



Emptying the Wardrobe, Clearing the House: A Microcosmic View into the Creation and Destruction of Clothing Value

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ABSTRACT

House clearance companies frequently operate as the first brokers of goods as they move from first-hand usage to second-hand repurposing or to disposal. Especially in their end-of-life formation, house clearers process and disperse diverse ranges of unwanted goods, accumulated over lifetimes, making commercial decisions at speed about their next directions. The small-scale study of UK house clearance practice is underpinned by empirical observation of disposal and dispersal processes at three key points—the cleared house, the waste processing site, and the reselling location—and by interviews with those who make the choices about what to keep and what to trade, as well as with those who buy it and sell it on. Taking a material culture approach that draws on wardrobe studies, garment biographies, and design histories, this study puts disembodied dress at its centre. It examines how clothes can move, in less than a week, out of wardrobes and into the domain of second-hand dealers and consumers, through declining scales of value, until garments are given away for free. What remains unwanted at the end of this process is culturally marked by many rejecting hands and constitutes the lowest ebb of utility and desirability, illuminating how cultural and financial value is constructed and deconstructed through local and global circuits of manufacture and reuse, and ultimately how waste is classified and produced.

KEYWORDS

House clearance, second-hand cultures, everyday dress, object biography, wardrobe studies, waste disposal, rubbish theory

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House clearance companies frequently operate as the first brokers of goods as they move from first-hand usage to second-hand repurposing or to disposal. Especially in their end-of-life formation, house clearers process and disperse diverse ranges of unwanted goods, accumulated over lifetimes, making commercial decisions at speed about their next directions. In such a recursive process of “secondhandedness”, items move rapidly through a series of systems of classification (Hetherington, 2004). Second-hand devaluing and revaluing can be intensely localised in its management, but it can also be a complex global process, where goods circulate through a wide range of sites and meanings, as social and

cultural researchers from Andrew Brooks (2015), Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe (2003), Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark (2005), John Scanlan (2005), Brian Thill (2015) to Michael Thompson (2017) have shown.

There has been a recent growth of interest among fashion history researchers seeking to understand the worn, dirty and distressed in dress (see, for example, Bide 2017; Sampson 2020). The aim of this article is to look beyond the storied romance of second-hand garments' patina effects as treasured items, to instead examine the cultural values of clothes that are unwanted and have reached the end of their desirable lives. To do this, I follow the microcosmic cycle of textile turnover in a medium-sized British house clearance company, whose high-speed *modus operandi* moves garments, in less than a week, out of wardrobes and into the domain of second-hand dealers and consumers, through declining scales of value, until garments are given away for free. What remains unwanted at the end of this process is culturally marked by many rejecting hands and constitutes the lowest ebb of utility and desirability, shedding light on how cultural and financial value is constructed and deconstructed, and ultimately how waste is classified and produced.

The research follows a single company on a single job relating to a single person; within this, I examine the social biography of the contents of her wardrobe as garments move through a series of sequential stages over a week. In this approach, I follow Arjun Appadurai's and Igor Kopytoff's model of considering commodities as persons with metaphorical social and cultural lives (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). "In doing the biography of a thing", Kopytoff suggests, "one would ask questions similar to those one would ask about people". These include: "Where does the thing come from and who made it?" and "How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?" (1986: pp. 66-67) In relation to the wardrobe as a particular category of goods, I consider it not only as an assemblage of clothing but, in the frame of Nicky Gregson and Vikki Beale's (2004) work in cultural geography, as a container of meaning and as a mobile site through which clothing flows. Gregson and Beale (2004, p. 692) demonstrate the utility of social biographical approaches in garments' existences and afterlives when they reflect on the mobilities of accumulation and divestment. "Clothes circulate", they argue. "They have lives with their initial possessors and lives which may exceed them." Sophie Woodward (2007), in her 'wardrobe studies' system of sociological analysis, argues that worn clothing not only narrates the lives of its wearers in its use and disposal but, by extension, that individual garments can be read as material archives or indexes; they can be read together as a body of biographical material and individually as elements of a life.

Underpinned by a material culture methodology that foregrounds the things with which the social and cultural world is populated and with which it communicates, this article asserts that objects' varied movements, meanings and status shifts are shaped by their materiality; that is, what they are made of and how they are made, and by whom, matters. The small-scale study is underpinned by empirical observation of disposal and dispersal processes at three key points—the cleared house, the waste processing site and the reselling location—and by interviews with those who make the choices about what to keep and what to trade,

as well as with those who buy it and sell it on. Through this, I offer a micro-view of garments' shifting cultural values. To contextualise and interpret the material, I draw on anthropology, cultural geography, design history, discard studies and fashion studies. To protect privacy, I use pseudonyms throughout for garments' wearers, sellers, users and destroyers.

