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4-29-2019

### Unraveling Ethos: the Commodification of Ethical Clothing

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Unraveling Ethos: the Commodification of Ethical Clothing  
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21 April 2019

Abstract: In the last decade there has been a noticeable attempt to subvert traditional modes of clothing production. The recent emergence of “ethical consumption” in the fashion industry is a case in point. This project argues that these new formations and practices around ethical consumption are mere appropriations of anti-corporate politics and sentiments for consumers in the West. Signification of ethical consumption through language and cultural capital give more value to individual articles of clothing and branded entities. This reformation of the clothing industry towards an ethical attitude is a rebranding tactic that avoids the source-issue altogether. Through advertising and normalization of globalized labor, it is not the part of the consumer to take responsibility for the harms the fashion industry perpetuates. It is the system itself by which clothing is produced that need to be changed, not brands added. The fashion industry needs less and better, not more.

Keywords: ethical clothing, ethical consumption, sustainability, globalization, labor, commodity feminism, individualization

Function and aesthetics defined clothing's development as a cultural signifier and practice, but a contemporary look at clothing as an industry reveals a labor crisis disproportionately affecting women of the Third World. Humans need clothing. Mass produced textiles for "fast fashion," however, necessitated by a globalized economy export labor and displace workplace regulation with some of the most cited human rights violations and pay discrepancies existing in international markets. Despite frequent whistleblowing on brands like Zara, Nike, H&M, Gap, and Adidas (along with countless others) for poor working conditions, business largely remains unaffected. "Fast fashion's" legacy embodies the cycling between popularity of mass production, revelations on the conditions needed to maintain mass production, and subsequent deafness to the implications of the structure. One can view ethical fashion, then, as a response to the problematic nature of mass-produced clothing and one possible solution to fast fashion's infringement on labor conditions.

The distinction between ethics in a philosophical sense and how it is termed to describe apparel is necessary for this ethical fashion's functionality. This is not an existential use of ethics but a moral one, tied to a set of business practices within the industry and its relationship to labor. Upon first glance ethical fashion (also called sustainable, conscious, eco-friendly, or slow fashion) presented a viable response to the needs of new shopping models from the last 10 years. The term is directly related to conditions surrounding commodity production. Efrat Tseëlon goes into depth about this in the introduction to *Fashion and Ethics*, defining the term as one "that incorporates positive ethical practices such as environmental, social and economic responsibility" (5). Perhaps the most curious aspect of ethical fashion's modality is its ability to signify a wide variety of concepts. Tseëlon cites it as a "moving target" (5), made to reference either a commitment to the "green" lifestyle (recycling, organic fabrics, lessened water usage,

biodegradable packaging, etc.) or to negate labor injustices (mainly to do with fair wages and safe worker conditions).

Social media environments created a fast access to and a proliferation of information detailing the origins of purchasable commodities to a potential consumer base. This online exposure created an inverse effect on fast and ethical fashion alike. Consumers grew to favor companies who advertised a sustainable production process in lieu of corporate corruption. Tragedies such as the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh exposed the price cheap clothing pays with a death toll of over a thousand and 2,500 injured. Garment worker complaints the day before about cracks in the building's structure went ignored as it became the deadliest clothing factory incident in history. This spurred the creation of documentaries such as *The True Cost*, one of the most-cited pieces of media surrounding the renunciation of fast fashion. Rana Plaza turned into a highlight of the documentary juxtaposed against First World greed, with purveyors of fast fashion deemed the source of the problem. A similar scandal appeared in 2015 around a campaign with celebrities wearing t-shirts that read, "This is what a feminist looks like." Reporters revealed women in Mauritius made the shirts for less than a dollar an hour and subsequent articles quickly noted the hypocrisy. *The Guardian* labelled the co-opting of social movements via promotional goods for profit as an example of commodity feminism and opted for consumers to boycott (Hoskins). Despite the difference in severity, both events as publicized by the media illustrate how ethical fashion appeared as an answer to fast fashion's blight upon garment worker lives.

