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## Dressing the World: From Fast Fashion to Secondhand Fashion

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# **Dressing the World:**

## **From Fast Fashion to Secondhand Fashion**

GLOBAL CITIES CAPSTONE

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## **Introduction**

On April 23, 2013, the Rana Plaza garment factory complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed, due to longstanding structural instabilities, killing 1134 workers and injuring more than 2500 (“Bangladesh Factory Collapse Toll Passes 1,000”). A vast number of global fast fashion labels, including United Colors of Benetton, Walmart, Zara and Mango had subcontracted work to numerous workshops housed in this complex. This horrific accident caused a global outcry and companies promised to quickly improve the conditions of laborers who worked for their local subcontractors.

In the initial months and years after the disaster, Bangladesh experienced one of the most effective campaigns to improve labor and safety conditions (Paton). Structural improvements were made to garment factories, labor rights were improved and workers’ wages increased. Most notably, in 2013, the “Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh” was signed by global companies such as Adidas, ESPRIT, Inditex (incl. Zara), H&M, Mango, Primark, and others to further the efforts toward better working conditions for garment workers. However, such seemingly ambitious initiatives have proven ineffective as the positive effects of the 2013 Accord remain limited and actual labor conditions have only minimally improved (Greenhouse).

Unfortunately, even seven years after the Rana Plaza disaster, major casualties continue to characterize the current fashion industry. In December 2019, Rima Khatun, a 20-year old worker was killed by flying rubble after a gas boiler exploded in a garment factory on the outskirts of Dhaka (Paton). Women like Rima Khatun pay with their well-being, or even their lives, to sustain the circulation of cheap fashion on a daily basis while corporations continue to enjoy exorbitant profits, and consumers collect new trendy clothes at an affordable price.

While garment workshops in Bangladesh are responsible for great harm, they are only one of the many exploitative stations in the global fashion supply chain. All around the world, cotton farms, textile mills, shopping malls, and secondhand clothing collectors, to list a few, contribute to the production and sale of global fashion. It is important to also carefully look at one of the more final stations in the life of fast fashion items. After clothes have been discarded, or more concretely, donated to charities in Europe and North America they enter yet another commercial circuit, that is the global secondhand clothes trade. The secondhand clothing exchange stands out as one of the lesser known links in the fashion chain that is deserves more attention and analysis. This hidden afterlife of discarded garments is largely unknown to consumers in the United States and Europe. Because the fashion industry is a large global complex, where one harmful practice leads to another, it is very difficult for consumers to gain overview and insight without doing elaborate research to find out where their clothes come from and how their clothes are able to be so inexpensive. Khatun's story, and the ineffectiveness of the Bangladesh Accord, pose further questions about the unsustainability of contemporary fashion production and consumption practices.

### **Global Fashion: Project Description**

This project contributes to the ongoing critical conversation around the current fashion industry and the resulting secondhand clothing trade. Everyone wears clothes, which means that fashion involves consumers on a global scale. As a clothed individual, it is impossible to be a bystander to the operations of the fashion world. However, because this topic is so complex and multi-layered, it is crucial to focus on concrete spaces that are part of the global fashion industry, analyze how they fit into the larger dynamics, and explain how these spaces are interconnected.

In the following, I present a brief history about what is known as the “fast fashion”. I review the current scholarly literature about the fast fashion and secondhand fashion debate. Most centrally, I will contribute my own research and observations with clothing circuits in multiple globalized locations between 2016 and 2020. The following questions guide my work: Why are cities critical locations in the analysis of the global fashion web? How are the current fashion circuits and institutions socially and environmentally unsustainable? What do alternatives to fast fashion look like (for example, used clothes and sustainable brands)? And lastly, is it possible to do away the secondhand trade entirely or does it have the capacity to manifest itself in positive ways? I aim to answer these questions with the insight and guidance given in fashion literature as well as information that I have gathered through my own research.

Over the past two years, I conducted research while studying abroad in three major global cities: Rabat, Morocco, Dakar, Senegal, and London, England. My research was inspired by my prior work as a volunteer at a local thrift shop in my hometown, Monmouth, Illinois and my work as a barista in an urban shopping mall in my mother’s home city, Stuttgart, Germany. In Monmouth, I was taken aback at the immense loads of clothing which could be thrown away in a small town of under 10,000 people. In Stuttgart, a city of about 600,000, I often watched consumers, from behind my coffee shop counter, as they piled into the mall and walked out with bags filled to the brim, from early in the morning until the mall closed. These experiences provided me with an initial shock at the enormous span of the fast fashion universe which prompted me to study and learn more about fashion circuits in diverse locations. By focusing on Rabat, Dakar, and London and taking further insights from Monmouth and Stuttgart, I gathered relevant data from very different contexts that are all part of the global fashion world.

In each context, I observed a variety of commercial spaces, like malls, open-air secondhand markets and local thrift shops from different perspectives (as a consumer, spectator, employee, volunteer, etc.). Central to my empirical research is the illustration of how different ways of buying, selling, and creating fashion in these cities can be understood as responses and contributions to the global fashion world that move beyond the city and the country that they originate in. At the core of my study are the observations of spaces where people participate in the fast fashion or secondhand clothing exchange as part of their everyday lives. This includes illustrating how people, places, and policies contribute to the life of a garment on an international scale. Based on these observations and resulting reflections, I argue that while elements of the contemporary fashion industry are socially and environmentally unsustainable, structural transformations across supply chains, and methods of distribution, must be made in order to stop the fashion industry's negative impact on people and the planet. In the following, I discuss that because fashion circuits around the globe are tightly interwoven, structural transformations can only have a positive impact if global fashion giants in adopt more sustainable practices, consumers to embrace new attitudes toward shopping, and a slow processes of phasing out secondhand clothing imports in take place over time.

### **Brief Overview: What is “fast fashion”?**

“Fast fashion” emerged in the 1990s at the complex intersection of dynamics, namely globalization, neoliberal economic policies, more efficient and affordable modes of transportation and communication, and an increasing disposable income for teens and young adults. As neoliberal policies opened ever more countries to global production and consumption processes, fashion corporations were able to produce ever cheaper textiles by moving production

to countries like China or Bangladesh, where wages were minimal and workers' rights practically non-existent. Most corporations moved to a business model where they no longer owned or ran factories themselves, and instead sub-contracted their orders to a multitude of small workshops in low wage countries. In these workshops, large numbers of mostly young women labor under often horrific conditions, as mentioned in the introduction illustrate.

These developments have also prompted large global companies, to reduce former bi-annual or seasonal fashion cycles to six week cycles, which guarantees that every time customers enter stores, they are able to find something new (Lutz). The Spanish Inditex group (the world's largest fashion corporation) is at the forefront of this issue running the successful fast fashion labels Zara, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Oysho, and Stradivarius, with Zara being by far the most famous and profitable. Zara was one of the first companies to introduce ever faster fashion cycles and now "delivers new product every two weeks, on average, i.e., 26 times a year, rather than only during the typical, fall, winter, spring and summer seasons" (Weinswig). With this high turnover of seasonal trends, consumers can visit their favorite fast fashion shops multiple times a month to keep up with what is in style. This disassociation with seasons means that clothing is valued more for its trendiness than for its purpose which makes it seem more disposable.

Fast fashion is also the root of great environmental issues, beginning with production where, for example, "The process of making one cotton t-shirt emits about 5 kilograms of carbon dioxide – around the amount produced during a 12-mile car drive. It also uses as much as 1,750 liters of water" (Gerretsen). In regards to the disposal of a garment, similarly shocking statistics reveal further planetary threats. For example, in 2015, 73% of clothing was destined to be landfilled or incinerated (Ellen MacArthur). In 2019, the H&M Group reportedly collected more than 29,005 metric tons of unwanted clothing (Gerretsen). However, the majority of unwanted

clothes are not even recyclable due to the chemical complexity and synthetic nature of widely used cheap materials such as polyester.

Social sustainability issues, caused by fast fashion, include vast amounts of unwanted clothing that ends up in the donation centers. There, it is sorted and some of it is either sold in thrift stores for charity or in stylish vintage boutiques. However, what is widely unknown, is that most donation centers cannot handle the sheer mass of donations they receive meaning most cannot be sold locally and are sorted, sold, and shipped to commercial traders overseas.

In a nutshell, the circulation of fast fashion relies heavily on the “shop til you drop” motto which encourages consumers to buy more and more clothes without thinking much about where their it comes from, how it may affect them once they have purchased it, and where it might go once they are bored with it. In the following section, I provide an analysis of academic and journalistic debates about the history of fast fashion, and contemporary role of fast fashion in the lives of people from around the world.

## **Debating the culture, economy and environmental impact of fast fashion**

Fast fashion, with its ever faster cycles of production and consumption, represents central capitalist dynamics such as the exploitation of workers, the planet, and consumers for the sake of profit maximization. These capitalist objectives have advocated for the replacement of need-based consumption with want-based consumption in wealthy countries over the past thirty years as people buy more clothing than they need.

