

Cultural Studies Review
volume 22 number 1 March 2016
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrij/index>
pp. 59–77
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Darning Mark's Jumper

Wearing Love and Sorrow

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—COMFORT

In the winter of 2010 I darned a jumper belonging to my partner. It was a nice jumper—an upmarket streetwear label—but had been stored in a plastic bin bag, attacked by moths and was now scattered with bullet-sized holes and fraying at the cuffs. In an attempt to make the mending seamless and return this neglected, ten-year-old garment to a state of relative newness, I used three different wools. When the darning was too tight, the ply too thick or the colour wrong, I undid my handiwork and started over again. Despite these efforts, the end result was not quite the feat of invisible mending I had imagined, and his jumper looked somewhat imperfect and scarred. Around this time, I was due to present a conference paper on fashion, clothes and memory. And because it had been his idea to write the paper, and because he was a man who considered himself resolutely outside of fashion, and

ISSN 1837-8692

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Citation: Cultural Studies Review (CSR) 2016, 22, 4909, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v22i1.4909>

because he was in hospital and could not attend, I ended the paper by describing Mark's reaction to my not entirely successful darning. Running his hand over the valleys of uneven wool, he said: 'I love that you can see where it's been darned.'

Two years later, I returned to that original paper with the intention of using its ideas as a starting point for a longer essay. I wanted to write about the nature of our attachment to old clothes. I had in mind my favourite t-shirt which, after more than a decade of wearing, was dissolving at the seams. Still I kept wearing it. I wanted to write about Roland Barthes's paradigm of fashion that included a definition of 'pauperisation' as being when 'a garment is worn beyond its natural replacement time'.¹ I wanted to write about how fashion, despite a reputation for being obsessed with novelty and change, had—in the concept of chic—also honoured wear and ageing. I was less interested in (but could not ignore) the popularity of vintage, distressed and recycled clothing; the 'aesthetics of poverty';² and what Barbara Vinken calls the aesthetic manoeuvre that shows 'old as old'.³ I wanted to take a resonant phrase from Georg Simmel about fashion's 'psychological shimmer of permanency' and argue that old clothes represented the essence of longevity, the desire for permanence that is the other half of fashion's perpetual quest for novelty.⁴ Most of all, I wanted to write about Mark's jumper. But no matter how hard I tried, it refused to fit, its presence ambushed every attempt to insert it into a theoretical discussion. Mark's jumper could not be thought of in the abstract; it demanded a narrative of its own.

When I included the darning of his jumper as a personal anecdote, a snapshot biography tagged onto the end of an academic paper, Mark was already gravely ill. A few months earlier, he had been diagnosed with stage four cancer and given six months to live. In writing him into my paper, I was materialising his presence, a presence denied only by his illness. If in doing this I was putting faith in something vaguely occult, the act of darning owed even more to the supernatural. Taking a ragged, moth-eaten and dusty garment, washing and drying it in the sun, painstakingly removing the pilled balls of wool and then repairing the multiple holes and damaged edges was more than care for a material object. Every step in the process of darning—from buying the wool to blending the yarns, anchoring the thread and weaving over-and-under to create the grain of the patch—was an act of love. Each passage of the needle, each stitch, was restoring something that had been

eaten away and I didn't pretend to ignore the symbolism. This was more than the resurrection of a woollen jumper.

Like the meals I cooked, where every ingredient was supposed to fight the disease that his many doctors proclaimed was a lost cause, this was an act of reconstitution. Of course, just as I did not always believe that the incorporation of certain foods would cure him, I did not always believe that the love and care I put into mending his jumper would have any actual effect on his body. I knew I could do nothing about the virulent cancer that attacked his lungs, his liver, his bones; nothing about the brain tumours that whittled away his sense of self, deleting files of memory. I could do nothing about the side effects of the drugs, the radiotherapy, the chemotherapy; nothing about the even more debilitating and humiliating effects of the disastrous experiments of a quack doctor he had turned to in desperation. But I could give back life to his favourite jumper, the jumper that he would wear close to his skin, that would keep him warm, that would protect and give him comfort.

And this was no small thing.

