from this type of syncretic creation, but it is also reliant on the prestige of presenting that comes from presenting their collections in affluent fashion centres, Paris in the case of the former and Milan in the case of the latter. As such, their work has repercussions in two directions, bringing African fashion to the forefront by presenting their collection on the world stage thanks to a prestigious setting, but also consolidating the European capitals' status as the epicentres of the fashion world. Despite this, it is interesting to note that both Seydou and Turahirwa did return to their home countries after their European success, which shows that going to Europe can be more of a stepping stone in their professional development rather than the end goal. However, the return to the home country is not without its challenges, and the case of Turahirwa's return is a good example of the complexity of intersectionality.

Beyond the creative directions and commercial advantages that it brought to his work as a designer, Turahirwa's time in Italy also allowed him to openly live as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as to engage with the hedonistic side of the Italian fashion world, two elements that are frowned upon in contemporary Rwandan society and that deeply hurt his respectability. Back in Kigali, Turahirwa shared an Instagram post of his passport picture in which his gender has been changed to female, with a humorous mention of #ThankYouKagame, which resulted in his arrest. He was also accused of drug use during his stay in Italy, which resulted in criticism by the Rwandan press (TV5MONDE Info, 2023; Lepidi, 2023). This shows how certain characteristics or behaviours, such as a taste for provocation, that are normalized and accepted among Italian fashion designers are firmly condemned in Rwanda. Turahirwa gained a lot of standing as an international artist due to his time at Polimoda, but also hurt his popularity at home, and even his personal freedom and safety. It is also important to highlight one of the most complex aspects of this dynamic: Turahirwa is publicly acknowledged as one of the tailors working for President Paul Kagame, who prefers wearing clothes made by Rwandan designers in order

to exemplify *agaciro* and to demonstrate the quality of the clothes made in the country. This offers formidable recognition to the designer, but it also imposes on him a lot of pressure and expectation from the public eyes, as it places him in the entourage of Rwanda's number one public figure.

What is interesting about this occurrence is that it reveals some aspects of *agaciro* that are not highlighted in official communications or even previous studies about this concept. It is only through this case study that I took notice that the notion of dignity, which is how agaciro is usually translated, is not solely concerned with economic self-reliance or political stability, like I previously thought as the concept is often presented under this angle in the literature (Rutazibwa, 2014; Behuria, 2016; Behuria, 2019). For example, in a commencement speech he gave for the Commencement Ceremony for Gashora Girls academy, Paul Kagame asked the young Rwandans to "internalize what we mean when we say *Agaciro*. Whatever you do, whatever you will be, you must embody the dignity of Rwandans." (Behuria, 2016, p.444). This remains a fairly broad definition, and dignity have often been associated by scholars with ambition due to the Rwandan government's central focuses on entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, health and education (Behuria, 2016, p.444). Therefore, the controversy that occurred when Turahirwa was accused reveals that agaciro also embodies a conception of dignity that is rooted in upholding certain values or behaviours that are seen as important to the aforementioned autonomy and stability.

The Turahirwa controversy reveals how Rwanda's attempt to separate itself from the broader fashion system is not only a separation from the material implications of importing tons of secondhand clothes everywhere, but also a separation from the values and lifestyles associated with this industry, which are seen as incompatible with the values promoted by the government. As such, there is a conflict between Rwandan societal norms on sexuality and the norms that are promoted in the fashion industry. This tension, which is inherent to the study of transnational networks that go across cultures, has to be taken into account and prove that one cannot study the Rwandan fashion scene from a purely economic or material standpoint. Elements that would initially be considered anecdotal by a fashion researcher

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used to working on the Western fashion system, like a designer's sexuality or lifestyle, take a new importance when they are put into a context where those same elements are publicly discussed in popular media and can have direct repercussions on the public perception and physical wellbeing of the designer, even leading to a house arrest.

As a matter of fact, the "delinking" that occurred in Rwanda following its secondhand clothing ban is much more present at this symbolical level, since at the material level, Rwanda remains dependent on textile importations from China, India or Turkey to create its Made in Rwanda clothing as the country does not produce textile (Kagayo, 2022, p.27). The delinking that happened following the secondhand clothing ban appears to more of a delinking from Western countries, their fashion industry and the values they harbour, rather than the accession of autonomy through a functional local economy.