Current ethical and environmental crises in the fashion industry are rooted in practices which started more than half a century ago. Well into the 1950s and 1960s, ordinary people, bought a winter coat when they needed one and would wear this coat for many years. Such (not



very profitable) consumer practices slowly changed with the emerging consumer society starting in the 1980s and quickly gained tremendous momentum. Since then, many consumers have shifted toward shopping multiple times a month, and buying items that do not serve a long-term purpose. These trends fostered the emergence of popular mass retailers like Primark (founded in 1969), Forever XXI (founded in 1984, recently filed for bankruptcy) or Old Navy (founded in 1994) that offer clothing in the affordable price range. By the 1990s, these and other companies and brands (for example, Zara, H &M, Mango, Aéropostale and many others) started to crowd main shopping miles and malls in cities across the globe, replacing local retailers and boutiques who offered handcrafted goods. Fast fashion stores and brands frequently became successful at the expense of older, now seemingly outdated, and stale department stores or smaller local retailers who still offered locally manufactured textiles and offered services such as hat making and tailored dresses.

These developments transformed shopping from being a necessary errand to an event or all-day experience. New stores offered “branded” goods and presented a constantly changing selections of “hip” clothes that especially appealed to a younger audience, which by the 1990s had ever larger amounts of money at their disposal. The new brands sold a “lifestyle” and cultural images along with their clothes as they introduced unique logos suggesting trendiness and status. Wearing a particular brand increasingly situated these young customers in specific cultural youth contexts where always having the latest and the trendiest outfits was the new social currency. In short, shopping for clothes, especially in excessive amounts, became not only normal, but essential if one wanted to fit in.

In her book *The End of Fashion: How Marketing Changed the Clothing Business Forever*, published in 1999, Journalist Teri Agins examines the emergence of the fast fashion

industry as partly rooted in the changing practices of some of the western world's most prominent designers such as Donna Karen, Christian Dior, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, and Tommy Hilfiger. Savvy marketing plans and mainstream consumer demands gave rise to the mass-marketing of clothes on a global scale, which had never happened before as fashion had previously been something enjoyed only by the rich and admired by the rest. According to Agins: "Fashion's youthquake of the 1960s revolved around the joy of shopping... As more wealthy women got hooked on the more affordable frocks at boutiques, they began to lose interest in collecting expensive couture clothes" (pp. 28). Agins explains that this shift gained momentum once mainstream consumers were no longer interested in looking to Paris for style direction and styled themselves entirely based on their own fashion agenda. In response to this shift, designers developed new lines and strategies with a clear view on what sells and how to best sell more as fast and as frequently as possible.

By the 1980s, customers increasingly preferred comfort and practicality for their everyday wear which paved the way for retailers like Gap and J. Crew who produced simple and comfortable items such as polo shirts that changed very little from season to season. "By the end of the 1980s, most Americans were wedded to jeans, loose knit tops, and Nike shoes, which became the acceptable standard of everyday dress even in offices" (pp. 9). Middle class consumers wanted trendy clothes at an affordable price and in response, designers offered simple designs with ever less complexity in their patterns with the understanding that selling more clothes more frequently would be a lucrative market where the volume of sales promised growing profits.

Ralph Lauren and his fashion company understood the run for specific fashion market shares early on. He not only produced comfortable clothes but marketed these clothes along with

a lifestyle dream through the company's ads and campaigns which promised luxury, leisure, and sophistication through images of country clubs, the world-renowned polo horse, and fancy beach houses. The company suggested to customers that by buying these clothes, they would mysteriously gain access to an upper class world and its fanciful leisure activities. Agins summarizes the success of the Lauren brand: "Founded in 1967, Polo Ralph Lauren had sales of \$1.7 billion in the fiscal year ending April 1999 – translating into more than \$5 billion at retail – turning out apparel for men, women, and children, sheets, towels, furniture, cosmetics, china, crystal, and even designer paint in hues of denim, suede, and thirty-two shades of white" (pp. 83). Many brands followed Ralph Lauren in creating brands with lifestyle promises, for example, Tommy Hilfiger.

The dawn of the neoliberal era, in the 1980s, increasingly broke down borders and trade barriers. In response, fashion companies started to move their business overseas, in the race for profit and ever cheaper production costs, leaving their European and American countries of origin and their unionized or simply higher cost workers. Agins summarizes these transformations: "Beginning in the 1980s, more apparel makers shifted most of their manufacturing from the U.S. to low-cost factories in the Far East, where they were able to provide more quality at an attractive price: good-looking polo shirts and other apparel that were perfectly acceptable to most people – with no sustainable difference between one brand or another" (pp. 12-13). As companies began to offer ever more affordable clothes and provided the popular look people were striving for, quality became an afterthought. The impossibility of quality control spiraled out of control as companies became ever more willing to cut corners in production to lower prices (pp. 30).

In the context of brutal global competition, companies had to neatly carve out market spaces for themselves in the complex global fashion landscape which entailed targeting their products at customers with regard to age groups, class, race, ethnicity, and lifestyle choices. These developments initially emerged in the form of department stores where diverse brands and items of all kinds, and for all age groups, were available for purchase under one roof. “By the 1990s, Chicagoland was bustling with branches of Bloomingdale’s, Nordstrom, Henri Bendel, Lord & Taylor, and an aggressive discounter called Kohl’s” (pp. 164). Stores and brands proliferated in this new era of hyper-consumption. Agins observes: “Chains kept multiplying. By the early 1990s, retail space across the nation had mushroomed at an astonishing pace... There were more than 35,000 malls in operation by 1992, an estimated 18 square feet of retail space for every man, woman, and child in America or nearly triple the number that existed in 1972” (pp. 181). This poses further questions about whether the grandeur and dominance of the shopping mall diverted our attention from important social institutions and investments in public spaces that are not linked to spending money.

In *Shopping Malls and other Sacred Spaces*, published in 2002, Jon Pahl contributes to the fashion conversation from a theological perspective. He argues that malls are not only problematic because they tempt us into spending lots of money, but also because they are misleading in guising themselves as spaces advocating for public life. In the first three chapters, Pahl identifies shopping malls in America as “sacred spaces” because buying a t-shirt has transformed itself into a rejuvenating experience as it is advertised as a way for buyers to seek redemption and self-improvement rather than to simply keep themselves clothed.

Pahl further argues that malls (and other shopping destinations) have become spaces to which consumers obsessively return to for a renewed sense of redemption as the satisfaction

from previous buying wears off very quickly. Pahl observes that, people seek solutions to their problems and expect an elevated sense of happiness from malls, the way one might do in a religious space. Pahl even compares the structure of malls to sacred spaces as they often have skylights and fake plants incorporated into their design to create allusions to nature and salvation. He states: “[Malls] are more than ordinary buildings. They function, in fact, as sacred places of the religion of the market” (Pahl, 65). In further notes, Pahl explains that benign details like this contribute to the misleading promise of shopping malls as “safe” public spaces. He contends this notion by arguing that these promises are as empty as a mall’s sole purpose is to make profits and is therefore only welcoming to a select group of profitable visitors excluding people such as the poor and the homeless (pp. 63). Unlike a true sacred space, Pahl reasons: “All the mall can give us are very finite experiences of consuming whatever commodity happens to strike our current fancy, in exchange for our cash” (pp. 73).

Ultimately, these consumer patterns leave people feeling empty and unsatisfied as they simultaneously deplete and devastate the lives of humans and the planet with their global circuits of exploitation. Pahl also points to the largely invisible costs of fashion by mentioning the production of blue jeans. He explains that commercial cotton farming for jeans requires incredible amounts of water and harsh pesticides, while the dyeing process pollutes the water and soil (Pahl 23-24). Pahl’s proposed solution to this fashion problem is to shop for clothing at local charity shops, which he argues takes away support from companies who use sweatshop labor and significantly reduces negative environmental costs. Finally, he urges readers to reflect on the larger implications of the fashion system and concludes that “understanding the functioning of the fashion system can help us from becoming its slaves” (Pahl 25). By encouraging a more informed attitude toward clothes shopping, Pahl is not only promoting social and environmental

sustainability, but also the well-being of the consumer who falls victim to the empty promises of mass-marketing.

In *The High Price of Materialism*, published in 2002, Tim Kasser presents psychological research illustrating how marketing and materialism actually lead consumers to experience a decline in self-worth, happiness, and positive relationships to others. He suggests that materialism not only enslaves the minds of consumers causing them to buy more and more as their happiness levels decline, but it also punishes the rest of the world. Kasser describes overconsumption as a global crisis. He writes that even with “enough material resources to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate every living individual on Earth” and, “the global capacity to enhance health care, fight major diseases, and considerably clean up the environment,” most of the world’s population lives without the fulfillment of basic survival needs (Kasser, ix). Similar to Pahl’s argument, Kasser rightfully explains that this is because “each one of us, can so readily be converted to the religions of consumerism and materialism... vast numbers of us have been seduced into believing that having more wealth and material possessions is essential to the good life.”