Individual consumers base participation in ethical consumption as an opposition to sweatshops and abusive labor conditions when its rise is actually symptomatic of the current state of capitalism, globalization, and technology. The way ethical clothing companies

participating in this paradigm brand themselves is entirely cognizant of that individuality. The focus shifts to the lone consumer without questioning or ultimately challenging the structures that allow injustices like Rana Plaza to happen, which generates more profit through a combination of Western guilt and Western affluence. Targeted advertising uses ethical clothing's language of ethos to attract customers, which customers internalize as a 'good practice.' These clothes then signify ethical shopping, thus generating a kind of wearable cultural capital. This capstone aims to provide an analysis for this virtue signaling through a Saussurean sign analysis of the advertising and how this ethos relates to Marxist sensibilities about commodity production.

In the first section of *Capital Vol. I* Marx uses linen and coats to describe how commodities obtain monetary value through the process of exchange (Marx 163). In a way, this is one of the earliest theoretical discussions about capitalism's relationship to clothing, and perhaps, its ethical implications. His choice to examine the way linen becomes a coat not only shows an accessible example of how value is created, but also shows how long industrial garment production has dealt with labor injustices. However, what this capstone discusses is something Marx never could have conceived of. In "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret," he writes:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the

products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. (174)

What this means in the production of clothing specifically has to do with its assemblage and manufacturing. This means one person cuts the fabric, another sews, another packs it for shipping, and so on, with each worker being paid less than the total sum of each coat worked on. This is also where the ethical clothing distinction and the problematic nature of its branding can begin.

From a consumer standpoint the value placed on ethical clothing is based in the difference of its labor from fast fashion counterparts, and there is indeed great merit in this stance. For a fast fashion garment to come out with a retail value that is cheap for Westerners, the cost of shipping, fabric, and production mean each worker is making mere pennies per hour. This measly wage does not include any variety of other labor infractions, such as long work hours, poor working conditions, or lack of access to unions. Ethical fashion asks: what happens when clothing is made using sustainably-sourced fabrics with workers who make a livable wage? While the question itself is not so nebulous, this concept has become contradictory in its proclamation. The way ethical clothing is branded through various cultural signifiers implicates choice as the zenith of salvation in an economic system that is inherently tied to exploitation.

The branding and advertising strategies of these companies ultimately has roots behind what fashion means in a semiotic sense. In Fred Davis' "Do Clothes Speak? What Makes Them Fashion?" he describes the code and signifier/signified systems by which fashion operates culturally within our (read: Western) society. Clothing in and of itself only consists of a variety of things. Initially he states the categories: "fabric, texture, color, pattern, volume, silhouette, occasion" (Davis 149), but the contexts of how meaning can be produced are ever-changing, as

fashion does season to season. He notes that this context is static as well: "...what some combination of clothes or a certain style emphasis 'means' will vary tremendously depending on the identity of the wearer, the occasion, the place, the company..." (Davis 151). What he describes has more to do with different ways one might view the same garment or textile and how that functions as a relationship to society. However, the signified/signifier relationship can be applied to ethical clothing as well, despite it lacking a completely uniform look. What is unique about this particular facet of the fashion industry is that it is not so much a style, but a lifestyle the consumers are buying into.

The signifiers Davis describes have more to do with highlighting differences between the fashion-savvy elite and mainstream ready-to-wear's personal taste in clothing, but ethical fashion can easily be put under the scope of this framework. On a visual level many ethical brands tend to have a similar aesthetic. Clean, timeless silhouettes are used to last in the wardrobe for years to come. Neutral or muted colors tone the fabric because of organic dyes. Simple but secure stitching lessens impact on the garment worker. These are a few of the ways to spot these clothes in someone else's closet. However, in the same way that Balenciaga or Ralph Lauren's connotations have to do with their branded identity, the same goes for the purveyors of ethical brands. Instead of frivolous wealth, this becomes spending with a moral intention behind it. This transaction of capital is now rendered with a purpose for the betterment of society on behalf of the consumer.

