Costuming Potential: Accommodating Unworn Clothes[*]

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Mindful of theoretical discourses developed in anthropology, folklore, and material culture studies, this article uses preliminary findings from an ethnographic case study conducted in Bloomington, Indiana amongst recent college graduates to examine not only the "why" of keeping unworn clothing in America, but more importantly the "how." Previous studies of kept clothing—as well as of saved belongings more generally—have almost exclusively highlighted the positive emotional and existential benefits of keeping for owners. This article complicates that picture by focusing on objects characterized by their owners as burdens. By attending closely to the historical, geographical, and socially-situated reality of its subjects, this exploratory investigation offers new insights into practical strategies for manipulating normative values attached to clothing and easing feelings of ambivalence connected with their continued accommodation. [Keywords: dress, costume, value, exchange, circulation]

Introduction

While researching the wardrobes and household management practices of recent college graduates in Bloomington, Indiana from 2005 to 2006, I was struck by a particular category of possessions presented with obvious feelings of embarrassment or ambivalence.[1] When pressed, owners often claimed "I don't know why I still have this; I don't really want it," while simultaneously expressing great reluctance to give it up. This emic category—a category, in the case of clothing, defined by the owner as unwearable without hope for reintroduction—is comprised of commodities, mass-produced consumer products, that enter owners' homes through purchase or gift with the hope of serving conventional utilitarian roles, but for a variety of reasons have either failed or ceased to please. Yet, counter to the typical view of disposable commodities, these possessions are not divested and instead continue as mental and physical burdens for their owners. Certainly, not all unused belongings become burdensome, suggesting there is much room for further inquiry and examination. I offer these preliminary findings in an effort to open new discussions concerning the important topic of material accommodation in industrial and post-industrial societies.

Material culture scholars have become increasingly interested in aspects beyond production and consumption to explore the practices of disposal and the second-lives of objects through re-circulation and reuse (e.g., Glass 2008; Gregson 2007; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Hansen 2000; Lucas 2002; Norris 2004, 2010). A less studied stage in an object's life cycle is the possible

liminal zone of unwanted or conflicted accommodation, not as a desired part of an ever-growing collection—its presence justified as integral for dreams of completion or improved connoisseurship—but as a weight ambivalently retained. Capitalism in western societies saturates our lives in material clutter, promises us happiness and self-fulfillment through accumulation and ownership. Not all commodities, however, are easily alienated bric-a-brac, readily discarded or replaced. It is perhaps not surprising why people hold onto objects in light of theories of objectification in which agents require external forms to help fix inchoate ideas of self and of the world (see Graeber 2001:115; Miller 1987, 2001a; Tilley 2006); people make objects, but they also use objects to make themselves. Once items become imbued with social or personal meanings, erected as individualized signs of events, relationships, or aspects of biographical and social identity, draining them of those meanings or sending them back into circulation can foster feelings of guilt, loss, or failure. The existing literature on kept objects has largely focused on how these belongings are "fundamental in conceptualizing and symbolizing the self," enumerating their positive associations and ties to prized memories (e.g., Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989:329; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halmon 1981). In relation to this case study, I am more interested in those objects that are deemed deficient in this regard by their owners. While the "why" of keeping in the West has been explicitly, though not exhaustively, explored, the "how"—both physically and intellectually—has not been addressed so fully. How do individuals in the United States justify to themselves and to others the retention of *unwanted* objects in the face of dominant discourses against certain types of hoarding and waste, especially of commodities deemed disposable or lacking in utility, such as unworn clothing?

This article uses a small, but detailed case study to extract larger principles about kept clothing for further exploration. Dress is always situated within interlocking social and cultural contexts in which the individual must navigate the gray area that we all inhabit between personal and shared understanding. To truly appreciate the complexity and the possibilities for creative agency, scholars cannot neglect the very small, but important acts of situated daily life that may otherwise be left out of the "official" record. Ethical histories are built through the accumulation of patient ethnographies. Therefore, with this study, I offer another step in the ongoing examination of clothing's expressive potential on and off the body.

The Burden of Unworn Clothes

Clothing offers an interesting window into the world of kept objects since this category of belongings is readily recognized in the West as exhibiting characteristics of both artistic creations (either of designers or of consumers who select and personalize outfits) and of mass-produced commodities circulating in impersonal product chains. Normative, but highly variable, expectations govern the compiling of clothing necessary for various social contexts and cleanliness, revealing diverse opinions as to the optimum size and range of clothing collections. Because wardrobes accumulate slowly over time, they may demonstrate the evolution of someone's tastes and circumstances, leaving a fossilized record of past selves in kept clothing. While scholars of Western dress practices continue to augment the vast documentation of clothing's expressive capabilities when connected to human bodies, far fewer have explored the meaningfulness or communicative strategies of clothing at rest and within regimes of maintenance. Some notable exceptions include philosophical, abstract, or empirical examinations

of personal clothing collections and the spaces they inhabit (e.g., Urbach 1996; Cwerner 2001; Goffman 1965; Guy and Banim 2000; Woodward 2007) as well as studies of laundering practices (e.g., Laermans and Meulders 1999; Shove 2003; Furst 1996). Understanding the complex intersection of individual and collective strategies in western societies for producing value through clothing could still benefit from deeper examinations of cycles of storage, maintenance, disposal, and re-circulation. This investigation concentrates on the potential movement of unworn, but kept, clothing within possible conceptual and physical systems of wardrobe classification by owners. Put more simply, what do owners do in their homes and in their minds to make room for clothes they have chosen not to wear but refuse to relinquish?

