13

"Ole Rag 'n' Lumber"

Intergenerational, Gendered, and Classed Relationships with Clothing from Rag 'n' Bone to Depop

Liza Betts

This essay explores intergenerational, gendered, and classed relationships with dress, clothing, and dressing practices through a combination of anecdotal narrative, material culture analysis, oral history, and critical analysis. It presents a journey through four generations of women in the same family from East London, from a twentieth-century "rag-and-bone" merchant to a contemporary teen using virtual resale clothing platforms such as Depop.

The narratives are deeply personal; they contextualize individual items of clothing while revealing wider histories of gendered class formations, lived experience, and the fluid manifestations of class consciousness. Audre Lorde comments on the transformative power of exploring the self and the experiences we have been subjected to:

> As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings, and the honest exploration of them, become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action.
>
> [1984] 2007: 26

Through explicit subject positioning, it is hoped that this writing may give voice to the invisible and will therefore change the perception and understanding of a particular set of lived class experiences. Importantly, the narratives make visible implicit moments of contestation (Lefebvre 1968) that exist in engagement with dress and fashion, as well as the practices of dressing politicized bodies and how such moments, often imperceptible, can and often do take place against the backdrop of the mother–daughter relationship, an idea that has been explored in previous chapters of this book, including those by Darnell Jamal-Lisby and Kimberly Lamm.

The work is written as an example of a "patchwork text" (Scoggins and Winter 1999); it incorporates anecdotal narrative as well as critical analysis of class experiences. Each of the four narratives can be read as a separate essay but when patched together the sections form a personally informed and poignant overview of the development of class experience in London for women (in particular, mothers) across the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first. This approach "brings to the fore the political issues embedded in writing styles" and is seen "as a tool for the study of those that are multiply marginalized" (Ilmonen 2019: 13).

The four generations examined are the author's paternal grandmother, Eliza, the author's mother, Sheila, the author, Liza, and the author's daughter, Maia. The narratives begin in the poverty-stricken immediate post-war period in the UK and end with contemporary teenage engagement with reuse and online recycled clothing platforms. They contain analysis of transient identity formations that emerge as a result of the engagement with material culture and are embedded in an imagined past, saturated in a sensory "present," but simultaneously speak to an idealized future.

A mixed-method approach is used, combining oral histories that document the direct experiences of three of the four narratives. Ethnographic research has been employed in the form of extended qualitative interviews. It is suggested that the type of narrative and lived experience under examination rarely features in academic writing in the way presented here, via the lens of acknowledged subjective forces and informed by interwoven lived experience. As Nathan Connolly comments,

> the closer you get to the bottom the more likely you will find marginalized communities and social exclusion and the less likely you are to find writing that speaks of these lives written by the writers who live it.
>
> 2017: 64

Eliza

Eliza Betts was my paternal grandmother—a woman who died before I was born but who has been a constant presence throughout my life. Eliza was born in 1915 into poverty in East London; she married young and had had eight children before she was 31.

In the mid-to-late 1940s, one of Eliza's jobs was rag-and-bone merchant. Rag-and-bone merchants were collectors of old clothes or textiles, and historically, old bones, which were resold to make glue.

Against the backdrop of post-war shortages and clothing rationing in the UK Eliza would walk an area of around 40 streets, collecting used clothing and pieces of cloth or textiles in an old pram. She would return home with the "rags" and would divide them; some would be identified as good enough for resale, and these would be washed and ironed or pressed, predominantly by her children. Some would be identified as useful to clothe the children or herself and they too would be washed and pressed. The items that had been marked out for resale were taken to local, more affluent residential locations and resold. She was well known in the areas in which she resold the textiles as having a good eye for "quality" items that would satisfy the complex sartorial taste systems at play within this particular context of consumption (systems that have always extracted more than just function from the garments circulated). Brooks employs a poignant quote from Adam Smith dated from 1776 in his 2015 book *Clothing Poverty*: "the old clothes which another bestows on him he exchanges for other old clothes that suit him better" (Smith 1776, quoted in Brooks 2015: 77), which speaks to the often-ignored selection practices and concept of sartorial choice or formations of taste employed by consumers of discarded items.