By comparing the empty promise of constant buying of clothes to the short-lived satisfaction provided by fast food, Kasser supports the larger argument that buying more clothes does leaves shoppers feeling upset and lost (pp. 27). Kasser argues that consumers feel empty because what they are buying is actually not at all unique or catering to their personal preferences. With his analysis of marketing slogans and advertising patterns, he contests the popular notion that each shopper can “have it their way” by noting that “ads are designed to sell prepackaged individuals” which quite literally means that it is impossible to strive for originality under a system which relies on mass production and mass consumption (pp. 74). This inability to

foster originality through the consumption of mass-produced objects, leads people to go back to the store for a renewed attempt at cultivating their individuality over and over again. Kasser concludes that by overconsuming people are not only hurting themselves and other people, but they are destroying their home as well: “Humans, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, are consuming resources at a pace that far outweighs Earth’s ability both to renew these resources and absorb the resultant wastes... The ultimate problem implied by these studies is that if we continue to be driven by selfishness and materialism, ecological disaster awaits us” (pp. 92-93). However, issues concerning environmental sustainability only cover a fraction of the overconsumption issue.

In her 2019 bestseller, *Fashionopolis*, Dana Thomas asks pressing questions about the future of fast fashion and argues that it cannot continue to exist in its current form. She sheds light on positive initiatives, fostered by fashion circuits around the world who work tirelessly, through the nodes of fashion production and consumption, to create a more sustainable fashion world. She discusses issues such as organic cotton and indigo farming, “slow” fashion companies who design, manufacture, and sell all in the same place, and fabric recycling operatives such as labels who upcycle old clothing or companies who buy take back their used clothes.

Thomas points to environmental catastrophes such as commercial cotton farming: “Almost one kilogram (2.2 pounds) of hazardous pesticides is required to grow one hectare – or two and a half acres” (Thomas, 2). Thomas also laments the relatively recent trend of obsessive consumption patterns and adds: “Shoppers snap up five times more clothing now than they did in 1980. In 2018, that averaged sixty-eight garments a year. As a whole, the world’s citizens acquire 80 billion apparel items annually” (3). Social sustainability issues are the focus of her

narrative as she raises awareness about offshoring and the eradication of workers' rights and protection: "Up until the late 1970s, the United States produced at least 70 percent of the apparel that Americans purchased. And – thanks to the New Deal – for much of the twentieth century, brands and manufacturers were expected to adhere to strict national labor laws" (4). These insights pose further questions about consequences and global threats caused by fast fashion.

### **Debating social sustainability, secondhand clothes and markets**

Questions about social sustainability are pressing with regard to the contemporary fashion industry. There are concerns about the treatment of textile workers, as addressed in the introduction, and many more along the supply chain. There are further, and often neglected questions, concerning the afterlife of millions of tons of quickly discarded pieces of fast fashion, and those involved in handling and distributing what is known as secondhand, used, or "thrifted" clothing. While donating clothes is a better alternative to throwing them in the garbage, it is problematic because the mass of unwanted clothing overwhelms charity shops like Salvation Army or Goodwill, and therefore is largely sold to commercial merchants who then proceed to sell these clothes mostly in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

This secondhand clothing trade has evolved into a four-billion-dollar business (Brooks, "Preface to the Second Edition," xv). According to Thomas, "in 2017, USAID reported that the East African Community (EAC), an association comprised of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, and South Sudan, imports as much as \$274 million worth of used clothes each year. Kenya alone accepts 100,000 tons annually" (pp. 7). While it is often remarked that this issue attracts "only limited popular and academic attention", this issue has received considerable attention from scholars around the world over the past thirty years (Brooks, "Stretching Global



Production Networks,” 2). In the following, I present texts which concentrate on the many aspects global exchange. Because I concentrate on Rabat (a North African city) and Dakar (a West African city) in my research, many of the following texts focus on Dakar or other similar cities in Africa.

In *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, published in 2012, Elizabeth Cline highlights contemporary global fashion problems, starting with the aftermath of neoliberal policies causing garment production to move to low wage countries and reviewing how this has impacted people across the entire fashion supply chain. Cline explains: “In 1996 the American textile industry employed 624,000 workers. Today, that number has fallen to less than 120,000” (Cline, 50). Cline observes that this issues further led companies to vastly diversify their supply chains allowing for one clothing item to be assembled in multiple countries rather than sourcing materials and manufacturing clothing in concentrated spaces. Cline explains that fast fashion companies “simply spread their supply chains all over the world, taking advantage of cost savings in every country they could. By 2003 Gap Inc., which also owns Banana Republic and Old Navy, was ordering its clothes from more than 1,200 different factories in 42 countries” (pp. 52). This exclusive focus on cost control and profit maximization, resulted in the disappearance of quality control. In turn, garment lifespans continued to shrink which prompted the ever faster consumption and disposal cycle. It is important to note that this decline in quality is caused by sweatshop managers who are pressured to produce more and more of the constantly renewed designs, and in turn force their workers to work ever faster under horrible conditions.

Cline also draws attention to the issue of overconsumption in the United States and its consequences such as vast quantities of textile waste. Cline notes: “every year, Americans throw away 12.7 million tons, or 68 pounds of textiles per person, according to the Environmental

Protection Agency, which also estimates that 1.6 million tons of this waste could be recycled or reused” (pp. 122). Like all other garbage, clothes remain in landfills for decades or even centuries as few materials ever disintegrate under landfill conditions. Cline wonders, whether clothes in donation centers fare any better? Her answer is, not really, because there will never be enough customers willing, or in enough of a need, to buy up the tons of garments that arrive at donation centers. Cline sites an example from a single Salvation Army store, explaining that if cloths did not sell within a month, they were “pulled from their hangers and tossed in bins” collecting up to “18 tons, or 36 bales, of unwanted clothing” in only three days (pp. 126). Once these garments are removed from the sales floor, they are sold to international traders in large quantities, packed into bales and shipped overseas where they undergo further processes until they are sold in vast secondhand clothing markets. Unfortunately, because these bales are filled with much of what did not sell at charity shops in the U.S., the quality of the clothes that reach countries in Africa is often questionable. Many of the donated fast fashion pieces are of poor quality and further deteriorate after being worn and enduring a few wash cycles. Cline explains, “As the quality of clothing Americans buy and donate goes down, the stuff that ends up on Africa’s shores can be quite shoddy” (pp. 136). Cline argues that poor quality secondhand clothes are not in the interest of the importing countries, however, does not elaborate much on the secondhand trading process in Africa.

In her by now classic book, *Salaula*, published in 2000, Karen Tranberg Hansen examines the secondhand trade in Lusaka, Zambia by elaborating on its colonial roots and its contemporary role as a sartorial influence. While she is critical of this institution, deeming it problematic and questionable, she discusses the notable positive impacts it has on local livelihoods by highlighting Zambian sartorial creativity. Hansen draws attention to the role of

secondhand clothing as worthy of examination: “That much of this clothing in recent years has been imported secondhand garments, does not reduce the power of this commodity to mediate modern sensibilities, but has rather accentuated the role it plays in externalizing identity in everyday life” (Hansen, *Salaula* 15). By focusing on secondhand clothing as a contributor to self-representation, which affects how people perceive themselves and how they would like others to perceive them, Hansen argues that secondhand clothing imports have offered Zambians different forms of inspiration when it comes to fashion creation.

In the face of the harsh criticism made in regards to the secondhand trade, Hansen contrasts its efficacy with the damage it causes. In “Helping or Hindering? Controversies around the International Second-Hand Clothing Trade,” an article published in 2004, Hansen offers a variety of perspectives on the issue by demonstrating that there is no concrete way of deciding whether the secondhand trade is positive or negative, as it is a complex and multifaceted issue involving many different players and opinions. However, she also notes that, all creative possibilities considered, it cannot be ignored that the trade is immensely profitable for a select few and that the issue therefore must be looked at critically. Hansen remarks: “Between 1980 and 2001, the worldwide trade grew more than sevenfold (from a value of \$207 million to \$1,498 million)” (Hansen, “Helping or Hindering?,” 3).

In “The Secondhand Clothing Market in Africa and Its Influence on Local Fashions,” an article published in 2014, Hansen gives an illustration of the uniquely positive results of the secondhand trade in Zambia. Hansen observes the creativity in the individual outfits that are put together as a positive result, alongside the emergence of fashionable secondhand boutiques. She describes: “The market contains special stalls, in Zambia called ‘boutiques,’ selling pre-selected items, coordinated to form matched outfits that are stylish. The ‘boutiques’ tend to be operated

by young men who have a keen eye for fashion. Once traders open their secondhand clothing bales, these young men descend on them, ‘picking’ garments on the spot” (Hansen, “The Secondhand Clothing Market in Africa”). Hansen remarks that the import of secondhand clothes allows Zambians to position themselves within the global fashion landscape: “Depending on its location in class and regional terms and on gender and age, people in Zambia attribute meanings about freedom from wants and normative constraints into secondhand clothing consumption and in so doing, they comment on their own position in a global world...Consumers in Zambia are local arbiters of stylistic innovations that are contributing to the breakdown of fashion’s Western hegemony.”

