

Learning through wear: Experiencing the everyday vintage wardrobe

There is a patch of red, slightly inflamed, dry skin on my right index finger that never quite heals. Typically more noticeable in the summer months, it is a sign of the imprint my clothing choices leave on me. This skin irritation has largely been caused by my penchant for tightly fitted 1950s and 1970s clothes, the worn skin symptomatic of having to pinch garments tightly together, so that metal zips, 50 years old or more, can slide up my back or the side of my torso with ease.

My clothes tend to leave other marks too. From boning that has worn through its cotton binding with age leaving stab marks on my skin to red lines encircling my waist from belts secured tightly around my middle. Some may consider my clothing choices suffering for fashion. In an era of easy to wear soft clothing, my choice to encase my body in tight garments may seem surprising. Yet, I find these garments liberating at the same time, and despite the marks left on my skin, generally comfortable too. In these vintage pieces I feel confident and notably my posture is often improved.

When I look closely at my clothes, I recognise that they do not just leave marks on me, but I leave marks on them too. As Ellen Sampson suggests, 'in the performance of dressing and the practice of everyday life, we are marking and altering our clothes.'¹ This is most notable in the make-up marks I seem to leave behind. For example, the faded whisper of red lipstick, smeared on linings, where garments have been hastily pulled over my head as I undress.

Clothes however do not just speak of the past people who have worn them, but often the past environments they have been worn or stored in. The smell of stale cigarette smoke, difficult to remove, hinting of a garments past life before smoking was banned indoors. The faint tang of damp and mould, still present after multiple washes indicating poorly heated and ventilated homes.

These examples indicate the physical and emotional affects that clothes can have on us, and we upon them. Sampson writes that;

In studying wearing, one is studying the social relations between people and their clothes. Clothing has both the capacity to affect deeply and to effect change. [...] This affect – or the capacity of garments to affect us – is both symbolic and bodily/material. Clothes are both the locus and the agents of affect, while at the same time being affected themselves. The body and the garment are in a constant reiterative cycle of affecting one another. The body-self is affected physically and emotionally through wearing and simultaneously the materiality of the garment, its meanings and value are changed through wear: This cycle of affects moulds both bodily selves, identities and garments.²

My identity is deeply emmeshed in the clothes I choose to wear. In this chapter I look intimately at my own interactions and relationships with garments from my everyday vintage wardrobe, questioning broadly the idea of clothes as the 'locus and agents of affect.'³ The wearing of vintage fashion in the Twentieth and Twenty-first century, and its development from subcultural fashion to mainstream acceptance, has been broadly considered by scholars over the past thirty years.⁴ However here I offer a different angle, considering my own personal experiences. Using wearing as a central methodological practice, I borrow heavily from the work of Sampson. She has suggested the 'experience' of wearing clothing is still a relatively under-explored and unconventional research methodology.⁵ Here, my usage of this methodology, whilst looking at historical garments from the Twentieth century, is rooted in the contemporary. As will be shown, the rising popularity of vintage as a fashion trend is intimately tied up with the increasing speed at which clothing was produced in the Twentieth century, the greater availability of low-cost garments and their consequent shorter initial life cycles.

Vintage clothing has a special power of its own and when these garments are worn there is a feeling of the past continually colliding with the present. Their multiple life stories and owners can be buried within the very fibres of the garments and through wear there can be an intimate connection with their past lives. Whilst what I have written is deeply personal, it offers a model through which clothes can more widely be considered. We all experience clothes on a daily basis, and questioning how clothes 'feel' when we wear them can be a valuable tool. Of course, wear of clothes, once they leave the private wardrobe and enter into a public collection is no longer possible. Yet, by turning to consider our own personal experiences of what we feel about clothes, and how we wear them, by adopting an approach rooted in material culture and

wearing for our own clothes, it may open up further ways to consider those we cannot wear and how to collect stories of garments which were once worn.

Sampson has suggested that 'wearing is often a tacit and tactile experience: from the tacit knowledge embodied in acts of dressing, to the sensory experience of garments and skin, to the complex relationships between memory, experience, and garments.'⁶ Consequently, it can be challenging to articulate how wearing 'feels'. The research presented here is centred on my own personal experiences of wearing vintage precisely for this reason and follows an autoethnographic approach to wear. This can be posited as 'insider knowledge'. As Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis and Stacy Holman Jones suggest, 'insider knowledge does not suggest that an autoethnographer can articulate more truthful or more accurate knowledge as compared to outsiders, but rather that as authors we can tell our stories in novel ways when compared to how others may be able to tell them.'⁷

This articulation of my wearing research methodology is presented primarily through five case studies on garments that form part of my everyday wardrobe. Through the practice of wearing these garments I have considered the physical 'tacit' and 'tactile' experience of wear alongside how and why I wear vintage and what personally adds 'value' to these clothes. Vintage complicates the idea of memory and clothing, on wearing these garments it is not only my own memories which can re-surface, but also there is often the imagined—or in rare cases, the known, previous owner whom I form an intimate connection with through re-wear.