The saying "ole rag 'n' lumber" (meaning old clothes or textiles and lumber, a term encompassing any or all other types of items that might be discarded) is what she would call out as she walked the streets collecting the textiles, and my father has a vivid memory of hearing her call, her voice, traveling, meandering, and winding its way into his school building through open windows while he sat with his friends in class. There was no shame attached to the recognition of her voice and the purpose and meaning it conveyed; all the children in the class were in the same social position and suffering poverty at similar levels. They were experiencing what Paul Dave explains as a "consolidated collective identity" (Dave, quoted in Ashby and Higson 2000: 349), embodying resistance in the form of ambivalence, refusing to entertain middle-class narratives of embarrassment or shame but rather gaining strength and identity through subtle defiance. As Baudrillard comments, "their strength is actual, in the present, it exists in their silence, in the ability to absorb and neutralise, they are superior to any power acting on them" ([1981] 1994: 3).

Eliza's narrative is simultaneously poignant and empowering and can be explored in a number of important ways that speak to the tension that exists within and throughout writing on social class in the UK. The laboring body that

Eliza inhabited has not often been represented in the same way as the heroic industrial working-class male was and still is. Often, constructed histories present female manual or physical work as occurring at unique social, cultural, or political moments—for example, the use of female labor during the First and Second World War. Alternatively, they present much broader theoretical discourses such as feminist perspectives on the developing role of women in society or the exploitative feminized labor of historical and contemporary fashion production; however, the broad nature of these areas of study means individual narratives are often omitted.

With the focus on the heroic male laboring body and its relationship to traditional industrial heritage in the UK, the work of women has been reduced to a supporting role that was/is often confined to the domestic sphere, as Williamson, Beynon, and Rowbotham comment: "only a particular kind of labour is usually focused on. Millions of different jobs that people do all over the place never seem to feature" (2001:101).

In reality, women from the lower classes have always had to engage with hard physical labor—and still do, alongside the men and children. The labor engaged with, despite familiar narratives to the contrary, is diverse, requires a myriad of skills and knowledge, and, importantly, exists in a space beyond the reductive ternary of sex worker, cleaner/servant, or factory worker. The social knowledge employed by Eliza in order to both buy and sell successfully exists within a system outside legitimized or valued knowledge systems, particularly within the context of the late 1940s, a period that predates the fashion for shopping "vintage," a practice much more familiar within contemporary fashion consumption.

After the Second World War the feminizing of the laboring body became problematic within mainstream society and was viewed as a dangerous ingredient in the breakdown of traditional family structures and hierarchies identified by sociological functionalists as imperative for society to operate successfully (Bynder 1969; Murdock 1949; Parsons 1959). Clearly the concern here was for the middle-class female laboring body. There was a conscious desire to re-position that type of female body back within the domestic sphere and identify those types of women once more as inactive, rather than productive, members of society with a decorative function or as embodied evidence of a successful man via conspicuous consumption (Veblen [1899] 1994). Christian Dior's New Look is often pointed to as an example of this dynamic in fashion history.