After Mark's death, this jumper became the thing of his that most recalled him to me. I slept in it, wrapped in arms that once wrapped him. At first I wore it layered with a t-shirt of his I had taken to sleeping in after picking it up off the floor one day and immersing myself in his smell. It was a t-shirt he wore often and at the time it annoyed him that my 'theft' had taken it out of circulation, as if I did not have the decency to wait until he died before appropriating his things. Eventually, I wore the jumper on its own, the prickly wool—nothing like the smooth caress of his skin—embracing my neck, my arms, my back, my belly, my breasts, consoling me deeply. Wearing this jumper I would dream of him, vivid, potent dreams. From these dreams—dreams that mimicked the act of love where garments are discarded so urgently, so unconsciously, that it is only later, when you find them in discarded huddles on the floor, that you realise that at some point they must have been removed—I would awake naked, sure of his presence and overwhelmed with desire. Long after the smell of him had faded to something more imagined than real, memories of his body remained in the shape of his jumper, in its past, but most of all in the uneven patches of darning that could conjure up the touch of his hands as he had fingered the wool, his voice coming to me in the soft wonder of the remembered words: I love that you can see where it's been darned.

What did Mark mean? I love that you can see where it's been darned. There is nothing significant about darning, which is by definition a small, domestic act. Unlike its more popular, more visible cousin knitting, it is not an act of creation. On the contrary, it has been described as a 'mind-boggling tedious and time-consuming' chore from bygone times, 'right up there with mangling the laundry'.⁵ In our advanced capitalist economy, where the possibility of discarding and replacement is the default option, things to be darned, like things to be mended or ironed, sit in a basket waiting their turn. Darning is an in-between act of low priority, something to be done while watching TV—or not done at all. If we do get around to darning a garment, it is to extend its life, or because it matters enough *not* to be replaced. Either way, once darned, the garment becomes unique, singular—literally, irreplaceable.

There is one famous anecdote about darning. It comes to us from John Locke who used it to illustrate a philosophical question regarding the essential nature of physical objects. In some accounts, the anecdote involves the worsted stockings of Sir John Cutler, which are darned by his maid with silk thread over and over until nothing is left of the original. But the more common account involves John Locke's own woollen socks: if he were to darn a hole in a favourite sock, would it still be the same sock? What about if he added another darned patch, and then another, and another until the sock was entirely a patchwork of darned holes? Would the sock be fundamentally changed? Would it still be 'his' sock? These are metaphysical questions that divide philosophers. Some say yes, some say no. One way to solve the paradox is to consider the frame of reference, some criterion that is specific to Locke's sock. For example, if it is possession that counts, then what the sock is made of—its constituent materials—becomes irrelevant. On the other hand, caution Giselle Walker and Elizabeth Leedham-Green: 'If possession is insufficient to the enquiry at hand, they cease to be the same socks once they've been darned, and [at this point they] stop being metaphysically interesting.'⁶ This is not good news. Or rather, this is only bad news if what I want is a darned jumper that is metaphysically interesting. I could get caught up thinking about relevant frames of reference, or whether altering the material constitution of Mark's jumper changed its essential nature. But perhaps this is all too abstract. I am not dealing here with a jumper that

has been completely reconstituted through darning—and even if I were, I’m not sure that I would agree that Mark’s darned jumper (or Locke’s darned sock) is the same jumper (or sock) as its undarned original.

In this, I am not alone. I make this discovery by way of doing a topic search for darning online, something I soon realise I should have done long ago. First, I scroll through information about how to darn correctly. After all this time, I am only slightly surprised to find that my technique is wrong; it is no wonder that Mark could see where his jumper had been darned. The best link is illustrated with a pamphlet, issued by the UK Board of Trade during World War II, called ‘How To Darn Holes and Tears’. From readers’ comments and tutorials I learn that there are special tools and materials—such as darning mushrooms and darning wool—and that the correct darning technique involves working from the back of the garment and ensuring that the tension is always even. Tips and advice are passed down from mothers, grandmothers and even a ‘Grandpa’ or two; photographs illustrate garments ‘before’ and ‘after’—the latter sometimes accompanied by a trumpeting ‘Tadaa!’ Everyone is after the same thing: a sock or jumper that is seamlessly, invisibly mended. The philosophy of ‘Make Do and Mend’ permeates readers’ comments. A burned-out light bulb, a door knob, a lemon or rolled-up magazine can be used in place of a wooden mushroom or egg; a single strand of embroidery thread or crochet wool also does the job; a third sock can serve as a ready-made patch for the pair. All small fragments of advice, stitched together by an individual sense of achievement and pride that the abstract musings of philosophers and their thought experiments cannot begin to embrace.

