

Going Against the Grain: Exploring Possibilities of Refashioning Secondhand  
Clothing through Place, Practice, and Community

By Courtney Shepard

Senior Honors Thesis  
Department of Anthropology  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

April 10, 2015

Approved:

Townsend Middleton, Thesis Advisor  
Michal Osterweil, Reader  
Arturo Escobar, Reader

## Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	3
Introduction	4
A Microcosm	4
Introduction & Literature Review	5
Chapter One: The Place	19
Chapter Two: The Practice	30
Chapter Three: The Community	46
Conclusion	60
Appendix	64
A. Parts of a Sewing Machine Diagram and Parts Description	64
B. Fast Fashion Infographic	66
C. Some Refashion Blogger Links	67
D. Henriette Roued Cunliffe Refashion blog post	68
E. Confessions of a Refashionista Refashion Blog Post	73
F. Renegade Seamstress Refashion Blog Post	79
G. Christine Ramsey Refashion Blog Post	84
H. Personal Refashion Blog Post Example	87
Bibliography	90

## Acknowledgements

This was the largest research and writing project that I have taken on thus far in my life and it would not be possible without the journey I have encountered and the people I've met along the way.

The first people in my life that exposed me to the power and beauty of craft culture were my mother and grandmothers, Sherri, Beverly, and Joyce. So thanks mom for teaching me the importance of thrift shopping, thanks Mawmaw for being a particularly avid sewer in my life and exposing me to that craft, and thank you Grandma for teaching me to crochet. It is easily one of the most precious gifts I have received and I cherish it dearly. Also, a big thank you to my dad and papa, Kevin and Adrian Shepard, for your stubbornness to have to do things yourself as it taught me the beauty of DIY culture (even though neither of you call it that). I also want to give a big thank you to Kim and Bob Reetz for being the best neighbors i.e. teaching me to sew on a machine and how to play a violin.

I want to thank all of the refashionistas that I have talked with so far on my journey of secondhand refashioning, especially to Sheri Pavlovic, Beth Huntington, Christine Ramsey, Roz Cohen, and Carissa Browning for telling me with your words what your own experience has been with refashioning. Also, I'd like to thank Ann May Woodward and the Scrap Exchange for letting me conduct research there and for lighting me up with inspiration every time I visit. I'd like to thank Beth Stewart from Redress Raleigh for telling me about the industry perspective of sustainable fashion.

I definitely wouldn't be able to have written this without the help and constant support and love of great friends (& housemates) so thank you to Daniel, Allison, Katie, Travis, and Erick. They challenge me to think about problems and help me to appreciate so much of this life I've been given.

I appreciate the funding I have received from the Dunlevie Undergraduate Honors Thesis Research Grant, without which I could not have participated in many necessary community meetups at the Scrap Exchange or read numerous books on refashioning, fast fashion, and craft culture.

Finally, I am so grateful to thank all of those in my academic path that have helped me with this project. Thank you, Professor Ben Arbuckle for leading the Anthropology thesis class this year and getting us all on track. I extend a big thank you to my thesis committee for taking the time to read and critique my work. Michal Osterweil, I truly appreciate the few times I've heard you speak and lead Arturo's class as I identify strongly with your style and teachings. Arturo Escobar, I am forever grateful for all you have taught me in the short year I have known you. You have inspired me to continue with hope and excitement toward building a world I want to live in and the power of community, the resilience of humans, and the importance of every being. And to my advisor, Townsend Middleton, I thank you so very much for your patience, guiding, and teaching this past year. I have learned so much from you about Postcolonial issues in South Asia in addition to how to go about writing an honors thesis in Anthropology.

## **Introduction**

### **A Microcosm**

Upon the realization of the many problems that the world faces today, (social, ecological, local, global, economic, etc.) many people from an array of disciplines and backgrounds are realizing the necessity for drastic sustainable change. Quite simply, there are a multitude of things wrong with our system of operating and we must act to change, as it is imperative to our global health and well-being in every sense.

Many words come to mind when thinking of the necessary sustainable transitions we must face: re-conceptualize, re-frame, re-design, re-localize, re-skill, and re-imagine, just to name a few. This idea of “re” has “re-vamped” many social movements and practices that aim towards living more sustainably. One such concept with this impact is refashioning.

In particular, I refer to refashioning used garments and textiles for the purpose of re-creating clothes for the individual wearer while simultaneously counteracting textile waste and retail consumerism. The reason for studying refashioning stems from the underlying issues within the entire fashion industry at large. The fashion industry contributes directly in a myriad of ways to the problems we find throughout our world today.

The good news is that many involved within the fashion industry are beginning to take ecological sustainability into account every step of the way of creating a garment. The drawback that caught my attention is the lack of representation of sustainable fashion measures within academia, especially in America. There is much more research regarding the sustainability of fashion going on in the UK and Europe. However in Europe, there

are many more accounts of measures of sustainability taken from within the fashion industry and not as much focus on consumer agency or individual practice.

Thus, I have studied the place, practice, and communities associated with the refashioning of used, or secondhand clothing and textiles between October 2014 and April 2015 on a local level in North Carolina as well as on an international level thanks to DIY communities made visible through the internet. Prevailing themes have been weaved into my research—those of sustainability, DIY, bricolage, and building communities of practice. All of these themes have intertwined this relatively small practice of refashioning with bigger ideas and lessons we can learn about the sustainable transitions we all must face to reimagine our future and not fall victim to the ‘Business as Usual’ (see Macy and Johnstone, 4-5) approach (and its effects) that currently dominates our mode of being in the world.

---

## **Ripping at the Seams**

We’ve been exposed to countless news reports of the dangers of climate change<sup>1</sup>, the mistreatment of factory workers in the Global South, and the state of environmental crisis the world is in because of anthropogenic destruction of the Earth’s ecological systems. These practices of resource exhaustion, extraction, and emission are now too inevitable to ignore, yet the processes that drive economic growth have become the systematic norm. People everywhere are feeling effects of the malpractices to ecological systems begun in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as the Industrial Revolution transitioned to new

---

<sup>1</sup> Consult the IPCC for up to date information on climate change.

manufacturing processes and new paradigm shifts dominated mainstream society in Europe and the United States. These practices still greatly impact the globalized world, continually producing an overabundance of commodities that drive an overconsumption habit practiced by much of human society.

A major industry that is seen everywhere at the root of American consumerism is the fashion industry. Clothing and apparel are the second largest consumer sector behind food (Cline, 8; Cox). Even after a garment has been used firsthand, clothing and textiles are transported to an array of different places—secondhand stores, back to processing plants to be recycled, into landfills, or most prominently, overseas to secondhand markets<sup>2</sup> (Rivoli, 176-7). Thus, the fashion industry is connected at many levels of emissions.

Additionally, the fashion industry is excessively wasteful in terms of resource use in production and short term consumption practices. The life cycle of a garment from factory production to landfill is much shorter today as the fast fashion<sup>3</sup> movement takes root in most affluent countries, which contributes to the waste problem in our overflowing landfills. Elizabeth Cline observes that “Fast Fashion is a radical method of retailing that has broken away from seasonal selling and puts out new inventory constantly throughout the year. Fast-fashion merchandise is typically priced much lower than its competitors” (Cline, 96). One of the problems with the fast fashion system is its complete disregard for sustainability.

---

<sup>2</sup> In her book, *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy*, Rivoli states that between 1990 and 2003, the US exported 7 billion pounds of used clothing and textile products to the rest of the world.

<sup>3</sup> Fast fashion refers to speeding up the process of getting the newest items from the runways to retail outlets for consumer purchase with many consequences such as lesser quality goods and lower wages for factory workers (Fletcher & Grose, 125-7).

People try to combat clothing and textile waste by recycling it back into the community circulation and out of landfills. Donating unwanted clothes, shoes, and other household items can be done on an individual level and has the potential to impact at a community level. According to the National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops, the resale and thrift industry has grown in its number of stores by 7% annually for the past two years and there are now around 25,000 resale, consignment, and Not For Profit resale shops in the United States alone (NARTS). Yet, according to the EPA, 14.3 million tons of textiles were still generated as waste in 2012 in America despite efforts of recycling clothes back into the community, which accounts for 5.7% of all municipal solid waste in US landfills<sup>4</sup>.

The problem here is behavioral and systemic. In American society, we are socialized to consume something new if a commodity is broken. This socialization reduces our agency as individuals and requires our dependency on large corporations to clothe us. These corporations and industrial systems are responsible, as we know, for devastating many of the planet's limited resources, such as depleting soils because of monocultures like cotton grown for textiles and fabrics, pumping toxins (e.g. pesticides) into plants used for textile production and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere which contributes to accelerated climate change, and overworking and underpaying factory workers, often located in the Global South, to make these products without being able to reap the benefits of their labor (Fletcher & Grose).

Consumers are told by the market the specifics of wearing a garment and J.K. Gibson-Graham points out that “it’s hard not to feel like pawns in a huge conspiracy to get us to consume, discard, consume, discard” (Gibson-Graham, 5). These social aspects

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/consERVE/materials/textiles.htm>

of fashion have weaved themselves into the fabric we buy to clothe ourselves. Clothes and fashion have the ability to shape how we feel about ourselves, which is important in identity formation. But, we've come to a dangerous point that pushes the Earth's natural resources to make the machine of fashion run faster and faster.

---

### **Limits of Existing Research in Sustainable Fashion and Design**

As we are in the midst of what some scholars are calling the Anthropocene<sup>5</sup>, it is important for humans to transition into truly more sustainable ways of living that can successfully support ecological systems and anthropogenic systems alike. Reshaping the fashion industry is an important part of this transition. Fletcher and Grose<sup>6</sup> argue that “sustainability offers the biggest critique the fashion sector has ever had. It challenges fashion at the level of detail (fibre and process) and also at the level of the whole (economic models, goals, rules, values, and belief systems).” This holistic perspective is necessary to see the faults of the fashion sector in all of its parts and also to begin to shift paradigms that incorporate sustainable fashion and design into the equation.

Eco-fashion is certainly an avenue within the fashion industry that pursues more ecologically balanced practices of design and consumption. Kate Fletcher and Lynda Grose are pioneers in the field of studying sustainable eco-fashion and design and write on many such examples in their book *Fashion & Sustainability: Design for Change*. This eco-fashion movement and its activity from the design and production standpoint is

---

<sup>5</sup> The Anthropocene is an informal geological epoch termed by Paul Crutzen and noted by many scholars as an epoch beginning at the beginnings of industrialization in which humans began having a profound and arguably, detrimental, effect on Earth's ecosystems.

<sup>6</sup> In their preface of *Fashion and Sustainability: Design For Change*; pp. 8.



mainly being practiced, researched, and documented in Europe and the UK. Kate Fletcher is from the UK and contributes very much to the field of sustainable design. Tamsin Blanchard, also from the UK speaks on ecological initiatives within the fashion industry within her book *Green is the New Black*. Other notable scholars of sustainable fashion are Sass Brown and Sandy Black, both of whom are from the UK.

This focus of eco-fashion and design predominantly in Europe is precisely why I focus on the impact that refashioning has had in America for this project. In particular, I study at a local level in North Carolina for my research on the topic of sustainable design and DIY<sup>7</sup> culture through the medium of refashioning secondhand or, used, garments and textiles. Sustainable fashion, design, and refashioning are not a mainstream topic or practice, especially in America. Therefore, studying this topic is important because it offers a new and fresh perspective because of the place I introduce paired with the practice of refashioning.

---

## **What is Refashioning?**

For the purposes of my project, I define refashioning in terms of used clothing. *Refashioning* is the skill of using creative processes to transform used fabrics, textiles, and/or clothing into something else that better fits the individual's needs via the process of sewing, upcycling, embroidery, or other craft. Refashioning, also called

---

<sup>7</sup> DIY is an acronym standing for Do It Yourself. It is a movement that has gained major popularity throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is often associated with crafting, mending, altering, refashioning non-professionally.

reconditioning<sup>8</sup>, “fuses thrift with creativity and embellishment” (Fletcher & Grose, 67). This process gives a garment new life in the sense it is not discarded by the user and sent to a landfill, but instead continues to cycle within society. This practice of recycling these goods back into the community is quintessential to refashioning in that re-cycling offers the ability to re-fashion an item.

Furthermore, refashioning goes beyond a consuming sphere. Reusing and recycling secondhand goods throughout communities is a very important choice and act as a consumer. But, I am researching further into the realm of refashioning secondhand goods because I want to see the multiple roles involved. Refashioning is ultimately a mindset in which one is a producer in addition to being a consumer. What I really want to know is whether by exploring the possibilities of refashioning through various outlets, can we see sustainable and ontological transitions in practice with this community of refashioners?

There are some fashion brands and designers that have made a business out of the practice of refashioning/reconditioning such as From Somewhere, Junky Styling, Goodone, and William Good (Fletcher & Grose, 69; Brown ). This is a great beginning to sustainable design practices from within the fashion industry. For my project, however, I focus on individuals who are refashioning secondhand clothing for themselves and their families on a much smaller and local scale. Local, sustainable, and individual practices of refashioning can sprout from a grass roots level and create and stimulate communities of practice. Refashioning is a direct practice that combats blind consumerism and

---

<sup>8</sup> The reason I am using the terminology refashioning versus reconditioning, upcycling, or any other acceptable term for this practice is because the people I have communicated with through interviews or blogs I have seen online mostly use the word “refashioning”. So, ultimately, I want to be true to the practice and practitioners and use the language they are using.

reimagines agency of the individual. The refashioning approach I study here is a bottom-up approach because that is the most accessible for individuals.