Using wearing as a methodology is both 'embodied' and 'bodily' and here I discuss my own body and feelings about it, alongside my everyday wardrobe.⁸ The use of wear as a research methodology can be seen more broadly as part of the 'embodied' turn in fashion and dress studies. Hilary Davidson suggests that this is 'the trend for scholars of history to appreciate and incorporate embodied, experiential, implicit or tacit knowledges gained through making and doing into their study of history. The embodied turn concept encompasses both the coming into being of objects and the role of bodies in their making.'⁹ Generally it is used to refer to remaking clothing and the wear or use of replicas, but equally this study, with

‘subjective bodily experience’ of dress at its heart, can be seen as part of wider concepts of embodiment.

An unsuitable methodology?

My methodology is one neither available to nor suitable for all and is limited to the wear of personal objects. Once garments enter into an archive or museum collection, their status changes. What was once clothing becomes artefact. After this point garments should no longer be worn. There are a multitude of reasons as to why this is the case, related to conservation issues and the potential damage that can be caused by bodies.¹⁰ Often the proportion of historical garments, even those less than seventy years old, are different to contemporary ones, and unless encased in period correct underpinnings, modern bodies can easily cause irreversible damage to garments. Furthermore, as Ingrid Mida argues ‘a garment that once belonged to another person is subtly altered when worn again. This could destroy critical evidence of the marks and imprints of the original wearer.’¹¹ This is why there are particular challenges around garments worn by celebrities, or significant figures, whose garments were often custom made. One only has to consider the furore that arose in May 2022 when Kim Kardashian wore Marilyn Monroe’s custom 1962 skin-like sheath dress by Jean Louis.

I argue that it is precisely because garments cannot be worn once they enter into a museum setting that it is however vitally important to collect stories of wear from donors where possible. My own experience of working in museums has illustrated that often, when items are donated a layer of donor information is missing. Beyond the typical questions we may ask, the factual, when and where did you buy it? where did you wear it? Are there questions that represent the deeply personal physical and emotional experience of wearing that we should ask too— How did it feel and how did it make you feel? How did it fit your body? So much can be understood about garments through careful material culture analysis but added information about the experience of wear can offer valuable information for future conservation, storage and display.

Writing in 2000 Joanne Entwistle suggested that ‘the costume museum makes the garment into a fetish, it tells of how the garment was made, the techniques of stitching, embroidery and decoration used as well as the historical era in which it was once worn. What it cannot tell us is how the garment was worn, how the garment moved when on a body, what it sounded like when it moved and how it felt to the wearer. Without a body, dress lacks fullness and movement; it is incomplete.’¹² Yet, advancements in digital technology mean that the possibilities of re-creating digital version of historical dress in movement are almost with us. Understanding the past experiences of how garments were worn and how they felt, where possible, will help to ensure digital recreations can accurately portray garments for new audiences.

Wearing vintage fashion and second-hand consumption

I can still clearly picture when vintage clothing became part of my everyday life. It is the summer of 2006, and after seeing an article in *Elle Girl* I set off on a mission from my home in Sutton, Greater London to Shoreditch. I am trying to navigate my way through East London, in an era before google maps— and still fairly rudimentary mobile phones available to teenagers—I am relying on some directions hastily written on a scrap of paper. I find ‘Cheshire Street’ a relatively sleepy side street off Brick lane and amble down it, hunting for ‘Beyond Retro’. The feeling of that first entry into Beyond Retro was one of wonder, the cavernous former dairy filled with vintage clothes from different eras. On that first visit, somewhat intimidated by the sheer volume of clothes on offer, I bought myself a blouse and a scarf, and left. But, this was the start of something which changed my relationship with clothing and how I dressed, my first real foray into vintage clothing beyond low price purchases of belts, handbags and jewellery in local charity shops.

Soon after I set up an ebay account, tantalised by the prospect of not only buying vintage clothes in person, but online too— and buying things from as far afield as America. The internet opened up considerable opportunities for the purchase of vintage fashion and as Heike Jenss has argued, it was the rise of the internet and the increasing popularity of e-commerce sites like ebay and etsy, during the late 1990s and early 2000s which helped cement the popularity of vintage as a

‘wide-ranging trend and aesthetic phenomenon.’¹³ Indeed, my own shift towards a sartorial identity built on vintage clothes coincided in large parts with the rise of vintage as a fashionable alternative to the mainstream.

Almost instantly, largely because of the low price of the garments I was buying, vintage formed the central part of my wardrobe. Over the following fifteen years I have had, probably thousands, of vintage garments pass through my hands; from ruined 1920s cocktail dresses, the chiffon worn so thin they disintegrated in my hands, to immaculate unworn 1950s cotton day dresses that still had their paper swing tickets attached. Importantly, considering the scope of this book, my everyday wardrobe is a vintage one and on a daily basis it is rare that my outfit is comprised of anything less than fifty percent old.