On his end, Moses Turahirwa has a bigger impact on the material circuits of fashion, since his success has a designer has brought Rwandan crafts into the highly prized European high fashion circuit through Italy. Similar to other designers who operate in the growing African luxury scene, Turahirwa's clothes are sustainable insofar as they are hand-crafted and produced in a very small circuit, and this aspect of being environmentally friendly is one highlighted by brands on the continent to set themselves apart from their European counterparts which are often associated with the various environmental scandals mentioned in the first part of this thesis (Martin-Leke & Ellis, 2014; Iqani & Dosekun, 2020). While he does not offer a direct solution to prevent garment dumping in Rwanda, what Turahirwa does is secure Rwanda a spot in the up-and-coming world of sustainable and craft-based fashion.

What makes *Moshions* so interesting is that it shows how critical insights on the fashion system can be modulated even when taking part in the said system. The designer's decision to go study in Italy and the success is brought him is a textbook fashion success story, yet he always used Italy has a vantage point to highlight and valorize the craft and artisanry of the African continent. Moshions' exhibits all of the classical elements of a prestigious European fashion house: seasonal collections, glamour photoshoots, premium materials, exclusive clientele. Yet it always does so while affirming the Rwandan roots and identity

of the brand, and associate the country and its culture with luxury. We can therefore associate Moshions with the emerging wave of *African luxury*, which aims to counter reductive discourses on Africa by offering representations of luxury, abundance, wealth and high artisanry (Iqani & Dosekun, 2020). As such, while it does criticize and respond to some aspects of the coloniality of the fashion system, most notably the colonial hierarchization of spaces and cultures, it still operates within a capitalist framework, the central tenets of which it does not criticize. The same criticisms that can be made to couture houses and other industries reliant on the patronage of the ultra-wealthy therefore also applies to Moshions (Millet, 2021). To put things into perspective, it is interesting to compare this trajectory with our other case study, which adopts a radically different position in regard to the fashion industry.

3.2. Cedric Mizero

In the burgeoning fashionscape of Kigali, not all actors follow the traditional pathway of a fashion designer. This is the case of self-taught conceptual artist Cedric Mizero, who takes inspiration from fashion design to develop his mixed media work combining paint, textures, fabrics and still objects (Mizero, n.d.). Born in the rural community of Gishoma, Rwanda, Mizero moved to Kigali in 2012 to develop his artistic practice. From the get-go, Mizero's work was firmly anchored in his local context, drawing inspiration from the women of his community.

The first of his projects to be archived online is *Fashion for All,* which he started in 2016 by hiring local women and men from Gishoma to act as models for his collections with the goal of "inviting people to reflect on the value of each individual and their right to access and enjoy fashion regardless of their age, size, social or economic status." (Mizero, *Fashion for All*, n.d.) The second, *Beauty in the Heart*, was a 2018 project in which he challenges the existing standards of beauty that are established in the fashion industry, through photographic portraits of rural women wearing his creations [See Annex 1, Figure 5]. Mizero's website informs us that this project "celebrates the important role of rural women in society and draw attention to their beauty, which transcends the hardship they experience in their daily life. By seeing farmers on the runway, people were invited to acknowledge

and understand the beauty, strength and abilities of rural women, who are a driving force of local economy but whose needs are often overlooked and unappreciated." (Mizero, *Beauty in the Art*, n.d.). These two projects are very interesting in that they deeply question the power dynamics at the heart of the contemporary fashion geography, as a product of colonialism and globalization. In both *Fashion for All* and *Beauty in the Heart*, Mizero brings the margins into the centre, and uses his art as a means to give voice. In his pictures, Rwanda does not appear as a passive background, but as an active participant. This central idea was expanded upon by the artist the following year, when he was invited to London to curate an exhibition destined to be his international breakthrough, *Dreaming my Memory*.

In 2019, Mizero was one of the 16 finalists (out of 200 applying designers) to be selected for the International Fashion Showcase at London's Somerset House, an event co-organized by the aforementioned British Council in partnership with the British Fashion Council, the London College of Fashion, and Somerset House as part of this year's London's Fashion Week (Mizero, n.d.). The International Fashion Showcase 2019 was described in the following terms by the British Council:

> The free exhibition is a key part of London Fashion Week, giving both the public and industry professionals the opportunity to discover emerging fashion from four continents: Africa, America, Asia and Europe and to celebrate its global relevance. The collections presented offer a balanced mix of womenswear and menswear exploring topical but universally shared issues and present new ideas and solutions that are shaping fashion globally. (British Fashion Council, 2019)