One identifier of ethical clothing based on social media and website production alone is the "About" section. The purpose of this separate page is to give an insight onto the values and production of the brand. While mainstream brands will list clothing available and omit any personal statement, ethical brands almost always assert the intention of the company in an

attempt to lift the veil behind who is making these clothes in order to give insight and foster a connection between the clothing and the manufacturer. It is in these strategies where ethical buzzwords come into play to signify to the potential consumer that there is merit in purchasing this clothing as opposed to their unethical counterparts. Many use the words ethical and sustainable themselves, but also include (and are not limited to): clean, radical, natural, transparency, green, mindful, responsibility, activist, local, organic, empowerment, impact, intentional, etc. These words create a cultural connotation in the mind of the ethically-minded consumer to signify that these companies know what refers to this set of practices in this lens of ethical fashion, and to encourage purchase of their products.

While all branding discussed in this capstone is inevitably in the pursuit of capital, some of these ethical brands have been criticized more than others for being outright insidious in the nature of their statement. Outrage was expressed recently over the brand Carcel, a Danish company who employs incarcerated Peruvian and Thai women to manufacture their clothing. Carcel co-opts ideas surrounding feminism and ethical fashion to fulfill a of white savior complex within the structure and name of their company. While most brands do not take such an extreme position in regard to their globalized workforce, information listed on the website states that a monthly salary towards a Thai worker is around \$256, but when looking at the prices for their alpaca wool sweaters, the total comes out to \$244 per garment (Carcel). This cost overhead can be analyzed on their fair wages page in the price breakdown but defending the use of imprisoned women in the Third World as the entire labor force while up-charging to that price point is a blatant overuse of commodity feminism.

It is this kind of co-opting of belief systems and values that are taking place behind the usage of these words, ideas, and moral values. Similarly, the brand Indigenous uses the faces of



artisanal workers in Peru who (along with their name) signify the ties back to the earth for their branding strategy. There are pages on their website where you can meet the workers, using pictures of Quechua weavers and knitters whose identity centers around the same name of the company. A myriad of meanings can be conveyed here and understood through the effects of this marketing. The smiling brown faces in this particular “About” section correlate to a happy workplace. The backstories behind these women and the farms where the organic materials come from give a sense of authenticity, one that speaks to the healthy environment of the clothing’s origins. The very name Indigenous suggests there a connection to being socially conscious and aware, which can then be applied to the origins of this clothing.

These tactics are some of the most blatant uses of branding to portray cultural meanings by any of the clothing companies within ethical fashion but overall, they are on a smaller scale of production and not widely-known within the community. When talking about the way meaning is conveyed by and through clothing advertisements, modeling, and “About” section lingo, The Reformation takes the lead in conveying purpose through strategic branding. The Reformation has made a sizeable name for itself within the last decade with over a million Instagram followers at the time of this writing and constant mentions singing praises within ethical fashion bloggers online. The very name itself is not as tied into the labor production, as was Carcel, and it’s not as appropriative of marginalized identities, as Indigenous. However, the name does suggest change and an upheaval transition from of old practices to for new ones. The Instagram biography advertises that “Being naked is the #1 sustainable option. We’re #2”, suggesting an empowered space where women can choose to buy their clothing through the lens of this ethical paradigm. In this subsequent “About” section The Reformation lists what it does to offset the carbon costs of typical clothing manufacturing and dispersal: eco-friendly lighting and power

sources at the factories, sustainable and fairly waged workers at partner textile manufacturing, textiles that are themselves from easily farmed sources (such as eucalyptus, which uses less water than the high-impact of cotton) or otherwise deadstock fabric, active efforts to save water production and carbon dioxide emissions through their factories, eco-friendly packaging, largely recycled waste, the list goes on. Their mission statement and sustainability report is updated on their website each quarter for reviewing by any potential customer wishing to make the switch (Reformation).

