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

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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

ends up in landfill (DSNY 2011), or about 181 million kilos. This translates into about twenty-two kilos per each of the 8.18 million (US Census Bureau 2011) city residents. This compares with Sweden's rate of nearly nineteen kilos of clothing and textiles discarded per person annually (PRODCOM in Cato 2010: 9).

This paper does not assess the potential environmental, economic, social or cultural benefits that the widespread recycling of textiles might yield, but it should be noted that in terms of life cycle assessment, the reprocessing of materials such as wool, cotton, and polyester into new yarns and fabrics, or repurposing of garments through reconstruction or other secondary uses does save energy, water, and carbon emissions as compared to fabric and garment production from "virgin" materials (Wang 2006; Farrant et al. 2010; SMART 2011; Textile Exchange 2012). Yet, those facts alone do not necessarily mean that textile recycling is increasing chances for global well-being. As far back as 2003, 6 million metric tons of used clothing were being exported annually from the USA, mostly to Africa and other developing areas of the world (Claudio 2007). The long term impact of this flood of second-hand clothing from high-consuming countries to developing countries is unknown. Even if it provides a number of economic benefits for local entrepreneurs and tailoring businesses, it may undermine others, such as local agriculture, manufacturing, and cultural diversity (Maynard 2004; Baden and Barber 2005; Mitumba 2005; Mhango and Niehm 2005; Palmer and Clark 2005; Allwood et al. 2006; Hawley recycling, by placing so-called "green halos" above consumers' heads, might in fact encourage fashion consumption. Such a phenomenon has been shown to occur in other areas of consumption (Polimeni et al. 2009, Catlin and Wang forthcoming), but appears to not yet have been studied in the realm of textile recycling. However, if consumption of clothing made with new materials can be offset with clothing made with recycled materials, the need for which has been argued repeatedly in the Defra's Sustainable Clothing Action Plan (2010), it would be a positive change. Meanwhile, the action of recycling textiles at least shows a willingness on the part of consumers to "do the right thing".

Wearable Collections is a New York City based business that collects textiles at various sites around the city, including apartment houses, schools, places of worship, and, in the case looked at here, the Union Square Greenmarket (farmers market), which has about 60,000 visitors per day (GrownNYC 2011b). Wearable Collections (which will sometimes here be referred to as WC, even with its unfortunate connotation) began in 2000, and started collecting textiles at the farmers market in January 2009 by agreement with GrowNYC, the not-for-profit agency 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 parks, are part of the greening of the city. WC is present at Union Square on Mondays and Saturdays throughout the year from about eight in the morning to four in the afternoon. As of mid-2012, WC was collecting "tens of thousands of pounds" of used textiles per week (Baruchowitz 2012), some of that from special events such as the November 2010 New York City Marathon, from which they picked up about roughly 15,000 kilos of garments from the starting point and along the route (CBS 2010). WC does not itself physically alter any material; they only collect it. In fact, Adam Baruchowitz, one of the founders and energetic president of the company, sometimes refers to himself as a garbage man. With its presence in New York City, WC could be said to be filling a public need through private enterprise, although Baruchowitz declines to call his enterprise a social-business (Baruchowitz 2012). Since 2007, when GrowNYC began collecting textiles for recycling, and in collaboration with WC since 2009, about half a million kilos of apparel and other textile waste have been diverted from landfill (GrowNYC 2011a). Buruchowitz estimates their eighteen greenmarket locations take in about a third of the total tonnage they receive annually, all of it without monetary compensation for the "donors".

Recycling in the City

Recycling of many materials was common in the city before World War II, but it fell out of practice soon after and was not restarted until modern day curbside collecting of used paper began in 1986. In 1989, recycling became mandatory where services were provided, and by 1997, all of the five boroughs, Manhattan, The Bronx, Staten Island, Queens, and Brooklyn were included. Recycling services were temporarily cut back after September 11, 2001 and again due to budget cuts between 2002 and 2004 (DSNY 2012a). Today recycling of most paper, many sorts of plastics, glass, and metal is a part of life for New Yorkers, but to greater and lesser degrees in the various geographic areas. In 2011 capture rates (the percentages of refuse of the type that the city requires its citizens to place in recycling bags and garbage receptacles marked for recycling) ranged from a high of nearly sixty percent to a low of just over fifteen percent. The highest rate was achieved in the wealthy southern tip of Manhattan; the worst rate was recorded in the impoverished South Bronx. Statistics indicate about fifteen percent of total refuse is diverted from landfill to recycling. The total average recovery rate for the city is less than half the national average (EPA

2011; DSNY 2007). This is anecdotally attributed to small living spaces. Many New Yorkers say they just have no place to store recyclables, which are picked up by the New York Department of Sanitation (DSNY) once a week as opposed to three times weekly for non-recyclables. Another much discussed hindrance is poor communication from the DSNY. Information provided to the public is famously hard to decipher, and multiple exceptions and inconsistencies about what can and cannot be put into the recycling stream exist: plastic bottles are allowed in some cases, but not in others; plastic bags and yoghurt cups are not; cardboard pizza boxes are, the paper plates on which the pizza is eaten are not. The Department claims economic justifications for determining what is accepted and what is not (DSNY 2012b) but the rules do little to encourage greater participation. Textiles are not permitted to join the other recyclable materials that can be placed at the curb for weekly pick up.