In addition to the participation in the exhibition, the showcase also provided its participants with "a bespoke online programme, developed by London College of Fashion, UAL, which will cover all aspects of business development from branding to sales and production to sustainability (British Fashion Council, 2019). This appears to be in line with the discourse present in the Fashion Revolution report, which was also hosted in collaboration with the British Fashion Council, in that it seeks to promote a form of green capitalism where sustainability is mainly taken into account as something to be considered when developing

branding and a sales strategy. Although the fashion showcase is an occasion for designers from various parts of the world to present their work in the highly mediatized context of the London Fashion Week, it also exports the European model through this formation, although it is up to each individual designer to adopt or not aspects of this model. Case in point, it is noteworthy that Mizero never started a label or a clothing line following the Fashion Showcase[7], preferring to focus instead on artistic projects focusing on exhibitions, photography, set design or costume design.

This trajectory is already perceptible in his creation for the IFS 2019, *Dreaming my Memory*[8], which awarded him a Special Mention to Curation. For the exhibit, Mizero used his artisanal knowledge to craft garments embodying the lived experiences of the rural population of his native village, therefore bringing an area that is usually at the margins of the world's fashion geography, Gishoma, right to its epicentre in London's Somerset house. He makes use of heavy symbolism from his native culture pertaining, such as flowers for medicine or cows for wealth and power, and weaves them into garments to highlight the role of women in rural Rwandan society [See Annex 1, Figure 6]. It is an exhibition that uses visual storytelling to bring the attention of the public to the lives and stories of Rwanda that are starkly absent from the fashion world.

The first part of this thesis highlighted how the fashion industry operates through erasure and absence: it erases strategic elements of its production chain that are deemed unglamorous or irrelevant, and instead draw the attention on carefully curated images that fit with the industry's vision. Since 2016, Mizero's project has always strived to redirect the gaze to show the beauty that lies in these spaces that are kept away from fashion. With *Dreaming my Memory*, Mizero was able to deliver his message further than ever before, using the strategic location of London's Somerset House, to highlight the legacy and contribution of women, especially mothers, in rural Rwanda, and the role that they play in their community. This is in stark contrast with the usual discourse of the fashion industry,

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[7] At least at the time of writing this thesis, which is january 2025.
[8] A digital recreation of the exhibition, as well as the IFS' other exhibitions this year, can be accessed online through the following link : https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=GCEy2qXd4EA

which is centred around youth[9], whiteness, individualism, consumerism and hedonism. Furthermore, Mizero's exhibition is not tied to any clothing line or any product that is to be sold: its main focus is to deliver its message by acting as an homage to the work of the women of his village.

As an artist and not a small business owner, Cedric Mizero is not eligible for the Agaciro Development Fund, and his work is funded independently from the state (through the sale of his art or international grants and prizes), but it is interesting to note that his artistic goal, which he set before the secondhand clothing ban in Rwanda, shares this objective of highlighting the dignity and autonomy of the Rwandan people, in his case more specifically women living in rural areas. This is a good remainder that before being a political project, *agaciro* remains first and foremost a concept that is woven deeply into Rwandan identity and values,

This is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Mizero's work, and the reason that his work warrants further study: he uses fashion design as a media, and not as an end itself. Whereas fashion designers usually embed their garments with meaning with the hope of successfully selling them (Barthes, 1967), Mizero uses clothing as a way to tell stories. These stories can take the form of an homage, as is the case with *Dreaming my Memory*, which is a celebration of the social power and dignity of women in rural Rwanda. Although the term *agaciro* is not mentioned by the artist itself, perhaps due to its political connotation, this project does contribute to showing to the global stage a different image of Rwandans, celebrating both their craft in the garments themselves and their culture in the stories that are portrayed. Similarly, in the case of *Beauty in the Heart*, although Mizero does not make any explicit mention to colonialism and its history, his work still acts as an answer to the process of exclusion and erasure that played a significant part in colonization. By giving a central role to the women of his native Gishoma, he challenges the traditional

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[9] This mainstream discourse perpetuated by the fashion industry also permeteated in other spheres, most notably the wellness industry. I have studied how the concept of « graceful ageing » has been exploited by entrepreneurs to capitalize on our cultural anxieties regarding aging in the following article : Prince, Alexandre. ""Ageing Gracefully" with Gwyneth Paltrow and GOOP: Ageism in a Cosmic Wellness Discourse". Conflict, Challenge, and Change (Off Campus: Seggau School of Thought 10), edited by Satty Flaherty-Echeverría, Nicole Haring, Simon Maierhofer. 2024, pp. 3-18, DOI: 10.25364/25.10:2024.1

narrative of the fashion house photoshoot and the Eurocentric beauty norms it promotes. With that being said, Mizero can also be more overly political and critical, as is the case with the work he did as a costume designer for Anisia Uzeyman and Saul Williams' film *Neptune Frost* (2021), which takes a firm stance against the effects of extractivism and waste dumping.