In both academic and popular writing, the fashion industry is commonly portrayed as wasteful and exploitative, not only in its mode of low wage mass production, but also in its hegemonic system of high turnover and faddishness (Wilson 1985:67-90; Leopold 1992; Craik 1994:212-213; Guy, Green, and Banim 2001). While the obsolescence created by the fashion system does not automatically make "unfashionable" clothing un-wearable in all social contexts (see, for example, discussions of fashion subcultures such as in Jenss 2004 and Wojcik 1995, second-hand and vintage shopping as in Palmer and Clark 2005, or examples of women habitually wearing items housed in their wardrobes for 30 years or more in Woodward 2007), the mass media—especially through fashion magazines, self-help books, and television—encourage the divestment of clothing either to make room for newer, more "appropriate" purchases or to simplify one's life. Taggart and Walker's "I Don't Have a Thing to Wear: The Psychology of Your Closet", offers a humorous and representative example of the plethora of self-help books currently on the market that promise to help the reader organize and refine their wardrobes and, by extension, their lives (2003). The authors argue that the presence of unworn clothing is tied to poor choices driven by low self-esteem and a lack of self-awareness. By reading this book, they write, "you may experience a change in perception, gain more self-confidence through self-knowledge, and find a touch of adventure and challenge teasing you to try to become more than you are now and what deep in your heart you authentically hope to be" (xv). According to Taggart and Walker, the reader is stymied in her quest to reach full potential by the inability to "streamline, update, expand, weed out, and improve" her closet (10). Out with the old, in with the new, repeat, repeat, repeat.

This style of discourse does not exist solely in the ink and airwaves of mass media but has been internalized by some consumers, as is reflected in the ethnographic record. Nicky Gregson's ethnographic study of household strategies of accommodation in the UK, for example, found that the habitual sorting and ridding of clothing was considered by the subjects of her investigation as part of a normative process of managing a wardrobe (2007:118). The continual refinement of one's wardrobe is therefore touted by both these mass-media outlets and by regular folks as a necessary skill in the art of self-adornment; the retention of unworn clothing, on the other hand, is an emblem of failure in the form of over-sentimentality, fetishization, or poor shopping competence.

Growing ecological and ethical concerns have given rise to the mobilization of "eco fashion" movements that critique "fast fashion" (a term that, in this context, plays on the cultural connotations of "fast food" and its accompanying inexpensive, low-quality consumables) by pointing out the environmental and humanitarian costs of the current system of clothing

production, distribution, and marketing (see Lee and Sevier 2007; Claudio 2007).[2] Since the Second World War, however, consumption in the United States has become increasingly tied to discourses of patriotism, and in recent, post-911 years, personal consumer spending has been discursively framed by politicians and government analysts as responsible for driving the economy, ensuring the nation's continued place as a global superpower, and sending a symbolic message to America's enemies in the War on Terror. Former President George W. Bush, for example, in his response to the attacks on September 11, 2001, warned, "We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don't conduct business, or people don't shop" (quoted in Blair 2001). The U.S. apparel market reported $195.6 billion in sales for 2007 (NPD Group, Inc. 2008). According to the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office for Solid Waste, however, Americans dispose of an estimated 11.8 million tons of clothing and textiles annually, or about 68 lbs per person (Council for Textile Recycling). Much of this divested material enters second-hand clothing and textile salvage markets (see Hansen 2000 for a more thorough discussion), and approximately 61% of "recovered" clothing will be exported to foreign countries (EPA). The statistics imply an impressive movement of clothing in and out of circulation within the United States. These social patterns of consumption, divestment, and re-circulation, however, do not clearly account for practices of keeping unworn, everyday clothing in light of the readily available avenues for ridding and replacing them.

Western perceptions of value regularly recognize the inalienable potential of special classes of garments, such as one-of-a-kind couture or wedding dresses that often find their way into the holdings of museums, relieving individuals and families from the burden of keeping while simultaneously helping to stabilize connections between particular people and objects through provenance.[3] The elaborate steps taken, for example, to clean, preserve, and store wedding dresses for future generations as emblems of the creation and reproduction of familial identity suggests that owners hope to transform these garments into "inalienable possessions" as outlined by Annette Weiner (1992). In the contemporary American context, as Weiner demonstrates for the Melanesian one, this objective requires serious social and material labor. Sometimes it helps to outsource the effort. Museums have consistently been analyzed for their ability to valorize and validate social elites; they also provide a venue in modern capitalist societies for preserving the inalienability of family heirlooms and the accoutrements of social authority (Myers and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2001:293). But what does this mean for your old, faded Van Halen t-shirt? Normative practices in the United States rarely offer strategies for elevating everyday clothing to inalienable status, except for the allowances granted, maybe only temporarily, in the dramatic cases of mourning over human loss (e.g., Stallybrass 1999; Layne 2000; Ash 1996). The desire or perceived need to retain unworn, "useless" clothing, therefore, is complicated by conflicting social discourses about the potential personal fulfillment of continual consumption and the increasing eco-minded pressure to restrict, reuse, and re-circulate.