Textile Recycling and Textile Recycling in the City

Common sense and historical evidence inform us that textile recycling is as old as textiles. The time and effort needed for the production, collecting, and processing of raw materials throughout most of human history meant that textiles remained valuable even after extended wear and tear. This partially explains why few extant examples of commonly used pre-industrial fabrics exist today; they were so valuable that they were used until they literally disappeared. In Nordic regions, for example, old fabrics were stuffed into walls to help guard against the cold. Even after the industrial revolution was well-established, the shoddy and mungo (reclaimed wool) industry of nineteenth century England made fortunes (Jubb 1860), but as more efficient production took hold, textiles began to lose their high value. Today, in high consumption 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 eighty-five percent of textiles end up in landfill (EPA 2011).

A large portion of the fifteen percent of textiles in the US that are not put into landfill are given to non-profit organizations such as Goodwill and the Salvation Army, which in turn sell the goods in their shops and to used-clothing sorters and exporters. As a result, only a small percentage of textiles are currently reused for any purpose within the United States, and the same presumably is true for New York City, where it is estimated that every year almost 180,000 metric tons of textiles from households, the majority of which is clothing, are thrown into garbage headed for the landfill (GrowNYC 2011a) accounting for seven percent of the waste that enters landfill (DSNY 2011).

Textile recycling is more common among the wealthy New Yorkers

than poor ones: "There is a clear inverse relationship between income and textile waste generation. Lower income residents throw out more [roughly three times as much] in the way of used clothing, 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" (Navarro 2011). Called re-FashionNYC, it copies one aspect of the WC model by providing receptacles for textiles in or near apartment buildings. As this program has only recently been launched, the city has not yet provided data on its success or failure, but DSNY (2012c) notes that

"[u]nlike existing thrift shops and charitable operations that receive donations in their shops or pick up door to door, re-fashionNYC allows you to make donations from the convenience of your own building whenever you want. In contrast to for-profit used clothing companies [such as Wearable Collections] that supply similar collection bins, re-fashionNYC 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 impossible to know which entity is the more efficient benefactor. Curious is DSNY's implication that recycling textiles ought not to be monetized. Such a position would be contrary to the ideas promoted by environmental and economic policy gurus such as Paul Hawken (2010), and John Ehrenfeld (2008) who advocate for increasing the monetary value of resources.

In the Field in the City

Union Square is a compact-size city park and gathering spot at the crossroads of downtown and uptown Manhattan. On the days when the market is not too uncomfortably packed with jostling shoppers and passersby, the abundance and variety of fresh, often organic, fruits, vegetables, bakery goods, raw milk cheeses, New York City honey, and Long Island wines is an uplifting visual and gastronomical feast. In the autumn, the time of year this experiment was conducted, there are dozens of types of red, green, and yellow apples and pears, huge turquoise squash, pumpkins, herbs, purple and white cabbage, sprouts, turnips, fall flowers, pies, cakes and more, all ready for the coming of Thanksgiving.

I have been through this area thousands of times since the early 1980's when I moved to a nearby neighborhood. At that time Union Square Park was a bleak, litter-strewn zone where you needed to go to get the subway to get someplace else. For me it was also a place to see people sell, buy and use drugs openly, or where I occasionally got up the nerve to sit for a few minutes on the broken remains of a bench to ponder life in financially bankrupt but creative New York City. Surrounding the park were a few retail landmarks like S.Klein's decrepit department store which offered an "on the square" deal for its customers, and Paterson Silks, a late-lingering remnant of the days when buying fabrics for sewing clothes was common, as well as many 99-cent sorts stores selling low quality textiles such as sheer cotton-polyester sheets, similarly sleazy printed vinyl "damask" curtains, snagged terry cloth towels, kitschy embroidered dishcloths, and flatly utilitarian floral-patterned house smocks.

In 2012, due to the decades long resurgence of New York's economy, the rehabilitation of the park and the subway station beneath it, an influx of students and young employed people seeking once-affordable housing, and the popularity of the farmers market itself, the area is now charged with trendy and trend-setting restaurants, fashion and home furnishings retailers, modeling agencies, graphic and design companies, arts organizations, theatres and high-technology businesses that are part of the so-called creative class (Florida 2003). The streets bounding the north and east of the park have been traffic-calmed by paving them with cobblestones, and installing planters and café tables and chairs on the widened sidewalks. Visitors now enjoy new lawns, benches, and recreation areas, and even a clean public restroom, one of very few in the entire city.