In a 2009 article, “Making Fashion in the City: A Case Study of Tailors and Designers in Dakar, Senegal” Joanna Grabski writes about Dakar, Senegal, where fashion plays an essential role in shaping urban life. Like in Lusaka, secondhand fashion is one of the many contributors to the fashion scenery. Grabski writes that in Dakar, “fashion making is a quintessentially urban phenomenon in that the city offers unparalleled creative and human resources” (Grabski, “Making Fashion in the City,” 216). Among these creative resources is not only the secondhand clothing market, but the popular and well-respected craftsmanship of local tailors who design and create unique custom-made garments quite literally on every street corner. Grabski examines the relationship between these two players in the fashion game and explains that while they are competitors, they also become colleagues as tailors are often asked to mend and hem secondhand finds and are able to derive inspiration from global fashion trends represented in fast fashion garments.

While Grabski is critical of the secondhand trade, she argues that these two fashion circuits can inform and inspire one another in a positive way. With regard to the tailors, Grabski

emphasizes the importance of their traditional designs and originality of these pieces. Grabski further argues that while secondhand clothes may be less expensive, tailored clothing has a strong advantage over secondhand clothing because it is made to fit its wearer perfectly. She writes that, “although new Western-style T-shirts, sports-jerseys, jogging suits, and trousers are desired by some because of their availability, reasonable price, style, and relatively good quality, they have the disadvantage of being mass-produced and not made to measure” (pp. 228). By acknowledging and praising Dakar’s established fashion practices, Grabski reaffirms the arguments made against the excessive and imposing secondhand clothing trade.

In *Art World City*, Grabski writes about how the secondhand trade manifests itself in concrete spaces such as the famous Colobane Market (Grabski, *Art World City*, 148). Later on Grabski describes how local tailors use these resources in ways that allow them to be creative and yield a profit. For example, skilled tailors collect used garments or even secondhand sheets from they produce entirely new garments (pp. 148). Grabski writes that these practices shape the city as one of the top art cities in Africa: “Their visibility, accessibility, and variety underscore the centrality of projects of reinvention to the city’s creative economy” (pp. 149). Grabski concludes that secondhand clothing contributes to the creative energies which make Dakar a vibrant global city full of resources and opportunity.

In “Youth Cosmopolitanism: Clothing, the City and Globalization in Dakar, Senegal,” an article published in 2007, Suzanne Scheld examines imported clothing in Dakar. She highlights the cultural and economic threat posed by an additional competitor in the world of global fashion in Dakar, namely the Chinese imports. Scheld explains that, while many local shoppers prefer European or American used clothes for their better quality, Chinese imports pose an additional

economic threat to local tailors and does not play a cooperative role in the fashion scene the way secondhand imports do.

Scheld distinguishes between the two competitors by providing the definitions of these two types of imports Wolof: “A large part of items sold in Dakar are fëgg jay, a Wolof term meaning ‘shake and sell,’ or secondhand clothing...another large quantity of clothing comes from China and it’s called tekk-tëgg, which means to ‘put on-take off’ in a rapid motion” (Scheld, 240). Shaking and selling comes from the quite literal action of retrieving items from an opened clothing bale, presenting it to customers, and selling it within moments. Scheld writes that “tekk-tëgg,” reflects the short lifespan of low-grade Chinese garments which are prone to falling apart after a couple of wears.

As Scheld explores the economic side of the secondhand exchange, she critically notes that it “lends itself to informal economic practices since most textiles are imported by container or suitcase and are not accurately counted or taxed at the ports or borders. Traders in the municipal markets are taxed, but kin relations often mediate the amounts and how often traders actually pay” (pp. 239). Scheld notes that, while the vast market for this merchandise creates many low-wage jobs of small traders, it remains situated in complex network of minor corruption due to the absence of regulation. Similar to Hansen and Grabski, Scheld acknowledges that secondhand clothing provides rich opportunities for urban youth to style themselves in creative ways and very importantly make statements about their cosmopolitan cultural knowledge and belonging. Scheld remarks that these young trendsetters draw sartorial connections through the intersection of fashion circuits and thereby participate in and contribute to the global fashion scene without even having to leave Dakar.

Kitojo Wetengere offers a more critical perspective in his 2018 article, “Is the Banning of Importation of Second-Hand Clothes and Shoes a Panacea to Industrialization in East Africa?” He writes that the imposing nature of American and European secondhand imports, and low-grade Chinese imports, is partially responsible for the decline and depletion of East African industries. In turn, he proposes the idea of banning secondhand clothing imports to East Africa after initiating a slow process of phasing them out, to avoid leaving people out of work overnight. Wetengere acknowledges that these foreign imports are not the sole reason behind the breakdown of local industries and ultimately concludes that over the years, “undesirable imports of cheap and poor quality from Asian countries reduced local industries’ efficiency and competitiveness... Since the local produce was unable to compete with these products, the only option was to ‘*die a natural death*’. One of the reasons why the local produce was unable to compete was caused by the death of outdated technology. When the local textiles and leather industries were about to die, the influx of secondhand clothing nailed the coffin of their death” (Wetengere, 134). Wetengere portrays local industries as troubled and suffering from lack of investment in up-to-date technology, even though this in itself does not account for their demise. He argues that slowly phasing out the secondhand trade and putting in place reasonable investments in technology would be better long-term solutions as the former provides little to no prospect for local development. Wetengere concludes that this exchange (and the imports of cheap Chinese clothes) only integrates these countries more severely into unequal global textile circuits where they are now situated at the very bottom.

In his 2012 article “Stretching Global Production Networks: The International Second-Hand Clothing Trade,” Andrew Brooks sharply criticizes global fast fashion and secondhand circuits as institutions that promote global inequality and produce extreme poverty. One of

Brooks's central critique is that the masking of the secondhand trade as a "charitable" institution creates a lack of awareness on the side of the clothing donor. He further elaborates on the technical aspects of bale packing and the inherent inequality in the distribution of these bales.

In regards to the clothing donations, Brooks warns that: "Clothing donors in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States do not understand the final market, and the origin is not known by people who consume second-hand clothes in countries such as Mozambique, the Philippines, and Zambia" (Brooks, "Stretching Global Production Networks," 2). Clothing consumers, turned into clothing donors, assume they are giving their clothes away for a good cause, when in fact, because of the vast quantities of donations, most of these clothes quickly enter commercial networks to sell these clothes for profit to traders in Africa, Asia and Latin America. While donating clothes is still better than throwing them away, donors profit from a decluttered closet and clothing distributors profit from the sales of used clothing, consumers in the countries receiving the bales receive overpriced, low-grade clothing.

This is not to say that charities like Salvation Army "mishandle" donations, it simply means that they cannot possibly sell used clothes in such vast quantities and are therefore forced to sell their surplus to commercial traders to avoid dumping them into the garbage. While Salvation Army and other charitable organizations indeed use the funds they receive by selling their excess clothes for their charitable projects, they still contribute to often problematic circuits of the global secondhand clothing trade, especially as this exchange continues to be immensely profitable. Furthermore, according to Brooks, "The trade is especially important in Africa and by volume second-hand clothes are frequently the largest consumer import and accounts for over 50% of the clothing market in many sub-Saharan African countries" (pp. 2)



Authors like Brooks and Cline alert readers about the many destructive aspects of the trade which are often overlooked. Brooks explains that, “the collection, sorting and export of second-hand clothes are positively coded by western governments as these processes act as self-financing recycling systems” (pp. 4). Because of this charitable narrative, “audiences interpret the roles of charities and ‘read’ the second-hand clothing trade in ways that are culturally constructed, but these understandings are disconnected from the reality of a large-scale free-market export trade.” Brooks demonstrates that understanding donation centers in this way is misleading by offering shocking statistics: “The narrative of donating old clothing for local sale to raise funds and help the less-able stimulates donations and is an important part of the imagery and material culture that sustains the socially embedded roles of charities in the GPN; despite only an estimated 30% of second-hand clothing being locally retailed.”

Brooks points out that sealed bales are a dishonest sales tactic because vendors are not able to see what is inside the bale before opening it. Brooks states that in this way, traders are able to get rid of shoddy items as they are mixed in with a few good quality items. Brooks writes that packing lists combine popular and unpopular pieces which enables big traders “to profit from less desirable bulky and unfashionable clothes and accumulate greater total income” (pp. 7). Overall Brooks concludes that, “the trade traces a gradient of inequality between affluent populations who readily consume and dispose of clothing and the poor; for whom opportunities to purchase new clothes are constrained by poverty” (pp. 10). This poses the question whether the secondhand clothing trade should continue to exist or not? While it is widely argued that secondhand imports destroy local industries, this popular notion is countered with the argument and evidence that secondhand clothing imports offer creative outlets to buyers in countries with lower purchasing power.