A house, its owner and her wardrobe

On a rainy summer's day in 2019 in the south east of England, Total Clearances is doing the rounds. Every day is busy: clearing, sorting, dumping what won't sell, selling what will, dumping again. Jobs may be grand or modest; depending on content, some the company charge for and some they pay to clear. There may be cash in the garage and oil paintings in the attic or hypodermic needles in the carpet and excrement in the bath. While house clearance companies may undertake a range of different jobs for commercial landlords and local authorities as well as private clients, including end-of-tenancy clearance, waste disposal and removals, most commonly, elderly people have passed away and their families instruct the clearers to deal with a lifetime of accumulated possessions that must be dispersed. As I trail the company, the job I follow, an employee tells me, "is profoundly unexciting and completely typical".

We are in a cul-de-sac in a suburban area on the coast, on the edges of a town of around 100,000 residents. An elderly widow, living alone, has recently died; she had released equity from her home via re-mortgaging and the finance company need it emptied within 30 days of death. Judging by the ages of her offspring, she was in her eighties. Although many details of her life and death are unknown to me, she had significant health issues: there are mobility aids throughout and prescription medications piled high. Relatives have already gone through her possessions, as the clearance workers tell me is usual. Some sentimental items have been taken but plenty of others remain, including personal photographs. I am looking for clothes, in particular, to trace their journeys through the second-hand system; it is possible that the deceased's garments have been weeded by family and friends. Nonetheless, there are still five wardrobes' worth, and three stuffed chests of drawers. The deceased was a woman who liked clothes and bought them regularly and recently. There are many new items with labels still attached.

A quick appraisal reveals an identifiable taste. The woman—I will call her Judy—liked stretch jersey in bright colours (pink, purple, turquoise), bold patterns and embellishments (beaded necklines, sequins, crystal and sparkle). There's some formal wear in the form of longer, shinier dresses and more formal fitted jackets, but mostly the clothing is daily wear designed for comfort, from fleeces to Crocs. The clothes are from a repetitive set of middle-market British high street retail locations: Marks and Spencer, BHS (British Home Stores) and particularly Bonmarché. The bedside cabinet shows that Judy received Bonmarché promotions in the post. The photograph chosen to represent Judy at her funeral shows her with a snazzy pink rinse in her grey hair and a turquoise feather fascinator, wearing a bright print jersey top. Her loud and proud colours and styles match Julia Twigg's (2013, p. 63) observation in *Fashion and Age: Dress, The Body and Later Life* that brighter colours now characterise the older market in fashion; this is evidence, as she sees it, of a cultural trend

for older women to resist invisibility.

While Judy may have embraced visibility, looking through a stranger's bedroom after their death feels uncomfortable. Some of the remaining clothes have a strong sense of presence—well-worn brown leather sandals, for example, appear just-stepped-out-of. Judy's hair is tangled in her hairbrush and her dressing gown still hangs on the back of the door [Figure 1]. Judy's funeral, indeed, had been only two weeks before. Seeing death so close at hand may not something that most people have to experience regularly, but this is what house clearance companies do, all day, every day, mostly unobserved by outsiders.



FIGURE 1 Judy's dressing gown. Photograph by author, 2019.

The house clearance company

Commercial house clearance services remain under-researched, although the process of clearing a house from a bereaved relative's point of view has been researched by Melanie Lovatt (2015) and Valerie Guillard (2016), who note the emotional challenges and caring

responsibilities ascribed to practical acts of recategorizing formerly highly personalised and embodied goods. There is abundant scholarly literature on cognate territories, including flea markets and yard sales, junk shops and auction sites (see, for example, Hillis, Petit and Epsley 2006; Horne and Madrell 2002; Gregson and Crewe 2003); these variously examine the subtle and sometimes contested ways that cultural and economic values are negotiated and reinscribed through site-specific contexts by their various players, including donors, traders, dealers and purchasers.

Each domain for the revaluation of goods has its own characteristics, and while their relations can be complex and interdependent, none map precisely onto house clearances, whose business model is somewhat opaque, even deliberately concealed. In 1979, Thompson (2017, p. 115) first opposed the “reputable and scholarly” activities of the antique dealer with the lowest categories of trader that include the totter, the rag-and-bone man and scrap-dealer. House clearance operatives have their own internal hierarchies of professionalism and respectability, company by company, but four decades on, they still inhabit the lower range of cultural value, as “bottom feeders in the second-hand food chain”, to use the words of a Total Clearance employee. The trade’s murky reputation has been tainted by the worst of the unregulated sector’s underhand practices but also by its association with the end of life.