I find these stories of personal achievement, frugality and extending the lifetime of a knitted item uplifting, but I am not part of this world. There is nothing here that gets to the essence of my relationship with Mark’s jumper. Nothing that gets to the depth of what I feel, what I experience with this one thing. When I leave the internet and come back to books, Leslie Chamberlain’s exploration of Martin Heidegger’s engagement with materiality strikes a chord. Heidegger’s ‘great idea’, writes Chamberlain is that ‘the this-ness of a thing is what differentiates it from all other things in existence’.⁷ For Heidegger, philosophy was mistaken about the nature of materiality. Distinctions of subject/object, truth/appearance and the elevation of reason above all imposed a conceptualisation on objects that closed

down multiple possibilities. 'Things', wrote Heidegger, 'are infinitely more, and other, than what they represent in the homogenous medium of strict concepts.'⁸ Chamberlain makes the point that this reinvention or renegotiation of what materiality actually was is perhaps not so new now, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the rescuing of this-ness that Heidegger traced produced a key distinction: "*that* things are", not "*what* they are"⁹.

Writing about things, about stuff, I know is certainly not so new now; within the field of anthropology, for example, the study of material culture is a unique discipline, one that has stretched our understanding of the material beyond the world of artefacts and objects to embrace a larger conceptualisation of culture and, even, immateriality.¹⁰ Closer to the topic at hand, the literary and cultural theorist Peter Stallybrass, for one, has written brilliantly on the materiality of clothes, in particular, interrogating our post-Cartesian embarrassment about things, wondering why 'the life of matter is relegated to the trash can of the "merely"', simply because they are 'mere things'.¹¹ I'm familiar with this tradition; still, it is comforting to know that somewhere in philosophy there is a place for 'mere things' like darned jumpers as 'infinitely more, and other'.

—HAUNTING

That an old and ragged jumper figured so largely in my grief, bringing me closest to Mark, *becoming* him, has much to do with the role that clothes have played in my life. For years, my work revolved around designing, making and buying clothes for other people; added to this is a decade or more of writing, thinking and teaching about clothes, costume and fashion. Perhaps more than most, I am deeply involved with the things I wear; I buy vintage and second-hand, I recycle and remodel styles, I design and get things made. What I do buy I generally keep forever. I have three wardrobes and hardly ever throw anything out. Mark, too, for all his professions to be unaffected by fashion, was not unaffected by clothes. For him they were not anonymous items, but things with history, memory and meaning. Upon being diagnosed, one of the first things he wanted to do was go shopping—not for anything 'new', but for things from his past. We tracked down a pair of sunglasses like ones he used to have, and hunted for an elusive pair of jeans, as if attempting to recreate the younger, healthier self he once had been.

Like me, he hung onto things—an over-sized, thick cabled cardigan, patterned with snowflakes and reindeer that had belonged to his father, an incomplete collection of surf club t-shirts and faded western shirts all shared the crowded space of his wardrobe with rarely worn suits and handmade English shoes that gave him a sense of confidence and authority at important meetings. He kept in his memory for years details of what I was wearing when we first met, could recall whole outfits I had once worn and was never immune to the power of clothes. After a fight one morning, acted out on the newly public stage his illness imposed upon us, he emerged dressed in a vintage hand-knitted vest I had given him. Throughout the summer it had hung in his wardrobe unworn; wearing it now for the first time was an olive branch, his way of wordlessly apologising in front of the audience of his friends, ‘speaking’ through clothes in an intimate dialogue that had nothing to do with them communicating as ‘signs’. So to be consoled by his jumper, to imagine that its sleeves are his arms, its body is his body, and that in wearing his jumper I am wearing *him*, is not out of the ordinary; for me, it is second nature.