There are many reasons why people may choose to wear vintage. For some wearing vintage clothes is about creating an intimate physical connection with the past and many vintage wearers seek to re-create total period accurate looks. However, for others vintage garments are simply the ingredients for creating an interesting look and certainly this is my experience. Other factors for choosing vintage garments include fabric, fit, design, quality of manufacture or perceived ‘uniqueness.’ However, vintage clothing, particularly more recently produced vintage, has an oxymoronic uniqueness. Many vintage garments, particularly those that might be considered ‘everyday’, would have originally been mass-produced.

Initially when I began buying vintage my driving reason for choosing vintage clothes over contemporary ones related to their fit. I am petite with narrow shoulders, a small waist and comparatively large hips. My body shape simply does not suit most contemporary clothing, so it was a revelation, when buying vintage, to find clothes that truly fitted my body. As time progressed my choice to buy vintage over new also became rooted in sustainable consumption, spurred on by working in fashion retail and seeing the poor quality of many new garments produced by the companies I worked for. Increasingly I recognised that in order to be sustainable I had to follow an approach advocated by Alison Gill and Abby Mellick Lopes that sustainable consumption is ‘more about making new relationships than making new things.’¹⁴

The popularity of vintage as a fashionable alternative to buying new is however intimately tied up with the fast fashion industry. Our attitudes to clothing and their value has altered dramatically over the past 100 years because of the acceleration of fashion production against a backdrop of falling prices for clothing. A 2017 report by the Ellen MacArthur foundation illustrated the overproduction and consumption of clothes and decline in their utilisation. Worldwide, clothing utilisation — the average number of times a garment is worn before it ceases to be used — decreased by 36% between 2000 and 2015. Globally, customers miss out on \$460 billion of value each year by throwing away clothes that they could continue to wear, and some garments are estimated to be discarded after just seven to ten wears.¹⁵

This acceleration of fashion production and the proliferation of new clothes consequently means that people are more likely to quickly dispose of their clothes, yet equally these clothes are less likely to be 'worn out' and can be discovered anew by someone later. Because of the acceleration of fashion production, vintage clothing, particularly that produced from the 1970s onwards, can often be found in its original, or very near to original form with little sign of alteration or repair, arguably also showing less of an imprint of its previous owner/s. Collecting the stories of worn clothing from the Twentieth century can be challenging, because the intimate signs of wear are less obvious.

In 1980 Madeline Ginsburg wrote eloquently on historical garments and the second-hand trade, her research demonstrating that continual wear, alterations and long-term use were as common in luxury garments as everyday ones. Ginsburg came to understand these stories of wear and re-use through careful material culture analysis of surviving garments.¹⁶ Yet ideas of wear, re-wear and the potential long-term usage of garments by different people is less often considered with twentieth century garments. Not only because clothing became a less valuable commodity, but also owing to the fact that signs of wear, alteration and re-use are not so evident unless that information is provided. Indeed, as Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe suggest 'many conventional accounts of consumption [...] see either the act of purchase or the point of production as the key defining moment in a commodity's biography.'¹⁷ It is vital, where possible, that we consider the various lives garments have lived. Looking beyond initial purchase and to further re-purchases as second-hand or vintage provides not only information about garments themselves, but wider patterns of

consumption. As Gregson and Crewe indicate 'power and value can be imbued in commodities long after the original production has ceased, through cycles of use, transformation and reuse.' Value, they argue 'is rarely (if ever) an inherent property of objects, but rather a judgement made about them by consumers and traders.'¹⁸

This is certainly true for vintage garments, the value of which goes through cycles, much like any other kind of 'antique' — I mean this both in a monetary sense and a more abstract sense. Some garments for example, have dropped in value as it has increasingly been recognised that the depiction of non-white figures on them represents potentially harmful racial stereotypes. On the other hand, the increasing availability of searchable digital magazine archives, means it is possible to easily date garments accurately, and sell them alongside their original advertisements. This layered provenance consequently adding to their value.

Many hands

I am aware that often by the time I wear my vintage pieces they have passed through many hands, worn, perhaps altered, their contexts different each time. Each owner and wearer adds their own layer of meaning to garments, but also physically alters the garment itself. However gently worn, every wear will ultimately contribute to a garment's degradation. Clothes are very rarely ever frozen in time, nor remain as they once originally were. Garments may be obviously altered, often for reasons of fashion, hemlines shortened or sleeves removed for example. Their alterations may also be seen more in marks left behind, what Gregson and Crewe refer to as the 'trace/s of habitation', the sweat stains or food spills which, when not cleaned immediately, will seep into the fibres of the garment, and often discolour them in a way that washing cannot totally remove.¹⁹ However, clothes are affected by actions beyond wear. Cleaning, sunlight and storage can all affect garments materially. Washing for example may cause the fabric of some garments to change, perhaps becoming softer, and particularly if made from synthetic fibres, the garment may lose its original shape.

