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Spring 2023

Thrift : A Respelling of Home

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Recommended Citation

Bernal, Penelope B., "Thrift : A Respelling of Home" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 155.
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Thrift : A Respelling of Home

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Penelope Belen Bernal Cabildo

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

Dedication

To all the thrifters out there! I hope I made you proud.

Acknowledgements

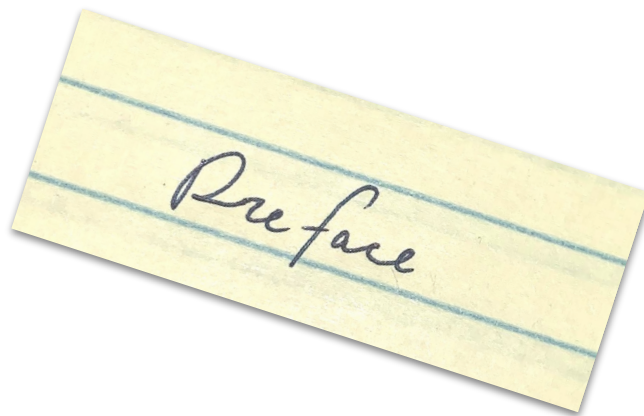
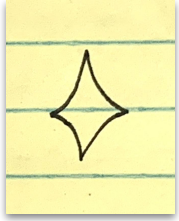
I would like to thank my Senior Project Advisor – Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins. It's finally done, yay!

I would like to thank my partner, Liv, who has been by my side throughout this project.

I would like to thank my interlocutors for all their insightful comments about thrifting.

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At the edge of the world, I am in Berlin, and I can't quite understand how the edge could be this warm. Perhaps my initial judgments are a bit premature. Judgments made during a daydream of colossal clouds that cling to the otherworldly sky and the greenery that makes its way through the cracks of concrete. It seems that wherever I go, my life revolves around very insular environments: rotating through English speaking bookshops and overheard conversations in the same three cafés. The edge of the world contains everything, yet your body cannot manifest itself to be more than one place at once.

At the edge of the world, I wait many feet underground for the U-Bahn or run toward the oncoming tram because the East is where my body rests. The East is where I sit cross-legged with my pixelated cover of Cortázar's visage to hide mine behind. The mysterious nature of his words, the interplay of language and sense, it all feels like a letter written directly for my eyes to see as I enter the bleakness of Berlin. The grey meets you when you're ready. I thrift a black leather coat.

–Ashley D. Escobar, “At the Edge of the World”

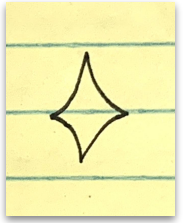


Ed Yong in “The One True Voyage”, writes, “Earth teems with sights and textures, sounds and vibrations ... but every animal can only tap into a small fraction of reality's fullness. Each is enclosed within its own unique sensory bubble, perceiving but a tiny sliver of an immense world.”² In “At the Edge of the World, Ashley, a dear friend of mine, identifies Berlin and its ‘edge’ as her sensory bubble, the dreamlike space which informs and molds her thoughts. This is exemplified in her use of ethereal imagery, such as colossal clouds and pixelated Cortázar book covers, as well as her acknowledgement of the fact that the world she senses and sees is constructed by her limited and insular view of life.

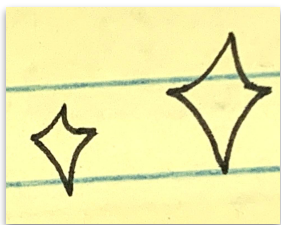
My ‘edge’, my sensory bubble is the Unter den Linden, a mile long street in the center of Berlin which begins at Alexanderplatz, a famous square named after the Russian Tsar Alexander I, and ends at the Brandenburg Gate, the historic location of the fall of the Berlin wall. By identifying my sensory bubble as a singular street, I intentionally imply that the notion of pilgrimage is incredibly important to my thought production. In other words, when I say my sensory bubble is the Unter den Linden, I mean that the dream-like space which informs and molds my thoughts can best be described as the walk I continually take towards the Brandenburg gate.

Though I have walked up the Unter den Linden, physically, multiple times, I still consider myself walking on that path. It’s a metaphor of how life and self-growth is much like walking up a street filled with museums and storefronts. It’s been 21 years and, with respect to my metaphorical walk, I have just left my starting point.

² Ed Yong, “The One True Voyage,” in *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms around Us* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2023), p. 1.



INTRODUCTION



Wearing a pair of acid-wash jeans, I moved to Berlin when the summer sun was a vivid red. Beams of light upon our faces, my father and I took out our respective cameras and captured the moment via photograph : purple clouds, a red sun, an old train stop, sprouts of green grass, iron train tracks, and two cameras. Thumb to screen, finger to button, my father and I documented Berlin through the essence of ourselves. It was not just a photo of Berlin, it was a photo that documented the first day of my life long pilgrimage towards self-discovery.

The unfamiliar is often described as unnatural, intimidating, at times even inferior – but Berlin was the *undiscovered*. The thing you anticipate and dream about every night until it happens. And when it happened, I was prompted to figure out : what do I like? What will be the places that I go to? Where will I build knowledge?

Through trial and error, via mindless wandering and overheard conversations, I came across places which felt like home. I visited weekly flea markets, watched beatnik movies in parks with palaces in them, filled my stomach with pistachio baklava, and discovered thrift stores for the first time. In fact, once I discovered thrift stores, I never looked back.

Berlin thrift stores, in general, were transformational spaces for me, but the thrift store that began this whole affair was the Gesundbrunnen Humana thrift store. ‘Humana’ is a German thrift store chain which resembles medium-sized US thrift stores like Beacons’ Closet, Buffalo Exchange, and Out of the Closet.

While I love all thrift stores, the Humana in Gesundbrunnen was special because it fit my needs. It was big, often empty, and had an entire room of clothing that was priced at € 1. [I still have a Humana dress which I purchased for 50 cents]. Between classes, on weekends, I found myself sneaking into the Gesundbrunnen Humana whenever I could. I would spend hours

looking through racks of discounted clothes and knick-knacks – from black velvet lederhosen to red vintage button ups, to USSR pins, to statues of brown boots, everything I found made me curious.

With every pin I found or label I read, I grew more and more curious of their connection to a deeper history within Berlin material culture. Once I moved back to the states and began studying at Bard, my interest in thrift stores expanded beyond Berlin and grew to include thrift stores as a whole.

I began my anthropological research by searching for what my friend, Aislinn, would call ‘frissons’, but is more akin to Audre Lorde’s ‘erotics’ – “an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire ... the fullness of depth of feeling.”³ In the same way Lorde describes dancing, building a bookcase, and writing a poem as erotic, I would argue that the experience of sifting through clothing racks, putting on vintage dresses, and listening to music while searching for knick knacks, has a similar effect. So much so, that one could argue that the conversations and the experiences that I write about in this ethnography are all a product of the erotics’ Lorde speaks of.

In addition to being intellectually pleasurable, thrift stores have played large roles in all of my Anthropological exploits. For ‘Representing the Other’ [an ethnographic film class I took], I donned thrifted clothing as I interviewed latinos about their cultural celebrations. While discussing Animal Crossing for ‘Introduction to Cultural Anthropology’, I went to Ben & Gracies to get inspiration and think. Throughout my college experience, thrift stores have been

³ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (Brooklyn, NY: Out & Out Books, 1978), p. 206.

an integral spaces for my intellectual self growth— they have been places to think, places where I could let go of embarrassing experiences, places which motivated me to keep going.

For the purposes of continuity, I decided to conduct participant observation at three thrift stores near Bard College : The Red Hook Church Shop [Red Hook, NY], Ben & Gracies [Red Hook, NY], and Thrift 2 Fight [Tivoli, NY]. My participant observation consisted of volunteering [Ben & Gracies] as well as participating as a shopper. In addition, I interviewed individuals who, not only, identified themselves either as ‘thrifters’ and/or as employees of thrift stores, but also, are currently living in New York State. Finally, despite the fact that I spent the same amount of time in each thrift store, a majority of this ethnography takes place in the Red Hook Church Shop, as I met more than half of my interlocutors there.

Inspired by Audre Lorde’s, *Zami : A ResPELLing of my name*, “Thrift : A ResPELLing of Home,” is an ethnography that actively connects fieldwork, ethnographic research, and personal narrative. This can be exemplified in the design of the ethnography, which, at times, resembles a diary.

This ethnography does not aim to tell you the objective truth of thrift stores, but rather, the purpose of this ethnography is to give the reader an intimate view of thrifting through the conversation of three main topics : As Is, One-of-a-Kind, and Community. Like a conversation, there are times where things are left unsaid, where ideas land and don’t land – all of which conceptualize how difficult it is to explore thrift stores within the confines of a 60+ page paper.

With that being said, I recommend you consider this paper as the equivalent of sitting down on a bench and beginning to knit a scarf. It is a brief moment – a tiny peek into a world that is hidden behind a screen door. Yet, there is something to learn from just that peek. In

Chapter 1, I borrow the term ‘as is’ to encourage my readers to consider how clothing is not neutral. Rather, every item of clothing is designed and manufactured with a specific intention in mind. Equally important, I talk about how we can use the term ‘as is’ to explore pathways which are often disregarded. In Chapter 2, I explain how thrift stores are sanctuaries for one-of-a-kind people and things. In addition, I explain how secondhand clothing is used to refuse normative society. Finally, in Chapter 3, I talk about how thrift stores bridge community.



AS IS



Chapter 1: As Is

In late summer, far from home, I walked down a brick sidewalk with my partner. Hand and hand, we noticed strings of green grass which hugged the crevices of the brick, causing us to walk in angles in order to prevent damaging them. When the angles made us dizzy, we walked into a thrift store to ease our heads and browse.

I have been in many thrift stores throughout my life, from seven-story tall thrift stores in Germany to Woodstock holes in the walls – places where just moving left could cause more than 10 items to fall to the floor.

