



## Introduction: Second-hand Cultures in Unsettled Times

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### ABSTRACT

This special issue responds to a series of unfolding environmental and social crises that have contributed to an unsettled period in second-hand cultures. While these worlds have long existed as part of the informal economy, they have often been overlooked, even as a growing body of work across a range of approaches began to examine the second-hand as an integral area of cultural and social life. This special issue draws on themes and work shared at a particular moment of reflection and urgency: an interdisciplinary and international online symposium called "Second-hand Cultures in Unsettled Times", held online during the 15-16 June 2021 as the world was trying to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. From this conference, we identify three emerging areas of study and practice in this growing field: death, waste, and the lives and "afterlives" of things, extraction and gentrification, and repair and reparation. We map the many methods and approaches to studying second-hand cultures and economies in the field. We also sketch the contours of the articles that comprise this issue around themes of waste and value, politics and change, and emotion and repair in second-hand. Finally, we outline future political orientations, questions and directions for this important area of cultural study.

### KEYWORDS

Second-hand cultures and economies, waste, extraction, repair, circular economy, re-use

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## A FRAME OF UNSETTLED TIMES

This issue seeks to respond to the pressing socio-cultural and geopolitical problems second-hand cultures and economies face within our unsettled world. While second-hand worlds

have long existed as part of the informal economy, they have often taken place in the social margins, so ordinary as to be overlooked (Sherry 1990; Fernández-Kelly and Shefner 2006; Fontaine 2008; Le Zotte 2017; Goldstein 2020); yet a growing body of work across a range of approaches has begun to examine the second-hand as an integral area of cultural and social life (see, for example, Gregson and Crewe 2003; Podkalicka and Meese 2012; Nickel 2016; Edwards and Gibson 2017; Hansen and Le Zotte 2019). More recently, second-hand economies have boomed and transformed, prompting a surge of interest from individual aspirational resellers all the way up to governments, charities, industry and venture capitalists around the world (ThredUp 2019). From reselling sites, swaps, charity shops, and thrift stores to global waste streams, markets, and waste picking, second-hand worlds continue to invite challenging questions. These questions include the nature of value and waste, labour and equity, damage and repair, sustainability and design, ethics and politics, death and renewal, and the intersecting areas of class, gender, race, and disability, as well as of method and approach. What is more, second-hand economies have been unsettled further by the global COVID-19 pandemic in ways that are not yet fully understood.

This special issue draws on themes and work shared in an interdisciplinary and international symposium called “Second-hand Cultures in Unsettled Times”, held online during the 15-16 June 2021. The motivation for this symposium, and subsequently this special issue, drew from three intersecting and urgent contemporary moments in the field of second-hand research.

### ***New pressures, present crises***

First, reflecting a strong strand of second-hand scholarship and practice, the symposium and special issue have been motivated by a sense of rising urgency over climate and environmental catastrophe. Second-hand practices and systems, like the circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013), seem to offer potential resources for re-imagining and re-working the harms of consumer capitalism and extractive colonialism, even as these same second-hand practices and systems can be critiqued as feeding off capitalism and colonialism (McLaren et al. 2020; Liboiron 2021). The circular economy promises to close loops: ending waste and pollution, re-circulating things and materials, and ‘re-generat[ing] nature’ (Ellen MacArthur Foundation et al. 2015). Yet as critics point out, while the circular economy is often celebrated, its actual existence is usually ‘limited and fragile’ (Gregson et al. 2015, p. 218), and can be appropriated and incorporated into ‘business as usual’. While extending the lifecycle of everyday goods might be an important step to avoid ‘buying new’, for example, a truly circular economy requires more than just the recycling of goods, as this does nothing to prevent the production of waste. Merely extending our use of objects in the second-hand economy doesn’t address the millions of new things manufactured every

second: unchecked, global apparel consumption alone is projected to rise from 62 million tons in 2019 to 102 million tons by 2030 (House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee 2019, p. 5; Isenhour 2016). Zero-waste, circular design requires a system-level shift that emphasises extended manufacturer responsibility (beyond the point of sale) and inhibits the production of disposable goods.

A rising body of scholarship from a range of disciplines therefore focuses on the entanglement of second-hand processes in waste, pollution, climate change, and environmental collapse (Norris 2012, 2019; Stanley 2015; Stanes and Gibson 2019; Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). Many focus on the human harms (and possibilities) caused by the same excesses, approaching second-hand with a focus on social, cultural and political creative and entrepreneurial production, and on problems of second-hand labour (Reno 2009; Botticello 2012; Le Zotte 2013; Samson 2015; Giles 2018; Ayres 2019). These include waste-picking, what Gregson et al. (2016) call the “‘dirty work’ of the green economy”. Among these voices have been calls for justice from organisations such as Fashion Revolution and The OR Foundation, among others, to address some of the deep inequities embedded in the labour and environmental politics of second-hand economies.

The second source of urgency underpinning this special issue is the recent, unprecedented interest and investment in second-hand and circular economies. Enthusiasm for thrifting, upcycled crafting, swapping and reselling among the general public has now spread to charities, governments, and industry. Digital platforms and global trade routes have supercharged second-hand exchange around the world, provoking political and popular debates on issues from reseller ethics to import legislation, as Mondragón-Toledo and Morales-Tapia and Rahmawati et al. explore in this issue (see also Parker and Weber 2013, Hansen and Le Zotte 2019, p. 2; Kneese and Palm 2020). Platforms like ThredUp and Etsy have been valued in the billions, and the growth of sales of second-hand objects, predicted only to soar (ThredUp 2019; Moss and Bapna 2020). As this special issue explores, this has been a time of an intensification of extraction from second-hand. Charities such as The Salvation Army and Goodwill, Inc. set the precedent in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for producing revenue from second-hand waste, supplanting more marginal traders; and globalised, digital advancements have only ramped up this process (Le Zotte 2013; Ayres 2019; Gosling 2021). Digital data has been described as the “new oil” (Schwab, Marcus and Oyola et al. 2011), yet used clothes and things could be considered a comparable resource ripe and ready to be mined: the rising value of second-hand things is now incorporated into the plans of venture capital (Moss and Bapna 2020). These extraordinary investments, whether of feeling, of money, of resources, or in legislation, add an urgency to existing issues around the second-hand that our collective work seeks to examine.

