Changing the World Not Just our Wardrobes: A Sensibility for Sustainable Clothing, Care and Quiet Activism.

Clothing as Quiet Activism in the Time of Covid-19

In a recent webinar about sustainable, ethical fashion and activism the journalist and author Tansy Hoskins urged her audience to work collectively for social change and to always keep the wider consequences of their everyday actions in mind (Fashion Roundtable, 2020). Developing the concept of 'women's wisdom', Hazel Clark (2019: 310) also pointed to the importance of everyday agencies in challenging the fashion status quo. She argues that models already exist in 'theories and practices which have been devised and applied by women'. This chapter examines the quietly activist potential in women's everyday skills, knowledge, and capacities to address our dangerous fashion system (Marcketti and Karpova, 2020; HoC 2019). It draws on material and findings from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded project 'S4S: Designing a Sensibility for Sustainable Clothing' (2019-20). S4S combines arts and social science methods to investigate how by 'making together' (Hackney et al 2016) stitch groups might shape, uncover, or draw out incipient sensibilities (mind-sets, imaginaries) that promote pro-environmental values, qualities, aspirations, aesthetics, and self-identities through everyday behaviours. We argue that participatory fashion and textiles practices are potentially an important tool for generating a sensibility for sustainability and therefore for informing policy on behaviour change.

The research team includes arts researchers at the University of Wolverhampton, politics academics at University of Exeter, partners: campaign group Fashion Revolution, sustainable clothing brand Antiform, and community organisations in Cornwall and the West Midlands. The project launch - which included an address from Fashion Revolution's Orsola de Castro delivered from inside her wardrobe - recruited forty participants who went on to attend

making, upcycling, and repurposing workshops, kept clothing diaries, contributed to films, wardrobe audits, discussion, events and to the S4S pop-up exhibition.

The politics of fashion and fashion activism is a topic of vital current interest (Bartlett 2019). Underpinned by work on amateur creativity and community activism (Harrison, 2015; Middleton, 2015), S4S employs the concept of 'quiet activism', a quietly affective activism that is embedded in everyday life (Hackney, 2013). This involves employing crafts processes – often those conventionally associated with women's domestic skills, denigrated as amateur, and overlooked – to co-produce 'making interventions' that build community agencies, assets and affects (Hackney et al, 2016). When, as now in a time of pandemic, the structures of capitalism are under severe strain, alternative and countercultural values and practices move into the mainstream (Castells et al, 2012). Arts, crafts and DIY activities that take place in the shed, on the allotment, or at the kitchen table have renewed potential to shape new quietly revolutionary and ethically sustainable versions of how we might live, work, relate to one another and our environment, and put them into action.

As Covid-19 highlights social inequalities new ideas about universal care or a commons of care provide a model for inventive forms of rethinking society (The Care Collective, 2020; Craftspace, 2020; Rodgers et al, 2019; CARE, 2013-14). As most of us spend more time being at and working from home, we are also spending more time with our wardrobes and ideally getting more creative with garments. Rediscovering care for our existing clothes, moreover, might align with increased attention to care for others and self-care for ourselves. This chapter examines a selection of material from the S4S wardrobe audits, locating them within the context of fashion changes in the wake of Covid-19. Using the lens of quiet activism, we reflect on what we might expect from our participants during Covid-19. Would

they follow the large uptick in online clothing purchases or, on the basis of what they told us, would they be likely employ time making, mending, or modifying clothing?

The Quietly Activist Wardrobe: Method and Methodology

S4S research methods were designed to mimic and rework phases of the lifecycle of clothing by inserting material, sensory and emotional practices generated within communities to encourage participants to rethink their relationship with the fashion system (Barthes, 1990/1967/; Kaiser, 2012; Hackney et al 2020). A conceptual framework: 'think, feel, act' was embedded in questionnaires and wardrobe interviews to prompt a reflective, reflexive response. Our method, combining quantitative social science with qualitative practice-based arts research, is underpinned by a shared interest in the principles of 'embodied research' which invites participants to use their bodies in order to explore and generate knowledges (Spatz, 2017; Vachelli, 2018). The principle combines the emphasis on activity and learning found in action-oriented research, with a focus on the physical and emotional use of the body, feeling, and affect.

