

Fabric and Flesh: A Tactile Exploration of Personhood and *Becoming*

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Abstract

New materialism posits clothing as a material agent, part of a networked self, existing in ever-changing space and time. This interview-based project explores clothing's bodily relationships through the work of new materialist theorists Jane Bennett, Daniel Miller, and Ian Hodder, and queer and feminist theorists Jack Halberstam, Sara Ahmed, and Rebecca Coleman. By "queering" the materiality of clothing, I argue that both queerness and materials exist in a liminal space. The orientation toward the material clothing in my research leads to *becoming* through bodily connection with the unseen and seen. My review of related literature examines semiotic work that dominates current research on clothing, introduces materialist approaches to clothing focused on memory and "thing agency," and finally, consumer shifts towards secondhand clothing. These themes emerged in my twelve interviews with people who design and sew clothes. Each interview focused on a single garment meaningful to them. Interview results provide examples of the ways clothing is important beyond the aesthetic, has agency and reciprocal relationships of care, and extends personhood. Ultimately, the stories of participants demonstrate the ways clothing and bodies act upon each other, giving care and changing over time. I argue that orientation towards the material and recognition of reciprocal bodily relationships leads to *becoming* that understands the body as something in constant flux.

Keywords: new materialism, queer theory, materiality, material agency, bodily extension, clothing, becoming

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Clothes are among our most personal possessions. They are the main medium between our sense of our bodies and our sense of the external world.

– Daniel Miller, *Stuff*

I owe inspiration for this research to my pink corduroy shirt, found for \$5 at the Goodwill in Wooster, Ohio. This was not a garment I intended to purchase when walking into the store with my friends on a Saturday last spring, but it presented itself to me with bright coral color, ribbed texture, and brown buttons running along its front. Since that day in March, I have worn this pink shirt, with its conveniently placed pocket for phone and campus card, every day. When not covering my body, it waits nearby draped over the back of a chair or hanging on my bedpost. There is an intimacy between my physical body and the material of this shirt that goes beyond an interest in its aesthetic appeal or representative qualities.

The interaction between flesh and material can lead to physical, emotional, and spatial awareness or a *becoming* through material intimacy. I define intimacy not by a person's interest in or value of a garment, but by its inevitable material interaction with flesh. The blurring of human and nonhuman is necessary for thinking about the body as part of a shifting network of *things*, therefore making up one's personhood. This challenges hierarchical divides between human and nonhuman or wearer and garment that hinders the ability to discuss clothing's enmeshment with the body or its agency. By turning outward toward materials and questioning notions of the self as limited to the biological or physiological form (Grosz 1995), I explore intimacy between body and clothing and ways that orienting toward materiality means that personhood, in fact, *becomes*, through seen and unseen material relationships and is ever-

changing. These changes are tangible and intangible because the body is composed of materials and in relation with other materials; the ways in which each interacts is inevitably in flux.

My exploration of the relationship between bodies and clothing begins with new materialist theory, establishing material agency, extended personhood, and materials, not as stagnant, but as changing. Through this lens, the body becomes one material within an assemblage, shifting spatiotemporally. I draw on the work of philosopher Jane Bennett, anthropologist Daniel Miller, and archaeologist Ian Hodder who provide a theoretical lens for exploring materiality and nonhuman agency. The material shift within space and time that they propose parallels assertions within queer theory about queerness existing in a liminal space due to its lack of connection to a biological clock that matches hegemonic or heteronormative time (Halberstam 2005, 5).

Queer theory recognizes the way that queerness is decentered in a heteronormative public. This delegation to the background is similar to the way that the nonhuman becomes unseen due to the focus on the human. Queering of materials means that clothing and bodies can be thought of as existing in an in-between or ever-changing space. Sara Ahmed's work pushes this idea further by discussing orientation towards certain materials (Ahmed 2006, 552) and the ways this in turn leads to *becoming* (Coleman 2009, 26). By recognizing the ways that bodies can be oriented towards or away from the conventional—human-centric or heterosexual, my research prioritizes the nonhuman and queer and is therefore aptly placed to challenge normative conceptions of personhood.

My second chapter is dedicated to my literature review, which provides a brief overview of historically anthropological and sociological ways to study dress. I then explain semiotic, or representational approaches to clothing. With an understanding of the limitations of seeing

clothing solely through a semiotic lens, I underscore the importance of adopting a new materialist approach as it pertains to thing-agency, memory, and extended personhood. The last area I touch on in my literature review is secondhand clothing and how it connects to consumption trends and sustainability. This was not initially a central focus of my study, yet the connections to materiality became clear as all participants spoke about secondhand clothing.

My third chapter articulates the methods I used. I conducted 12 semi-formal interviews by phone or on Microsoft Teams video call with people who make and/or design clothing. Although this work could have been completed with anyone because everyone is part of material networks, I chose to interview makers because of their additional level of attention to, and care for, clothing. Each interview focused on a single garment of importance to my participants and was supplemented by photos they sent after the interview. I have included some of the images of participants' garments to provide visual context for their responses. These conversations offered invaluable insights into lived experiences that demonstrate the ways in which bodies and clothes interact.

I also discuss how this particular historical moment—during the COVID-19 pandemic—altered my independent study. For example, I originally intended to interview everyone in person and photograph their garments myself, but this was no longer possible due to the pandemic. Although I was initially disappointed, I was also able to extend my study to include participants across the United States and asked them to photograph their own garments, leading them to become closer collaborators in my work.

Since I was unable to take the artistic photographs with participants that I had hoped, capturing their clothing on and off their bodies, I conducted my own photography project with my brother. These photos of the pink shirt wrinkled on my body are snapshots that morph body

and material together, drawing attention to the changes and bends in the garment and its relationship to the body. Readers can view these photos at the end of this thesis and/or on my companion website.

My analysis of the interviews center on four themes: clothing's meaning beyond aesthetics, material agency, reciprocal relationships of care, and lastly, secondhand clothing as connection to former wearers. Many of the participants' narratives evoke ideas of material agency and memory that overlap with previous research. Together, their responses demonstrate ever-changing understandings of personhood and reciprocal learning through material intimacy.

I conclude by arguing that through bodily, intimate connections with clothing, personhood is made up of both seen and unseen materials. Looking outward towards these material relationships draws attention to the intertwined nature of human and nonhuman. Connections between body and garment and other seen and unseen materials show the ways in which the body does not exist in isolation but in relation to other *things*. Furthermore, the body itself may not be that which is visually changing, but because of its connection to shifting materials that make up personhood—personhood constantly shifts and so does the body.

Chapter 2. Theory

New materialist and queer theory provide important starting points to establish clothing as something with material agency, meaning it has the ability to impact both human and nonhuman actors without the aid of human interaction. Furthermore, I follow Halberstam's definition of what it means to "queer," which refers to "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (2005, 6). I queer the material by establishing that queerness and materials exist in a similar liminal space and are in constant flux. This helps establish a connection between the human and nonhuman (Luciano and Chen 2006). The body as—or *becoming*—something inherently queer and not contained to the biological and physiological form.

Daniel Miller establishes the human and thing as inherently intertwined to the point that we are surrounded by—and made up of—stuff. According to Miller clothing is *stuff*—something that cannot be defined because it constantly changes. His notion of stuff includes both the unseen and seen—referring to the material, as well as the invisible such as memory and smell. Miller notes that humans have been defined historically by their opposition to and ability to control "stuff;" therefore, it is an aversion to the nonhuman which validates humanity. His understanding of stuff challenges such an oppositional relationship by "exposing ourselves [humans] to our own materiality" (2010, 6). We may be different from a book or table, he argues, but bodies are made up of stuff (i.e., blood and guts) and therefore intertwined with the nonhuman. By thinking about bodies as made up of stuff, humans and nonhumans do not exist within a binary but are instead intertwined and interdependent.

This is an understanding of the body that recognizes its connection to many other elements rather than as any singular individual actor. Because Miller understands bodies as

materials, he draws attention to the complexity of materials and thus the complexity of persons. Applying a new materialist perspective to clothing challenges a semiotic approach to stuff and offers a different way of thinking about the relationship between clothing and personhood.

In this chapter, I expand on new materialist approaches to *stuff* in the context of a much larger body of literature on semiotics—a symbolic approach, particularly its application in studies of clothing. I include the critiques and limitations of this thinking in order to orient my own work towards a new materialist lens that recognizes clothing's importance beyond representation. Instead, there is a focus on its ability to act, exist spatiotemporally, and be part of an ever-changing network of materials. I then connect new materialist theories to queer theory about queerness existing in liminal space and personhood *becoming* through an orientation towards the material.

Semiotics and the New Materialist Critique

Semiotics, the study of symbols and their uses, as a theoretical foundation for analyzing objects, suggests that objects are primarily representational. In the context of clothing, the way someone gets dressed becomes representative of an individual's identity. Because we focus very little attention on *stuff* for its own sake, considering clothing symbolically is quite intuitive. Clothing represents class, gender, age, and other attributes, but representational meaning only acknowledges the influence of clothing on a surface level. This is not to claim that clothing cannot have symbolic meaning, but literature on clothing has been dominated by work that fails to understand the unseen aspects of clothing which recognize the importance of the material apart from its ability to serve persons (Lurie 2000; Yodanis 2019).