Following the notions of prominent ethnographers (Geertz 1973; Humphrey 1989; Sanjek 1990), 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 various styles of buildings — from historical ornate terra cotta constructions to slick glass contemporary edifices — that hem the park. An anonymous-looking white apartment tower has replaced the mid-century red painted steel and glass building once housing Paterson Silks. Who buys fabric when clothes are so cheap? On the streets around the park are local, national and international chain stores: Staples, Barnes and Noble, Best Buy, and fashion outlets such as Forever 21, Diesel, American Eagle, and Shoemania. Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, two very popular grocery stores help make this area a foodie's paradise. A late nineteenth century stone-faced building held Andy Warhol's factory in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nearby on an asphalt

island surrounded by car traffic is a larger than life-size chrome sculpture of a suited Warhol holding a gigantic shopping bag. Twenty meters away, in the park itself, amid small trees is a bronze sculpture of Gandhi walking in his famous dhoti. It is very frequently garlanded with marigold necklaces. The contrasting symbolism of these two sculptures is almost comical. The north side of the park is smooth with New York's signature hexagonal asphalt paving blocks, and serves as the location for the green-market, which first opened in 1976 with just a few farmers, but now hosts 140 vendors (GrowNYC 2011b).

Underneath the park is Union Square subway station, the fourth largest in the transit system, serving 35 million riders annually (MTA 2011). Everyday, in addition to the crush of inhabitants and commuters going to and from work, it seems that American tourists from every state of the country and guests from every country of the world are part of the famously vibrant New York mosaic of humanity. In this setting, I observed the goings on at Wearable Collections on most Saturdays in October, November, and December, 2011. Three of those visits are described in the next sections.

Saturday November 5, 2011

The morning air was chilly and the sky clear blue like early November should be. The sun was bright on a group of six or 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 trees, is another waste repository: Wearable Collections. Under Wearable Collections' black canvas tent were three open nylon laundry bags, hanging upright with the help of metal frames, into which people come to dump all sorts of textiles products. Evan (a pseudonym), to whom I had introduced myself some weeks before, was there behind the folding table behind the bags. A young thin black man, he was huddled on a folding chair and waiting to help people with their incoming "donations". He was wearing a hoodie, and jacket trimmed with fake fur, surrounded by maybe twenty-five or thirty already-filled and tied-closed nylon laundry bags. No one else was with him at the time, but judging from the waist-high, five by three meter pile of stuffed sacks, a lot of "reverse-customers" had already been "de-shopping". The sacks were neatly stacked, and, because of the heavy shadow, their colors appeared dark: charcoal, maroon, black and indigo rather than the lurid synthetic colors that they would be if, like the rotting food nearby, they had been in the strong sunlight. I was concerned to be imposing on Evan's

time, especially since I had not received permission, from either GrowNYC, the city agency that runs the market or Wearable Collections, to observe and talk to people about why they were bringing in their used textiles. I reintroduced myself to Evan, and he said that it was fine for me to hang with him.

Evan is in his mid-twenties, grew up in Harlem and studied sociology at a prestigious all male, virtually all black college in the southern United States. He is analytic and curious about the phenomenon of recycling and consumer culture, and made it known that even before taking this part time job, he was thinking about recycling. He said that he has come to understand that textile recycling is a "greatly overlooked area". After we got more comfortable with each other, and when he had time between helping people stash their castaways, answering questions, and organizing the bags, Evan commented on some things he has noticed during his several months of working there. Particularly interesting insofar as my desire to look for ethnographic patterns, was that he has, after months on the job, observed some archetypes of people who bring in textiles. For example, husbands and boyfriends whom he suspects have been told by wives and girlfriends to get rid of old or worn out clothes. Another group he called "regulars", which meant those he recognized as dropping off things nearly every week. Soon after he mentioned "regulars", a regular showed up to drop off a few small articles. This older, modestly dressed but carefully coiffed woman who (guessing from the nearly empty shopping cart she was pulling) came to the market to buy food more than to drop off textiles, said hello, and dropped into an open laundry bag a small cotton t-shirt and a pair of well-used, neatly folded graying athletic socks. I imagined that without the convenience of Wearable Collections, she might have otherwise tossed these things into the trash, and I wanted to ask her about that, but she too quickly went on her way.