Often portrayed in films and books, such dependence by the heartbroken and bereaved on the clothes of lovers who have died is not uncommon. Tilda Swinton, as Eva in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, sits in her rented living room on a shabby couch clutching in her hands the Led Zeppelin t-shirt of her dead husband, twisting it like rosary beads, sobbing into it, burying her face in the garment that is impregnated by his smell. In *Brokeback Mountain* Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) keeps for years the shirt of Ennis (Heath Ledger) hanging beneath his own shirt in his small closet, the two garments wrapped around each other in eternal embrace. But alongside these stories of remembrance, there are also stories of the clothes of the dead being discarded or banished. In his essay, ‘Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things’, Stallybrass refers to a scene from Philip Roth’s autobiography, *Patrimony*, that describes the author finding his father on the day of his mother’s funeral in their bedroom, chucking her clothes into a plastic garbage bag to be taken to Jewish relief while, in another part of the house, mourners gather. He is completely without sentiment and cannot get rid of them too soon—these empty material traces, these ‘symbolic relics’ that, writes Roth, ‘were no substitute for the real companion of fifty-five years’.¹²

The question, 'What are we to do with the clothes of the dead?' is at the centre of Stallybrass's essay. It is also the question confronted by Henry James after the suicide in Venice of his friend Constance Fenimore Woolson. Her relatives had seen to the packing of her papers, paintings and mementoes to take back with them to America, but had left the contents of her wardrobe and dressing tables untouched. In his novel *The Master*, Colm Tóibín describes Henry's dilemma. Anxious to safeguard Constance's privacy from snooping friends, he confides only in her trusted gondolier, Tito, who dismisses the suggestion that maybe a convent would be interested in them: 'Not the clothes of the dead ... no one will want the clothes of the dead.'¹³ Nor can her clothing, like the letters he has so methodically sorted, be burned. And so in the pink glow of dusk, the two men ferry her dresses, her coats and skirts, her stockings, her undergarments and shoes along the Grand Canal and beyond the Lido to bury them in the inky water of the lagoon. In the fading light of day, the presence of the dead woman is palpable—in the clothes redolent of her smell, in the 'strange contentment' felt by Henry and in the calmness of the place where she is their only witness. When it comes to carrying out the 'grim task', Henry finds he cannot do it; it would be as if he was lifting and dropping her body overboard. In the end, after blessing himself, it is Tito who reaches for the first dress, then another and another, tenderly placing them on the calm bed of water, murmuring prayers as they float away and sink beneath the surface. It is only when all her garments have been buried in their watery grave and the writer and the gondolier are set to return to shore, that Tito becomes aware of the dark shapes, 'like black balloons', surrounding them—the dresses, pregnant and billowing, returned to the surface. Henry is prepared to leave it to the grey mist and dark blanket of the approaching night to enfold the guilty evidence. But, again, it is Tito who acts; again, blessing himself as he pushes the dresses back down with his pole, working with a furious determination until the last one is finally, and eternally, buried.

Not the clothes of the dead ... no one will want the clothes of the dead. Like clothes without bodies, the clothes of the dead can make us uneasy. They are inanimate, ghostly, empty things with arms and legs, that hang inert in closets or congregate with other discarded clothes on the racks of op shops or dealers in second-hand clothes, imitating but never able to be the bodies they once dressed. In

a well-known passage from the opening pages of her pioneering book, *Adorned in Dreams*, Elizabeth Wilson writes of how clothes in museums 'hint at something only half understood, sinister, threatening; the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life'.¹⁴ A parallel point is made by Jean Cocteau when writing about the freshly washed dresses he comes across in a farmyard at Rochecorbon, 'hanging in the sun, side by side, like Bluebeard's wives, only lifeless. They lacked their souls, and the soul of a dress is a body'.¹⁵ This way of thinking—that the soul of a dress is a body—is almost orthodox in certain branches of fashion and dress studies, but it's a proposition of which I have never been entirely convinced. Do clothes really need the animating presence of a body to be considered complete? Or is there another way to think about what we are speaking of here? What about the memory of a body? Or the life of cloth itself? Wilson is right about the inherent spookiness of clothes in museums. These clothes, imbued with memories of previous lives, recall a sense of human frailty, their presence a melancholy boast of survival, as if it is not their owners who have discarded them but they who have discarded their owners. To the visitor, wearing unexceptional, everyday clothes, the intricacies of a period costume or a piece of couture have a way of announcing their presence, as if each thread of silk brocade, each hand-stitched pleat or time-worn sleeve is party to something we can never share. And it's not only garments of the highest quality that evince this air of exclusivity. Even an old t-shirt can make us feel a little immaterial, especially if that old t-shirt was designed by Vivienne Westwood, came from a shop in the King's Road, London, called World, witnessed the invention of The Sex Pistols and travelled the too-fast-to-live road with its too-young-to-die owner, Sid Vicious.