The store we entered that day was moderate in size – it was a singular room filled with racks and hooks. The entire store, painted white, was lined with these racks – featuring a number of brown tweed coats, scuffed dress shoes, and graphic t-shirts. No place was left empty, and the thrifter in me was excited to explore what the store had to offer. The air conditioner rumbled in my ear, as I went hanger by hanger. In the summer, my memory of those clothes were vivid, but now, those clothes have been lost to time, their colors – blurred and unkept like knotted thread. The one exception is a brown gingham crop top with a scallop neckline.

The style was distinctly mod [short for modern] – a 1960s' British fashion trend that I have loved since childhood. Think : geometric patterns, color blocking, short shift dresses, and Twiggy. I've always loved this style of clothing, as it is incredibly campy and playful. Mod models are always posing in odd ways : with their legs open wide, their backs arched, and their hands to their hips – making them look like fashionable spiders.

Despite my longtime interest in Mod, I have yet to acquire clothing from this time period, as thrift stores in the US rarely carry it. So, when I saw the brown gingham crop top, I immediately was interested in purchasing it. While trying it on, I noticed one thing : the top required five buttons to fasten, yet two were inadequate – one button was missing, the other was broken in half. I went to the front desk and asked if they could give me a discount – something that I had gotten at other stores. To my surprise, the cashier said, ‘Sorry, the shirt is sold as is,’ and proceeded to tell me how I can sew a button.

I was taken aback, but I ended up purchasing the shirt anyway. When I see an item sold ‘as is’, I typically see the phrasing as a form of acknowledgment or respect for the item in itself. A seller is showing respect for an item when they refuse to bring down the price – the item’s possible rips or stains do not make the item less valuable, but instead, are aspects that make the item whole. For example, vintage clothing typically has some wear and tear, there could be no lining or a few stray threads, but when you look at vintage clothing you never think about its deformities. Rather, that wear and tear showcases the resilience of the garment.

However, from the perspective of a seller, ‘as is’ is “ a warning to buyers that they have no claim against sellers if the item does not match the buyer’s expectations.”⁴ In other words, when an item is sold ‘as is’, it means that an item's price cannot be haggled down – the piece is sold ‘as is’, no matter if there are stains, rips, or in my case, a broken button or two.

At retail stores, like Walmart and Target, items are marketed as new, implying that the item will be without any defects. However, this is not always the case; stains and lost buttons are common in retail stores, muddying the assumption that all items sold there are pristine and new.

⁴ Henry Lydiate, “Secondary Sales Risks,” Artquest, accessed May 2, 2023, <https://artquest.org.uk/artlaw-article/secondary-sales-risks/>.

Asking for a discount, in this context, makes sense as the item did not live up to its' marketed expectation.

On the other hand, thrift stores market their items as 'secondhand.' Thus, when an item is 'defective' – there is no clear connection to a manufacturer nor an individual who made it. In addition, there is no expectation for a secondhand good to be new. The use of 'as is', in this context, is incredibly useful, as it puts the shopper in their place – informing them that their expectations are, at times, unrealistic and that they should not pay attention to the defects.

After doing participant observation at Ben & Gracies, the Red Hook Church Shop, and Thrift 2 Fight, I have noticed that everyone has a different mentality about 'as is.' At Thrift 2 Fight, price tags with 'as is' are common, typically on vintage and higher priced clothing, signaling that asking for a discount at the Tivoli-based store is a faux pas. On the other hand, discounting is common at Ben & Gracies and the Red Hook Church Shop. "If someone asks [if they could have] something for free, I'll give it to them for free," an interlocutor tells me.

The varied discount philosophy within these stores, could be for a number of reasons. Thrift stores that aren't backed by institutions rely solely on purchases in order to make profit and pay wages. So, thrift stores like Thrift 2 Fight are more likely to promote discounts through mitzvah boards, which are forms of discounts that function like anonymous gift cards. On the other hand, thrift stores that are backed by institutions [like churches] can be more economically flexible because they have greater access to resources, as well as, alternative ways of making money.

In this chapter, I borrow the term 'as is' to explore the ways in which we can see thrift stores and clothing in depth. 'As is' is typically used in an economic context, one that demands

buyers to not question defects and value systems. However, I would argue that ‘as is’ is multifaceted and showcases an intimate way of looking at items in depth, in which terms like ‘whole’, ‘full’, and ‘all’ can not. Throughout this chapter, I utilize the concept ‘as is’ in order to investigate what sellers commonly advise us to disregard. Much like a walk, ‘as is’ encourages us to explore possible paths that we had previously not thought about.

prequel: objects

Materials, for centuries, have been used to showcase what could never be actualized in words. Archaeologists dedicate their lives looking for materials, searching for their history, considering the ways in which they have influenced humanity, but still, archaeologists express that there is more to learn. Typically, when we try to understand objects as they are, we start with thinking about the essence they emit, the ‘aura’ they have within them.

Essence and aura: both vague terms that showcase the difficulty of defining what encompasses an object.

Notions of essence and aura have been utilized to create stories about the possible lineages of items, to the point where scholars like Christine Harold have argued that such storytelling has been influential in the fueling of our curiosity and sense of specialness (Harold 2020).

Specifically, Harold theorizes that when we consider an item to have an essence, we feel special because some of it rubs off on us. “Humans have a long history of seeing objects as

containing an essence of their previous owner ... such items make us feel connected to something larger, perhaps a bit more special than we would be without them.⁵”

–

When I sat down on the concrete floor of the free-use store [a free clothing store at Bard College], I met Ruby. Ruby is short, she has a gap in her teeth, and her hair is naturally curly.

A white feeder shirt, worn out baggy jeans, ripped up shoes, and a stained dress – the clothes Ruby and I donned that day, are commonly considered defective and damaged. They have stains that we did not make, rips that we didn’t rip.

Like scars, those defects are physical clues into the past experiences of the person who previously wore them. They are mementos that evolve into ourselves. Rips, stains, cracks, etc. remind us that thrifted items are items that are continually being altered by the people who own them. They collect labels over time, labels such as worn-out, trendy, broken, old, kitschy – all of which enable us to envision the previous lives of items.

“ It [thrifted clothing] usually smells like the person before,” Ruby tells me. She plays with her blue pen – her fingers seemingly anxious to do something.

“I think it does keep it [aura] for a while, but then the more I wear it, the more it becomes mine. And I don't know if that person's aura fades away, but, I guess, maybe I think about it less.” When Ruby says, ‘the more I wear it, the more it becomes mine,’ she lingers on the idea that ‘aura’ does not fade, it becomes neutralized – the item, the history it used to have, becomes intertwined with Ruby – making her a little more special afterwards.

⁵ Christine Harold, “The Value of Story: Extending the Value of Objects,” *Things Worth Keeping*, September 2020, pp. 133-168, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv10vm2wd.8>, 137.

When you go to a retail store, all items are marketed as ‘ownerless.’ As long as you can buy something – it can be yours – even if it does not seem right. However, Ruby’s take is interesting because she describes ownership attained after a purchase [rather than during]. The more and more she builds a connection with an item – the more the item feels ‘lived in’ by her. Anyone could put on thigh high boots, the crown jewels, or an astronaut suit, and physically it will look like it belongs to them, but mentally, that might not be the case.

The mental aspect is what Ruby hints at. Through the process of wearing, intimacy is built, memories are forged, to the point where, in the context of secondhand clothes, the previous owner’s ‘aura’ does not fade, it's just thought of less. This form of ownership is built upon the idea that people are continually bonding with their material possessions, undoubtedly creating a mutual sense of “duty and stewardship⁶.”

⁶ Christine Harold, “The Value of Story: Extending the Value of Objects,” *Things Worth Keeping*, September 2020, pp. 133-168, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv10vm2wd.8>, 141.

part one : "clothing is not neutral"

march — 9:14am, rain

hair, red

clothes, texas tuxedo : carpenter jeans, jean jacket, 'little red fox' shirt

shoes, brown & blue cowboy boots

I disguised myself because I didn't know what to expect – what others would expect from me.

The first thing I noticed about Chris was his hair. Chris's hair reminds me of rollercoasters from my childhood. The type I had to tilt my head up to see.

I experienced those rollercoasters from the comfort of my mothers' lap and noticed how they resembled yarn after a kitten had played with it. Those coasters were larger than life, endless loops of lines and screams – screams which made me anxious to grow up so I, too, can be a part of the yarn.

Chris' hair isn't the rollercoaster itself, rather, his hair is the liminal period of time when the rollercoaster turns upside down, and, for a second, everyone's hair is defying gravity. Sculpted in points like lotus petals, his hair points up into the air like a blooming flower. "I like your hair," I told him the day we met. "It's memorable."

"I'd like to think so." He replied.

We met in a required Anthropology class our junior year. Sitting in a narrow room with only one window, we began the process of thinking about our Senior Project. During which,

Chris and I had, perhaps, the most influential conversation I've had in college. Squished in that small, dim room, surrounded by my peers, I began to talk to him about my time in Berlin – how I found emblems of the Cold War in every thrift store I went to. “It makes you curious about what that means: Are people disproportionately giving away items from that period? What is the Cold War’s legacy in modern-day Berlin? How much of the Cold War lives on in the material culture of the people who live there?” Back and forth, we talked about this dynamic, until he told me, “No item of clothing is neutral.”

Eureka!

Something had finally clicked. I had circled around that conclusion for so long, but had never been able to dictate it. When Chris says, ‘no item of clothing is neutral,’ he is able to identify, what I would argue, is the basis of this entire project – every item of clothing is made *and* used with a specific agenda in mind. Once we understand this agenda, the way in which we interact with clothing completely changes.

We begin to see the ‘meat’ of clothing. The ‘as is’ of clothing. Everything, especially clothing, has been produced with intention – that intention being informed by politics.

For example, T-shirts that say ‘I support young black businesses’ or ‘Black Lives Matter’ are explicit examples of how people use the media of the shirt to showcase a particular political position, as well as, gain support for their political missions. “The politics of your clothes today can mean everything from buying one of OFF-White’s ‘I support young black businesses

T-shirts' ... to not buying much of anything at all out of a dedication to sustainability.⁷”

However, a shirt's design is not the only thing that is political about clothing. We have to ask ourselves: how do shirts come to be? Who makes them? What are the conditions in which shirts are reproduced?