Another category that Evan spoke about was people who ask for more than one receipt per donation. Although Wearable Collections is a for-profit business, through their partnership with the non-profit GrowNYC, and because WC donates about five cents per pound (roughly eight Euro cents a kilo) of textiles received to GrowNYC, receipts for tax-deductible donations are made available. That figure makes a typical sack's donation value about one dollar. It is hard to believe that anyone would actually claim such a low value (the receipts are filled in by the so-called donors themselves), but it points to the discrepancy between the actual worth (almost nothing) and the pretend worth (some increment toward the original purchase?). Oddly, a moment after Evan mentioned this multiple receipts

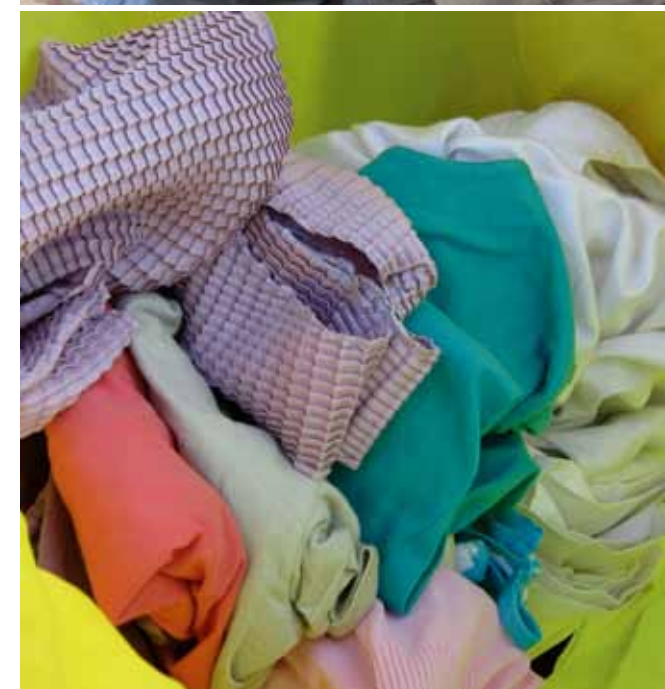


Fig 1: New and worn clothing deposited for recycling.

category, a couple, a man and woman, dropped off several ripped paper bags of clothing and children's (so-called stuffed animal) playthings. They had driven in an expensive car up to the curb beside the site, and the woman, who happened to be quite loud, dressed in beige corduroy pants, black boots, and a bulky metallic knit sweater, demanded, "Give me six more receipts!" Evan gave her more receipts, saying to me afterwards that he guesses she was lying, but that it is not his job to inform the IRS of potential tax-cheats. Two other categories Evan mentioned were young women who bring in large shopping bags filled only with shoes and school teachers who bring their young students by to show that textile recycling is possible.

After some hours of getting comfortable with each other, Evan and I speculated about other possible categories. We thought that perhaps some of the hundreds of apparently well-paid people dressed in clean casual clothes from retailers like the Gap, L.L. Bean, and Club Monaco who stream through the market might be called Good Consumers. Evan said they would have to display a bit of righteousness when dropping off used clothes in order to qualify. Guilt Mediating Fashionistas was the name I proposed for the young women, maybe real life cousins of the Sex in the City television and film character Carrie Bradshaw, who shop frequently, buy large volumes of clothing, and have trouble storing it all. Could the young woman with noticeably well-applied makeup carrying a yoga mat in an eco-friendly labeled yoga mat carrier who dropped off kilos of clothing in undamaged, hardly-used faux-leather shoulder bags that were part of the donation be in such a category? There is a growing body of research about young consumers' clothing disposal habits in high-consumption societies, (Domina and Koch 1999; Bianchi and Birtwistle 2001; Domina and Koch 2007; Morgan and Birtwistle 2009; Joung and Park-Poaps 2011). I have not found research directly linking high volume clothing shopping with a propensity to recycle textiles, but it would not be a huge surprise to find such a correlation.

One person after another came to the site, almost everyone in a hurry. It was difficult to catch people for the semi-structured interviews I had prepared, which included these components: an explanation of the purpose of the interview; a disclosure about how it would be used, a consent form stating that it was voluntary; demographic questions; and a series of questions about an item being dropped off, such as: What is it? How many times did you wear it? How did you feel when you wore it? Why did you stop wearing it? Why did you decide to bring it here?" The same interview was available on paper for anyone willing to take the time to respond in written form, either on

the spot or at their leisure, but as soon became apparent, this method would fail. In retrospect, I should have guessed as much, as the interview took fifteen to twenty minutes – a lot of time for people who just want to stuff their stuff in bags, smile, maybe say thank you, and scurry away. When I managed to catch the attention of the slow ones, almost no one was willing to talk, even if, following Seidman's (2005) interviewing guidelines I tried my best to intuitively approach each individual in a way that I hoped respected his or her uniqueness. One of the several people whom I did get responses from that day, a woman with a Portuguese accent, wrote that she was sad that her beloved pants had fallen apart, and was happy they could be put to some use. An amiable man who dropped off some old t-shirts and running shoes, asked to take the survey by email. He answered promptly. It turns out he was twenty-four, a trader on Wall Street with an income of over \$100,000. He happens to live in Manhattan District 1, the municipal area with the highest textile recycling rate in the city, but several miles from Union Square. He said his reason for bringing the clothes all the way up to Union Square was because he was already planning to go to the farmers market.