Workshops, stitching groups and participants' wardrobes were conceptualised as spaces 'in between' the flow of fast fashion. Research interventions (activities, wardrobe audits, diaries, films etc.) short-circuited the flow by emphasising, for instance, the quality, skill, labour and environmental impacts conventionally hidden in mainstream discourse. These spaces and interventions provided participants with opportunities to connect and reflect on the topic in depth through engaged social material practices as they make and talk together (Hackney et al 2016; Shercliff and Twigger Holroyd, 2020). The research is thus both informative and transformative (Heras and Tabera, 2014).

Initially associated with material culture studies, ethnography, and social anthropology (Guy and Banim, 2003; Clarke and Miller, 2002), there is growing interest in wardrobe practices in sustainable fashion studies. Kate Fletcher and Ingun Grimstad Klepp (2017) argue for Wardrobe Studies as a discipline with methods including laundry probes, clothes mapping, caring through clothing, in addition to the clothes counting and interviews conducted in S4S. The value of wardrobe methods, they contend, is their attention to both the specificities and the pluralism of the 'lifeworld of garments' – the 'social, relational, material, practical questions' played out in and around wardrobes (2017: 2-5). Wardrobe methods can better help us understand the capacity of individuals to challenge the status quo and create sustainable futures for clothes, an ambition that itself is quietly activist.

The role of wardrobes in identity construction has been tackled from several perspectives such as life-history, clothes collections, and circulation (Smith 2015; Cwerner, 2001; Gregson and Beale, 2004). Sophie Woodward's (2007) seminal ethnography of the wardrobe, however, is perhaps the most helpful for interpreting the S4S audit material. Addressing the largely neglected topic of why women wear what they wear, Woodward studied the acts of clothes selection, combination, and wardrobe management involved in twenty-seven women's wardrobes: what is retained (worn and unworn) or divested, items gifted, passed down or swapped. She examines how women use clothing to negotiate relationships and self-identities. Clothing functions as 'sartorial biography' (2007: 102), an extension of the self, or 'personhood in aesthetic form' (Gell, 1998: 157), which can help us understand the multiplicity and complexity of identity and embody our potential selves. We consume, retain, or gift items as a means of maintaining continuity with others, experimenting with new imaginaries, or managing 'rupture'– major life changes such as losing a job, having a child, marrying, moving to live in a new country/culture (Woodward, 2007: 107). All these

elements feature to some extent in the S4S wardrobe audit interviews. Significantly, many who engaged most fully with the project were undergoing a form of rupture in their professional and/or personal lives. Drawn initially to the project by an interest in textile crafts and/or sustainability they discovered that it came 'at the right time' to impact their lives more generally. The project methods, including the wardrobe audits, helped them to negotiate and reimagine self-identities and new futures for themselves, as well as the planet, under the rubric of a sustainable clothing sensibility.

The S4S wardrobe audit involved participants: 1) estimating the number of clothes they owned, excluding underwear, then counting them, 2) being interviewed in front of their wardrobes. We interviewed fifteen participants and have completed count forms for nine, some stopped part way through, horrified by the number of clothes they owned. Notable is the significant difference between the number of items estimated and those counted in wardrobes. Figure 1 shows the box plot distributions for participants' guesses of the number of items in their wardrobe against the number counted. The mean value for guesses was 111 items (minimum 30 maximum of 230) and for counted items 146 (minimum 33 maximum 340). This masks a significant standard deviation, shown by the tails on the box plot for 'total'. Even the participant with few items underestimated the number of garments in her wardrobe by 10%. Others were drastically different. At the upper end of the scale, Abigail estimated 150 items, but counted 340. A second notable feature is the larger number of clothes owned in comparison to Woodward's (2005) study, where totals ranged between 35 and 182, evidence perhaps increasing clothing consumption (Twigger Holroyd 2017). This could relate to access to cheap fast fashion from online retailers, but issues of clothing retention also play a part.