House clearances, then, sit at the intersection of three strands of practice: the antiques trade, refuse disposal and the death industry. Its operators are consequently part-dealers, part-dustmen and part-undertakers. There is no regulatory body that oversees house clearance companies, although a voluntary Association of UK House Clearance Companies, established 2009, attempted to provide an online system of approved traders with a common code of practice including that companies must advertise fairly, be covered by liability insurance, and carry a waste disposal licence. Only fifteen companies signed up nationally to this national scheme despite the very busy marketplace; for context, a 2022 internet search for trade listings show more than fifteen companies advertising within a five-mile radius of my house. The voluntary association has been superseded, in any case, by the emergence of commercial comparison sites, such as CheckATrade, TrustPilot and TrustATrader, which offer user-evaluated means to rate reputations. In fact, any person with access to a vehicle and a website can offer house clearance services and, judging by the many horror stories published online, unscrupulous practices include theft, damage to property, and fly tipping.

The company I scrutinised is keenly aware of these negative associations; transparency, sensitivity and professionalism are their watch words. They promote their good standing on ratings sites and they make much of their good recycling record even though the need to dispose of all items by the end of each week leads to some expedencies. As a medium-sized company—employing six permanent staff, operating two Luton-style trucks, renting several large-scale industrial storage sheds, and clearing up to ten houses a week over three counties—their business model is to sell all items at speed to avoid paying for storage or the substantial fees of commercial waste disposal; the weekly clearance cycle culminates

in a substantial weekend sale of goods at a busy open-air second-hand market. Although there is no comparative survey of house clearance methods nationally, the company employees, who all have decades of experience, tell me their model is typical. For my purposes, tracing post-mortem objects' afterlives, the high-speed turnover also offers a neat microcosm of the wanted and unwanted, the saleable and unsaleable, mapping clothing's movement from wardrobe to waste.

Beyond house clearances in general, the UK trade in second-hand clothing is a large-scale, longstanding and expanding business made up of increasingly diversified elements along its reuse routes. As part of his observation about its "shadowy world", populated by "an uneasy cast of actors", Brooks (2015, p. 7) notes that inside information about practices and quantities can be hard to obtain. Nonetheless, he cites 2014 statistics from the Waste and Resource Action Programme, showing that 650,000 tonnes of used-clothing items were collected by the secondary textile industry, representing about half of all new clothes consumed (Brooks 2015, pp. 128-129). The expanding scale of the market is due to the expanding first-hand market in clothes production, as well as the rising value of second-hand items as exportable commodities. "New clothing consumption creates the preconditions for second-hand clothing systems of provision", Brooks astutely observes. "The new and used clothing sectors are woven together. New purchases are interconnected to disposal" (Brooks 2015, p. 123). Some players in the used clothing market may operate only in one stage in the structure, such as processing donations in a charity shop, but others operate across several intersecting elements, such as the retro retailer, who may act as the clearer, processor, picker and seller. Few second-hand traders, however, are happy to divulge fine details about their sourcing and sale methods (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 219).

Damian is an exception, as one of three Total Clearance employees on the job who I observe, all with multiple links to second-hand selling; several had parents in the trade before them. Alongside his employment as a house clearer, Damian sells clothes at Portobello Road antiques market in London and was the former owner of a vintage fashion boutique. He buys some of his stock from his clearance employer; other material is purchased through his connections with large-scale regional textile processors who operate commercial clothing banks and pay charity shops for their unwanted stock. Through these multiple connections, he has an insider view of all levels on the ladder of value. In the designation of sociologists Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews (2012, p. 552), Damian could be classified as a cultural intermediary, that is, one who constructs value "by framing how others – end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries – engage with goods, affecting and effecting others' orientations towards those goods as legitimate".

As Damian picks through Judy's garments, he decides what to dump and what to take to the car boot sale, where, typically, two trucks of the week's gains are up for grabs. Underwear, he tells me, has no significant resale value. It is more work to pack and unload it, only to reload and dump it at the end of the market, than to dump in advance, he explains as he works. "Overseas traders, buying by the kilo from the ragman, value underwear as

you can get more pieces per kilo, and they are selling by piece. It doesn't work like that in Britain. Materials that can't make an immediate profit go straight to the dump." He separates out tights, socks, knickers and brassieres for immediate disposal.

The waste processing site

For businesses who hold formal licenses from local authorities, trade waste can be deposited at designated commercial sites at locations typically on the fringes of towns and cities with easy access from main roads. Flat fees are charged for the disposal of some individual items, such as mattresses. Waste is otherwise paid for by weight across a series of priced categories per tonne, such as Waste Electronic and Electrical Equipment (WEEE) at £495, which covers a range of household appliances from washing machines and cookers to fridges (see, for example, Light Bros 2022). At the disposal site used by Total Clearances, large-scale items including scrap cars and building waste from industrial construction are managed alongside house clearance spoils. The site is busy; trucks queue to enter and crane grabbers move materials around, in and out. As I watch from the cab of the truck, men in hard hats, work boots and high-visibility clothing sign off paperwork in Portakabins and guide users to the relevant destinations for their detritus. The driver of the Total Clearance truck backs it into a vast indoor unit where miscellaneous decaying waste is bulldozed into enormous mounds [Figure 2]. At the close of Judy's house clearance, material judged to have no resale value is added to the pile: broken furniture, rusted tools from the garden shed, chemicals from under the kitchen sink and pharmaceuticals from the bathroom cabinet. These join a miscellany of personal possessions, disposed of for discretion, from utility bills to family photographs. Judy's dressing down from the back of her bedroom door is the first garment to be thrown from the tail lift at the back of the truck.