Semiotic analysis necessitates individual personhood; without an individual, there is nothing that can be represented. Karen Barad challenges the notion that linguistic, physical externalizations are representations of individuals because we cannot assume that the individual exists. She describes the individual as a presupposition rooted in Western philosophy, so widely accepted in the West that it has come to be assumed as scientific fact (Barad 2000, 123). Questioning the notion of individual being contained within the biological body allows for the body and personhood to be considered a composition of more than the contents within the biological and physiological form, creating the opportunity for the body to be understood as yet another material, connected to networks of *stuff*. In recognizing the body's materiality, there cannot be one individual agent assumed in the way that Barad describes.

Clothing becomes an extension rather than a representation of the body. Studied together, Miller and Barad demonstrate how a semiotic approach limits the study of objects because this anthropocentric perspective considers materials only in relationship to human desires. I adopt this thinking for my own study of clothing, because it creates an expansive framework for seeing the ways in which clothing can act upon a wearer and be an imbedded part of personhood.

I continue to use the word *unseen* because it easily encompasses all that we do not recognize when viewing a garment. Clothing is made up of—and intertwined with—the unseen. The chain of bodies and things that came into contact with the garment: the machine that wove the fabric, the person who cut and sewed it, the plastic package that kept it dry, those who transported it around the globe, the hanger that fended off wrinkles—this web of relations can continue to grow. In the context of Miller's work, this process of production, exploitative more often than not, is part of what we wear when we get dressed. Production is one example of

unseen aspects of materials that is further obscured when we focus only on presentation and performance.

An understanding of material agency is necessary in studying the relationship between things and the ways in which personhood *becomes* through interaction with materials. Philosopher Jane Bennett describes the “vibrancy of matter” or the ways that all materials have agency (Bennett 2010, viii). This is not an external source of agency that things become possessed with when in contact with humans, but instead, all materials are imbued with a force that is intrinsic to their existence. Bennett describes an individual vitality of all matter, as well as a collective agency of assemblage, which elaborates on the concept of assemblage by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987 as cited in Bennett 2010, 23).¹ When Bennett writes about assemblages, she is writing about “distributive agency” or agency of the collective (Bennett 2010, 20). Within this collective, she includes things, people, weather, space, and other matter. Bennett builds on “thing-agency” which is an “atomistic rather than a congregational understanding of agency” (2010, 20), and does not recognize the ways in which agency occurs through an assemblage or collection of active materials rather than single agents. Bennett, like Miller, delves into humans’ obsession with the binary of human versus nonhuman, inert versus alive, agent versus patient. Bennett posits that “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds hubris and earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (2010, ix). If combined with Miller’s argument that contrasting ourselves with inert substance makes us human, we are human through our desire to dominate the nonhuman.

¹ This is an ontological framework for understanding social complexity that was developed in the book *A Thousand Plateaus*. The theory emphasizes changes and interaction between elements, focusing on their exchange and dependency on one another.

Bennett further blurs the line between human and nonhuman by stating that all things are made of a common substance (Spinoza 1992 as cited in Bennett 2010, 21). These “social bodies” are constantly affecting or being affected by one another, which places humans and things in parallel as social agents that are both acting upon and being acted on. Applying the idea of vibrant matter to clothing, a garment impacts those around it and changes over time. Furthermore, clothing has a distinctive history of how it was created as well as a finite lifespan, existing beyond its interactions with humans. For example, in a landfill, clothing among other objects decomposes and therefore cannot remain forever. Clothing like other matter is part of an assemblage, whether visible or invisible. These assemblages include physical objects, bodies, social constructs, and sensations. Bodies are a part of—and created through—assemblages.

Archaeologist Ian Hodder draws on Bennett’s theory of assemblage to write about “human-thing entanglement.” He focuses on the qualities of a thing itself, inevitably existing in temporalities that are unclear or unknown to us and the way things not only interact with humans but also with each other (Hodder 2012, 4). He is interested in the relationship between things and people from the perspective of the thing itself and uses Bennett’s concept of vibrant matter to do so. Like Bennett, Hodder conceptualizes things as alive and part of an interconnected web of entities—existing in different temporalities from our own. *Thing* is a broad term that encompasses how things are collections of matter, energy, biochemical processes, and information. Hodder separates human from thing by saying humans are a particular kind of thing. Therefore, things are thought of as different from humans—humans simply interact with things. He distinguishes human and thing more so than Bennett or Miller and instead thinks about them as intertwined with one another while being separate entities.

Hodder further challenges scholarship that assumes humans function as social agents who make, use, or need things for their own self-improvement. From this perspective humans only recognize materials when they satisfy a need, but new materialists are challenging this idea by saying that materials have importance beyond human use. Humans and materials are both made up of the seen and often unseen *things* like Miller and Bennett describe. Hodder writes, “I am interested in how the human dependence on things leads to an entanglement between humans and things that has implications for the ways in which we have evolved and for the ways in which we live in societies today” (Hodder 2012, 10). The interplay that Hodder describes between persons and things implies agency from both things and persons.

Miller, Hodder, and Bennett all stress the importance of the nonhuman. Hodder cites Bennett, but this is the only formal tie between the three scholars. While this may be a result of their different disciplinary backgrounds, together their works orient my understanding of clothing as part of an assemblage of unseen and seen agents in constant flux. The body is a material within this network, intimately connected to clothing through physical touch. The dynamic between materials is always shifting in space and time. In thinking about material assemblage, the dichotomy of human versus nonhuman is deconstructed because both exist in a parallel relationship rather than a hierarchical one. Queering the material allows for the material to be something that personhood *becomes* through interaction with clothing.

Queerness and the Unseen

Although materialists and queer theorists approach the topic of time from different perspectives, their descriptions of the relationship between thing and time are parallel on several key points. Queerness is understood as existing in a liminal space, an unseen, in-between that is

difficult to identify. Among new materialists, objects are considered in a very similar way. My hope in bringing these theoretical perspectives together to queer the material and subsequently explore the ways orientation towards the material leads to becoming.

Considering space and time in tandem is necessary, because what falls within an assemblage shifts. The invisible systems of production and social expectations that influence social bodies do not remain the same throughout time and differ by culture. The flux that clothing exists within parallels the unseen, changing quality of queerness that Jack Halberstam writes about in *Queer Time and Place*. Halberstam's work on queer time and place is foundational to understanding queer temporality. His focus in the book is to "make sense of the decisions that queer people make about where to live, how to live and how to redraft relationally itself" (Halberstam 2005, 152). These theories are applied to understanding everyday realities of often invisible people. Queer temporality disrupts "the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human" (Halberstam 2005, 152). Materials exist within this temporality because by acknowledging that the nonhuman and human influence one another, there is an immediate disruption of social norms that generally provide agency only to the human. Human opposition to an object is similar to how heteronormativity is assumed. To disrupt these assumptions, one must recognize the unseen as that which is queer and nonhuman.² Queer time provides a theoretical concept that can tie together the queer and the nonhuman, because ever-changing temporal landscape that queer theorists and materialists write about surrounds all entities.

These theories of queer time are created in opposition to "the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (Halberstam 2005, 1). Queer time must be created in

² I am specifically writing about the queer and the nonhuman, but these structures are highly racialized and it must be recognized that Black and Brown bodies are also rendered invisible within normative social structures.

opposition to heterosexuality because of how it challenges that which is seen every day to instead focus on what is ignored—the queer. In this creation, there is a binary created between that which is queer and that which is heterosexual—unseen or seen. If combined with materiality, all “stuff” is queer because of how stuff is both unseen and in constant flux. As Halberstam explains, the creation of queer time is not only established in an oppositional sense but also in relation to “logics of location, movement, and identification” (2005, 1). Queer time is developed in relation to specific locations, the shifting of queer communities, and the identification of queerness by others. There is a clear establishment of queerness as something that adapts and changes within different spaces and over time. This time is not necessarily linear and causal but part of a shifting network of stuff.

One example of this disruption of linear time is through Halberstam’s exploration of transgender film, where being transgender is understood to be made up of temporality and visibility (Halberstam 2005, 77). When transgender characters are seen as transgender, “he/she is both failing to pass and threatening to expose a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present, and future” (Halberstam 2005, 77). This demands a reorientation from the viewer to reevaluate the past—previously understood through a heteronormative, cisgender lens—and alter perspectives for the future. This example demonstrates the way in which queerness alters temporality through displacing previously assumed norms.

The unseen is also a key feature of feminist and queer theorist Sara Ahmed’s writing on queer phenomenology. She examines the “orientation” toward or away from certain objects—thus thinking about sexuality as an orientation towards certain “things” and existence in specific spaces. When oriented toward the queer, we are facing that which is unseen. Ahmed writes, “Some things are relegated to the background to sustain a certain direction, in other words, to

keep attention on the what that is faced” (2006, 547). The direction that is sustained is human-centered, heterosexual, and white.