Finally, the third source of urgency motivating this special issue relates to the way the COVID-19 pandemic has also unsettled second-hand economies in ways we are only just beginning to understand, and which invite further study. The pandemic paused or even upended familiar systems of consumption, divestment, disposal, and exchange in both informal and formal second-hand economies (Kim and Kim 2022; Zwanka and Buff 2021). As Maddrell discusses in the forward of this special issue, it precipitated a moment of reckoning for the problems of established consumer systems, and opened up new ways of moving used and unwanted things along, at the household level and beyond. The moment of pause made visible the ways in which second-hand economies seem to help problematic objects to 'disappear', even though critics point out that nothing is ever truly 'thrown away' (de Coverly et al. 2008; Davies 2022). At the same time, these unsettled times and unsettling critiques provide opportunities to think about how such economies might be navigated differently. To the unsettled and unsettling challenges of environmental catastrophe, financial extraction, and pandemic interruption, we now add war, political upheaval, inflation, increasing worker unrest and industrial action, and rising costs of living in many parts of the world.

These urgent crises motivated the interdisciplinary call of the Second-hand Cultures in Unsettled Times symposium, and drive this special issue. Our orientation is always critical, always political, but is also enmeshed with and inspired by the pleasures of the second-hand. We reserve space, therefore, to celebrate and explore the richness and vitality of human and nonhuman cultural creation. Further, the field of second-hand studies is dispersed across disciplines and geography, and opportunities to gather collectively and share insights have hitherto been rare. The symposium enabled an exciting moment of 'coming together' for second-hand studies – in shared questions, concerns and commitments. We saw in *JOMEC Journal*, as a fully open access, online, free and interdisciplinary journal, an opportunity to allow for the openness and capaciousness of second-hand studies.

### **ANSWERING WITH A ROAR: SECOND-HAND STUDIES STRANDS AND THEMES**

To the urgency of these unsettled and unsettling times and questions, those working on second-hand cultures and economies answer with a roar. The Second-hand Cultures in Unsettled Times symposium drew from a profusion of extraordinary work from around the world, from historical analyses of 18<sup>th</sup> century second-hand auctions (Stobart and Pennell 2021) and 20<sup>th</sup> century transnational trade in Chandigarh's modernist furniture (Seitz et al. 2021), to contemporary ethnographic studies of changing and overlooked second-hand practices and contexts in Mexico, Indonesia, India and China (Mondragón-Toledo and Morales-Tapia, this issue; Rahmawati, Febriyanti and Tutiasri, this issue; Sarkar 2021;

Stockton 2021), to practice-based workshops on garment repair in the UK and making zero waste fabric yarn in the US (Roberts 2021, Findley this issue). Below, we identify three areas of pressing, global concern from the symposium that are driving forward this loosely affiliated and exciting field of study.

### ***Death, waste, and the lives and 'afterlives' of things***

The first emerging theme addresses questions of death, waste, and the many 'afterlives' of things and materials (Stanes and Gibson 2017). While others have noted the way the taint of contamination, abjection and death has long been associated with the second-hand (Gregson, Crewe and Brooks; Fitton 2013; Le Zotte 2017), the COVID-19 pandemic has initiated closer everyday entanglements with germs, contagion and the belongings of the dead (Maddrell 2021; this issue). Death and loss have always suffused second-hand exchanges: Wassell Smith (2021) describes 19<sup>th</sup> century 'sales at the mast' of deceased fellow sailor's possessions, while Kurland (2021) explores the emotive commemoration and collecting on eBay of USPS memorabilia, and Rivas (2021) and Findley (this issue) trace how memory and loss are imbued in clothing (see also Stallybrass 2001; Wellesley Smith and Kiff 2021). The keeping, collecting, and hoarding of things relates to questions of loss and divestment. As Pollen (this issue) and others (Lovatt 2015; Potts 2015) have pointed out, the death of a person often means dealing with both treasured and 'problem things', particularly those that are unwanted, unpleasantly reminiscent or undesirable: waste.

The politics of the global trade and circulation second-hand, moreover, are haunted by the ghosts of the West. The millions of tons of second-hand clothing sold, transformed, resold or dumped in Ghana, for example, are referred to there as 'Dead White Man's Clothes' (The OR Foundation no date); these objects persist in carrying the phantom of an imagined other around the world (Norris and Gupta 2021). This is the violence of capitalism: it extracts value, and leaves ghostly traces. So many of Marx's metaphors were about death, and subsequent theoretical discussions on the significance of the 'zombie' in popular culture refer to the brain-dead consumer and 'zombified' producer (Lauro and Embry 2008). The spectre of death that hovers around second-hand things is haunted not only by the lives and biographies of the people who made the object or its components and materials, but about the 'afterlives' of these objects as they move through second-hand economies—however slowly—toward becoming waste (Pollen this issue, Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). As Liboiron (2021, p. 8) makes clear, "there is no disposability" without colonialism, and the occupation of and access to Indigenous land for disposal. Second-hand things hold in their metal, plastic and fibre bodies an interlinked violence of extraction and destruction (Nixon 2011); their manufacture and disposal fed by an 'accumulation by dispossession' (Samson 2015) that has changed and is irrevocably changing the landscape, hurtling toward climate

disaster. In response, scholars call for a specific form of social and economic repair: reparations. This line of scholarship returns to considerations of death, contamination, pollution, and waste, but with a twist toward rebalancing historic, embodied, ongoing injustices through the decolonising of Indigenous land, and reparations (Liboiron 2021; de Greef 2022). Reparations are what The OR Foundation (no date), based in Ghana, has demanded as the only possible remedy to the violence, harm and deep debt caused by the fashion industry, and its second-hand circuits of things and clothes, in its current form.