Getting dressed is a sensorial, embodied experience. As Sophie Woodward suggests, 'clothing is imbued with meaning not only through how it appears, but also through how it feels, smells and sounds.'²⁰ I argue that this experience is enhanced when wearing vintage. One is aware of not only their own body, but the other bodies that have also previously experienced these garments. This specific sensory experience is particularly related to smell, as sometimes a previous owners smell will be re-activated when an older garment is worn. As Gregson and Crewe suggest clothing is 'an extension of our own corporeality. It becomes us; we personalize it and possess it through our own leakiness [...] Corporeal presence then, the personalization and possession which remains trapped in the cloth, is critical to the exchange and consumption of second-hand clothing.'²¹

Sampson has suggested that 'there is something in the bodily nature of the garment, perhaps its 'skin-like' quality [...] that allows it to serve as a gateway, vessel, or locus for recollection.'²² For me, with a preference for tightly fitted clothes, this second-skin nature of clothing is more enhanced. The ghostly traces of previous owners are more likely to be found, simply because the garments sit so close to the skin. Vintage clothes make you confront both your own body and the past bodies that have worn them. This is particularly noticeable in those garments which, without alteration, fit like a glove and lead you to wonder about the 'other' body which once existed and was an almost an identical shape to your own.

Object stories

My clothes can be broadly divided into three categories: wardrobe, collection and stock. These are murky boundaries and pieces will often cross between the three. As a vintage dealer I will often buy garments as stock, only to discover they fit and let them live, at least for a while, in my wardrobe. Equally, thanks to my business once I tire of a vintage piece it will generally migrate and become a piece of stock, destined to be sold onto another vintage wearer. Despite this opportunity, there are many garments in my wardrobe that are rarely worn, held onto 'just in case'. I am not unusual in this sense, in her 2007 book *Why Women Wear What they Wear*, Woodward indicated that clothes in wardrobes are not always

active, or in-use. 'On average 12.2 per cent of women's wardrobes are inactive' and in some cases this rises to 40 percent. Woodward refers to these garments as frozen or dormant, suggesting that 'both the items of clothing and the former aspect of herself that they embody remain temporally frozen, their potential reactivation projected into an imagined future.'²³ Garments in a wardrobe may belong to the past and the present. Woodward suggests that many women had clothes hanging in their wardrobes for twenty years or more, having a 'long-term relationship' with them.²⁴

Here, I have chosen to study five garments that are all part of my 'active' wardrobe, worn regularly. The garments represent my everyday fashion sense very broadly. I tried to pick a range of garments that covered the full spectrum of my general wardrobe, representing the diversity in garment styles, periods, cost of items and purchasing sites that my wardrobe encompasses. These garments were purchased over a relatively long time period. However, I noted when trying to think through the concept of my 'everyday' wardrobe, that the majority of my most worn garments were purchased in 2017 or 2018. This led me to ask questions about my own sartorial identity— was there a particular reason why at this point I seemed to identify a sense of style that has stuck? More than anything, I think this was reflective of my financial situation, as I had less disposable income to spend on vintage, I became more careful with my purchases, buying only those I was confident I loved.

My 'everyday' wardrobe is largely different to that worn by many others. What others may consider party frocks or outfits for formal occasions form part of my everyday garment rotation. I have happily swept into work in elaborate 1970s maxi dresses with billowing balloon sleeves or 1950s cotton sundresses, puffed out with layers of petticoats. It is important to remember that everyday should not be synonymised with boring, plain or simple. In terms of dress 'everyday' refers to the styles worn on a day-to-day basis, whatever your style may be. The concept of what constitutes the 'everyday' can be difficult to navigate, and not everyone's experience of the everyday is the same. Indeed, Lisa Heinze has suggested that 'everyday life' is an amorphous term.' Citing the work of Ben Highmore she suggested that it is a paradoxical term due to the presence of both the 'ordinary and extraordinary' in everyday life.²⁵

I would argue that a wearing methodology is not only tied up in the physical act of wear, but also the wardrobe experience. Choosing what to wear, touching garments within the wardrobe, can be as important as actually putting these garments on. For this chapter I wore all five selected garments again. An exercise that felt like revisiting old friends. Using questions laid out by Sampson in *Entanglement, Affect and Experience: Walking and Wearing (shoes) as Experimental Research Methodology* I sought to carefully document my experience of wear, considering the full embodied experience.²⁶ Alongside this I completed a standard material culture analysis, using that proposed by Alexandra Kim and Mida in the 'Dress Detective.' In order to understand each garment in as rounded a way as possible.²⁷ Whilst I only wore a small number of garments for this exercise, as will be seen, it made me think broadly about my own sense of style and the importance of both physical and emotional 'feel' of garments.

Simon Massey wholesale couture suit jacket. Black wool with black velvet accents, c 1952.

