



Materials that linger: An embodied geography of polyester clothes



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ABSTRACT

Narratives of clothing reuse and repurpose have centred on second-hand economies, recycling, upcycling and DIY, fashioning a particular kind of ‘wasted’ aesthetic where stitching, darning and patching become visible. But what of clothes that don’t show signs of wear, because they are made from human-made fabrics that degrade much more slowly than organic materials? Drawing on ethnographic ‘fashion journeys’ with young adults from Sydney, Australia, this paper follows polyester clothes, geographically and temporally, beyond of spaces of production, to their everyday use, storage, divestment, reuse and recirculation. Clothing is theorised as always in-process – materially, temporally and spatially – and understood haptically through relations between agentic component materials and human touch. Reconfiguring concepts of fashion waste questions how clothes become redundant: their material memories instead lingering in wardrobes, in stockpiles of divested objects and hand-me-downs, entering cycles of second-hand trade and ultimately, landfill. Polyester manifests a particular variant of material culture: both mundane and malignant, its feel and slow decay result in clothing that seldom slips from the category of surplus to excess in clear ways. An embodied approach, focused on materials and haptic properties of touch and ‘feel’, reveals the contours of an otherwise opaque everyday geography of clothing waste.

1. Introduction

Steph draws aside a set of clothes set neatly on hangers, sighing as she pulls with the weight of her body to search for clothes that have found their way to the forgotten liminal space deep within her built-in wardrobe. It is the spot, Steph tells me, where unresolved or ambivalent garments live. Her hand disappears in between the clothes, re-emerging after a short time with a black and red jumper. The material fibres are long and feathery. As Steph draws it out to the light the fibres dance and the fabric shines. Holding the jumper by the shoulders Steph says that this jumper is ‘really old’ but ‘really comfy’. It shows some signs of wear – bald patches from bodily friction and some pulling around the neckline – but it does not look old.

Steph – 19, full-time international student, share household

The object above, described from an ethnographic encounter that informed this paper, provides an entrée into the accumulation, abandonment and lingering of clothes. There is much waste in clothes. Clothing is based on an aesthetic market that fetishises the new to replace the old, even if the old is still ‘good as new’ (Binotto and Payne, 2016, 4; Entwistle, 2009). The speeding up of production, innumerable trends and multi-seasonal cycles, and increasingly short stays of

garments within wardrobes all amplify clothing waste (Binotto and Payne, 2016; Emgin, 2012; Norris, 2012a,b, 2015; Fletcher, 2016; Gregson and Crang, 2015). The purchasing, use and disposal of clothing accounts for up to 14 percent of total household waste and between 7 and 10 percent of a household’s total ecological footprint (Gibson et al., 2013). Figures suggest that the average person in affluent countries such as the United States, Britain and Australia consumes up to 27 kgs of clothing, and discards 23kg of clothing, annually (Allwood et al., 2006; Cline, 2013, 2014; WRAP, 2014). More than 30 percent of discarded clothing is destined for landfill (WRAP, 2014). Clothing waste contributes to a range of ecological problems such as excess water use, and groundwater, soil and air pollution (Allwood et al., 2006; Cline, 2013; Fletcher, 2014, 2016; Norris, 2015; WRAP, 2014). Clothing fibres are said to be the most abundant form of material waste (Siegle, 2017). And indeed, the vast majority – up to two thirds – of clothing made, and discarded globally each year now features human-made materials, such as polyester, which draw on finite resources including crude oil (FAO/ICAC, 2013). Problems generated by clothing waste have a lifespan that far outweighs their short fashionable life. This is especially so for human-made materials. In this paper, we trace human-made clothes geographically, following a material that has become ubiquitous in most clothes, and that especially lingers across numerous material and temporal scales – polyester.

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The clothing textiles economy is awash with engineered materials that are adopted and manufactured into products to suit different object functions. The annual production of polyester now exceeds 22.67 billion tonnes (Cline, 2013), making it the most produced textile globally. Yet seldom have such materials featured in material cultural geographic analysis. We follow polyester and its visceral relations beyond spaces of production, into everyday use, storage and divestment. We show how polyester's materiality – its very plasticity – unleashes an unsettling set of contradictory relations among clothes wearers: discomfort and comfort, disgust and appreciation, nonchalance and neglect. Both mundane and malignant, polyester's feel and slow decay mean that clothing seldom slips from the category of surplus to excess in clear ways. Key to our argument is that an embodied approach, focused on materials and the haptic properties of touch and 'feel', reveals geographies of clothing waste otherwise obscured from view.

We begin with a contextual discussion of the 'problem' of polyester. The emphasis here is to situate polyester materially across all scales of a garment's production, use and disposal – as a textile enrolled within global supply chains of the clothing industry, and as a hidden plastic derivative. Polyester is known to exert certain effects and impacts; its multiple forms and lingering qualities linking diverse actors, challenging understandings of waste, what forms waste takes, and where waste goes. From this material account of polyester we build an argument for an embodied analysis that is attuned to material affordances in everyday spaces of clothing use, storage, and divestment. Our empirical exploration follows, drawing on ethnographic research that follow the fashion journeys of young adults in Sydney, Australia. Ethnographic threads explore the meanings, values and practices of polyester in stories of clothing consumption. We follow polyester from purchase to wear, wardrobe to washing, and ultimately, as clothes become unwanted and unvalued. Our attention to everyday material relations involving clothes reveal complex embodied engagements between consumers and polyester – from attachment to disgust, pleasure to deception. Sensorial, emotional and evaluative engagements with polyester are key to unlocking its material politics, and challenge responses to problems of clothing waste. To conclude, we consider what a focus on polyester might add to current understandings of clothing consumption and disposal.