Eliza's body was not marked out as fashionable, valuable, desirable, or subject to regulation in the same way as other female bodies because of the class position she occupied. As Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody write,

> the painful recognition of otherness marked on the body, felt by working class women, a feeling of less or lacking that had to be managed or whether concealed or revealed demonstrates that working class subjects know exactly how they are positioned.
>
> 2001: 42

Eliza and many other women like her were, and continue to be, subject to narratives of disgust (Lawler 2005a, 2008; Skeggs 2004, 2005) or produced as socially deficient (Haylett 2001). The work Eliza did and the way she used her body to do it is subject to continuing prejudices that deal not least with the notion of hygiene. Her body occupies two distinct realms of physicality often attributed to the working class. In the first realm, working-class bodies are seen as the repositories of middle-class fears; they are often labeled as socially deficient, lacking value, undisciplined, and unhygienic (Lawler 2005a; Skeggs 2004; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). A parallel realm exists, wherein in order to receive any form of acknowledgment or limited forms of respect, experiences such as Eliza's must embody the pain, struggle, and suffering of the authentic and heroic (male) laborer (Lawler 2005b, 2008). To exist in both spaces, as Eliza and many other women did and still do, requires the skill of absorbing the affect associated with the explicit and implicit injuries of class (Sennett and Cobb 1972) and the devaluing of women's role in society.

As a result of Eliza's gender and circumstances, she can be thought of as an example of an individualized working-class self that is denied a visible existence (Casey 2010). Identity, as Skeggs (2005) argues, is not a concept we all have equal access to; for some within society, identity is something imposed upon them by others in order to maintain boundaries and privilege. Those who do not have access to the means by which identity is managed become subject to the power relationships embedded within social knowledge and the implosive violence it produces.

Eliza's identity is inextricably linked to the work she had to do. She was defined and categorized by it; her voice literally spoke to and of it. The gap between who Eliza was and who she was allowed to be is where understandings about the working classes are formed, maintained, and have managed to preserve oppressions that privilege experiential distance. As Skeggs comments, "struggles with personhood have a long history tied to classifications" (2005: 121). Here the struggle exists both internally via common negotiations with the self and externally as social, cultural, political, and economic factors conspire to construct identities on behalf of those denied a self: "self-narration is linked to the idea of character or personhood where only the bourgeoisie are capable of being an individual" (ibid., 124). The middle-class voyeuristic lens through which working class identities are often constructed or articulated routinely misinterprets, misrepresents, or omits altogether great swathes of nuanced class experience, including that of motherhood. Maintaining the self as we negotiate motherhood is a complex and difficult process; individual roles, priorities, and interests will inevitably change as part of an unavoidable morphing from "I" to "we." When this process is experienced by the marginalized, who are part of a system of hierarchy that prohibits some from fully expressing or developing the self, the notion of a compromised narrated self is rendered simultaneously both more meaningful from a middle-class perspective and meaningless from the point of view of the marginalized.

Sheila

Sheila was born in East London in 1939; she was the eldest of three children born to LMF—Little Maggie Frappell—and "Alf," or Alfred. The family were not well off but there was work and a regular income for Alfred in the docks of the East End and Margaret (Maggs) bore and raised her children stoically to understand that family was a concept to be respected, preserved, and maintained against external forces, above all else.

Sheila was / is an intelligent girl/woman; she had ambitions of becoming a police officer. Unfortunately, her family, and her father in particular, forbade this career choice and so Sheila settled for various low-skilled roles in retail, light industry, and admin before becoming a dental nurse. Work, for those of the working classes, often circumnavigates the concepts of "career" or "choice" and becomes much more about what is available, offering a fair salary for a fair day's work, and for women, particularly within the context of the 1960s and 1970s in the UK, what is manageable in relation to whatever domestic responsibilities or children they may have.

Sheila is my mother. We have a very difficult relationship.

The relationship is difficult because we are so very different and yet so very similar. We are born of different times; we have different understandings of what it is to be a woman and a mother, yet in many ways we are one. My mother became a woman against the backdrop of shifting class and gender formations in the UK in the post-war period; the shifts left a residue of internalized conflict to complement the conflicts produced socially and culturally. She exists on the theoretical periphery of feminism but her lived experience is evidence of feminism in action. She has a strong voice that will not be quieted, and she lives life according to her own individual boundaries and moral codes—a feminist, surely! Yet, in many ways she is anti-woman, always a critical commentator, offering judgements, not necessarily support, and holding women to a higher standard than male counterparts, often apportioning blame and shame. She has taught me many things—how to be a woman and why I will not be a woman like her. Yet, I love my mother.