Ahmed focuses on this relationship between objects and bodies and what exists in the background. The example she uses—the writing table—comes from philosopher Edmund Husserl (1970). The writing table allows the person to write and the table is able to become a writing table through the body’s orientation. We can approach a table differently and the table will change along with us; therefore, body and object are part of the becoming of objects. Orientations are meant to draw attention to how life becomes directed by orienting people towards certain objects that have already been provided. This orientation is part of the becoming of things because bodies are shaped not only through what they are oriented towards, but what they are physically in contact with. The relationship that Ahmed discusses between writer and table shows that the table becomes a writing table through the interaction with a writer and the person necessitates the existence of the table and materials to write in order to become a writer. Thus, bodies are shaped by contact with things—just as things change in relation to bodies (Ahmed 2006, 552). Rebecca Coleman builds on Halberstam and Ahmed’s work in her own research about becoming through images.

Coleman’s empirical study on girls and media images, helps provide another example of the ways in which the materiality of bodies or the personhood “become through how they are known, understood and lived as multiple and diverse moments of temporal and spatial experience” (Coleman 2009, 26). When combined with Halberstam and Ahmed’s writing, the temporal is an important space in which things become and both materials and queerness exist in a liminal space and time because of the ways they are decentered from normative social recognition.

Ahmed uses this word “unseen” in regard to the unseen aspects of Husserl’s room. Ahmed explains that this is accomplished “by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness” (2006, 549). It is necessary to look into the origins of, and relations between, things that cannot be seen because it is through this process that one uncovers and orients towards the unseen or queer. When we perceive, we observe one side of an object. Collective observation and understanding allows for a better understanding of objects. The writings on queer time and place, and queer phenomenology, help to clarify the unseen nature of things. What is being described is a kind of becoming of persons or bodies through interaction with things.

Together, queer and new materialist theory, can also help to understand the body as something made up of materials, rather than being limited to its biological form. This helps differentiate it from naturalistic arguments (Grosv 1995, 31). Recognizing the nonhuman as queer makes it possible to challenge dichotomies of human versus nonhuman and think about the body as something that changes in relation to other materials. The work of materialists moves beyond conventional thinking of human and nonhuman as distinct categories—forged in opposition to one another and instead as interconnected and interdependent entities. Queer theorists demonstrate how queerness, like materials, are often rendered invisible and constantly changing.

By decentering the human, my study also aims to draw attention to the queer. When combining materialist and queer theories, it is possible to create an understanding of the relationship between objects and bodies as one that is in constant flux and evolving, as bodies and materials change side by side and in relation to each other. This is an important starting point

for studying clothing and bodies. In the following chapter, I explore previous studies of clothing in anthropology and sociology and some of the ways materialism as already been applied in anthropological work.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

There is a historical difference between the study of dress in anthropology versus sociology, cultural studies, and psychology (Entwistle 2015). Anthropology has been primarily concerned with dress or adornment, leading to work like Roach-Higgins and Eicher's (1995) on defining dress.³ Much of the late 20th- and 21st-century anthropological work on clothing has been concerned with non-Western studies of dress which Karen Transberg Hansen (2004) highlights in her anthropological review. Sociological work centers Western research on dress that focuses on the aesthetics of clothing and the ways in which clothing represents individual identity (Lurie 2000; Crane 2000; Yodanis 2019). Another area anthropologists have focused on is the meaning of cloth (Schneider 1987). I draw on both bodies of work, creating a necessarily interdisciplinary literature review that primarily focuses on materialist approaches that Hansen shows emerging in the early 2000s. These texts delve into the material agency of clothing and intimacy between the body and garment. It is this research that challenges purely representational approaches to clothing.

To demonstrate the kind of research that new materialist work on clothing moves away from, I begin by providing two examples of semiotic research concerned with the representational qualities of clothing. Second, I present research about memory and clothing in order to show that former selves or sensations can be remembered through garments. This begins the discussion of material agency and extended personhood. The third section further builds on materials ability to act, which extends the new materialist critique outlined in the previous

³ I choose to use the word clothing instead of "dress," a term coined by Joanne Eicher (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1995) to encompass all kinds of bodily adornment in order to focus on items made of cloth and not tattoos or piercings that fall into bodily adornment.

chapter. I conclude with a brief review of research on the consumption of secondhand clothing that demonstrates the ways in which consumers are shifting towards secondhand clothing, and in doing so, connecting with former wearers. Together, the sections draw attention to the ways that clothing is connected to a vast network of seen and unseen materials. This includes memory, fabric, production, and former wearers and producers. *Becoming* is understood through these seen and unseen elements of clothing.

Semiotic Approaches to the Study of Dress

Literary scholar Allison Lurie's classic *The Language of Clothes* (2000 [1981]) is widely referenced among materialist researchers on clothing as an example of semiotic approach toward dress. Lurie proposes that clothing can be understood as a language, one in which we recognize the meaning of many more words in the vocabulary than we have access to ourselves. She makes this clarification because everyone does not own all styles of clothing and yet there are prevalent social assumptions or understandings of garments. These languages are culturally specific, just as there are many languages in the world. Clothing, therefore, is representative of an individual, conveying information about that person's class, ethnicity, race, or gender. Clothing, according to Lurie, embodies the choices that individuals make: "To choose clothes, either in a store or at home, is to define and describe ourselves" (Lurie 2000, 5). Miller argues, however, Lurie's discursive approach toward clothing fails to address the physical impacts that clothing has on the body, instead highlighting its representational qualities for an individual. Although there are representational aspects of clothing, moving away from a semiotic approach opens possibilities for talking about clothing's ability to act on bodies rather than purely represent them.

A more contemporary study by sociologist Carrie Yodanis (2019) examines the ways individuals conform to societal pressures in the United States through their clothing. Yodanis conducted her research through interviews and literature, writing about the societal rules that dictate “getting dressed” in the West. She focuses on the ways in which individuals conform and imitate others through their dress: “In the Western world today, our personal style is not so personal; it is social, shaped and limited by countless external influences” (Yodanis, 2019). Yodanis addresses the way in which people are judged and evaluated based on their clothes. She uses the examples of uniforms and status, since those with more wealth have more control over how they present themselves. The ways people judge one another or conform change through shifting attitudes towards clothing. Similar to Lurie’s approach, Yodanis suggests that agency is connected to the individual and their ability to choose or shift the ways in which they view clothing and people.

While Lurie’s research established a framework for understanding clothing as language, and Yodanis uses a similar approach by researching conformity, they are emblematic of a larger body of interdisciplinary scholarship that positions clothing as purely symbolic and representational. Situating my research in a nonrepresentational understanding of clothing allows for clothing to be enmeshed with the body and understood as part of personhood. This is crucial for *becoming* as being oriented towards clothing and *becoming* through it cannot occur if clothing only symbolizes aspects of individual personhood which gives agency to the wearer alone. The following sections explore what material agency tangibly looks or feels like.

Material Agency and Extended Personhood

Sociologist Muara Banim and psychologist Ali Guy (2001), based in the England, provide an exploratory analysis of no-longer-worn clothes (Guy and Banim, 2001). They look for an intersection between sociology and psychology in order to understand the individual within a broader social context. Their research concludes that kept items of clothing “are not only tangible reminders of past identities but, more importantly, they provide a set of symbolic links across women’s past, present, and future identities” (Banim and Guy 2001, 216). Furthermore, they argue that past relationships with clothing influence the ways that women wear their current garments. This helps them maintain a cohesive understanding of their personal change over time—from past to present self. Banim and Guy employed a few different methods. They asked 15 women to provide a reflective essay about their interest in clothing and then to keep a clothing diary for two weeks. The last aspect of their research was interviewing each participant near their wardrobe, something I planned to do in my own study before COVID necessitated virtual interviews. Drawing from their data, they found that women establish attachments to items of clothing, and it is this emotional connection that leads them to keep clothing after it is no longer being worn.

This clothing serves as a link to their broader social surroundings, capturing memories of happy times or versions of themselves that become embodied in the clothing. Thus, the clothing is a connection between a past version of themselves and others around them during that time. The associations that participants had with their clothing were not always positive, but also negative, sometimes reminders of pain or loss. Banim and Guy convey the ways in which clothing has meaning beyond utility; clothing is not always kept because of what it can *do* for somebody, but instead there is an urge to keep it due to its binding quality between past

memories and selves and the present. This work connects to my own by providing insight into the ways clothing can be physical versions of past selves.

Building on Banim and Guy's research, philosopher Alison Slater (2014), through primary interviews with the owners of each garment, presents two case studies of historical garments. She argues that memory becomes imbedded over time in the wearing of a garment. Her method for this research employed two historical case studies of collected garments through in-depth interviews with the owners of these items. This is an interesting shift from Banim and Guy because instead of saying that clothing is attributed meaning by the wearer, Slater shows how memory and meaning go beyond the symbolic, are developed in the garment itself, and contained there long after the garment has stopped being worn. She writes, "The materiality of dress 'wears' in memory, regardless of whether the garment itself remains material or is now immaterial; it plays a significant role at the time of wearing, in memory formation and in how garments 'wear' in our long-term memories." Additionally, the remembered materiality of a garment can connect past and present, meaning that it is not only through physical touch that there is a connection to past selves but also through the memory of a past tactile relationship with the garment. This approach to clothing addresses the physical relationship between body and material and leads to insight about the ways that clothing itself changes over time and elicits emotions that are remembered through touch. I asked every participant to have their garment with them for this reason; memories and feelings can be contained and conjured through tactile relationships.