For my project, I study local refashioning practices to highlight this behavior happening in America at this time as well as to highlight the power of small communities in creating social change in times of necessary sustainability measures and global transitions of practice. America as a nation is at the root of a consumption problem. And as an American myself, I see fit to delve into my home and local sphere to do my research for the sake of getting to the root of this problem.

---

### **Approaches and Methods**

From September of 2014 to March of 2015, I studied the practices, places, and communities associated with the specific DIY culture of refashioning secondhand garments and textiles in Durham, NC and online. I was particularly interested in the potential refashioning has as a sustainable practice and one that shows an active approach against mainstream consumerism that provides individual agency. In true anthropological fashion, I conducted this research using two predominant methods—interviews and participant observation with the practice of refashioning. I felt it was important for me to get a grasp on the actual practice of what I was studying. I learned to sew on a sewing machine and refashion my own clothing on a basic level. I have now made my own space in this community of practice based on my new knowledge and reskilling of sewing.

Refashioning culture needed research in order to be documented and analyzed at local and global levels. Locally, I conducted most of my field research at a creative reuse center in Durham, North Carolina called the Scrap Exchange. Additionally, I connected

with thrift and consignment store owners or employees in the Triangle area and others who engage in refashioning used textiles and other garments in North Carolina. Globally, I connected with individuals through the internet, specifically, through researching refashioning blogs and holding interviews through Skype. Many of my informants are refashioners themselves that also post refashion blogs online.

Refashion bloggers online occupy spaces in the greater DIY, or Do-It-Yourself, communities. DIY activities add a sense of accomplishment, agency, and even empowerment to the individual. Although the acronym DIY suggests an extremely individualistic perspective, these growing online DIY communities focus on sharing their works. I have included the topic of DIY in my thesis about refashioning because I believe this acronym and the associated practices and movements along with the internet have assisted refashioners in coming together over common practices—refashioning and talking about it in online spaces.

---

### **DIY in a Virtual Space**

DIY can be defined as any “creation, modification, or repair of objects without the aid of paid professionals” (Kuznetsov & Paulos, 1). DIY, or the Do It Yourself movement encompasses the practice of refashioning secondhand clothing because DIY refers to the practitioner. DIY is often associated with amateur level experience with something. The draw of DIY for people is that it makes a skill available for the individual and the public simultaneously. DIY inherently provides agency and a sense of empowerment to the individual engaging in DIY activity, whether it be staining

unfinished furniture or cutting designs in a T-shirt. The beauty about the DIY movement is that the average person is able to build, fix, or make something without professional help.

Unfortunately, the DIY community is not connected with mainstream academic spheres; yet, it is important to bridge this gap and give part of the DIY community a voice by highlighting the important practice of refashioning already used garments and textiles. One of my informants for this project, Henriette Roued-Cunliffe from Copenhagen, Denmark is doing research with the DIY community but describes it as difficult because she has a hard time reaching certain populations due to the vast nature of the DIY world in a virtual space (Roued-Cunliffe, 2014). The difficulty with bringing the topic of DIY to an academic lens is that the communities and practices that make up the DIY movement are varied and diverse in content and even location (Kuznetsov & Paulos, 2). There is not necessarily a specific geographical location for DIY practices.

The internet and Human-Computer Interactions (HCI) have proved rather prominent in today's world of DIY because of the easily accessible help online for a DIY project. Websites like Pinterest and Etsy are breeding grounds for creativity and offer a quick outlet for the user to participate easily in DIY activity and practices. According to Kuznetsov and Paulos in their study regarding HCI and DIY, "DIY communities serve as instruments of learning through features such as discussion forums, the 'instructable' format, images and video"(Kuznetsov & Paulos, 7). Essentially, there is a lot of individual agency involved in the practice of DIY and it is assisted through the help of the internet.

Another interesting aspect of the internet is the lack of borders and geographical limits because it offers more points of connection between physically separated individuals. This interconnectivity allows DIY networks to be built internationally. With my study, I focus on the online refashioning communities built that are both communities of thought and communities of practice. Online communities present very different communities than other social communities because of the lack of live human interaction. But, because of international communication available, refashioning communities have been able to thrive in the internet setting.

---

### **Bricolage**

One topic that dovetails effortlessly with DIY culture and particularly refashioning is the concept of bricolage and the bricoleur. Claude Levi-Strauss was a French anthropologist who introduced the word ‘bricoleur’ into the field of Anthropology (Levi-Strauss. 1961). A *bricoleur* is one who engages in bricolage, or, one who is “adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, [...] does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His [her] universe of instruments is closed and the rules of [her] game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’” (Levi-Strauss, 11). Bricolage has been used in many academic contexts and not just about physical practice, but also in arenas of thought as well. This concept of bricolage ties in with my topic in the sense that refashioners are not utilizing any new materials to engage in their skill. They are innovative with the used textiles and fabrics around them already in existence.

As Levi-Strauss explains, bricoleurs use “whatever is at hand” (11). This concept ties in with themes of DIY and ecological sustainability in the context of my project. One engaging in the practice of textile- and refashioning- bricolage is able to use whatever tools are around this individual. From a DIY perspective, engaging in bricolage makes sense because no new fabric or materials must be produced but instead, the bricoleur uses public knowledge, individual creativity, and already used material to conceive of something new to them.

In terms of ecological sustainability, bricolage is complimentary in the sense that no new materials must be manufactured, but instead the practitioner or refashioner must choose from the used clothing around them in whatever capacity that may be (thrift store, clothing swap, one’s own closet, etc.) in order to innovatively create something new from these used materials. Bricolage will prove to be an interesting underlying conceptual theme for my project as I expand upon the craft of refashioning.

---

## **Communities of Practice**

Another broad theme that continues throughout this project is that of community building in reference to refashioning communities. Although there are multiple facets of the communities involved within the realm of refashioning, all of these arenas are open to others joining and participating in skill and knowledge sharing, which is a necessity for the community to continue. I argue that the multiple groups of refashioning within this thesis, whether online or in a physical space, exemplify communities of practice based on legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger introduce the theoretical concepts

of a community of practice as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 98). To become involved as a “*full participant*” in a particular community of practice, one must learn the skills of the practices involved (Lave & Wenger, 29). They argue that once an individual becomes a full participant in a community of practice, the individual inhabits legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 35).

Refashioning is certainly a skill-based practice and is most often done as a practice on an individual level. Yet, there exist many communities of refashioners. Many refashioners can connect in various ways about their shared interest in refashioning. Even then, “a shared interest alone does not necessarily yield a community of practice” according to Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (44). The structure of a community of practice encompasses three elements—domain, community, and practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 45-6). These straight forward elements are not so simple when creating a community of practice. They take efforts of balance to develop and maintain all three principles equitably. The realm of refashioning and the communities of practice involved include all of these elements. Refashioners have a foundational similar interest and many have similar motives behind the practice of refashioning. The greater refashioning community is comprised of small pockets of networks, some in the physical sphere, such as at the Scrap Exchange, and others that participate in virtual spaces through refashion blogs. Finally, the practice of refashioning is comprised of various skills, such as sewing and bricolage, and is a dynamic process.

---

## **Roadmap for this Thesis**



All of my research for this project has culminated into the following three chapters showcasing place, practice, and community aspects of refashioning. Below, I have given a broad overview of the synopses of the following chapters to provide a clear design and place to locate the contents within:

- I. My first chapter showcasing my research for this project revolves around the places involved with refashioning. Predominantly, I focus my fieldwork on a case study on a reuse center in Durham, North Carolina called the Scrap Exchange. The Scrap Exchange has offered a fresh insight into the world of refashioning as a local venue resource for this project. Additionally, I offer a look at thrift stores as important places for recycling clothing within the community and as common places associated with the beginning steps of refashioning.
- II. The second chapter provides the accounts of several “refashioners” from all over the world and specifically, a detailed account of the practice of refashioning secondhand clothing. These accounts of refashioners are from internet blogs or from interviews I have conducted in regard to these blogs. I will provide accounts of not only the practice of refashioning, but also the practice of authoring these refashions onto internet blogs.
- III. In chapter three, I show how online refashioning blogs and blog communities are spreading and sharing the practice of refashioning secondhand goods in order to build communities of practice with situated learning opportunities. The internet once again serves as a major platform in order to build these communities like the Refashion Co-op or the Sewing Party. I present several examples of local and global DIY refashioning communities in virtual and physical spaces.

One underlying research question is this: can we understand the practice of refashioning secondhand goods as an important environmental movement? I am not suggesting that the practice of refashioning secondhand garments and blogging about it is a complete solution to all of the problems the fashion industry faces environmentally or ecologically, but it is one way in which people have begun to shift paradigms in the practice of clothing oneself with used garments and textiles. Through studying the places, practice, and communities built associated with refashioning, I have seen its potential as a

small sustainable practice that teaches larger lessons about sustainability, DIY, bricolage, and communities of practice. These are the constant themes that weave throughout the coming chapters and what can all be tied into as the larger concepts addressed by the practice of refashioning used garments and textiles.

## Chapter One: The Place

---

“I’m interested in a Reuse Revolution”

*-Ann May Woodward  
Executive Director of the Scrap Exchange*

---

### **Introduction**

This chapter highlights the beginning steps of the refashioning process--the places involved in sustainably sourcing materials. Sustainable materials in the practice of refashioning include secondhand, or used goods—particularly garments, fabrics, and clothing that are reused or repurposed by the refashioner. Secondhand goods, when reused, are sustainable because they lengthen product life and keep products cycling throughout communities instead of much too slowly decomposing in landfills and municipal waste spaces. Clothing reuse in particular can conserve up to 90% or 95% of the energy<sup>9</sup> required to manufacture new garment items (Fletcher & Grose, 66).

The more conventionally used method of sourcing secondhand clothing by refashioners takes place at thrift or consignment shops. However, in this chapter, I concentrate on a local reuse center called the Scrap Exchange, located in Durham, North Carolina, because of its novelty and potential importance within the reuse community. I describe my field research at the Scrap Exchange in detail and argue that this reuse center and other reuse centers have a valuable place in the world of refashioning, whether it’s with clothing, furniture, reframing paradigms, etc.

---

<sup>9</sup> Energy here does not factor in labor.

## **Traditional Secondhand Stores**

Refashionistas mostly utilize conventional thrift, consignment, or charity shops as places for sourcing their refashion creativity and materials. Chains such as Goodwill, Buffalo Exchange, Plato's Closet, and the Salvation Army are well known resale shop chains in the US. Additionally, there are many more locally based thrift stores and outlets to obtain secondhand garments and clothing. In sum, there are upwards of 25,000 secondhand stores in the United States alone (NARTS).

The traditional setup of a secondhand store upon first glance mimics the look of any retail clothing place of business. There are racks of hanging clothes usually categorized by gender, age, and size. Thrift stores in particular usually collect and sell household items from books to pottery to board games in addition to clothing and garments. The difference in a thrift store and a retail store on further examination is the variety and uniqueness of items in thrift or any secondhand stores. One purpose of secondhand arenas is to collect and recirculate goods back into the community. They encompass the physical place that goods cycle in and out of stores based on donations and consumers. This means that instead of a rack of tee shirts that are identical in everything but size, such as in a department store, there is probably a rack of blouses that are different sizes, styles, colors, textures, and years.

Part of the thrill of sourcing secondhand goods is the complete serendipity and randomness of the process. Refashioners often engage in bricolage by visiting a thrift store, not knowing what they will find, and being inspired by the items that happen to be there at that day, place, and time. Rarely will there be two of the same items in a thrift store because they are not bound by only the current fashion industry. There are often

garments in thrift stores that have been in existence for thirty years or more. For instance, a pair of harem pants manufactured in the 1980s may be hanging on a rack beside a pair of high end jeans made in 2013 in your local Goodwill.<sup>10</sup> It all depends on what is donated from within the community. Thrift stores and other secondhand stores are gaining popularity and are especially popular for refashionistas, but there is also a completely new kind of place I've encountered locally that has the potential to be a great resource for many types of refashioning.

### **The Scrap Exchange**

---

"The Scrap Exchange is a nonprofit creative reuse arts center located in Durham, North Carolina. Our mission is to promote creativity, environmental awareness, and community through reuse."<sup>11</sup>

*-The Scrap Exchange Website*

---

The Scrap Exchange is not your neighborhood thrift store. As stated in its mission statement above, the Scrap Exchange is a creative reuse center. This center in Durham, NC is the geographical physical location where I conducted most of my field research for this project. Between December 2014 and March 2015, I visited the Scrap Exchange almost weekly to partake in community events and observe the local store culture. As a compliment to my participant observation of refashioning and interviewing the director, spending time at the Scrap Exchange opened my eyes to even greater possibilities in the practices involved in refashioning. Let me begin with my first experience at the Scrap Exchange so as to paint a detailed picture.