Why then not accept the 'ghostly existence' of clothes?¹⁶ Why not value it? As soon as Henry gathers a bundle of Constance's clothes in his arms, he feels her presence, a presence that remains as he and Tito make their way out to the lagoon she loved and continues until the last dress is finally and completely submerged.¹⁷ Wearing the jacket of his dead friend, Allon White, while presenting an academic paper, Stallybrass is so overcome he cannot continue. Later, he realises that, for the first time since his death, his friend has returned to him. As he began to read his paper, Stallybrass writes:

I was inhabited by his presence, taken over. If I wore the jacket, Allon wore me. He was there in the wrinkles of the elbows, wrinkles that in the

technical jargon of sewing are called 'memory'; he was there in the stains at the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits.

Above all he was there in the smell.¹⁸

Stallybrass goes on to explain that he has always wanted to be touched by the dead, wanted them to haunt him, had 'even hoped that they would rise up and inhabit me'.¹⁹ It's a sentiment I understand. *This* is the embodiment of grief, of mourning. Unexpected garments—a ragged jumper, an old jacket—are not what you wear to mourn; rather, the wearing is the mourning itself, the materialisation of the absent body. To believe in the possibility of such haunting is to banish the notion that clothes are empty of the person who once wore them. Instead of inanimate, ghostly and empty, they are poetic, vital and alive; the dress, the jacket, the jumper, a body remembered. Maybe, even (why not?), its soul.

—FETISH

Upon mentioning to someone—I can't remember who—what I was writing in relation to Mark's jumper they asked if I would consider seeing a medium. So far removed from the realm of possibility is the chance that I would go down this path, or, for that matter, even know anyone who would make this suggestion that, as I write now, I wonder if hadn't dreamt the whole encounter. Certainly, the notion of a medium coming to me in a dream makes more sense; things my rational, everyday self would not contemplate, my unconscious, dreaming self would find perfectly normal. I am not, however, blind as to why the connection—wherever it came from—might be made. Elements of the irrational and the occult run through the narrative I have woven around Mark's jumper. I don't believe in witchcraft, I don't believe in ghosts, I don't believe in a realm occupied by mediums. But I do believe in the medium of clothes. I know that Mark's jumper is 'not Mark', and yet, his darned jumper remains only nominally detached from his body and through tears of grief I escape to a place of enchantment, a place of memory, of love, of loss and desire, to a place where he is whole.

Such ideas sit uneasily with who we are meant to be as modern, rational subjects. They are primitive and animistic, harking back to a shadowy, pre-modern, pre-capitalist world. To attach 'ideas of a superstitious, magical and spiritual nature' to clothes, writes Wilson, is to transform them into 'something like secular

fetishes'.²⁰ One of the most provocative thinkers on clothing, dress and fashion, Wilson's exploration of what she calls 'Magic Fashion' draws on the concept of the fetish as a way into understanding 'the enduring mystery of the meaning of clothes'.²¹ Part of that mystery can be attributed to the intimate relation that exists between garments and bodies, a relation that sets apart clothing—the things we wear next to our skin—from other treasured objects in our lives, such as photographs, heirlooms or a child's toy. In the branch of fashion scholarship that is informed by cultural studies, this intimate relation and the blurred boundary that exists between body and garment, between the self and the not-self, is central to the study of the 'inner meaning of clothes'.²² Although there is much overlap, this approach contrasts with that of the dress or costume historian and their tradition of focusing on the garment-as-object. Although Wilson is a foundational member of the cultural studies approach, she notes that neither methodology adequately accounts for the 'quasi-magical properties and meanings' of a garment.²³ It is this terrain of the 'unexplained residue'²⁴ that she attempts to explore using the idea of the fetish, a concept that, from the beginning sought to leach any intrinsic power from the things we wear closest to our skin.

To fetishise an object is to give it life, to grant a different relationship between people and things from the one mapped out for us in the modern capitalist economy. What interests Wilson in the concept of the fetish is its origins as an object with condensed magical or religious power that has an active relationship with the body of the wearer. Beginning with the etymology of the word 'fetish' itself, as a concept fetishism has a complicated and complex history that is difficult to simplify.²⁵ First elaborated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the establishment of trade between Europe and West Africa, the term was originally associated with anthropology and the religious and cultural significance of an object. Late in the eighteenth century, 'fetishism' was invented as a theoretical term that received widespread acceptance.²⁶ In the following centuries, Marx and, later, Freud would appropriate the concept of fetishism and apply it, respectively, to the commodity form and sexual behaviour. Fetishism, then, has (at least) three distinct meanings, from three different traditions, but in all, elements of clothing, the body and magic play a defining role.