While the choice to put these ideals upfront and at the core of The Reformation's brand strategy can be played off as a selling vantage, perhaps the most interesting aspect of their clothing design and production lies not within the sustainable aspects themselves, nor any ploy within the marketing. Rather, it is their sizing and the implications within the bodies being advertised. The Reformation constantly comes under criticism from women larger than a US size 12, smaller than the national average of 16-18 (George-Parkin), for cosigning the long-standing issue of high-quality clothing only able to be worn by thin women. While the brand did launch a plus size line in the last year, the clothing to choose from over their main line is scarce. As of this paper all that are available are five pairs of jeans for plus sizes while straight sizes carry well over one hundred varieties of dresses, coats, blouses, and other garments tailored to accentuate a thin body. When one looks at their Instagram account the women shown in almost every image are skinny and white, save for the spare token Black model or the plus-sized woman with an (still socially acceptable) hourglass figure. There have been debates around what the implications of only having straight sizes can mean, but what this implies within the context of this capstone can be read quite easily. The only people who are allowed to obtain this brand's ethical clothing are the ones who can quite literally fit into it. Excluding the sizes that most women in the United

States wear from this branded narrative of the ethical woman in flowy blouses and wind-whipped wrap dresses marks difference in any non-thin body. Or rather, bodies above a women's size 12 do not fit into their ethical paradigm.

In this context and through The Reformation's advertising, the ethically clothed woman has to not only be beautiful and (primarily) white, but skinny as well. This model for manufacturing is generally accepted by the larger fashion houses, who have a long-standing legacy of worship of the white and thin model. However, within sustainable fashion the clothing is already tied to a moral set of values by the wearer. The larger contexts these clothing brands provide by and through the implications of wearing their products imply through this process of exclusion. The goal and outreach of their brand performance is already filled with lofty world-saving ideals, so who quite literally does not fit The Reformation's standard has equally as large of a significance.

Another place to explore the connotations of wearing these clothing brands is through the lens of the fashion blogger on YouTube. A simple search for ethical or sustainable fashion immediately yields thousands of results, many with hauls (a video cataloging each item a person bought after shopping en masse) featuring brands like The Reformation in tandem with follow-up videos about the dangers of fast fashion and the importance of shopping ethically (Hawkinson). Through the wearing of these clothes and having followers view one's politics within in an outfit for the already-branded persona of a vlogger, it is the spectacle of embodying the morals of ethical fashion people

An example of this a video by vlogger Sarah Hawkinson detailing the methods of her shopping. She apologizes to the viewer, talking about the constant stream of commenters who spoke ill of the brands she previously had recorded haul videos for, including fast fashion giants

like H&M, Urban Outfitters, or Forever 21. She repeats that she was “willfully ignorant,” going in depth about how her participation in buying clothes from these brands was, in turn, directly supporting sweatshop labor (Hawkinson). It was not until she had watched *The True Cost* that the realization of where these clothes come from came to fruition for her, a common awakening point for many former fast fashion shoppers by way of a documentary that centers itself around the Rana Plaza collapsing in Bangladesh. Between this hard-to-swallow knowledge of the conditions garment workers in the Third World face, as well as pressure from thousands of subscribers, Sarah now promotes the ethical lifestyle. This not only entails reusable shopping bags over plastic and other waste-saving techniques (commonly referred to as “going green”) but buying only vintage or ethically sourced brands of clothing as well.

What she goes on to say in the rest of the video, however, describes a point of contention within the ethical shopping paradigm: the decision to switch to a sustainable lifestyle does not impact the way she interacts with shopping. She instead focuses on thrifting, saying that shopping is a “hobby, something I truly truly love.” While she may be buying less overall the hauls are an essential part to her YouTube channel at this point in her career as a vlogger. The connotation to this new lifestyle she’s embraced is one of guilt-free buying, as no longer do her purchases directly support the companies that cause so much strife and pain to overseas workers. While there are hundreds of other YouTubers doing the exact same thing by making this switch, what this means for ethical clothing is that brand names such as The Reformation by association are equated to this set of ethics within the fashion industry. Buying from these brands exhumes the consumer of questioning this innate nature to constantly buy. By virtue of this, the symbolic nature of ethical fashion holds more meaning than the items of clothing themselves.