By asking these questions, you begin to visualize racks of clothes, not simply as clothes, but as items that were made by people thousands of miles away from you, designed with the intention to be mass-produced, and showcased in a sterilized way in order to disguise the neoliberal context in which it was created. The rise of privatization and the reduction of state involvement in the economy, core aspects of neoliberalism, has put large corporations in control of not just natural resources, but also consumers.

Along the wall of the Olin Language Center, there lies a collage of different clothing tags pinned to a world map. The map is called, “The Global Shake Down” and it asks its participants to answer, “Where does your fashion statement come from?” Analysis of the map showcases that a majority of the fashion statements were from East Asia and North/Central America, showcasing, that of the 100 billion clothes produced every year⁸, a majority of them are made in specific regions of the world in which we have little control of their labor conditions.

In addition, a recent survey found that, “the average household's cost for clothing per month is about \$120 (that's \$1,434 per year).⁹” This means that households are consistently

⁷ Maya Singer, “Can Fashion Be Political?,” *Vogue*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/charting-the-influence-of-politics-on-fashion>.

⁸ Arabella Ruiz, “17 Most Worrying Textile Waste Statistics & Facts ,” *The Roundup*, 2023, <https://theroundup.org/textile-waste-statistics/>.

⁹ “Consumer Expenditure Surveys,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), accessed May 3, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/cex/>.

buying clothing throughout the year. Kaitlyn, a volunteer at the Red Hook Church Shop and a local designer, tells me, “50 years ago, people bought, like, four things, but now, you're buying four things, like a week.”

The rise of storage units, junk drawers, basements, closets, storage rooms, and garages demonstrate how we, as individuals, actively use essential parts of homes and outdoor spaces to accommodate our material ventures. Simply put, as a society, we have built infrastructure which makes overconsumption appear acceptable.

Throughout my fieldwork, I have stood in rooms filled with boxes, trash bags, and clothing racks. In one of these rooms, I met Kaitlyn and Louise, an employee at the Red Hook Church Shop.

From my understanding, the Red Hook Church Shop originally encompassed just the basement of the Episcopal Christ Church dance hall. But, due to increased demands, the thrift store expanded to encompass not just the basement, but also the top floor. During this process, the basement was split in half: one half for storing donations, the other half for selling home goods.

While I have been on both sides, I interviewed Louise and Kaitlyn in the designated donation section of the basement. This section is low to the ground and situated within two rooms. The first room, large and square, is reserved for storage and the holding of newly donated items. The second room is a long, narrow, closet-like room which is where a majority of the organization takes place. Racks are dispersed throughout the room, each labeled by type – dress, shirt, coat, etc. When Louise gives me a tour of the space, she stops at a rack which has been tasked to hold items she isn't sure about selling.

Louise shows us a silk scarf with the name, 'University of Hong Kong' printed in block letters against a blue and green sky. "Why would you buy a scarf like this? I don't understand it myself because I don't wear scarves like this." She says, touching the silk delicately.

"It does make you wonder – somebody went [to Hong Kong] and then brought it back to Red Hook, of all places, and then they decided they didn't want it anymore." Unintentionally, Louise is thinking in an 'as is' way. She wonders what led the scarf to her store, engaging with the little clues she can deduce from observation.

She continues, "Maybe it's one of those things that they bought, thinking, one day I'll be one of those women who wears a scarf. But then they chose not to, and then donated it to us, which is really lovely."

Without really thinking about it, Louise paints a picture of who the previous owner could be. She visualizes a woman who traveled the world, purchased a scarf, despite not being a 'scarf-person', and then decided that the purchase was a mistake, so they donated it.

It's kinda funny. Everyone has an idea of what fits them – people know what items of clothing make them feel comfortable. Yet, it is not uncommon for people to buy things that don't fit within their own comfiness criteria. Though Louise's story is fictitious, it was created from real life consumer thoughts, as we utilize social and/or political narratives in order to justify purchases which we know we shouldn't.

The fictitious person Louise created, purchased the scarf for a social reason – the scarf was pretty and she thought one day she could become a woman who wore a scarf. In contrast, a political reason could be : the woman knew the scarf was produced by union workers and she

wanted to support them, so she bought the scarf – knowing that she would not wear it. While she had good intentions, by purchasing something she won't use, she is participating in unnecessary consumption that could lead to unnecessary waste disposal. These stories allude to the idea that we consume out of habit, rather than out of necessity.

As I talk later about in this chapter, thrift stores are a result of this overconsumption. This is because there is a societal need for infrastructure in which people can dispose of unwanted items – last season clothing, espadrilles bought on holiday in Spain, etc.

How did we get this way? Greg Castillo writes in “Domesticating the Cold War: Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Pall Germany,” that the encouragement of consumerism was a way in which the United States could promote economic growth and spread American values. Though Castillo is specifically talking about Cold War-era West Berlin, one could only assume that the American economists who developed the Marshall Plan were heavily inspired by US economic growth strategies. “The US Marshall Plan set its sights on the notion of Konsumterror. Private consumption was integral to 'the American way of life'¹⁰” By pushing consumption, the thought was to “fuel economic expansion ... [and] stabilize capitalist democracy.¹¹” While the building of consumerist culture in West Germany built much needed economic growth, it also encouraged the spread of needless spending – which can be not only a detriment to someone's wallet but also to the environment.

¹⁰ Greg Castillo, “Domesticating the Cold War: Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005): pp. 261-288, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009405051553>, 268.

¹¹ Greg Castillo, “Domesticating the Cold War: Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005): pp. 261-288, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009405051553>, 268.

With the environment in mind, Sierra, an employee at Thrift 2 Fight, tells me, “My New Year's resolution this year is to not buy any clothes – new or used.” Sierra’s resolution is rooted in the idea that consumption of clothes is a choice – for someone who is an adult, who has minimal changes in their body type [at least in comparison to children], there is no real need to purchase new clothes. In addition, the resolution is not only a sustainable stance, but also an example of what Amar Cheema and Dilip Soman label as ‘Malleable Mental Accounting,’ a “cognitive form of bookkeeping that individuals practice to keep track of expenses and control consumption.¹²” In other words, a form of mental budgeting that is intended to control the way in which we spend our money.

Theoretically, this form of budget management is incredibly helpful as it stops us from spending needlessly. However, since budgeting is occurring mentally, rather than being controlled through a spending limit on a credit card, that means that budgeting tends to become malleable, allowing us to “circumvent established controls and to indulge in the very behavior that [we] were attempting to avoid.¹³”

Jennifer Le Zotte, a historian who is interested in material culture and thrift stores, identifies another form of Mental Malleable Accounting wherein people see donation as an action which allows them to buy more. “Though occasionally promoted as an anticapitalist pursuit, secondhand commerce justified accelerated buying for many participants. Through

¹² Amar Cheema and Dilip Soman, “Malleable Mental Accounting: The Effect of Flexibility on the Justification of Attractive Spending and Consumption Decisions,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2006): pp. 33-44, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1601_6, 33.

¹³ Amar Cheema and Dilip Soman, “Malleable Mental Accounting: The Effect of Flexibility on the Justification of Attractive Spending and Consumption Decisions,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2006): pp. 33-44, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1601_6, 34.

donations, civically responsible citizens rationalized *new* purchases based on their forfeiture of used items—after all, last season’s discarded shoes were not crowding landfills or taxing municipal incinerators¹⁴.”

Part two : As Is, ‘What are the ecological footprints inside our thrift stores?’

As a graduate from FIT, Kailtyn is constantly thinking about the ecological footprint of clothes. “We're seeing in the thrift store that there’s a lot of Shein, Forever 21, Zara, but, also, people don't want them because they're crappy, they're made poorly. they're just going to end up in a landfill. And they're never going to break down because they're made of polyester.”

Kaitlyn’s observation is not a new one – I myself had noticed how common fast fashion clothing is within thrift stores. However, what is nuanced about Kaitlyn’s statement is how she is able to visualize the severity of the fast fashion industry.

By stating that fast fashion clothes are made of plastic and will not break down, we are forced to think about how the clothes we have within our closets, the new garments in production right now, etc. will persist even when we die. Whether we like it or not, our clothing has a longer lifespan than us. Imagine that : the clothing that is dumped into landfills will remain there for hundreds of years – outliving us all.

Luz Claudio writes, “Once bought, an estimated 21% of annual clothing purchases stay in the home¹⁵.” This statistic means nearly 80% of all clothing purchases are thrown away or

¹⁴Jennifer Le Zotte, *From Goodwill to Grunge: A History of Secondhand Styles and Alternative Economies* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 5.

¹⁵ Luz Claudio, “Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 115, no. 9 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.115-a449>, 450.

donated, showcasing that a majority of clothing purchases are often regretted. Forcing us to step back and account for the fact that excess waste is not a random phenomenon, rather, it is a product of our own actions.

Items made of polyester and spandex last the longest, with polyester taking between 50-200 years to degrade, and spandex lasting indefinitely. In comparison, fabrics made of cellulose, like linens and cottons, can take only a couple of weeks to decompose under the best conditions. However, cellulose fabrics are sustainably less efficient to produce due to large amounts of water use, leaving us at an ecological deadend, wherein, all fabrics hurt the environment in one way or another. Kaitlyn continues,

It takes 2700 liters for one [cotton] t-shirt, which is about what a person drinks in two and a half years. And now we're facing our shortages ...the world wildlife fund has estimated that by 2025, two thirds of the world's population won't have access to clean drinking water. So it's a little cringey because a lot of the people who don't have access to our clean water – are making our clothes.