The discussion here focuses on a particular item of clothing that was important to her as a young woman. In the mid-1950s, when she was 17, she and her friend designed and made her a skirt. What is interesting about this object is that it was intended to very clearly mark my mother out as different. The skirt was full, in line with Dior's aesthetic introduced as the previous decade had drawn to a close. It was of a navy-blue, mid-weight wool and had a "grown-on," higher than was usual waistband, with shoulder straps that were attached to the front and back of the skirt—a pinafore of sorts. She wore the skirt a lot, and she holds familiar and warm memories of it still.

The mid-to-late 1940s and early 1950s were a time of change within the class systems and structures of the United Kingdom as a result of the development and increasing popularity of post-war socialism. The working classes had begun to feel valued and legitimized. However, the conservative governments from 1951 to 1964 had reimposed ideas of privilege and hierarchy and subjected the population to them once more; these ideas distorted the evolution of working-class consciousness and became layered upon and within class experience.

The class divisions reinforced in the UK at this time were clear and continued to be focused on a narrow, prescriptive, and easily managed set of markers, such as money, education, or employment. As Savage remarks, "boundaries could be clearly marked through salary and wages in the 50s and 60s, so it was easier to know who you and others were" (2015: 211).

Interestingly, this point in history, in which class markers were being reinforced politically and culturally, is also viewed as a moment where in some contexts, economic symbolism and the obvious display of wealth was becoming less desirable, while the value of authentic "working class-ness" was gaining value and traction. This is often seen through a shift in the focus of representations (Williamson, Beynon and Rowbotham 2001) within theater, popular cinema, and literature that drew on the narratives and interior tragedy of class struggles; for example, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Allan Sillitoe 1958), *Look Back in Anger* (John Osborne 1956), and *A Taste of Honey* (Shelagh Delaney

1958). Class struggle may have been fashionable at this time but clearly, for many still experiencing the daily privations of a harsh working-class existence, those representations were visible articulations of a struggle they were not given the tools to either articulate, embrace, or resist (commissioning and publishing were managed by the middle classes, as remains the case today). As such, they reinforced the experience of class etched into the psyche (Raey 2017) that carried with it the endemic heavy burden of shame (Connolly 2017; Sayer 2005).

My mother's experiences of the self and her awareness of her position and value sit atop the tension described. At a time when the working classes were being told to embrace their experiences, she was eager to step aside from them. For her, bespoke clothing choices were deliberately sought out to position her as respectable and aspirational and to generate the possibility of achievements that would practically, if not theoretically, move her away from the confines of the social class that she felt restricted her.

In order to do this, she needed to mark herself as sartorially different and set a boundary of distinction between herself and others like her. She was attempting to transition from "difference" to "distinction." Difference here is understood via the work of the Marxist scholar Henri Lefebvre as a concept that organizes and categorizes (within groups) and creates hierarchies. Distinction is a stage further than difference; it separates, marks boundaries, and produces a distance that is impossible to traverse (Lefebvre 2005).

Sheila was aware of the power woven into the value system of clothing. She was simultaneously expressing a different type of taste, one that is part of the working-class system of value and cannot be separated from her subjective positioning, and one that was renouncing that same position. She was defying her own existence through sartorial difference; as Baudrillard explains, "defiance comes from that with no name or meaning, it is defiance of existence" ([1981] 1994: 70).