Previous studies have asked why women, particularly, keep unworn clothing. Maura Banim and Ali Guy (2001), through interviews with fifteen women in England, theorized that kept clothing continues to function semiotically for its owners by embodying relationships, memories of past experiences, former biographical life stages, and learned lessons. These meanings, they found, may be intimately tied to the materiality of the garment—as in an item of clothing that no longer fits a changing body, or based on idiosyncratic associations, beyond those coded by social

collectives or the fashion industry, superimposed upon the garment—as in correlations with events or emotions experienced while wearing them. Banim and Guy also note that women may feel a "problematic connection" to their kept clothing as both positive and negative reflections of self (218). Elizabeth Bye and Ellen McKinney (2007), using questionnaire responses from nearly fifty women aged 35 to 65, concentrated only on kept clothing that currently did not fit (but may be worn again in the future). They, however, produced very similar findings as Banim and Guy, categorizing the results into four non-exclusive classes: clothing kept to aid "weight management," to off-set its "investment value," for its "sentimental value," or for its beauty alone. Sophie Woodward (2007) further expands our appreciation of the potential scope of kept clothing. In her ethnographic and structural analysis of seventeen women's wardrobes in England, she calculated the percentage of "inactive" clothing present in the wardrobe as ranging from 0 to nearly 42% (with an average of 12%).

These scholars, among others, convincingly argue that clothing can serve an extended life of self-expression beyond the strictly functional as mirrors for personal reflection, treasures, or flash points of memory and past sensuous experience. However, while the authors demonstrate ways garments continue to perform as personal signs of individual and collective identity when disconnected from the body—and thus why they are difficult to part with—they neither explore to what extent individuals feel pressured to let go of unworn items nor *how* owners may creatively recontextualize them in order to rationalize their decisions. Woodward, for example, mentions that one woman in her sample carved out a specific location in her closet for storing the beloved cast-offs of her former career (47). With a higher than average percentage of inactive clothing in her wardrobe (24%), Woodward does not represent her as particularly anxious about their presence (52-56). This begs the question: what contextual factors might account for the repeated expressions of ambivalence that I encountered while researching this case study?

Opening the Closet

Like Woodward, these reflections arise from a "bedroom ethnography" in which theoretical principles are drawn from extended time spent with a small sample of individuals while in private spaces. Over the course of a year, I followed eight young men and women while they engaged in housework, mostly connected with the care and organization of clothing. In addition to discussing with them, both formally and informally, interpretations of their activities, together we dissected their wardrobes, hanger by hanger, drawer by drawer.

Popular conception draws the division of public and private space at the front door of the home, but occupants usually conceptualize far finer gradations.[4] The closet, unlike the living room, is rarely opened for visual consumption and evaluation. While the bathroom medicine cabinet may be violated by curious guests, the clothing closet is thought to be less vulnerable. When I explained to one woman, for example, that I wanted to inventory her clothing closet, she jokingly asked if I was conducting a psychological investigation that would prove her worst fears about herself and answer why she has yet to marry. Lisa Simmons listened patiently to my proposal and replied, "I have a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology; I know what's going on here. You want to analyze *me*." The wardrobe, when viewed in its entirety, belies the consciously-directed, context-specific dressing that people engage in daily. For many, unrestricted access to the closet

negates one's chance at self-authorship. Because of the private—to some, perhaps, intrusive—nature of my inquiry, my research sample is as much a reflection of those who would agree to let me rummage through their personal belongings and hang out in the most privileged areas of their homes while observing their daily activities, as it is a directed selection of people representing a cross-section of gender, class background, and social networks living in similar contextual circumstances connected to life stage and expected future accomplishments. Despite their differing living spaces, working identities, and social affiliations, what I found most striking was, in fact, the remarkably similar methods they exhibited for keeping unworn clothing.

Bloomington, Indiana is like any number of Midwestern college towns in the United States with a yearly influx of new students from around the country and overseas. The local economy and culture is influenced by the push-pull between "townie" and "university" created by equal parts reliance, resentment, and appreciation. While Indiana has experienced "brain drain" in recent years as the most qualified of Hoosiers move out of state in pursuit of higher-paying jobs, Bloomington has a glut of highly-educated, underemployed Indiana University alumni. Some college graduates, whether originally from Bloomington or not, find themselves in a holding pattern, unable or unwilling to relocate, but simultaneously dissatisfied with employment opportunities. Forty percent of the 72,000 people residing in Bloomington hold BA degrees or higher, compared to the estimated 22% statewide and 27% national averages (U.S. Census Bureau). Most of the previous studies conducted on the retention of clothing in Western contexts have either focused on city dwellers or else ignored the positional underpinnings that may further deepen our understanding. This case study draws conclusions from the situated reality of its subjects. In the mode of anthropology and folklore studies, I am seeking depth within a snapshot of time and space.

The young individuals who graciously invited me into their homes were all recent college graduates in their 20s and early 30s from low to upper-middleclass backgrounds, living alone or with a romantic partner for the first time, in rented spaces with little to no storage potential. These eight people represent a significant cross section of young Americans currently fighting for sustainable employment in small to mid-sized towns throughout the Midwest, and elsewhere, longing for lifestyles they once thought easily attainable. Unlike more established adults in America, they had not had the time, space, or resources to accumulate a large repertoire of belongings. They moved regularly—almost every one to two years, providing ample opportunities for shedding unwanted things. Yet, when we inspected their wardrobes, each one brandished clothing they never wore. Many of the reasons offered in explanation were reminiscent of the arguments made in Banim and Guy, Bye and McKinney, and Woodward. Fully cognizant of opinions espoused through the media, such as TLC's television show "What Not to Wear" in which participants' sentimental wardrobes are viciously picked apart and disposed of in large trashcans, the people whom I spoke with felt it not only necessary to rationalize keeping unworn clothing, but also to re-make them through conceptual value transformations.