Derived from the pidgin word *fetisso*, the fetish can be traced to the Portuguese word (*feitico*), meaning 'magical practice' or 'witchcraft', which, in turn, can be traced to the Latin word, *facere*, meaning 'to make'. *Facere* is also the root of the word, 'fashion' (*facio*) and, in its anthropological sense, from the start the fetish was associated with objects worn on or close to the body. Made from materials that, to Western eyes, ranged from the 'worthless' (grasses, wood, leather, beads) to the precious (silver and gold), these objects—amulets, pouches and so on—signified to the original owners as both 'dress and ornament, and to something revered as a Deity'.²⁷ By contrast, for the European entrepreneurs who traded in them their value was purely economic. Condemned as pagan worship or witchcraft by, first, the Catholic Portuguese (who differentiated their own 'legitimate' religious accoutrements, such as rosary beads from the 'illegitimate' fetish object), and then the Protestant Dutch, the concept of the fetish was developed to demonise the power of 'alien' objects. This is not to say that objects did not retain interest but that the nature of that interest was economic; to the European entrepreneur, the fetish could be highly sought after, not for its intrinsic power or any meaning it held, but for its exchange value as a desirable commodity to be sold for profit in the marketplace. This shift is important, writes Stallybrass, because it implied:

a new definition of what it meant to be European: that is, a subject unhampered by fixation upon objects, a subject who, having recognized the true (i.e. market) value of the object-as-commodity, fixated instead upon transcendental values that transformed gold into ships, ships into guns, guns into tobacco, tobacco into sugar, sugar into gold, and all into accountable profit. What was demonized in the concept of the fetish was the possibility that history, memory, and desire might be materialized in objects that are touched and loved and worn.²⁸

As described in the book Stallybrass wrote with Ann Rosalind Jones, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, the demonisation of worn objects reflected a growing uneasiness with unclear divisions of social categories. In the 'cloth economy' of the Renaissance, clothes were interwoven with the self, moulding and shaping the physical and social subject. By contrast, in the Enlightenment, the significance of clothes to the constitution of the self unravelled: as conceived by the modern mind, 'subjects are prior to objects, wearers to what is worn'.²⁹ Further

complicating the modern subject's relationship with things, the period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the emergence of the commodity form. Clothes-as-objects had, of course, always been detachable from the wearer; they could move from body to body, be pulled apart, remodelled, passed on, sold or pawned. They had value as currency, forming a substantial part of the payment made by the monarch to the aristocratic attendant, the craftsman to the apprentice and so on, in what was, to a certain extent, a non-monetary economy. But they were also materialisations, with animating and constitutive powers, that stitched the subject to the state, the son to the father, the wife to the husband, the servant to the master.

More than surface embroiderings, in the Renaissance clothes-as-objects were 'fashionings' that transformed; social relations of loyalty, paternity and servitude; symbolic meanings of history, love, memory and loss could be deeply embodied in things that were worn, whether they were made of silk, velvet, wool, linen, leather, metal or precious stone. Clothes-as-commodities, on the other hand, were 'fashion', detachable and discardable goods that became 'the commodities upon which international capitalism was founded'.³⁰ The significance of this is noted by Wilson: in the nineteenth century the commodity form would underpin the rhetorical and theoretical ideas of Marx's theory of commodification. In Marx's writings, however, there was a crucial shift in the meaning of the fetish in relation to the human actor; whereas the anthropological fetish was understood to bestow power on the owner or wearer, the commodity fetish involved human disempowerment and alienation. What was lost with capitalism—"the most abstract society that has ever existed"³¹—was meaningful relations between people and things, between us and clothes.