For groups that are often understood through the broad strokes of collective categorization, the right to difference, let alone distinction, is not always available. Lefebvre states that,

> it is not easy to grasp the paradox, which eludes all reductionist thinking, whereby the homogenous covers and contains the fragmented, making room for a strict hierarchization.
>
> 2005: 84

My mother desired and attempted to claim the right to difference through her choice of the skirt. For her, the desire to mark a separation from other members of the working classes was key to her identity. She would not and still will not consider shopping from the vintage/resale/charity/secondhand market; to do so would be to admit a lack of achievement, success, or improvement in social position. Buying new and not relying on others' "castoffs" was a sign of progress and respectability. The desire and ability to buy new, often expensive, bespoke, or rigorously sourced items made the precarious nature of her position or experiences opaque, or so she believed.

Culturally, socially, and financially my mother remains working class. Ironically, her inability to transcend the negative associations she has inscribed to particular forms of consumption re-positions her firmly back in the realm of the working class. As Sartre states,

> by projecting ourselves towards the possibility to escape the contradictions of our existence, we reveal who we are and enter another realm of contradictions, thus at the same time that we surpass our class, our class identity is made manifest.
>
> 1968: 100

It is her awareness of the fine line that balances existence or experiences, how potent certain actions, behaviors, or symbols are or can be within the realms of hierarchized difference, and how easily one can slip and fall to the wrong side of the line—the precarious nature of "being" or owning identity when experienced through working-class experience—that fixes her position and prohibits any form of conceptual if not practical social mobility. The anxiety around such precarity that Sheila feels and how she understands fashion, dress, or clothing to play such a key role in our position on the right or wrong side of the line of difference is a familiar aspect of class experience. My mother, in her uniquely blunt way, educated me about this through her own anxiety and inadvertently opened my eyes to the sartorial or identity-forming oppressions faced by girls like me and women like her. For her, there was no viable alternative; for me, there was resistance. Hopefully, as my daughter develops into a woman, resistance evolves into a defiant refusal to accept.

Liza

I was born in East London in 1971, the third child of Bill and Sheila. For as long as I can remember there has been both a disconnect and a connection to my family, my siblings, and my mother. This was the result of a tangible sense of acceptance, belonging and togetherness, and difference, of being "apart" and also "a part" of a group, a family. The notion of family as a means of support and protection was instilled in us by our parents for whom the family unit must/should be preserved and maintained at all costs. This is a necessity for survival and a reflection of the precarity of everyday working-class lived experience.

My connection and disconnection with my mother has a long, and at times painful, history. We are connected through the concept of care; as a younger child I endured a number of years of invasive medical treatment, and my mother steered me and supported me through this. She championed my achievements and fought for me at every turn. But she never understood me. She still does not understand me. Now, I find myself caring for my mother as she ages, and her body begins to yield; I steer her through the days and fight for her to have the retirement she desires and deserves.

My politics and my mother's general rejection of politics separate us, and yet our experiences of being working-class women and mothers ultimately bind us together. I feel as though my class consciousness has developed in part because of what she is and what she is not, what she has taught me and what I have had to teach myself so that I can understand who I am, and how I am understood and positioned in the society of which I am a part.

The anecdotal narratives drawn upon here speak to both the connection and the separations that exist between us in relation to clothing and fashion, but they exist as a result of the conflict and tension that defines our mother-daughter relationship—a tension that sits at the intersection of identity politics and being.

In my last year of primary school, aged 11, I needed a new coat. The year 1981 was a period of political, cultural, and social conflict within the UK; the country was three years into the first term of the divisive and problematic political reign of Margaret Thatcher. Inflation was at 9 percent and unemployment at 10 percent—the highest it had been for over fifty years. The country was about to go to war with Argentina over the remote Falkland Islands and there were civil and race riots in many major UK cities. In the area of East London where I grew up and within the milieu of youth styles, a particular fashion object became very popular—the oxblood leather box blazer: single breasted with one button fastening, a straight hem, and narrow lapels. This clothing object could be/was employed in a chameleon style by many of the youth cultures of the time. It spoke to a dangerous, subversive aesthetic with a value system different to the mainstream. It was confrontational, rock-and-roll cool, and gender neutral. I wanted one of my own.