Re-Valuing the Wardrobe

Value, as characterized by Nancy Munn, materializes through creative action in which an actor's potential agency is realized in concrete form (1986). David Graeber explains, "value, then, is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves," but these activities must be recognized by others to be potent (2001:45). Value is dependent, therefore, on the shifting awareness and intentions of actors who can actively foreground or hide, as need or desire dictates, the accrued meanings they transfer, construct, or recognize through objects. Even when the typical trajectory of an object through which value is conventionally realized—as in the act of self-adornment for clothing—is no longer available, individuals may find new, socially-recognized ways to produce additional values for the object through conceptual transformation. While this activity is not the dramatic transformation typically associated with exchange as examined in classic anthropological texts—converting labor into yams, yams into hospitality, and hospitality into fame (Munn 1986)—nor is it the type of physical transformation more commonly of interest to folklorists or material culture scholars—like the refashioning of old clothing into a patchwork quilt (e.g., Frisch 2010)—individual strategies for keeping possessions by reconceptualizing them perhaps represents a more subtle and common practice in many American homes.

While a number of strategies for justifying retention are surely available, as an illustration intended to contribute to the scholarly dialogue concerning available choices, I will focus on the most prevalent type of value transformation that I found for both gifted and self-selected belongings.

Failed Gifts

One very important category of kept clothing includes those that enter the repertoire of belongings through gifting. Marcel Mauss (1950) and many since, have insisted that no gift is ever free; the act of gift exchange generates mutually committed relationships that once entered into are difficult to abandon. Furthermore, the objectified gift itself, inalienable from the giver, retains a link to that person and thus becomes unique from any other object of its type; it bears a distinctive history despite its relationship to mass-production or ubiquity (Carrier 1991; Appadurai 1986; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Weiner 1992). In his effort to examine how "moral" communities are constructed and maintained through gift exchange, Mauss argued that a social actor is not only obligated to give, but also to receive, in order to create equality among participants (1950:13). Even when a gift fails to fulfill its utilitarian role as a cultural object (as in an item of clothing in the wrong size) or its referential role as a sign that accurately indexes the relationship as desired by both parties (as in a successful synchronization of how the giver and receiver wish to see each other and be seen), the recipient, if he or she desires not to sever or weaken the relationship, not only must accept the gift, but may also feel obliged to keep it, indefinitely; rejecting a gift may be tantamount to rejecting the giver (Carrier 1991:126; Caplow 1984:1314; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:66; Banim and Guy 2001; Mauss 1950:13). A failed gift, therefore, is not the same as an unreciprocated gift in which an attempt to create or maintain a social connection is refused or severed. The conceptual

transformation of failed gifts may alleviate some of the problems present in keeping them for receivers.

James McWilliams, for example, a manager of a regional game store, stashed a collection of suits given by his father in the closet of his spare bedroom primarily reserved for the costumes connected to his long-term involvement with live-action role-playing (LARP).[5] Hanging alongside outfits evoking mythological creatures, fantastical characters, and anachronistic eras, their relegation to a domain of fantasy-wear is consistent with his interpretation of the suits as inappropriate for his daily reality. James's father gave him the collection of hand-me-down suits when James advanced to the manager position of his store; he interpreted his father's bequest as an endorsement of pride in his accomplishment, similar to a "passing of the torch." He intoned, "it was a nice gesture from my father trying to give me all these suits because I've made my way into the business world, blah blah blah." Although the dress code and atmosphere of James's job is too casual for a suit, the gift is signatory of a recognized future potential in both class and professionalism. James begrudgingly espoused the material and aesthetic virtues of the suits, but emphatically asserted that he would never wear them. The garments neither conform to his lifestyle goals nor to his sense of personal style. James does own a single all-purpose suit that he purchased for himself; unlike the collection of suits that he described as "iconic of middle-management" in style, his suit is dark, slim, pinstriped and, in his mind, reflects "an element of danger"—in other words, another type of fantasy, but one inconsistent with his father's. The compulsion to keep his father's suits, because of their materialization of familial approval and a biological identity, was both a blessing and a burden—a metonymic burden as a reminder that despite his father's hopes, James would never aspire to a suit-worthy career, and a material burden as objects that once draped the body of a loved one and continue to demand storage space. Despite his desire to rid himself of the suits, to do so would require forfeiting the substantiation of intangible connections, affection, and praise. James keenly felt the pressure to accept and keep them, explaining that even in the absence of available storage space, "I would have driven around with them in my car." By recontexualizing the suits, James is able to diminish his father's imposition, but not to fully expunge his personal feelings of obligation.[6]