---

<sup>10</sup> This observation is based on my own experiences in thrift stores, particularly Goodwill stores across the state of North Carolina.

<sup>11</sup> -<http://scrapexchange.org/what-we-do/>

Driving up to this warehouse building island in a parking lot sea of an old deserted strip mall for the first time, I wondered if I was in the right place or if my iPhone GPS led me astray yet again. As, I kept looking, however, I noticed the proud “Scrap Exchange” banner on the side of this large concrete building. As I ventured inside, I was amazed and amused at all the stuff inside—scraps from barrels of bottle caps to rolls of fabric scraps to bins of old photos to rows of vinyl records.

After an interview with the director of the Scrap Exchange, Ann May Woodward, I was further enticed to scope out all that this place had to offer. Ann May told me the ins and outs of this reuse center endearingly called “the Scrap” as we ambled around the entire premise. She and a team began the Scrap Exchange in 1991 based off of an Australian organization called ‘The Reverse Garbage Truck’<sup>12</sup>. The Scrap Exchange sought out a sustainable way to supply artists, teachers, and parents with high quality and low cost reused materials. It’s important to keep the materials housed within the Scrap affordable for all members of the community to allow accessibility and opportunity especially to people with a lower income status.

The Scrap Exchange aims to be inclusive to all, which is important when considering the gentrification that is happening in many other areas within the city of Durham<sup>13</sup>. On my Sunday weekly visits to observe the Scrap Exchange, I saw a wide range of people visiting. There were black, latino/a, and white families most of the time. The ages of people at the Scrap ranged from anywhere between 5 years old and 85 years old. Being in the Lakewood area in Durham, the Scrap Exchange is in a very interesting place geographically because it marks the intersection of many communities in Durham.

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://scrapexchange.org/about/history/>

<sup>13</sup> Conversations of gentrification podcast: <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/your-money/ask-money/conversation-gentrification>

It will certainly be interesting to see what community development comes in the next years to the Lakewood Shopping Center which is where the Scrap Exchange rests.

The Scrap Exchange is currently in its fourth and, hopefully, final destination. There is permanent staff as well as volunteer staff to help the nonprofit run smoothly. The Scrap's



business model consists of “specializing in [collecting] industrial discards” of around 250 businesses in five counties throughout central North Carolina per year (Woodward). What’s more is that the Scrap brings in 70 tons of “scraps” a year to be re-circulated within the community through their resale store.

“It’s really about keeping things in circulation and the more that you keep out of the landfill and the more that you keep out of the transfer station, the more it gets circulated in the community. So, we’re a part of a system of waste prevention in reuse.” -  
-Ann May Woodward, Scrap Exchange Executive Director

The interview went very well and I got even more information involving community events going on at the Scrap Exchange geared toward people of all ages and backgrounds. Then, I explored around for myself a bit and ended up finding lots of small treasures: some funky fabric scraps from the 75 cent bin, some bottle caps from a giant barrel, a set of four shot glasses with old gangster rap sheets on them (i.e. Al Capone), and a button to fix a pair of pants. Woodward said it right when she told me that the

Scrap Exchange is “a land of distraction”—especially, I would add, for the bricoleur and any crafter.<sup>14</sup>

### **Scrap Exchange as Community Hub**

The Scrap Exchange’s focus on the environment as well as the community is notable compared to other secondhand venues I have observed. And it successfully bridges these topics together with different outreach programs for the entire community to participate. In addition to being a resale venue, the Scrap Exchange hosts events, programs, classes, and studio space throughout the year in order to further involve the community. Many of these events are held in the Design Center or the Make & Take Center studio spaces`. These are areas inside the Scrap Exchange that act as creative spaces. The Make & Take Center is geared towards a younger crowd to find “stuff” in the store and use tools in the Make & Take area to recreate new art. The Design Center is filled with machinery such as sewing machines, irons, sergers, tee shirt presses, and more in order to design clothing, garments, fabric, etc. and this arena hosts many of the group classes offered at the Scrap. Both of these centers are accessible to the public most of the time for a \$5 fee for 1.5 hours. Other notable areas within the Scrap Exchange are the art gallery which hosts local community art, the welding area which will be up and running later in 2015, and there are even plans being made for a community garden to be planted in the current parking lot.

*Events:*

---

<sup>14</sup> The facts in this section come from my interview with Ann May Woodward, director of the Scrap Exchange or from the Scrap Exchange’s website on the page recounting their history as an organization.



Some of the events in the past year at the Scrap Exchange include their Grand Reopening celebration in November of 2014 on their new property which included a zero waste food truck rodeo and a marching band and Smashfest which is held on Black Friday every year after Thanksgiving as a counterpoint to the mass consumerism going on in retail places nationwide<sup>15</sup>. The event features old pottery is smashed against walls in a fun and cathartic manner by people of all ages. Other events hosted by the Scrap Exchange are kids' birthday parties held in the Make & Take Center and what the Scrap Exchange calls Events by the Truckload where staff members drive truckloads of Scrap Exchange treasures to schools or businesses to promote creative reuse permeating throughout the community.

Perhaps the most meaningful event sponsored by the Scrap to this particular project, however, is their annual community clothing swap entitled Swap-o-Rama-Rama. This year, the event was held on January 31, 2015 and over 100 people showed up to participate in a large clothing swap. The details of the event included a suggested \$10 donation per person<sup>16</sup> and unlimited access to the clothes brought in by other members of the community. The premise of any clothing swap is that whoever is participating brings in their used clothes that they would otherwise donate to one physical space and then the participants search, browse, and sift through the piles of clothing brought in and take new-to-them, albeit used, clothing and garment items home with them. Thus, everyone involved swaps their clothing with each other. At the Swap-o-Rama-Rama, there are several volunteers that sort clothing based on gender and type of clothing (i.e. jackets are separated from pants are separated from dresses, etc.) and then bring the organized

---

<sup>15</sup> <http://scrapexchange.org/calendar/2014-11-28/>

<sup>16</sup> No one was turned away if they could not or did not pay the suggested \$10 donation for the event.

clothes into a more accessible space for participants and set them in their designated piles.

There was a silkscreening press available to screenprint newfound used treasures. There were also workshops to demonstrate how to turn tee shirts into tee shirt yarn and repurpose them into accessories as well as do-it-yourself/make-it-yourself laundry detergent that was made with eco-friendly ingredients. The activities involved in the annual Swap can all be brought back to reclaiming agency, new knowledge, and a sense of autonomy through the medium of used clothing.

Near the end of the event, any volunteers and participants were invited to waltz around the entire warehouse in a “fashion trashion” show manner to show off the new used garment treasures that individuals found. There was an eclectic group with eccentric styles marching around to the beat of a water canister refashioned into a drum of sorts alerting other customers in the resale store of the Swap-o-Rama-Rama shenanigans taking place in the design center. There was a buzz of excitement going around the event the entire afternoon much in alignment with Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence (Durkheim, 208). This shared experience with bursts of high energy brought the Scrap Exchange community together with a sense of collective belonging surrounded by others and their used clothing.

The Swap-o-Rama-Rama was a great physical example of sourcing materials for refashioning secondhand goods. I walked away with many items that didn’t fit my body quite right, but with a bit of refashioning, I can work a loose blouse into a well-fitting masterpiece and keep that piece of clothing in circulation in the community while simultaneously exercising my own bricolage capabilities and creativity.

*Classes:*

The Scrap also offers a variety of group classes for reskilling the community in craft-based skills such as knitting and candle making. These classes cost monetary fees but are discounted for members<sup>17</sup> of the Scrap Exchange and students. The Scrap Exchange sees value in reskilling the community in these ways because it builds a sense of agency as well as a better holistically skilled community. There are even specific craft classes geared towards children as well as a ‘Very Special Arts’ series geared to impaired and differently-abled adults. The wide variety of classes taught through the Scrap Exchange includes a knitting class, a candle making class, a worm bin class focused around how to compost, crafting for a campfire class, a tee shirt yarn class, and a basics of sewing class<sup>18</sup>.

The ‘Basics of Sewing’ class series is taught multiple times per year by volunteer and refashioner, Christine Ramsey. This particular course utilizes the resources in the design center of the Scrap Exchange and is open to around 8-9 participants. During the course, Christine gives an overview of the parts of a sewing machine and what all of the tools, commonly called notions, used in sewing are and how to use them. It’s a three hour course with an optional hour of sewing at the end. The participants leave the course knowing how to sew either a pillow case or a handbag with their newfound sewing skills. The goal of the classes offered at the Scrap Exchange is to draw in more community members with the focus of reskilling people of different ages and backgrounds. These

---

<sup>17</sup> The Scrap Exchange membership is called the Friends Club and there are different levels of membership including a Friends Membership for \$40/year, a Discount membership (for students, clergy, seniors, teachers, military, and people living more than 50 miles away) for \$30/year, an Academic Amigos Membership for a group of 10 teachers for \$100/year, and a Lifetime Membership for \$1000. Member benefits include 20% off all store purchases, 30% off on the last Sunday of every month, 50% off on storewide sale days, and a 10% off discount on creative classes and parties.

<sup>18</sup> There is a Basics of Sewing class for children and a separate one for adults.

classes further the claim about the Scrap Exchange as more than a store but also as a community meeting place.

### *Programs*

The Scrap Exchange also hosts a monthly free community sewing meetup called ‘Second Sunday Sewing’ and it is supervised by Christine Ramsey. The second Sunday of every month, the community is invited to partake in this free program to use the sewing machines and anything in the design center to create, make, refashion, upcycle, etc. This program is where I conducted most of my own fieldwork. I wanted to get a genuine grasp on sewing so that I could become a refashionista of my own and this program made my method of participant observation possible for this project.

At the first Second Sunday Sewing program I attended at the Scrap Exchange, I overheard a woman mentioning how she was refashioning a pair of pants into a skirt and that she got this garment from a thrift store. This was my first time seeing and hearing the act and deliberate process of refashioning secondhand goods in action. Additionally, this woman feeling comfortable enough in this space of the design center to proclaim her refashioning actions shows how the Scrap is an effective community hub and space for more subversive activities. These programs are creating a space for new knowledge and dialogue to be shared and for communities of practice to be built upon. Usually, refashioning is done in one’s home by oneself, but the Scrap Exchange is a physical place providing an outlet for activities such as refashioning secondhand clothing.

Executive Director Ann May Woodward summed up the events and programs offered by the Scrap Exchange well when she noted, “We’re perpetuating self-reliance.

We're trained to be the ultimate consumers, but we're going against the grain" (Sorg, 2014). As I have argued here, the Scrap Exchange is not just a resale store. It is a physical space in the Durham, NC community that is actively participating in a paradigm shift in our society to show the importance of reuse. The diverse array of events, programs, and even classes hosted by the Scrap Exchange helps to relay the concept of holism within the sustainability paradigm. Environment, community, and creativity are all very different pillars that the Scrap Exchange stands for but they all intersect and overlap with each other in this physical space.

The Scrap Exchange marks a place where a paradigm shift is in action. Refashioning is just one of the activities happening in this place, and refashioning is not mutually exclusive to this place, but the Scrap Exchange in particular along with other reuse centers are important as physical spaces and places because they offer an outlet for these paradigm shifts to occur. For the purposes of this project, the Scrap Exchange acts as a prime example of a place to sustainably source used fabric, garments, and other goods in order to refashion them into something else. But, this place clearly stands for and symbolizes much more.

## Chapter Two: The Practice

---

“The three “thank you’s” of sewing and refashioning—the Earth thanks you, the people of the Earth thank you, and finally, thank yourself because sewing is very good for you.”

-Christine Ramsey  
*Refashioner*

---

In the previous chapter, we’ve seen a glimpse into the places involved in sourcing materials for refashioning garments. In this chapter, I detail the mental, physical, and virtual practices that refashioning entails. Beginning with motives behind the practice of refashioning, I set up the mental processes involved, including creativity and bricolage—namely building something new with the used materials at hand already in existence. The act of refashioning secondhand garments and clothing is generally an individual one throughout the process stage and subsequently fans out to reach to a broader community. Yet, since every individual’s process of refashioning varies, it is necessary to showcase a few of the refashioners that I had the opportunity to interview throughout the chapter. I interviewed these individuals through Skype communication software or in person and had the opportunity to talk to people as close to me locally in Chapel Hill and as far as Copenhagen and Berlin (yet another aspect of the connectivity of refashioning and how the internet plays an important role in this system). I convey the process of not only refashioning secondhand clothing, but also the process of blogging about refashioning in order to connect with online DIY communities on a national and international level. I also provide my own observations regarding the shortcomings of this practice in terms of limitations of accessibility and opportunity to certain groups and populations. As nothing

in this world is perfect, I acknowledge these attributes of refashioning while alternately pointing out the many benefits this practice reveals as well.

## **Motives**

The practitioners themselves are driving the practice of refashioning and thus the intended focus throughout this project because refashioning is not only a sustainable physical practice but also it is the sustainable mindsets that are driving the practice. There is a necessary balance with the “thinking” and “doing” of lifestyle shifts and so it is necessary to highlight all that goes into the practice of refashioning secondhand clothing. Common motives stem from financial, ecological, skill-based, and therapeutic benefits. Here, I offer three character sketches to reveal the particular motives behind these women participating in refashioning.