Saturday November 12, 2011

The market was very busy; people seemed energized by the crisp, almost cold air. In the vendor's spot north of WC were the farmers from New Jersey who bring in truckloads of grey-green and clean-smelling eucalyptus branches that shoppers, including me, buy by the armful to freshen up apartments for the holiday season. I felt more confident than the first week of interviewing, and was ready with an abbreviated version of the interview on clipboards for people to fill in, and a sign up sheet for anyone who might agree to do it electronically. Evan was consolidating drop offs. He told me that as usual, there were some bags of clothing left in the lot before he and other workers from WC arrived at eight. After bringing my informant, Evan, a coffee, I started to approach people. "Hi, I'm doing academic research about textile recycling. Would you answer a couple of questions about what your bringing in and why you're dropping it off?" I imagined that the words "academic research" might sound pretentious or off-putting, but it was important to convey that I was not selling something. A middle-aged woman, warmly dressed against the weather, was interested in talking. She was working full-time to shut down Indian Point nuclear power plant in Westchester County, about a thirty-minute train ride away. She didn't have anything to drop off, but asked me many questions about textile recycling. Besides loving the greenmarket and shopping there regularly, she described herself as a clothes hoarder. We talked in general about consumption habits, emotional attachments to

objects and clothing, and she was fascinated to watch with me so many people so freely disposing of their textile possessions.

Despite the auspicious beginning, my efforts that day produced fewer results than the previous occasion. It was still difficult to get people to engage. Dozens of negative responses were given. "No thanks", "Sorry, I don't have time", "Not interesting to me." The most common response, just as I have given countless times when someone in a public space approaches me with a request, was a quick shake of the head signifying "No." Although it had not been possible for this exploratory project, I was sorry not to have a dedicated area in which to sit down and talk with people. I imagined that comfortable chairs, literature on the topic, and an incentive — apple cider and donuts — would have made created the right setting. Nonetheless, it was clear just by observing and listening to the questions people asked and the very brief comments they made that many people were curious about textile recycling. I counted two people who only asked questions for every one person who dropped off items. That meant that approximately 150 people asked questions that day, with another seventy-five or so donating (and also sometimes asking questions). Most questions were about other days, locations, or times. About one in three people who came to the booth wanted to know what happens to the textiles. Evan stated again and again in very general terms throughout the day that it is sold to a sorting facility; that useable clothing is then sold by the sorter to second-hand vendors; and that non-useable clothing and other textiles are repurposed for insulation or stuffing. Specific statistics for the materials from WC were not known by Evan, but nationwide about forty-five percent is exported to developing and poor countries. Thirty percent is used for wiping and polishing rags; twenty percent for stuffing, insulation, sound-proofing, and "pet padding"; and five percent is "not fit" for recycling (SMART 2011). Interestingly although many were surprised, no one seemed to object to the profit making nature of the business, even if they were giving the resources for free. (This important tangent is discussed in the full version of this paper.)

Very often people expressed relief that they found a convenient place to dispose of old clothes. Others offered comments such as, "it's about time we had something like this", "finally", "see you next week", or the romantic "where have you been all my life?" Virtually everyone thanked Evan, either with words, a smile, or a thumbs up sign.

Toward the end of the afternoon, a human — submerged under a cloak of hundreds of interlinked aluminum beer and soda cans

— rattled into the market. The half-living half-dead sculpture, a mobile mini-mountain three meters high and nine wide, parked itself midway between Wearable Collections and the plastic composting cans food scraps. It seemed to me to be saying, "Remember metal is recyclable too!" "We're swimming in discards." "Who are we really?"

Saturday November 19, 2011

To prepare for the next visit, I sought advice from two experts. I discussed my methods with ethnographic Professor Terry Williams, in whose Field Methods class I was participating and sustainable fashion and textile researcher Kate Fletcher, whose ethnographic research includes the project Local Wisdom that investigates individuals' long-term attachments to particular garments. Having recognized that most potential respondents would share, if I were lucky, less than a minute of their time, I decided to abandon the structured interview entirely in favor of attempting many very brief interactions or "flash interviews" (Williams 2011). Fletcher shared with me a compilation of categories of clothing that she keeps in mind while doing unstructured interviews that seek insights into why people cherish and keep certain items of apparel (Fletcher 2011). To make the categories relevant for my project, I simply considered their opposites, which are listed below within the brackets following Fletcher's originals.