Kaitlyn visualizes the very real consequences of fashion manufacturing, where the production of all clothes contain a paradigm of exploitation. This paradigm, which is essential in a globalized capitalist world, forces impoverished countries to sell their much needed resources, as well as their labor, in order to acquire capital. Luz Claudio in Waste Couture points out, “ the manufacturer of polyester and other synthetic fabrics is an energy intensive process requiring

large amounts of crude oil and releasing emissions including volatile organic compounds, particulate matter, and acid gasses such as hydrogen chloride, all of which can cause or aggravate respiratory disease¹⁶.” Once crude oil gets into water streams, essential resources are contaminated – eliminating peoples’ access to clean water for irrigation, cooking, and drinking. Such showcases that the basic needs of impoverished people often conflicts with capitalism.

In addition, when Kaitlyn states that “a lot of the people who don’t have access to our clean water – are making our clothes” and that it takes “2700 liters to make a single cotton shirt”, we can see that the clothing in which we don has been produced within an unbalanced, unequal, economy. Neoliberalism and accelerated globalization has forced impoverished countries to take the brunt of ecological devastation – for nothing more than a small paycheck. Of course, the factory workers are not to blame, rather, to blame is the ‘first world’ consumer who is consistently demanding cheap, newly manufactured trendy clothing.

Kaitlyn visualizes this reality from the scope of her own experience while studying at FIT,

That was when the Bangladesh fires happened. I want to say it was 2013 – Rana Plaza. Over 100 women died in a factory that got caught on fire and they were locked inside. And I don't remember, but it was like, brand names that you and I have heard of – had their stuff made there. It was kind of a shock to the system and to the industry. But also nothing's really changed, right?

¹⁶ Luz Claudio, “Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 115, no. 9 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.115-a449>, 450.

What a horrific sight. Consumption of clothing has gotten so bad that it has inadvertently led to the death of over a hundred women. I guess, the harsh reality of fast fashion clothing is that we have no idea where it comes from. Yes, we see clothing tags, but we do not know the specifics – which city, which factory, which person. I mean, it is entirely possible that some of the clothes in our closets [in 2013] were produced in the Rana Plaza factory.

Of course, this is only one story, only one fire, but the New York Times reported that, “Between 2012 and 2019, there were more than 150 fire and other safety episodes connected to the country’s garment industry, according to the Solidarity Center, a workers’ rights organization. A total of more than 1,300 people died in those incidents, and more than 3,800 people were injured.¹⁷” Despite the fact that factory fires are so common, I was unable to find a single political leader [from the Global North] whom has commented on them.

The lack of institutional change has encouraged individuals to take matters into their own hands and forgo participation in corporate capitalism. Thrift stores, in particular, allow individuals to do such a thing, how? This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

ending thought of chapter one : As Is, thinking globally

The morning after my second milonga, a type of structured Tango, I sat in my Tango teacher’s breakfast nook overlooking a plain of common reed. In the nook, I sat next to the guest

¹⁷ Saif Hasnat and Emily Schmall, “Dozens Die as Another Factory Fire Strikes Bangladesh,” The New York Times (The New York Times, July 9, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/world/asia/bangladesh-factory-fire.html>.

dancers, a fellow student, and my teacher as we spoke about everyday things. One of the dancers, a Fullbright scholar who studied in Argentina, told me something that I found quite interesting.

He told me that when he lived in South America, he would go to plazas and see them filled with merchants selling mountains of used clothing [from the states] in plastics bags, “They would sell these huge bags of clothes, which you could not open until they bought them for like \$5 ... That’s why you see pictures of kids in Africa and South America wearing random family reunion T-shirts.”

When he said this to me, I couldn’t help but think about the reeds in front of us. If I wanted to, I could walk up to the plain of reed and see every part of it.

In California, the same is true – perhaps even more so. The grass is never tall – they can be dried, dyed green, accompanied by dandelions, but you always have to look down to grass. You can lie down on your stomach and grass won’t even surround you or touch your sides, it is purely something that you sit or lie on. In fact, I have deep adolescent memories of lying on grass and trying to use it in different ways. During after-school care at the local recreation center, I would taste test grass, enjoying the lemon-like juice I would suck out of it. When our lawn was green, I would stare intensely at shards of grass in an attempt to see its’ ‘aura,’ a distinct energy that a plant emits around itself [information I acquired from a tiny book about color theory]. However, not everyone is able to see them in this way. Sometimes, all you have is a photo.

According to Luz Claudio, “only about one-fifth of the clothing donated to charities is directly used or sold in their thrift shops, there are nowhere near enough people in America to absorb the mountains of castoffs, even if they were given away.¹⁸” This means that four-fifths of

¹⁸ Luz Claudio, “Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 115, no. 9 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.115-a449>, 452.

used clothing [given to charities] gets shipped abroad to Latin American plazas, Zambian *mitumbas*, and Harajuku thrift stores, to name a few.

While these markets are excellent ways to disperse donated American clothing, they tend to be bad for local economies. As, used American clothing is often favored [over local clothing] due to a sense of modernity members feel while wearing them (Claudio 2007). Such sentiment encourages people to prioritize spending their money on used American goods, rather than supporting their local artisans, showcasing how the excess amount of American secondhand clothing has the potential to affect local economies in ‘third world’ countries (Claudio 2007).

This dynamic between ‘first’ and ‘third’ world became more apparent after my mother shared with me, “There are no thrift stores in Mexico – in the third world.”

Though her claim is factually incorrect, she points to how thrift stores are disproportionately represented in the Global North. This is most likely because first world countries are often ‘throw-away’ societies, aka, countries which produce high amounts of waste. In fact, the EPA reported that, “Americans throw away more than 68 pounds of clothing and textiles per person per year.¹⁹” Whether we understand it or not, capitalist systems create paradigms of excess — excess which is often in the form of waste. This is visualized in *Waste and Want*, “we buy things devised to be thrown out after brief use : packaging designed to move goods one way from factories to consumers, and ‘disposable’ products, used one time to save the labor of washing or refilling. In addition, vast numbers of us declare clothes and household goods obsolete owing to changing tastes.²⁰”

¹⁹ Luz Claudio, “Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 115, no. 9 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.115-a449>, 451.

²⁰ Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co, 2013), 4.

American's are constantly throwing stuff away, showcasing how comfortable they are with disposing. From clothing drop off boxes, which not only look like large public trash cans, but they are also found in places where trash cans are placed, to the fact that donors often put their donations in trash bags, waste imagery is incredibly prevalent within thrift stores. Yet, "nothing is inherently trash."²¹ Rather, excessive build up of trash is a byproduct of habit. This could be showcased by the fact that people who do not live in throw-away societies, do not produce as much waste as people who do live in such societies.

²¹ Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co, 2013), 5.



ONE OF A KIND



One of a Kind

I grew up reading books about extravagant girls who dressed in extravagant ways. In *Fancy Nancy*, Nancy puts multicolored necklaces in her unruly hair, steals her mothers' stilettos, and hosts themed afternoon picnics with her stuffed animals every weekend. Children's books condition kids to be brave, to showcase their true selves, and to consider the breaking of rules as, at times, necessary to get things done. Yet, we live in a society that is systematically oppressive, putting huge consequences on the breaking of rules and being 'different'.

Point blank – once out of adolescence, the things that used to bring us joy, such as excessive accessorizing or 'playing pretend', are considered to be childish and inappropriate; we are told to leave those desires behind and *be normal*. For me and my interlocutors, thrift stores are the life line which keep that childish joy and curiosity alive. Simply put, thrift stores are sanctuaries for one-of-a-kind people and things. Historically, this has also been the case, as thrift stores [and thrifted goods] have been used to nurture individuality and rebel against the status quo. "Used goods commerce gave people who wanted to resist middle-class culture or corporate capitalism the apparent means to participate in crafting individual identities based on consumer choices—arguably, by substituting superficial cultural solutions for genuine political action."²²

In this chapter, I utilize the phrase 'one-of-a-kind' to explore the ways in which people use thrift stores to refuse societal conformity. Through participant observation and interviews with interlocutors, I was told narratives of refusal, from refusing to participate in fast fashion to refusing societal gender norms, which have taught me the importance of refusal within thrift

²² Le Jennifer Zotte, *From Goodwill to Grunge: A History of Secondhand Styles and Alternative Economies* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 5.

culture. This is because refusal is an activator of change. “Refusal is not another word for resistance, instead, refusal is a critique ... Refusal is hopeful. Refusal is willful.”²³ When I say thrifters ‘refuse societal conformity’, I am speaking about how thrifters are constantly interfering with a number of preexisting structures which keep White Heterosexual Male Capitalist America powerful : middle-class culture, corporate capitalism, societal homophobia, ethnocentrism – all of which constitute ‘normative society.’

The people in power, the white people who rule over everyone, show up in children’s books all the time. They are the police, the ‘titans’, *la migra*, the manager, the security guard, the owner, the teacher, and everytime, the young kid is able to fight back, to walk around them, and, in some cases, beat them.

prequel, struggles with looking presentable

When I was younger, my father threw away a majority of my clothes and took me to Old Navy. There – we bought a number of shorts, slacks, tops, and button ups – all the same, just in a variety of colors. At the time, I was excited by the prospect of getting new clothes, as shopping trips were quite rare, but, once the garments were placed in my sticker-bound armoire, I saw them for what they were : an attempt to control the way I dressed. An unneeded, un-school issued uniform.

²³ Carole McGranahan, “Theorizing Refusal: An Introduction,” *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 3 (2016): pp. 319-325, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.3.01>. 322.

To dress me in that way, was to showcase my ability to be a tidy child. (Which I was not). In addition, it was a method my father utilized in order to show his peers that he was a good parent – as he kept his daughter looking ‘acceptable’. My father is not the only parent who has done this, in fact, this narrative is shared by other children of immigrants.

For example, Zoe [they/she], an acquaintance from Tango class, shared with me, that, their mother critiques them for wearing thrifted ripped jeans as they make Zoe look ‘unpresentable’,

When I was, like, a young adult and I would, like, try and wear jeans with holes in the knees, my mom was like, you can't go outside in those pants because you don't look presentable. It's a real example of generational trauma – where you get judged on your appearance.