2. The problem of polyester

Consumers interact with the material qualities of polyester daily, but rarely do we think of ourselves as wearing plastic. While organic textiles like cotton or wool are marketed via their 'natural' origins, the derivation of polyester is passively concealed. Fabric engineering and garment design typically conceal plastic origins, making them unknown on labels and deceiving the wearer. Their goal instead is to mimic or approximate the 'natural' feel of organic fibres, while aiding textile flexibility, and reducing production costs. Even though a global industry worth \$US 467 billion, and employing an estimated 75 million people, the geographical provenance, production systems and environmental impacts of the textile and garment sector remain largely invisible (Brooks, 2013, 2015a,b; Norris, 2012b; Stotz and Kane, 2015). Further, the swiftness with which fashions cycle and synthetic materials transform means that even if one is comparatively well-attuned to the properties of clothing textiles, a wearer can no longer be certain where and how materials are made (Küchler, 2015). Amidst growing material excess, consumers are arguably less attuned to the strength and durability of clothing fabrics, what fabrics and textiles are actually made out of, or how they work with the body or beyond in terms of their environmental impact (Hebrok and Klepp, 2014; Hebrok et al., 2016; Küchler, 2015; Fletcher, 2016). The growing array of human-made textiles only renders the situation further opaque.

Polyester is best described as a category of polymers produced by mixing ethylene glycol (a petroleum derivative) and terephthalic acid. But polymers are not polyester fabric in isolation (Liborion, 2016). The

process of making polyester is subject to numerous chemical additives and configurations. Hundreds of polyester varieties exist (Scheirs and Long, 2003). In its simplest material form the poly(ethylene terephthalate) (PET) polymer is coarse, rigid and slightly transparent in shade, akin to off white. To promote the material characteristics of polyester – as flexible, soft, fluffy, vibrant, light – other plastic additives or monomers are added at various stages of the production process (Fries et al., 2013; Scheirs and Long, 2003). Adding a delustrant like powdered titanium dioxide (TiO₂), for instance, removes the gloss and lustre of plastic, and creates a slightly rougher surface on fibres, reducing sheen and transparency, and increasing opacity (Windler et al., 2012). Other additives improve or modify appearance, elasticity, mechanical or thermal resistance, durability or performance (Fries et al., 2013; Napper and Thompson, 2016; Li et al., 2010). In the final stages of processing, polyester fibres are combed, spun, woven or knitted at high speeds into finished fabric sheets that often closely resemble silk, cotton or wool (Schneider, 1994). The polymer build of polyester produces a hardwearing material that is slow to show signs of wear and tear (Fletcher, 2014; Li et al., 2010).

Polyester sits alongside other plastics that are 'emblematic of economies of abundance and ecological destruction' (Gabrys et al., 2013, 3). The consequences of uncontrolled growth and persistent proliferation of plastic – in all of its forms – is, in Küchler's words 'one of the greatest ecological, health and environmental challenges of our time' (2015, 272). Scholarship across geography (Furniss, 2015; Phillips, 2016, 2017), material culture (Liborion, 2016), cultural studies (Hawkins, 2001, 2006, 2009, 2013; Gabrys, 2013; Gabrys et al., 2013) and design (Fisher, 2004, 2013) has responded to the ubiquity of plastics, opening up conceptual and ontological considerations to engage the materialities of plastic, its scale, visibility, physical and temporal persistence, and interactions with human and non-human worlds. But despite its ubiquity, the plasticity inherent in polyester clothes, and everyday bodily relations with it, have thus far evaded scrutiny. One reason for this is that much commentary on the political-economic and environmental problems of clothing assumes their stability and ontological security – the unit of analysis being garments as finished, coherent objects. Whereas materials have been privileged in the sciences and engineering, there has been a tradition of general neglect in the humanities and social sciences (Ingold, 2007; Küchler, 2015). Materials have been deemed unsocial – 'the raw stuff from which people would be able to shape cultural and social life, but in themselves not cultural' (Drazin, 2015, xvii).

Focusing instead on polyester as an agentic component material requires theorising clothes as always 'in-process' rather than as singular, stable or static 'things' (Ingold, 2007, 2012; Dominguez Rubio, 2016; Fletcher, 2016; Stanes, submitted for publication). Our approach to clothes-in-process considers clothes as collections of materials that are held together provisionally, and always in flux. Clothes are never stable, finished commodities but rather assembled items: assortments of fabric, thread, buttons and zippers in temporary coherence, awaiting further use and adaptation, and subsequent ridding and decay (Fletcher, 2016). Clothing is conceptualised here as a temporary assemblage of agentic materials in transition, linked to upstream relational geographies of resource extraction, and manufacture (Castree, 2001; Cook et al., 2007; Gibson, 2016), and undergoing various stages of post-sale decomposition and decay, across multiple scales and temporalities, between bodies and other non-human actors and contact surfaces.

Polyester is one example of a mobile material in-process: fibres pill, split, break and wear down, while at the same time 'generating new material arrangements' with shifting forms and temporalities (Gabrys, 2013, 208). Manufactured, human-made and popularised by fast fashion chains, polyester has lingering qualities that extend well beyond a garment's fashionable lifespan, but that are still poorly analysed in the context of everyday use. But unlike plastic bags or bottled water, where plasticity is upfront, and frequently a site of political

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