Alternative Futures: The Creative Reconsideration of Fashion Objects

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ALTERNATIVE FUTURES: THE CREATIVE RECONSIDERATION OF USED FASHION OBJECTS

by

KATHRYN ROBERTS

A master’s capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
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Alternative Futures: The Creative Reconsideration of Used Fashion Objects

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Kathryn Roberts

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of
the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Alternative Futures: The Creative Reconsideration of Used Fashion Objects

by

Kathryn Roberts

Advisor: Professor Eugenia Paulicelli

This project is the beginning of what I intend to be a larger, evolving work that seeks to marry the theoretical with the practical when considering fashion objects that have “served their purpose”. The object at the project’s focal point: a worn out pair of blue jeans. My particular focus on jeans is based on the fact that they, alongside the t-shirt, are one of the most ubiquitous and commonly owned pieces of clothing for people all over the world. This wardrobe staple transcends age, race, and class, as it occupies an iconic status that has made them invulnerable to trends. It is that very same popularity which has caused denim to create a staggering amount of pollution, both when it is produced, and at the time it is discarded.

The project I am proposing will be an educational workshop that provides information on what really happens to our clothes when we get rid of them, in addition to hands-on workshops where participants are tasked with contemplating and then executing possible new uses for a single pair of blue jeans. In short, the old jeans will be reimagined and refashioned into new objects. There will also be some workshop offerings that will be solely devoted to learning a variety of mending techniques. Since space constraints
and availability often limit in-person workshops, I have also incorporated my work within the ITP program to create a supplemental online component (https://collaborativequiltingproject.wordpress.com) in hopes of giving the workshop a digital life, thus broadening the boundaries of the classroom.

This chance to learn more about our clothing while crafting as a group within the workshop, is offered in the spirit of creativity and fun, while also intending to add dimension to the critical dialogue around the environmental implications of the fashion industry.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1. Introduction

As getting dressed is an act that nearly every person in the world participates in each and every day, so are needed tremendous amounts of garments to clothe those bodies. It’s the creation of all of those clothes that has made the fashion industry one of the largest commercial enterprises on the planet. Fashion affects millions of people across a supply chain that spans the globe before the clothes even make it into the hands of consumers. But that is only half of the story in the life of a garment. What happens to all of those clothes when they have become worn out, or have become unwanted by their owners due to changing body size, changing tastes, or when the clothing’s style has been outmoded by gone-in-a-moment fashion trends? Throughout my studies at CUNY Graduate Center, it has been this question of “what comes after” that has remained at the forefront of my mind. Actively seeking to address this feels all the more urgent in this era of fast fashion where companies churn out clothes at faster and faster rates, and in the process gives consumers the message that these garments are nothing more than a readily disposable commodity. Cheaply bought, briefly worn, thrown out, replenished by more of the same. The resulting influence on our consumer culture is that of encouraging not only buying as a matter of impulse, but buying in large quantities.

As an artist, I have an ingrained desire to interact with the materials themselves and have sought out ways to combine this tactile engagement with my academic studies whenever possible. The work being described in this paper, entitled Project Denim is my attempt to do just that. Coming from a professional background both in design and education, I felt I could best express my desire for responsible change within the fashion
industry in making available a creative pedagogical tool that would facilitate dialogue through inclusivity and the shared act of making.

The efforts detailed in this paper are the starting point of what I intend to be an evolving, long-term project that seeks to marry the theoretical with the practical when considering fashion objects that have “served their purpose”. The object at the project’s focal point, worn-out blue jeans, is explored within in-person workshops (comprised of an educational component and an experiential learning component), and most recently, through a digital art exhibition space. The material contemplation of the jeans within both of these spaces seeks to examine the topic of unwanted clothing through the exploration of the following questions:

- What happens to our clothing when we are done with them?
- Do signs of use/love add or subtract to the value of material?
- What are the parameters for defining worthlessness/waste?
- What do fashion objects represent aside from the latest trends?
- How can the average person reduce their textile waste?

These are only things that can be understood by slowing down and with considerate meditation on this specific medium, both of which are in direct opposition to the fast fashion mentality.