While ripped jeans are something Zoe sees as normal and trendy, Zoe's mother sees ripped jeans as an indication of untidiness. Zoe explains their mother's reaction as an example of generational trauma, wherein, past traumatic experiences has led Zoe's mom to be, at times, irrationally concerned about the way in which she and her children are perceived. Whether it is true or not, thrifted clothing carries along a stigma of uncleanliness and poverty. This is showcased in history books, wherein “given that goods were abundantly available through catalogs, specialty shops, and department stores, most citizens [1894-1930] thought potentially unhygienic secondhand wearables suitable for donating to the poorest of the poor but hardly fit

for public sale.²⁴ Since newly manufactured clothing is readily accessible, most people prefer to buy new clothes and are confused as to why people thrift – oftentimes assuming they cannot afford to buy new clothes. This is not true and is something that thrifters have to unlearn. Zoe continues,

[One day] she [Zoe's mother] needed to go to the doctor and get seen. And so she went and she took a shower, she washed her hair, she shaved her legs. She put on a dress. She put on a full face of foundation and makeup because she was so sickly pale that you could tell. And I'm, like, sitting in her room, and I'm watching, and she's explaining to me that [from her parents' lived experience in Cuba, in the US, and her lived experience in the United States] if you didn't look presentable enough, a doctor could turn you away. So it's like this amount of respectability involved in your dress that I needed to unlearn a little bit.

As kids with immigrant parents, Zoe and myself frequently interact with generational trauma through the ways in which we dress and our parents' subsequent reactions to them. The generational trauma that we face comes from the societal pressure to be successful members of white American society.

Clothing and the way in which people present themselves, indicates one's ability to integrate and assimilate – our fathers put on black suits with solid colored ties, our mothers wear long dresses with florals and apply makeup to their faces, and it's up to them to make sure that

²⁴Jennifer Le Zotte, “‘Not Charity, but a Chance’: Philanthropic Capitalism and the Rise of American Thrift Stores, 1894–1930,” *The New England Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): pp. 169-195, https://doi.org/10.1162/tneq_a_00275, 170.

we do too. However, our generation is beginning to pick apart and identify the moments in our lives where the notion of presentability was misconstrued to be an allusion to whiteness. So now, we wear the thrifted clothing of our choice : ripped jeans, vintage dresses, scuffed cowboy boots; while understanding that our parents' concerns are very real.

What has occurred is a sterilized society wherein, to be a 'good' American citizen is to be a conformist – to accept rules and laws without protest. Despite the fact that these rules, laws, and norms, are all socially constructed, as they are informed by historical and social factors. Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture.”²⁵

Part one.two : attacking class through the art of DIY

Under shaded archways in Tehachapi, I used to reference C. Scott Hemphill and Jeannie Suk’s paper, “The Law, Culture, and Economics of Fashion,” all the time. Particularly I was interested in *trickle down fashion theory*, which is characterized by the “desire for group distinction on the part of the higher classes, and the attempt to efface external class markers through imitation on the part of the lower classes.”²⁶ Think : knock-off culture and fast fashion piracy scandals.

²⁵ Anzaldúa Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 12.

²⁶ Hemphill, C. Scott C. Hemphill & Jeannie C. Suk, “The Law, Culture, and Economics of Fashion”, *Stan. L. Rev.* 1147 (2009). 61.

I saw trickle down fashion theory as an indicator of class control, wherein, the clothes that we wear are unconscious imitations of the aesthetics and beliefs of the upper class. However, my opinion shifted after I spoke to Shaheem [they/them] last fall. Shaheem, a model I met in the East Village, explained that, despite the origin or inspiration behind most clothes, what is really important – is how people wear them :

I think vintage is the closest thing to luxury because things aren't as well-made as they used to. So I think it is a power move, but like, in the favor of the people because we are wearing it in a fresh way that maybe someone else didn't. So I definitely think it's a power move, but I think the people [thrifters] benefit from it for sure. It would be an ego thing if the rich were like, 'yeah, you're wearing our clothes', but like, a bad ego move because it's like, 'okay, but you weren't imaginative' ...even if it is outdated clothing, we're wearing it in a fresh way.

Shaheem's perspective is particularly insightful because it pushes against the status quo in an interesting way. Instead of seeing clothing as a power move from the side of the rich, Shaheem distorts this mentality and flips it around as a power move from the side of the thrifter [who are from all economic classes]. Shaheem uses the phrase, 'power move,' in order to explain how thrifters showcase their power over the mainstream – which is through imaginative ways of styling and altering. An H&M jumpsuit is just an H&M jumpsuit until it goes into the hands of a thrifter.

Shaheem particularly does this via ‘DIY’, an acronym for ‘do it yourself’. For those who do not know, DIY typically involves alterations that are done without a sewing machine and are made with items found at craft stores, such as, hot glue, scissors, plastic jewels, paint, etc. A self proclaimed ‘DIY Creature,’ Shaheem explains that the creative potential of a thrifted good is what encourages them to thrift,

DIYing is what inspires me to buy a piece. Most likely, I would say 80, 70, 80% of the time. When I see something, I'm saying, what can I do to it? I'll see something and I'll think, how can I cut that? Or what can I add to that?

Through ripping and cutting, Shaheem is able to transform a ‘normal’ item of clothing into something that is distinctly personal and one-of-a-kind.

Part one.five : attacking class through the art of upcycling

The way in which Kaitlyn attacks class is through the art of upcycling, a process of repurposing which gives unwanted items ‘second lives’. Rubbing her fingers against her desk, Kaitlyn tells me that her upcycling brand began because there needed to be an alternative to the fast paced, unsustainable, fashion industry,

The fashion industry is so quick. We've gotten to this insane pace of deliveries and buying a new season [all the time]. Zara puts new clothes on their racks every single week. It's crazy that there's so much turnover ... I know that we all have like, no one needs to be buying anything new, I'm fully aware. But this train is not going to stop. And so I would rather offer the best option that I could, right, that's helping reduce waste instead of having all these shirts go into landfill and just end up decaying or not or taking 200 years to break down..

Refusing to take part in the unsustainable fashion industry, Kaitlyn had to figure out for herself how she could contribute to the fashion industry in a sustainable fashion way. For Kaitlyn, this meant not only creating items through a closed-loop system, “ in which materials are continuously kept in the production consumption cycle and maintain their status as resources,²⁷” but also figuring out how she could include the encouragement of sustainable practices within the clothing she produces. Kaitlyn tells me,

I want everything that we do, everything that we touch, everything within the studio to be giving life back into the earth and not taking away. The eventual goal is to put more back than I am taking away. It's like something that I really want people to feel when they're in my shop or when they're wearing my clothes is like, more so than it's cute and it helps the environment, but also how they're living their lives.

²⁷Kristin A. Scott and S. Todd Weaver, “The Intersection of Sustainable Consumption and Anticonsumption,” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, February 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0748676618811851>, 294.

Her initiative is always connected to the environment and the deduction of waste. As, upcycling has the ability to go beyond cuteness and become an activator of change. What a philosopher does via writing, she does in the only way she knows how : through fashion. In this way, she is not only creating garments from sustainable materials, but she is also intentionally implementing her vision of sustainability within the clothes she upcycles.

Ultimately her goal is to make her clothing timeless, which means she intentionally designs her clothes to never go out of style. To create a timeless piece is to continue the chain (Harold, 2020). She explains,

My brand is simple ...there's always new stuff to be doing, but the Core collection is not going to change. You know, like, we'll have new iterations, and will have new colors. Everything is always one of a kind because I'm working with one shirt at a time. But there's different ways to showcase them. I'm trying to not be too trendy, you know, because that's where you get like, caught up in the people buying things unnecessarily and really stick to timeless, classic pieces that can be worn again and again and again.

No item in her collection is the same, sure, they could look similar or could have the same core elements – but that's the point, as they are designed to be forever appealing and forever wearable. Something that cannot be said for many high fashion brands, which create clothing that is meant to shock, rather than meant to last – think : platform crocs or ‘big red boots’.

My idea of sustainable fashion is simplicity, because if you have something that is, like, really out there and really bold, you may not grab that time and time again. So I wanted my clothes to be lived in. I wanted them to have more stories added to them.

Kaitlyn emphasizes the importance of storytelling within her brand. The name of her brand, Apres L'amour, meaning 'life after love', not only alludes to the secondhand nature of all of her items, but also to how sewing can be used to 'bring life' back into objects which were previously discarded/donated by their previous owners. Despite the fact that her collection consists of all secondhand items, she actively attempts to make her items not look secondhand. This is because of the stigma surrounding thrifted clothing. Which to me, was somewhat surprising as a whole part of her brand is centered around using sustainable material. "Why do you do that?" I ask.

Kaitlyn sighs, "Because there's a stigma around secondhand clothes. There's a psychology behind it, like, if someone else wore it, it's dirty. It's used, it's gross. So the whole concept, even the name of my brand, is [that] there's a new life that can be lived after it's been loved." Kaitlyn's decision to design her secondhand clothing to not look secondhand, is a way in which she attempts to walk around the stigma surrounding secondhand clothing, a stigma that has been reinforced by white society. "I kind of hate it. I have friends that comment about it being dirty, or like smelly."

part two : a late night conversation about fashion with aislinn

Aislinn's hair is black now, but it didn't used to be. Freshman year, we dyed it red in the middle of the night. I remember how the red droplets of her undried-unkempt curls stained gray Berlin streets as we showcased her new [old] hair to Pankow teens. Then, a year and a half later, we bleached her hair platinum blonde, her eyes in tears as the bleach burned her scalp until 5 in the morning. After the fact, she looked like an East Asian Albert Einstein – her bleach-matted-curls stuck up in the air as if the wind was permanently tugging at it. Her hair stayed like that until the winter break of our Junior year – when she moved back in with her grandma, who had religiously called her throughout the semester about dyeing it back to black. Now her hair is black and it is impossible to distinguish hers' from mine once it lands on the black faux-fur rug in her bedroom.

We entered college with clunky wardrobes. Due to wearing school-issued uniforms throughout all of highschool, my closet was composed of clothing from elementary school. Living in a small apartment in Queens, Aislinn never really had the opportunity to buy a lot of clothes, her wardrobe consisted of a couple of anime t-shirts and some black skinny jeans. So when we moved to Berlin and discovered thrift stores, a revolution began for the both of us.