Dirt, contamination and pollution in second-hand economies expose vital questions for the present: from how 'dirty' textile materials might be reimagined and regenerated (Norris 2019), to who does the 'dirty work' of sorting, picking and cleaning in the so-called green or circular economies, and threading through these flows, how colonialism underwrites this uneven harm to the people and land where second-hand waste ends up (Gregson et al. 2016; Murphy 2017; Ayres 2019). There is renewed attention, too, on the way this labour of sorting and salvage happens in the 'back room' spaces of the Global North—the rag trade warehouses (Botticello 2012) and back rooms of charity shops and thrift stores (Maddrell 2017; Ayres 2019; Broadhead 2021). The 'elsewhere' or 'away' of such attitudes to waste is contravened by more local, radical practices of salvage, like the "Bodging, Tatting and Making Do" of New Traveller vehicle dwellers who, among others, long exiled to the margins, make and furnish durable homes out of other's waste (Craft 2021).

### **Intensifying extraction**

The second main theme drawn from the symposium that we see orientating current second-hand studies relates to intensifying extraction from, and gentrification of, these worlds. The extraction of value from marginal second-hand economies is hardly new: Le Zotte (2013; 2017) traces how the likes of Goodwill, Inc. and The Salvation Army in the US gleaned enormous profits from taking over and 'cleansing' the second-hand markets in which Jewish and immigrant traders, foreclosed from other work, had made their living; Gosling (2021) outlines how the 19<sup>th</sup> century Salvation Army re-framed the hard labour of recycling and salvage operations in its workhouses as religious salvation; Seitz, Thandapani and Wittrick (2021) show how 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist furniture built in Chandigarh, India for use and reuse in public spaces like libraries has been bought up by the international auction market at low prices, and resold for hefty sums to collectors. Lifter's book (2019) *Fashioning Indie* describes the pathway by which the circulation of 'indie' or alternative thrift styles moved from music festivals to the high street, spiralling in the present to further financial extraction. Other scholars have noted how second-hand consumption has long involved implicit knowledges and the skill of the 'hunt' (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 185), and picking out craft, cut and value from the jumbled heap (McRobbie 1989; Roberts 2021).



These contemporary trends of intensifying extraction from and gentrification of second-hand cultures and economies are directing a great deal of contemporary scholarship. In her keynote talk for the symposium, McRobbie (2021) addressed what she called “the politics of second-hand washing”: cleansing, appropriating and reselling second-hand and vintage clothes as a way to ‘wash’ away fashion’s ugly excesses. This ‘washing’ is, she argues, “capitalism’s current crisis”. This current global economy refracts a key insight from her 1989 essay, “Zoot suits and Second-hand dresses”, where she noted middle class young women ‘ransacking’ second-hand markets for inexpensive dresses (McRobbie 1989, p. 34-35). Rising interest in second-hand style and consumption among young people around the world, such as in Mexico, China, and Indonesia, has changed these markets, and provoked popular and critical reflection upon the consequences about the consequences of gentrification (Ortega 2016; Mondragón-Toledo and Morales-Tapia, this issue; Rahmawati, Febriyanti and Tutiasri, this issue).

Another key element of this theme revolves around the ethics of sourcing, reselling and pricing for second-hand resellers who spoke at the Symposium, including A. Cleopatra, of sustainable fashion brand *Vêtement Vintage*, Liisa Jokinen, founder of Gem, a vintage search app, and Pilar Garibay, of *Bodega Numero Tres* vintage shop. Too often the vintage market prices out people with less buying power (Kneese and Palm 2020). The intensification of extraction puts ever-increasing pressure on the gig workers of second-hand, too, to upskill and improve upon what Kneese and Palm (2020) call their ‘listing labour’, and to ‘pivot or Perish’ in response to sharp changes in the market (Ayres 2022). Contemporary scholarship explores how new trends of extraction and gentrification in second-hand economies are gendered, racialised, and classed (Dahl 2014): the rise of Big Thrift of the likes of ThredUp, Vinted, and Depop, for example, have made these dynamics even more lurid and mobile (Lifter 2021; Ayres 2022). Such changes direct us to thinking about second-hand labour: from tactile, intimate (re)making, design, and craft, to rethinking shopping as work (Ayres 2019), to understanding the politics of digital labour in reselling and ecommerce (Kneese and Palm 2020; Kneese et al. 2022), to broader issues of working conditions, organising, health, wellbeing and justice in second-hand circuits and disposal chains around the world. Who makes money from these cultures and economies? Whose knowledge and labour is acknowledged and valued? How are the ethics and politics of second-hand economies changing and on the move? These are some of the questions recent changes invite.

### **Repair and reparation**

Finally, the third theme to emerge from the symposium concerns repair. Acts of repair are further unpacked within this issue, but also recently more broadly in studies of second-hand

and circular economies. Some of this work uplifts and amplifies creative interventions in repair with critique built into their structure and style. This line of scholarship interrogates the creative, generative potential of the repair as a cultural form: the cut, the patch, and the 'stitched resistance' of repair in second-hand fashion cultures around the world, from punk slashes and patches to modified uniforms under South African apartheid (de Greef 2020, 2022) to hand-repaired *boro* in Japan (Li 2022). O'Connell (2021), for example, draws our attention to 'vintrashe', the upcycled and re-printed clothes of the Cuban label *Clandestina*.