My mum refused to buy me one of the jackets.

Instead, she bought me a powder blue, soft leather "safari"-style jacket. It had a zip front, elasticized waist, stand collar, and four slanted zipped pockets. It was different in every stylistic element. The motivation for this decision that was communicated to me was the importance of difference, of standing out, not following the crowd. Why, she asked, did I want to be like everyone else? No, she said, I needed something that would make me visible and mark me as different. Of course, as a shy 11-year-old, I didn't want to stand out or be visible. I wanted to fit in, maintain my invisible status, gain access to the fluid and transient world of "cool" and, importantly, feel as though I belonged. It was only when I reflected on this episode recently that I saw the congruence between my mother's actions, her own sartorial experiences as a teen, and the motivations and the social politics of Thatcher, the mawkish individualism and anti-collectivism of the evolving neoliberal agenda.

Later in the mid-1980s, as a 15-year-old, my sense of self and my confidence had developed. I had embraced the notion of difference, I no longer wanted to be just like everyone else, my interests were developing and evolving away from the local and national mainstream ideas, and I used clothing as a way to communicate this. On one occasion, my friend and I went on a Saturday shopping trip to London's Covent Garden and, as you do with teenage friends, we bought matching pairs of used Levi's jeans from the shop American Classics. There was a nostalgic nod to the 1950s and Americana within popular fashion and music at the time in London, and my friend and I wanted to reference this.

We returned home excited and victorious and planned, as teenagers often do, to wear our matching Levi's to a local club that evening.

My mother was having none of it.

In fact, when I showed my mum what I had bought, her rage and frustration were incandescent. She was so angered she decided to march me back up to the shop in Covent Garden—a 50-minute journey on the London tube. Completely misunderstanding the concept, purpose, and appeal of the shop, she complained that the staff had knowingly deceived a child and sold them used goods and she (to my horror) demanded a refund from the cool and amused cashier.

Within this moment of embarrassment my relationship with my mother fractured. This was at a time where the cultural turn towards individual experience and expression was gaining traction (Byrne 2005), but I was denied my own individual sartorial expression by a woman who had not only told me this was important a few years earlier but who I later came to learn had claimed her own through her style choices. The difference between us, as well as my mother's concept of individuality, was embodied in the threads of the jeans and my mother's working-class shame. I understood, as an angry and disillusioned teen, that style distinctions are not simply a product of class difference (Ashby and Higson 2000) but that within class experience individual aesthetic choices are made that conceptually transcend social position. As Casey comments, there is "no straightforward relationship between consumption and social position" (2010: 231).

What I have come to understand is that, as Forrest explains, "class has an interactive relationship with space" (2017: 39). We all have a relationship with historical space; my mother's relationship with social class is different to mine because the relationships emerged during different historical periods. During the mid-1950s class was seen as a possession to be discarded or rejected in order to achieve the idealized social mobility and distance from the hidden injuries and suffering experienced by many of the working class, including my grandmother. In the mid-1980s, class distinctions were being redrawn as the gap between the haves and the have-nots widened, while propaganda reframed the fable of mobility to convince some it had been achieved—for example, the "right to buy" social housing scheme in the UK. At the same time, particularly in the industrial heartlands of the UK, entire communities and generations were cast adrift. The historical space within which we emerge as social beings, as women, defines us in ways it can take a lifetime to process or understand.

In addition to the relationship with historical time, class has an interactive relationship to the conceptual space of the mind where identities are formed. Henri Lefebvre claims that contestation begins from negation (1968); to contest class position conceptually one has to understand and experience class as a negation. Growing up in Thatcher's Britain of the 1980s and during my time in the film and television industries in the 1990s, I was made well aware of the problematic ways the working class was produced through representations that had little or nothing to do with my own experiences of class, gender, and dressing.