Sheri\*, one refashionista I spoke with through Skype, noted that she began learning about the evils of fast fashion (high human cost, ecological degradation, and excessive consumerism) and has committed to only buying used clothing from secondhand stores and scoffs at the H&M on her street as she walks past to get to her favorite charity shop in Berlin. Four years ago, she vowed never to shop at retail outlets again. So, she began getting her clothing at charity shops and through other secondhand means. After this conscious decision to oppose fast fashion, she reskilled herself using a sewing machine and then began to refashion and document her creations into a Wordpress blog after her initial mental paradigm shift.

Beth\*<sup>19</sup>, the Renegade Seamstress<sup>20</sup>, a refashionista with a very popular blog, recently told me that her motives started out as financially based and they've grown to encompass ecological motives in addition to financial reasons. Thrift stores generally sell clothing at a much lower cost to the individual consumer than compared to mainstream retail outlets. But, many brands and retail stores can now compete with thrift store prices while selling brand new clothes. While this seems like a winning scenario for many consumers, Beth also recognizes the dangers of this process as fast fashion and sees refashioning as a beneficial practice because it actively combats the fast fashion movement by not depending on this industry to clothe herself. She also mentions the benefits of being able to fit clothes to her body rather than fitting her body to the clothes. This mental shift is important for one's self-image and creates a sense of agency in the individual.

Christine Ramsey\*, a refashioner of used textiles into "Tool Aprons", has a deep appreciation of crafting and creativity through sewing. She grew up learning to sew from school and influential women in her life. She craves the craft in the sense that sewing calms her in a therapeutic sense. At the same time, she attributes sustainability of materials and reducing her impact of high human costs to her motives of refashioning.

For all of these women and others that I talked to, refashioning is fun, pure and simple. They love one or all aspects of refashioning, whether it's finding a retro textile sample, exercising their bricoleur brains, or creating a masterpiece with their sewing machine. For refashioners, that the practice is fun is a huge motivator. Refashioning

---

<sup>19</sup> Every name marked with an asterisk indicates an individual I interviewed for this research and will be cited as an interview at the end of this thesis.

<sup>20</sup> The Renegade Seamstress is the name of Beth Huntington's refashion blog. She takes on this persona within the refashioning community.



doesn't feel like work even though they are participating in labor and this is central motive to the refashioning process.

Many of these women like to buy clothes and enjoy creating their own style through concepts of fashion, but many recognize the problems within the fashion and apparel industry that are spelled out to a greater extent in the introduction and they are therefore, driven away from participating in mainstream retail consumerism. One solution to fast fashion is recycling clothes through the community in thrift stores, charity shops, reuse centers, etc. This must include participation on all ends to work, or “close the loop” of sustainable recycling of goods—donors and consumers of thrift stores/charity shops, etc.

However, there are drawbacks to thrift shopping in the eyes of many. Many people today often opt out of thrift shopping because of a lack of quality control of the materials. There is no guarantee that everything you find in a thrift shop or clothing swap that appeals to you will be in your size or desired style, but if you look through the eyes of a refashioner, this obstacle does not matter. They have developed skills to see the potential of an outdated muumuu, for example, and upcycle or rework this used garment to fit their body and their style.

## **Muses**

For these women partaking in this practice of refashioning marks a crucial way in which they engage with a creative process. Along with their motives for refashioning, there are also the muses that inspire their creations. Often times, the women I interviewed described to me that their inspiration came from outfits they saw previously in fashion

magazines, sewing patterns, and online. There are a great many fashion, refashion and DIY blogs and websites where inspiration can be drawn from.

Pinterest<sup>21</sup> is one such website that most women I interviewed thought it notable to mention. Pinterest is a customizable DIY haven that allows the individual user to build her own profile to tailor to her own interests. There are boards that you can categorize to pin anything you find interesting on the internet and you can also scroll through other boards. So, it acts as a hub for many crafters or even those just looking at interesting projects with no intention of making them. There is a specific board on Pinterest devoted to refashioning garments that acts as an inspiration for many refashioners and leads refashioners to other refashioning blogs or online resources.

Other muses consist of other refashion blogs or other websites containing fashion ideas. It has become part of the practice of refashioning to scroll through websites until their brain is inundated with refashioning possibilities. These women learn from each other, from websites, from books. Sometimes, inspiration comes from within the individual. Yet, whenever the muse strikes, it is an exciting feeling because the refashioner is ready to begin the physical practice of refashioning.

### **The Physical Practice**

The individual refashioning practice, as with individual muses, can differ greatly from refashioner to refashioner. Refashioning is often a dynamic process and many different practices are known to constitute this process. So, one refashioner can experience a myriad of different practices throughout her greater process of refashioning. Although the process is dynamic and can differ greatly between individuals, there are a

---

<sup>21</sup> [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

few fundamentals that every refashioners experiences and they are spelled out in the following section.

*Sourcing:*

The first action to take in the physical practice of refashioning is sourcing and accumulating the secondhand/used materials to work with. There are many ways to do this as we have glimpsed at a bouquet of different places that house these used goods in the previous chapter. The most common places to source materials are thrift stores, charity shops, clothing swaps, reuse centers, and simply asking neighbors, friends, or community members for “old” clothes. There are, of course, more outlandish ways of going about getting used garments such as scouring landfills for goods—a scavenger hunt of sorts.

However, there are also social stigmas attached to the idea of reusing clothing in any capacity. Many people in my mother’s generation<sup>22</sup> and older regard thrift shops as places where people of lower socioeconomic status acquire clothing and therefore, thrift/charity shops and secondhand goods have become equated with a certain status (this becomes clear just in the names given to these places i.e. thrift and charity). Since our society gravitates around the economy and economic status has become a dominant way of judging someone, shopping at thrift stores for clothing has become an indicator of low economic status. This is problematic in that the economic wealth of a person should not be an ultimate indicator of character, but this often becomes the way to judge people in a cultures focused around ideals of conspicuous consumption and growth.

---

<sup>22</sup> I have talked with my mother on this subject. She has had personal experience in her life of shopping for used and secondhand clothing out of financial necessity.

However, as more and more people are realizing the potential of sustainability in recycling and reuse, secondhand goods are slowly seeping into more “trendy” circles. Less textile waste ends up in landfills and there is a certain virtue found in vintage clothing. So, wearing used secondhand clothing is becoming socially acceptable when the “trendy” styles are adhered to.

Thrift stores and reuse centers have become a sort of bricoleur’s paradise for these women. Finding a dress, regardless of the size, length, or even style with the right texture or pattern can equate to a thrilling trip to source some great material for a project that is stewing in a refashioner’s brain. Beth Huntington describes an important tip for thrift shopping that especially utilizes bricolage, “When you train your eye, thrift store shopping can become an adventurous treasure hunt” (Huntington, 13). Refashioners will often constantly be on the lookout for a secondhand dress to refashion, even if they buy it one day and don’t utilize it in a refashioning project for months afterward. In this way, refashioning is a mindset that is always encompassing the way through which these women practice their everyday life<sup>23</sup> as a bricoleur.

As far as preparing for a specific project, refashionistas approach their craft in multiple ways. There could be an instance when she is scrolling through Pinterest or a magazine and simply sees an ensemble she admires and begins thinking with her DIY gears turning of ways to recreate something for her and therefore have a fairly clear idea of a project in her mind before she starts. Alternatively, she could be wandering the aisles of her favorite local Goodwill in town and see a corduroy skirt that is too large for her

---

<sup>23</sup> In *The practice of everyday life* introduction, anthropologist Michel de Certeau and his ideas of subversion are extremely applicable in the context of refashioners using concepts of bricolage to reimagine secondhand clothing in a thrift store. He speaks especially of the idea of recreating or reappropriating something to subtly challenge the dominating system or in other words, “to escape it without leaving it”.

frame but could be upcycled into funky vest. However these creative urges begin, the first physical step is to procure your material.

*In the workspace:*

Then, a refashionista introduces her material into her workspace, continuing to brainstorm the limitless possibilities this fabric can take on the second time around! Refashioning requires some amount of space to create within. Some refashionistas have their own studio often equipped with a rack or a box of textiles, garments, or fabrics that are on the ready to be refashioned. Most refashionistas require their sewing machine for many projects (Huntington, 18). The brand and quality of the machine does not matter much as long as you have a basic sewing machine. It can be a brand new Singer or a 50 year old Pfaff, but as long as it sews a stitch, a refashioner is in business.

Along with a sewing machine comes an entire slew of other necessary materials, most of them small in size. Any good seamstress will tell you that you ought to have a good pair of sewing scissors—just for sewing projects and nothing else. You need a seam ripper, measuring tape, and marking chalk. You need decent thread (the European thread is the best according to refashioner, Christine Ramsey<sup>24\*</sup>), you need extra sewing machine needles, many pins and some method of keeping them all together, and an iron for pressing in between each step. Optional items are a rotary cutter, a cutting mat, and a dress form (Huntington, 17-8).

Although most refashionistas have access to a sewing machine and it is a crucial element for many refashioning projects, there are a plethora of “no sew” refashioning projects that can be found as tutorials online for refashionistas at all levels. These projects

---

<sup>24</sup> Christine Ramsey is in charge of teaching the Basics of Sewing course offered at the Scrap Exchange and also is the supervisor over the “Second-Sunday Sewing” community meet up every month at the Scrap Exchange. She states that European thread is made with better quality and has less snag and

often involve using scissors to cut new designs in used clothing and garments or different materials used to dye or bleach the used clothing. As for creating a blog post dedicated to the project, a refashionista needs a camera and access to a computer. Most importantly, with most handiwork or craft endeavor, a great deal of patience is necessary, but this is not a material good.

*Utilization of skills:*

Once all the materials have been procured, a refashionista begins transforming the garment or fabric into something different. Again, this specific process can be very broad materially because there are many possibilities for transformation taking into account different fabrics and tools used and what the refashioner is looking to create. There is often dyeing and cutting of fabric, pinning, sewing, pressing, hemming, and the constant attention to the sewing machine. For instance, a refashioner often must re-thread the bobbin during the process because the bobbin is simply too small for a large project and it's not the same size as the top thread.<sup>25</sup> Essentially, there is a lot to a refashioning project that will seem effortless if done well. Lots of time and practice are both needed in order to sharpen a refashionista's skills.

*Simultaneous Blogging:*

Multiple practices make up what I am calling the refashioning process. Often, different activities are practiced simultaneously, so this process takes a great deal of focus. For the purpose of creating a refashion blog, a refashionista must be able to document her process of refashioning. So, every step of the way, she must take pictures

---

<sup>25</sup> For clearer examples of the diversity of products created by refashionistas, see the appendix at the end of the thesis. There, I have included brief case studies of the refashionistas I interviewed along with a sample of their individual craft and style. Additionally, I have included a sample refashion blog post that I created myself.

of the process i.e. cutting fabric, sewing fabric, pressing fabric, dyeing fabric, and before & after pictures of the garments and/or accessories. There is a basic structure to a refashion blog post. The structure is composed of a series of pictures beginning with a “before picture” of the garment before it has been refashioned by the refashioner. Normally, every necessary step of the project is shown in photograph format with an accompanying caption describing each step explicitly so that readers online can get a greater understanding without being in the room with the refashioner. Finally, at the end of a post, there is an after picture with the refashionista wearing the garment.

With all that in mind, the refashionista is great at executing multiple activities throughout the entire practice of refashioning, keeping her future blog post on the backburners in her head. After the pictures are taken of the process, the refashionista uploads the pictures to her blog and composes the step by step instructions for the readers. This process happens for every refashion and every post. Blogs take quite a great deal of effort to upkeep and manage to say the least.

## **Time**

The amount of time and effort this process takes for those involving themselves in the process and practices is extensive at the very least. Even if an individual is a quick and talented seamstress, the overlapping process of documenting the practice through the medium of a refashion blog adds a great deal of time to the endeavor. The Renegade Seamstress\* relayed to me that she spends around 10 hours every week refashioning and writing a complimentary blog post. She does this on top of a full-time job as a kindergarten teacher. She loves the entire process, so this makes her more willing to

devote 10 hours per week to refashioning, but that is still an ample amount of time to spend on a leisure activity.

Sheri\* from Berlin gave me an excellent comparative perspective to think about regarding her refashion blog. She estimates she spends at least 5 hours from start to finish making a post versus the three minutes or less it takes for her viewers to scroll through her post. She claims that many of these people have no idea how much time has been put into making that post and admits this is frustrating for her. Yet, despite the amount of time and effort the practice takes, she is still dedicated to refashioning and sharing her experience through her blog.

### **Opportunity and Privilege**

As most things we encounter, the process of refashioning itself falls short of ideal when looked at with the critical gaze of opportunity and privilege. Refashioning would be an ideal practice if, right now, everyone had access, opportunity, and time to take on this endeavor. However, there are things certain conditions that impact the access and opportunity of refashioning. Primarily, not everyone has access to the physical machinery to refashion secondhand clothing. Sure, there are lots of ways to upcycle clothing on a tight budget without many other materials aside from scissors or vegetable-skin dyes. But, more often than not, refashioning requires some type of machinery. Electric sewing machines are most commonly used in the practices I have seen, meaning that one must have access to the machinery as well as access to electricity, which not everyone has on an individual level across a larger spectrum. Places like the Scrap Exchange are useful in this sense because of the community-based access to the design center and in particular,



free community events with access to sewing machines and the important resource of a teacher of the skill of sewing. One relatively positive note is that most of the materials used for refashioning are highly reduced in price compared to retail clothing since they are secondhand goods. So, this allows for a greater number of people to have access to the garment and textile materials needed to refashion them.