Repair in particular has seen rising interest and investment from industry, governments and researchers seduced by their promise as a 'fix' for the damage of waste and climate catastrophe (McLaren et al. 2020; van der Velden 2022). The slow and local work of repair has proliferated through, for example, a blooming network of repair cafés, where people can bring broken household objects to be repaired by volunteers, and the rising 'right to repair' movement (Godwin 2019; Schmid 2019). Critiquing romantic (Ureta 2014), utilitarian or instrumentalist uses of repair, an emerging scholarship has begun to turn instead to the complexity and 'reconfiguring' power of repair in the context of the circular economy (McLaren et al. 2020; Niskanen et al. 2021), and to explore the real unfurling of repair work in specific times and contexts (Dant 2010; Strebel et al. 2019).

There is an emphasis on acknowledging and accounting for the significance of the people who have been doing this work all along, without celebration, and often in the face of stigma: Indigenous stewards of land and other living beings; immigrants practicing thrift as a survival strategy, as well as the 'scavver', 'tatter', or 'saviour(s)' (Mann 2021), scrap metal collectors, and 'ragmen' (O'Brien 2012), vehicle dwellers fitting a kitchen of salvaged appliances and wood (Craft 2021), or boat dwellers circulating homeware among themselves (Flutter 2021). Other important research looks at makers repairing the gaps in the mainstream economy, such as informal economies set up to produce and distribute Trans-supportive DIY undergarments (Streck and Reddy-Best 2021). There is an attention to the emotional and social repair that can emerge from the labour of repairing things together, for example in women's sewing and embroidery collectives in India (Sirkar 2021), for stitchers and in communities surviving the deindustrialisation of textile factories in Northern England (Wellesley-Smith 2021; Wellesley-Smith and Kiff 2021), or, in the case of Dorcas Societies, as space of respite for Black women migrants to Britain from the Caribbean (Sinclair 2015; 2021). Still another related strand of research and practice has turned to the teaching and sharing of skills of repair, in classrooms, the aforementioned community repair cafés, or other spaces, especially in considering what's next for second-hand futures (Findley, this issue; Bradley and Persson 2022). In recent work in the UK, for example, scholars describe how handling, caring for and repairing clothes – rather than doomsday statistics – have



attuned and oriented people to buying less (Willett et al. 2022).

Practice and research often join together in research on repair circuits and systems. This line of work explores practical interventions (or repairs) within institutions – especially the university – through the setting up second-hand exchange infrastructure (Wishart 2021) or creating a student hub for swapping, mending and dyeing clothes at the University of Greenwich (Akbas and Souchet 2021), to celebrating the intimate interplay of clothes and spaces (Huebner 2021). Other work directs practical circular design interventions in other sectors, such as charity shops (Earley et al. 2021). Others address how critical awareness of sustainability in second-hand, and concrete repair and reuse craft might be shared and taught: from school workshops to design education (Dunstan 2021; Igoe et al. 2021) and accessible critical writing on fashion and pop culture, as in the magazine *Dismantle* (Bernstein and Chatelain 2022). These efforts to repair broken circuits and systems within second-hand also extend to the municipal, such as the FABSCRAP textile recycling and reuse store in New York City, or ReLondon's (2021; Carter 2021) 'Love Not Landfill' campaign, too (Romo Chavez 2021; Carter 2021). Finally, this turn to repair might also connect back to the radical repair of reparations mentioned above.

This work shows the way second-hand research and practice is implicated within the most pressing ethical, environmental and economic questions of the present. The articles cited here represent some of this scholarship and practice. While the symposium and special issue represent only a narrow slice of this emerging and exciting area, it is our hope that they have utility as jumping off points for further enquiry. Their presence in this issue reflects a commitment to the critical politics of second-hand: questions of gender, sexuality, disability, decolonising, abolitionism, and anti-racism in second-hand cultures, as well as of the important presence and contributions of underrepresented, marginalised or invisible second-hand makers, workers, and communities. Connected to these politics, as second-hand studies gather more interest, are issues of method and approach raised in this special issue.

## **SECONDHANDEDNESS IN THE FIELD: METHODS AND APPROACHES**

The new work in second-hand studies we outline here is grounded in scholarship from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s that examines overlooked sites of second-hand consumption, exchange, and divestment. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary in scope, significant work comes from cultural studies, design research, geography, sociology, and anthropology in particular. Some significant work focuses on everyday sites of second-hand production: whether it is Angela McRobbie's (1989) insistence that the shopping and trading happening in London's second-hand markets in the 1980s be counted as a cultural (and political)

endeavour, or Sherry (1990) on suburban US flea markets or Herrmann's (2005, 2015) on the gendered emotionality of value in the US garage sale, or Palmer and Clark's (2005) edited collection on second-hand style around the world. Foundational sociological and geographical work takes up vintage shops, car boot sales, and charity shops (Horne and Maddrell 2002; Gregson and Crewe 2003; reviewed in Broadhead, this issue). Still other formative work focuses on the relations formed through everyday second-hand exchanges, such as Miller's (1998) insights into how shopping 'makes' bonds of care. Others follow economic circuits, such as transnational recycling markets (Hansen 2000; Norris 2012), and examine waste and second-hand salvage (Thompson 1979; Strasser 1999).

Theoretically, in their insightful mapping of the emerging field of 'changing secondhand economies', Hansen and Le Zotte (2019) point out the prevalence in nearly all second-hand scholarship of the thinking of Marcel Mauss (2002) on the gift, Mary Douglas (1966) on dirt, not unproblematically, and Arjun Appadurai (1986) on the lives of things. Yet because the second-hand is so ubiquitous and everyday, unfolding alongside so many other processes, second-hand studies also draws from a transdisciplinary profusion of other work: in studies of affect and emotion (Stallybrass 2001; Felski 2000; Ngai 2007; Highmore 2013; Ahmed 2004), Black and Indigenous scholarship (Stack 1974; hooks 1992; Ford 2015, 2019; Liboiron 2021), and Science and Technology Studies (Graham and Thrift 2007; Ureta 2014; Haraway 2016), among others. The contemporary conversation has also been shaped by books appealing to both popular and academic audiences (Minter 2019; Brooks 2015; Hoskin 2022; De Castro 2021). This groundwork informs the breadth of methods in the diverse and evolving field of second-hand studies.