Also, core to this project is a desire for inclusivity. The audience for this work is intended to be broad, in my deliberate attempt for this project to not merely be “preaching to the choir”. It is intended to promote open participation by anyone, inside of fashion or out, inside of academia or out, and with or without experience as a maker. Novices are
enthusiastically welcomed. Sustainability and intrinsic material considerations around fashion are conversations that are happening often among fashion scholars. This is critical and must continue, but if any meaningful progress is to be made in creating a more thoughtful, sustainability-driven fashion industry, it will only happen at the insistence of consumers.

2. Why Denim

Before going into the specifics components of this project, I find it important to clarify why this work is devoted explicitly to denim. Neither the topics of textile waste or material culture are by any means exclusive to denim, so technically any used garment would work within the parameters of the project.

The particular focus on denim jeans is based on the fact that they (along with t-shirts) are one of the most ubiquitous and commonly owned pieces of clothing for people all over the world. This wardrobe staple transcends age, race, and class, occupying a unique iconic status that has made them invulnerable to trends or ever seeming old-fashioned. Waistlines and hemlines will rise and fall with the trends of the moment, but jeans never exit the fashion scene. Ranging from low-end (fast fashion) to high-priced couture, manufacturers see to it that there is a pair of jeans for just about everyone. Because of this popularity, fashion companies are estimated to produce more than 1.2 billion pairs per year¹. It’s not just the large quantities of needed material that are problematic when contemplating the production of such a staggering volume of jeans, there is also a matter

of pollution. In the New York Times article “Fashion Tries on Zero Waste”, Simon Collins, dean of the school of fashion at Parsons, discusses that jeans “are one of the most wasteful and polluting garments that are made.” This is attributed in the article to a combination of waste fabric created in production, in addition to, “…dyes added only to be washed out again, the energy used to transport the denim all over the world and the gallons of water used by consumer to clean the jeans.”

But what happens to all of that denim when the consumer is through with them? Most pairs of jeans make their way to one of four places: the landfill, second-hand markets, textile reclamation centers or being upcycled. (Each of these destinations will be further discussed in the portion of this paper which details the educational components within the workshop.)

Also of importance to this project is the fact that jeans occupy a privileged position among garments. While most clothing in this country is tossed out at the first signs of wear-and-tear, many individuals feel that jeans are made more desirable for their signs of having been lived in. A ripped knee, a few holes in the thighs, or a ragged hem are ways for an individual’s jeans to stand out, to be more personal. Sometimes this distress is authentically gained, other times it is manufactured to look this way. Just walk in to a store and you are likely to find many styles that have been pre-distressed or finished in a way that makes them appear to be coated in mud, oil, paint, or others indicators of labor. No matter their origins, all of these markings add meaning. People’s intimate connection to their jeans is well-expressed by author Sophie Woodward in her essay “‘Humble’ Blue

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Jeans: Material Culture Approaches to Understanding the Ordinary, Global, and the Personal”:

“Jeans are ‘generic’ as they are worn by many different sectors of the population, yet also personal as they take on the body of the wearer, becoming softer over time (a property of how they are woven and dyed). Being fashionable, or wearing clothes such as jeans that we know many other people are wearing, allows us to feel part of a wider global humanity…” (Woodward, 2016).3

This rarified viewpoint that wear can add positive aspects to a garment is an ideal entry way for starting a conversation about why that is, and when valuing evidence of use might even extend beyond denim.

It should be noted, that focusing solely on one material is also intended to act as a bond connecting all of the participants, quietly adding to the dialogue in its own way, and making the versatility of the material all the more evident. As the work being created is chosen by the individual based on their personal aesthetics, creativity, and skill set, it will naturally produce an innate variety in the outcomes.

3. Educational Components of the Workshop

Though not hands-on like the rest of the proposed workshop, the educational component of this project is of critical importance to the success of the whole. I believe without providing educational resources (i.e. pamphlets, PowerPoint presentations, group discussion, etc.) to the participants about what happens to our clothes when we choose to get rid of them, it is hard to understand the significance of what is being asked of them when we sit down to create. The crafting should absolutely be fun, but understanding the

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underlying statement of why it is happening is what makes the workshop relevant: what we do as consumers matters and those decisions often have far-reaching consequences that many of us are not aware of. The possible futures of our jeans that will be included in the educational resources deal with their ending up in a landfill, a second-hand market, a textile reclamation center or being upcycled. Each of these is detailed below.