My experience of social class and the conceptual formation of my constantly evolving class identity is the space where my ideas about fashion and dress have emerged. These ideas own my grandmother's struggle, understand yet reject my mother's motivations, and claim a space to empower and value different ways of being (Skeggs 2004) outside legitimized and reductive systems of discrimination and control. This is the experience of being working class that I hope to pass onto my daughters.

Maia

Maia is my daughter. Born fifteen years ago, she changed my life forever. We are close, I think, I hope. In my mind I understand her; we discuss her hopes and dreams for the future, her fears, her anxieties. I support and love her unconditionally. I try to stand in her shoes and understand what life is like now for girls who are growing into women in the digital age. The world has changed significantly and I'm approaching the point where the shifts occur too fast for me to process, but Maia teaches me. I also have another daughter, Mirielle, and I marvel constantly at how the girls can be so different in character and temperament. I have an equally powerful connection and conversations with Miri, but her interests are very different to her sister's.

Maia loves clothes. She asked for a subscription to *Vogue* as a Christmas present aged 12; she understands form, design, and color. She is astute and informed in relation to historical references and contemporary discourses around dress, fashion, and identity. She is developing her own sense of style and refuses to blindly follow the crowd; she is happy to mark herself as different and stand by her convictions.

She has a determined and single-minded streak and from a very early age knew what she did and did not want to wear. She defiantly refused to wear the uniform shoes when she started nursery school—it took the nursery staff more than a week to gently coax her out of the colorful Wellington boots she preferred and into the black Mary Janes. She has at times driven me to distraction as she wrangles with the sensory relationship she has with materials; seams and fabrics had to feel right and be positioned correctly for her body and if they were not, she would refuse to wear the item, often leaving an exasperated and panicked me thinking, "what do I do?"

As she grew older, and her body began to develop, our conflicts centered around what was "appropriate" or not to wear. I found myself face-to-face with the embodied third- and fourth-wave feminist mantra of *choice*. Part of me supported this. I wanted to be able to champion her choices and encourage her desire to express herself in whatever way she wanted to, but I was also terrified. I had to help her understand the rules of the game women are still expected to play—a game we did not choose with rules not of our making. We mourned together the curbs to her expressive freedom that women across the globe find themselves powerless to control.

Maia also wrangles with her class position. She is aware of her own privileges and also of the oppressions she continues to encounter. She understands that both her and my experiences speak to the idea of class in transition (Williamson, Beynon, and Rowbotham 2001) and that working-class identities can be and often are confusing as boundaries become continually blurred (Casey 2010; Connolly 2017). She knows her family history, the stories of the women who preceded her and the spaces they occupied within society, the work they did, and the experiences they were subject to. She understands that familial history plays a part in how class consciousness and class identity develop and evolve. Despite the economic or social advances that have been made, the histories that live within us still play a part in determining where we think we belong. Her mother may be an academic, but she is a working-class academic. She is also very aware of how class inequality is constantly re-made (Haylett 2001) and reframed via the symbolic notion of taste that is frequently applied to fashion, clothing, and dressing practices.

My daughter's relationship with clothes has distilled down into a conscious form of consumption. As Palmer and Clark comment, "Second-hand clothing industries exist worldwide, predicated on excess production of clothing and a market for reusing worn clothes" (Palmer and Clark 2005: 3). A large part of what Maia consumes comes from the resale market: charity shops, "retro" boutiques, and online resale platforms such as Depop and Vinted. Her relationship with secondhand or used clothing is unapologetic. There is no shame, disgust, or denial. She uses the relationship to claim her right to difference (Lefebvre 2005)—a difference formed from the patchwork of experiences that made those who made her who she is. Maia's past, and the pasts of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, are present in her engagement with the items of clothing she purchases. Additionally, the items also hold their own histories of past use, and it is the combination of those histories and her experiential present where she is marked and marks herself as different. Lefebvre states that difference "exists socially only as something perceived, and yet is perceived as such only in relations that are at once reciprocal and extensive. It situates differential elements, derived from particularities and history" (2005: 115). Maia perceives her own difference through an evolving identity formed from the histories of the women outlined in this essay and the histories of the objects she buys.