### ***Methods and approaches***

Second-hand culture lends itself to novel and innovative research methods due to the multifarious forms, sites, individuals and practices it encompasses. Many of these second-hand methods are explored within this special issue. In particular, qualitative, interpretative methodologies proliferate, as they enable the requisite depth needed to explore the nuances and complexities of secondhandedness. These forms of research emerge from very disparate academic fields: sociology and social policy, marketing, geography, business, anthropology and history, where the evolving cultural economy of cast-offs, resale, reuse, thrift vintage and upcycling continues to prompt debates and dissent.

The most familiar form this research takes is through the use of ethnographic methods such as participant observation, ethnographic interviews, diaries and other immersive research tools. Ethnographic research methods are ideal for exploring deeper questions of culture and power, and their strength lies in often directly engaging with the worldviews of their

interlocuters. It allows scholars (and in some cases, practitioners who are already working in second-hand shopping or crafting spaces) access to a clearer and more in-depth understanding of the everyday material, emotive, affective or lived experiences of second-hand culture.

In particular, reflexive ethnographic methods deconstruct and examine our assumptions about the 'realities' of second-hand cultures, and questions their concreteness – including our value systems, prior knowledge and innate biases. The second-hand researcher must have a "dialogic relationship" with the site or subject of study (Fitton 2022): understanding that by being a part of the social world they are studying, it may influence them, and they may also influence it. Thus, reflexivity is key to a number of the methods used within this special issue, and more broadly in researching the second-hand world.

Autoethnography in particular can offer insights into the contradictions and paradoxes reflexivity can cause. Consider Wendy S Shaw's (2019) account of 'Do It Yourself' urban reuse subcultures, where she recounts personal memories elicited from reflecting on items she has owned. She discusses the importance of developing a racialised and classed understanding of our own past attachments to things – in her case Aboriginalia that was formerly deemed low value and could be easily scavenged by people within her own punk subculture. What was treated regarded as 'crude' tat and adopted by Australian punks as a symbol of anti-capitalism has now become highly collectable and thus valuable as 'kitsch'. The postcolonial conflict that arises as a result is grappled with in Shaw's reflexive approach.

Whilst ethnographic methods necessitate micro-analysis of behaviours and experience, often within case study settings, contemporary approaches to researching secondhandedness are forced to consider the bigger picture of the global political economy of consumer goods. The now-critical threat of environmental damage and destruction, as well as social harms such as labour exploitation, have been exacerbated by the drive for fast fashion and global commodity circulation; something the second-hand world has been accused of propping up. Anthropologists have been conducting fieldwork illuminating these practices, such as Karen Tranberg Hansen (2000, 2002, 2003), whose work on the Zambian second-hand clothing trade ('*Saluala*') combines interviews with media reports, detailed household budgets and a text from the colonial period to show the historical, political and legislative context that has enabled the trade to thrive there. Such work has highlighted the hitherto under-reported, yet important political role that women play in these informal global economies (Hansen 2000, 2002, 2003; see also Milgram 2004 on trash work in the Phillipines; Fredericks 2012 on female Senegalese waste 'entrepreneurs' and Norris 2012, on textile dismantling and reuse in India).

Research into global supply chains has also expanded upon traditional methodologies that encourage plotting the biography of a 'thing' and following its movements (Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986). Nicky Gregson, Mike Crang and colleagues (2010, 2012) interviewed families who buy 'ship breaking' furniture in Bangladesh, seeking to bring attention to the back-end of an item's biography, once its use as an assemblage has been entirely exhausted and it is 'broken down' into parts as it moves closer to becoming rubbish (Thompson 1979). Their research highlights how the Global South is frequently excluded from second-hand debates and treated as a space solely where commodities are produced, rather than as 'multiply entangled' within "flows that have more diverse paths and directions". (Gregson et al. 2010, p 7). Second-hand studies not only open up an important way in to understand these often obscured, 'entangled' relations, but offer a unique position to highlight and analyse these developments.

What becomes evident through Gregson et al's (2015; 2016) research, as well as in that of other researchers exploring global resale and reuse chains, is that international environmental policies such as those established in the Basel Convention on transboundary waste actually facilitated these new markets to develop (Clapp 2002). Critical geographers have also employed methods that have lent credence to this point, such as Andrew Brooks' (2015) analysis that maps "new mercantilist" trade routes, of which charities and their retail arms in the West play a key role in destroying local industries in the Global South. Whilst some authors argue that flourishing markets replete with Western cast-offs are not necessarily repressing those involved in them (Hansen 2000), ethnographic research into global processing sites such as the factories recycling cloth in blankets in Lucy Norris' study in India have suggested otherwise: first-hand observational accounts detail the hazardous practices of extraction of 'raw' materials, the lack of knowledge about the consequences of working with toxic by-products, and the sensory unpleasantness of these spaces for those who work in them. The contradictions revealed within second-hand spaces in global markets highlight the importance of on-the-ground ethnographic research to extend our understanding. This method offers insight into the complicated political histories of sovereign nations and international second-hand trade, through the lens of the multifactorial experiences of the everyday.