Figure 1 [insert here]

While the 'before' and 'after' data-interviews captured participants' affective learning journeys through the project and any self-reported behaviour change, the in-project interviews invited reflections on their clothing choices, practices, and feelings. We report on three of each. Although the wardrobe audit might have been perceived as an invasion of privacy, women engaged with it strongly, thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to talk about their wardrobes.

Through the Wardrobe: Affective Journeys

This section takes an affective journey with three participants, who expressed different attitudes to clothing, examining their responses to the wardrobe audit and how it impacted them. Christine, originally from Italy, places a lot of store on looking good. However, in the pre-workshops interview she admitted to losing control over her wardrobe:

> I have to say that this is the worst time in my life in terms of owning so much stuff … I think that recently I've let myself go a little bit too much … When I buy things on Amazon … I still have things wrapped, or things that are absolutely brand new, part of this big lot of stuff that I buy.

She was shocked at the volume of items that she had, many of which were unworn. By the post-workshops wardrobe audit she was relieved to pass on garments that she had kept for years, but still thought she had too many. She was possibly more ashamed of her wardrobe than beforehand. Christine learnt how to alter and repurpose a garment and subsequently came to love the fluidity of clothing. Occasionally she was tempted to buy cheap clothes from Amazon but restrained herself, perhaps due to the affective impact of feeling she had too

many clothes. She continued to shop online because of the limited range of shops in the small town where she lived. The change in Christine with regards to prioritising quality over quantity can be attributed to the workshops. She appreciated the difficulty of being sustainable and why reducing clothing is challenging but important. Having achieved the skills to do basic mending she wants to continue learning and has bought a sewing machine. She prefers structured learning, confirming how important workshops and purposeful projects are in challenging social norms and encouraging pro-environmental behaviour change (Twigger Holroyd 2017, 2020). The change she has undergone seems to have been an amplification of her clothing thinking and practice rather than a radical transformation.

Tiffany, already experienced in clothes-making and sustainable thinking, deepened her knowledge and skills through project participation. She told us how she had started to make changes:

She had already started to make changes as stated in the initial wardrobe audit:

> I think the evidence is the lack of things that I've bought … it's like the only thing I've bought recently is … those trousers and like I say, they had them in the window and every time I walked past I was like I really like those … so I know I'm gonna get wear out of them …. before starting the workshops I used to finish work and stroll around Truro and spend like a t-shirt here and a t-shirt there, but I don't now because I think I've got loads of things.

By the final wardrobe audit her ethical thinking had deepened and she had pretty much stopped shopping for clothes. She has a checklist now before buying: have I got anything like

it already? Is the fibre natural? Can I make it myself? Is it the most sustainable option on my budget? Her purchases became more considered and she plans to re-make items she does not wear. The workshops amplified her latent interest in sustainability and her aim to repurpose garments reflects a new awareness of their fluidity and malleability. She feels less pressure to dress in a 'cookie-cutter' style and is happy to be more unique. Tiffany really enjoyed the workshops and the community of friendships built there.

Susan's love of fashion brands and looking good was reflected in her clothing count. She said, 'It took me ages, about 90 minutes in the end … when I counted them all … I couldn't believe how many clothes I've got, especially summer tops, I was really surprised'. Unlike Tiffany and Christine, she had an additional twenty to thirty items in the final wardrobe audit count. Expecting always to be brand-oriented, she feels that she makes good clothing choices, and has a style that she is comfortable with. For ethical reasons she now chooses locally based brand and doesn't shop online. One change is that she cares less now about what she wears and how she looks, putting comfort first, something that she associates with the area she lives where there is less cultural peer pressure. She no longer buys cheap clothes choosing better quality items that last. Another change is that she washes clothes less often and spends less money because she knows that she has enough clothes to wear, and consequently shops less. Susan really enjoyed the social aspects of the workshops and considered the up-skilling strategies she learnt useful. Rather than asking her mum, she now fixes more of her clothes herself – and her boyfriend's too.