Yet, another downside to the practice of refashioning and blogging about the practice takes a considerable amount of time, which many people don't have unlimited sources of this resource. Many people of a certain socio-economic level or status who are affected greatly by the current systems in place with jobs that often don't pay a sufficient living wage face many limited resources including time. Many people (especially those who are shopping at secondhand stores due to financial necessity) cannot afford to spend 10 hours a week refashioning clothing because they do not make a fair living wage and therefore must devote more time to other money-making endeavors in order to support themselves and/or their families. People facing this scenario do not have time to devote to refashioning secondhand textiles and so the draw of "fast fashion" lures people in to unbeatable sale prices of brand new dresses and pants for \$2.

Ultimately, the groups and populations that mainly participate in the practice of refashioning and writing refashion blogs are middle-class, white women in affluent societal contexts. This is not always the case, but this seems to be the demographic I have observed practicing the refashioning of secondhand clothing. Everyone I interviewed running a refashion blog fit this demographic. Additionally, I have only encountered a handful of refashion blogs that are written by women of color. Of course, there is a possibility that my findings and knowledge of the refashioning blogging community is

distorted in terms of class and race, but this is most likely not a coincidence. Issues of class and race inequality permeate throughout American society and these issues lead me to believe that the main demographic of the refashioning community is not coincidental at all.

Gender roles and stereotypes present another realistic issue within the practice of refashioning. The refashioning community is overwhelmingly comprised of women. All of the people I interviewed who partake in the practices of refashioning secondhand goods identify as women. Traditionally in American society, women were taught the skill of sewing. Socially, we are often confined by certain gender roles and stereotypes. So, as much as I recognize that gender is a social construct, gender roles and norms are still very pervasive and powerful within society and can have effects psychologically on an individual. Many men may feel discouraged from refashioning clothing because it involves practices and skills commonly practiced by women. Even today, through my own experiences, I have observed that those who know how to hand stitch or operate a sewing machine are overwhelmingly women.

From these issues stems the realization that if you don't have access to certain physical materials as well as to the mental skills, refashioning is not a feasible practice. Most women I have talked to and most of the blogs I've looked at reflect a sense that to be a refashioner of secondhand goods, you must have a certain income level, skill level, and a good deal of time to devote to refashioning and running a blog. This takes a great deal of privilege, which is important to note because as an activity that lends itself to the Do-It-Yourself community, there are double standards coming into play. The topic of refashioning secondhand goods needs more research and exploration within its

shortcomings. What I suppose will be noted is that the feasibility of this practice faces issues based on unequal access to material and skill-based resources.

### **The Benefits of Refashioning for the Individual**

There are a myriad of benefits that stem from the practice of refashioning, namely body and self-image, individual agency, skill cultivation, and community building.

According to Beth Huntington\*<sup>26</sup>, refashioning has a positive effect on her views of body and self-image. With a vicious media culture that controls mainstream standards of beauty and an apparel industry that designs clothes based on these indoctrinated standards, many women have a lower view of themselves. If you don't fit into a certain mold or dress size, then there is something wrong with your body. This is the mentality I certainly grew up with from all sides of the media. Refashioning, particularly for Beth Huntington\* has given her a new perspective of her body because she can now inhabit the mentality that this practice is allowing her to fit clothes to her own body and not feel insufficient if she can't fit into a certain dress marked with a number that is standardized by an industry. Refashioning truly helps the individual see the beauty of their body and to acknowledge that bodies are shaped differently and there is nothing wrong with this.

Refashioning also is a beneficial practice in the sense it gives the individual participant a sense of agency. Refashioning transforms the role of the consumer into a producer and a creator. Through the practice, an individual controls what they are wearing by reframing these garments to their body and also equipping their bodies with skill sets that are not necessary for an average consumer that depends on just the apparel industry to clothe themselves. Thus, refashioners become agents with ability.

---

<sup>26</sup> The Renegade Seamstress

Skill acquisition has been an implicit undertone throughout this chapter because it is a very quantifiable benefit of refashioning. When one “learns” to refashion secondhand clothing, they are learning a wide array of skills. The obvious skill acquired is sewing with a sewing machine. This is helpful to actually make and alter your own clothes. Many people today do not know how to use a sewing machine or to simply sew a button on a pair of pants. Sewing skills are not taught in most schools as opposed to one generation ago when “home economics” was a required course for most middle and high school females. Aside from obvious problems of instilling gender roles with classes like home economics for girls and woodshop for boys, skills like sewing are vital in a life that is not dependent on the mainstream apparel industry. Blogging is a newer skill that takes a certain knowledge of computers. This is a valuable skill today as DIY movements continue to grow with the help of the internet.

Finally, a great benefit to sharing the practice of refashioning with others is the aspect of community building. DIY communities thrive on the internet because everyone generally has an equal voice. This community building gives individual refashioners hope that what they’re practicing is creating a movement, no matter how big or small. These communities of thought and practice help the individual better visualize the collective.

---

Ultimately, refashioning secondhand clothing is not just a process or an act, but it is a mindset, a lifestyle, a way of being. It’s one that goes (& sews) against the grain of clothing oneself in mainstream society. Refashioning exemplifies many of the “re-” principles that are necessary for a sustainable transition to occur in our lives-- reuse, reduce, recycle, reimagine, re-do, revamp, repurpose, rethink, etc. etc. It is an activity that

brings agency to the individual that allows them to reinvent their role in the cycle of apparel. They transform themselves into more than just a consumer. Rather, they also take on roles of producer, inventor, innovator, crafter, and even bricoleur. Additionally, the process of blogging adds another layer of skill and time commitment. There are skills cultivated such as writing to a greater public as well as graphic design. For some refashioners, a skill of photography is sharpened. These practices are truly influencing the ontology of the individual in the sense of cultivating a wide set of skills and practices.

Although the refashioning practice itself is exhibited through individual practice, there is certainly a connection to others and a sense of community created once these women post their blogs to the internet. A large part of refashioning is this act of sharing with someone their process and subsequent creation. These individual blogs are the medium to document one's process of refashioning. But this desire to share and the help of the internet leads us into the next chapter about community building.

## Chapter 3: The Community

---

“[Refashioning] is a really neat way to bring the whole world together.”

*-Beth Huntington  
Refashioner*

---

### Introduction

Although the practice of refashioning is largely an individual one from the sourcing to the sewing aspects, there is also a collective component to the entire refashioning process that makes it what it is. The role of community in the refashioning process reiterates the constant theme of the sustainability movement presented throughout this thesis because of the presence of community building within many sustainable movements.

In particular, the communities built through refashioning worlds are communities of thought and communities of practice. Communities of practice refer to communities that convene and build together based on a similar practice or action, namely refashioning for this particular project. These communities are built in varied spheres both throughout the digital world of the internet and the physical world of place-based locations<sup>27</sup>. Throughout the following chapter, I explore the multiple networks and communities that the practice of refashioning creates in order to explicate why this sense of community is vital to the subversive and sustainable practice of refashioning as a whole.

In order to describe these various forms of community within the world of refashioning, I've drawn on methods such as interviewing, online research, and

---

<sup>27</sup> As a general note, the purpose of this project is not to raise the legitimacy of one form of community building over another, but rather to highlight some of the many different forms taking place now.

participant observation. I was able to draw on a couple of the same interviews for this section that I also used in the previous chapter. These interviews are thorough accounts with refashionistas as well as with directors at the Scrap Exchange and Redress Raleigh. The online research was a useful method in this chapter because of the focus on virtual community building. I simultaneously completed online research and participated in online sewing and refashioning communities of practice with the Sewing Party and the Refashion Co-op. These are simple and common methodologies but they are certainly effective within this chapter on the community aspect of refashioning.

### **Refashion Blogs**

The last chapter focused on the individual blogging process that refashionistas go through to make a blog post. Yet, to build a community through a refashion blog, there are many facets other than one refashionista typing and posting a blog post onto her individual refashion blog. An important facet of any community is the concept and practice of building a network where multiple people can collaborate towards the particular goals of the community. For a blogger to create a community, even a small network, she must have followers and/or subscribers to her blog. Gaining followers can be difficult for some bloggers, but certain pockets of the internet are teeming with craft and DIY culture, including refashioning, where many communities of followers have been built.

A number of refashionistas have created their own network on an individual blogger level. The Renegade Seamstress—mentioned in the previous chapter—has a

personal refashion blog<sup>28</sup> but has many links to other refashionista blogs on the sidebar of her own blog. When I interviewed her, she mentioned having many friends and acquaintances through her blog that she hasn't met other than on the internet. She said she communicates with online friends "mostly just through comments and writing back and forth, but it's really a neat way to bring the whole world together because I know people now in England, Australia, and Finland. It's just so neat." Some of the people she has met are other refashionistas that she has gained inspiration from and vice versa. Additionally, Beth has gained some 10,000 followers of her blog. That said, not everyone who follows a refashion blog is a refashioner of secondhand clothing, but they are certainly showing an interest in the practice and are valuable members of this online DIY community.

### **The Refashion Co-op<sup>29</sup>**

Refashioning communities online are also taking the form of collective blogs with input from many refashioners versus refashioning blogs run by individuals. The Refashion Co-op is a great example of an online refashioning collective. The Refashion Co-op was started by one of the refashioner's I had the pleasure of interviewing, Henriette Roued Cunliffe. She resides in Copenhagen, Denmark as a researcher of DIY culture and has a personal refashion blog as well<sup>30</sup>. Yet, she saw the need to build a collective for the world of refashioning after the beloved collective refashion blog, "Wardrobe Surgeon" shut down and thus, the Refashion Co-op was started with the help

---

<sup>28</sup> <https://chicvelopements.wordpress.com/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://refashionco-op.blogspot.com/>

<sup>30</sup> Henriette's personal blog can be found at <http://www.roued.com/>.



of a few refashioners that were willing to be in the core group of editors on February 14, 2011.

The setup of this blog has a base of ten editors/mediators that are assigned different weekdays to mediate the blog. The blog is comprised of up to 100 contributors at any one time including the core group of ten editors. The guidelines for the blog require contributors to post a refashion blog at least once per month. If someone desires to be a contributor, they must contact the core group of editors to see if there is enough space on the blog setup i.e. if there are less than 100 people participating at that time. The setup of editors for the Refashion Co-op is very democratic in that no one person has power over all the blog posts and/or the editors. All of the decisions are made collectively between the core group of editors.

From the perspective of the followers and viewers of the blog, the Refashion Co-op showcases a slew of different posts made by different people all focused around refashioning or upcycling clothing and garments. One can scroll through the different posts of refashions and is able to click and choose a specific post by a specific refashioner. In this way, the Refashion Co-op acts as a visual refashioning forum.

The Refashion Co-op has had the concept of community building in mind since its founding. The ultimate and far-reaching aims of the Refashion Co-op are as follows,

“This is a collaborative blog, a space for contributors worldwide to showcase their finished projects and share techniques. We also envision it as a place to gain inspiration and further the dialogue around sustainable fashion, consumerism, personal style, and frugal fashion. Most importantly, we hope

this will be a space to connect with like-minded folks by fostering a sense of community among contributors and readers alike.”<sup>31</sup>

Taken from the “About” page of the blog, this quote signifies a much broader meaning to the individual practice of refashioning used garments and clothing with a clear focus on community and collectives.

The Refashion Co-op is unique in that it is an online community and uses this asset as an advantage and opportunity to deteriorate international borders of the DIY refashioning communities on a global scale. This is a collective made up of women from across the world who want to build deeper communities with their shared love and attention to refashioning clothing. These women are not necessarily professionals of refashioning, blogging, or photography, and thus is a very open community to refashioners of all levels. I think of the Refashion Co-op as a specialized cyber-based group that focuses on the collaborative aspect of refashioning where the sharing of ideas as well as magnificent creations is highly encouraged.

### **The Sewing Party<sup>32</sup>**

In a similar digital vein, the Sewing Party is an online event with the intention of bringing sewing communities together over the internet. The sewing party was held on November 15, 2014 for the first time. The event ticket cost \$40 and included numerous resources for seamstresses at all skill levels. There were many companies sponsoring the

---

<sup>31</sup> This is quoted from the “About” section of the Refashion Co-op blog found here: <http://refashionco-op.blogspot.com/p/about.html>.

<sup>32</sup> <http://events.thesewingparty.com/event/index.php/index.html>

event that all support the craft and skill of sewing including Singer, Jo-Ann, and Etsy<sup>33</sup>. The setup of the event mimicked that of a conference of sorts—an online conference accessible to all the participants from their separate locations. There were many different “classes” and educators that pre-recorded a video of their lessons. Different educators were given different time slots on the day of the sewing party and viewers could choose which classes they wanted to virtually attend. As the classes were aired, viewers could chat with each other and the educator in real time with the chat feature included in each class. Many of the educators also included handouts of patterns or general notes to accompany their video seminar. While the official party was a several hour event on November 15, the ticketholders have the added ability to re-watch all of the videos of the classes and see transcripts of the realtime participation forums for up to three months following the event.