This was not simply a fashion revolution, it was a revolution that changed everything about ourselves – it changed how we looked at our own bodies, it taught us about what we liked, and what we did not like. This exploration would not have happened without thrift stores like

Humama and Pick-n-Weight. Throughout our freshman year, we visited thrift stores and explored genres of clothing in which we had never been exposed to in American shopping malls.

The first month of college, I went through a cargo pant phase and wore baggy camouflage pants styled with plain black t-shirts. My intention was to merge business-casual attire with an edgy military aesthetic (not my best idea). Aislinn found an Indian textile store named ‘Guru,’ and began wearing a black jacket with rips in the sleeves and Indian designs. The next month, I was inspired by white Oktoberfest blouses and dumped my cargo pants for black corduroy. While, Aislinn went through a harem pant phase and looked like an MC Hammer background dancer. The cycle continued.

The night I interviewed Aislinn, we sat together and looked at all of the clothes and knick knacks she has collected throughout her college experience, the items that have led her to where she is now. She showed me handmade scarves, she reminisced about a hot pink ski jacket that she left in Berlin, and I watched as her long boney hands waved liquidly through the air, expressing emotions which could not be accurately dictated through language. After knowing her for so long, I have found that Aislinn’s primary form of communication is through her hands, before she learned how to talk – her fists and her limbs were the ways in which she spoke and pushed through the world.

“What do you like about thrifted clothes?” I ask her.

She shrugs and plays with the blue tulle of her shirt, rubbing the fabric between her thin fingers, “It's more interesting if clothes are off towards your side or on your shoulder, like, traveling with the flow of your body.” Just like her own hands, the clothes she prefers have movement, they travel with the flow of her body, they accentuate what she considers to be her best features. In many ways, she even considers clothing as an extension of herself, something that is, at times, indistinguishable from the ‘natural’ parts of her body.

When she speaks of flow, the first image that comes to mind is the image of the size chart – a socially constructed form of measurement that clothing stores use to generalize body sizes and shapes.

Size charts create abstract size categories, such as, small, medium, large – and accompany them with chest, waist, and leg measurements – in order to create garments that ‘fit’ everyone but no one. There is nothing one-of-a-kind about them.

No garment, created within this boundary, is able to fit someone just right, as the item was not produced to accentuate one’s body – it was meant to ‘fit’. In other words, most garments are not constructed to ‘travel with the flow of one's body’, they are constructed to do the bare minimum – to be something someone can physically put on.

Size charts establish a social norm which pressures individuals to maintain a specific body size in order to ‘fit’ into their categories. Individuals who wear such clothing actively dress themselves in clothing of conformity – clothes that were created within a social template.

Such gives me flashbacks to the mid 2010s when my mother drove me to the Californian desert, with a truckload of clothes, in order to meet my godmother, Tia Paty [paa-thi], and my ten year old cousin, Natalia [na-tah-li-a] for lunch. When Natalia was young, she was chubby, her baby fat making her cheeks and stomach full. And despite ongoing self-consciousness about my weight, I was pretty average and have had the same clothing size since middle school – wearing medium and larges. There, in the parking lot of a diner overlooking a cracked desert sand and beige mountains, my mother opened her trunk and asked Paty if Natalia would like my old clothes. Without looking at the clothes, Paty sighs and says to my mom, “*María*. She can’t fit into those.” Who could have blamed Paty for saying that? I had told my mom the same when she put the clothes in her car. But who knows? There probably would have been something that did *fit*, but size is seen as a concrete thing – when it really isn’t.

As a society, we have come to see sizes as social facts. People look for labels of ‘small, medium, and larges’ without really looking at garments – deriving meaning from words that are fluid in nature, as every manufacturer has a different size chart they adhere to.

In addition, sizes have different meanings depending on geography. Thus, you can go to a thrift store in Japan and find clothes that are labeled as medium, when they would be considered x-small in accordance to US size charts. At the same time, you can go into Japanese thrift stores and find vintage US college sweatshirts labeled as ‘medium’ but are actually XL in Japanese size

charts. No matter their dimensions, they will be placed in the size section that is stated on the price tag.

Aislinn furthers this notion when she explains that newly manufactured items lack shape, “I don't like buying things that look new as far as condition wise, something that looks like it could come from H&M and Zara. It has no shape.”

Aislinn connects the notion of ‘new’ and lack of ‘shape’ together, alluding to how newly manufactured clothing is often of poor quality, especially compared to items found at thrift stores. This is a bit of a paradox, as thrifted clothing is often stigmatized for being of lesser quality [in comparison to new clothing]. It makes us reconsider how we judge an item's quality : are new clothes actually better clothes, or, are they just new?

Aislinn points to her own shirt, a sea green upcycled shirt with screen printed leaves and the words ‘Thermal Nuclear Science’ . It’s an odd shirt, not only in its’ design but in its’ construction as well. It’s technically cropped but at the end of the green cotton fabric, the seamstress who made it, had added transparent blue tulle which created a skirt-like effect. With diagonal red lines printed across her entire chest, the green shirt lingers to just above Aislinn’s belly button, while the tulle hangs to Aislinns’ calf. It’s a shirt that has movement, a shirt that, design wise, we had never seen before. Aislinn says,

I like to experiment with sheer clothing, like mesh and layers on top of a camisole or a tank top. I think it's interesting experimenting with volumes of materials, like a small top with enormous baggy pants and layer belts and buckles, asymmetrical pieces, or stitching in a place you wouldn't really expect. They won't necessarily be center right. Or patterns in the crevice. Right. It's more interesting if they're off towards your side or on your shoulder, like, traveling with the flow of your body, then to just be stamped right on the shirt. You know what I mean? I think with fast fashion like shein, they reproduce images really easily and quickly. They just stamp the same images right at the center.

She hints at the aggression of fast fashion clothing – they **stamp** their clothes on you, they copy the same images, they center items to the point of uniformity.

She's not wrong, fast fashion companies literally copy and paste high fashion designs and sell them as their own. *The Domino Effect* explains, “Consumers flipping through their special edition fashion magazines could now point to a most-adored fashion trend and find a mimicked, cheaper copy in a local retail store—often before the original designer’s version even hit stores. The instant gratification mentality of eager consumers leads buyers to want to purchase the latest fashion trends as soon as possible.²⁸” Fashion manufacturers are actively “mimicking designer

²⁸ Cassandra Elrod, “The Domino Effect: How Inadequate Intellectual Property Rights in the Fashion Industry Affect Global Sustainability,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 24, no. 2 (2017): pp. 575-595, <https://doi.org/10.2979/indjglolegstu.24.2.0575>, 577.

trends and purchasing new stock on a weekly basis in order to replenish the store's merchandise,²⁹ which is most definitely illegal.

Through stamping and copying – a form of capitalist uniformity is produced. Fast fashion retailers create a standard of how clothing should be worn, as well as, how items of clothing should be produced. Uniformity with fashion, signified in extensive copying and similar design initiatives, destabilize the very purpose of fashion expression – which is meant to be fluid and not contain boundaries.

“I know what you're talking about.” I reply back, understanding the multiple dimensions of the case, “ So what makes your shirt different? Is it the layering of it?”

She looks at the shirt in hands, and like with everything she encounters – she stares at it with calm curiosity. Aislinn isn't fast, she takes her time with everything she does, I wait patiently for her answer to come, for her curiosity to build a self proclaimed acceptable answer,

Yeah. And how, whoever designed this piece didn't just use one material and even, like, the color of the cloth and the tying of this string, I guess there's string material. It's not uniform. It's a mismatched set. Yeah. But it's not something really bizarre.

²⁹ Cassandra Elrod, “The Domino Effect: How Inadequate Intellectual Property Rights in the Fashion Industry Affect Global Sustainability,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 24, no. 2 (2017): pp. 575-595, <https://doi.org/10.2979/indjglolegstu.24.2.0575>, 585.

It was the uniqueness, the nonconformity that allured Aislinn. It was something different, something that she would not find anywhere else. Aislinn's remark shook me, I had not expected her to have thought of such a connection – something that now that she said it, seemed so obvious, I replied,

There's still a pattern, but it's not uniform. That kind of reminds me of what you were talking about with fast fashion, where you were saying that fast fashion companies recreate images – like uniform images. When they do this it feels like it's too manufactured, that they're trying too hard. Versus the clothes that you're showing or, like, the clothes you find at thrift stores. Those are, like, not to use the word genuine pieces, but they're more interesting. They have stories behind them. They have patterns that are different.

This conversation made me think about how fast fashion clothing, in its own way, maintains the status quo, both visually and under the surface. Visually, fast fashion clothes are similar to a lot of other clothing – as they actively take designs from designers and recreate cheaper versions of them. They have very similar shapes, patterns, colors, etc. There is nothing out of the blue, or particularly inventive about their clothes.

In addition, fast fashion clothes are a form of corporate fashion – a fashion that is highly industrialized, manufactured by a large company, and typically gains its money through multiple

chains. The preference to be one-of-a-kind, to dress in clothes that are not fast fashion, is to be nonconformative. It is to understand what makes you more happy vs what is considered trendy.

–

Nineteen years old, stuck in a dorm room, Aislinn and I ordered clothing from the infamous fast fashion brand SHEIN. We were yearning for new clothes and throughout social media, we had seen our peers buy cute affordable clothing from SHEIN.

Allured by the idea of cute clothes we could afford, we bought a boat load of clothing and waited a month or two for them to arrive on our doorstep. I remember trying on a pair of beige corduroy pants, thin as paper, and thinking about how uncomfortable I felt – how the pants gave me a wedgie, how it only looked good from certain angles. While we liked a majority of the clothes we purchased, now, we hardly wear them – some of them have already donated.

‘Fast fashion is not meant to last’, that is what I wrote in my journal after the fact. ‘Fast fashion is trendy, not timeless.’

ending thought of chapter two: a thrift store, a woman's space?