Regardless, quoting Hansen, Brooks adds that there are “two schools of thought” when it comes to thinking about the secondhand trade as many argue that these imports kill local businesses while others, contend that these imports also offer creative outlets and opportunities for the cosmopolitan youth in many global cities (pp. 5). Ultimately, Brooks insists that this exchange inherently favors the wealthier participants and therefore renders itself discreditable because global secondhand traders make sizable profits, whereas local small-scale traders make only a minimal living. Looking at these chains and circumstances it is very obvious that consumers are not the winners in the fast fashion industry or and the secondhand clothing trade.

## **Fashion Circuits in Global Cities**

Fast-fashion and the resulting secondhand market are complexly interwoven and are best examined in their concrete manifestations at different spaces. I will, in the following sections, provide concrete examples, experiences and observations about the multi-layered global landscape of fast fashion marketing and consumption, and its lesser known second chapter, the secondhand clothing trade. Over the past two years I have worked in and observed elements of this vast global field in five different contexts: a thrift store in a small Midwestern town in the United States, malls and stores in Stuttgart, Germany, in the fast fashion circuits and secondhand markets of Rabat, Morocco, second-hand markets and a designer and fashion studio in Dakar Senegal, and finally in vintage boutiques and markets, as well as a sustainable fabric/fashion company in London, UK.

The first two stops in my journey inspired me to find out more about sustainability questions regarding the fast fashion industry as a complex global network. The three global cities of focus provided me with in-person experiences where I learned about how elements of fast

fashion and the secondhand trade mentioned in the literature above, play out in other contexts. Upon making connections between these five seemingly disconnected places, and their various fashion-related activities, a much larger network of links and material flow becomes clearly visible. In the following sections, I will illustrate how each of these cities is home to different spaces which occupy their own unique positions on the complex global map of fashion production, marketing, wearing, discarding, donating, and reselling of fast fashion. I will further discuss the social sustainability questions posed by these practices with guidance from the analytical debates provided in the definition and history I provided about fast fashion and the secondhand clothing trade, as well as the debates surrounding them.

## **1. Stop: Small Town USA**

### **Monmouth, Illinois: A Midwestern American Charity/Thrift Store**

Throughout my high school and college years, I volunteered at a thrift store in my hometown of Monmouth IL. This store is part of a senior center to which proceeds are given to help pay for bingo nights and annual excursions for local elderly people. As part of my work, I spent many Saturday mornings helping the store manager, Dawn (all of the following names are pseudonyms for the protection of the individual), sort through endless garbage bags and boxes full of donated clothes. My first surprise were the vast quantities of donated clothing in a small town of less than 10,000 people, my second surprise was the spectrum of quality in the donations ranging from completely unworn to tattered rags. Thanks to Dawn, who always tries her best to make use of every donation, most of the clothing was sent to be repurposed somehow. Completely unwearable clothes that did not land in the garbage, were thrown into recycling bags which was later shipped off to make insulation for low-income housing or paper (mostly in

Canada). For a few years, Dawn had an agreement with a trader who shipped excess clothing to countries in Africa as well.

Every Saturday, a designated space on the second floor known as “the corner” was piled almost up to the ceiling with more trash bags filled mostly with clothing, but often many other items such as toy trucks or shower curtains. We sorted the clothing which Dawn then stored by type and size in boxes on the third and fourth floor of the building. This way, she knew where things were and could reach for them when she was in need of specific items, for example, women’s capris during the springtime or Halloween costumes for children. Because the quantity of the sorted donations contains more clothes than could ever be sold in the shop itself, Dawn stays very well connected with organizations in the area and across the United States to bring donations to people for free on a seasonal basis or in times of need. Not only does she have ties to Native American reservations, to whom she often donates clothing and appliances, but she also organizes bags filled with winter coats for kids in the local schools and provides donations of clothing to local families in neighboring towns who have lost their homes in a storm or a fire.

One of my most impressionable experiences at the shop, was when Dawn was asked if she had 500 “thank you” themed greeting cards for a community center to send to veterans. Within two days, Dawn had collected two times this amount from her supplies at the donation center. Any time a community member asks for a large supply of t-shirts supporting a specific national football team or baseball league. Dawn was always able to find hundreds of the requested items in her stock piles on the storage floors. If someone is in need of a couch or a television, Dawn is able to source a donation and have it ready to go within days. In regard to medical supplies, the storage floors have many perfectly functioning wheelchairs and crutches. In the summer of 2017, Dawn had a parking lot hat sale where she laid over two thousand ball

caps in to be sold in one day. She later told me that five hundred of them came solely from one donor's collection.

In many ways, this thrift shop is a very sustainable organization because it promotes the repurposing of used items and gives these items a new life in the same town they were donated in. Many people from the town and beyond, benefit from these initiatives and the shop's high level of organization. However, it is important to note that Dawn is often overwhelmed by the quantity of donations, works many hours of overtime, and suffers from physical health issues because of long hours of standing, heavy lifting, and transporting thousands of garments every day. Most of the people working at the shop are senior volunteers, volunteers organized through community service. Occasionally Dawn receives help from local groups such as fraternity groups from the surrounding colleges or sports teams, but unfortunately, this source of help is also rare and sporadic meaning she does most things on her own.

In terms of the actual sales floor, Dawn is able to turn around sizable profits because people purchase secondhand goods in town. Low-income local families, including immigrants from Mexico, Myanmar and several African countries are frequent buyers these clothes, along with some high school and college students in search of a bargain or an ugly Christmas sweater, and the occasional crafters on the lookout for some cheaper materials to work with than those offered at large craft supply chains. Thrift stores, such as this one, are able to provide just about anything, especially if customers are willing to wait a while for a specific donation. My experience as a volunteer in the thrift store led me to pose increasingly critical questions about fashion marketing and individual consumption patterns. Why did people buy so many clothes? Why do people discard clothes so quickly after they bought them? And why do people buy clothes that they will throw away without ever wearing them?

## **2. Stop: Medium-Sized European City**

### **Stuttgart, Germany: Observing fast fashion as a barista directly neighboring PRIMARK**

Since 2016, I have spent every summer working in a coffee shop/stall in the Milaneo mall in Stuttgart, Germany. Stuttgart is a medium city of about 600,000 people and it is the capital of Baden-Württemberg which makes very different from Monmouth, Illinois. However, I argue that these two seemingly unrelated spaces are connected by their shared engagement in the fast fashion exchange and consequential waste production. The Milaeno opened in the fall of 2014, about a year and a half before I started working there. The coffee shop I worked at is located right next to what was initially the only branch of Primark in the city (a second one opened on the main shopping mile in 2017), a vast Irish fast fashion company that manages to undercut the prices of its competitors like H&M, Zara or Mango. Primark routinely sells t-shirts for as cheap as 3 Euro (about \$2.70) and often puts higher priced items on sale for one eighth of the price after only a few weeks of not being sold.

Primark's super-cheap prices are in part achieved by the total absence of advertising, as Primark lives of personal communication between its customers. Primark also does not have an online shop. They further cut costs by using recurrent patterns for clothes and using surprisingly simple designs that can be made with minimal labor. Year after year, I have noticed that new collections only look slightly different from those of the previous years. By the summer of 2016 the novelty of Primark had not worn off in the slightest since its opening, especially on the weekends when groups of teenagers (or even slightly younger kids) often from the countryside (based on hearing their regional dialects), traveled to Stuttgart and to turn the store upside down and empty their pockets in exchange for colorful polyester and chiffon shirts and dresses.

Primark is known for its large brown shopping bags which customers often walk out carrying three or even four of as they leave the store.

However, teenagers certainly are not the only dedicated consumers of Primark's fast fashion. Mostly younger but also some middle-aged women of what can vaguely be describes as the new multi-ethnic German lower class (including ethnic German, Turkish-German, recent immigrant from Africa, refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, and many others) similarly perform their consumer pilgrimages to Primark. Between the coffee shop and the Primark store there is a playground with many benches which plays a central role in this context because numerous young women "park" their boyfriends, husbands, children or elderly mothers there to await their return an hour or so later with the obligatory stuffed Primark bags. As Pahl mentioned in his argument about malls as safe public spaces where leisure and consumption meet, this playground serves as a "leisure" space in the midst of profitmaking.

As the days progressed, groups of avid consumers or patient waiters made their way over to our coffee shop for coffee, soda, or a sugary snack (crepes and fruit smoothies). After exiting Primark, teenage shoppers, and young women would eagerly show their purchase to those who had patiently (or sometimes not so patiently in the case of some younger children) waited for their return. The women showed on their purchases of 6 Euro blouses and 8 Euro jeans, mixed in with some cute pieces for the kids and or t-shirts for the men. From my perch behind the counter, I could often observe consumers unloading fifteen or more purchases from one excursion. No amount of colorful, cheap clothes, shoes and accessories could ever be enough.