While the pre-workshop clothing counts revealed to participants that they had more clothes than they need, post-workshop audits revealed that the project had amplified thoughts around sustainability and clothing that participants already experienced rather than engendering

radical transformational change. Both Susan and Tiffany reflected more deeply on the life course of a garment, causing them to re-value clothing as precious rather than disposable. They developed different strategies to address this in their everyday lives dependent on their personal preferences, identities and lifestyles, all prime examples of quiet activism. Tiffany restricted consumption by posing a rigorous set of questions before she bought a garment. Susan, for whom clothes shopping was deeply ingrained in her self-identity and self-presentation, reduced her shopping and mended garments to prolong longevity. Both evidenced a new awareness of the fluidity and malleability of clothing as they embraced upcycling (Hackney et al, 2019).

In and Out of the Wardrobe: Spaces of Quiet Activism

The longer, in-project interviews revealed connections between women's subjective engagement with their wardrobes and quietly activist sensibilities for clothing behaviour change. The three individuals featured in this section were deeply involved in the project, observing that it had come at the right time for them. Each was experiencing some form of major life change (Woodward's concept of 'rupture'): career change, family moving on, for example. A brief outline of each woman's background will be followed by consideration of 1) their affective response to the wardrobe audit, 2) clothing stories, 3) emergent clothing sensibilities through the lens of quiet activism.

Abigail, a skilled dressmaker, trained in fashion, was employed in the textiles industry local to where she lived until it moved offshore. Married and a mother to three young girls, family is a major concern alongside her ambition to set up a sustainable textiles-related business. Admitting that the prospect of the clothing count left her 'mildly terrified' – and that she was horrified by the number of items she owned – these feelings swiftly turned to pleasure as

Abigail became engrossed in the garments, ‘reminding myself of what’s there and the stories behind it’. Clothes function for her as a mode of storytelling, a material photo-album, memento or autobiography that recalls and momentarily fixes personal temporalities, events, connections with family, all integral to her own multiple identities as daughter, sibling, working professional, mother, and wife (Jenns 2015). She speaks of her clothes with love as if in an emotional relationship with them and treats them with great care. A red skirt suit, her mother’s going-away outfit when she first married aged twenty-three in the 1960s, is a favourite. Abigail loves the fabric, texture, colour, design, and original label, but it is what she terms the ‘sentimental values’ that are most important. She wears it often (Figure 2) – usually the jacket with jeans or skirts, for events even a job interview – and hopes that her daughters will do the same, the garment connecting three generations of women. Woodward (2007: 113, 103) considers the mother-daughter relationship central to the expression of self-identity through clothing, the act of wearing items being a ‘shared bond’. Wearing this treasured item of her mother’s wardrobe, Abigail forges an embodied connection with her as a young woman, in part situating herself in the position of her mother but also, by teaming the jacket with other items, using it to negotiate her own present identity.

Abigail has a rich and lively system for acquiring clothes and passing them on, from regular swaps with sisters – a means of maintaining family connections and continuities as well as saving money – to charity shop finds, and gifted family items. She is motivated by the thrill of the second-hand bargain, something that requires cultural capital (knowledge and skill) to recognise value. While she brought expertise to the project, she valued the process of ‘working on and bouncing ideas and sharing’ with others in ‘very much a reciprocal situation’. The clothing sensibility emerging from Abigail’s audit interview centres on a ‘heightened sensitivity’ to the wider ethical and sustainable responsibilities that inform her

clothing choices. Acknowledging love for and pride in her wardrobe, she links this to a growing sense of self-confidence, irrespective of fashion, ‘If I love it and it’s me and that’s what I want to say on that given day, wear it!’.