- o *Garments that are shared between people* [those that are worn only by one person];
- o *Garments that are regularly worn and have never been washed (and aren't leather!)* [those that are washed frequently];
- o *Garments that show or tell the story of how they have been used* [those that are silent about their history];
- o *Garments that are made up of interchangeable pieces that can be worn in different ways* [those that are static];
- o *Garments that are worn the same in different situations* [those that feel appropriate only to specific situations];
- o *Garments or elements of garments that make for easy repair* [those that are difficult to fix];
- o *Garments enjoying a third, fourth or fifth life* [those that last only one life time];

- o *Garments that catch your attention each time you wear them* [those that are boring];
- o *Garments worn in ways that reinforce or defy the producer's* [or wearer's] *values* [those that are silent about values];
- o *Garments that connect us to others and/or remind us of our potential* [those that have forgotten to remind us of our potential];
- o *Garments worn in response to changing economic and environmental* [social, or cultural] *concerns* [those that are irrelevant to economic, environmental, social, or cultural issues];
- o *Garments that are adapted over and again to meet changing needs* [those that fossilize];
- o *Garments that are perfect for you* [those that you do not connect with].

It was colder that Saturday than on previous visits, so I had to bundle up. As before, I tried to consider whether what I wore might influence what people might say to me. I tried to dress in a way that I thought would convey an approachable but not formal attitude: clean not faded jeans, white button down shirt, black sweater, a grey, blue, and oatmeal wool tweed jacket, plaid wool scarf, leather shoes. At the site, Evan was conversing with so-called donors. He was wearing the same green and black striped hoodie as usual, and an acrylic herringbone patterned woven cap.

With the new simplified agenda, I felt free to observe more, to take more pictures, to be more participatory. Rather than introducing myself and my aims to those who came by, I placed myself very near the collection bags and interjected any comment that came to my mind when someone put an item into a collection bag. Perhaps in another city, this method might be considered rude, but in New York, where people are always turning to each other and asking questions or giving opinions, it worked extremely well. Happily during the few hours I was there that day, I was able to chat briefly with about forty people My prompts were spontaneous, but included utterances such as:

- o *Wow, you've brought in quite a few bags of stuff!*
- o *Hey, that's a pretty dress. Are you sure you want to get rid of it?*
- o *I had a pair of shoes like that.*

- o *What's wrong with those pants?*
- o *Oh, I see these towels have been used for a long time.*
- o *Those purses could be consigned to a vintage shop. Why are you giving them away?*
- o *That looks comfortable.*
- o *You know those pills* [the small balls of fiber that collect on the surfaces of some fabrics] *can be scraped off.*
- o *That looks new!*
- o *Looks like you've had them for a long time.*
- o *Didn't your sister want these skirts?*
- o *Did you know that those t-shirts are going to be sent to Chile?*
- o *Don't you hate when socks wear out in only that one spot?*

It was remarkable how easily people spoke in response to my prompts, and remarkable how unremarkable most of their comments were:

- o *Oh, that skirt never really fit me right.*
- o *I have too many of these.*
- o *My girlfriend told me to clean out my closets.*
- o *I didn't want to throw this stuff in the trash.*
- o *Bringing it here is better than throwing it out.*
- o *I liked it when I bought it, but I never wore it.*
- o *I wore that a long time, but it's falling apart.*
- o *I just decided to get a bunch of new clothes, so all of this had to go.*
- o *I'm going back to Korea, and I don't want to bring all this with me.*
- o *I don't know where a lot of this came from. I can't remember where I bought it.*

- o *The colors used to be nice, but they look old now.*
- o *I lost weight and have to get rid of all this, otherwise, I'll gain it back.*
- o *I don't remember having so much crap to get rid of back in the day.*
- o *Some of it I just got tired of wearing, some doesn't fit right.*
- o *Usually I put my old clothes on the street, but this seems like a better idea.*
- o *There's no Goodwill near me.*
- o *I never really thought about what happens to this. Does it go to Staten Island?* [Staten Island, a borough of New York City was until recently home to one of the world's largest landfills.]
- o *If this place wasn't here, I'd just put it all in the garbage or maybe give it away, but nobody really wants it.*
- o *My kids grew out of it, and my friends' kids are too old for it.*
- o *I tried selling it myself, but it wasn't worth my time.*
- o *I heard that bedbugs like old clothes, so I'm not taking any chances.*
- o *It feels creepy, which is weird, 'cause when I got it I thought it was cool.*
- o *My apartment is so small, I don't have space to have anything that I don't wear.*
- o *It's easier to get new stuff.*

If the above comments, more of which were collected during subsequent visits, were mundane they seem to reflect the dull relationships many people in consumption societies have with much of their (industrially-produced) clothing. (I cannot recall seeing any handmade items being discarded.) The flash interview method was very productive, so if this project continues, it would be an effective means for establishing patterns that either fit my inversions of Fletchers categories, or point to other reasons why people abandon/recycle their garments.