One of the first things I noticed about Ben & Gracies was that all of their employees were females, in addition, a majority of their clientele was female. I remember asking around as to why this was the case, the manager, Nelly, ended up telling me, "It just kind of has happened." Damien, the manager of the Red Hook Church Shop, hypothesized that the reason why there are so many women in thrift stores is because "men don't like shopping." For a long time I lingered on this thought, as, with so much female representation, you would think something more was going on.

Once I interviewed Louise at the Red Hook Church Shop, my thoughts began to be visualized. As Louise told me about a course she took, wherein, one of the readings was about how department stores were constructed to be spaces for women – specifically places which encouraged women to purchase things.

In the beige basement of RHCS, Louise, she leans against a wood table and begins her story by saying, "I got a really shitty memory, just so you know,

The first department store was opened in New York City. The guy who opened it was a very famous guy. He wanted to sell to women – he knew that women were the ones who bought things. He made the whole idea of providing dresses that were 'ready to wear

out'. Where you can buy it off the rack. And then he realized that women in those days would go home in order to go to the bathroom, so they wouldn't shop for long. So he thought, 'How can I make this different? I'll put bathrooms in so they can use the bathroom in the department store!

Louise springs up, reenacting his thought process through her actions,

And then he realized that they want to sit and be sociable because they don't have many options of going out and being sociable in the 1800s. So then he put a coffee shop in the department store and all these things just to make women spend money, buy things. Even back then he was like, trying to work out, how can I get these women in one place, keep them here, and sell them shit.

Louise identifies the mechanisms that men have utilized in order to create consumers out of women. By building toilets and coffee shops, business men were able to create spaces for women to spend their time and their money. While the idea is manipulative and informed by a capitalist structure, there is something remarkable about it, as perhaps, department stores were the first places that were actively constructed to cater to women.

What a one-of-a-kind thing! For the first time, women were able to dominate a place within the public sphere. Yes, it was a store, yes, the infrastructure was created in order to

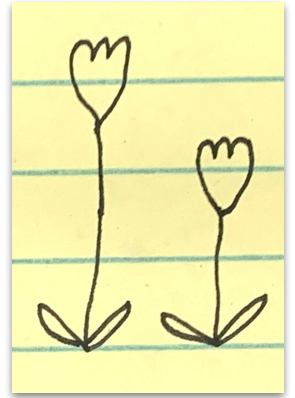
encourage women to spend their money, but you could only imagine how important a space like that was in a male dominated society.

Spaces like this are studied all the time, for example in “Restroom World” Beverly Gordon describes a small bathroom at the University of Wisconsin in which has become a space for women to be themselves :

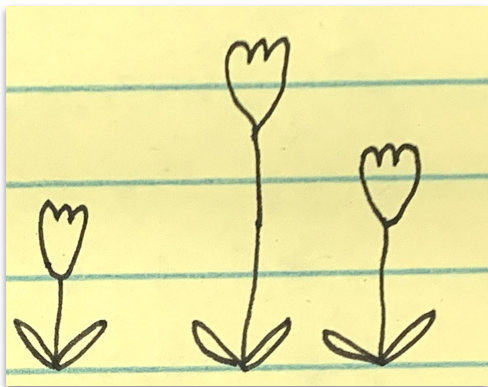
women's norms not only prevail, but also where women's "culture" is expressed unabashedly ... the mere presence of such an unexpected and "female" space in the halls academe-one that is "hidden" behind a closed door-has helped cement the feeling of a special female community within the school. It is the sense of connection or bonding within the group of regulars that makes the space ‘work’³⁰”

Though Gordon is not talking about thrift stores, it is important to note : in places that are typically man-dominated, sanctuary for women can be found in unlikely places. Yes, we can claim that the reason why women are overly represented in thrift stores is because men don’t like shopping, but I would not be surprised if it was more than that – maybe the reason why there are so many female thrifters is because thrift stores have becomes spaces in which women can unabashedly be themselves.

³⁰ Beverly Gordon, “Embodiment, Community Building, and Aesthetic Saturation in ‘Restroom World,” A Backstage Women’s Space,” *Journal of American Folklore* 116, no. 462 (January 2003): pp. 444-464, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4137757>, 446.



COMMUNITY



“I can tell you’re a thrifter. True thrifters see each other” – Shaheem to me.

On the internet, thrifters all look the same – they are women, they are thin, they are young, they are trendy, and they are white. This unofficial thrifter uniform is informed by algorithmic biases within social media platforms, which work together to construct a misconstrued notion of who thrifters are and how thrifters look. A ‘true’ thrifter does not have an explicit uniform, rather, thrifters are people who feel immense pleasure within thrift stores. When true thrifters meet, they don’t simply notice clothing – they notice a shared sense of passion. Just as Shaheem was able to recognize me as a true thrifter, I was able to recognize Trish as one.

I met Trish while interviewing Damien at the Red Hook Church Shop. Initially, she came in with a friend of hers, both of them practically beaming with glee and filling the vast room with the sound of laughter. They bounced around the entire store, looking at tchotchkes’ and inspecting bundles of jewelry. Snickering to themselves, joking around with Damien, you could tell that whether they knew it or not, the thrift store was the equivalent of a playground to them. This was the place where they could be playful and excited.

Seeing the joy in their demeanor, I asked if I could interview them while they were checking out. Laughing it off, Trish tells me, “I don’t think I have anything to say,” and leaves with her friend. However, a few minutes later, she comes in again and tells me, “I thought about it and do have something to say.” Shortly after, I drove to her house and interviewed her.

Filled with dinosaur motifs, the interior of Trish's house emulates joy through bold paint jobs and playful decor. As we sat in her sunroom, light filtering in calmly, she told me about her job as an antique dealer and how important it is for items to find homes. "I'm very willing to give a lot of it away for free, even though I buy it at the thrift shops. It was so cheap that I'd rather see people use it."

As I talked about in Chapter One, items placed in garages, basements, and storage units, live in the periphery of our minds. The items are owned – but they are never used, they are tied to our experiences – yet they are often forgotten. For Trish, this is disheartening because the items she intends to sell, the items that live in her garage, are so rich with character that she takes no pleasure in seeing them unused, gathering dust in her garage.

Once the interview is over, Trish gives me a tour of her sizable garage. Lined with bookcases, boxes, and bags, Trish shows me the items she is the most excited about – an exquisite Tiffany-style lamp shaped like a lily in bloom, a green avon bottle in the shape of a fish emerging from water, and an interesting pin from the 70s – all of which were magnificent to look at. Perhaps influenced by our previous conversation, or, because she sensed the shared passion we have for thrift stores, she ended up offering them to me for free – something that I was not expecting and could not say no to.

When she gives me these items, there is an understanding that I will fulfill what she wants for them – I will use them, I will take care of them, I will continue *the chain* (Harold 2020). My experience with Trish not only shaped me, but also shaped the way in which I think about thrift stores in conjunction with community. By being a point of conversation that connects unlikely people, by being a physical space that encourages people to meet and be curious, thrift store’s bridge community through untalked ways.

I originally wanted to showcase community through the lens of a pseudo-new wave archaeologist, an investigator of given away material culture. Such was the pitch I gave to myself and others, “ Objects have stories, have history, and are highly personal. Thus, if one were to study items in thrift stores, one should be able to get a snapshot of the material culture of a community.” This perspective of ‘Community and Thrifting’ encourages one to hyper analyze a series of items and define communal meaning. Despite my interest in this viewpoint, when I sat upon a concrete floor with Ruby, Aislinn’s bed sheets, Trish’s chair, and listened and experienced thrift stores with friends, acquaintances, and professionals, I knew I wanted to tweak my narrative.

I wanted to focus on people, not objects. With every interview, I was told about the ways in which thrift stores matter, why people keep going back, and how thrift stores bridge community. In fact, the first time I pitched the idea of thrift stores being communal spaces was in March. I was talking to a Ben & Gracies employee and she gave me a look that I had interpreted as, “Girl you do you.” So I did, and I do.

part one : how can thrift stores be community spaces?

Sometimes I didn't have to ask, someone would bring up the subject and I would eagerly listen to them, excited that the topic came up unprompted. This happened with Zoe. "What should be the primary goal of a thrift store?" I ask while sipping tea.

"Look," Zoe begins by pensively considering the notion which was introduced in 'One-of-a-kind', wherein, department stores were built as spaces for women. "If we're talking about spaces like department stores being venues for women to spend their money and drawing them to do that by making it a community space, then a thrift store should be a community space."

Zoe talks with their hands. They move up and down, side to side, almost as if their hands were building the scene that Zoe births in their speech, "It should be a place where everyone feels welcome ... and it shouldn't be a resource that people feel like they can bleed dry. Right?" Without meaning to, I gave them a perplexed look. I had never considered thrift stores as a resource – thrift stores are places, they are built and established by people. Resources are naturally occurring – things that are extracted from soil, cut down from canopies, exploited for the means of society.

Thinking for a second, Zoe explains that the issue is that some people *use* thrift stores as resources, when they shouldn't. "I don't know how to phrase it ... I think that some people see a

thrift store as a resource and not as a community space. And not just like a resource as in fresh water as a resource, but a resource as in, like, this is an oil well. Let me drain it and sell it.”

When a thrift store is used as an ‘oil-well-like resource,’ one is arguing that thrift stores are resources people exploit but do not replenish— a store that is nothing more than something someone can take advantage of, without any obligation to give back. There is no thought about where items come from, nor about who could benefit from the items more. This is the type of thrifter Zoe pushes back against:

I've seen some suspect things at free-use. I would never sell a piece that I got from free use. If I got a piece from free use and after a year or so it doesn't fit me anymore, I'd bring it back to free use. You don't sell it on the Kline lawn, but, I've definitely seen people who do that – they decide that they want to sell clothing that was given to the community as a gift.

Zoes’ argument calls back to the idea of a true thrifter. People who sell clothes that they acquired for free, people who deplete thrift stores of their stock for hauls, people who purchase things and then donate them a month later – do not fit the mold of a true thrifter. They are shoppers, not thrifters. To Zoe, this distinction is important because, though similar, shoppers and thrifters think about consumption in different ways. For example, shoppers see thrifted goods as products, while Zoe considers thrifted goods to be gifts – and treats them as such.