She argues for more purposeful dialogue about our lives with clothes – a form of everyday activism in itself – admitting to getting a ‘warm fuzzy feeling’ when hers are noticed. Wearability, nevertheless, is most prized. Abigail makes, alters, purchases, embellishes, and selects clothes with the express purpose of extending longevity. This involves a flow of making interactions between her wardrobe, sewing room and ‘Reclaiming Fashion’, her business concept (running classes in environmental stitch activism for young people, which the project helped her take to the House of Lords (HoL, 2019)). As her daughter observed, ‘Mummy you’re a great engineer, a fashion engineer’.

Sarah, who works in museums and heritage, was experiencing a major challenge in her professional life, which was affecting her self-esteem when she joined the project. Initially leading a set of workshops, she joined as a participant when she realised that ‘exchanging ideas … sharing ideas, and developing ideas with other people’ renewed her self-confidence, and ‘reminded me I am good at stuff’. Sarah has experienced periods of unemployment, is good at strategizing to economise, can make, repair and alter clothes, and habitually buys from charity shops.

She was, nevertheless, shocked at the size of her wardrobe. Her estimation of twenty or thirty pairs of shoes, for instance, fell short of the fifty-two pairs she owns; ‘a pair for every week of the year’, she joked. For the interview Sarah enjoyed arranging all her clothes in her dining room, reflecting on her pleasure in ownership as she created a colourful display (Figure 3).

Management, staging and display is central to her relationship with clothes for, although she claims never to have considered herself fashionable, she consciously assembles items to construct personas: ‘cycling Sarah’; ‘outdoor Sarah’; ‘grown working in an art gallery Sarah’; ‘tomboyish Sarah’; ‘girly Sarah’; ‘history Sarah - my Lucy Worsley dress’. ‘I’m a lot of different Sarah’s’, she concludes, and she has garments and stories for each.

The wardrobe audit prompted Sarah to develop a strategy to limit consumption. A habitual organiser who has been known even to document her purchases (date, price, shop), she is adept at planning and extended these wardrobe management skills to develop a tool to help her live a more sustainable life. Drawing on her knowledge of dress history, Sarah adopted the British Board of Trade’s 1940s wartime ration scheme (Howell, 2013) challenging herself to use only sixty-six coupons over a period of seven months, something she achieved with coupons to spare, partly through stopping daily purchases of tights or stockings. An act of quiet activism, this couponing strategy helped Sarah ‘make do without’, as she put it, a contemporary response to wartime make-do-and-mend, a personalised version of the citizen activism that women’s groups and many female MPs encouraged women to participate in during the war years (Hackney, 2020).

The project determined Sarah to ‘buy less and wear longer’ and develop strategies to assist her in this. Influencing others, moreover, to find their own sustainable clothing sensibilities, she provides an informal personalised dress service for colleagues, and runs workshops on upcycling for Girl Guides, as well as repurposing and adapting unworn garments for her family. Guilt felt after the wardrobe audit prompted her to think up strategies such as her coupon system and act on them to limit clothing consumption. Sarah shaped her own

affective journey through the project, continuing to take pleasure in her wardrobe by feeling ‘virtuous’ rather than ‘guilty’.

Suzanne trained in furniture design, working as a designer before taking up a post in higher education. As a mother of four boys, she has a busy family life, which shapes a primarily functional relationship with clothing and makes shopping a chore. There is also a gendered dimension to this

> [b]ecause my family are all men I've never really done the going shopping thing as an activity … I'm not a fashion person; I don’t particularly think I'm fashionable either, so clothes are a bit of a funny thing for me.