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 Linty Blanket Discarder

A young woman, maybe 25, 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 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 old, but it became intolerable. She had some other seemingly non-problematic clothes that she was discarding, but she was uncomfortable discussing them.

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, inappropriately to the cold, wore khaki pants, a short sleeved business shirt, and trailed behind her, his face red from carrying a bunch of large bags of kids clothes and stuffed animals. I tried to engage her, but she kind of barked at me to give her my pen. I said I remembered her. She said she comes here often, that she has got a lot of stuff. But she and her husband were gone before I could get any more information out of her ... taking with them still more receipts.

The Purple-Coat Lady

One of the first people who had agreed to talk about what she was dropping off was a heavy-set middle aged woman, dressed very casually in a purple wool-like 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

repair. She also said she was a good sewer, that her mother had been a seamstress and taught her how, and that she knew she could have patched the jeans, but that was not acceptable “in this day and age”. Her husband agreed, and said he had too many jeans anyway. She also said that she had tried to give them away (there were at least six pairs in the bag) through the website Craigslist, but that no one wanted them. We talked about patching, and I mentioned a linen shirt from the 1900’s that I had seen recently at the Nordiska Museum in Stockholm in a show about ways that garments’ lives used to be extended. That shirt had so many patches that it was hard to find anything of the original garment. She said she wished patching was ok these days, but that another problem was even if it were, the low quality of the denim of her husband’s jeans would not support patching, (The last point she made, I am fairly sure is not true).

Linda

Another person who spoke openly with me was someone who I had at first accidentally annoyed. I had noticed that she, a woman of about sixty with grey shoulder length straight hair and a comfortable but elegant style, was watching me take notes. I asked her if she had something to drop off. She became immediately defensive, wanting to know who I was and what I was doing. I apologized for not introducing myself before asking her a question, and then we proceeded to have a twenty-minute long conversation. She told me that she did not have anything to drop off at that particular time, but that she was in fact a regular, and that she occasionally stood nearby the site and watched what was going on. Linda is a fashion editor, but declined to say for whom she worked. She was wearing an activewear jacket of a brand I didn’t recognize that fit her more closely than a North-face or Patagonia jacket would have, and the fabric was an iridescent green-brown that was unusual compared to the typically black, navy, and unobtrusive colors that are commonly used in these kinds of jackets. She was also wearing a dark blue resist-dyed Indian silk scarf that we discussed because it was so pretty. She self-identified as a recovering “fabricoholic” and when I jokingly (I thought) asked her what a fabricoholic was, she seriously explained that it was like an alcoholic but with fabric. She said she has been bringing in clothing and fabric regularly as part of her rehabilitation, and asked me a lot of questions about my work and what I had been learning. She confided that she does not like Wearable Collections because “they are dishonest about what they are doing” [because WC’s communication, at the time of this study, did not clearly present itself as a profit oriented business], but nonetheless brings her discards to them because it is convenient and she likes coming to the market.

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) all of these people presented themselves as in dire 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 quickly become a de facto distribution center — but occasionally Evan did, saying, “I can’t say no to homeless women with children.” One man, about forty years old, obviously homeless and not adequately dressed for the cold, told Evan that he needed a warm jacket. Evan was not willing to dig around in the bags for clothes, but he did say that if a coat came in he would hold it for him. Indeed, a coat came in, and Evan held it 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 accents indicated they might have been from a French-speaking Caribbean country, arrived in the morning, talked with Evan, and then went to sit on a bench. Periodically, when something was delivered that Evan thought might be good for them, he put it aside. After a while, Evan had packed up a donated suitcase for them, and handed it to them from the side of the tent. In a place like New York, where there is a tremendous disparity between the super rich and the very poor, the fact that (mostly white) people are dropping off kilos of clothes, while some others, (usually black) intermittently come by for bare necessities, underscores the obvious fact that in order to recycle textiles, one must first have excess material wealth.

The Too-Short-to-Keep Sweater Leaver

A young woman whose accent I could not place, styled in classic Gap-like basics brought in a large clear bag plastic bag packed with apparel. It was an incidental sign that her plastic bag was clear, because she was also quite forthcoming about the stuff in the bag. She was happy to pick out something to tell me about, though she could not decide what. I picked a knit sweater near the top of the bag,. She said it was perfectly good, but was too short. I asked her what too short meant, and she clarified that it was out of style. She volunteered that there were a lot of new clothes in the bag that she did not like soon after she bought them, but for one reason or another did not or could not return them to the stores from where they came.