Interview methodologies such as oral histories, where participants are encouraged to reflect on their reuse practices and relationships with items as they progress through their social life, can also offer insights into the colourful diversity of global second-hand practices. For example, Olga Gurova's (2009) fascinating study into the transformative use and re-use of underwear draws on a series of oral histories with Russian people who lived through the

Soviet era. Her participants' frank discussion of how clothing was rationed, repaired and passed on illuminates how the socio-political landscape can construct an intimacy with the things we own. This method "offer[s] rich evidence about the subjective or personal *meanings* of past events"(Thomson 1998, p. 584), encapsulated by this beautiful quote on the practice of 'wearing out' (*donashivanie*) intimate items:

"Oh, what mom's drawers have put me through! She got them from grandma and has been doing her best to wear them very carefully, so as to hand them on to me. And they've survived! At this point, they're the faintest shade of blue, but they're indestructible, blast them!" (Gurova 2009, p52-3)

Oral histories, and historical research more generally, are useful for retrospectively exploring how second-hand culture evolves at times of state-imposed economies of shortage – both in post-socialist countries (Gurova 2009; Hájek and Samec 2017; Bartlett 2022), but also in periods of austerity in the West (Hall and Jayne 2016; Murphy 2017). This co-evolution of shortage and scarcity with salvage and second-hand relate closely to the current crises and unsettled times that motivated this special issue. Archival studies such as those of Beverly Lemire (1988, 1997, 2005) have illustrated how a distant past of pre- and early-industrial second-hand markets still have relevance to the cultural economy around re-selling to this day. Cultural memory methodology can also be seen in studies focusing upon more recent forays into secondhandedness, such as Jenss' work on 60s fashion, exploring how we inherit and create subjective "sartorial biographies" (Tarlo, cited in Jenss 2015, p. 6).

More recently, second-hand research methodologies have had to adapt to the role of digital media in the second-hand field. The incorporation of digital culture into everyday life has been revolutionising second-hand shopping since eBay auctioned its first item, a broken laser pen, in 1995 (ebay.com. N.D) and shows little sign of abating. The ubiquity of social media within people's lives has led to more people informally engaging with the second-hand economy – particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, as was clear in the interviews conducted by Jennifer Lynn Ayres (2022) with vintage sellers on Instagram. The many apps and online services available that facilitate not only the sale of used clothing (Vinted, Depop, ThredUp, Poshmark, Hardly Ever Worn It) but also of electronics (Music Magpie, Swappa) and unwanted second-hand goods in general (Freecycle, Nextdoor, Etsy, Gumtree, OfferUp, Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, Preloved, and Schpock to name but a few) offer ample new sites to explore with novel digital methods. Combining traditional ethnographic methods with digital ethnography can offer insight into the tensions presented by the market pressure to 'digitise' second-hand shopping, described as 'listing labour' in mixed-method research by Kneese and Palm (2020). The additional, often hidden, labour involved in the

'platformisation' of existing physical vintage stores is explored through their digital ethnography of the stores' accounts on Etsy, Discogs, Instagram and Facebook, in-person shop visits, and semi-structured interviews. The digital method in particular demonstrated how important 'authenticity' and 'crafting online personas' (Kneese and Palm 2020, p. 8) is to second-hand selling online; and revealed the gendered, racialised and classed nature of this 'listing labour'. Similar research that examines online case studies (for example, that of Etsy crafting and women's labour [Luckman 2013]) highlights the need to examine claims of a 'digital knowledge economy' of these online platforms alongside historical research into informal economies.

### **IN THIS ISSUE: WASTE AND VALUE, POLITICS AND CHANGE, EMOTION AND REPAIR**

The wide range of fieldwork and methodological innovation that is demonstrated by second-hand practitioners and researchers above has, we hope, been well represented by the work showcased in this special issue. We begin with Violet Broadhead's long-form book review because, while the article sits at the end of this special issue, the three books she revisits provide the theoretical foundation for many of the articles that follow in this issue. Broadhead scopes the pivotal themes and insights of three monographs, all published around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that have shaped the interdisciplinary field of second-hand studies: Horne and Maddrell's (2000) *Charity Shops: Retailing, Consumption and Society*; Gregson and Crewe's (2003) *Second-hand Cultures*, and Tranberg Hansen's (2000) *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia*. All three, Broadhead argues, are important not only for focusing on overlooked second-hand cultures and economies but also because they attend to the materiality, sociality and ordinariness of second-hand consumption, offering richly observed empirical accounts of distinct, emplaced second-hand spaces and practices. Following up on subsequent work by these authors and others, Broadhead 'takes stock' of the entangled cultural, political and economic dynamics of this transdisciplinary field, offering readers a guide to some of the field's formative ideas.

#### ***Waste and value***

The first group of articles addresses questions of waste, value, and the labour (and knowledge) involved in deciding what is valued and what is waste in different sites in the second-hand economy in the UK.

Anabella Pollen traces one worn garment, a polyester Bonmarché bathrobe, as it is moved out and along amidst other belongings cleared by a house clearance company after the owner's death. Her article brings together a constellation of approaches: first, observing how one house clearance company clears a house, reselling and disposing of its contents over



the course of a week, and second, undertaking a 'wardrobe study' (Woodward 2007) of one item of clothing caught up in this house clearance (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). Here, Pollen looks past more valorised second-hand objects of study, such as the vintage or antique, to examine the end-of-life of an unwanted, undesirable item of clothing. Tracing the production, marketing, and purchase of the bathrobe, she follows it further, through the local and global processes through which ordinary household things are resold, recirculated and become waste. One of her aims is to slow down the circulation of cheap, fast fashion, to examine the system in granular detail, and how overlooked actors like the house clearance company sort and broker value and waste within it.

In the UK charity shop, Triona Fitton examines how the unstable value of second-hand items is actively negotiated by staff and shoppers. This matters, she argues, because even as charity retailers have tended to 'professionalise', causing them to raise and standardise their prices, economic and social upheaval puts pressure upon charity shops to offer affordably priced goods for those who need them. She argues that, despite the apparent stability of professionalised norms and policies, value in charity shops continues to be changeable, unstable, and only settled through social exchanges. Based on a micro-ethnography of two distinct types of charity shops, a chain retailer and an independent hospice shop, Fitton outlines four orientations to the negotiation over value of items: *neutral*, *profit*, *social*, or *mission*. Fitton situates her analysis of these exchanges in sociological critiques of how people navigate consumer culture and capitalism, developing upon the work of Cova and Rémy (2007) to theorise these negotiations as 'Participant-Driven Experiences', where staff and customers work together on the purchase process in order to stave off the alienation that results from the invasion of capitalism within spaces it is not expected.