The ways that this memory transfers generationally is explored by anthropologist and museum curator Amiria Henare (2005). Henare's research explores the materiality of Maori cloaks and their ceremonial use, considering how cloaks or *kuhu* are able to ease the passage

between stages in life. She argues that the physical threads join layers of generational time, providing a tangible link between ancestors and their descendants (Henare 2005, 121). Part of the meaning is felt when the cloak is worn in one generation and passed down to the next. In describing this transfer of personhood, Henare draws on Alfred Gell's (1998) study of the Kula. In his work, he explains the way the passage of these shell valuables are extensions of personhood because each change spatiotemporally by being passed from person to person (Gell 1998, 231). Thinking about personhood as something that can be contained within an object and altered along the way, the self becomes extended through space and time as various people interact with an object over generations and in different locations.

When the body is thought of as part of an assemblage made up of materials, and when those materials, in connection to bodies as in the example from Gell, move through space and time, the body too is changing due to its relationship to these items. Therefore, personhood changes because personhood is made up of not only the body, but also the many other materials linked to the physical form. Although Henare's argument centers on the ceremonial importance of Maori cloaks, the concept of personhood being transferred in the relationship between wearer and cloth can inform the understanding of all garments, not just those that hold cultural or ritual significance. In particular, the intimacy that Henare articulates between generations is connected to my work in the way that clothing has links between people, whether this is someone known or unknown by the wearer.

In my consideration of personhood as something not contained within clothing but as something in part made up of clothing and other nonhuman materials, I include the work of sociologist Sophie Woodward and music psychologist Alinka Greasley (2017), conducting research in England. Their comparative study of wardrobes and music collections considers

personal collections as material assemblages and attempts to expand research about consumption to include rarely used or unused items like the cloaks in Henare's work that continue to hold meaning and are tied to persons without being worn frequently. Woodward and Greasley draw on Bennett's understanding of material assemblage, offering a tangible application of her theories and addressing the intersections of vibrancy in both dress and music.

Clothing may choose the wearer by tumbling out of a drawer, or a new piece of clothing makes an older item look shabby in its presence, altering one's experience of the garment. Participants also articulated their unsuccessful attempts to control their clothing and described its persistence to explode out of drawers and spill elsewhere. Clothing has qualities that are easily recognizable like being soft or sparkly or shiny, attracting us to specific garments. Happy or painful memories can be associated with these pieces of clothing similar to the research of Slater and Banim and Guy. Therefore, garments are in a sense 'choosing wearers' through their qualities; clothing becomes a living thing that acts upon its surroundings and wearer.

Woodward and Greasley employed a number of different methods to study collections as assemblages. Their methods included interviewing 15 women in London and Nottingham along with object interviews, photography, clothes diaries and general observations of clothing practices. For the music component, they interviewed 12 men and 11 women from a number of locations in England. They also examined music collection audits and explored participants' daily music practices, such as listening to CDs. By thinking of collections as assemblages, it is possible to think about daily consumption practices as relational, not in isolation, but instead, within the context of a wide array of items generally excluded when thinking of clothing and music collections. Their expanded definition includes clothing as well as people, the wardrobe, dust, light, hangers, plastic bags, sweat, et cetera (Greasley and Woodward 2017, 13). The list

can grow as connections are made between clothing, music, bodies, and the environment. Extending Bennett's theoretical work, Woodward and Greasley's study demonstrates the vibrancy of wardrobes and music as part of collections that are made up of and a part of assemblages. They are directly citing Bennett's work on vibrant matter and material assemblages and how it applies to dress. In this, we see a tangible example of the ways in which one's consumption, and thus wearing, goes beyond the materiality of the clothing itself to include the clothing's contact with many other materials.

Similarly, prior to his theoretical work on the nature of *stuff* reviewed in the previous chapter, Daniel Miller engaged in a study with political anthropologist Mukulika Banerjee (2008) on the sari as a living garment that challenges assumptions about "the nature of modern life" (Banerjee and Miller 2008, 3). Based on over 100 extended interviews conducted in India—supplemented with Banerjee's field work between 1999-2003 in west Bengal, their book *The Sari* focuses on the sari's social, political, and physical contributions. Their population was diverse, including consumers and producers in rural and urban areas. I focus on two chapters: one that highlights the bodily relationship between the sari and wearer and another that demonstrates the importance of thinking about the sari in relation to other objects and spaces with which it comes in contact.

Banerjee and Miller argue that there is an intimate relationship between the sari and the body—a constant negotiation between the body and the sari because it is an unstitched garment. The wearer learns to fold and move in the fabric and in return the sari softens with use. The *pallu*, the end of the sari that lays down the back and is in constant need of adjustment, acts in many different ways. It can be used to take hot pots off the stove or to play peek-a-boo. Sometimes the pallu is left with a sleeping infant so as to avoid waking them; the smell and feel

comforts them like their mother is still there. In a sense, a part of their mother does remain with them. The pallu can also protect the wearer from dust, smog, or the heat of the sun outside. These are all ways in which the sari collaborates with the wearer, but this is not always how it behaves. Banerjee and Miller describe the ways in which the pallu can also “betray” the wearer by getting caught in car doors, lighting on fire when at the stove, slipping down of their shoulder, or tripping them (2008, 40).

Banerjee and Miller’s work exemplifies the agency described by Bennett, Miller, and Hodder in how they demonstrate the garment acting upon the wearer. Their physical experience within the garment—and the sweat, dust, and cleaning that goes into the fabric along with the constant negotiation between the needs of the sari and the needs of the wearer—build intimacy between sari and wearer. Banerjee and Miller’s research demonstrates the connections between how cloth adjusts to its environment, and how this in turn impacts the clothed body. The two can function together or in opposition to one another. The intimacy of someone touching the sari is as if they are touching the person’s body. Their work underscores the material relationship between the body and clothing, one that is inevitably intertwined. Their work further highlights the ways that materials can have agency and how the relationship between the body and clothing adapts differently in environments. The ways in which materials act help us understand how clothes become part of personhood or work as extensions of the body.

For the present study, when I think about bodily intimacy and clothing, I am also considering the closeness to those who produce, sew, and ship the garment along with the many others who interact with the garment directly or indirectly. The bodily connection between wearer and garment and producer and garment are also intertwined.

Production and Secondhand Clothing

The production that occurs before wearers purchase or are gifted an article of clothing is part of the unseen relationship that wearers have with garments. This process is often highly exploitative, as evidenced in the production of materials such as cotton and silk, the weaving of textiles, the sewing of garments, and their eventual disposal (Roy Choudhury 2014; Małgorzata 2018). Development studies expert Alessandra Mezzandri (2016) writes about what she terms “the sweatshop regime” to emphasize the relationship between production and distribution of products and bodies. Her work challenges the neoliberal narrative that a “cheap labor model” will on its own time morph into a more inclusive capitalism that supports the poor. Rather, she highlights capitalism’s reliance on low-wage labor for producing profit. Mezzandri completed field work over 10 years, beginning in early autumn of 2004. She focused on mapping garment work across the primary areas of production in India, conducting a total of 176 interviews. Her participants ranged from garment suppliers to representatives of apparel business associations to government offices and activist networks as well as unions and laborers. In addition to these interviews, she collected industrial and labor reports to contribute to her analysis.

Mezzandri underscores how the effects of the sweatshop regime are “worn” by laborers in a sweatshop regime (2016, 3). This produces an intimacy between the bodies of the workers, who are often women. The precarious relationship between workers’ bodies and making clothes—particularly given the neoliberal structures that deregulate labor and prioritize profit—frequently contribute to unhealthy working conditions that can all too often result in illness and death.⁴ The consumption of clothing is also a consumption of these women’s bodies because it is

⁴ Violence is a part of garment labor history with the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911 where garment workers jumped to their death to avoid the burning building (Powell 2014, 118). More recently, the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh in 2013 that killed over 1,100 garment workers trapped inside (Powell 2014, 109). Harm caused by working conditions does not always result in death but does impact the workers’ health

impossible to disconnect their bodies and labor from the clothing itself. Whether acknowledged or not by the wearer of the clothing produced through this process, one is interacting not only with the intimacy of a garment but also with the bodies of those who interacted previously with it.

In response to a growing awareness of exploitative practices in the garment industry and of the environmental impacts, around the world, consumers are buying clothing secondhand as a way to divest from fast fashion and be more sustainable (Fredriksson and Aslan 2018; Rudawska, Grębosz-Krawczyk, and Ryding 2018; Hansen and Le Zotte 2019). As you will see in the following chapters, purchasing secondhand clothing was something almost all of my participants did with the reasoning that this was a more sustainable⁵ and emotionally meaningful way of purchasing clothes.