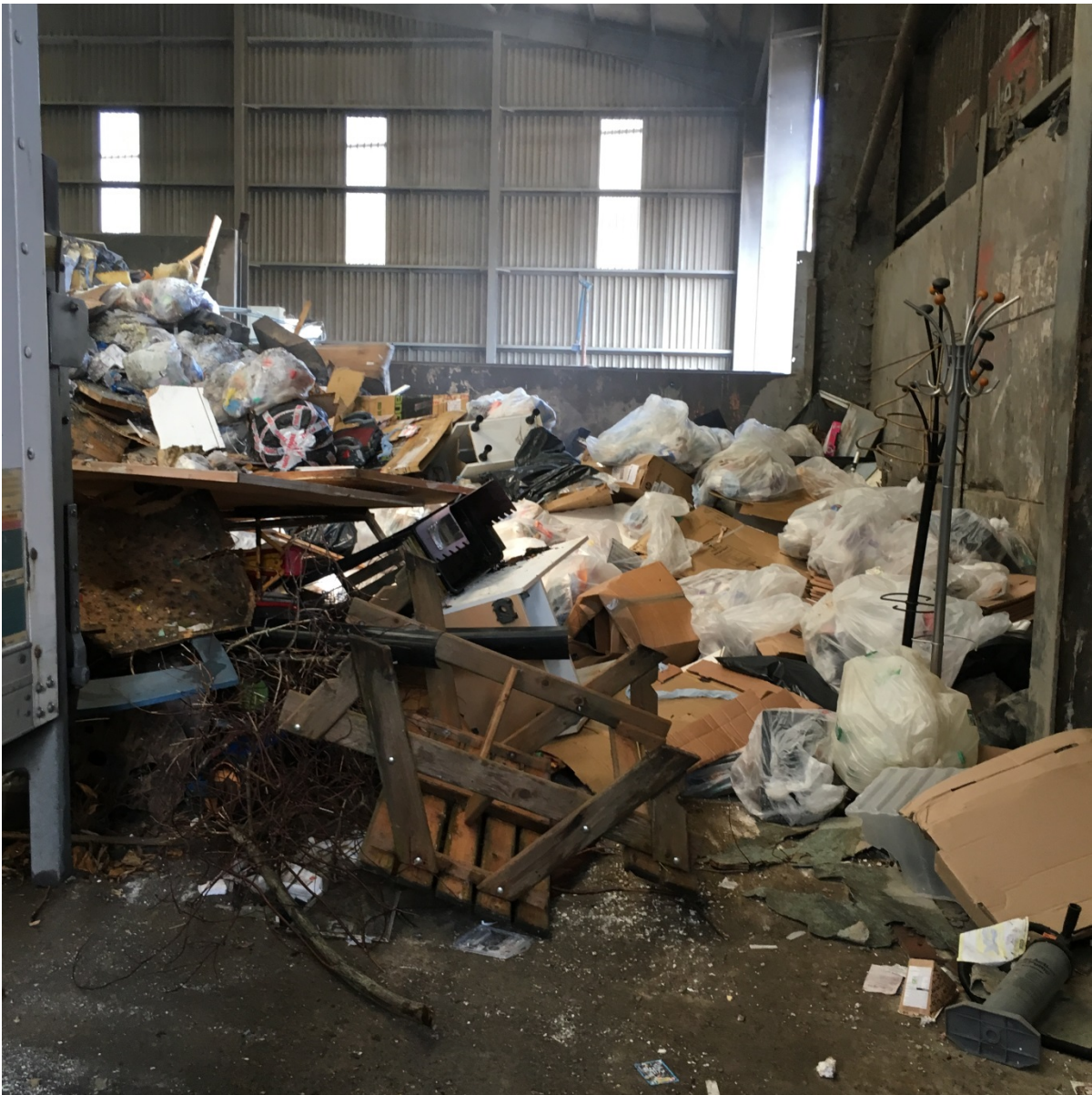


FIGURE 2 The waste disposal site. Photograph by author, 2019.