The content of the classes vary tremendously even though they all tie into sewing one way or another. For example, there were classes on quilting, sewing for cosplay<sup>34</sup>, creative influence, sewing pattern building, Etsy entrepreneurship, sewing zippers, refashioning, and more. Jillian Owens, who is the writer of the ‘Refashionista’ blog is very well-known within the refashioning community. She is one of the educators involved in the Sewing Party. She hosts a class explicitly on refashioning involved around her own refashioning process.

---

<sup>33</sup> Other sponsors of the Sewing Party include Pfaff, BurdaStyle, Husqvarna, Viking, Sew Steady, Arrow Sewing Cabinets, inspira Studio, Coats, pellon, The McCall Pattern Company, Simplicity creative group, 6D Embroidery System, TruEmbroidery, American & Elfrid, C&T Publishing, Ghee’s Sewing & Notions, Handi-Quilter, Sulky, Swarovski, and Threads.

<sup>34</sup> According to Oxford dictionaries online, cosplay is “the practice of dressing up as a character from a [movie](#), book, or [video game](#), especially one from the [Japanese genres](#) of [manga](#) and [anime](#).”

Although the content of the Sewing Party is not exclusively an event for refashioning secondhand clothing, many of the skills brought forth from this event are used by refashioners and other individuals to refashion secondhand clothing. Sewing on a machine is generally a practice used by many refashioners. Thus, the Sewing Party is a great resource and community built that refashioners can tap into for help and comradery.

Other than a fun and innovative online event for the sewing community, the Sewing Party is a virtual place of connection for the sewing community with resources to knowledge that cannot be found altogether anywhere else. The Sewing Party exemplifies a community of thought and practice where knowledge is spread to everyone involved. Ultimately, it serves as a virtual space that prizes community-wide reskilling, teaching, learning, creativity, and sewing.

### **Benefits of the Internet within Refashioning Communities**

One fantastic quality of building communities through the internet is the ability to break geographical barriers. Even as an example with my own research for this project, I have been able to personally interview refashionistas in Oregon, Texas, North Carolina, Berlin, and Copenhagen through Skype. And I have been able to explore many more refashion blogs based all over the world thanks to the digital technology the internet offers. Critiques of the internet point out how it speeds up globalization because of the ease of communication despite geographical barriers. Yet, according to refashioner Henriette Roued Cunliffe, in the online DIY community “the internet is just a medium for sharing.” She also states that “through DIY, we can really see how much of the internet is

about culture and not about technology<sup>35</sup>.” This input from the informant is an exquisite example of analysis of DIY culture. Anthropologically speaking, thinking about the internet as culture rather than just technology leads to thought provoking ideas. Sharing one’s craft through a medium such as the internet brings the potential of sharing culture to an entirely new level. The internet serves as a great stage for crafters, refashioners, and those interested in DIY projects.

### **Refashioning Books**

There are a number of books being published by refashion bloggers about their practices and experience with refashioning secondhand/used clothing and garments. Books are a great way to communicate further in depth to readers about skills and materials necessary for refashioning and to reach out into the refashioning community. They also offer a different kind of accessibility for readers that blogs are incapable of—there is no need for internet access if you have a book based on refashioning. These books differ from sewing and other craft “how-to” books because they feature a personal side focused on the specific refashionista who authored the book. These books are categorized in the craft category, yet refashioning books are emerging as a subgenre. The personal take and story involved within these books adds a layer of inspiration and humanity to the reader as if to say that “anyone can if I can” type of mentality.

Two refashion bloggers I have researched also have written books on their refashioning experiences. Beth Huntington, the author of the Renegade Seamstress refashion blog has just published “The Refashion Handbook: Refit, Redesign, Remake for Every Body” in 2014. Her book is especially useful for beginning refashioners

---

<sup>35</sup> Taken from an interview over Skype with Henriette Roued Cunliffe 12/10/2014.

because Beth focuses on thrift store material sourcing, creative inspiration, basics of sewing for refashioning, and necessary tools for refashioning. She then goes through examples of her own refashions that are reminiscent to her blog posts. Upon talking to Beth about her book, she mentioned that it is often in the ‘best sellers’ in the sewing book category on Amazon.com. Additionally, she said many [sewing] magazines are endorsing and advertising the book. Since her book on refashioning is making waves in the overall sewing community, this is big news for the refashioning world because the practice is getting more public notice at least within larger crafting and sewing communities.

Another book has been published by refashioner Marisa Lynch regarding her refashioning experience as well. Marisa Lynch is the author of the refashion blog “New Dress A Day”<sup>36</sup>. The premise of her blog was to refashion inexpensive thrift store dress finds into dresses that fit her body every day for one day a year because of financial necessity. She wrote a book also based on her blog, “New Dress a Day: The Ultimate DIY Guide to Creating Fashion Dos from Thrift-Store Don'ts” which was published in 2012. These books and others written by refashioners are yet another medium through which the global refashioning community is being built.

### **Community Building at the Scrap Exchange<sup>37</sup>**

The Scrap Exchange, focused on in the first chapter of this thesis, is a dynamic physical place that offers many community building events, programs, and activities for

---

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.newdressaday.com/>

<sup>37</sup> The Scrap Exchange also has an easily accessible website for the purpose of easing communication within the community: <http://scrapexchange.org/>.

many aspects of DIY culture including refashioning<sup>38</sup>. Although the Scrap Exchange is not specifically geared to refashioning, it is certainly one activity that is being pursued here on a community scale. The Swap-o-Rama-Rama is a large clothing swap that glorifies reusing clothing and recycling it through the community. The beauty of this annual event is that people are more tightly connected visually to the other people in the community that they are all swapping clothes with, so the event becomes more than just swapping used clothing. It also becomes an arena where commodities are not the most important thing within a consumer event because people are connecting to others face-to-face through the swapping of clothing.

My experience as an insider and volunteer participating in the event assisted me in seeing this first hand. I observed people coming in with bags of their old clothes and searching through piles of other used clothes all the while interacting with the other participants. Seeing people in person helped me to see the humanity of the event. Although I didn't necessarily see the exact person who donated a purple sweater I came across, I did get to see the community participating directly. Everyone at the Swap-O-Rama-Rama donated clothes and everyone there hunted around for "new-to-them" clothes through the piles and piles of donated clothing.

The Scrap Exchange offers another physical space for the community of refashioning to grow. The design center within the Scrap Exchange houses many sewing machines, sergers, an iron, and other tools necessary for refashioning. The Basics of Sewing class and the Second Sunday Sewing events described in greater detail in chapter one create an ideal setting for a physical refashioning community to convene. This

---

<sup>38</sup> Please refer to the first chapter to read more in depth about the Scrap Exchange. I mentioned it once again in this chapter to highlight the community aspect of the Scrap Exchange.

community of refashioning at the Scrap Exchange is not very large because the design center only has the ability to allow around 10-20 people designing at a time. Yet, the fact that this physical space exists and people are using it to refashion secondhand goods while forging bonds with one another is significant to the community building aspect of refashioning within a physical sphere.

In my time at the Scrap learning sewing and refashioning skills in the design center, I encountered several unspoken community building opportunities. Both the Basics of Sewing workshop as well as the Second Sunday Sewing events provide an environment of situated learning in which there was a main instructor, Christine Ramsey, and there were a great deal of the other eight people interacting with each other, learning together, in the specific context of sewing that helps to shape these groups as communities of practice. Christine often paints a broader picture, too of how by our choice to learn to sew, upcycle, and refashion as individuals actually ties us all in collectively with factory workers across the world who we might never meet face to face but we are lessening their burden in some sense. She also mentions how we are more interactive relationally with the ecological community because by our choice to sew used garments and fabrics, we are acknowledging the burden of our planet and choosing to be a part of the whole Earth community. These exchanges and examples of situated learning shape the idea of the relationships built through refashioning stem into communities of practice.

## **Redress Raleigh<sup>39</sup>**

---

<sup>39</sup> <http://redressraleigh.com/>



Redress Raleigh offers an alternative means to forging of refashioning communities. Redress Raleigh is a locally based company in Raleigh, North Carolina that provides a bridge from fashion industry designers using refashioning techniques to consumers looking for more ethically produced fashion. Redress Raleigh is not a place for resale and does not directly sell goods. Instead, this company plans and hosts events centered around the theme of sustainable fashion.

Despite the focus of the city of Raleigh in the name, Redress Raleigh is not only a city-wide based area for the growth of a refashioning community. They have connections all over the state of North Carolina and they hold an annual conference that attracts speakers and learners from across the United States. Last year, the eco-fashion author Sass Brown was a guest speaker at the conference held in Raleigh, NC. Sass Brown has most recently authored “Refashioned: Cutting-Edge Clothing From Upcycled Materials” (2013), which showcases refashioning from the designer’s perspective and how refashioning plays a role even from an industry perspective. The Redress Raleigh conference also hosts a “refashion” show that showcases many of the fashion designers that are local partners using ethical and sustainable methods of designing clothing, some of which involve refashioning. The refashion show is the largest event of the year for Redress Raleigh and offers a local scope into sustainable fashion for designers and consumers.

The company also hosts local events year round that cater towards refashioning such as their “Swap, Don’t Shop” annual clothing swap in Raleigh, North Carolina. One of the founders of the company, Beth Stewart, told me in an interview that Redress Raleigh is also concerned with educating young girls about the fashion industry and ways

they can revamp their own wardrobe through upcycling clothing. So, because of this, Beth hosted an event at the Girls World Expo (2014) in Raleigh, NC centered on upcycling and refashioning thrifted dresses. The event was catered toward teenage girls and taught about upcycling and refashioning in a positive light while sharing community resources for upcycling and refashioning i.e. Scrap Exchange and Cary Arts Center.

Redress Raleigh proves as a reminder that the mainstream face of the fashion industry does not have to be that of the unsustainable market in New York, London, and Paris that consumers typically see, but there are other places, like Raleigh, NC, that are offering a fresh and sustainable look at the fashion industry. The sustainable fashion conference held annually with their own refashion show is unparalleled in the fashion industry and is inspiring to those who want to learn more about sustainable fashion consumer choices.

## **Conclusion**

The various examples of websites, blogs, books, community centers, and conferences are all important to the community building aspect of refashioning. All of these avenues into the community of refashioning secondhand clothing aid in the permeating knowledge of the importance of refashioning that seeps into broader spheres of society. Each and every medium through which the culture of refashioning is communicated, whether it is a blog, a book, a video, or a community based class at a reuse center, helps to reach a more diverse range of people and the openness of the refashioning culture helps with more and more interested individuals to take part in this community in some way.

As the world seems to be ripping at the proverbial seams, the communities built through refashioning show ways in which we can “refashion” lives as well as clothing into a reimagined world of closer-knit communities of skilled individuals with a greater sense of agency. My own experience with various groups’ acceptance into physical and virtual refashioning communities is a testament to the openness of these refashioning communities. The people involved with refashioning that I’ve encountered are putting in great efforts to build these communities of practice. They are building skills as well as growing deeper bonds with the networks that are created. Refashioners are thriving through these communities of thought and practice because of the contagious creativity and positive feedback from others.

## **Conclusion: Mending It All Together**

In this thesis, I have explored various aspects of the subculture of refashioning secondhand garments through the lenses of ecological sustainability, subverting the role of the consumer, the creative processes of bricolage, and building communities of practice. I specifically have focused on the places, practices, and communities involved within the realm of refashioning secondhand goods.

The first chapter situated the places that sourcing materials encompasses within the greater processes of refashioning. The chapter focused on a local site where I completed my field work in Durham, North Carolina called the Scrap Exchange which hosts many community events and programs in addition to promoting reclaimed knowledge and reskilling for members of the community.

The second chapter honed in on the process of refashioning from retrieving used materials to sewing to posting a blog online, all the while utilizing the element of bricolage to creatively reclaim and redefine used or secondhand fabric or garments. This chapter relied on the voices of the refashionistas themselves as refashioning is their art and practice.

The third chapter highlighted various places in which refashioning communities have come into existence. There are many online communities throughout blogospheres and other websites where refashioning has become the centerpiece of conversation and gathered many individuals internationally to this particular realm of the DIY world. Additionally, there are many physical spaces where individuals interact face to face in regards to refashioning. These are all highlighted here along with an explanation of the

importance of community building for the practice of refashioning and how it is all part of a greater whole.

The subject and implications of refashioning secondhand clothing span many academic fields. Yet, as I have worked to show throughout this thesis, the discipline of anthropology offers particularly valuable tools that can strengthen this project. While we are faced with the dark annals of anthropological beginnings steeped in racist imperialism, we must also continue to oppose forces like this within all fields of academia and simultaneously appreciate the valuable work that has been accomplished within anthropology along the way.

To that end, I have utilized common anthropological methodologies such as participant observation and the use of direct/native voice of the refashioners to communicate their experiences with their own words. These methods offer insight into the world of refashioning for the reader and have helped me achieve an ethnographic perspective as a refashioner myself. Indeed, using participant observation has inspired me to become a refashioner of secondhand goods and given me a more intimate perspective of the experience that refashioners themselves go through.