Gift exchange can be an imposition on recipients, not only for the reasons classically explored in the scholarship on exchange, namely the expectation to reciprocate (e.g., Simmel 1950:392; Caplow 1984:1315-1317; Carrier 1991; Fajans 1993), but also because it can create material and psychological burdens for recipients who feel compelled to balance the intentions and interpretations of the giver with their own. Through material objects, individuals can "project their being through space and time" not only to enhance their own social value and continuity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1990:203), but also to transfer their influence onto others, actively defining the roles of people and relationships. Scholars have long argued that gifts "allow individuals to insinuate certain symbolic properties within the lives of a gift recipient" (McCracken 1986, see also Schwartz 1967; Furby 1978). More recently, in his discussion of household "provisioning," Daniel Miller maintains that shoppers, in addition to demonstrating their love through making choices thought to accurately reflect the beneficiary's desires and personality, also construct the recipient into the giver's ideal version by buying for the image of the person they wish the receiver to be (Miller 2001a, 2001b:108-109). One woman I spoke with confided, "my mom always thinks of me as being smaller than I really am; she's always buying

me things that don't fit." Disappointment attached to evaluations of her weight prevented this woman from confronting her mother whose ultimate intentions were unclear to her.

Recipients, however, need not be passive performers in this scenario and may develop various ways of avoiding or defusing impositions without sabotaging the relationship.[7] James illustrates only one possible strategy for keeping-while-not-giving-in to the images imposed upon him through gifting. His example also demonstrates the most common type of value transformation for clothing that I encountered in the homes of young graduates.

Accommodating Old Clothes: Transforming the Everyday into Fantasy

The categorization of unworn, everyday clothing into an auxiliary collection labeled "costume" was remarkably common for both gifted and self-selected garments. There may be several factors contributing to its frequency in my research, the most obvious relating to the specific identities of my sample. Only three of the individuals I spoke with were involved in social or professional organizations tied to costuming activities such as LARP groups, the Society for Creative Anachronism, or theatre troupes.[8] Rachael Himsel, for example, a public relations director for the Bloomington Playwrights Project (a non-profit theatre organization), transfers unworn clothing from her active wardrobe and the rejected "Walmart specials" regularly sent by her mother into plastic bags stored on the top shelf of her clothing closet (Figure 1).[9] In addition to this grouping, Rachael, despite being 32 years old, also keeps her high school prom dress at the back of her closet, hung to prevent damage. Rachael's explanation for her costume collection was unique, however, in that she maintained it not simply for herself but as potential materials to loan to actor friends, acquaintances, or colleagues. Rachael is the youngest of ten siblings, some of whom have children older than her. Growing up sharing a bedroom and a closet with an older sister, being continually reminded explicitly and implicitly to consider the needs of her large family, Rachael feels anxious about the hoarding of unused belongings, but even more so about waste. She explained, "I am a child of someone who grew up in the Depression, so that was a huge influence on all of us growing up. I definitely worry about becoming a 'hoarder' as my mother is, but I also understand the logic behind it...which is the scary thing!" Holding onto objects for the possible benefit of others, sacrificing her own storage space for the sake of the struggling theatre company, provides a way of keeping, even clothing that does not fit her, without violating Rachael's personal sense of propriety.

While three people had clear connections to costuming groups, the majority did not. In fact, the frequency or expressed importance of costuming in their lives had little impact on whether or not they transformed unworn clothing into "costumes." Another important factor contributing to the recurrence of this type of conceptual transformation may be closely tied to the large number of social costuming opportunities available for individuals in their 20s and early 30s in Bloomington, a small town shaped by its transient population of university students. Despite its population size, Bloomington supports at least four costume retail and rental shops—Costume Delights, Campus Costumes, Vintage Wearhouse, and Costume Alibi. This does not include the seasonal stores that pop up around town during the Fall months. Many of the individuals whom I spoke with enthusiastically described not only annual Halloween parties but also regular circuits of themed house parties in which costumes were mandatory for attendance. Several local bars

host similar themed nights on annual or monthly rotations. Jake's sports bar, for example, morphs into monthly *Axis of Evil* dance parties in which attendees compete for the most audacious interpretations of themes like "Zombie Prom 2007" or "NeoVictorian Steampunk Tea Party."[10] The Bluebird Nightclub also holds annual costumed events such as Mardi Gras/Carnival, Halloween, and Rock 'N' Roll Prom (read about the most recent Prom in Younis 2010). Costuming is an integral part of the young adult social scene in Bloomington, Indiana, cutting across a number of social subcultures and interests.

Figure 1. Rachael Himsel standing in front of her closet.

Since many young college graduates in Bloomington regularly or sporadically attend costume events in some form, whether as professional or amateur performers, as one of a crowd of revelers, or as a spectator, the idea to re-categorize unworn clothing as possible materials for costuming proves attractive, though this potential of saved garments may never be realized and, in fact, many admitted that to be the case. Auxiliary costume collections, rather than constituting a separate contextual set of active clothing, more commonly served as a repository for transitional pieces, a strategy for justifying their potential practicality by infusing them with new found value.