The Landfill

As much loved as the blue jeans may once have been by their owners, unfortunately, the fate that awaits most of them, and most textiles in general, is to end up in a landfill. On average, most North Americans will discard nearly seventy pounds of clothing per year,4 with eighty-five percent of those discarded textiles ending up in a landfill.5 According to the website Californians Against Waste, this isn’t only a matter of the tremendous amount of space that textile take up in landfills, “clothes in the landfill can decompose, releasing methane, dyes and other chemicals that can leach into the soil.” 6 Those same polluting dyes that were used in the jeans production come back to harm the environment once again.

Jeans in the Second-Hand Markets

Not such a bleak future is fated for every pair of jeans, however. Many pairs of jeans find their way into the second-hand clothing market. This includes thrift and charity-run

5 http://www.cawrecycles.org/recycling-news/2235?rq=textiles
stores, including well-known chains such as the Salvation Army, Goodwill, and Value Village stores. The second-hand market meets a number of needs. They provide low cost goods for low-income families, thrifty consumers in search of bargains, as well as devotees to vintage garments, who are eager to track down designer treasures at a fraction of the cost it would take to acquire the same item from a boutique. In the charity owned shops, the money made from sales not only supports the charity itself, but in some cases uses the sales position in the store itself as a way to employ and give job training to individuals in need.7

There is a lot to be positive about in sending used garments, to the second-hand markets, but it is not without a negative side. Most consumers are likely to think that their donation will be ultimately find a good home within their community, but the truth is that second-hand clothing frequently has global implications, which have an adverse affect on textile industries in other countries. In Pietra Rivoli’s book *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy*, she states that from “1990 and 2003, the United States exported nearly 7 billion pounds of used clothing and other worn textiles products to the rest of the world, and the industry now has customers in more than 100 countries.”8 Finding a new home abroad is hardly the fate that the typical American would predict for the bag off of old clothing they drop off at their local donation center, but there’s good chance that’s exactly where they are headed. In theory, this doesn’t sound so bad: you get rid of what you no longer want and someone elsewhere makes use of it. The problem with this is that most of the clothing will make its way to very poor countries, frequently, ones located in


Africa. The constant flow of cheap used clothes from the West has contributed to conditions that make it extremely challenging for textile manufacturers to succeed within their own country. This is discussed in the BBC article “Where Do Your Old Clothes Go?” which details the research of Dr. Andrew Brooks, author of the book Clothing Poverty. One example the article sites, is the country of Uganda where Brooks’ research found that “second-hand garments now account for more than 81% of all clothing purchases.”

Certainly the goal is to keep useful garments out of the landfill, but knowing some of the less positive aspects of the second-hand market makes for some complicated consideration for consumers who want to make donations. This is especially true in light of the fact that consumers are keeping clothing for shorter and shorter amounts of time before discarding. In a recent survey, 33% of women said that they “consider clothes ‘old’ after wearing them fewer than three times.” This seems to imply that many of these garments being donated today are still in like-new condition and are hardly deserving of being handled in the same way as common litter.

Textile Reclamation

Textile reclamation, or textile recycling, is another way that jeans and other used garments can escape the landfill. Jana M. Hawley details this practice as “the breakdown

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of fabric to fiber through cutting shredding, carding and other mechanical processes. Then fiber is re-engineered into value-added products. These value-added products include stuffing, automotive components, carpet underlays, building materials such as roofing felt and low-end blankets.”¹¹ Though sometimes the recycled textiles do make their way back into new garments, they are mostly converted into these types of lower-end products that the consumer doesn’t take much notice of. Textile reclamation is frequently handled by the same businesses that buy castoff garments from thrift stores. The items not making the cut to be sold overseas are likely to end up sorted for textile recycling.¹² There are also some communities in the U.S. that have access to public bins which allow individuals to donate directly to a textile recycling facility, however, this practice has yet to be widely implemented.