As time continues, it is important for the field of Anthropology to continue taking a helpful, yet critical gaze at humanity and its interaction with other systems. Through this project in particular, I have employed anthropological concepts to thoroughly explore the ins and outs of refashioning. Alternatively, refashioning secondhand clothing and its potential impact as a practice can speak to anthropologists in productive ways as well. The fundamental building blocks of solid anthropological research are based in ethnography and passionate fieldwork. While many positive structures currently exist

within the field, perhaps the mechanism through which the field of anthropology can further succeed is in the contents of its research. Anthropological research and fieldwork that are ecologically incorporative is of the utmost importance. This research field takes on many different forms just as one piece of used fabric can be reworked through several transformations until it fits the particular refashioner's style and body. Essentially, the tools for anthropologists to reframe the field exist already. However, anthropologists should learn from the way refashioners conceive and use bricolage in the practice of refashioning.

Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss coined the terminology of bricolage in his work *Pensee Sauvage* in 1962<sup>40</sup>, but bricolage is a multipurpose concept that can be used here to push the practice of Anthropology even further when using it in concordance with the practice of refashioning secondhand goods. The refashioners I researched are all practitioners of bricolage. They use already-used resources—fabric, garments, clothing, textiles, etc.—to create something completely new that serves a greater purpose in portraying their identity through clothing. I am calling on anthropologists to look at this community of refashioners and learn from their use of bricolage as a form of inspiration in the field of Anthropology and its various forms of fieldwork. The question here is how we, as anthropologists, might refashion anthropology going forth.

How can anthropologists use the resources already in existence to transform this field into a useful platform to aid humanity in these trying times of the Anthropocene<sup>41</sup>? The sustainability movement is slowly gaining ground within certain pockets of human

---

<sup>40</sup> *Le Pensee Sauvage*, or *The Savage Mind* was first released in France in 1962 and translated into English in 1966.

<sup>41</sup> The term 'Anthropocene', which I've used in the introduction was coined by Paul Crutzen and is gaining ground in many academic spheres and points to the human detrimental effect on greater ecological systems.

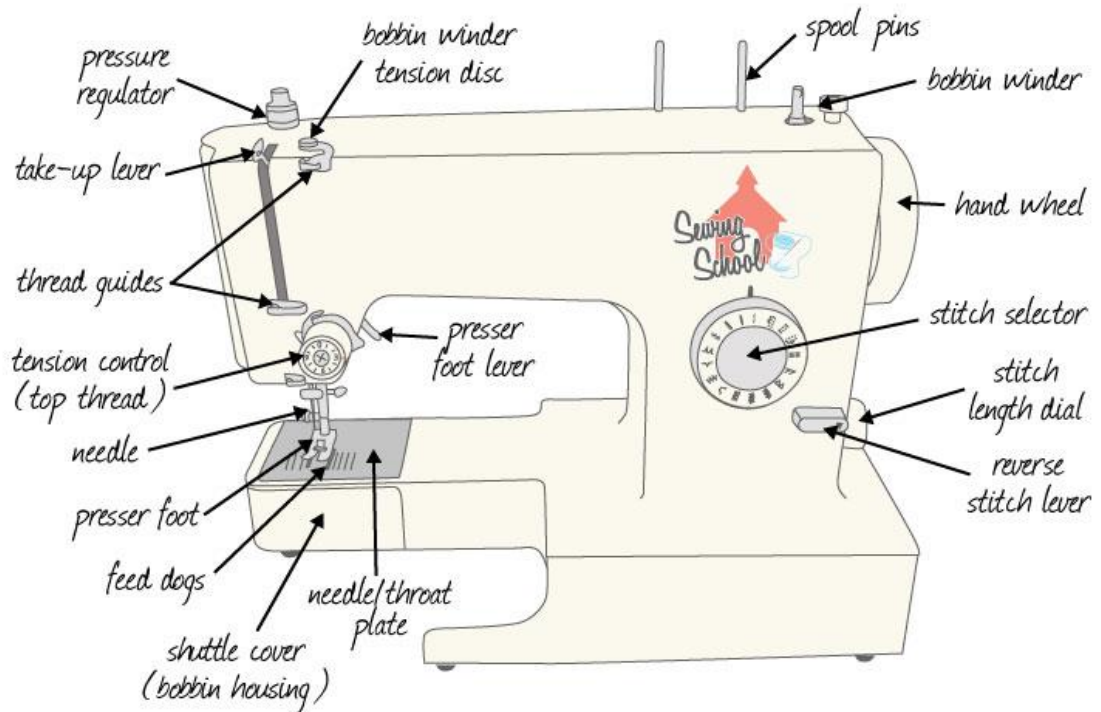
society. A valuable niche for the field of Anthropology within the broader theme of ecological sustainability is to utilize bricolage in order to refashion what Anthropology can do for humanity—and the planet—at this time.

There are productive similarities between refashioning secondhand goods through sewing and reshaping the field of anthropology through fieldwork. The practitioners of each are crafters in their own way—one dealing with more physical and mechanistic mediums and the other through theoretical and academic methods. Yet, both can effectively use the concept of bricolage in accordance with the undercurrent of ecological sustainability to build skilled and diverse communities of thought and sustainable communities of practice. With that being said, my hope is that this thesis will provide us a good point of discourse within the anthropology of refashioning while taking action to refashion anthropology.

## Appendix

### A. The Anatomy of a Sewing Machine<sup>42</sup>

#### Anatomy of a Sewing Machine



#### **Bobbin Winder Tension Disc**

- keeps your thread taut when you're winding a bobbin

#### **Pressure Regulator**

- adjusts the amount of pressure that the presser foot uses to hold your fabric down as you stitch.

#### **Thread Take-up Lever**

- moves your thread up and down as you sew
- thread goes through this lever when you thread your sewing machine

#### **Thread Guides**

- used to keep your thread in place as you sew — they are located at various points on the machine
- without these guides, your thread could become loose and tangled inside your machine

#### **Tension Control**

- a very important element that is used to adjust how loose or tight your stitches are

#### **Needle**

<sup>42</sup> Image and description of parts from <http://sewingschool.org/2011/10/09/back-to-sewing-school-anatomy-of-a-sewing-machine/>.



- moves your thread through the fabric
- unlike hand sewing needles, it's eye is just above the point
- needles come in varying sizes — the needle you use depends on the type of fabric you are using

#### **Presser Foot**

- used to keep your fabric flat and taut as you sew
- there are several different types of presser feet for different functions, such as sewing zippers or button holes — you typically use at least a couple of presser feet for a project

#### **Feed Dogs**

- metal strips with little teeth that stick up from the needle plate and move your fabric along as you sew
- they move faster or slower depending on how hard you press the foot pedal

#### **Shuttle Cover (Bobbin Housing)**

- the bobbin is a special spool that holds your bottom thread inside the sewing machine
- bobbins can be inserted through the front (front-loading) or top (drop-in), depending on your machine

#### **Needle/Throat Plate**

- the flat metal plate that sits below your needle
- protects the inside of your sewing machine, and has seam guides that indicate how far from the edge of your fabric you are stitching

#### **Presser Foot Lever**

- lowers the presser foot into place when you are ready to sew, and to lifts it up when you want to move your fabric

#### **Reverse Sewing Lever/Button**

- allows you to sew backwards when pressed
- backstitching at the beginning and end of your seams adds stability and prevents the ends from coming loose

#### **Stitch Length Dial**

- changes the length of your stitches

#### **Stitch Selector**

- allows you to choose a stitch based on your project needs
- also lets you choose the width of your stitch for a zig zag or other decorative stitch

#### **Hand Wheel**

- used to manually move the needle up and down
- you also use the hand wheel to disengage your needle so that it doesn't move while you wind a bobbin

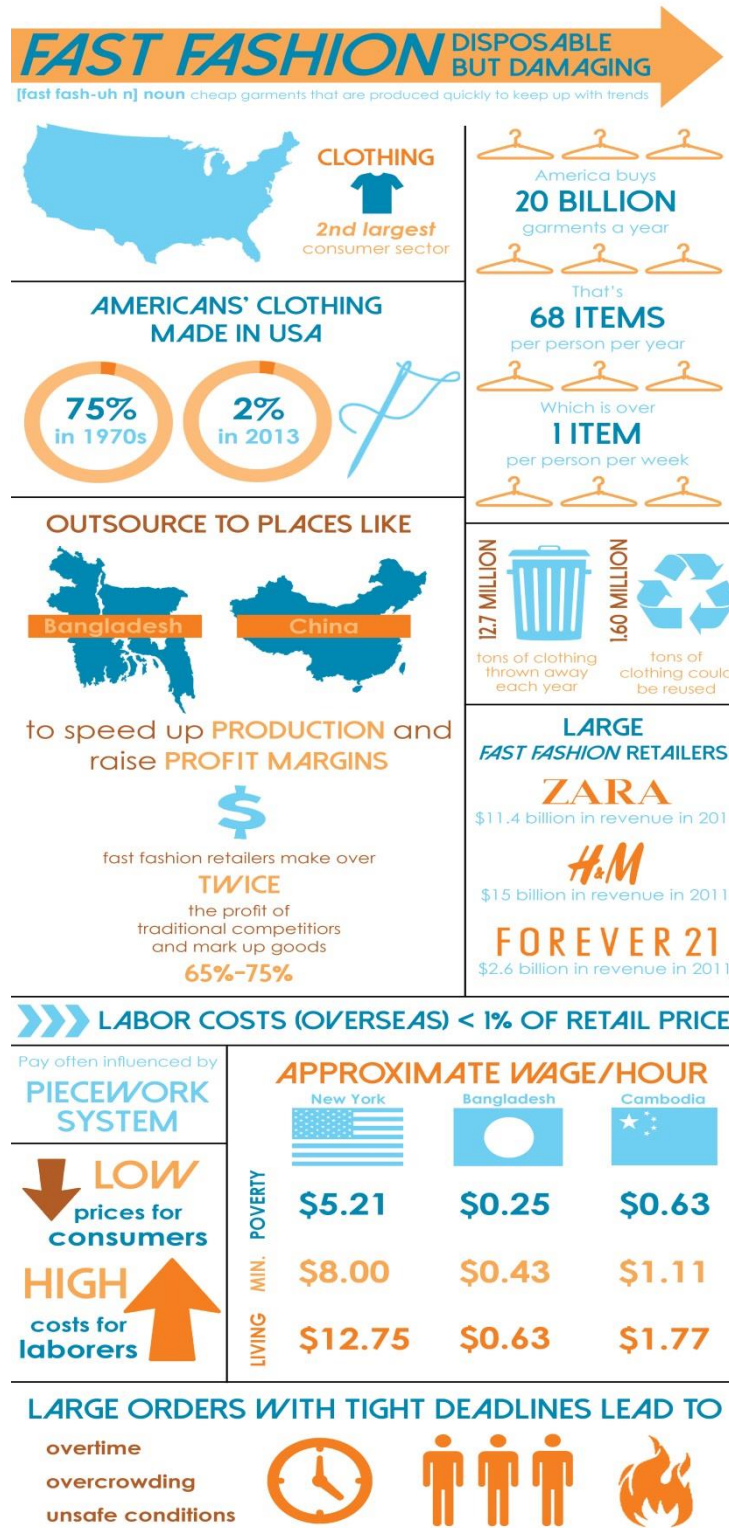
#### **Bobbin Winder**

- a peg that spins your bobbin as you wind thread on to it
- powered by the foot pedal when your needle is disengaged

#### **Spool Pins**

- where your spool of thread sits while you sew

B. **Fast Fashion Infographic**<sup>43</sup>



<sup>43</sup> Used with permission by Alex Heinz with information from *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion* by Elizabeth Cline. Infographic can be found here: <https://alexandriaheinz.wordpress.com/type/image/page/2/>

### **C. Some Refashion Blog Links**

REFASHIONISTA

<http://refashionista.net/>

Refashion Co-op

<http://refashionco-op.blogspot.com/>

Confessions of a Refashionista

<http://awesomesauceasshattery.com/>

The Olive Ant

<http://www.theoliveant.com/>

The Renegade Seamstress

<https://chicenvelopements.wordpress.com/>

Carissa Knits

<http://www.carissaknits.com/>

Little Did You Know

<http://littledyknow.blogspot.com/>

Eddie's Room

<http://www.roued.com/>

Christine Ramsey

<https://kikisrewinddesigns.wordpress.com/>

Do-over clothes

<http://do-overclothes.com/>

Sophie

<http://www.bysophieb.com/?m=1>

Cristina-In the mood for couture

<http://en.inthemoodforcouture.com/>

That Cheap Bitch-fashion DIY collective

<http://thatcheapbitch.com/that-cheap-bitch/>

Second Chances by Susan

<http://secondchancesbysusan.blogspot.com/>

#### D. Example Refashion Blog Post- Henriette Roued-Cunliffe

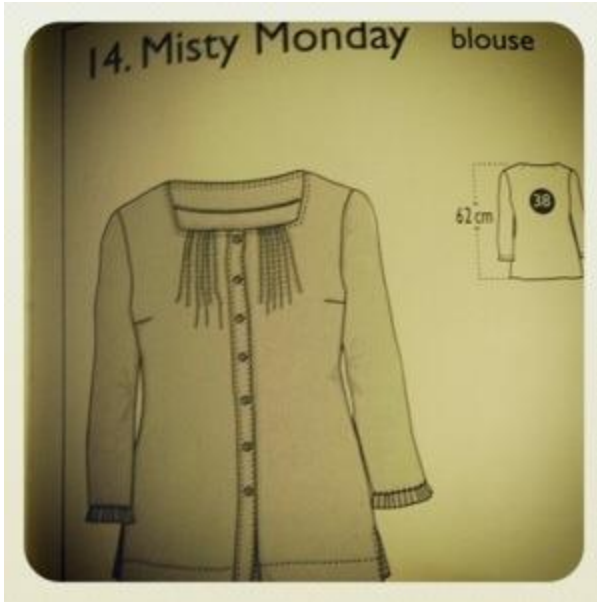


This refashion is both about shirts and about refashioning from a pattern. I think there is a lot to be said about refashioning from a pattern. It is very handy when the item you are trying to make is very far from the item you are refashioning. A good example of this is my [t-shirt to retro baby shorts refashion](#) from last year.