Christina Gasko, for example, a twenty-six year old telemarketing supervisor, described the spare bedroom closet that she shared with James McWilliams as just such a transitional space in which garments move from active to decreasing stages of inactive use.[11] Christina, a talented self-taught seamstress, supplies most of her costuming needs (which are many as an active LARPer) by constructing garments from scratch.[12] However, hanging alongside beautifully-crafted costumes created for specific occasions, like her 2006 Marie Antoinette Halloween costume or a LARP-related metallic green taffeta gown with a detachable train of individually hand-sewn peacock feathers, are more mundane items, like faded t-shirts and jackets that had once experienced regular wear. Christina transferred an expensive and much worn maroon pants suit bought during a trip to France, later deemed too "Scully-style"—referring to the character on a 1990s television show, *The X-Files*—to the costume closet when it shifted past her personal comfort zone for fashionability.[13] Christina rationalized that despite its unsuitability for contemporary, daily endeavors, "it'd make a great costume." While the suit, however, has remained unworn, its transformation from the active wardrobe to an expanded category of possibilities prevents what Christina describes as a painful process of relinquishing ownership of not only the physical garment and what it has come to embody in the way of memory and identity, but also its future unknown potential. Christina asserts, "there's normal clothing that I don't wear anymore that I've stuck in the costume closet because it *might* be useful at some point." These kept pieces are categorically different from the items that Christina purchases or makes specifically to serve as costumes. This "just in case" attitude is directly tied to conscious feelings of lack: "I have so few chances to buy new things, I don't want to give these things up." For Christina, this suit, in part, represents a past of plenty, a less economically complicated period in her life.

Like many in their demographic group, the individuals with whom I spoke expressed anxiety over the transitional nature of their lives marked by financial insecurity, premature careers with demanding schedules and low pay, and increasing responsibilities to others such as romantic partners and employers. Now independent of the financial and material support of their families, the ability to maintain the same lifestyles without the same resources proves trying for many, especially in the face of social competition and marketing schemes geared toward stimulating consumption. The stockpiling of unworn clothing by young adults may be causally related to an appreciation of their uncertain futures.[14] Anxieties over the "real world" may likewise be galvanizing the rich opportunities for indulging in fantasy through costuming in a place populated by a workforce of unfulfilled potential.

Keeping unworn clothing is not a form of collecting. The grouping of unworn clothing under the conceptual frame of "costume," as I have described, is distinct from the phenomena of collecting

typically studied by scholars (see Belk 2006 for a recent historiography of scholarship on collecting practices). Most importantly, no one depicted themselves as collectors or the conglomerate of unworn clothing in their possession as a "set," even if, like Christina Gasko, they were interested in building a usable repertoire of costumes. Kept clothing, by contrast, never received the routinized maintenance and devotion associated with prized collections, placed on display—like in Henry Glassie's descriptions of Ellen Cutler's lovingly arranged and repeatedly washed dresser of delph (1982:361-72, 2006:197-204), or secreted away only to be gazed upon and caressed in private—like Kula shells. Rather than expressing sentiments of accomplishment, pride, or connoisseurship usually reported by collectors, keepers were more likely to connect their activities to concerns for thrift and regret or the avoidance of tension within relationships characterized by exchange or interdependence.

Blessings and Burdens: Managing Disappointment

Graeber argues that "to understand the value attributed to any particular object means that one must understand the meaning of the various acts of creation, consecration, use and appropriation, and so on, that make up its history" (2001:114). Objects, in material culture studies, are regularly acknowledged as deeply embedded in processes of self and group identity making including the creation and maintenance of memory, social continuity, and interpersonal or economic networks.[15] The accumulation of these laminated values can inspire the desire to hold onto objects seen as lacking in value by members of larger society who recognize only their monetary or unexceptional qualities. The disjoint between these "regimes of value" (Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991; Myers 2001; Graeber 2001) may create anxiety in some owners. Banim and Guy, for example, reported women's impressions that clothing must be worn to justify its purchase cost. Unworn clothing may be kept to assuage the guilt or remorse of a disappointing purchase by rationalizing its continued presence as "getting one's money's worth" out of it or as reminders of unacceptable images or styles to be avoided in the future (2001:209-211). However, the impulse to justify misspent money may also simultaneously reflect feelings of culpability to others such as household members or partners; imprudent spending or accumulation may be interpreted as a symbolic or real disregard for people bound by emotional and material interdependence. To dispose of such clothing is to openly admit failure; to keep them prevents a loss of both perceived economic value and the equality or balance maintained within intimate relationships—unless of course the collection of unused items becomes too large. Conceptual value transformations offer only one possible strategy for negotiating the perceptions, intentions, and wishes of others by balancing the need or desire for keeping with expanded interpretations of potential functionality.

While the garments that I investigated were never themselves physically altered, a more easily observable transformative act, owners were no less active or conscious in their attempts to inculcate new, socially-recognizable values for them. Transferring them into new storage contexts, kept on the margins of the functioning wardrobe (like Rachael's prom dress) or completely removed (like Christina and James' costume closet) helped substantiate acts of conceptual transformation while simultaneously achieving practical and psychological needs for order. Perhaps the consistently cited desire to preserve both the currently identified and the still undiscovered potentials of the items prevented their alteration, or the myriad of meanings and

values recognized by owners depended in part on the continued physical integrity of the garments.