Similarly, fashion and merchandising researchers Katelyn Sorensen and Jennifer Johnson Jorgenson (2019) conducted a study exploring the perceptions of millennials⁶ towards fast fashion and secondhand clothing. In order to study this topic, they used a method common in psychological research, Q methodology. To measure participant's viewpoints, they placed 14 descriptions of ideal clothing items in a grid where participants had to rank the statements from agree to disagree. This method focuses on personal perspectives and experiences (Sorensen and Johnson Jorgensen 2019, 4). Their results show that fast fashion is still viewed as more favorable due to its trendiness, easy-store layout, and pricing. However, secondhand clothing is viewed as

due to working long hours with toxic material. Previous anthropological research has also highlighted the ways in which women working in factories in Malaysia will fall ill or possession by spirits as forms of resistance against the exploitative labor of capitalism (Ong 1988).

⁵ Exploring whether secondhand clothing economies are in fact more sustainable is beyond the scope of my research, but you can see the work of Karen Hansen and Jennifer Le Zotte (2019) for more information on this topic.

⁶ There are differing opinions about the age range of millennials is. For this study, they define millennial as anyone born between 1980 and 1999.

more sustainable yet received negative responses for having more confusing store layouts and being less trendy. Sustainability motivates many to shop secondhand.

My interviews confirm that while sustainability is certainly one reason young people purchase clothing secondhand, it is not the only reason. Many of my participants articulated their desire for an already worn garment as something with more character because of its connection to past wearers. This connects to Slater's earlier research about memory being contained within garments. They also expressed a joy in shopping for secondhand clothing because of the experience of discovery (Fredriksson and Aslan 2018; Rudawska, Grębosz-Krawczyk, and Ryding 2018). I explore this further in my analysis.

The scholarship included shows the limitations of semiotic work and the ways in which materialist approaches show that memory can be contained within garments. Research on memory in clothing begins to show the ways clothing can have material agency. I develop this further in my discussion of clothing as an extension of personhood, using work that directly references Miller and Bennett. My final section briefly includes some discussion of clothing production and consumer shifts towards secondhand clothing. Together, each section offers examples of the unseen and seen aspects of clothing and bodies that interact with clothing from the production process to the wearers. In highlighting the ways that clothing is not purely fabric and thread, but part of broader material assemblage, *becoming* through clothes means an acknowledgement of the material relations to the production process, past wearers, and future landfill.

Chapter 4. Methodology

Everyday clothing and its relationship to the wearer has been explored by philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and queer theorists; each brings different methods and approaches and presents diverse analyses, including historical interpretation, study of fabric and production, and wardrobe audits. The most widely used method among texts I draw from, however, is the use of in-depth interviews as a way of capturing the relationship between human and clothing. Drawing in particular on Banerjee and Miller (2008), Guy and Banim (2001), Woodward and Greasley's (2017) work, I chose to conduct interviews and engage with photographs to capture the in-between or intimacy between body and clothing established through physical touch. One of the limitations of studies solely based on interviews is that they inherently center the human experience, something that Daniel Miller (2010) and Jane Bennett (2010) attempt to decenter in the hopes of reorienting focus towards the material or nonhuman. In order to emphasize the relationship between object and person, all my interview questions focus on the garment itself or the relationship between wearer and clothing, but never solely on the wearer.

My 12 semi-formal interviews were conducted over the course of two months—November and December 2020—on Microsoft Teams video calls or by phone. Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes. All those who participated were people who sewed or designed clothing. I utilized snowball sampling for finding participants, meaning that I started with those in my personal circle of friends and extended my circle of contacts from there by word of mouth. It is necessary to note that my interviews were originally meant to be held in person, but due to the spread of COVID-19, this was not possible. This meant that I was unable to photograph interviewees with their clothing and wardrobes, as intended. Instead, I asked participants to send

photographs of their meaningful garment at the end of the interview. An unexpected result of this unanticipated change was that participants became more like collaborators because of their increased involvement in the project. The images provided are visual representations of the garments that the interviews centered around and supplement the narratives shared by participants. Additionally, the inclusion of photos draws attention to the form, color, and texture of the garment, which highlights its materiality for readers and for me, since we are not able to touch the garment personally. The interviews provided a dynamic opportunity to speak with an enthusiastic group of people who make things, and further, to understand the intimacy between garment and wearer.

My reasons for choosing to speak only with those who make clothing are linked to the additional level of intimacy with clothing that producing or altering it entails and the heightened attention to materiality that they have through the process of sewing. I want to note that everyone has an intimacy with their clothing whether or not they are aware of the clothing production process, involved in its creation, or care about fashion. Therefore, I could have interviewed non-makers for this project, but ultimately, I chose to interview makers in order to narrow my population and to seek out people with added care for and attention to clothing.

I contacted each collaborator through email or social media, shared background information about my project, and provided them with the opportunity to learn more about my research before they agreed to an interview. Most responded with interest, but several were unavailable or unresponsive. It is important to acknowledge that the stresses of COVID-19 made everyday stresses even more acute as it was difficult for people, particularly women, who have been shown to be disproportionately impacted by job losses, childcare needs, and other aspects of the pandemic—to take time out of their day for a research project (Donner 2020).

Once collaborators showed interest, we scheduled an interview time, and I shared information about choosing a garment and a brief introduction to my topic. I scheduled a time, included consent forms, and requested that they think of a single garment meaningful to them to discuss during the interview. This garment could be something that they owned or even something they no longer owned, but it did not need to be something that they made by hand. I included the aspect of something that they no longer own because, as previous research highlights, the intimacy between wearer and garment can be maintained through memory (Banim and Guy 2001; Henare 2005). For each interview, I requested that my collaborator bring the garment they were speaking about and have it near them during the virtual interview. This allowed me to see the garment they were referring to and to ask specific questions based on what I saw. It also meant that when I asked questions about texture, shape, and feeling, they could reach down and touch the garment instead of recalling the feelings from memory. Only two collaborators did not have their garment with them, due to their location. Most brought their garment to the virtual interview and frequently looked down at it when answering questions or held it up to the screen for me to see details. The opportunity to observe collaborators with their garments helped dictate the specific follow up questions that I asked about texture or images on the garment.

In order to capture the interplay between body and garment, I structured all interview questions around the garment that they chose prior to the interview. These questions were divided into three sections, each interconnected and building on the previous one. The first questions centered on how the garment felt when on and off the body, where it was from and where it was stored. The second portion of questions were directed at change and whether the garment had changed over time, changed the wearer, or changed their interactions with the piece

of clothing. The third and final set of questions asked about the wearer's perspective on clothing that they make versus what they buy and how personal qualities impact the ways that they make or interact with clothing. Together, my questions were intended to create a holistic understanding of the garment itself and its interaction and importance to the wearer.

Prior to delving into the structured questions, I began each interview with introductions and some casual conversation since I had never met a majority of my interviewees and felt that it was important to build some trust before beginning the planned questions. I not only introduced myself as a student and researcher but as a maker, someone who sews clothing in my free time and deeply cares for the process of making and wearing clothes. The structure of interviews creates a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Stacey 1988, 23), and beginning with these introductions and establishing common interests with my collaborators is one of the ways that I attempted to lessen the divide between interviewee and interviewer. The flexibility with which I approached interviews meant that I rearranged the order of questions I asked depending on the direction each interview went. The one question that I always made sure to include was, "What made you choose this garment out of others?" This generally came as one of the first questions after introductions in order to start off a conversation about the specific garment.

In addition to the interviews, I asked each participant at the end of the interview or in my follow up email to share, if they were willing, some photos of the garment about which they spoke. Most participants chose to share, and for some it seemed like a joy to share them with another person who cared about these connections. Including photographs felt necessary because photos contextualize and visualize what is being spoken about in the interviews. I specifically

asked for photos that included the garment both on and off the body. These are meant to capture the vibrancy of the garment alone and its change once on the body.

Because I did not have the opportunity to photograph my collaborators' clothing in the way that I had hoped, with close-ups and abstraction to emphasize the motion, the life-like qualities of clothing, and the ways that it can look different over time, I engaged in a more personal photography project with the pink shirt that I introduced readers to in my first chapter. I started paying attention to the shirt because of the frequency with which I wore it and the way that it felt on my body. It quickly became like a second skin, always on or near me to the point where people recognize the shirt as "Ella," something a participant described about her own sweater in an interview. The images captured by my brother are vibrant pink, wrinkling on my body. The series of photos provide an alternative way of conveying themes of change and materiality that have been integrated throughout my work. I chose photos instead of a recording, partially out of practicality and partially out of a desire for readers to stop and look closely at the object. Because my Independent Study is primarily text-based and will be online and printed as a paper, I wanted photos because they are easily included in documents, whereas a video would not have been possible to include into my printed document.