Watching the same scene unfold for hours each day, I wondered whether all these pieces would ever be worn? How often would they be worn? Would some of them rip the third time they were worn or washed? When would people return for more? How long would they keep the

pieces? How would people discard the clothes? These observations made me ever more curious after the production, use and afterlife of fast fashion. My observations from the thrift shop in Monmouth had given me a small-scale idea of what this looked like, which made me eager to learn about fast fashion and secondhand clothing circuits in global cities.

### **3. Stop: Global City in North Africa**

#### **Rabat, Morocco**

Rabat is the capital of Morocco and has about 580,000 residents. Morocco was a French protectorate from 1912 to 1956 and the French influence remains visible in many aspects of Moroccan life. French remains a widely spoken second language in Moroccan cities and institutions continue to illustrate former and current influences and connections to France. Morocco's close proximity to Spain and to Europe allows for constant cultural and economic exchange with European nations and today millions of Moroccans live in France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

I studied in Rabat, Morocco from August to December of 2018, through the AmidEast program located in the upscale residential neighborhood of Agdal while I lived with a host family just a few blocks beyond the walled old city, called the Medina. Traveling between these two spaces every day (often doing the 45 minute walk by foot), the social difference between these quarters became quickly apparent. These differences were visibly represented by the clothes of residents in the different neighborhoods. On the most obvious level, sartorial choices and styles differed along with the relative quality of clothes and the way they were sold in stores and how and where people bought their clothing. In Agdal, people wore western-style outfits



while people around the Medina more commonly wore the tradition Moroccan djellaba (a loose-fitting robe typically worn over other clothing).

Agdal has a rather impressive fast fashion shopping mile (including Stradivarius, Oysho, and Tommy Hilfiger) and not too far away is the Mega Mall which also offers recreational activities such as ice skating and bowling. Yet for the popular masses, like my host family, these stores were far out of financial reach. This, however, does not mean that they are unaware of these stores or the fashion trends they market. Individuals and families short of cash to buy these fashionable items, devise their own strategies to navigate more affordable ways to acquire the clothes they find fashionable and thereby participate in global fashion trends.

### **Morocco Mall in Casablanca**

While I was studying in Rabat, I lived with a host family of four: my host mother Amina, my host father Ali (both in their thirties), and their children Omar, 12, and Yasmine, 8 (at the time). They took me in as one of their own and I quickly felt at home in their apartment near the Medina. Amina worked as a school bus supervisor for a private French school about 30 minutes from the family home and Ali was a guard in the Royal Palace. Together, they work very hard to provide for their children to give them the best education and opportunities possible. It is through Amina's job that her children receive free tuition at the upscale private school.

Among her many duties as a mother, Amina tries to keep her children well dressed in presentable and durable clothing. However, in Rabat, this task is a much bigger challenge than one might expect. Fast fashion shops are common in fancy neighborhoods alongside Starbucks and McDonald's which are considered very fashionable in Rabat, yet these shops are unaffordable to most people in Rabat. There are much more affordable options in the vast

markets of the old city/Medina. In the Medina, everything from floral materials for couch cushions sold by the meter to knock-off Gucci flip flops are available at affordable prices. There are also plenty of low-grade Chinese imports of all sorts, like those mentioned above by Wetengere and Scheld. These imports include plentiful children's outfits with popular Western logos such as Mickey Mouse or yellow minions. However, consumers like Amina are very aware of the quality of these clothes and know that these items do not withstand many washes before they are completely out of shape or lose their prints and colors. While one can bargain and for lower prices in the Medina, the money is wasted when these clothes fall apart after a few wash cycles.

Amina often spoke about wanting to shop at the fast fashion stores in Adgal or marveled at shops like H&M when she saw advertisements through Facebook or on posters around the city. During my first weekend in Rabat, Amina and the family insisted that we take a trip to Casablanca and visit the Morocco Mall. I was very curious to see and experience this large mall and see how it compared to malls in the United States and Germany, but I also wondered what we would do once we arrived and what Amina would actually buy. We walked around for about an hour and admired all the shop windows and the enormous aquarium. Embellishments were all over the interior of the mall, from giant palm trees in the center of the mall to geometric Moroccan designs on the sides of the escalators. The mall was coded to look "Moroccan" and used familiar visual symbols which relates to the structural appeal of malls as "scared spaces" where people are reminded of their values, as stated by Pahl. After taking a few selfies together we decided to go home. We did not buy anything at the mall, but later purchased some snacks at a small stand on the street. Amina was anxious to share her photos on Facebook and with her relatives through WhatsApp once we arrived back in Rabat for the evening.

## **Shopping for Children's Clothes: Thrift Markets in Rabat and Salé**

Soon after the Morocco Mall excursion, Amina invited me to join her on a bargain-hunting trip in and around the Medina. Because of her well-founded biases against Chinese imports Amina was not very successful in the Medina as she took fault with most of the pieces she examined. Even though she occasionally mentioned her dream of being able to shop at the Morocco Mall or upscale shops in Rabat, she continuously reminded me that there were more affordable options available elsewhere. Amina wanted better for her children and was well aware of several large secondhand markets where used clothes mostly from Europe were sold. Once Amina realized that I enjoyed accompanying her on her shopping excursions, and that I was interested in learning more about the circulation of clothes in Rabat, invited me to a trip to the secondhand she Market in Salé, Rabat's lesser known neighboring city.

My first trip to Salé was my first experience at a large secondhand market outside the United States and Germany. Amina advised me to leave my cellphone at home because it would not be wise to keep it on me in what would be a very large crowd of people. We left the house at noon on a Saturday. Ali drove us to the market and then we parted ways when he settled in a coffee shop with groups of other men near the market. Amina and I made our way into dense crowds until we came to a halt at a large table surrounded by women and children. I asked Amina to fill me in on what we were looking or waiting for and she responded by speaking directly into my ear that they would be opening bales filled with jeans for girls between sizes 8 and 10 from H&M within the next 20 minutes or so. It took much longer than 20 minutes, but once the bales were opened, I realized the jeans were all identical, brand new, and still had the price tags attached to them. Once Amina had collected a pair that she liked, we went deeper into the sales area to bargain for a good price with one of the young men in charge of collecting the

cash. After a bit of negotiation, Amina brought the jeans down to a reasonable price and rushed us to the next station.

This process is much more stressful than regular shopping as it involves fighting between customers for single items. The consumers at these markets are almost all women looking for clothing for themselves, their children, or their husbands. The vendors are almost all men. Some women leave their children at booths to reserve spaces for themselves while they look for bargains at another stall. At our second stop, we waited for a trader to open a bale which was announced to contain women's clothes. Because the vendor in the neighboring booth was still distributing items from his bale, we had to wait about an hour so that they would not be selling things at the same time which would take away business from one vendor to another. Once the bale was opened the vendor would lift one piece out of the bale at a time at a rapid pace and toss it in the direction of the woman either shouting the loudest or reaching the farthest for the item. Amina often struggled with other women over items and because there was no time or space to try on clothes, she would either hold up the item or put the waistband of a pair of jeans around her neck to gauge the size quickly before fixing her attention on the vendor again. As the process continued, the pile of unwanted clothing on the table before us grew into a small mountain.

We repeated this process a few times before we made our way back to meet Ali around 5pm. We had collected a total of six items and were exhausted. When we returned to the apartment, Amina washed and hung the laundry so that she would be able to properly store the items in her closet until the time was right for the children to wear them. Only then did I realize that this was the length Amina had to go to in order to find affordable and durable clothing for her children. It is important to note that the central purpose for Amina's visit to thrift market was for her children (with the exception of her professional dress, Amina most always wears the

traditional Moroccan djellaba). After some reflection, it was clear to me that Amina had to not only save an entire afternoon for this activity, but also went through an excessive amount of work to save a few Moroccan dirhams and acquire a few good quality items for her children.

### **Bargain Hunting for a Vintage Instagram Look**

In my second month in Rabat, I was studying at a coffee shop near my host family's apartment when a Moroccan girl around my age approached me, introduced herself as Leyla, and complimented my jeans in perfect English (she also told me that she was a university student at the university in Rabat majoring in English Language Studies). I was wearing a pair of washed out, high-waist women's jeans that I had picked up at my local thrift shop in America for \$1 a few years ago. Of course I could not refrain from saying they were a thrifted find. Upon hearing this, the girl looked at me with a surprised look on her face and exclaimed that thrifting is her biggest passion. By the looks of her outfit, I could tell that her comment was genuine. She was wearing a loose hijab with an oversized button down men's shirt in a Burberry pattern, and 1950s cat-eye sunglasses and high-waist jeans. Her look was much more curated and intentional than mine, and I made sure to return the compliment. Due to the nature of this incredibly serendipitous encounter, we exchanged phone numbers, followed each other on social media platforms, and agreed to get coffee together soon to talk about our mutual passion for secondhand clothing.