Purchased on ebay for £24, 2019.

(figure 1 around here)

For the past ten years I have extensively researched the London wholesale couture trade, a sector recognised as creating garments that were heavily influenced by Parisian designs, yet adapted to meet ready-to-wear manufacturing techniques in Britain. This jacket was produced by wholesale couture firm Simon Massey, established by Harry Massey c 1943, and is typical of the firms' early 1950s output. Through a material culture analysis, the quality of the garment becomes clear, and it has a surfeit of hand finished details. However, my experience and understanding of wholesale couturiers as producers of high-quality garments more broadly has been enhanced through wear. When putting on this suit jacket the inherent, hush quality of the piece is more evident. The way in which the lining is stitched in place so that it glides over the arm, the shoulder pads that neatly mould to my natural shoulder line and the weights in the hemline ensure it sits correctly. This suit jacket also has a form of its own, canvas padding in the hip area, alongside padded shoulders creates an exaggerated hourglass silhouette, the desirable shape of the period.

Wearing this jacket make me question my own material knowledge of clothes— why do I feel that I can define a garment as being of high ‘quality’ workmanship? Largely this is thanks to experiences as a child with my Grandfather (who had worked in the tailoring trade). Being taught how to speedily whip stitch hems by hand and machine sew using my Great Grandmother’s slow rhythmic Singer treadle sewing machine. Later I trained as a fashion designer and the skills learnt during this degree certainly helped to develop my material knowledge further. Whilst today I rarely complete anything more than a simple repair, these experiences, this knowledge of sewing, and understanding of how garments are made has led me to have a greater appreciation for the complexities of manufacture.

Horrockses Fashions cotton dress and matching bolero, 1948

Purchased from Biddy Stanford (via facebook) for £100, 2013.

(fig 2 around here)

Generally, when I purchase a garment from ebay, like in the Simon Massey jacket, there is limited provenance available. However, some items I have purchased direct from their long-term custodians. One piece is a Horrockses dress, purchased from my friend Biddy Stanford in 2013. The dress was made in 1948 and is covered with an exuberant print designed by Alastair Morton. The dress, as a May 1948 *Vogue* advertisement indicated, could be purchased from Harvey Nichols for £5.7. 8 (and ten coupons). Biddy purchased the dress second-hand, around 1980. She seems to remember that then, considering vintage clothes were still plentiful and relatively cheap, it was quite expensive, costing her around £20- purchased either from Marvellette on the Kings Road, or Cornucopia in Colchester.

This dress has been heavily altered. The front bodice seam particularly shows considerable signs of alteration, with other smaller alterations elsewhere, all in order to make the garment smaller. Most of these alterations have been executed in bright green thread. Whilst these are an attempt to match with the green waves within the print, they are quite obvious inside the dress. The buttons on the back of the dress have been stitched in place with the same vibrant green thread, and it is clear when studying the button placket that

the buttons once were stitched elsewhere. The alterations to the button placement have further decreased the size of the dress, particularly at the waist. There are signs however that some alterations have been executed in order to prolong the life of the dress, the top button has been re-enforced inside with what appears to be webbing. The alterations (primarily executed by Biddy) are key to the biography of this garment. On documenting these repairs, I contacted Biddy. Asking her simply as to whether she had altered this dress. This opened up a dialogue about her perceived value of clothes and how this has changed over time. Biddy stated;

I altered it SO MUCH!! SORRY - in those days I altered absolutely everything! I was obsessed with everything fitting snugly on that waist[...]I was a very cavalier seamstress in those days and viewed all garments as a starting point. [...] I think the cups on the dress were too far apart for my frame so I probably took in the centre seam? These were all my stock alteration tricks to suit my body at the time. I know it seems wicked now but at the time vintage frocks were in plentiful supply [...] Back then I was full of confidence and optimism and honestly thought I would be improving the garment! I have much more respect for clothes now [...] I am very afraid of ruining things.²⁸

Biddy suggested she was unhappy with the alterations she had made, which meant it did not fit properly anyway. This led to the dress being relegated for some years to the dressing up box, until, noticing the label, Biddy contacted me to ask if I might be interested in it.²⁹ Through wear and re-wear garments can be re-contextualised and new layers of meaning added. For Biddy this sundress represented a failure of her own sewing skills. For me, this poor stitching, the fact that it is now in altered condition, is actually part of its appeal. The dress has a multi-layered connection to a dear friend of mine, but also as it has been heavily altered I feel I can wear it with little fear of further damage. This dress is an excellent example of the fact that, as Gregson and Crewe argue, value 'is rarely (if ever) an inherent property of objects, but rather a judgement made about them by consumers and traders.'³⁰

On the body this dress has its problems. Biddy's hand repairs mean that the bust does not quite sit properly, and I find myself continually re-adjusting both it and my bra throughout the day. However, some of the problems of fit one experiences when wearing this dress

have not been caused by Bidy but relate to its original manufacture. The buttons on the back are not the most effective fastening, and a zip would have created a much neater line. Normally I would reject a matching bolero with a sundress, thinking they make a dress look fussy, but with this dress I find myself wearing the bolero with it too, more than anything to cover up the awkward way the buttons bulge through the centre back seam.