In addition, you can view them on my companion website:

<https://fabricandflesh.collegeofwooster.net/>, providing a digital space to view the images included in my thesis. Photos also demand attention and careful observation. In this case, for the photos interspersed throughout my analysis chapter, they are primarily there to support the visualization of the reader as they read about each garment through quotes and analysis. The photos that I chose to include are meant to draw the reader's attention to the garment and changes that occur, depending on the angle, closeness, or focus on the particular garment. My

hope is that whether or not one chooses to read this entire study, one can look to these photos and get a sense of at least some of the takeaways without reading them. This is my attempt to convey ideas in a non-literary way for those who are more compelled by images than written words.

I have highlighted some of the limitations of my methodological approach throughout this section, but I would like to include a few other practical impacts of virtual interviews on this project. A number of times, the audio or video cut out during an interview which was a challenge. This meant that the interviews were frequently broken up, and this disrupted the rhythm of questions or made it challenging to hear one another. However, completing my interviews virtually also made it possible for me to speak with makers across the country instead of only those in my immediate vicinity or a single community.

Following the completion of all my interviews, I began my transcription and analysis, which involved close reading of each interview to identify commonalities and differences and to find themes among them. I include extensive direct quotes as a form of collaboration and to mediate the influence of my own positionality (Craven and Davis 2016, 84). The following chapter will delve into the analysis of these quotes and broader themes identified among the interviews.

Methodologically, my research has been collaborative and interdisciplinary. I combine multiple methods to explore material intimacy with the body, using semi-formal interviews and photographs of their garments. Additionally, I include a creative photography component and companion website in order to provide an alternative medium for exploring ideas about material and bodily intimacy and change. These methods together establish a focus on the interplay between garment and body which leads to an exploration of material agency and changing personhood.

Chapter 5. Analysis

It may come as some surprise to readers after reading about my intense interest in clothing that I do not know about latest fashion trends or top designers, and I avoid shopping. Nevertheless, I am endlessly intrigued by understanding the relationships that bodies have to clothing and the ways that clothing can draw attention to broader bodily networks or assemblages. Part of this interest in materials, and the learning that occurs when interacting with them, stems from my own enjoyment of making clothing.

I began sewing for my dolls when I was five or six, scarves and hats that matched my own. When I turned 11, I began sewing historical garments with my friend Ruby in the summer. We did this for five years, making bloomers, regency gowns, and cloaks, until costumes and make-believe games no longer occupied our time. I began sewing wearable garments, a dress for my brother's bar mitzvah, a skirt for my birthday, or shirt made of fabric scraps. Due to this personal interest in clothing and sewing, my interviews became meaningful conversations rather than one-sided questioning. Participants' experiences are an important component of my research as well as an individual source of inspiration to my artistic endeavors moving forward.

In order to maintain the confidentiality of my collaborators, I use pseudonyms. Quotes remain exactly as recorded during the interview with the exception of repeated words and "ums" edited out for clarity. These interviews were crucial in my exploration of clothing and body and personhood, and many of the responses my participants had echo ideas highlighted in the research in my literature review.

Because pursuing interviews necessitated speaking with people, there was an automatic focus on the human. I recognize this as an obstacle because it contradicts much of the new materialist theory that encourages the decentering of the human and reorientation towards the

material. Bodies as a material are included in this; yet, they would not be studied in the form of individual questions which center psychological rather than physical experiences. Although the language that all participants used was individualistic and referenced personal style, the ideas and stories they shared were deeply connected to the body and clothing as materials.

I focus on three themes: clothing's meaning beyond aesthetics, material agency, reciprocal relationships of care, and how secondhand clothing embodies connections to former wearers; I write about them in this order because it is the sequence in which these themes arose during the interviews. They connect to one another through their attention to the body of the wearer or of previous wearers. The application of new materialist and queer theory encourages understanding beyond observations about a wearers' desire for or comfort in a specific garment but instead prompts discussion about the extension of body itself and intimacy with the nonhuman and human.

Because the interviews focus on the garments themselves and their relation to the wearer, I want to begin with a short discussion of the kinds of articles of clothing participants chose. Nine selected something purchased secondhand or gifted to them and three chose something that they designed and made themselves. Seven of the garments were coverings like coats, sweaters, jackets, two were large circle skirts, one dress, and one scarf. I make note of my participants' article of clothing because you can see the value in soft, warm materials, or in contrast a skirt that takes up physical space. The garments were linked to comfort and confidence and a garment's ability to adopt the shape of one's body or alter the way one moves. My participants came from various different sewing backgrounds, four have been working as independent fashion designers for over 20 years, six were recently out of fashion school or currently

completing their studies, and 2 studied other forms of art but have extensive experience making clothing for themselves and others.

Following introductions, I asked my participants to tell me about their chosen garment. Intentionally open-ended, this question allowed participants to provide their specific context for choosing a garment and helped frame my questions about physical touch and relationship to the garment in the subsequent portions of the interview. The answers to this question more often than not began with a statement about how the garment feels on their body.

Bodily Sensation in Clothing

Dayana, a fashion designer, who primarily works from home, designing and sewing clothing for individuals as well as working as an advocate for more sustainable and ethical labor in the fashion industry, chose a tan sweater gifted to her by her mother. As she describes, this is not a fashionable piece of clothing but a practical one. Over the years, it has provided comfort and aided her in her daily work by having just the right sized pockets. Along with this garment having an appealing texture, it is a staple color.

It has the perfect color...If I want to, I can close it around my neck. It keeps me warm and has this pocket that's perfect for my chapstick and for my phone. It's just so perfect...and the color is a little light like taupe... And yeah, that has become like [my] go to piece. It's yeah very generic sweater. Really, nothing incredibly fashionable, or, special about it. It is just practical.

Dayana presents the way that this garment is important because of how it feels around her neck and holds exactly what she needs such as her chapstick and phone. It is not important to her for aesthetic reasons, stating at the end that it is “nothing incredibly fashionable.” She shows how a garment's closeness to one's body and feeling is important as well as the way that clothing can provide physical support throughout the day by holding frequently required items. A return

to Bennett's work on 'vibrancy of matter' shows the ways that Dayana's sweater has the ability to impact her as a wearer, enticing her with warmth, soft texture, and space for placing items.



Figure 1. Dayana's Brown Sweater

The feeling of clothes is connected to material agency as clothes make themselves appealing, enticing us through their physical textures like Dayana explains. Analyzing the 'feeling of being dressed' is helpful for recognizing the *becoming* that occurs between bodies and materials (Ruggerone 2017, 581). In order to explore *becoming* through orientation to materials such as clothing, it is necessary to first notice the physical sensations within a piece of clothing. When noticing these feelings, they extend awareness

beyond the bodily relationship and draws attention to materials in and movement through space.

Ann who chose a less practical garment describes her skirt and the ways it influences her attention to and movement in space. This attention was not established through the wearer's desire to observe or be highly conscious of the space but instead through a need demanded by the garment itself.

It has a lot to do with the quantity of fabric in the weight. It's not the most practical skirt because when you sit down you have all that fabric falling down to the floor. You know it's a lot of fabric to deal with for taking care of your personal needs...But there's this awareness because there's so much fabric, there's an awareness of it when I'm wearing it.

There are certain clothes that you put on, you can forget that you have clothes on you; they're a second skin, and this is not that kind of piece. With this you're always aware that you're wearing this skirt with all this fabric, and that's kind of the fun of it. I have a chair so at my computer I have a chair that is on wheels and I have to be careful that the skirt doesn't get under the wheels. You know, when I wheeled back and forth. In that sense, it's not a practical. Piece of clothing to wear just around the house, but I like wearing it around the house.

The way that she describes how this skirt draws attention to her movement, space, and materials around her, demonstrates material agency. If she is not careful, the fabric will get caught underneath the wheels of her computer chair and prevent her from moving, damaging the fabric. The garment necessitates a kind of attention that differs from Dayana's example which is more practical and molded to her body. This skirt, like Banerjee and Miller discuss in their research on the sari, can "betray" the wearer (2008, 40). This is not to say that it necessarily interferes every day but simply that it has the capacity to and therefore requires attention from the wearer.

The relationship Ann helps us notice between the computer chair and the skirt is important because it provides an example of how the material relationship between fabric and flesh brings awareness and intimacy or

material closeness to object within a space. It is the clothing that draws awareness to other materials, as well as our own bodies, as we move through space. We see through these



Figure 2. Ann's White Skirt

relationships that intimacy between bodies exists beyond that which the human body touches and instead extends through nonhuman interactions. This is one example of a garment that demands the wearer's attention or orientation to surrounding space, movement, and physical body, but others shared similar experiences.

The four participants who spoke about how their garment altered their movement or drew their attention outward to external materials and space, also reflected on how this feeling harkened to a different era, one where the garment shapes the wearer rather than the wearer shaping the garment. Emma, a student studying special occasion and costume design at the Fashion Institute of Technology described how her dress and this kind of vintage garment or garments that imitate older styles can change one's "way of walking around and feeling like you're being in your body." The ability for a garment to change one's body does not seem to be isolated to older garments as participants each shared the ways that their clothing impacts how they feel in their body.