A few weeks later, after going back and forth on whether or not it was a good idea to meet up with a complete stranger, Leyla and I decided to meet up for coffee near the coffee shop where we previously had met. As we discussed the problem of fast-fashion, cheap Chinese knock-off pieces, and the incredibly overpriced costs of "vintage" fashion, Leyla offered to take

me along to some of her favorite thrift shops in Salé. Through our excursions, I learned more about the secondhand trade in Morocco and what it means to younger shoppers who are looking to curate certain looks to position themselves not only in their local fashion context, but on global social media.

These thrift shops were completely different from the market I had visited with Amina. The entire operation was located in a large arcade filled with little shops, similar to the Medina, however, rather than selling leather bags or fake Gucci belts, each shop sold a specific genre of secondhand clothing. One boutique sold strictly bomber jackets while another sold vintage boots, like Doc Martens. Many well-known Western brands such as Wrangler, Ralph Lauren, Adidas, Levi's and many more were available for a fraction of their original price. Leyla informed me that if there was ever something particular she was looking for, she would simply ask vendors to keep an eye out for whatever it was she was looking for and quite often she would have the item within a week or two.

This greatly reminded me of my experience with Dawn. She explained to me that vendors would collect second-hand clothing bales by genre or country of origin (similar to those being opened at the thrift market I had attended with Amina) and stock their stores with whatever particular item they were looking to sell. Based on my visits with Leyla, this method worked quite well. During our first visit, Leyla even picked up a green puffer jacket she had specifically asked for during a previous visit. Later on, we found two corduroy jackets of similar make from Wrangler and purchased them for less than the equivalent of \$4. Leyla's objective while shopping at thrift shops is very different from Amina's (Leyla has a higher purchasing power), as it stems from her aim to create fashionable looks using at an affordable price while making a fashion statement and maintaining a modest look.

## **Stop 4: Global City in West Africa**

### **Dakar, Senegal**

Dakar is the capital of Senegal which is home to just under 1.2 million people. It is one of the most important and exciting cities in West Africa and is a hub for artistic, economic, and cultural exchange. In Dakar, I lived in “Sicap Baobab” from March to June of 2019. There I went to school at the Baobab Center and lived with a host family. I visited markets with members of my host family often and also did an internship with a local tailor and fashion designer. During my free time, I visited tailors, second-hand clothing markets, and fabric vendors around my neighborhood. For my project, I visited the Sea Plaza Shopping Mall and attended Dakar Fashion Week to examine fast fashion and high fashion circuits in Dakar. Among the most important spaces which I will talk about in this section is the Colobane Market, one of the most well-known market spaces in Dakar which has received international attention for many years. Dakar is very well-known for its vibrant and unique fashion scene which is comprised of the secondhand trade including everything from clothing to car parts, low-grade Chinese imports from phone cases to wedding gown embellishments, and finally fabric boutiques where people from all walks of life purchase textiles and additional fashion trimmings before visiting local tailors for custom-made garments.

### **Second Hand Clothing Markets: Colobane**

During the first week of my homestay, I mentioned to my host mother Louise, that I was interested in the Colobane market after having heard about it in documentary films and reading about it in books. While Louise was in disbelief that I would want to visit Colobane, a place she

considered dirty and for poor people, she asked her housekeeper, Mariama, to accompany me on a journey to visit the market a Sunday afternoon, a day notorious for little traffic.

Within the week, Mariama and I set out early in the morning to visit the market. The market is centered at a large roundabout and spills over into the neighboring streets where vendors sell from either piles of unloaded bales in the street or from shops designated to one category of clothing such as white shoes or military style jackets. In the curated shops, the items are cleaned and refurbished to perfection so that it is almost impossible to tell that they are used.

Mariama and I spent most of our time looking at clothes under umbrellas on the concrete stretch separating two opposing lanes of traffic. The clothes were sorted into categories such as baby dresses, fashion scarves, and graphic tees. They were hung on collapsible constructions covered by umbrellas and piled up on tarps. I did not buy anything, but as I sifted through clothes, I found t-shirts from different American high schools advocating for breast cancer awareness and hoodies from a variety of sororities and fraternities. Not only is it ironic that shirts with charitable messages printed on them can be found in these piles, but shirts associated with organizations centered around charity and awareness are also present. This example resonates with Brooks's argument that clothing donors are often unaware of the afterlife of their clothing.

Mariama ended up purchasing two pairs of sweatpants, neither of which were in stellar condition, for the equivalent to \$1. She bought both of these items for the sole purpose of wearing around the house. While purchasing two pairs of secondhand sweatpants seems benign, the overall grandeur of the market as a space which offers imported goods which could be produced in local industries, exemplifies the argument made by Wetengere that clearly states that investment in up-to-date technology would serve as a better investment in spaces like Dakar in order to promote long-term local developments.



## **Secondhand Boutiques in Residential Neighborhoods**

Another common manifestation of the secondhand clothing exchange are boutiques as described by Hansen. Across the street from my host family's house, there were two such secondhand boutiques which offered clothing of all types neatly organized by size and style category. On my walk to school, there was also a boutique which specialized in refurbishing used shoes by fixing the heel, adding gem stones, or replacing the sole. None of these spaces were much bigger than a small room, but they were filled from top to bottom with colorful items.

For special occasions, my host mother insisted that I dress up which meant that I needed a tailored dress with local fabrics and dressy shoes. She organized the dress for me with a tailor whose workshop was directly below the house and explained to me that I would need some black shoes sandals or heels. Upon her request, I stopped by one of the local secondhand boutiques and asked the vendor, Amadou, a family friend of my host mother's, if he had any black sandals in the European size 37. He did not have any that fit me, but he assured me that he would be able to provide me with a selection if I was willing to wait a few days.

A day later, Amadou stopped me on my way back from school informing me that he had brought back five pairs of black sandals in my size for me to choose from. I chose a pair that looked brand new from Zara and paid the equivalent to seven USD after some bargaining. My host mother was satisfied with my choice and the shoes served their purpose at many birthday parties, weddings, funeral services, and religious festivities she took me to. Amadou's shop not only shows the creative aspects of these boutiques, but also represents the vast and tightly-knit networks which exist among secondhand traders in Dakar who collaborate in distributing goods and share the profits. Amadou's business is much like the secondhand boutiques described by Hansen.

## **Local Fashion Designer: Original Fashion ‘Made in Africa’**

Throughout the spring, I interned with a small fashion design company, called Aminata Designs, which prides itself in creating locally sourced and manufactured goods. I had the opportunity to regularly visit the design studio and go to various textile shops and markets with the founder, Aminata, and her assistant to learn about what the work of a local fashion designer looks like. The company’s aim is to cater to an audience that appreciates African fashion that incorporates Western style elements. Their mission is to use primarily African textiles in order to support local craftsmanship and traditional clothing styles as well as clothing styles with a modern approach.

Aminata employs one tailor and also sews much of the pieces herself. The garments are of very high quality and are tailored to perfectly the customer. This is a luxury very few people can afford in the western world anymore, however, in Senegal it is a very appreciated and readily available business. In June 2019, Aminata launched a website where the clothing is available for purchase and delivery. Aside from designing and tailoring, Aminata incorporates the community through charity events (for example breaking the fast events during Ramadan) and collaborates with other designers in the area to promote the importance of supporting local businesses.

One of the frequent complaints voiced by Aminata (as well as the tailors in my neighborhood), is the secondhand clothing trade and the recent arrival of fast fashion chains through the recently built Sea Plaza Mall on the corniche in Dakar, which offers fast fashion labels such as H&M and Jennyfer. While Aminata acknowledged the fact that the secondhand clothing trade in Dakar produces jobs and provides people with inexpensive clothing options, they lamented the way that it detracts from local fashion companies and makes their business endeavors far more competitive. They further pointed out the shoddy quality of the secondhand

clothing which does not even justify these used garments as worthy competitors to their unique custom-made clothes.

## **Stop 5: Global City and Top Fashion City in Europe**

### **London, UK**

My fashion voyage concludes with my ten-week study abroad term in London, England where I took courses at the Florida State University Campus through Lawrence University London Center program during from January to March of 2020. London is the capital of the United Kingdom and has a population of just under 9 million people. Upon arriving in London, I had answered many of my questions regarding the fast fashion scene in cities like Stuttgart, Rabat and Dakar. I had also learned about the great expanse of the secondhand trade in these global cities which made me wonder what these fashion exchanges looked like in one of the world's wealthiest and most well-known fashion hubs.