The garment

Brooks (2015, p. 221) has observed the difficulty of mapping accurate trade patterns for used garments after dispersal. “Tracing where clothing comes from and how it gets to market is methodologically challenging”, he notes. In *Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-Hand Clothes*, he (2015) traced a single blouse donated to a Scope charity clothing bank in 2004 in a supermarket car park in a small town in Leicestershire and followed its subsequent object biography across international trade routes including Mozambique and Zambia. “A clothing item donated at another time to a different Scope bank”, Brooks (2015, p. 223) reflected, “could have followed a completely different route to its final market. A multitude of different counter-factual pathways can be imagined.” For this small-scale study, I adapt this focus on the single item to scrutinise Judy’s dressing gown. Its repurposing journey is shorter, with a different destination, but its contextual object biography is similarly geographically wide.

What are the cultural meanings of a dressing gown? As a humble item used to provide domestic warmth, rarely seen outside the home, the garment does not have a privileged status and has mostly escaped cultural representation, with a few exceptions. In 1772, Denis Diderot composed a whimsical essay, “Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown”. Here the old faithful brown belted garment on which the French philosopher regularly wiped his pen is rashly disposed of in favour of a striking new red version, leading to a set of ill consequences bound up in 18th-century metaphors about manners and morals. Modern dressing gowns for women emerged from 18th century men’s banyans as articles to be worn as part of a bedwear ensemble (Swain, 1972). As fashion historian Christine Boydell (2020) has observed, to be seen in a dressing gown in public is to cross a respectable border, implying slovenliness, given its intimate associations with underwear, bedroom and bathroom. A garment in this mode plays a key structuring role in the British 1957 kitchen sink film *Woman in a Dressing Gown*. Here it variously signalled an unhappy marriage, loss of public persona and female entrapment. Cultural historian Lynda Nead (2017) has considered the dressing gown at length as a means to understand postwar structures of feeling as communicated in advertising and film; her work offers a model for considering how history can be told through everyday objects. Yet, for an elderly woman in a retirement town in 2019, a pale blue quilted polyester robe from Bonmarché is neither poetic trifle nor cinematic plot device; it is a modest home comfort amid poor health. The garment is cheap and functional; it is what is worn when no-one is watching. Its used state, its proximity to the body, and the associations it carries—of older women, of illness—are not highly prized culturally.

Similarly, the dressing gown’s material messages, as a plastic polymer fibre garment whose deterioration is not marked by the highly valued ‘wasted’ or patina aesthetic effects of denim or leather, is not associated with any of garment recycling’s fashionable and pleasurable performances. As Elyse Stanes and Christopher Gibson (2017) have observed, of artificial fibres in the fashion recycling economy, “polyester’s materiality—its very plasticity—unleashes an unsettling set of contradictory relations” in its Western users and re-users, including discomfort, disgust, sweatiness and neglect. Polyester garments, they argue, have become the overlooked stuff of garment waste. Despite clothing’s participation in ever-mobile clothing circuits, which are theoretically ever-unfinished and ever in process as potentially reusable materials, Stanes and Gibson (2017) found that polyester garments frequently constituted the unwanted goods of the second-hand economies they scrutinised (in Sydney, Australia). Most polyester clothing, they noted, ends up in landfill. This was the fate of Judy’s dressing gown on the other side of the world.

Gregson and Crewe’s (2003, pp. 6-7) study of second-hand practices in early 21st century Britain examines how and why goods come to be cast out. They note that these decisions are highly regulated and disciplined, informed by class positions and concerns about respectability. They observe the complexity of object-value relations that operate in the boundary between the cherished and the unwanted, and how these are produced and maintained in practice, particularly in relation to goods that exist at the border between

categories. As part of their investigation, they examine how second-hand clothes that carry traces of “bodily presence” are negotiated by second-hand traders. Here, strategies of divestment, including cleaning practices but also more immaterial associations that insert imagined distance between former owner and current user, are put into play. These are especially deployed in the case of what Gregson and Crewe (2003, pp. 155-156) call “leaky” garments, where perspiration marks, stains or other bodily traces of the former owner are evident.

In some instances, Gregson and Crewe (2003, p. 157) note, “a presence associated with visual and/or olfactory leakiness works to render garments valueless; potentially even impossible to revalorize”. This is unequivocally the case with used underwear, which the researchers were “consistently and without hesitation” informed was undesirable and could not be repurposed or rehabilitated. Most of their interviewees also added nightwear to their list (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 158). Where garments were associated with aged or deceased former owners, the issue was further compounded. Former wearers needed to be imagined as desirable, youthful and attractive figures in order for their garments to harness the same meanings. Inscriptions associated with disease or death symbolically polluted the item (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p. 162). On the border of underwear and bedwear, Judy’s well-worn and stained dressing gown, associated with an unwell woman in her eighties, could not easily enter the second-hand fashion market, even at the bottom end of the ladder of cultural value via the end-of-life house clearance.

