The Worn, The Torn, The Wearable: textile recycling in Union Square

David Goldsmith
The Swedish School of Textiles, University of Borås
david.goldsmith@hb.se

Abstract
This narrative focuses on one aspect of the growing phenomenon of textile recycling: the act of “getting rid of” one’s no longer wanted clothing. The story here derives from many visits to Wearable Collections, a business that collects apparel (as well as towels, sheets, shoes, and other textiles) with an “inlet” at the popular Union Square Greenmarket in Manhattan. Over several months, I watched hundreds of individuals drop off thousands of kilos of materials for recycling and talked with many of them about what they were doing and why they were doing it. This investigation was undertaken for two purposes. On one hand, it was a device for practicing a variety of ethnographic field methods to support my current Ph.D. action research with enterprises aiming to build more sustainable fashion systems. On the other hand, it was a means to gain knowledge of what is happening with textile recycling in New York City. The pages that follow have been excerpted from a longer and broader account.

The term textile recycling is used here broadly. It encompasses upcycling (for example, making a dress from old dresses, or producing yarn from trimmings from garment manufacturing); downcycling (such as shredding worn out textiles for insulation); practices such as selling, swapping, or giving away; and any other ways of reusing or repurposing that saves — or at least delays — textiles from being buried in landfills or otherwise wasted.

Keywords: textile recycling, second-hand clothing, textile waste management, sustainable fashion, Union Square Greenmarket

Introduction
Give me your tired [trousers], your poor [pajamas]
Your huddled masses [of clothing] yearning to breathe free,
The wretched [but recyclable] refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost [textiles] to me, ...

with apologies to Emma Lazarus, poet of “The New Colossus” that is associated with the Statue of Liberty.

Increasing the amount of textiles that are recycled — whether as clothes to be worn again, repurposed into rags or bespoke suits, or in other ways made useful, such as for cleaning rags or fuel — is often thought of as one of the ways human beings might mitigate the damages caused by the intense appetite of the fashion beast (Council for Textiles Recycling 2012; Fisher et al. 2008). By weight, New York City’s residential (non-industrial) textile refuse is about seven percent of the total amount of trash that...
end up in landfill (DSNY 2011), or about 181 million kilos. This translates into about twenty-two kilos per each of the 8.18 million New Yorkers (PRODCOM in Cato 2010: 9). The Nordic Textile Journal

Wearable Collections is a New York City based business that runs the city’s greenmarkets. Many New Yorkers have come to love and depend upon the fifty-four farmers markets featuring local fruits, vegetables, meats, artisanal breads, cheeses, wines, and other products that, together with urban agriculture, bike sharing, and the transformation of the city’s waterfront into an uplifting visual and gastronomical feast. In the autumn, the time comes when the market is not too uncomfortably packed with turnips, fall flowers, pies, cakes and more, all ready for the crossroads of downtown and uptown Manhattan. On the South Bronx. Statistics indicate about fifteen percent of total goods in their shops and to used-clothing sorters and exporters. In fact, Adam Baruchowitz, one of the founders and business (Baruchowitz 2012). Since 2007, when GrowNYC began collecting textiles for recycling, and in collaboration with WC does not itself physically alter any material; they only collect it. In fact, Adam Baruchowitz, one of the founders and those facts alone do not necessarily mean that textile recycling can be monetized. Such a position would be contrary to the ideas of your own building whenever you want. In contrast to for-profit recycling is as old as textiles. The time and effort needed for the transformation cultures such as the U.S. and Western Europe, putting a torn t-shirt in the garbage is now normal. In the United States about forty-five percent of textiles end up in landfill (EPA 2011). In May 2011 DSNY, in partnership with the well-established non-profit organization Housing Works, began “one of the first large-scale consumer textile recycling programs in the country” (Baruchowitz 2012). In the case of GrowNYC, the company, sometimes refers itself to itself as a “garbage man.” With its presence in New York City, WC could be said to be filling a public need through private enterprise, and garment production from “virgin” materials (Wang 2006; Farrant et al. 2010; SMART 2011; Textile Exchange 2012). Yet, if one could relate text to textile recycling, the majority of which is clothing, are thrown into garbage every year almost 180,000 metric tons of textiles from households, such as Goodwill and the Salvation Army, which in turn sell the’s collection bins, re-fashioNYC is 100% nonprofit and charitable (emphasis added). Without examining the DSNY’s accounting alongside Wearable Collections, which donates part of its income to charity, it is poor communication from the DSNY. Information provided to households, linens, shoes … than do higher income residents” (DSNY 2007: 54), but the reasons for that are unknown. Could it be that rich people have better quality clothes that say “don’t throw me out”? Do poorer and less educated people have worries other than finding a place for their used garments? In May 2011 DSNY, in partnership with the well-established non-profit organization Housing Works, began “one of the first large-scale consumer textile recycling programs in the country” (Baruchowitz 2012). In the case of GrowNYC, the company, sometimes refers itself to itself as a “garbage man.” With its presence in New York City, WC could be said to be filling a public need through private enterprise, and garment production from “virgin” materials (Wang 2006; Farrant et al. 2010; SMART 2011; Textile Exchange 2012). 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The morning air was chilly and the sky clear blue like early November in the past. The sun was bright at guests of either seven large grey polyethylene garbage cans being filled with rotting fruit and vegetable scraps carried here by those New Yorkers dedicated enough to divert their kitchen compostables from the mainstream waste stream. Ten meters away, on the western edge of the park in a cold shadow cast by the park’s Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Arch, is another waste repository: Wearable Collections. Under the arch a young thin black man, huddled on a folding chair, was surrounded by maybe twenty-five to thirty already-filled and overflowing garbage bags. A young thin black man, he was huddled on a folding chair, and to firstly study the physical setting, including the public restroom, one of very few in the entire city.