Horrockses is unquestionably one of my favourite labels, and much of my summer wardrobe comprises of dresses by the brand. Indeed, Horrockses garments are amongst the most desirable on the vintage market today. Part of the reason for their enduring popularity with vintage wearers is because they wear so well, often their prints are still vibrant and the garments can easily be washed and cared for. This dress is however in some ways a poor example by the brand, produced when material shortages were still hampering the fashion and textiles trades, its workmanship is symptomatic of the lack of resources available to many manufacturers in the late 1940s. Alongside the awkward button fastening, the dress lacks the finishing of many other Horrockses I own, the seams are badly frayed throughout and all of the seams would have benefitted from being overlocked.

Alice Edwards dress, cotton with a Calpreta drip-dry sheen finish, 1960

Purchased on ebay for around £50, 2018.

(Figure 3 around here)

Sometimes previous owners may not be known by name but have obviously left their imprint upon a vintage garment. There is a ghost still of the previous owner found in the bones of a favourite summer dress by ready-to-wear firm Alice Edwards, the bones very obviously moulded to the shape of the previous owner through wear. When I wear this dress, her shape is all the more striking because she was blessed with a more ample bosom than I—despite the rest of the dress suggesting her measurements were not dissimilar to my own. In some ways I am grateful for these misshapen bones. As my bust does not fill out the dress, they have remained in this shape, giving the illusion through wear of perhaps a more hourglass silhouette than I am naturally blessed with.

Alice Edwards was established c 1946. The company from the outset specialised in medium-range cheerful printed cotton and nylon dresses. The company was based in London, but manufactured most of their garments in Wales. This dress bears the 'Alice Edwards Italians' label, as promotional literature purports, inspired by the founder Alice's trips to the country. Dresses bearing this label are, like Horrockses, desirable on the vintage market—largely because their silhouettes are still so wearable today. This garment was purchased relatively cheaply however because it needed a new zip. I took this to be professionally repaired and it is striking that no discernible evidence of the repair can be seen. A period accurate zip was used, and the zip has been stitched seemingly along the same stitch lines as the original. Other than this necessary repair, the dress when I bought it was in remarkably good condition. It is evident when studying this dress that its manufacture, despite being a fairly low-price dress when new (a version of this dress with short sleeves retailed at 99/6), was of very high quality. The bodice is fully lined, there are generous seam allowances throughout, and each seam has been carefully finished to ensure it does not fray. The vibrancy of the cotton is notable too, when looking inside the dress it is clear to see that it has not faded. It is challenging to do a like for like comparison, as this dress and the Horrockses discussed previously were made under very different circumstances, however overall this dress is finished to a much higher standard.

Woodward has suggested that 'within the wardrobe, the outfits which embody bad memories or were a failure are thrown away.'³¹ Yet, this is not the case for this dress, despite being worn multiple times over the summer of 2019 amidst a terrible relationship break-up in some ways it seems to have had the opposite effect. Worn at some of my lowest moments, the dress, with its tightly fitted waist, full skirt, sweetheart neckline and bold cheerful print is a stereotypically 'me' garment. In many ways I think it was so heavily worn in the summer of 2019 as an attempt to make me feel a little better about the challenging situation I found myself in. This dress indicates the power I see in clothes. On wearing again, I am still reminded of these bad memories, but also, ultimately this dress makes me feel good about myself. I wonder whether, as the previous owner is still ghostly present in the bones of the dress, am I somehow taking possession of her energy when I wear it?

Sportaville blouse and short co-ordinate set in cotton, c 1956

Purchased from Frock & Roll Reading (via Instagram) for £25, 2017.

(Figure 4 around here)

An alert from instagram pings on my phone as someone has tagged me in a post. I swipe to unlock my phone and see an instagram post for a vintage 1950s two-piece outfit by British brand Sportaville consisting of shorts and matching blouse. The price is low (owing to fairly poor condition) and the size is right, so I comment, professing my interest. This little outfit despite its damage quickly becomes a wardrobe favourite.

Shorts and blouse co-ordinate sets were a popular part of Sportaville's design output in the late 50s and early 60s, however it is the printed fabric of this set which establishes its significance. This angel fish pattern was designed by noted Hawaiian textile designer Alfred Shaheen. However, unlike most Shaheen textiles this set is unsigned. A version of this print appeared in a 1956 advertisement in the trade journal *the Ambassador*, and it seems likely that this design was produced under license in Britain for Oriana fabrics. Despite the poor condition of this set, the fact the print was designed by Shaheen means that it is highly desirable to vintage collectors and consequently can be seen as a lucky find.