—COMMODITY

In his essay 'The Cultural Biography of Things', Igor Kopytoff makes the point that the division between people and things is 'culturally speaking, exceptional' and unique to capitalism.³² There is, for example, the reality of pre-capitalist exchange as described by Marcel Mauss in his classic study, *The Gift*, where objects exchanged are described as "personified beings that talk and take part in the contract. They state their desire to be given away". Things-as-gifts are not "indifferent things"; they have "a name, a personality, a past".³³ We have already seen that clothes in the

Renaissance could be 'worn deeply'; in the sense that they were 'seen as printing, charactering, haunting', they were things that literally fashioned, described by Jones and Stallybrass as 'material establishers of identity itself'.³⁴ But when it comes to the subject in modern capitalist economies, writes Kopytoff, physical objects and people are polarised: at one end, 'physical objects ... represent the natural universe of commodities', while at the other, people 'represent the natural universe of individuation and singularization'.³⁵

From his 'commonplace' definition of a commodity as 'an item with use value that also has exchange value', Kopytoff expands our understanding of a commodity from this definition to one that takes into account the notion of commoditisation as a process.³⁶ In short, things do not remain things; commodities do not remain commodities. Stallybrass illustrates superbly this process of commoditisation in his essay, 'Marx's Coat', where he describes how, as much as Marx was in and out of debt, his coat was in and out of the pawnshop. Over the course of its migrations back and forth from the pawnshop, Marx's coat shifted in and out of its status as commodity and thing. Returned to Marx as something he could wear, that kept him warm and that performed all the functions of a coat, it was 'decommodified', its phantom-like existence replaced by sensuous characteristics, its 'thingliness' returned. But even as his coat held the potential for decommodification, its potential for recommodification remained. Haunted by the possibility of being turned into a liquid asset, Marx's coat was not the only possession in his poverty-stricken household that was in 'a constant state of being-about-to-disappear'.³⁷ From his aristocratic wife's family silver to the children's clothes, nothing was safe from 'the spectre of dispossession'; everything was potentially up for recommodification by being converted into cash.³⁸

Measured by Kopytoff's simple definition of a commodity as an item with use value that also has exchange value, the one thing that would rescue Marx's coat from the spectre of dispossession and establish it permanently in the realm of things would be for it to become so threadbare as to be unwearable. Unwearable it would be unsaleable, and unsaleable it would be stripped of 'the unmistakable indicator of commodity status'.³⁹ This is not, it goes without saying, the condition in which Marx anticipated the theoretical coat of *Capital*, much less his own, being returned to its owner.

Non-saleability, however, has its own appeal. If 'to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be "common"', notes Kopytoff, its opposite is to be 'uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular ... and not exchangeable for anything else'.⁴⁰ Such 'non-commodities' exist on polar planes, ranging from things that are 'uniquely valuable', such as heirlooms, to those that are 'uniquely worthless'.⁴¹ As an instance of the latter, Kopytoff proffers a pair of old slippers which have been with someone for so long that parting from them is 'unthinkable' and, like a grandmother's wedding ring or great-grandfather's war medal, are 'priceless'.⁴² But as a casual glance in the window of any pawnshop will testify, when it comes to an object's status as a permanently deactivated non-commodity, heirlooms are not as safe a bet as Kopytoff's categorisation might seem to imply. In our yearning for the truly singular, incomparable and unique, we are left then to contemplate the world of old slippers. This is also to return us to the world of ragged t-shirts, old jackets and darned jumpers—those things that have been touched and loved and worn for so long that, not only have they become a part of us, they have also become unsaleable. This is not to say they have no value; such things are priceless, uniquely worthless and, to use the expression with the full force of its meaning, we literally cannot give them away.

—THINGS

Mark's jumper is not an indifferent thing; it states its desire to be kept; it is imbued with history, memory, love, life, loss and desire; it is infinitely more, and other. When I wear Mark's jumper, I am wearing love and sorrow. But at one point, it was also a consumer object, a mass-produced commodity manufactured by who-knows-whom in who-knows-where in who-knows-what conditions. That is the paradox of our relationship with things in 'a society dominated by capital and consumption', writes Wilson; in many ways, we have no choice but to attach ourselves to material goods. They are what we have. They *are*.

I come back to Mark's words: I love that you can see where it's been darned. When he pulled his jumper out of the plastic bin bag where it had been stored for several winters and asked me if I could do something with it, he of course didn't want it returned as the same dusty, neglected thing. But neither did he want it to be reconstituted entirely—he didn't want it to be new, he didn't want it to be different;

he wanted only to be able to wear it again. But in the process of redressing the neglect of years and attempting to return it from its entropic state, something else happened, and the mundane chores of washing and repairing were elevated to an act of nurture, care and love. My darning, imperfect and exposed, failed to erase or efface the signs of time; it betrayed traces of where my hands, my fingers had been. It became singularised, individual, unique. At the same time, it recalled earlier, less grief-stricken times, when the jumper—and Mark—had been whole. In the midst of crisis and rupture and feelings of utter helplessness, it was a materialisation of the small things I could do; it brought comfort, it signalled love, it reminded. This jumper that was touched and loved and worn.