Simon Hobbs takes us to the car boot sale: ephemeral markets held in open fields, car parks, school grounds, and areas of wasteland across the UK, where people sell used goods from their cars. Revisiting the seminal work of Gregson and Crewe (2003) on these second-hand markets, Hobbs suggests that re-examination of the sale's enduring appeal as a complex site of cultural knowledge, pleasure, livelihood, and sociality is long overdue. Hobbs uses fan studies to study 'booting' as a form of fandom: an activity external to mainstream culture that people engage in to cope with everyday life. Hobbs argues that 'booting', like other fandoms, entails tacit knowledge and cultural competencies in haggling, and knowing of value; Hobbs explains that booting is similar to other fandoms in that it involves accessible but niche interests, shared pleasures and community, in part because of the car boot sale's spatial and social marginality, relative affordability and offline openness. Considering changes like land development pressures, pandemic limitations on gatherings, and the rise in digital second-hand commerce, Hobbs outlines the many ways the 'analogue' space of

the car boot sale nevertheless continues to matter.

### **Politics and change**

The second grouping of articles addresses the distinct and changing politics of second-hand cultures in different contexts. Brenda Mondragón-Toledo and Diana Morales-Tapia explore the changing second-hand clothes economy in the Mexican region of Puebla-Tlaxcala, moving from the *tianguis* (open-air markets), to consumer-to-consumer ecommerce on social media. Situating their study in critiques of cross-border US-Mexico second-hand trade and regulation, they describe an informal, illegal and dynamic second-hand market shaped by US colonialism, overconsumption, and dumping, smuggling, drug cartels, and trade regulation, which is now changing rapidly in response to new participants, shifting cultural values, and economic pressures. Like others in this issue, Mondragón-Toledo and Morales-Tapia use ethnographic methods, here an accidental ethnography of their own experiences over several years as consumers and resellers in the *tianguis* and online. Within this market, they trace four persistent issues: the lingering stigma and yet de-stigmatisation around second-hand clothes; the problems around dumping waste, with related tensions around fast fashion and environmental sustainability; the economic precarity and security of consumers and resellers; and the rising gentrification of these markets.

Similar histories and new developments refract through the Indonesian second-hand clothing market. Aulia Rahmawati, Syafrida N. Febriyanti, and Ririn P. Tutiasri detail how trade in imported second-hand clothes in Indonesia has been made illegal to protect local clothing economies and discourage the transnational dumping of second-hand clothes by wealthier nations such as South Korea. Yet trade in second-hand clothes is booming, fuelled by digital reselling and ecommerce among young Indonesians. Intrigued by these trends, Rahmawati, Febriyanti and Tutiasri survey and interview young Indonesian thrifters about their motivations for and understanding of second-hand consumption. The authors find that the practice of thrifting for their participants has many layers of meaning, from thrifting as a strategy for coping with economic challenges, to a means of expressing one's identity and individuality through style, to a means to create community belonging, as well as constituting a form of environmental responsibility. Their work points to new directions for research into second-hand consumption in the unique, thriving and culturally and politically complex market of Indonesia.

Through a cultural studies lens, Alida Payson argues that the apparently innocuous UK charity shop functions as a site of welfare politics shaped by the makeover, especially under austerity. She analyses two television programmes, a 2009 BBC Two reality television makeover programme *Mary, Queen of Charity Shops*, and a cult-hit comedy web series,

Charity Shop Sue (2019). In the first programme, retail celebrity Mary Portas sweeps in to revamp a shabby British charity shop, sweeping out old things, people, and spaces, to make way for new ones. Revisiting the violence of makeover cultures (McRobbie 2004) and charitable rehabilitation (Nickel 2016), the article explores how the makeover of things, people, and places in charity shops relates to a regime of real-world austerity politics: 'makeover welfare', in which the makeover is offered as a remedy for the removal of welfare. By contrasting Mary Portas' sanitising shop overhauls with the camp satire of Charity Shop Sue's failed makeovers, Payson explores second-hand's counter-aesthetic to makeover welfare: a surprisingly durable politics located in unruly tatt, stubborn subjects, and jumbled, marginal spaces. Payson's argument relates to our broader point in this introduction around the gentrification of second-hand: the recent, wholesale class restructuring, upscaling of and extraction from second-hand spaces to maximize profit by appealing to middle class tastes and appetites.

### ***Emotion and repair***

The third and final group of articles addresses themes of emotion in second-hand cultures: attachment to real and imagined times and places; memory, connections, and sociality that becomes embedded in clothing.

Esther Pugh's piece explores what she calls the 'complex bricolage' of second-hand consumption. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, she imagines and traces the past, present and future of a single second-hand garment in her possession: a handstitched, vintage patchwork cloak. Locating herself as a former vintage shop owner and current vintage enthusiast, Pugh explores her cloak's materiality and provenance, examining labels and textiles for traces of its obscured history.. Where other authors in this issue focus on the trash end of the spectrum of second-hand value, Pugh centres on the treasure. Foregrounding her relationship with this particular garment, she brings us in close to the realms of touch, habit, ritual, and the body. Drawing on literature on the aesthetics and pleasures of second-hand consumption, Pugh shows how this kind of emotional attachment might become an act of investment that deepens the "durability" (Fletcher 2015, p. 227), and therefore potentially the sustainability, of clothing.