Judy’s dressing gown carried a Bonmarché label. Unlike Le Bon Marché, the grand Paris department store, established in 1838 and associated with the birth of modern shopping, there is no design history of Bonmarché, the mid-price high street womenswear retailer. It is not a connoisseurial site for the appreciation of form and style but it forms a key point in the production of material meaning in this garment’s social biography. According to potted biographies provided in newspaper reports, Bonmarché’s founder, Gurchait Singh Chima, was born in India in 1924, and moved to Britain in 1950, where he first traded clothes as a door-to-door salesman. By 1982 he had clothes stalls in Huddersfield; the first Bonmarché shop opened in Doncaster in 1985. By 2002, when Chima sold to Peacocks, Bonmarché had over 300 stores and turned over more than £200 million annually (Zientek, 2018). According to 2002 acquisition proposals, where Bonmarché was characterised as a “high volume value retailer of affordable womenswear”, the company made a good partner for Peacocks, whose focus is the 25-45 age range; Bonmarché was said to focus on the over-45s, plus-sizes and to have a strong basis of loyal repeat customers (Peacock Group, 2002). Judy fitted all three of these categories. In 2012 Bonmarché was sold to Sun Capital, a company specialising in buyouts. In 2019, with annual losses of £6 million, Bonmarché accepted a rescue deal from Philip Day, owner of Edinburgh Woollen Mill among other companies. At the end of 2020, the company again went into administration after a tough year of trading under pandemic conditions and the collapse of its parent company. It continues to trade online and from a reduced basis of UK retail sites (Retail Week, 2022).

Looking at Bonmarché’s public face, however, there is no sign the brand is in financial

trouble. There is also no sign that the company caters for older or larger customers. Clothes are modelled in promotional photographs by slim women in their twenties. Print jersey tops of the type Judy liked begin at £6. Dressing gowns in polyester sell for £15 new [Figure 3] but, as established, there is little fantasy to be found in older women's well-worn bed wear. It is even less glamorous when its origins are known. Bonmarché was one of the retailers connected with the Rana Plaza garment production factory that collapsed to devastating effect in 2013 in Bangladesh, killing 1,134 people and injuring 2,500 more. Today Bonmarché clothes continue to be made in Bangladesh but a survey of current labels on display also reveal garments made in China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Morocco, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Vietnam, suggesting Bonmarché goes wherever the labour is cheapest. It certainly pulls out, without notice, when it suits, as documented by campaigns for improved garment industry conditions. For example, in 2016 Cambodian garment workers were left without employment when factories supplying Bonmarché, among other UK retailers, were closed by manufacturers without warning or compensation (Labour Behind the Label, 2017). Bonmarché was again in the headlines for its contribution to global textile production inequalities during the pandemic, as millions of pounds of cancelled orders left Bangladeshi suppliers out of pocket (Chapman, 2020).

These conditions are more than gross economics; they reveal worldwide networks of trade and their inequalities. As Kopytoff (1986, p. 68) argues in relation to the biographical method, "a culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories". These classifications are marked by space as well as time. Cheap garments circle the world, shifting in value and meaning as they move from factory to shop floor to wardrobe to second-hand sites. Judy may well have bought her Bonmarché garments from the local branch in her local town. Some were dumped in the county tip, fifteen miles away from her house, and others were taken to an outdoor weekly second-hand market in a city ten miles along the coast. Their production and sales were thus both international and very local; similar circuits can be traced as the garments sell on.



FIGURE 3 Dressing gowns on sale at Bonmarché. Photograph by author, 2019.

The market

Bundled into sacks made of bedspreads, what house clearers colloquially call ‘softs’ - clothing and other textiles - are hauled off the tail lift of the clearance trucks at 5.30am in a windswept coastal car park each Sunday. Dealers cluster as the shutters go up, hoping to get first choice on items that will turn a profit. Most are regulars who know what they want. The sacks this week contain Judy’s clothes mixed with garments from another clearance; they are quickly rooted through. Some of the first in line are traders at the same market who

have not yet set up their own stalls; one sells flamboyant and embellished womenswear; she pulls shiny shirts out for a couple of pounds at a time. Minutes later they are on her rails marked at £15. Another local trader specialises in nearly-new womenswear. She piles up Judy's unworn shoes and any garments with hanging tags intact; they too go straight on sale a few feet away at substantial mark-up; the spatial geographies of revaluation can operate at miniscule distances in the second-hand marketplace when the materials are right or the signs of wear are few.

As one of several regular buyers known to ship garments overseas, Amir selects items to send to his native Sudan where, he tells me, "they have nothing". He pulls Judy's sequinned party clothes into a bag, which the traders given him for free as he insists on helping pack away the stall each week, unrequested. He himself has little; he works as a cleaner supporting his wife and three young children in their eighth-floor council flat. Scholars of second-hand clothing's global export, particularly to continental Africa, have noted how clothes donated to UK charity shops, baled for sale via textile recycling depots, have penetrated and latterly dominated, clothing provision in locations such as Zambia (Tranberg Hansen, 2000), Mozambique (Brooks, 2015) and Ghana (OR Foundation, 2022). On a smaller scale, at the car boot sale, individuals who fill a bag or trolley of low-priced garments for shipping overseas, contribute to the wide geographical reach of garments' international journeys, but sidestep the main commercial circuits to reap the immediate benefits within familial networks.