Since purchasing this set in 2017, it has been worn each summer despite its condition. When I purchased the set it had colour run across the shorts, seemingly from the zip, leaving rusty coloured marks. The shorts showed signs of stress through the seams, where they were likely a little too tight for a previous owner. My wear of this set, particularly the shorts, has further contributed to their degradation. The already stressed waistband damaged considerably thanks to my seasonal bouts of hayfever. The button has been hastily stitched back on multiple times, and I note that on wearing it definitely needs securing again. The buttonhole too is out of shape, and I wonder whether the button now sewn on is original. I note here the transformations that the shorts in particular have undergone because of me, but wearing this outfit again in 2022 I have to question if the shorts may slip from active to dormant wardrobe. When worn, I feel self-consciously aware of how short they are and that my normally hidden intimate collection of tattoos (which I have added to in the past year) are quite visibly on display. In this instance my

changed body, one that I have actively changed through choice, has changed my relationship to my clothes.

Jean Varon balloon sleeve blouse, c 1973

Purchased from pret-a-vintage pop-up off Brick Lane for around £75, 2018.

(Figure 5 around here)

My preferred era of vintage clothing is primarily late 1940s to early 1960s, although I do quite often also wear 1970s pieces. One such garment is a red cotton dot print Jean Varon blouse with statement balloon sleeves. The blouse has a tie neckline and fastens at the front with plastic buttons. This blouse is notably missing its Jean Varon label. However, both I and the dealer I purchased this from knew what it was. This blouse quickly became such a loved part of my wardrobe that I set up an ebay saved search in the hope of finding another similar one. Eventually I managed to find the same blouse in black. This, unlike my red version, is labelled. The label is large and not fully tacked into place. On wearing the black version it is clear that the label of the red was likely removed because it was large and uncomfortable.

Whilst the red blouse is still perfectly wearable, it is notable that the manufacturing of this piece is not as high quality as many of my 1950s pieces. There are small seam allowances throughout and one side seam has frayed badly, roughly stitched together with golden thread. There is also evidence of other minor alterations. The blouse, as a small knot of thread on either side indicates, once had belt loops, but it looks as if they were hastily chopped off at some point prior to my ownership of the blouse. Despite the lack of belt loops, the slight wear to the polka dots around the waist indicates the continued wear of a belt.

The blouse is one that I consider to be extremely versatile, and I have probably worn it more times than any other garment selected as part of this research. However, this piece is one that is not tied up with particular memories. It is, for me, a wardrobe staple— a go to garment when I need something that makes a statement, but equally it is easy to wear. A

rare garment in my wardrobe, which is genuinely suited to wearing in winter (it is roomy enough that I can easily wear a thermal layer underneath.) This garment can however prove frustrating, as it does not photograph well. Static on a human form, the exaggerated balloon sleeves tend to droop, the overall silhouette for me reminiscent of a wilting flower. Yet, the blouse comes to life when in movement, the statement sleeves unquestionably taking up space. It is a blouse, when worn, that makes me feel confident, it is a fantastic blouse to present in, the sleeves exaggerating my own movements as I gesticulate.

Vintage clothing has a unique power and as Jenss suggests;

Due to the intimate relationship between clothing and the body, the wearing of old clothes generates an instant temporary exchange between the current wearer and the material past, between the body in the present and body history. There is likely no other object in material culture through which this kind of immediacy and at the same time temporal distance between present and past can be felt in a more intimate and immediate way.³²

In picking just a small selection of garments and wearing them I noted that my sartorial style was often about standing out and taking up space. I have always had a preference for wearing bright colours, but it was only when thinking carefully about the physical act of wearing that I recognised my clothing choices were heavily determined on the visual impact they make, and specifically creating exaggerated silhouettes. This preference is driven by shyness, and in many ways an awareness that, the larger than life statements my clothes make, mean that in a social situation they can act as a conversation starter.

It was striking when completing this exercise that, other than the dress purchased from Biddy, I knew nothing of the previous owners of my garments. Indeed, this is the case for almost all of my everyday wardrobe— in part this is symptomatic of where I have purchased these pieces— at vintage fairs, through ebay or in charity shops largely. However, if I turn to consider the more spectacular dresses I own, the evening gowns and wedding dresses— they often come with rich stories of their past lives in the form of attached notes and even photographs. The stories of everyday garments, precisely because of their everyday-ness are unlikely to be kept, unless part

of broader narrative relating to someone's sense of style, yet can tell rich stories about clothes themselves and the bodies that once inhabited them.

The act of wearing, as Woodward suggests, is a kind of 'performance of the self.'³³ It must be seen that our clothing choices are about relationships with our own bodies, with others and how we position ourselves within the world. Consequently, in performing this exercise I learnt not just about garments, but something about myself. That my, like most other people's clothing choices, are anchored on 'feel' both physically and emotionally. Clothes are ultimately powerful and can affect us in many ways, putting on a garment, particularly for the first time can be a special experience. For me, this pleasure comes in finding a garment that fits perfectly, with no need for alterations. I find the desire to twirl, no matter whether the garment is suitable for twirling or not, irresistible. There was also a sense of privilege in completing this exercise. My wardrobe is both past and present, but not just because I wear vintage, moreover because my body shape has remained relatively stable for all of my adult life.