Erica Kendall, a collections manager at a small history museum, commonly alters and physically reworks clothing in her wardrobe, but refuses to modify the few beloved dresses made by her grandmother, worn by her mother, and handed down to her.[16] She longs to wear them, but to alter them would undo the efforts of a lost loved one and change the tangible evidence of a version of her mother's physical form. She recognizes these "numinous" (Maines and Glynn 1993) dresses as her "birthright" and would never consider them as potential "costumes." As a professional custodian of historical artifacts, Erica highly esteems the act of preserving meanings through physical conservation, transferring the tools of museum curation to her own collection of belongings. Erica keeps a large assortment of unworn clothing, all of which gave her pause during our interviews, *except* these beloved dresses. While other kept items were stashed in the inconspicuous nooks and crannies of her bedroom, these dresses were lovingly hung in garment bags and sandwiched between the most appreciated pieces of her active repertoire.

Positionality is revealing in these instances. The managed physical distance between inactive and active clothing correlated with the values assigned by owners to the separate garments. Meanings and interpretations connected to objects are always in flux and may become momentarily visible in contextually-driven physical and semiotic shifts. Scholars have consistently noted the close proximity of worn clothing to the body (e.g., Belk 1991). Like a sponge against the skin, clothing absorbs real (e.g., sweat stains) and representational (e.g., memories) associations with the wearer. This physical and conceptual conflation of wearer with garment could provide comfort in times of absence—as do the dresses Erica keeps that belonged to her mother and grandmother, or they could provide tangible proof of disappointment—as do Christina's now unfashionable suit and James' unwanted hand-me-downs. Kept clothing may present opportunities for much needed continuity, but they may also become burdensome reminders of the gap between expectations and dissatisfaction. Disappointing possessions foster ambivalent feelings and anxiety and find themselves pushed to the margins. For the young men and women I encountered, putting this type of unworn clothing "out-of-sight" helped them "cool off" emotionally (McCracken 1988). Whereas Erica will likely never reject her relatives' dresses—they are not anxiety-laden—James longed to be rid of his father's "middle-management" suits and the paternal pressure they had come to embody, and in fact, two years after I ended the main ethnographic period of this work, he did. In 2008, James grabbed an opportunity to work in New Orleans, a city that had always captured his imagination. Shedding his last pretensions of following his father's footsteps into the business world, James now dons a porkpie hat, driving tourists around the French Quarter in a horse-drawn carriage. Before leaving Bloomington, he donated his father's suits to the local Goodwill and tattooed his bicep with the image of a phoenix rising from the flames. In his mind, James saw New Orleans as a rebirth, a chance to realize the kind of adult he wanted to be, the one he had only achieved in fantasy. To take that first step, as he explained, he had to "let go of all of that"—the suits, the disapproval, the disappointment, the self-doubt.

Like many young Americans, these men and women had high expectations for their futures. The disjuncture between their hopes and their current state of limbo perplexed them. As Christina had articulated, giving up potential options for clothing during a time when she had little disposable income and a lot of uncertainty about her future felt foolish. Giving away these garments to

second-hand retailers seemed only one step removed from wastefully throwing them away and the potential compensation from selling them never felt adequate. Worried about debt, yet longing for a lifestyle outside of their means, made their transition from familial dependency to autonomy seem especially prolonged. As one woman, Lisa Simmons, speculated, "We're getting ready, rather than just trying to maintain the life we're in now. I feel like we're getting ready to be *actual* adults."[17] For these young men and women, feelings of stagnation and uncertainty manifested in the very fabric of their wardrobes. As I came to realize, not every kept garment is an inviolable symbol of identity and personal history, though previous scholarship convincingly argues that such possibilities readily exist. Some kept clothing is more accurately an ambivalent, and perhaps temporary, burden that gives tangible form to internal or interpersonal struggles. Not all memories, past experiences, or life stages deserve careful preservation, especially in times of transition when difficult choices must be made. Lisa, for example, questioned her status as an adult but wanted nothing more than to feel successful in that role. Of all the men and women who participated, she had the fewest unworn garments in her wardrobe. She explained, "I'm so *not* like the Zen Buddhist person, but I do believe that the more things you have the more they start to control you. I think about all those things and I know they're there. They all have some sort of story. It's like too much memory management." In Lisa's mind, adulthood meant moving on, letting go, and re-inventing oneself. Few of the other participants would have been comfortable with Lisa's motto: "when in doubt, throw it out."

The young adults with whom I spoke were fully cognizant of the mutability of objects, their ability to be conceptually re-made. They also articulated feelings of ambivalence with conflicting desires to keep or let go of objects. Although they did not comprise a coherent sub-group, this social sample did share important features in common, most importantly their age and living circumstances. These similarities provided exploitable opportunities for rationalizing the retention of unworn clothing by reconceptualizing them as potential costumes to be worn within the local social scene. Although they did not necessarily know each other or belong to the same social networks, the larger culture of Bloomington presented models of behavior from which they could draw inspiration. Rather than attempting a comprehensive examination, my intention has been to demonstrate the possibilities that may arise within particular historical, geographical, and cultural situations. Investigating other situated realities would either expand our understanding of conceptual transformations or reveal other possible methods. My mother, for example, transformed some of her old clothes into dress-up costumes for my older sister and I when we were growing up in Southern Indiana. My sister and I are now in our thirties, yet my mother continues to store these clothes in her attic, suggesting that keeping them also serves her own personal needs. The stability and potentialities that belongings promise, colored by societal discourses against materialistic hoarding and the fetishizing of commodities, create a dialectic for which individuals develop strategies to reinvigorate objects thought to be both blessings and burdens for their owners. If we do indeed need objects to make ourselves, choosing what to keep and what to divest is a task of primary importance.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The bulk of this research was conducted over the course of a year with 8 individuals (6 women and 2 men) in 6 households. Chosen for their similarities in age and education level, they represent a range of employment situations from entry-level professional to semi-skilled. Each one came from a middle-class background, but most described their current situation as depressingly "low-rent." Because of the personal nature of the study, I approached a few individuals through mutual friends, but primarily recruited people that already knew me. Despite their connection through me, however, not all of the subjects knew each other and they do not constitute a single "social scene." In fact, several would be very uncomfortable to think of themselves being lumped into the same social category. Only three of the subjects were directly involved in organizations that naturally generate costuming opportunities: James and Christina who lived and LARPed together, and Rachael who worked as an administrator surrounded by actors.