As the sales day rolls on and the traders have had their fill, other more casual shoppers try on individual items for personal use. Some are Bonmarché's target consumers in size and age, and some are teenagers trying on new identities and making cheap fashion experiments. Following Total Clearance's business model of moving the maximum of stock on in order not to have to pay storage costs or dumping charges, by 11am, everything is a pound; by 11.30, all items are 50p. By midday, punters can take it away for a donation to a charity bucket. These expedient pricing decisions have developed over time from traders' tacit knowledge of the temporal shifts of customers at the market. Regulars who are familiar with this sequence of events come especially for the free stuff; they collect clothes for migrant camps at Calais or take bedding for animal charities. Damian explains, "in the end, someone will want it. Even Primark clothes that might otherwise be rejected go when they are free." Yet, not everything sells. Recognisable Items from Judy's wardrobe remain at the end of the event [Figure 4]. By this time, they've been handled and tried on multiple times, rained on, dragged through the mud and rejected at every price. They cannot be given away. They go back on the truck with the other market remnants - chipped crockery, bent cutlery and CDs without sleeves—to be reclassified as rubbish and to be reunited with the dressing gown, their former bedfellow.



FIGURE 4 The end of the car boot sale. Photograph by author, 2019.

The end of the line

What constitutes waste has been a central philosophical consideration in discard studies. Thompson (2017), for example, in *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, characterised rubbish as a covert category lying at the intersection of transient goods—those whose value is in decline—and durable goods—those whose values are on the ascendant. Rubbish, in this model, is the essential triangulating element by which transfers of value take place; it is the broker that enables dynamic social relationships, embodied in the social values ascribed to goods. Building on this work, cultural geographers such as

Kevin Hetherington (2003) have observed the flexible mobility of the category of rubbish and defined it as a form of social placement, reflecting and producing cultural values. In observing that categories of de- and re-valorization are not linear and may be “potentially endless”, Gregson and Crewe (2003, pp. 201-202) ask, “at what point does anything, ever, become ‘rubbish’? Indeed, what is ‘rubbish’?”.

Waste is also the subject of complex categorical scrutiny in the pragmatics of its management. Defined legally, in 2021 UK Government documentation: “material is considered to be waste when the producer or holder discards it, intends to discard it, or is required to discard it.” It could be argued that such a definition is as vague as to say waste, like beauty, exists in the eye of the beholder, or that, like the founding anthropological precepts of Mary Douglas (1966), that waste is merely matter out of place, or even, like conceptual art, that waste is so because it has been declared as such. What the government considers to be waste, however, is variable; reusable materials are not necessarily waste until subject to certain circumstances. For example, if reusable items enter the waste area of a disposal site, they become waste. If recyclable items are mixed with waste, the whole body becomes waste. Finally, if items have “low or negative economic value” and constitute “a burden” on the holder, they become waste (UK Government, 2021). For Total Clearances, these three transitions happen between the close of the Sunday car boot sale and when the waste disposal site opens on a Monday morning. In a further few days, this newly classified waste will be transferred by waste management operatives to a local incinerator, according to current patterns in the county. Judy’s body and its wrappings are ash within a month, within a few miles of her home. The biography of both person and things coincides at this point; their interconnection is more than a metaphorical device.

CONCLUSION: ORDERING THE DISORDERED

In his poetic analysis of cultural detritus, Thill (2015, p. 8) has argued that “waste is every object, plus time”. In Judy’s case, the movement of her garments from everyday wear to never-to-be-worn again is rapid, and perhaps unseemly in its speed. “If life in a modern consumer society involves the accumulation of objects”, Thill (2015, p. 99) reflects, then “death expels them into a new and untethered life, where new and harsh scales of value are laid upon them and judgements rendered in a swift and merciless order”. Whatever their speed, the operations of disposal and the production of waste could be perceived to be a natural process and an inevitable corollary of a consumer society predicated on the production of the new. This is how John Scanlon (2005, p. 43) perceives it, in his treatise *On Garbage*: “everything is eventually reduced to the condition of dirt”. The language of waste, he argues, “is a language of termini – of things cut off, things we lose interest in, things that reach a point of no return. In the end, of course, there is ruin and death” (Scanlon 2005, p. 49).