**Mending and Upcycling**

The final way of saving jeans from the landfill to be detailed in the workshop is by choosing to repair the damaged areas, or to upcycle them into something “new”. It is this last category of that is at the heart of *Project Denim.*

In case the exact meaning of this term is confusing, the Oxford English Dictionary defines upcycling as “reuse (discarded objects or materials) in such a way as to create a product of higher quality or value than the original.”¹³ Though the word itself may be fairly modern, the act itself is not. During times of conflict or scarcity in the past (most

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notably, the World Wars and during the depression) many families found that upcycling was a necessity. Whether because the materials themselves were hard to come by or just a lack of money to buy the materials, families, particularly women, were charged with working with what they had to create “new” items to meet the needs of their family. Fabric scraps and used garments could be transformed into quilts and blankets. An old dress could be made into a new garment. Zippers, buttons and other hardware were also removed and incorporated into other pieces being made. In our age of consumers having easy access to super stores such as Wal-Mart and Target, it can be hard to imagine a time when everything you needed (and a lot of what you don’t) wasn’t readily available and for sale at rock bottom prices. Today, upcycling is alive and well, though the motives for many in North America seem to have shifted away from dealing with a lack of needed materials, and towards its being a way of reducing environmental waste, or simply to experiment with craft skills.

4. Experiential Learning Component

In the hands-on component, there are two separate workshops that I have been preparing: one is devoted to the task of revitalizing garments, the other is focused on upcycling the garment into a new item.

In the mending workshop, participants are instructed to bring in a damaged denim garment from home, though small scraps of denim will be made available for experimentation by those who do not have a garment to work on. After a brief discussion about why it is can be of value to repair a garment, versus just buying a new one (especially when it is often so inexpensive to do so), they are instructed in a number of
different repair techniques which range from the very simplistic, to more specialized methods. This straightforward and inclusive activity is extremely friendly for people who have no experience with sewing or crafting. The repair work offers many opportunities for creativity and expression, as mends can either be inconspicuous, or highly decorative.

In the upcycling workshop, participants are charged with contemplating a single pair of jeans, and how they might be reimagined as a new object, or objects. Ideally most, if not all, of the material from the pair of jeans will be incorporated into these new items. An additional goal for those in the workshop is to try to create something that appeals to their own personal aesthetics, and to give consideration of whether or not this is an object that they would actually use. If the answer is no, then perhaps it is worth brainstorming other solutions. Although free experimentation is encouraged, I will also have a number of handouts available detailing how to make specific projects such as tote bags, phone cases, zippered pouches, bandanas, etc.

Everyone has different skill sets and strengths, and while it may not be everyone’s destiny to become a “maker”, I do think that the thoughtful contemplation of how to make useful a garment that was earmarked for the trash is an exercise that could have larger implications for the person involved. Perhaps going forward they are more mindful of what they buy: is it quality, is it enduring? Perhaps they are more likely to donate the used item to a charity or textile reclamation center. Or perhaps, they may find that mending and upcycling is something that they enjoyed and would like to take up again.

My greatest hope is that through this process a person comes to view used fashion items through a new lens. In North American society what is considered “waste” often turns out to be perfectly usable textiles. The fact that many people are not aware of this
makes it easy to remain in the dark about the wasteful habits within the fashion industry, and the ways that we as consumers are complicit in this wastefulness. Hopefully the workshop will serve as a way to shine a light on this, while promoting more sustainable personal practices.

5. Project Development

Preparing for the mending workshops was a straightforward task. Having many years of experience repairing my own clothes and with sewing in general, I set out to create a number of sample swatches that would showcase a variety of styles. These ranged from inconspicuous inner patches that were hardly visible, to outer patches in contrast fabrics with more stylized stitches.

To begin thinking about how to approach the upcycling aspect of the project, I wanted to creatively put myself in the same position that I would be asking the participants to enter. To that end, I gave myself the challenge of creating as many finished, high-quality objects as I could from a single pair of used jeans.