She has a strong community network of neighbours, friends, and family sharing hand-me-downs, and encourages family clothes swaps. The interview revealed how clothing embodies a complex set of temporal and emotional relationships – memories of relatives who had gifted things and occasions when pieces were worn (Jenss, 2015). Many items are decades old with rich histories. Engaging with project workshops reignited an interest in design and making, and Suzanne describes using a sewing machine at home for the first time in years. This coincided with one of her sons going to university, freeing up space for a sewing room, and re-connecting with colleagues she studied with in the 1990s. She felt a fashion sensibility begin to evolve, ‘Not fashion as in designer or the latest fashion, but just in terms of style. Sort of garments, quality, style, finish.’

For the clothing count, Suzanne devised an elaborate system for estimating then counting her clothes. This involved descriptions of individual pieces and notes about the fit and feel of the

garments resulting in an eleven-page document, rather than the single page of the original pro-forma. It revealed that there are around four times as many clothes in her wardrobe than she had estimated. Even though she doesn't buy new clothes, she was shocked and horrified at the amount of clothing and began to plan a managed reduction in a socially and environmentally sensitive way. First thing was to organise clothes into sizes, give away those that did not fit, and rotate seasonal clothing in and out of storage in the loft. Suzanne has good making skills and easily picked up skills at workshops. This enabled a sense of being able to choose exactly what to wear by making/altering/re-making it rather than 'accept something that was less than what you wanted'.

Suzanne's clothing sensibility emerged from her re-evaluating her clothes shopping behaviour as well as the extent of clothes she retains, using her sewing and design skills to make sure that what owns fits her and her family's needs. Being part of a group was important to her and during lockdown she has posted on social media about making clothes and accessories, and borrowing patterns from project participants, suggesting that the social connections remain and support an evolving sensibility for behaviour change.

Conclusion

The processual nature of making (building, crafting, shaping, constructing) a wardrobe involves an ongoing process of moving, exchanging, recalibrating, replacing and divesting as well as acquiring garments (Twigger Holroyd, 2017: 161-181). The complexity of this wardrobe work and extent to which it is integral to the labour of making the self needs to be recognised if we are to rethink the fashion system. The S4S interviews evidence a diverse range of strategies that participants devised to reduce the environmental impact of their wardrobes: repairing and repurposing garments, constructing a checklist or coupon system to

limit purchases, ‘being mindful’ (Sarah) of what is bought and where, buying locally and not online, buying nothing new for a year, swapping or passing-on clothing, buying second-hand, organising the wardrobe to insure, where possible, that clothes are worn. Such strategies evidence a particular set of priorities – to care for clothes, respect and value them, pay attention to ‘quality, style, finish’ (Suzanne), fabric and fit, how garments connect us to others, and other versions of ourselves. They signal an alternative sensibility of fashionability, whereby fashion consciousness is reimagined as sustainability consciousness. The personal becomes political and the wardrobe a quietly activist space for social, economic, and political agency

While, for many the project amplified existing ethical concerns about clothing rather than instigating radical behaviour change, for participants facing some form of ‘rupture’ in their lives it was especially significant. Seeking to forge new self-identities, they were particularly open to change. The social and cultural capital involved in being part of a community or group, additionally, clearly reinforces adherence to new norms of behaviour. If such sensibilities are to be maintained beyond the project, however, in the face of Covid-19 for instance, it is likely to be because they are rooted in a participant’s own circumstances, interests, needs, proclivities, networks, and ultimately self-identity. During Lockdown Suzanne has posted on social media about making clothes, accessories, and borrowing patterns from fellow S4S participants. Sarah, meanwhile, is itching to buy more clothes, albeit from charity shops as browsing these and fabric markets has been impossible. Clothes consciousness: the desire to use clothing to look and feel good, and communicate with others, is central to our social, emotional, and psychological identities. If a sensibility for sustainable clothing is integral to that sense of self and embedded in the structures and imaginaries of

everyday life, we can anticipate real affectual pro-environmental change, inside and outside the wardrobe.

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