Neptune Frost makes an interesting contribution to decoloniality in Rwanda, due to its central use of Kinyarwanda and Kirundi as the main languages of the film, and by addressing the theme of colonial extraction and exploitation. However, what is central to our topic at hand here are the costumes (and décor elements) designed by Mizero, which employ various discarded electronic elements to build Afrofuturist assemblages. Circuit boards, transistors, copper wires and keyboard keys are brought together to dress the members of the hacker collective that act as the main protagonists of the movie. This choice, made by Mizero, was practical, as he himself concedes in an interview:

> "The director Saul and I have met before in Rwanda before the film was shot, and it was through the deep conversations we had that I got the first freedom. He said, "go ahead and do anything you want." He did paint a picture of sci-fi and futuristic themes but I still did things my way based on the environment I was in and the materials I had at my disposal." (Dayo, 2021).

It is, however, an enlightening choice, as it highlights the complex relationship that emerges from global circuits of waste, and in that case electronic waste. Much of the focus in this thesis has been given to the textile waste emerging from the fashion industry, but the very same power geography that directs textile waste and secondhand clothes to the Global South also applies to electronics, which is especially strong around Rwanda and Burundi.

University of Toronto geographer R. N. Reddy, explains that "in Global South cities, e-waste "un-becomes"(Gregson & Crang, 2010) waste and rematerializes as value and a source of variegated wealth formation through the meticulous, manual labours of informal recyclers who have built vibrant economies of disassembly that reenroll e-waste into new circuits-of-value." (Reddy, 2016, p.58) Reddy demonstrates that as Western powers massively export their e-waste southwards, as a way to "displace its negative environmental externalities to the Global South", many informal recycles in the targeted

cities have "historically sustained themselves by fixing the waste-disposal problems created by capitalist urbanization" (Reddy, 2016, p.60). This same dynamic is present here in Mizero's creative process, where he managed to repurpose electronic waste to create Afrofuturistic costumes that give a visual coherency to the movie's anticolonial and anti-extractivist themes [See Annex 1, Figure 7]. The result is a powerful creation that goes across multiple media (fashion and film) carrying a decolonial message that goes beyond the scope of fashion and address issues tied to neocolonial extractivism and waste dumping practices.

Both *Dreaming my Memory* and the costumes for *Neptune Frost* offer a panorama of the ways in which Mizero's work provides insightful and rich critical discourse, and it is important to situate that such discourse is also informed by the artist's central place in Kigali Fashion Scene. Despite him not working for a fashion house or a large-scale fashion distributor, Mizero possesses a great presence in the local fashion scene and participates in collaboration. He notably collaborated numerous times with Moshions : the first time in 2020 to design a limited edition, zero waste hand-knitted jacket[10], and then in 2021 when Mizero did the set design for the installations that accompanied Turahirwa's 2021 *Imandwa* collection (RCFS Media, 2023). These collaborations testify to the fact that although they use fashion in a very distinct manner and to different ends, the two artists are able to join forces with the common goal of showcasing the excellence of Rwandan design to the world.

Conclusion: what Kigali's scene can teach us about decolonizing fashion

In the first part of this thesis, I highlighted how the historical development of the globalized fashion industry was intertwined with European imperialism and colonialization around the globe. The subsequent development of fashion studies as a field of inquiry investigating this history, but without questioning some of its underlying premises, ended up generating a field that can be complicit in the same processes of erasure as the fashion industry. It is by drawing inspiration from the postcolonial turn in fashion studies that I decided to take a look at Rwanda, who benefit from a very unique sartorial situation following the secondhand fashion ban of 2018.