The jeans that I was working with were about a year old and had been discarded by their owner to their obvious signs of wear and tear. As is often true with worn out jeans, the majority of the wear for this particular pair occurred in the seat, around the waist and at the knees. After dismantling the seams, I discovered that I had a surprisingly large amount of unmarred fabric to work with. One potential obstacle I encountered was that creating objects large in size would require piecing together a number of smaller textile pieces. I chose to overcome this by making this patchwork appearance a design feature that would be carried throughout the entire collection I was creating. I decided to
supplement a small amount of light colored recycled denim scraps and some felt, to exaggerate the patchwork/color block appearance into a deliberate aesthetic choice. I also supplemented a zipper, a magnetic closure, and two faux leather straps. Ultimately, I was able to make a total of four new objects from the one pair of jeans.

Having a background as an accessories designer, I naturally gravitated toward a collection of visually related accessories, which included a large tote with a patchwork front pocket, a zippered pouch, a reusable lunch sack and a two-pocket phone case.

6. Implementation

So far, I have had the opportunity to offer the workshop twice, both events occurring at Queens College, through the Freshman Year Initiative and in conjunction with Eugenia Paulicelli’s *The Fabric of Cultures: Systems in the Making* exhibition. It should be noted that the students in Freshman Year Initiative are not specifically studying fashion, rather this program encourages new students to take classes of varying topics while having an opportunity to become acquainted with the scholarly writing expected of them as college students. Approximately 20 students participated in each of the workshops. In addition to the hands-on and educational portion, I also had the students fill out brief questionnaires before the workshop got underway. The students were informed that the

14 “What is the Freshman Year Initiative?” http://fyi.qc.cuny.edu/
15 “The Fabric of Culture 2.0 as a whole took inspiration from a year and a half long research project and from classrooms at both Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center (Fall 2016), from several conversations and workshops that were organized at Queens College and from several institutions and colleagues on campus from different backgrounds and disciplines—Computer Science, Art, Linguistics and Design. This kind of dialogue has opened new doors toward an understanding not only of how fashion can be interpreted from a multilayered and prismatic perspective, but also of how to develop and imagine new ways of doing research that bridges the arts with pedagogy and science.” Paulicelli, Eugenia, ed. *The Fabric of Cultures: Systems in the Making*. Queens, NY: Queens College Art Center, City University of New York, 2017: 9.
questionnaires were anonymous, and that they were welcome to skip any questions that they would prefer not to answer. The questions focused on the student’s experience with sewing, whether they had ever had an item of clothing repaired (if so, by whom: i.e., themselves, a family member, or tailor), why they chose to have this item repaired, and what they typically do with garments when they showed signs of wear. These answers not only gave me a quick understanding about how much sewing help these students might be needing, but it provided and indication of whether or not this work we were about to engage in held any familiarity for them. Most of the students indicated that they did not craft or sew, though some of them had attempted to repair a garment before. It should be noted however, that all except three of the students responded that they had previously had repairs made to their garments by a family member. The most common reasons given for seeking to mend the items were because they were expensive, they were a favorite wardrobe piece, or they were special (such as a prom or bat mitzvah dress). This additional information proved to be incredibly useful in guiding the group discussion. I look forward to building on this investigation during the next offering, which is scheduled to occur during the Spring 2018 semester at The CUNY Graduate Center. This will likely include a more comprehensive questionnaire.

7. Engagement in the Digital Sphere

The most recent addition to *Project Denim*, is the inclusion of a digital art exhibition space entitled *The Collaborative Quilting Project*\(^1\). Created and curated to fulfill the requirements of my ITP Independent Study, this exhibition showcases a series of fabric

squares created by a number of artists. Quilt squares were intentionally selected as the vehicle for this project, as many of them are integral to the creation of a whole quilt. Having a variety of artists involved in the making of the quilt is intended to be symbolic of the many hands through which a garment passes in its lifecycle. Some of them known to us, some are anonymous laborers a world away, but all are essential in its story.

Each of the participants was made aware of the exhibition concept and given the following rules:

1. *The quilt square must measure 10" x 10".*

2. *It must be made almost entirely of used denim, though small amounts of supplementary material are permissible.*

Despite the unifying medium of worn denim and size constraints, all artists were encouraged to create their square in any way, employing any method, they preferred. It was important to me that everyone involved felt as much agency as possible in how to go about creating their work, as heterogeneity was an important component of the project’s overall meaning. As an optional step, each person was encouraged to include statements about the piece’s production, or personal significance of the materials involved. Some of the artists chose to engage with this optional writing, while others did not.