The idea of gift giving and thrift stores is interesting, because as explained in Marcel Mauss *The Gift*, gift giving comes with an obligation to ‘give back’, that is to say that, there is no such thing as a free gift (Mauss, 1925). Whether the receiver is expected to showcase thankfulness, or perhaps reciprocate the gift, gift giving implies a mutual exchange. This is further emphasized in the *Value of the Story*, referenced in Chapter One, where ownership is connected to a sense of duty (Harold 2020). Though Mauss and Harold are not referencing thrift stores, their concepts are crucial in understanding Zoe’s frustration towards shoppers. As their accusation, ‘people use thrift stores as resources’, stems from a frustration in that shoppers do not follow thrift decorum.

Now, what is thrift decorum? Thrift decorum is the expected social behavior inside a thrift store. This could be as simple as not complaining about a thrift stores’ unpleasant smell, “bad smell is like an indicator of a really great thrift experience (Zoe),” and being mindful of the people around you, “sometimes I observe other people because there's a courtesy. Like, when there is one huge rack. Everyone gets their own section (Shaheem).” This being said, thrift decorum falls into the bracket of ‘unsaid rules’, no one tells you how to behave in thrift stores, rather, thrift decorum is *learned* after being in thrift stores for a long time. Therefore, thrift decorum goes hand-in-hand with becoming a part of the thrift community.

When Zoe sips the last bit of their drink, they tell me, “ I think we need to see thrift stores as a community space, as a place for a love of fashion, and a love of clothing, and a love of style instead of as a get rich-quick-scheme.” While it may seem odd to consider a store as a

community space, there is no question that thrift stores do what community spaces do, which is, provide a common space where people can interact and build social networks.

True thrifters ‘see each other’ and are able to build relationships with one-another, even outside the physical space of the thrift store. This is because they share a mutual love for fashion and material culture. Aislinn describes this mutual love through the term ‘connect’:

Thrifting connects you to different time periods, different styles ... I think you develop your own style by going into thrift stores, your own unique style that you can be proud of and be like, you know, bitch, this is mine.

This speaks to how thrifters are called to thrift stores not just because they want a good deal, but, because thrift stores are accessible spaces for fashion exploration – a place where everyone can be introduced to products that can’t be found anywhere else, such as hot pink 1980s’ fascinators and brown vintage fur coats. In addition, as explained earlier, there is a sense of group obligation.

Members are encouraged to take from the community space, as well as, give back – to donate, to be respectful, to volunteer, to be engaged with the space. That is not to say that thrift stores make people feel obligated to spend money.

In fact, none of the people I interviewed expressed a sense of obligation to purchase anything at a thrift store, rather they continued to emphasize that thrift stores are places where

they can be themselves and explore. “Usually it's just like a fun thing to fill the time,” Ruby tells me.

This is interesting because stores are designed to encourage consumption – there is the stereotype of the annoyed worker who only wants ‘serious customers’, aka, customers that are willing to spend their money at the drop of a hat. Yet, thrift stores do not do this. Rather than curating a space in which people feel obligated to purchase things, thrift stores make people acknowledge the obligations that come along with purchasing. Like Trish with me, there is an obligation to use the item, to take care of the item, and to reduce its likelihood of being put back into circulation. This makes it so where thrifters are less likely to purchase things ‘for the hell of it’ and are more likely to purchase something that they know they will cherish. While this is not always successful, I mean who can say ‘no’ to a good deal every once in a while?, it encourages thrifters to have better consumption habits.

By creating an open atmosphere that does not make people feel obligated to consume, thrifters are able to build their own guidelines of consumption, a way in which they utilize thrift stores as a water-like resource. Shaheem tells me,

People always want to go thrifting with me. I think it's because I have these silly rules. Like, if it costs you grab it, look at it, and if you don't love it, leave it. I say that it has to scream at me. Do you know what I mean? When I go through racks, I need it to scream at me.

Ruby says,

It can be tempting, especially when prices are low. But over time I've noticed, I'll see something that I think is really cool and pretty ... but then I buy it and discover later that it doesn't really fit me. So I've realized over time, I've got to really pay attention : Am I actually going to wear this and make use out of it? If not, then I put it away.

Shaheem and Ruby are both talking about a form of consumerist restraint that they utilize in order to prevent rouge purchases. In fact, this form of consumerism encourages people to 'pay attention'. It is not enough to want an item, the item needs to check all of the boxes : does it fit size wise, does it feel 'right', will it be used, is there someone who needs this more ? These are the types of questions thrifters ask themselves in order to decide whether or not they will buy something.

Ruby uses the example of plus-sized clothing, in order to highlight the ways in which she 'pays attention' while thrifting.

There's a lot of people that like to buy oversized clothes and that aren't plus size – that takes away from the plus size section, which is usually already small. So I try to be aware

of that too. If I do find like a sweatshirt or something that is big on me, I make sure I'm actually going to wear and use it every day.

She explains that, when a non-plus-sized person purchases an item from a plus-size section – they are actively limiting someone's access to clothing – which is not good. This is why consumerist restraint is important, as it forces people to be observant and identify that certain items benefit certain people more than others. In addition Rubys' comment furthers the idea that thrift stores are community spaces, as she understands herself as a member of a community and thus, obligated to think about other members – about what they need, what they want, and the ways in which she can support her community through her thrifting actions.

part 2 : how do we give back?

Thrifters give back through donation. As someone who donates all the time, the act of donating is always connected to the thought of bringing joy to someone else. Whether we think about it or not, donation is an active way in which we interact and benefit our community. Think about it. No one has to donate anything, there is no law that forces one to donate. You could throw items away, sell them to consignment stores or pawn shops, or put them in storage. Yet, most people, especially thrifters, choose to donate because of a collective obligation to support one's community in the least wasteful way possible.

However, this is not the only way thrifters give back. The term ‘gift’ has two meanings. The first being, a physical item that is compassionately given to someone without monetary payment. The second being, a natural talent and ability. Thus, when we are considering how people give back to thrift stores, one of the ways they can do this is through the exchanging of gifts – physically and symbolically.

Next to a plaque labeled, ‘Art is How I Fight’, I came across a series of sculptures [at Thrift to Fight] named *Voodoo Sculptures* by Hector ‘Bori’ Rodriguez, an incarcerated artist who created sculptures in his cell from weathered items found in his jail yard. The plaque reads,

My inspirations came from finding dried, weathered walnuts in the yard. I noticed that when the shells split in half, there was a face that kind of looked like an African mask. With every lap I walked in the yard, I kept my eyes to the ground looking for more little masks ... the name ‘Voodoo’ came from an officer who was searching my cell and saw them. He approached me and asked if it was okay if he touched the pieces. He thought they were voodoo dolls. So I ran with his ignorance and told him that, yes, they were part of my religious beliefs and that they protected me from evil.

Rodriguez’ sculptures were placed throughout the store, but I found myself paying the most attention to a series of sculptures placed on a shelf that typically holds vintage hats. With wood glazed to look like driftwood, giant arms swaying in the air, blue faced owls huddled together, the sculptures play with human perception and nature. This is further exemplified by

Bori's signature bouncing from black to white, faint to obvious, showcasing the intertwined nature between himself, his gift, and nature.

By displaying his gift at a thrift store, he was able to share parts of himself to the community around him, despite the fact that his mobility is limited.

ending thought of chapter three :

On the corner of Houston and Allen, Shaheem tells me, "I can tell you're a thrifter. True thrifters see each other." Freshly tossed churros in my hand, my friend, Ashley, to my right, I felt incredibly seen by someone I did not know.

When Shaheem picked me out of the crowd and told me that they saw the thrifter in me – I was reminded of the thrift community that I was [and am still] a part of. In that moment, I told myself to get out of my comfort zone and follow my gut.

CONCLUSION



Conclusion



(Photo taken by Penelope Bernal)

Before showing me the ‘University of Hong Kong’ silk scarf, Louise shows me an olive green dress from the same rack. “It’s the most beautiful thing I ever saw in my life.” Louise tells me as she delicately touches the linen fabric. “Look how huge it is. And look at the embroidery. It’s gorgeous.”

And yet, Louise wasn’t sure about selling it. From her reaction, you’d think it’s because she wants it for herself, or, perhaps, the garment is ‘too beautiful’ to sell. But, that was not the case. Filled with South Asian motifs, Louise’s tentativeness about selling the dress, stems from a concern in which it will not fit within the confines of the thrift store,

We just don't know what to do with it because it's like proper, so we don't know what to do with it. We don't want to waste it. We don't want to put it up for Halloween because that's really inappropriate. But we're not sure what to do with it yet.

At the time, I did not question what Louise said, I just accepted it for what it was. But looking back at it, I wondered : would we have had the same conversation if we were in London? Would we have had the same conversation if Louise was not White – if I was not a Mexican American? Would we have the same conversation if we both were South Asian?

I don't think so. To keep that dress in the basement, is to make a couple assumptions. One – there are certain items of clothing which are off limits. This assumption is influenced by pushes to prevent cultural appropriation, wherein, 'indigenous clothing' such as saris, huipils, and sarongs should only be worn by people who are from the places in which such dress originated. Two – there lacks a clientele at the Red Hook Church Shop which fits this criteria.

In other words, the notion is to gatekeep for its' own protection – to stop cultural appropriation by not supplying the source. Personally, I'm not sure if this is needed.

As long as people are showing respect for indigenous clothing and wearing them on occasions that make sense, i.e. not for Halloween – indigenous clothes aren't costumes, I think people should be allowed to wear what they want to wear.

Conversations such as the one I had with Louise are rare to come by, as they occur in private spaces. However, they are interesting for that exact reason – they grappled with questions, in which, there are no clear, moral, answers.

Throughout this Senior Project, I have sat in my advisors' office and had talked about how unsatisfied I was with what I was writing about. There is just too much to tell, not enough time, and quite

honestly, I do not have the ability to express them all via written word – I wish I did. So I have to settle for this – a short conversation, a little peek into something that is much greater.

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