Following the notions of prominent ethnographers (Geertz 1973, Humphrey 1989, Janik 1950), during my visits to Union Square for this research I tried to imagine myself to be a curious newcomer, and to firstly study the physical setting, including the public restroom, one of very few in the entire city. The morning air was chilly and the sky clear blue like early November in the past. The sun was bright at guests of either seven large grey polyethylene garbage cans being filled with rotting fruit and vegetable scraps carried here by those New Yorkers dedicated enough to divert their kitchen compostables from the mainstream waste stream. Ten meters away, on the western edge of the park in a cold shadow cast by the park’s Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Arch, is another waste repository: Wearable Collections. Under the arch a young thin black man, huddled on a folding chair, was surrounded by maybe twenty-five to thirty already-filled and overflowing garbage bags. A young thin black man, he was huddled on a folding chair, and to firstly study the physical setting, including the public restroom, one of very few in the entire city.

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The Purple-Coat Lady

One of the first people who had agreed to talk about what she was doing was an older middle-aged woman who was very casually in a purple wool-like ear car coat and jeans — an outfit not unlike that worn by many of the close by farmers selling produce. She was with her husband, who was wearing a fuzzy polyester (again, the so-called fleece) jacket. She said she was discharging her husband’s jeans because they were beyond

Micro-Portraits

During the time spent at WC, I took notes of not only the setting, and what was happening from moment to moment (as best as I could), but also my observations and interactions with individuals. Following is a some micro-portraits (with some changes to personal details for the sake of privacy) of people who gave dimension to the textile recycling scene.

The Bossy Woman and Her Husband

It was surprising to me that a regular patron turned out to be the bossy and loud woman referred to above who had demanded multiple receipts. One afternoon while I was there she came back, wearing an animal print top, a huge fake fur jacket, skinny black pants, and spike-heeled boots. Her husband, dressed, inaccurately to the cold, wore khaki pants, a short sleeved business shirt, and trailed behind her, his face red from the effort. She looked at it together. Indeed it had problems. Besides collecting lint, it also had a bunch of snags. It was a pretty color, it was not new, but it became intolerable. She had some other seemingly non-problematic clothes that she was discarding, but she was uncomfortable discussing them.

The Linty Blanket Discarder

A young man, maybe 25, he came by wearing a grey cashmere turtleneck, a plain black wool skirt and boots. It was the kind of classic modern outfit that fashion marketing students at nearby Parsons The New School for Design or The Fashion Institute of Technology might wear. She had a slight Korean accent and was shy about talking, but did point out an item that she had grown to dislike: a pale blue shaggy-pile knitted throw, marketed these days as “fleece”. She said she really liked it when she got it, but after a few uses, it started to get “all linty” and she got irritated with the way it spread that lint onto her other fabrics. We saw the same thing happen to some of our garments.

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The Nordic Textile Journal
Homeless Man, Compelling Couple

Not everyone who comes to Wearable Collections wants to give away things. At least one person every time I visited the site wanted to be recipient of clothing. Not counting a woman who drunkenly bartered and begged to buy a paisley purse (and then decided it was not worth the impromptu agreed upon price of ten dollars), people presented with the need and struggling to get by. The WC workers are not encouraged to give out clothes — it is easy to see how the site could become a distribution center. Indeed, Evan had indicated that he needed a warm jacket. Evan was not willing to dig around in the bags for clothes, but did say that if a coat came in he would hope it was for him. Indeed, a coat came in, and Evan held it if for the man who came back later in the day. A similar event happened on another day, when a couple, both in their thirties and whose first names I do not recall, told Evan that he needed a warm coat. Evan was not willing to dig around in the bags for clothes, but did say that if a coat came in he would hope it was for him. Indeed, a coat came in, and Evan held it if for the man who came back later in the day. A similar event happened on another day, when a couple, both in their thirties and whose first names I do not recall, told Evan that he needed a warm coat. Evan was not willing to dig around in the bags for clothes, but did say that if a coat came in he would hope it was for him. Indeed, a coat came in, and Evan held it if for the man who came back later in the day. A similar event happened on another day, when a couple, both in their thirties and whose first names I do not recall, told Evan that he needed a warm coat. Evan was not willing to dig around in the bags for clothes, but did say that if a coat came in he would hope it was for him. Indeed, a coat came in, and Evan held it if for the man who came back later in the day. A similar event happened on another day, when a couple, both in their thirties and whose first names I do not recall, told Evan that he needed a warm coat. Evan was not willing to dig around in the bags for clothes, but did say that if a coat came in he would hope it was for him. Indeed, a coat came in, and Evan held it if for the man who came back later in the day.
the overall consumption of textiles. If we reach a point, in New York City or elsewhere, that people are wearing garments, and using towels, sheets, and other cloth products that are made of recycled materials instead of (and not in addition to) those made from new resources, textile recycling will have a much clearer value. It could happen. Industrially produced, and one-off clothing made from recycled materials are increasingly available. (Of the many producers, see for example sustainableclothing.com or junkystyling.co.uk.) At the moment however, even if what I heard and saw in Union Square made me feel somewhat optimistic or junkystyling.co.uk.) At the moment however, even if what I heard and saw in Union Square made me feel somewhat optimistic, and Street Basket Waste Characterization Study.


GrowNYC. Available online: http://www.grow nyc.org/\-clothing.