Over the course of the active research year, I visited participants' several times in their homes. In their presence, I made detailed inventories of their wardrobes, as comprehensively as they allowed, noting individual objects and their locations. In a kind of show-and-tell spirit, I let individuals direct initial conversations, telling stories about specific pieces and outlining their histories. I also asked numerous questions, especially concerning their personal rationalizations for organization and categorization. Later, I conducted more formalized, audio-recorded interviews in light of the inventories and fieldnotes that I had generated during previous meetings. The dates of these recordings are noted throughout the article.

2. As a business model, fast fashion is designed to provide imitation runway designs as quickly as possible at very low prices, a taste of luxury for the masses. The accompanying traits of high turnover and disposability, pioneered by retailers like Zara and H&M, have more recently come under fire, affixing new layers of meaning to the term.

3. For discussions concerning the heightened (even sacred) value recognized for wedding dresses in the West, see Friese (1997, 2001) and Otnes and Lowrey (1993).

4. Reimer and Leslie (2004:201)) refer to the finer gradations of public / private within the home, as well as disparate notions of individual ownership among family members, as "micro-geographies of domestic consumption."

5. While I met with James numerous times, audio-recorded interviews were conducted on April 22 and July 20, 2006. As outlined in the article's main body, I visited participants in their homes over the course of a year. Some of that time was spent in observation, but most of it was spent in directed co-explorations of wardrobes and informal conversation. I have logged the dates of more formalized, audio-recorded conversations in the notes. Communication with these truly

gracious people continues, however, as I have come to call all of them my friends, and I receive regular updates about their lives and closets. On May 2, 2010, for example, I had a long phone conversation with James as he extolled the many happy virtues of his new life in New Orleans, his new job as a horse-drawn carriage tour guide, and his evolving wardrobe that has taken "one step toward cowboy."

Live-action role-playing can be compared to improvisational theatre in which players embody a character (of their own creation) in manner and dress in order to act out improvised (or in some cases, loosely scripted) scenes and situations. Unlike traditional theatre, however, the action is not for the benefit of an audience beyond those also participating. For a more detailed description of LARP, see Todras-Whitehill 2004.

6. For those who have argued that the complex relationships between clothing and the shifting identities that give rise to keeping unworn garments are somehow a "peculiarly feminine mode of experience" have perhaps simply failed to ask men how they feel.

7. Miller (2001b:98) suggests Alison Clark's (1998) examination of catalogue shopping as a tool for the negotiation of gifts between parents and children. The creation and distribution of "wish lists" may also be considered as another possible strategy for avoiding unwanted gifts.

8. During the time of my investigation I was aware of at least seven operating, or recently disbanded, LARP groups in Bloomington proper: Vampire: The Masquerade; Changeling: The Dreaming; Lion, Lilly, and Sword (Faith and Fire); Buffy the Vampire Slayer; F.R.A.G. (Futuristic-Ranged Assault); Hogwarts 1914; and Exalted. Most of these groups based their games on rulebooks or rule systems available through White Wolf Publishing or Eden Studios, Inc. For a description of a recent Lion, Lilly, and Sword meeting in Bloomington, see Chen (2008). Some Bloomington LARPers claimed to also occasionally or regularly attend games in Indianapolis, Columbus, or Lafayette, Indiana. Christina Gasko had traveled as far as Florida to attend a specially-organized Changeling event.

9. While I met with Rachael numerous times, audio-recorded interviews were conducted on March 16 and September 29, 2006.

10. Find a schedule and description of *Axis of Evil*'s themed dance parties here: http://www.axisofevilbloomington.com/schedule.html, accessed April 14, 2008.

11. While I met with Christina numerous times, audio-recorded interviews were conducted on April 22 and July 20, 2006.

12. Christina estimates that she attends costuming events on average twice a month.

13. *The X-Files* aired on the Fox television network in the United States from 1993 to 2002.

14. Kopytoff argues that because a person's social identities in complex societies are "not only numerous but often conflicting," the resulting "drama of uncertainties" directly translates in the "biographies of things" (1986:89-90). Further research is necessary to determine how these types

of conceptual transformations, for unworn clothing or other belongings, may play out for groups possessing different sets of circumstances.

15. Pravina Shukla's (2008) ethnographic work on contemporary women's body art in India offers an excellent non-Western examination of these issues for clothing and accessories, as well as a thorough discussion in her concluding chapter of the current strengths and shortfalls of material culture driven studies of body art.

16. While I met with Erica numerous times, a audio-recorded interview was conducted on March 19, 2006.

17. While I met with Lisa numerous times, audio-recorded interviews were conducted on April 20 and October 13, 2006.

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