It is this nature of the haul video as a method to consume and flaunt that provides a contradiction within this ethical context. If the purpose of ethical fashion is to alleviate various boons of consumption, the haul becomes its antithesis. Another vlogger on YouTube by the handle bestdressed succinctly describes the issues with this format when discussing an all-sustainable haul she did in collaboration with vintage reselling site The Real Real. Despite lamenting about the price of the dress, she goes on to say “The whole point of this haul is to support sustainable brands... [I’m trying to] realize I should pay people a fair wage and support companies that I like” (“SUSTAINABLE HAUL”). With over five hundred thousand views on this particular video and over a million followers, Ashley of bestdressed surmises the best aspects of ethical fashion without ultimately questioning the nature of these buying habits to her large audience. Regardless of the sustainable aspects of the clothing she buys, the pursuit of the haul video and the incessant need to keep buying is what facilitates capital in the first place.

Within capitalism, this emphasis to buy differently is stark in the current economy where more choices are available to consumers than ever before. In a technological climate where the effects of waste are well-known and easily accessible it’s hard not to translate the guilt through buying products that might lessen the impact on the environment. However, capitalism in its ugliest, most wasteful forms does not stop once the consumer begins their sustainable, ethical fashion journey. If anything, it only packages these ideas under new, more appealing names. Last year fast fashion giant H&M joined in on the effort to make sustainability a new goal under their enterprise, announcing a line specifically with fairly sourced products and wages, and a goal to have a “climate positive value chain by 2040” (“Sustainability Report”). This may seem like the company has been paying its dues after criticism over unjust labor practices for so long. However, a wariness remains of what it would actually constitute for one of the biggest names in

the fast fashion industry to create a positive impact on the climate, despite continuously churning out the sheer volume of clothing (and consequently profit) H&M does. If this cycle of consumption and subsequent waste is what causes the biggest impact on the environment, it is only natural to see this effort by H&M as a way to strategize and buy into a new branding tactic in order to absolve responsibility and stay relevant.

Politicizing marginalized identities is another way ethical clothing works to persuade buyers into believing the hype. Appealing to the sensibilities of the Western woman shopper is essential to the marketing and branding of these companies. The fashion industry itself is catered around a necessity to sell. Women's buying power as a method to create tangible change both to the Third World and the environment are co-opted into branding strategies. Naomi Klein describes an aspect of this in a chapter of *No Logo* titled, "The Patriarchy Gets Funky." Representation is used as a tool to turn everything into a political statement, even when this statement is to get more young women to buy clothing. This notion is effervescent in the ethical clothing sphere of influence. She writes, "in the absence of more tangible political goals, any movement that is about fighting for better social mirrors is going to eventually fall victim to its own narcissism," (Klein 109). The way ethical clothing companies do this specifically through mentioning the gendered dynamic of women workers is not a means to an end when there is no viable opportunity for these women outside of the factories they labor at. This branded feminism is co-opted in a way that is palatable for consumption as women in the West see a glimpse of themselves in the garment worker of the Global South. The globalized labor force for garment making, similar to the consumer base for ethical fashion in the West, is also overwhelmingly comprised of women. Draws between feminized labor to upsell the idea of the working Third World woman are another way ethical fashion gives merit to overseas garment workers. This is

an evolved form of the consumerism Angela McRobbie describes from her piece on *Sex and the City*, which goes into detail about how the show and its materialist pining from the characters created a real-life shoe and designer habit from its viewers. The commodity feminism she writes of becomes inferred automatically through shows like *SATC* and the ever-present branding of clothing for women. In exchange for representation of the strong female character or branded entity is the belief system that subscribing to the ideologies of these media teaches how to buy and consume (McRobbie 547). The ethical clothing paradigm is an evolved conception of this. No longer are women latently taught that buying and consuming will say, exhume their heartbreak from men. What ethical clothing can do is shroud this tactic through the possibilities of changing the world.