Eventually, *The Collaborative Quilting Project* will also be enacted through the in-person workshops, but the creation of the corresponding digital component eliminates a number of impediments inherent within face-to-face engagement, primarily those of time constraints and limiting the number of participants based on the physical space available. An additional advantage of the digital element is that it allows for users to participate
from anywhere. For example, this first cohort included artists from 8 different states including New York, North Carolina, Wisconsin, California, and Oregon.

One of the challenges for me during this phase of the project was allowing the work to naturally evolve, some areas expanding, while others contracted. As I have been thinking about and planning for this project since last spring, I had certain presuppositions about how all this would work when I finally got to the implementation stage, primarily, that the overt theme of the work would be that of sustainability. As this exhibition functions alongside the larger body of work in Project Denim, I had assumed that it would also be addressing the issues of textile consumption and waste in the same overt manner, but as I began receiving the artists’ works and read their messages, it became clear that for many people the work was more related to embodiment, personal memory, and identity. As Peter Stallybrass puts it in his essay “Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things”, cloth’s “two almost contradictory aspects of its materiality: its ability to be permeated and transformed by the maker and wearer alike, its ability to endure over time.”

The material culture aspect was what had become foregrounded. After struggling with this, I realized that any effort to redirect the message from what it authentically was to what I wanted it to be would a have been a huge disservice to each of the participants, as well as to the project itself. The work had evolved, and it was essential to let it exist as exactly what it was: a dialogue. My part of the dialogue is sustainability, for others it is a different subject altogether. All valid, all part of the complex conversation of the meanings of fashion. It is my belief, that sustainability is tacitly woven throughout all of

the work just by the very nature that used garments are being incorporated, but seeing this evolution in meaning, has prompted me to consider other exciting ways in which this project might grow.

The layered complexities of fashion become all the more apparent when really taking the time to observe the context through which each artist perceived the garment, and how that perception often informed the ways they were moved to create their square. One of my favorite examples of this is seen in the work created by artist Melissa Gutierrez. In a message included with the square, Melissa explains that the exposure of threads (caused by the pants being too tight in some areas) led to damage that caused her to stopping wearing the pants altogether. Ironically, her piece uses exposed yellow threads to beautiful effect as square’s predominant design element.\(^{18}\) I believe that Melissa’s square also highlights how a garment (even when worn just a few times) can impact our memories, and even the way we think about our bodies.

8. Future plans for Project Denim

This work still feels like it is in its early stages, so I have a number of steps planned to continue to grow both the workshops and the Collaborative Quilting Project.

For the workshops, my experience at Queens College has shown that the mending aspect of the project is ready for full implementation. It is easy to do with any skills level, and can be completed in as little as an hour. This has been an extremely rewarding experience thus far, and I look forward to sharing this time with a new group of participants.

Presently, the upcycling workshop is still in need of some expansion. My first experiments with creating the grouping of accessories was a great jumping off point, but in the coming months, I am intending to repeat this experimentation with another two pairs of jeans. I will focus the objects from one pair around apparel, and the objects from the other pair around home goods. My intention is to have an extremely varied collection of objects before launching this project, illustrating to the crafters participating in the workshop that the possibilities of what they can create are limited by nothing other than their imagination. Another important consideration for the upcycling workshop, is how much time is required. As mentioned, the mending may be completes in as little as an hour, however I believe the upcycling would need a time span of approximately 3 hours to be successful in its aims. Addressing this challenge is my next step. Reimagining it as a digitized workshop, seems a particularly practical solution, as it allows for participants to engage in the work for whatever length of time that suits them best. I have, however, offered a scaled-down version at Queens College, again with the Freshman Year Initiative. Instead of everyone creating different projects, in this workshop everyone worked created zippered pouches, making use of fabric scraps that were produced from another project that the students had engaged with earlier in the semester. These more specific parameters were far more appropriate for the hour and 15 minute time frame that was available. Creating more of these project specific lessons may be the solution for making this upcycling workshop more practical within more formal classroom settings.