The jacket to be discussed was purchased online via the Depop app. It is a heavy, dark brown, lightly padded, worn leather bomber jacket. The style resembles an American aviator G-1 jacket, previously known as the M-422A jacket, available to American fighter pilots since the 1940s and popularized in cinematic representations such as 1986's *Top Gun* (directed by Tony Scott).

When asked why she chose to purchase the jacket my daughter explained that it looked practical and warm; she also understood the popular culture references, but for her, it communicated something meaningful about an imagined past of the 1980s or 1990s, a form of anemoia, or nostalgia for a time outside direct experience. She was very pleased with the purchase and when it arrived, she carried out a meticulous process of familiarizing herself with the object, moving it about through her hands and fingers, trying it on, and, importantly for her, smelling it. Macindoe explains that,

> smell is a complex entanglement of the personal and the social. Whilst sensed by an individual body, it is inevitably social: communicated, negotiated, and invested with meaning through social relationships.
>
> 2018: 387

The smell of the jacket and my daughter's embodied response to it became a part of her constantly evolving identity formation. She formulated or breathed in a fictional memory of an-other (Sartre 2007: 230), fabricating an environment and significance from her sensory response to the object and creating a model of a real without an origin. In Baudrillard's terms, she manufactured the hyper-real for her own purposes and satisfaction (Baudrillard [1970] 1998).

This process opened up possibilities of who she might choose or grow to be, and how she would communicate this to others through dress. Sartre claims that the concept of what might be possible allows us to escape the contradictions of our existence (1968). Maia's existence is a contradiction, a tension of aggressive consciousness and oppression played out across her class and gender identity. Within such a fractious context, Lefebvre reasons: how can we not have recourse to the imaginary, the resurgence of the historical past, the evocative fiction of other lives and different things? (2005: 82, 83). In my role as mother, which has developed in response to my identity as daughter and imagined granddaughter, I hope that I might have at least crafted a space or place for her, where to challenge or transgress expected boundaries is normalized so that the privilege of creativity I hoped to impart can emerge (Lefebvre 2005). Hopefully she can feel free to create an identity of her own making, not fixed to rigid class and gender classification, to contest that which is imposed upon her and consciously and strategically claim the right to an empowered difference.

Conclusion

This piece of writing has attempted to draw together four intergenerational narratives to explore the experiences and identities of working-class women in relation to clothing, consumption, and dressing practices. The purpose has been to try and make visible the types of engagement with dress that sit at the margins of what is considered fashionable. Such engagement is explored through a lens that offers a personal connection to each of the narratives and claims an unapologetic position with regard to the subjective understandings and analysis presented.

The experiences and evolution of the working-class women in East London examined here demonstrate a familiar trajectory of social progress yet reinforce the continued oppressive presence and experience of social class as a factor for many within the UK. This work has attempted to present an account of the extremes and nuance of class position and how the systems of class speak to different generations.

The primary research undertaken here is personal and grounded by ethnographic interviews (although Eliza's thoughts and feelings are conspicuous in their absence). The writing speaks to the powerful connections between mothers and daughters and the notion of a utopia often omitted when discussing marginalized or classed experiences. Here, the utopian ideal refers to the threads that connect acceptance through difference, support through struggle, and understanding through sharing; I certainly understand my own mother's positions and motivations much more by sharing and articulating her experiences and negotiations with the internal injuries of both her class and her gender. Each of these utopian threads or concepts speak to the notion of "care" and are critical, now more than ever, as we find ourselves at a time of political, social, and cultural fracture. Perhaps an appropriate conclusion would be for us to look toward marginalized and oppressed groups, familial or not, for solutions, rather than continuing to offer a picture where such groups are presented as the problem to be solved.

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