Perhaps one of the most harrowing aspects of the ethical paradigm and its relationship to capital is in trying to navigate different aspects of exploitation involved with the clothing production process. One does not have to go very far to know that the labor realities of clothing today come at the expense of people in a continued relationship contingent on a world-wide network of garment factories. Take any article out of most closets and more than likely the tags will cite countries of origin in the Global South. The way ethical fashion fits into this network of globalized labor is contingent on the exploitation of countries whose work is not valued nearly as much as it is in the West, and this is a critical fault in how it is marketed. This is separate from (but related to) the system that creates connotations towards seemingly “natural” sensibilities and infers a relationship to the identity of the customer. An ethical clothing giant that portrays various characteristics of this is the company Everlane.

When visiting the Everlane “About” page the tagline to the title reads: “Our way. Exceptional quality. Ethical factories. Radical Transparency” before presenting links about

processes by which the clothing is constructed, produced, shipped out and sold (“We believe...”). A big difference between their product and the majority of what constitutes ethical clothing currently is the price point: many of the clothes are in a more affordable mid-range, with pieces selling between \$50-150 USD to make a distinction from swaths of other companies selling single items for a minimum of \$200. The branding of Everlane is dependent on their prices by featuring several pieces in a pay-what-you-can system so that anybody who wants to make the switch to ethical clothing can still partake. Each item of clothing has the overhead costs cut and pays only for the hard cost of the garment, so the customer can buy for the lowest price. It’s certainly a unique experience compared to the notoriously expensive Reformation, where dresses easily retail for over \$200 and there is no description on the website for how much is being priced to overhead costs in the production of each garment.

Where Everlane has an interesting take on the way the clothing is marketed within its network of globalized labor and the way it is advertised on the website. A few clicks into the about section links to a map across the world showing where certain products are made, with a short write up on each specific factory. The inverse of this exists as well. When clicking on a piece to purchase there is a link to the specific factory of origin said clothing came from. The cheaper items tend to be produced from places like Vietnam or China, while the artisanal leather goods and other similar wares come out of Italy. In the labor breakdown for a \$20 t-shirt the site states the actual labor of sewing cost \$3.65 per garment. Compare this to their leather sandal made in Italy, where labor cost \$20 to make each pair, and it becomes evident that the gap in pricing is connected to the worth of labor within each specific country. Quite literally, the worth of the work appears to be determined by where the products come from, regardless of Everlane’s labor sourcing and rigid code of conduct for their factories. A list of traits routinely audited



include things like “child labor” or “human trafficking/slavery”. While this is a baseline ethical standard to abide by, it is listed in a way that serves as a merit to the company as opposed to what it should be, which is the norm (“Vendor Code of Conduct”). The fact that a slogan including the word “radical” is partnered with the idea that factories should not employ children perhaps says more about the clothing industry at large rather than Everlane in particular. Despite information being largely beneficial when available to consumers at large, the contradiction appears when a company is praised by the ethical clothing community for engaging with this kind of practice when it is in their advantage sales-wise to do so. This should be the standard, not exceptional.

The nature of globalized manufacturing practices and subsequent evolution over the last century are key in the ways power is manifested and held to subjugate so-called developing countries over developed ones. The horrors of what can come out of these kinds of production are inherent through simple search of where any mainstream clothing company’s product comes from. For example, it is common knowledge that Nike and Adidas use sweatshops. The public is aware of these things. Where the issue with Everlane comes into play is in how this level of transparency ends up being played out within the personal statements on their website. It is an attempt to not only make this production sound normal, but make it sound like this aids the Third World by giving opportunities through labor. In the description of the Kanaan Saigon Co. factory in Ho Chih Minh, somewhere Everlane seeks production from, it is described as a gem in a world full of textile production. The usage of this factory justifies the reasons for globalized production vis-à-vis employment despite a context-dependent and staggered relationship between the Third World and the West for outsourcing. In *No Nonsense Globalization*, Wayne Ellwood writes of the problems that arise through the sought-after labor in more disenfranchised

countries: “Instead of a homogenized global culture shaped by the narrow demands of the ‘money economy’, there is a resurgent push for equity and sustainability... The aim is for an economic system more connected to real human needs and aspirations- and less geared to the anti-human machinations of the corporate-led free market” (Ellwood 142). To have fairly waged labor be portrayed as a higher standard when is to uplift the idea that outsourcing and these globalized networks of production are necessary for capital to exist and maintain itself.