As the Collaborative Quilting Project is the newest iteration of this work, I am only just beginning to scratch the surface of its pedagogical possibilities, particularly in regards to its relation to the in-person workshops. Crossing the lines between the physical
and the digital has seems worthy of much deeper exploration. I find that I am excited not only by the possibilities that are unique to these spaces, but in the ways the two may be in dialogue. Thus far, *The Collaborative Quilting Project* has proved to be a rich space for diving in to the storytelling aspect of our garments. I have previously been viewing the workshops in more practical terms, but seeing the personal narratives being unearthed in the digital space has made me consider how the workshops may make space for delving in to this area as well. With some modifications, I believe that this could make for a substantial, scaffolded assignment for the undergraduate students, to whom I am teaching fashion courses at CUNY’s New York City College of Technology. This investigation is particularly suited to the “Introduction to the Fashion Industry” course, as its focus is acquainting students with the myriad meanings behind fashion, and the numerous stages involved in a garment takes from mere idea, to being fully realized upon the body. Having multiple opportunities throughout the semester to build on to this work is ideal in further developing mechanisms for using garments as a tool for considering the material, the practical, as well as the personal. Though this initial iteration of the project’s instructions stated that short statements were an optional component, for my undergraduate students I would like to formalize and expand this element of the work. It is my hope that this formal investigation of the tangible, personal item of clothing will open up new avenues for dialogue within our classroom, and could make for an exciting paper on the intrinsic value of fashion items. Value that extends beyond that of trends, utilitarian functions, and commodity, all of which are adequately covered in the class’s textbook. Layering this work with a digital element, whether it is through the *Collaborative Quilting Project* Wordpress site or through the academic commons, also
adds a further component, allowing the students to investigate ways of engaging in scholarship outside of the physical space of the classroom.

In Luke Waltzer’s article “Digital Humanities and the ‘Ugly Stepchildren’ of American Higher Education”, he points out that “...the digital humanities possesses the capability to invigorate humanities instruction in higher education and to reassert how the humanities can help us understand and shape the world around us.” The digital humanities’ interdisciplinary blending of traditional with technological, tangible with the abstract is an exciting new pedagogical frontier, and generally appears to be the direction academic scholarship is headed. As fashion and fashion studies are in their very essence traditional, technological, tangible, and abstract, it is wonderfully compatible for this avenue of exploration.

8. Conclusion

This chance to craft as a group within the workshop, and engage with participants online, though earnestly offered in the spirit of creativity and fun, is at its heart a way to add new dimensions to the critical dialogue around the environmental implications of the fashion industry. Ultimately, everyone has different skill sets and strengths. While it may not be everyone’s destiny to become a “maker”, the thoughtful contemplation of how to revitalize, or make a useful “new” from an item that was earmarked for the trash is an exercise that could have larger implications for that person, specifically, the realization that what our society has come to view as “waste” quite frequently turns out to be

perfectly usable textiles, If the only thing a participant achieves from their involvement with this Project Denim is taking a moment to slow down and make something for an hour or so, I still take that as some measure of success. For many people taking some time away to do an activity that doesn’t allow for being in front of a computer screen or clutching a phone is far from the norm. The deeper considerations involved for thinking about our clothes beyond the trends they represent, can really only be revealed in slowness, and is a small, though significant step toward being aware of the other meaningful conversations that center around our garments. I believe these are connection that can be made just as readily within the digital sphere as they may be in-person. This is true perhaps, even for those whose involvement with the project is merely as observer: viewing the works and reading their stories. This cannot be overstated, as it is through this interplay of participation and observation that both the physical and digital components of this project are truly in dialogue.
FIGURE 1: Mending examples with a variety of techniques for students to reference.
FIGURE 2: A donated pair used for this project. The owner had intended to donate them because of the wear and tear occurring in the knees and seat of the pants.
Figure 3: A collection of items that were created from the discarded jeans. Clockwise starting at the top right corner: zippered case, lunch sack, tote bag, and phone case
FIGURE 4: Sample instruction from an original project that creates a simple zip case from a small portion of a denim pant leg. Instructions are to be handed out in the workshop, or posted online for those participating on their own.
Denim: Reconsidering the Life of Used Objects

A workshop with Kat Roberts

>> November 29, 2017 >>
>> 1:30 - 2:30pm >>
>> Queens College Tech Incubator, CEP Hall 2 >>

Join Kat Roberts (MAL's candidate, CUNY Graduate Center) for a free, hands-on workshop in sustainable practice and creative upcycling, focusing on the reuse of denim.