This chapter has illustrated the potential benefits of wearing as a methodology, however it can be challenging to articulate the feeling of wear in a meaningful way. Here I discuss vintage clothes, but equally the methodology presented here could be applied effectively to contemporary clothing. As clothing utilisation has decreased, stories of wear are less obvious in garments themselves and more must be asked of the wearer. Stories of wear are not just about the garments themselves either but can be a way of constructing biographies and auto-biographies. Collecting stories of wear offers potential benefits for understanding consumption practices alongside future conversation, storage and display of garments too.

¹ Ellen Sampson, 'Entanglement, affect and experience: Walking and wearing (shoes) as experimental research methodology', *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 5.1 (2018), 64.

² Ibid, 66.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Below are some of the key academic texts that have dealt with vintage fashion and style since the late 1980s:

Tracy Diane Cassidy and Hannah Rose Bennett, 'The Rise of Vintage and the Vintage Consumer', *Fashion Practice* 4.2 (2012): 239–62.

Marilyn DeLong, Barbara Heinemann and Kathryn Reiley, 'Hooked on Vintage!', *Fashion Theory* 9.1 (2005): 23–42.

Nancy L Fischer, 'Vintage, the first 40 Years. *Culture Unbound*, 7 (2015): 45-66.

Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

Samantha Holland, *Modern Vintage Homes and Leisure Lives: Ghosts & Glamour* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Heike Jenss, 'Dressed in History: Retro Styles and the Construction of Authenticity in Youth Culture', *Fashion Theory* 8.4 (2004): 387-40.

Jenss, *Fashioning Memory: Vintage Style and Youth Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Jennifer Le Zotte, *From Goodwill to Grunge: A History of Secondhand Styles and Alternative Economies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

Maria Mackinney-Valentin, *Fashioning Identity Status Ambivalence in Contemporary Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

Angela McRobbie ed. *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses* (London: Routledge, 1989).

Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark, *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second Hand Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

Daniella Ryding, Claudia E. Henninger and Marta Blazquez Cano eds. *Vintage Luxury Fashion: Exploring the Rise of the Secondhand Clothing Trade* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Raphael Samuel, 'Retrofitting' and 'Retrochic' in *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994): 51-118.

⁵ Sampson, 2018. See also: Sampson, *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear* (Bloomsbury: London, 2020).

⁶ Sampson, 2018, 58.

⁷ Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis and Stacy Holman Jones, 'Autoethnography' in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, Jörg Matthes ed. (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017) available at:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011>

⁸ Sampson, 2018, 72.

⁹ Hilary Davidson, 'The Embodied Turn: Making and Remaking Dress as an Academic Practice', *Fashion Theory*, 23.3 (2019), 330.

¹⁰See: Philip Sykas, 'Caring or Wearing?', *Museums Journal* 87.3 (1987): 155-157.

There are rare occasions when the wear of certain museum artefacts can be deemed appropriate. For example, as part of wider attempts to de-colonise museums, it can be appropriate for those from the original communities who created them, to wear objects held in museum collections in order to connect with their heritage.

¹¹ Ingrid Mida, 'Animating the Body in Museum Exhibitions of Fashion and Dress', *Dress*, 41.1 (2015), 43.

¹² Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 10.

¹³ Jenss, 2015, 30.

¹⁴ Alison Gill & Abby Mellick Lopes, 'On Wearing: A Critical Framework for Valuing Design's Already Made', *Design and Culture*, 3.3 (2011): 307-327.

¹⁵ Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future* (2017, <http://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications>).

¹⁶ Madeleine Ginsburg, 'Rags to Riches: The Second-Hand Clothing Trade 1700–1978', *Costume*, 14 (1980): 121–35

¹⁷ Gregson and Crewe, 2003, 111.

¹⁸ Ibid, 172.

¹⁹ Ibid, 155.

²⁰ Sophie Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear* (Oxford: Berg, 2007) 55.

²¹ Gregson and Crewe, 171.

²² Sampson, 2018, 58.

²³ Woodward, 2007, 51.

²⁴ Ibid, 65.

²⁵ Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 16. Cited in: Lisa Heinze, 'Wardrobe Stories: Sustainability and the Everyday Aesthetics of Fashion Consumption', *Continuum*, 35.6 (2021): 853-869

²⁶ Sampson, 2018, 68

²⁷ Alexandra Kim and Ingrid Mida, *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion* (Bloomsbury: London, 2015).

²⁸ Biddy Stanford in conversation, May 2022.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gregson and Crewe, 2003, 112.

³¹ Woodward, 2007, 62.

³² Jenss, 2015, 108.

³³ Woodward, 2007, 59.