The Everlane model blends conceptions of female and globalized labor with the portrayal of women workers as some sort of girl power enterprise. The national identity and gender of the working woman in the Third World suddenly becomes politicized as this inherently good thing, despite jobs where the products factory workers produce are sold at a higher price than what their salaries could afford. Everlane uses this to their advantage in their promotion of their partnered factories. The very virtue of the workers being women is enough to warrant a mention in the blurbs describing these places where their clothing comes from. MAS Holdings in Sri Lanka, for example, employs a 73,000-person workforce that is “mostly women”. Nobland Vietnam Co. Ltd. is mentioned to have a female president (“Factories”). The listing of this gendered labor by Everlane becomes a way to normalize the systems by which these women work en masse to clothe Westerners.

Where the ethical consumer sits in the decision to shop today is intertwined between these ideas of what is being marketed and the realities of production. While this form of branding is nothing new, it is precise in its tactic of subtlety. While not every consumer may take the time to read up on each factory Everlane partners with, the very virtue of its availability is an example of its morality in the eyes of the Western shopper. Naomi Klein describes this in the form of revelations companies had in the late 90’s: “The first was that consumer companies would only

survive if they built corporate empires around ‘brand identities.’ The second was that the ballooning youth demographic held the key to market success” (Klein 112). Branding this image of the female worker and framing it as a rights issue erases the globalized procedures put in place to make her do so while simultaneously selling that identity relationship to young feminists in the West. To the ethical clothing brand, the very awareness of its production creates a level of trust. Any amount of transparency from the brand is enough warrant loyalty from the consumer base, no matter what the realities of the production are, regardless of the way commodities flow across the world at large.

Lastly, the way ethical clothing distinguishes itself from other clothes is within its price point. The obvious result of paying higher wages to garment workers and ensuring quality fabric is within the prices of each garment. Elizabeth Suzann is an example of one such ethical clothing company that exudes these qualities, with something as simple as a linen t-shirt retailing well over one hundred dollars. As far as garment production in the West is concerned this is about as close to being enmeshed with ethical practices as much as possible. All of the clothing orders are made and processed by a small team of garment workers in Nashville, Tennessee. The fabrics are organic and responsibly sourced from farms from the US, China, Korea, Japan, and New Zealand, specifically chosen for being natural fibers with the durability to last and biodegrade. The processes and facilities are routinely shown on their modest-sized Instagram featuring spotless white warehouse, the main site of production. The amount of overhead needed to sustain not just a livable but thriving wage in the United States is something not found in many Western clothing companies. This is especially prevalent in America where nearly all labor is outsourced (and if it is within the country, more often than not it is prison produced). Calling back to Elon Tseëfrat’s definition of ethical fashion’s traits, Elizabeth Suzann appears to hit all of the marks

for the conscious shopper. With the routine tests the ES team performs on durability and composability, not only is the fair labor aspect involved in the product, but there is minimal impact on the environment when the garment retires. Save for the lack of knowledge around the origins of the materials, it is about as close to perfect within the paradigm as a shopper could get.

However, the reality remains that if someone were to adopt the ethical lifestyle and make a full switch to eco-conscious living within their wardrobe it would be far from affordable. Elizabeth Suzann maintains high costs of each garment in order to sustain the ways it can produce such a high-quality and ethically sound item. This is purely on the basis that it is necessary to do so in order to set the standard the company swears by. Similar to The Reformation's exclusion via sizing, amorality automatically granted to the poor who could not afford to collect such expensive pieces. While each garment may be sustainable in the sense that they hit every mark of the paradigm's list, this is not the price point an average American could afford. Cultural Studies scholar Rimi Khan discusses this contradiction in her analysis of the documentary, *The True Cost*. She writes: "Ethical fashion tends to be more expensive than its fast fashion counterpart but this is understood as an investment worth making if one is serious about being a responsible consumer-citizen. In this way buying (into) ethical fashion becomes a marker of social distinction. It requires particular forms of both cultural and economic capital, to which different women have varying levels of access." Simply put, "affordability is a significant constraint on consumption choice" (Khan 9).