The Anonymous Victorinox Backpack Giver

A lot of people when stepping up to the nylon laundry bags where they leave their clothes, bags, shoes, sheets, ask a quick

question such as “Do I put this here?”, “In here?”, or for those into the New York Minute mode, merely “Here?”. Others just put their contribution in the laundry bags and wave good-bye. One such silent person, a young woman dressed in black floppy pants and a very bulky white wool sweater, left a brand new red and black Victorinox backpack just like the ones I had seen in a shop nearby for 165 dollars.

The Most Fashionable

I called her The Most Fashionable. The woman who earned this title on a grey Saturday in early December was literally very colorfully dressed. Arriving by folding bicycle, she was a festival of vivid fuzzy fabrics. She moved quickly. There was no time to take a picture, but in her woolen whirlwind I saw two bicycle baskets filled with food scraps and an obviously hand knit orange and red afghan-granny-square vest. A pink crocheted cap and purple scarf was caught up in her curly red hair, and she had, wool pom-poms tied to her shoes. I imagined that like a super small subset of the New York fashion avant-garde she may have even dyed the wool herself. She did not have any textiles to be recycled however: her only stop was the compost cans.

Whole Clothes Man

A handsome man, late twenties, perhaps one of the fashion models living nearby, came over with two loaded shopping bags. One bag was glossy and printed with the narrow multi-color horizontal stripes seen on Paul Smith branded scarves and socks, but was actually from Bloomingdale’s department store. He put the bags on the table, and asked if it was ok to “drop off here”. Like a lot of men, he left his clothes with no apparent regrets or care, whereas it was common for women to double-check what they were giving away. Of special interest in this donation was a short stack of neatly folded, new (with the hangtags still on) “eco-friendly” organic cotton khaki pants, t-shirts and polo shirts from Whole Foods. These products, designed to have less harmful impacts, had a value no greater than any other garments that populated the piles of the rejected.

The Old Washcloth Old Lady

The same day the Whole Clothes Man mentioned above contributed his pants and stuff, many other donors came and went. The pile of anonymous apparel grew sack by sack, eventually hypostatizing a modern fable with no clear moral. But before Wearable Collections closed the bags and finished packing them all into the truck that would cart them to New Jersey for sorting and then shipping to the world beyond, an old stooped woman who had made her way to the market with the help of her rolling-folding shopping cart opened her purse and tossed a

decrepit beige square of cotton terry cloth into one of the bags. This broken down washcloth, unlike the vast majority of the materials contributed, evidently had a long and useful life. It is the sort of fabric that Wearable Collections and other collectors do not want too much of. The more truly tired, really used textiles they bring into the recycling stream, the lower the price received per kilo will be.

Upcycling the Experience

With this writing, I have tried to relate two simultaneous occurrences. One, the practice I have gained using ethnographic field methods, and two, the anecdotal information I collected about one aspect of textile recycling. Moreover, I have also begun to place this experience within the larger context of consumption culture, recycling and the notion of sustainable fashion.

This project was embarked upon in conjunction with a graduate level course in ethnographic field methods at The New School in New York in support of my design management research based at The Swedish School of Textile in Borås. My primary action research however is with a social business located in Madhya Pradesh, India where fieldwork on the pros and cons of small-scale textile manufacturing will necessarily employ ethnographic methodologies. As more investment is being made in using design and design management as tools for solving society’s complex and unprecedented problems (Thackara 2006; Chapman and Grant 2007; Smith 2007; Ehrenfeld 2008), ethnographic skills that enable designers and managers to understand human dynamics have a critical role to play. With regard to this need for my own upskilling, I believe this endeavor will prove to be very useful.

Although I did not set out through this work to come to any particular conclusions, and it should also be remembered that my research methods were deliberately experimental and inconsistent, it seems, from the good number and enthusiasm of people who are choosing to bring their discards to just this one WC location, that there is a potential to radically increase textile recovery rates in New York City. The interviews and snap-conversations yielded mostly unsurprising reasons why people are disposing of their clothes. Despite exceptions, they boil down to people having too much stuff they do not value. There were indications that people were bringing in their clothes (and more) for recycling because of a desire to be “environmentally friendly”, and no one I talked with expressed any disagreement with the assumed positive ecological value of textile recycling in and of itself. During this engagement, however, I found little or no evidence that bringing in textiles for recycling, I might decrease

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 sustainuclimbing.com or junkstyling.co.uk.) At the moment however, even if what I heard and saw in Union Square made me feel somewhat optimistic and energized, I will keep in mind environmental economist John Ehrenfeld's remark that, "Reducing unsustainability will not create sustainability" (Ehrenfeld 2008: 20).

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