However much we might reconcile ourselves to the mortal ‘order of things’ - to borrow a phrase from Foucault on taxonomies and typologies, and to build on the social life metaphor of Appadurai - disposal is a cultural process that is mediated and produced through a set of decisions in the service of categories that are rarely subjected to scrutiny. Hetherington

(2004, p. 170) has astutely observed that when “the conduits of disposal” are working effectively, we pay them little heed, but we engage more attentively when such practices are invested with particular significance, such as “the disposal of the effects of a loved one who has just died”. He argues (2004, p. 170), “we see most clearly the importance, recursivity, and ongoing nature of disposal when the management of absence does not work effectively, when it unexpectedly returns or attains a presence and shocks us into a recognition of its significance”. This research shines a spotlight on one shadowy aspect of practice to provide such a presence. As Kopytoff (1986, p. 67) argues, too, “Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure.”

Judy was not known to me; her house clearance was a case study selected at random. In many ways, she was unremarkable as a person without wealth, status or fame; she could be any one of us. The clearance was purportedly typical, and it was one of many jobs in an ordinary working week for a company that is, itself, typical of a large-scale industry of small-to-medium sized individual service providers taking paid work of a similar kind every day across every part of the UK. Wardrobes, Gregson and Beale (2004, p. 699) argue, can be productive spaces for thinking through objects and their values, especially when they are considered as “temporary, transitory, spatial junctures, holding-places in the lives of things”. They are spaces, they observe, “which facilitate exitings” and thus tell us about “passages, flows and divestment” (Gregson and Beale 2004, p. 699). In scrutinising the afterlife of Judy’s wardrobe, and the humble everyday items within it, I have paid attention, in miniature, to a bigger process that is often concealed, whether for discretion, trade secrecy, or to hide the unpalatable truths of the global inequalities that sit beneath the pleasures of first world fashion shopping.

Although there is a longstanding Romantic tendency to wax poetic about cultural ruins, Thill (2015) has argued that a better categorisation for a class of goods that is rather less grand is the “derelict”. Thill (2015, pp. 6-7) defines it as:

that immense underclass of things that have much more quickly or surreptitiously fallen outside of visibility and desire in our time: the indifferent, the lost, the wayward, the leaking, the ugly, the truly abject and the unwanted – all the meddlesome waste caught in the cracks between the things we’ve build up in our minds as meaningful and majestic.

A soiled polyester domestic bed garment would seem to fit this category well, as an intimate item unable to be easily recuperated in contemporary taste, constructed from a fabric that does not deteriorate at speed or in line with cultural expectations about the desirable aesthetics of wear (Stanes and Gibson, 2017).

Thill’s derelict objects akin to what design historian Judy Attfield (2000, p. 5) calls “wild things”: the material culture of everyday life. Her interest is in understanding the social relations that play out through objects, especially in what she describes as “the largest part of the object’s biography, when it forms part of the disordered everyday clutter of the mundane”, joining the undisciplined ranks of things that don’t neatly belong anywhere. For

Attfield, such wild things take on particular cultural powers when they inhabit textile forms. She argues in a particularly pertinent passage to the material culture of garment decline:

It is the nature of the material that makes cloth so receptive to the nuances of meaning associated with the materialisation of identity. Its accessibility, adaptability, fluidity and the infinite possibilities of variation that renders it so amenable to matters of individuality, also make it easily disposed of, whether by folding it away and allowing it to lie forgotten in the attic, turning it to another use, passing it on or throwing it out. Because textiles lose their bloom, fade and rote more quickly than other materials, meanings dependent on longevity cannot rely on textiles to keep them fresh. The ephemerality that makes textiles susceptible to the ravages of time is what gives it the particular physical characteristics that materialise the impermanence of modern identity (Attfield 2000, p. 148).

As fashion historians Palmer and Clark (2005, p. 3) confirm, in relation to the potency of meanings attached to second-hand garments: “the tactile nature of cloth and the fact that clothes are worn on the body means that they can represent, and indeed often stand in for, human beings more forcefully than any other objects”. This is particularly the case when their wearer is deceased. Worn clothes, as the most invested and peopled of objects, might be the hardest to dispose of sentimentally but they can also be the hardest to sell commercially, steeped in their previous owner’s bodily traces, especially when little physical and psychic distance exists between the person, their possessions, and their repurposing.

Spatially, cheap clothing and its reuse encompasses the local and the global; temporally, its transitions hurry from treasure to trash. This article has slowed down these stages, scrutinised how they are constructed and motivated, and positioned their overlooked objects and practices in wider frames. By providing historical and cultural contexts in conjunction with close reading of sites and objects, this small-scale study has used material culture methods to offer new perspectives on the second-hand rag trade and, especially on house clearance companies’ distinctive contribution to the brokerage of value and waste. The sociological implications of rubbish are significant, Thompson (2017, p. 102) argues, “for only with its help can we make this connection between the micro and macro levels of social life”. As such, an object biography of humble wardrobe items of everyday dress from a post-mortem house clearance can be revelatory.

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