Perhaps this is ethical clothing's greatest paradox. The closer a garment gets to being produced and sustained in a way that nets a positive worth for consumer and planet, the further its accessibility becomes towards people who do not have a hundreds of dollars of disposable income.

Inherently this ties back into the system that reinforces the branding. The targeting of identity and ethos combine in this way to create a complex that could only emerge in this climate disaster imminent world, where the technology provided allows easy access to information about the state of labor conditions or environment. Social media is constantly bombarded with news stories about how unsustainable capitalism really is, creating a kneejerk response to turn to ethical shopping in order to exhume some sort of responsibility. In a world where individual choices are politicized and made to mean something tangible, this logic is sound. However, the focus put on individuals and singular companies to try and change things for the better limits the scope of change. The way companies like Everlane, The Reformation, and Elizabeth Suzann work is to just give another option to buyers without challenging or changing the structure of how clothing is produced today, despite toting an ethical, conscious, and mindful outlook that is used as a brand.

Perhaps in the past few years it has become apparent that this is where the consumer focus is headed as effects of climate change are felt almost everywhere. This is evident in the fact that H&M is working to become a more sustainable brand despite constantly churning out new, cheap clothing, but it is not enough. The flows are still in place to subjugate countries outside of North America and Europe all while divesting the workforce within those countries from using their labor to affect their communities on a local level. Given that the West is all too tied to a global network of production, simply choosing to buy differently is not enough. Consumers need to want more for the betterment of society and for the people whose hands have touched the commodities that are so easily able to use and dispose of; especially for something as ubiquitous as clothing. The true question of this ethical paradigm is in its longevity and its ability to sell so well. At what point does this stop becoming a way to give shoppers a new option and

turn that option into a place for profit? The way commodities work within capitalism is in pursuit of inevitable drive for surplus of goods and capital alike. Consumption and efforts to sustain itself is inherently an unethical process at the behest of the laborer. Ultimately the ethical clothing paradigm is merely an instrument used by companies in the pursuit of profit. Commodification of ethical consumption in this nature only reinforces the market without challenging the economic structure by which clothing is made, or even necessarily challenging the globalized production of clothing rampant today.

Perhaps an apt note to end on is Naomi Klein's commencement speech at the College of the Atlantic. She describes the workers she visited in Indonesia and the Philippines to do research for *No Logo*:

...One thing I found slightly jarring was that some of these same workers wore clothing festooned with knockoff trademarks of the very multinationals that were responsible for these conditions: Disney characters or Nike check marks. At one point, I asked a local labor organizer about this. Wasn't it strange—a contradiction?

It took a very long time for him to understand the question. When he finally did, he looked at me like I was nuts. You see, for him and his colleagues, individual consumption wasn't considered to be in the realm of politics at all. Power rested not in what you did as one person, but what you did as many people, as one part of a large, organize, and focused movement. For him, this meant organizing works to go on strike for better conditions, and eventually it meant winning the right to unionize. What you ate for lunch or happened to be wearing was of absolutely no concern whatsoever.

This was striking to me, because it was the mirror opposite of my culture back home in Canada. Where I came from, you expressed your political beliefs—firstly and very often lastly—through personal lifestyle choices. By loudly proclaiming your vegetarianism. By shopping fair trade and local and boycotting big, evil brands. (Klein)

Where this holds merit is within the space between the individual and the collective.

Later in the speech Klein goes on to say that nothing can truly happen in this world if we don't push for a better future for everybody equally, not in a savior complex sense, but to the benefit of all of humanity. Where we stand as global citizens, however, especially in tangent to other like-minded people is key in this shifting for the clothing industry towards better horizons.

The ethical clothing industry is tailored to allow individuals to assume the role of activist through buying when it is this endless need for consumption that facilitates these brands to thrive. Instead of buying into these notions, the West should focus efforts into ending the systems of harm that are perpetuated by the role of capitalism contingent in the purchasing of clothing instead of politicizing the identities of Third World women for the sake of self-serving feminist tendencies. We need less, not different.

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