London is a global high-fashion center along with New York, Paris, and Tokyo. However, it is also connected to the to the global fast fashion and secondhand fashion landscapes all over the world by way of the complex networks I explored in previous sections. London has recently established itself as one of the epicenters for innovation in socially and environmentally sustainable fashion. In London, I explored vintage boutiques, used clothing sales, department stores, the notorious fast fashion mile that is Oxford Street, and the many charity shops that the UK is well-known for. Otherwise, Oxfam and other British charity shops often caught my attention on my way to different school related activities. Most importantly, I spent 20 hours a week interning at a local non-profit called Fabric Forward (pseudonym for the purpose of this

essay) which advocates for socially and environmentally sustainable textile manufacturing and distribution all over Europe and the United States.

### **Vintage Shops in Brick Lane and Secondhand Markets**

Most of downtown London is highly commercialized meaning that most shops manicured to perfection and overpriced. Vintage boutiques are no exception to this rule. Before visiting London, I had always heard of the funky flare of places like Brick Lane where boutiques sold fashionable secondhand clothing to young style conscious Londoners. Upon seeing this for myself, I realized that this might have been true during the 1980s, but is not so much the case any longer.

As I walked along Brick Lane in Shoreditch, I came across countless shops selling everything from old designer collectables to brand new shoes that are commonly associated with old school looks such as Converse, Keds, and Doc Martens. Among other things, misprinted Burberry jackets sold by the dozen and old school sweatshirts with American sports teams printed on them are also sold in these shops to people looking for a polished vintage look. Despite the fact that these items are all used, the stark difference between these items and the items at the thrift shop in my hometown, for example, is that the items in London are sold for multiples of the price to eager consumers who willing to pay every cent. One of my most notable memories is of a yellow crewneck which I found particularly eclectic because it had the ten commandments of Bingo printed on it. It was a bit washed out and pilling on the sleeves so I figured it would not be too expensive. However, as I turned around the price tag I saw that it cost 37 pounds, the equivalent to about 46 USD. Of course there is an added amount of labor which goes into sorting and finding such items. However, this is a great example of how secondhand

clothes are sorted and the most appealing pieces are kept for buyers willing to spend a fortune on a less than perfect crewneck.

Another relevant, and perhaps less curated, space that I visited, was the traveling vintage kilo sale. Upon arrival, customers pay a pound to enter and are free to peruse countless clothing racks in the open air and can buy things for 15 pounds per kilo. I stumbled upon this sale in the form of a Facebook event and it sparked my curiosity so I attended one in an East London neighborhood. While there was an impressive amount of clothing available, I was disappointed to see that most of the womenswear were tattered Forever XXI and Primark shirts. As I moved to the menswear, I noticed that most of the items were incredibly oversized and therefore unwearable for the vast majority of young Londoners. This example demonstrates the diminished quality and selection of secondhand goods versus the vintage clothing shops.

### **Sustainable Non-Profit Work: Fabric Forward**

In terms of sustainable fashion, my most formative and exciting experience was taking part in the annual fabric exposition hosted by the non-profit I was working with. At this event, thousands of sustainable fabrics were on display for entrepreneurs, designers, clothing companies, textile mills, fashion students, and the general public to examine and potentially purchase for their own work. The non-profit did not sell these fabrics itself, but instead facilitates the liaisons between mills and designers. In addition to the exhibition, there was a seminar space in which discussions about exciting topics such as soil health, ethical farming standards, artificial intelligence in clothing, new economic models, current climate threats, and new marketing strategies were debated on by experts. During the two-day long exposition, dozens of panelists from all over the world offered their insight, while journalists and other fashion conscious

participants discussed the event on social media and through online newspapers. While initiatives set up by groups such as Fabric Forward set the stage for a more sustainable and viable future in fashion, many companies are still unwilling to make the big changes necessary in their current business models to join the movement in producing ethical fashion.

### **Global textile networks: What is the connection between Amina and Primark?**

Having met Amina, Leyla, Amadou, and having observed shopping-happy customers of Primark, questions emerge about what they have in common and what ties their activities together. Without doubt, these individuals and groups are part of a global network of fast fashion production, marketing, sale, consumption and re-consumption. They are exposed to the same fashion images (how else would Amina come to prefer H & M), they seek to favorably position themselves in a fashionable world (Leyla is a true fashion expert), they make a gainful living in this global market (Amadou is an expert salesman of used shoes and clothes) and ultimately somehow feed into the profits and survival of global fast fashion companies (like Primark and Zara), as they inhabit the same globalized sartorial universe. A number of more abstract points in my research clearly resonate with debates in the literature about the complex and problematic fast fashion and secondhand clothes business.

Beginning with Dawn's work at the local thrift shop, these large quantities of donated clothing represent the wasteful habits which have resulted from fast fashion over the last thirty years. The addictive and misleading consumption patterns observable at the Milaneo Mall are also examples of excessive fast fashion buying. These habits are indicative of the themes mentioned by Kasser and Pahl which focus on the empty promises of consumer landscapes such as shopping malls. These unfulfilled promises of consumption are represented though entire

garbage bags filled with brand new clothing which are donated to Dawn's thrift shop multiple times a week. Similarly, customers return to the Milaneo Mall fill big brown Primark bags with more goodies, over and over again, in search for more cheap garments because they are already bored of their purchases from their last shopping excursion.

Furthermore, Amina represents another kind of consumer who looks for certain fast fashion brands through fast fashion marketing on social media platforms and commercial spaces like the Morocco Mall. Though she cannot afford to buy fast fashion new, she uses global fashion trends and standards to dress her children. Like the mothers in the Milaneo Mall in Stuttgart, Amina spends entire afternoons looking for ways to spend her money wisely on outfits that will favorably position their children among their peers. While Leyla shops at similar markets, Leyla is also a fashion consumer and producer of images (Instagram) with limited means who uses her resources to style herself well, using images from global fashion producers from all over the internet. Leyla represents the cases made by Hansen and Scheld who argue that the secondhand trade allows young urban residents to creatively use clothes to invent and position themselves through styling on the global fashion landscape.

Amadou's boutique represents the theme of secondhand fashion boutiques highlighted by Hansen. Like the shopkeepers in Lusaka, Amadou is able to make a living by using his networks to sell "better" secondhand clothing to a better-situated audience. For Amadou, selling secondhand clothes is a profession that requires distinct skills and well-established connections and networks in the city and beyond. He provides an important service to his community by running a business that helps people create popular fast fashion looks without having to go out and spend long hours looking for specific items themselves. Like Dawn, and the vendors Leyla

buys clothing from, Amadou offers a helpful and resourceful service to customers looking for a specific item which is not only valuable to customers, but is also reduces global textile waste.

Aminata represents notes made by Grabski who writes that secondhand fashion compliments the work of tailors who use new ideas from fast fashion trends. Aminata artfully combines these new trends with existing expertise, local forms, original ideas and durable materials. Aminata's high standards and quality work resonates with Grabski's stance that tailored clothing has an advantage over fast fashion because it is not only unique, but it is made to fit the wearer perfectly. However, Aminata's work also represents Wetengere's argument against secondhand fashion. He states that while secondhand clothes can be a source of inspiration to tailors and designers, secondhand clothes threaten the tailoring businesses because it serves as a more affordable alternative to locally manufactured products.

Fashion Forward recognizes the problematic nature of these fashion global fashion circuits and offers solutions for a viable and more sustainable future by promoting the work of companies who are environmentally and socially ethical and sustainable. Fashion Forward's efforts resonate with the Cline's hope for a future of more conscious consumption and Thomas's promotion of innovative solutions, for example, organic cotton farming. Fashion Forward's mission also echoes Kasser's arguments about shopping less and becoming more intentional when buying clothes. This not only benefits our own mental health and well-being, but also positively impacts fashion circuits around the world. These connections show that these my case studies represent larger fields and issues in the universe of fast fashion, as each one represents a theme which renders the case studies representative of larger themes. Based on these connections, it is evident that the global fashion industry connects the entire world through individual pieces of clothing and popular fashion images.



## **Conclusion**

In this paper I examined aspects of the current fashion industry and showed how they are socially and environmentally unsustainable. I focused on fast fashion and secondhand fashion as two of the most profitable and exploitative parts of the fashion industry. I reviewed a variety of literary works that analyze the fast fashion and the secondhand clothing trade. I explained how they contribute to fashion debates and evaluated their criticisms of the fast fashion industry and their proposed solutions for the secondhand clothing trade today.

In my own research, I examined concrete spaces where the global fashion transactions exchange take place. My case studies contribute to larger conversations about fast fashion and secondhand fashion. They illustrate the concrete working of global dynamics and circuits at concrete times and spaces in the lives of ordinary people around the world. The observation and my analysis clearly resonate with arguments made in the literature about the complex relationships between fast fashion, secondhand fashion and the spaces in which they unfold. I illustrated global links among ordinary people and their consumption habits and places of work. I identified flaws in global fashion contexts and illustrated one first step toward a more sustainable sartorial future.

A number of further questions remain for future research, like how can African textile industries be redeveloped? How can we foster businesses like that of Aminata? How can we reduce the consumption of fast fashion in a realistic and meaningful manner? And, finally what will the effects of the current global COVID crisis be on the fast fashion industry?

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