I do like wearing shirts and so does my husband. He both likes wearing shirts himself and he thinks I look nice in a shirt too. Therefore, he didn't mind giving up an old shirt for this refashion.



Here is a before picture of the shirt.



This is the Ottobre Design pattern I used to refashion the shirt. It is from [number 5, 2012](#).



First step was to remove the front breast pocket.



Then I pinned the pattern to each side of the shirt and cut off the sleeves to the pattern together with the neckline. I didn't cut up the sides, but instead unpicked the top 10cm from the sleeves down in order to add a fitting on the front.



I then added pleating at the neckline and stabilising made from another shirt.



For the sleeves I made some pleats out of the other shirt material.



I cut the sleeves after the pattern to make a more female sleeve with 3/4 length and puff sleeves.



And finally the shirt is finished:



Please post a comment and share your latest shirt or pattern refashions with me. I would love to see them.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> This post is authored by Henriette Roued-Cunliffe from Copenhagen, Denmark and can be found on her website at this link: <http://www.roued.com/the-shirt-refashion/>. Henriette goes through her process of refashioning a men's shirt into a more feminine style blouse. She details her steps along the way and provides images for clarity and to share her process.



## E. Confessions of a Refashionista Refashion Blog Post<sup>45</sup>

### ***A Glamazonian Dress Refashion***

posted in [Dresses](#), [Jackets & Outerwear](#), [Tutorials](#), [Tutorials for Gals](#) by [Confessions of a Refashionista](#)

I thrifted a phenomenal vintage dress and jacket set for a mere €5! The only problem?



Measuring 150cm from shoulder seam to hem, it appears to have been originally created for a gorgeous glamazon – as I'm 156cm tall (in shoes) some rather drastic refashioning was in order!



<sup>45</sup> This refashion is authored by Sheri Pavlovic who lives in Berlin and was one of my informants. She goes into great detail in this blog post so the reader has a great sense of how to do this type of refashion herself. The online link to this post is here: <http://awesomesauceasshattery.com/2015/04/01/a-glamazonian-dress-refashion/>.

Here's what I did:

I revisited my Shrink That Dress video tutorial and resized that glorious frock to fit my not-at-all-glamazon-sized proportions.



As the fabric is thick & heavy I decided not to re-attach the sleeves and instead added some groovy **doodle stitching** (in the same colours as that fabulous bust embroidery) to the arm holes and dress hem.



On to the jacket: I carefully removed the sleeves from the jacket.



Snagged a coat with my desired fit and measured the arm-hole width.



Marked the too-big arm holes...



stitched straight down from my marks...



then chopped off the excess fabric and zigzagged the raw edges to prevent fraying.



At first I thought I'd keep the sleeves of the jacket long so I measured the arms of my template-coat...



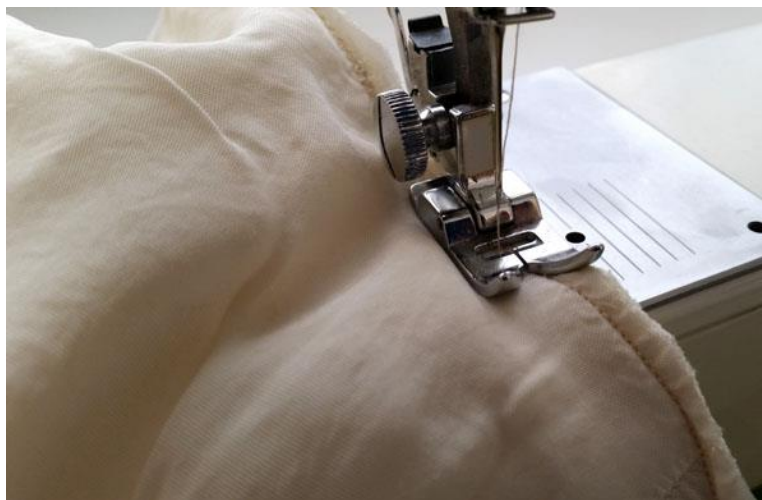
but then decided that 3/4 sleeves would look fabulous and chopped the arms even shorter!



I marked the sleeves with that smaller arm-hole width and stitched, trimmed & zigzagged each one.



Popped them into the jacket arm-holes with right sides facing, underarm seams and raw edges lined up.



Stitched, trimmed & zigzagged together...



and my gorgeous glamazonian jacket & frock finally fit moi!



*Side note: Berlin is welcoming Spring with chill-your-bones-snow-rain that has the magical ability to instantly curl my painstakingly straightened hair the second I step outside – harumph!*

## F. Renegade Seamstress Refashion Blog Post<sup>46</sup>

Up the Fun Factor with a Peplum Skirt Refashion

Posted on December 26, 2012 by The Renegade Seamstress



New Year's Eve is just around the corner.

Here's a quick refashion idea perfect for any celebration.

Start with a long thrift store skirt.

---

<sup>46</sup> This is a refashion by blog author Beth Huntington of the Renegade Seamstress refashion blog. The link to this refashion can be found here: <https://chicenvelopements.wordpress.com/2012/12/26/up-the-fun-factor-with-a-peplum-skirt-refashion/>.



Cut off the bottom to your desired length, leaving just enough for a hem.





To make the peplum, first measure your waist and divide by 6.28. This will give you the distance to measure for the top of your peplum.

Then, using the part of the skirt you cut off, measure that distance from the corner fold marking every so often to create a curved line. Notice the fold on the right side of the skirt.



Then measure the desired length of the peplum from the first line and draw another curved line.



Cut these two lines and repeat on the other side of the skirt bottom.



This will give you two half circles. Right sides together, sew one set of short sides together and finish the other ends with a small hem. Then your peplum will be removable and your skirt more versatile.



I didn't want to let the nice bias tape at the bottom of the original skirt go to waste so I unpicked it and used it to finish the top of my peplum.



Pin and sew the bias tape to the top of the peplum.



Finish the sides and the bottom of the peplum with a hem or bias tape.

I prefer bias tape to finish a rounded edge. After digging around my sewing supplies, I realized there was no black bias tape to be found. Dang! But trying to be a true refashionista, I just made my own with some light weight black fabric from my stash. (I'm working on a bias tape tutorial for you right now. It's actually quite easy and makes such a nice finish for any edge. If you're anything like me, once you learn how, you'll want to finish everything with this stuff.)

Nothing like the feeling of making due with what you have on hand. :)



Attach a hook and eye so you can remove your peplum for other looks.

And now you're ready for anything the New Year brings your way!

## G. Christine Ramsey Refashion Blog Post<sup>47</sup>

### *Tool Aprons for Women who Work HARD*

One of the best parts of making and selling my super-sturdy, upcycled tool aprons is that it puts me in contact with other hard-working women on a mission.



In the last few years, I've made aprons for gardeners, teachers, painters, knitters, seamstresses, decorators, and midwives.



And then there was Vibrantkate, the English Girl Guides camp counselor, who needed one for tent building. Kate, who became a mom this year, told me she now uses her apron for pegging the wash while holding baby Tom. (I bet he'll have a fun childhood.)

---

<sup>47</sup> This Refashion blog post is written by Christine Ramsey who is the author of the blog Kikisrewinddesigns and this post can be found at <https://kikisrewinddesigns.wordpress.com/2014/12/14/tool-aprons-for-women-who-work-hard/>.



And last week, I completed a project for Donna a local practitioner of massage techniques that help women with birth, pelvic and digestive problems.



Donna needed a special pocket for her massage oils. She loaned me a bottle and I went to work on her apron modification, making an elastic topped canvas pocket which I sewed inside one of the larger pockets.



And here's the final result!



Success! Another hard-working woman working in one of my tool aprons. It makes me proud

If you want to know more about Donna's practice Seven Generations Massage and Birth in Cary NC, go to [www.messageandbirth.com](http://www.messageandbirth.com)

And for more information about my tool aprons and other reclaimed fabric creations, check out my Etsy shop: [www.kikisrewinddesigns.etsy.com](http://www.kikisrewinddesigns.etsy.com)

## H. Example of My Own Refashion Blogpost

### Long Tunic to Crop Top Refashion

Here is the start of this oversized sleeveless tunic. This is one of my first official refashions:



First, I cut off the bottom half of the tunic to shorten the length. Then, I took in the sides and hemmed the sleeves.



After taking everything in, I used the leftover fabric to make ties for my crop top and attached them to each side at the bottom.





This makes for a cute summer-y crop top!



And it can be tied in the back or the front.



## Bibliography

- Blanchard, Tamsin. 2007. *Green is the new black : How to change the world with style*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Brown, Sass. 2013. *Refashioned: Cutting-Edge Clothing From Upcycled Materials*. London: Laurence King Pub.
- Browning, Carissa. (2014, December 23). Skype Interview.
- Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cline, Elizabeth L. 2012. *Overdressed : The shockingly high cost of cheap fashion*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.
- Cline, Scott. (2014, December 20). Personal Interview.
- Cohen, Roz. (2014, December 9). Personal Interview.
- Cox, Stan. 2007. "Dress for Excess: The Cost of Our Clothing Addiction,". November 30, 2007. Accessed April 2, 2015.  
[http://www.alternet.org/story/69256/dress\\_for\\_excess%3A\\_the\\_cost\\_of\\_our\\_clothing\\_addiction](http://www.alternet.org/story/69256/dress_for_excess%3A_the_cost_of_our_clothing_addiction).
- Crutzen, Paul J. 2006. *The "anthropocene"*. Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Durkheim, Émile, 1858-1917. 2001. *The elementary forms of religious life*, eds. Mark Sydney Cladis, , Carol Cosman and . Oxford: Oxford University Press
- EPA. "Textiles, Common Wastes & Materials." Environmental Protection Agency, n.d. Web. 04 Jan. 2015.
- Fletcher, Kate. 2012. *Fashion & sustainability : Design for change*, eds. Lynda Grose, . London: Laurence King Pub.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2013. *Take back the economy : An ethical guide for transforming our communities*, eds. Stephen Healy, . Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Heinz, Alexandria. 2014. *Fast Fashion Infographic*. Online. Accessed February 23, 2015.  
<https://alexandriaheinz.wordpress.com/type/image/page/2/>.
- Huntington, Beth. 2014. *The Refashion Handbook: Refit, Redesign, Remake for Every Body*. California: Stash Books. Print.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2015, February 17). Skype Interview.

IPCC, 2014: Summary for Policymakers, In: Climate Change 2014, Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Edenhofer, O., R. Pichs-Madruga, Y. Sokona, E. Farahani, S. Kadner, K. Seyboth, A. Adler, I. Baum, S. Brunner, P. Eickemeier, B. Kriemann, J. Savolainen, S. Schlömer, C. von Stechow, T. Zwickel and J.C. Minx (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA.

Kuznetsov, Stacey, and Eric Paulos. 2010. Rise of the expert amateur: DIY projects, communities, and cultures. Paper presented at Proceedings of the 6th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction: Extending Boundaries, .

Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated learning : Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge England] ;New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 1966, "The Science of the Concrete," pp. 1-22 in *The Savage Mind*, University of Chicago Press

Lynch, Marisa. 2012. *New dress a day : The ultimate DIY guide to creating fashion dos from thrift-store don'ts*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Macy, Joanna and Chris Johnstone. 2012. *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*, p.4-5. Novato, California: New World Library.

NARTS. "About NARTS - NARTS: The Association of Resale Professionals." N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Jan. 2015.

Pavlovic, Sheri. (2015, February 13). Skype Interview.

Ramsey, Christine. (2015, April 2). Telephone Interview.

Rivoli, Pietra. 2005. *The travels of a t-shirt in the global economy : An economist examines the markets, power, and politics of world trade*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons.

Roued-Cunliffe, Henriette. (2014, December 10). Skype Interview.

Sorg, Lisa. 2014. The Scrap Exchange and Possibility. *Indy Week*, October 1, 2014.

Wenger, Etienne, 1952-. 2002. *Cultivating communities of practice : A guide to managing knowledge*, eds. Richard A. (Richard Arnold) McDermott, . Boston: Harvard Business School Press

Woodward, Ann May. (2014, December 10). Personal Interview.