This program is proudly presented in conjunction with The Fabric of Cultures: Systems in the Making, a multimedia exhibition curated by Eugenia Paulicelli. On view at the Queens College Art Center, Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library, Level 6, from October 5 - December 15.

Please visit www.qcartscenter.org for more information.

FIGURE 5: A poster created for a denim workshop at Queens College.
FIGURE 6: Students at Queens College at a workshop on November 29, 2017.
FIGURE 7: A group shot of students working at the Queens College workshop.
Clothing Repair Survey

Date:
Location:
Age:
Gender:
Do you ever sew or craft?
   □ Yes  □ No  □ Unsure
If so, what types of projects?

Have you ever repaired a garment before?
   □ Yes  □ No  □ Unsure

Have you ever had a garment repaired by a member of your family?
   □ Yes  □ No  □ Unsure

Have you ever taken a garment to be repaired by a tailor?
   □ Yes  □ No  □ Unsure
If so, what was the item or items?

What made this particular garment worthy of being repaired?

What do you normally do with garments that have become worn out or damaged?

FIGURE 8: Questionnaire given to students participating in a mending workshop at Queens College.
FIGURE 9: Four quilt square submitted by the following artists (clockwise, starting from the top left corner): Julie Chase, Sullivan Anlyan, Melissa Gutierrez, and Jamie, Kepko.
FIGURE 10: Four quilt square submitted by the following artists (clockwise, starting from the top left corner): Kim Konen, Molly George, Amanda Seanor, Kat Roberts.
The bright blue piece of fabric in the center of this square came from one of my mom’s old dresses. I have photos of her wearing this dress and draping it over the back of a chair. Julie Smith Schneider, Maine, her favorite place. I made a guest book covered in this fabric and embroidered with her name that friends and family wrote memories in at her memorial service this summer.

She accepted that the tumor would eventually take her life before I did. “I want you to have my sewing machine,” she said, holding little bears, zipped up. But really, I wanted her to have her sewing machine to keep sewing with it for decades to come.

I used that sewing machine, a 1950s Singer Featherweight (in black metal, beauty), to sew this square from fabric I thought it fit my short legs when my mom was right, we would sit together and knit for hours and hours. “There will always be another baby,” she said, as tiny hats and sweaters piled around her. I made a series of whole-cloth quilts for my pregnant friends.

Future children. Even though she couldn’t easily walk anymore, she talked me through how to sew on the binding, then walk over to the sewing machine, sew it down, and for her told the binding over the raw edge + hand-stitch it down. She loved this step, second only to taking the quilt out of the dryer + seeing how it bunched up around the pincushion.

Even in her hospice bed, she kept quilting and knitting. When she didn’t have the right supplies on hand, she was resourceful to the end. In wrapper patch of notepaper, I found sewing needles held in place by a paper napkin. I found a nearly complete mittens with stitches held in place by a twisted drinking straw.

Since she passed, I feel closer to her when I am knitting and sewing with her scarf, her sweater, her mittens, her patterns, her sewing machine + making gifts for the people she loved.

Julie Smith Schneider
Ah, denim—take me back to my youth. The year was 1969. A new wardrobe staple, denim bell bottom jeans, were starting to appear everywhere it seemed. Especially on the nightly news coverage of the Vietnam War, where many of the marchers and campus protesters donned jeans. Heck, even The Beatles were wearing them! I convinced my mother I had to have a pair, although it would be another four years before I was allowed to wear them to school. I proudly adorned my new coveted jeans with a peace sign patch on one of the back pockets. So with this creation I pay homage to my first pair of jeans and all the memories that these two global icons invoke. Denim and the Peace Sign. Forever relevant!

11/30/2017
Katy

FIGURE 12: A note from Katy Cunningham about her submission, along with the quilt square.
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