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[10] https://www.moshions.rw/products/zero-waste-shirt-jacket-1

Analyzing the previous in-depth studies that have been conducted on the development of Rwanda's fashion scene following the ban, it appears that the initial objective of replacing the market for imported second-hand clothes with one for locally produced Rwandan garments has been unsuccessful, as these locally produced clothes remain out of reach for the majority of Rwandan consumers, who instead turn to more affordable, Chinese produced imported garments (Kagayo, 2022, p.6). What it did successfully accomplish, however, is bringing enough mediatic and academic attention to what was already going on in Kigali's fashion scene, and allowing certain designers to emerge on the international scene as powerful voices in fashion. This extra momentum allowed Kigali-based designers to gain a stronger international foothold, allowing their voice to be heard in an otherwise highly hierarchical fashion geography, and showing Rwanda's symbol, colours and stories everywhere around the globe. This is another striking conclusion that appears from this research: it is much easier for decolonization to manifest itself aesthetically rather than materially. Although the two designers of this study have no impact on the production chain of the clothes that most Rwandan will wear, which is imported for China, they both create garments that contribute to altering the narrative on Rwanda and on east african craftmanship on the global fashion scene. In addition to the economical transfer that accompanies the production and diffusion of those garments, they are also embedded with meaning and stories, which is where their contribution is at its richest.

While he still operates within a more traditional fashion context, Moses Turahirwa designs garments that work as a third space blending the craft traditions of both Rwanda and Italy, challenging preexisting hierarchies of fashion and style and offering a model in which both cultures can cooperate and nourish each other without the usual power dynamic in which European design only steals and borrows from other cultures. His case also highlights the complexity of intersectionality and of navigating the fashion industry in a transnational context, where values can vary greatly from one country to the next. It shows that Rwanda's quest for *agaciro* is complex, and that this concept itself is politically charged, which makes the path for autonomy and dignity tortuous for those that do not entirely conform with traditional Rwandan norms, even if they are brilliant and successful creatives.

Through a very different approach, Cedric Mizero uses fashion design not as an end in and of itself, but as a medium through which he can deliver powerful messages. He tackled topics as diverse as notions of beauty and the accessibility of fashion (*Fashion for All, Beauty in the Heart*), the strength of and challenges faced by women in rural Rwanda (*Dreaming my Memory*) or the environmental challenges brought forth by extractivism and dumping practices in Africa (costume design for *Neptune Frost*). Although Mizero does collaborate with more commercially oriented designers like Moshions and is an active participant of the Kigali fashion scene, he is possibly the designer that offers the most insightful critical insights on the ways in which the transnational fashion industry affects people and environments in Rwanda.

These two complementary trajectories are only two of many, and other brilliant designers could have been selected to look into the critical perspectives that emerged from Kigali's unique fashion context. What is important is that they carry the Rwandan experience to the forefront of the fashion world, in a way that brings new questions and opposes some of the most challenging and destructive aspects of this industry. As globalization continues and the fashion geography becomes more complex with each new wave of delocalization, it is important to hear the voices that emerge from the margins of that geography. It is by doing so that can we take a measure of the magnitude and destructiveness of fashion's dark underbelly, and the alternative paths that stand before us. Only then can we hope to one day fashion a better future for all of us.

Figure 1. A picture from the CBC Report "La poubelle de la mode" on the Dandora Wasteland, in which we see the founder of the NPO "Slums Going Green" that is being interviewed in the report (©Radio-Canada)

Kenyan residents sort scraps at the Dandora Landfill in Nairobi. Among the world's largest recycling dumps, Dandora receives about 2,000 tons of industrial, agricultural, medical and commercial waste per day. Edward Burtynsky/Sundaram Tagore Gallery and Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York all rights reserved

Figure 2. One of the photographs from Burtynsky's *African Studies* taken in the Dandora landfill, used as a centerpiece in the New York Times' article for the launch of the book (Ackerberg, 2023). (©Edward Burtynsky/Sundaram Tagore Gallery and Howard Greenberg Gallery)

Figure 3: Three *Moshions* looks showcased at Florence's Villa Romana for Pitti Uomo 2022 (©Isa King[11])

Figure 4 : Bologan outfit showcased by Chris Seydou on the runway of the 1996 Dak'Art biennale (© Victoria Rovine)

[11] https://satisfashionug.com/rwandese-brand-moshions-latest-collection-is-one-not-to-miss%EF%BB%BF/

Figure 5: One of the models for Cedric Mizero's *Beauty in the Heart* exhibition (© Cedric Mizero)

Figure 6: Part of Cedric Mizero's *Dreaming my Memory* exhibit at London's Somerset House of the International Fashion Showcase 2019 (©Cedric Mizero)

Figure 7: Encounter between the main characters Neptune (left) and Matalusa (right). Neptune's electronic wire headpiece and Matalusa's keyboard jacket are examples of Mizero's use of electronic waste to create Afrofuturist costumes (©Kino Lorber).

Figure 8: An example of Moshions' 2021 *Imandwa* collection, showcased in an installation designed by Cedric Mizero (©Rwanda Cultural Fashion Show).

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