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Dedicated in loving memory to Mark Cherry.
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¹ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. M. Ward and R. Howard, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983, p. 298.

² Akiko Fukai, 'A New Design Aesthetic', in L. Mitchell (ed.), *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney, 2005, p. 20.

³ Barbara Vinken, *Fashion Zeitgeist: Trends and Cycles in the Fashion System*, trans. M. Hewson, Berg, Oxford and New York, 2005, p. 69.

⁴ Georg Simmel, 'Fashion, Adornment and Style', in D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds), *Simmel on Culture*, Sage, London, 1997, p. 204.

⁵ 'Susannah' in Zoe Edwards, 'Make Do and Mend: Darning', <<http://www.coletterie.com/tutorials-tips-tricks/make-do-and-mend-darning>>.

- ⁶ Giselle Walker and Elizabeth Leedham-Green, 'Introduction', in G. Walker and E. Leedham-Green (eds), *Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 4.
- ⁷ Lesley Chamberlain, *A Shoe Story: Van Gogh, the Philosophers and the West*, Harbour, Chelmsford, 2014, p. 85.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88. Through Heidegger's letters and writings, Chamberlain traces his influences back to the medieval philosopher and theologian, Duns Scotus, as well as to the poets Rainer Maria Rilke and Gerard Manley Hopkins and artists Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2005.
- ¹¹ Peter Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things', in D. Ben-Amos and L. Weissberg (eds), *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1999, p. 39.
- ¹² Philip Roth, *Patrimony*, in Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds', p. 33.
- ¹³ Colm Tóibín, *The Master*, Picador, London, 2004, p. 266.
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ Jean Cocteau, *Beauty and the Beast: Diary of a Film*, Dover, Mineola, 1972, p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds', p. 31.
- ¹⁷ A more sinister ghostly inhabitation of clothing by the dead appears in James's early short story, *The Romance of Certain Old Clothes*, in which a dead wife gets her revenge when a promise is broken. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who brought this text, as well as others, to my attention.
- ¹⁸ Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds', p. 28.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ²⁰ Elizabeth Wilson, 'Magic Fashion', *Fashion Theory*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2004, p. 379.
- ²¹ Elizabeth Wilson, 'Notes on Fashion as Fetish', *Vestoj*, no. 2, 2011, p. 190.
- ²² Wilson, 'Notes on Fashion as Fetish', p. 189.
- ²³ Wilson, 'Magic Fashion', p. 379.
- ²⁴ Wilson, 'Notes on Fashion as Fetish', p. 189.
- ²⁵ The authoritative 'text' (used by both Wilson and Stallybrass) on the history of theories of fetishism is a series of essays by William Pietz called 'The Problem of the Fetish', published in the journal, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1985, 1987, 1988.
- ²⁶ William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa: Bosman's Guinea and the Enlightenment Theory of Fetishism', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 16, 1988, p. 107.
- ²⁷ John Atkins quoted in Pietz, p. 110. Atkins was an English slaver and the author of *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies, in His Majesty's Ships the Swallow and Weymouth*, London, 1737.
- ²⁸ Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', p. 186.

²⁹ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³¹ Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', p. 183.

³² Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 64.

³³ Mauss quoted in Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', p. 185.

³⁴ Jones and Stallybrass, p. 4.

³⁵ Kopytoff, p. 64.

³⁶ *Ibid.* The terms 'commodification' and 'commoditisation' are commonly listed as synonyms (see, for example, OED). Douglas Rushkoff helpfully distinguishes between the two:

"Commodification" is a somewhat Marxist idea, referring to the way that market values can replace other social values ... "Commoditization" [refers] specifically to the way that goods that used to be distinguishable in terms of attributes end up becoming mere commodities in the eyes of the market or consumers. Commodification is more of a crime of the market against humanity, while commoditization is more of a market problem for the manufacturers of branded goods'. (Douglas Rushkoff, 'Commodified vs. Commoditized', <<http://www.rushkoff.com/commodified-vs-commoditized/>>.)

In anthropology, however, the two terms are used interchangeably with 'commoditisation' the more common. Although Appadurai uses the latter term, in the interests of clarity, here I have mostly retained the terminology of commodification.

³⁷ Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', p. 196.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁹ Kopytoff, p. 69.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 75.

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