Lina, a recent graduate Pratt University in New York City, explained how when she designed her final collection and dressed her models in the garments, she paid particular attention to making androgynous garments that could be adjusted to different body types and the ways that this meant that they looked drastically different depending on who wore them and how they felt different for the models as well. In sharing this, she acknowledged how clothing can adapt to different bodies and how bodies also change, depending on the clothing worn.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that if clothing is considered an extension of the body (Banerjee and Miller 2008) or that the body is another form of material, then clothing becomes an extension of the body, shifting and changing because the human body and clothing are enmeshed with one another. This inevitable physical relationship where the body is in contact

with clothing means the clothing becomes tied to bodily sensations and emotions. Clothing demands attention be paid to the body by the wearer and designer because of its closeness to skin which has both a physical and emotional impact on the wearer. The impact is due to a tactile relationship rather than one's desire to wear a piece. The feeling one has in garments and therefore in relation to other objects are part of a reciprocal relationship, something that I will continue to explore in the following sections. The attention required from a garment creates a space for *becoming* and thus recognizing bodily change.

Material Agency

In every interview, I asked my participants if “their garment had changed them in any way.” All but a few responded with “no,” but based on the stories they shared, their garments did impact their bodies and relationship to nonhuman things. If I were to conduct my interviews again, I would reword this question. The assumption prevalent within semiotic research and mainstream media is that clothing is inert and representational, which creates challenges when speaking about material agency because it is difficult for participants to recognize the stories they share as examples of material agency. Although most collaborators did not believe they were sharing instances of material agency, each described a way in which their clothing had impacted them directly. Joanna's response is an illuminating example of the ways thinking and understanding can arise through tactile relationships.

The emotional impact of a garment—similar to the physical experience of wearing a garment—provide examples of material agency. In every interview, the interviewee mentioned the ways that clothing has the ability to comfort, boost confidence, or provide support for the wearer. Joanna, a fiber artist who purchased a sweater from a thrift store during her sophomore

year of college, explained the ways the sweater taught her about making and altered the way in which she designs and makes art.

It has so strongly impacted my personal like artistic identity. And I think it's become a big part of my identity. And I think other people, or at least my close friends, see it and they're like that's [Joanna's] sweater, like that is her. I think just the way that I make things and it sort of made me feel like I was allowed to make things in a way that I didn't know I wasn't before. And I think that was really significant for me.

Joanna describes how her friends recognize her through the sweater. This could be evidence of the ways in which there is an unconscious acknowledgement of the existence of nonhuman extended personhood. She states that this sweater “allowed [her] to make things,” demonstrating the garment’s ability to shift one’s mental or emotional state. The sweater created space for creativity through her physical interaction with the garment. In this interaction, the

impact is through the physical intimacy between body and clothing. Joanna describes a thinking that occurs through the tactile relationship with clothing since it is while wearing this garment that she expands her practice of making. In



Figure 3. Joanna's Cubist Face Sweater

this way, she becomes an artist

through her relationship with her garment, and that recognition of the sweater’s inclusion in her personhood is recognized by others⁷. Joanna’s sense of personhood changes due to her tactile

⁷ I want to clarify that the impact of her relationship does not change due to the recognition of its importance to her by friends.

relationship with her sweater while situated in a specific space and time. The same change may not have occurred if she were older or younger or in a different environment. This example shows how clothing does not solely bring awareness to the physical aspects of the space but also teaches one how to approach or think about situations.

Joanna cares for her garment by not washing it too much and letting it lay flat to dry. She said, “I take care of it because I care about it a lot and want it to last a long time.” This was a response that other participants shared, especially those who had chosen secondhand garments. “I want to make sure that I'm keeping it nice, and I don't want to wear it too often or wash it too often because I want to make sure that at some point...either I'll wear it to bits; but I'll wear it for a really long time, or I'll give it to someone else; and they'll love it to bits.” This is one example of the ways that a wearer gives back to a garment, an example of the reciprocal relationship. Changes that occur in the piece as it becomes more well-worn happen in the body as well through growth, age, or other forms of physical change. The learning and negation of this process happens through material relations.

Abby, a student in her final year of fashion school, had a similar relationship with her sweatshirt, which she purchased to remind her of home. Through its physical feeling on her body, it was comforting, slightly worn out having been purchased secondhand and worn for years to warm her body. Midway through speaking, she told me about how this piece of clothing taught her to be more mindful of situations. Her sentiment reiterates much of what I have discussed thus far about the ways that clothing brings awareness to one's surroundings.

Abby describes how this garment supported her through a challenging period during college. Even though she is no longer in the same difficult situations, she is still drawn to her sweatshirt when she needs comfort. This garment brought attention to caring for herself,

reminding her to be, “mindful in situations where [she’s] not super comfortable. Now, whenever I’m having a bad day, and I wear it, it still kind of incites that mindfulness attitude to look at



Figure 4. Abby's Blue Sweatshirt

things with more distance and more care.” Joanna and Abby’s responses show how the intimacy between the material and the body elicits an external learning or thinking. These are examples of material agency as well as ways of understanding learning through human/nonhuman

relationships. If the body is

considered *stuff* like Miller writes or a *thing* as Hodder proposes, the learning occurs through a body’s relationship to other materials. This connects to Ahmed’s work on queer phenomenology in the way she explores orientation towards or away from certain things. As understood through assemblage theory, what I am discussing is the orientation towards a meaningful garment and how this orientation connects to the unseen and seen elements of clothing connected to bodies.

Awareness is built not by looking inward but through looking outward toward the small interactions that occur between human and thing each day. As Ahmed writes, “Bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon” (2006, 543). She specifically refers to the orientation towards the unconventional or queer. In my

own work, this pertains to the orientation towards the material, which we have seen becomes something which is dismissed due to the centering of the human. But in discussing the ways that the nonhuman is inherently queer, orienting towards the nonhuman is then also an orientation towards the queer.

Additionally, connecting Ahmed's work with Coleman's work, when the body is oriented towards certain objects, there is a *becoming* that occurs. What new materialism shows is that the material one chooses is made up of both unseen and seen things. Therefore, when someone selects a garment, they are oriented towards what they can and cannot see. If we are to include the exploitative nature of garment production, then we are made up of those unseen qualities of garments as well. This is easily forgotten in studying the relationship between garments because the focus is on the immediate material relationship, but by connecting understandings of extended personhood and assemblage theory, the material is part of broader networks of nonhuman and human relations. While I did not delve into the production of each garment worn by my participants—and in many cases, wearers are unlikely to know that history—there were unseen aspects such as memory about which I could ask each participant.

Memory in Garments

In the last few examples, I focused on the interactions between wearer and garments or what can be seen when worn. Memory was an 'unseen' connection to bodies referenced during interviews. Rose told me about a mink coat passed down through three generations of women in her family, connecting her to her mother, aunt, and grandmother, whom she never met. This connection to the past is felt through the mink coat each time it is worn. She shared, "It's definitely a confidence booster. In some weird ways, at times, and I think what always feels so

special about wearing it is I think about all these other women in my life who have had the coat, and that feels like something that I'm kind of wearing and carrying as I'm wearing the garment.” The support of her family is imbued in the garment and something she feels when it is worn.

Similarly, Amiria Hanare’s research on Maori cloaks demonstrates the lineage of ancestry through clothing and helps draw connections between those alive and deceased, as well as the many relations that the garment had to other *things*. This ancestry is ultimately contained in the material itself (Hanare

2005, 135). Together, Hanare’s work and my interview with Rose highlight the ways memory is felt through the interaction with body and garment; both materials share meaning with each other. The intimacy

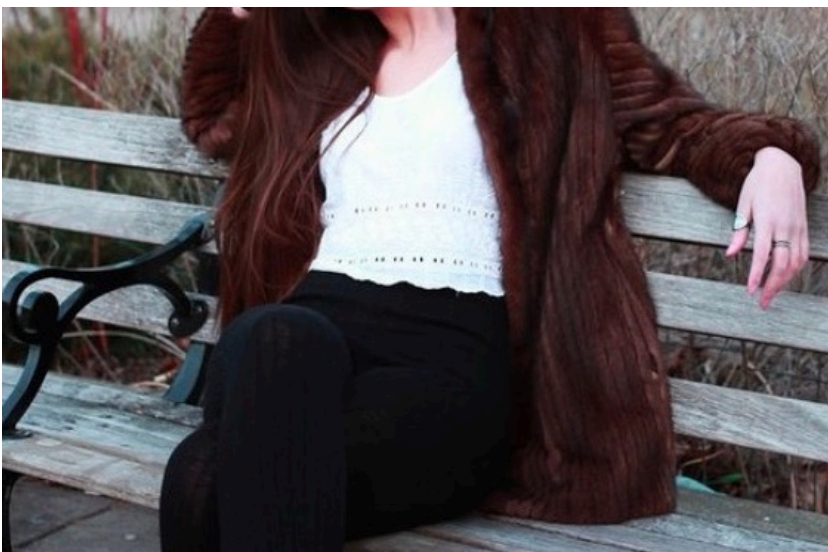


Figure 5. Rose's Mink Coat

of clothing does not only come through the desire for a certain garment, aesthetic pleasure, or need to be part of trend, but comes from the physical relationship between garment and body where one informs the other. In Allison Slater’s study of wearing memory through materials she not only argues that memory is contained within the garment, but that this captures a changing self and the garments relation to others (Slater 2014, 2). This connection to garments through their relationship with past wearers extends to people unknown to the current wearer.