Tasha Cobb invites us into the emotion, relationships and self-fashioning taking place in three very different clothing swaps in the UK's first 'Sharing City', Norwich. Using participant observation and interviews with swap participants, Cobb's work is framed by feminist and second-hand scholarship on clothing flows, sociality, transforming the self through style, and constructing value and the 'alternative'. In the first swap, she explores intimate sociality between friends: how warm feelings and a sense of identity can be imbued in particular

clothes, and how swappers might bond by offering their clothes, and by proxy, themselves, as a gift to others in the group. In the second, a tea shop swap, she points out the way participants embrace the circularity of the shop as a low risk opportunity to explore styles and find new clothes to fit changing bodies or selves, as well as the setting's 'cozy sociality' as an alternative to the high street. Finally, in the third and most formalised swapping site, Cobb addresses the more ambivalent aspects of swapping that looks more like shopping, with more 'hunting' for value in an ever-changing pool of clothes, and which produces consistent waste. Yet still here, Cobb argues that all of these swaps open up alternative spaces, values, and social relationships—ordinary ways of being otherwise to consumer capitalism.

Finally, also exploring emotion and second-hand clothes, but at the level of thread and stitch, Jules Findley's article brings the reader into the tactile and tacit qualities of second-hand clothes, teased out through the practice of repair. Using a design research approach, the article is based on observations and discussions from a hands-on repair workshop held as part of the Second-hand Cultures in Unsettled Times symposium (2021). Findley guides the reader through her own repair of a tear in the pocket of a beloved dressing gown of her mother's, inherited by the author after her mother's death, inviting the reader to stitch alongside her. As she sews, Findley ties in theory on how history, memory and emotion entwine in garments as what she calls the 'tacit' in second-hand clothes. She explores the power of certain garments, those imbued with grief and the embodied memory of friends and relatives. She traces the history of how repair skills and craft have been shared and taught. In our current period of catastrophic overconsumption, Findley offers the slow, reflective, skilled practice of repair, with its attention to the tacit qualities of things, as a kind of antidote.

## **WHAT NEXT AND WHERE TO IN SECOND-HAND STUDIES: PARADOXES AND CHALLENGES**

Like the unsettled times that have prompted this special issue, the interdisciplinary field of second-hand studies is equally moving, changing and unfolding. The articles in this special issue suggest, however, the most important questions are those that reckon with the paradoxes and tensions in second-hand cultures and economies. Going forward, imagining second-hand futures, where do we direct our critique? Looking over public and research debate on the ethics and politics of second-hand consumption, for example, we are keen to avoid the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility. While we are told our shopping choices will change the world, people have different relations of responsibility to these problems depending on their position and power (Liboiron 2021, p. 24; paperson 2017). A parent in Manchester shopping for a second-hand polyester school uniform for a child does

not share the same responsibility for that garment's afterlife as a manufacturer such as Sainsbury's Tu; a college student selling second-hand garments on Instagram in Puebla-Tlaxcala does not share the same responsibility as Walmart, Goodwill, Inc., or the United States government. Change rooted in individual consumption, 'ethical' or otherwise, is not a solution at the scale required for systemwide change.

So where should second-hand scholarship direct its attention? We suggest, based on our research, the work in this special issue, and beyond, a renewed interest in the leftovers, waste, castoffs, death and the "afterlives" (Pollen, this issue) of second-hand things. We are inspired by new directions of Discard Studies (MacBride 2019; Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022), and meeting the calls for international solidarity and reparations put forth by groups disproportionately impacted by the harms caused by these systems, such as The OR Foundation in Ghana or The Association of Raggpickers in Bengal (The International Alliance of Waste Pickers, no date). Moreover, questions of extraction, gentrification and "washing" (McRobbie 2021) in the second-hand economy have never been more pressing. In the vintage and reselling markets in the US where she now works as a vendor, Ayres (2022) sees first-hand how new evulsions in the world of second-hand culture on social media can be corrosive. She notes how the work of making a living has been turned into a fetishized lifestyle brand, where the thrifted "drop" and BOLO (be on the lookout) create surges of artificial scarcity and waste, and gendered and racialised inequalities propagate as white thrift 'bros' ransack their hunts through the rails of a rural Salvation Army, filming their hunt for social media 'clout'. She argues, too, that we should be wary of the emancipatory mythologies of women's micro-entrepreneurship in second-hand and reselling as these are often rooted in heteronormative ideas about whose labour counts. As the digitally fuelled rush on second-hand things picks up speed and heads mainstream, we return to the scholarship grounded in the political affordances of second-hand: as anti-capitalist, and about the obsolescent, out-of-fashion, obscure, even dead things, which might hold out possibilities for salvage, rethinking, and renewal.

Our approach requires embracing the paradoxes of second-hand cultures and economies. We want to celebrate the insouciant creativity, heterogeneity, and liminality of second-hand doings and things, whilst also foregrounding a critique of the relentless re-propagation of power relations in second-hand cultures and economies. We want to account for the pleasures and the harms of second-hand cultures, and how being involved in these economies (as users, makers, resellers and researchers) necessarily implicates us in negotiating difficult questions. We join a subset of scholarship interested in 'interrogating' the optimism of the circular economy (Gregson et al. 2015; McLaren et al. 2020), focusing instead on the dirty, ephemeral, sticky and difficult second-hand economy, which we

understand as often waste-producing. While we want to avoid the allure of greenwashing second-hand's problematic systems, of drowning in data, and of over-investing in technocratic solutions, we are also most interested in the cultural and political life of second-hand cultures and things: the fun, the promise, the pleasures, the affects. Our approaches try to stay situated in the everyday, both human and non-human, of material experiences and people's lives, to think about futures that are grounded in practice.

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Alida Payson is a Lecturer in the school of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. A lifelong thrifter, she recently finished a research project, *Charity Shop Country: Conviviality and Survival in Austerity Britain*, funded by The Leverhulme Trust.

Triona Fitton is a Senior Lecturer in the school of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent. She has a longstanding interest in charity shops (having worked in several), and in critical charity studies more generally. She is an ethnographer who also engages in historical and pedagogical research, particularly around issues of social justice.

Jennifer Ayres received her PhD in 2020 the Department of American Studies at New York University and is currently working on her first book manuscript, based on her Doctoral work. You can find her at your local antique market conducting oral history interviews with other vendors and buying and selling vintage jewellery.

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