As indicated earlier, there is a connection to the unseen through bodily relationship with wearers. The memories contained within a garment include not only the memories one has with

that piece of clothing, but also the interaction of the garment with former wearers' bodies. When wearing clothing, one is clothed in the material memory contained within the fabric. The unseen can also include spilled water on a pair of pants, the people who made the clothing, vehicles that transported it, and other aspects of assemblage.

If, as Woodward and Greasley (2017) and Miller (2010) posits, each situation, body, and interaction impacts the clothing, and is thought of as an extension of one's body, then, what is being worn are these unseen elements of clothing as well as the visible ones. The connection between body and clothing is seamless. Not only are we wearing the unseen connections, but by challenging the claim of individuality, bodies are made up of unseen and seen agents. The acknowledgement of material flux occurs with the orientation towards such items, which supports ideas of the body being in constant change.

Secondhand Clothing and Past Wearers

Secondhand clothing is something that I did not initially expect to address during my research, but ultimately it emerged as a part of participants' relationship to wearing and purchasing clothing. The connection to past wearers also links to Henare (2005), Slater (2005), and Guy and Banim's (2001) discussion of wearing unseen relationships within a garment. All garments selected for interviews were purchased secondhand, made by the participant, or gifted, new from a fast fashion brand—with the exception of one. In part, the topic of secondhand clothing arose during interviews because of the current fashion trends and ideas about sustainability that encourage shopping at secondhand stores. The appeal of secondhand clothing can be understood as a popular way of consuming clothing without participating in fast fashion (Sorenson and Jorgenson 2019). I focus on the ways that shopping secondhand connects new

wearers to the former owners of the garment. Participants shared that shopping secondhand was not only an attempt to be more sustainable or fashionable but about the ways that secondhand clothing feels on the body and their connection to a past wearer.

While speaking about her sweater establishing space to be creative, Joanna, who I introduced earlier, explained her reasoning for buying secondhand clothing. She used the example of a pair of pants to demonstrate the ways that the garment continues to shift over connection to a past wearer.

I...look back at this pair of pants that I have, and I think about all of the ways or all the different forms that it had before it has the form it has now. I also feel like...maybe these aren't going to serve me in the way they serve me now in two years, but I can alter them again or like make them into something else.

Joanna recognizes the fact that the garment she has will continue to change and serve her differently as she changes too. Emma also recognized the continued life of a garment by saying she is, "one step in a garment's journey." Not only are wearers one step in the garments' journey, but also one side of the network of nonhuman and human links connected to the garment from production to landfill.

These are all a part of a garment's past life, and there will often be a long life after it is worn by the current owner. The designer Lina, who created an androgynous senior-year fashion collection, was enticed by knowledge of a garment's past life. She told me about a large man's jean jacket found at a thrift store and embroidered by hand:

I almost like secondhand clothes more just because they're kind of worn in a little bit. There's a certain magic to being like, I wonder what they did with this weird secret pocket on the inside, or it was probably this older man wearing this who's super grumpy. And then there's me a young woman wearing the exact same thing.

An intimacy is built with the past wearer even though the two are meeting only through a piece of shared fabric, an extension of their bodies. Material holds knowledge within its fabric:

of the past wearer (such as the shape of their body) and memories (the particular collection of



Figure 6. Emma's Jean Jacket

smells and stains that it accumulates) (Slater 2014).

The clothing changes through its many relationships. Sometimes the change is visual, like the embroidery that Lina included on this jacket, and sometimes those changes are invisible, like the collection of dust on the right arm

sleeve or a wine stain that

managed to get removed in the wash. These changes are part of the *becoming* of persons that I have discussed throughout this section. The body as a material oriented towards other materials is ever-changing, and wearing involves both unseen and seen aspects of clothing.

Together, my 12 interviews with people who design and sew clothing highlight the importance of bodily sensation in clothes, material agency, memory, and secondhand clothing. The sensation of clothing and material agency shows a reciprocal relationship where materials and bodies are caring for and changing together through their interaction with one another. Wearing clothing can draw attention outside of the mind/body experience and instead connect bodies to networks of relationships with human and nonhuman things. The orientation towards material relationships emphasizes the body's connection to an ever-changing network of unseen

and seen tangible and intangible materials. Thus, the relationship between clothing and the wearer yields a process of *becoming* that is itself always in flux.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

All things including bodies are perpetually changing, being formed and affected by the force of every legible and illegible collision (from intestinal bacteria to heritable traits to a bold breeze), and so it might be correct to say that this thing I call my self is actually much more fluid (and much larger) than I have been schooled to believe.

– Harry Dodge, *My Meteorite*

In many ways, this project is closure, of not only a year of research, but of four years of exploring my interests in anthropology, philosophy, and environmental studies. The first writing that I submitted to the College of Wooster was an essay about the Regency dress I made, which is mentioned at the start of my analysis chapter. In that essay, I described the way I worked for days on a dress, only to then trip in it when running down a hill. Now, I look back on this experience and think about how that garment acted upon my body, changing my movements, tripping me, encouraging me to stand up straight. I remember the ways that I cared for the garment, washing out the mud and grass stains that covered it—here, another act of reciprocity between wearer and garment.

Likewise, I began this thesis by establishing the ways that new materialism and queer theory overlap in their recognition of materials and queerness existing in a liminal space and therefore always changing. The understanding of material agency and *becoming* through orientation towards the unseen is a crucial starting point for focusing my research on bodily relationships, not from a perspective of bodies being entirely separate from other materials, but instead, as shifting entities made up *of* materials.

The studies I explored initially delved into clothing as primarily representational, highlighting the perceptions that arise through observing dress. Yet, I chose to focus on the material itself, the ways in which memory can be captured within a garment, and how a piece of clothing can act upon a wearer. Attention to production and sustainability added a necessary recognition of the exploitative nature of clothing and a new shift toward buying secondhand garments in an attempt to divest from the environmental and human rights violations perpetuated by fast fashion.

The teaching that Ann, Joanna, and Abby described in their interviews is a kind of material relationship with the physical world that is felt rather than conceptualized. These are relationships that already exist through intimacy between body and thing. The intimacy established through physical touch between garment and body leads to reciprocal relationships, ones where the act of care can be both seen and unseen just as the act of *becoming* occurs through orientation towards both the unseen and seen aspects of dress. Through the addition of queer theory, I am able to talk about materials themselves as queer due to queerness existing outside of the norm and therefore a liminal space. The queering of the material is primarily an orientation toward the unseen aspects of clothing that are often forgotten when primacy is placed on their representational importance.

Included in the seen and unseen are the elements of a garment from memories contained within the material to the bodies of those who produced the item. These elements of dress cannot be disconnected from one another and therefore from personhood, *becoming* through exploitation, through violence, not out of choice, but by nature of the networks of clothing production predominant among fast fashion brands. Therefore, the body as a material is enmeshed with materials—together always shifting, adjusting, and changing in space and time.

The essentialist qualities of self are tied to individual bodies, the self being only discovered when looking inward, deeper into oneself. I hope further research will explore the ways that these non-physiological understandings of the body and *becoming* of personhood can impact research on bodily change, such as aging, body image, or understanding of gender affirming surgery. This project attempts to show the ways that personhood can be thought of as part of an interconnected web of relationships with human and nonhuman things. Material agency and extended personhood help reorganize understandings of self as something that is not contained within the physiological and therefore constantly connected and shifting in relation to other materials.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What led you to choose this garment instead of others?
2. Where is this garment kept when it isn't on your body?
3. Has it always lived there?
4. How does this garment feel?
5. How often do you wear this garment?
6. Do you have memories associated with this garment?
7. What kinds of memories are associated with this garment?
8. Are there ways that this garment has changed over time, and if so how?
9. Has the way you see this garment changed over time?
10. Have you always worn this garment in the same way?
11. When do you wear it differently?
12. Are there ways this garment has changed you?
13. Has your relationship to the garment changed over time?
14. How do you relate to the clothes you make versus the clothes you buy?
15. Are there any aspects of yourself that impact the way you think about clothing?

Appendix C: Pink Shirt

The following photos are images of the pink shirt mentioned in my acknowledgements and introduction to this project. I took these photos with my brother Aviv in Upstate New York. I wore the garment and directed the kinds of images that I wanted captured. Each close-up is meant to show the ways that fabric moves in relation to flesh, the curve of an arm and the wrinkles that form or the way the fabric itself mimicking skin. The close-up photos abstract the garment while also focusing on elements like cuff or button that remind the viewer of the subject. I have included the photos here, so they can be preserved in digital form. I have also printed physical copies and included them, separate from the pages of text, at the back of my thesis. The reader can arrange and view them in whatever order they desire. Arranging them provides a tactile interaction with the images and allows for an added element of change. Change is an important part of this project, the ways that clothing shifts, bodies change, and materials interact with one another. Enjoy!















