

## **More than Clothes: The Many Lives of a Denim Jacket**

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Clothing does not make the man, though it externalizes the inner self and materializes others perception of an individual or masses. A denim jacket may evoke an image of a cowboy, or maybe a rock star, and is ubiquitous in both fashion trends and personal styles. The material itself is durable and utilitarian, but the jeans as we know them now reflect the human embodiment of an article of clothing. We buy jeans pre-distressed, hinting at the wear and tear incurred through manual labor or constant wear. In my own wardrobe, my jean jacket symbolizes the intersection of the many roles I play in my personal and professional life. It has been with me for over a decade, seen stages and album covers, kept me warm on unexpected chilly evenings, and has the wear and tear to match its use.

Displayed prominently on an album cover, my jacket is worn in and comfortable. It has seen stage and screen, a layer of protection in cooler weather, and while I forget I am wearing it, it has a presence all its own while simultaneously disguising any attitudes incongruent with my personality. No, this is not denim that was pre-worn for fashion's sake, but has earned its holes and fading for being worn consistently in the last decade or more. It is my prized hand-me-down, and worth more than the most expensive item I have purchased new.

I came to own this jacket in my early twenties on a trip to Delaware with a friend. I was the third or fourth person to receive the jacket, as this group of women often had clothing exchanges and swaps. At the time, my wardrobe was rife with discounted clothes from the Gap in the name of Middle American capitalism via fast fashion. It was cool in Midland Park, NJ to appear as though having paid full price for clothing made cheap enough to sell at half the price in the first place. Two parts of myself in one jacket: the kid who mostly lived in hand me downs and discounts, and the other who went to great lengths to cover that up. In Sophie Woodward's "JEANEALOGIES: Materiality and the (im)permanence of relationships and intimacy," she discusses the

many relationships an owner has to their clothing. Steph, who wears the jeans of a romantic something-or-other, finds both comfort and challenges her feminine identity by wearing his jeans. Woodward notes that the woman “exemplifies a core contradiction many young women embody between the desire to be fashionable through participation in fast fashion and simultaneously wanted to reject and repudiate the fashion mainstream and the femininity in bodies.” Similarly, I see my jacket as a vehicle for androgyny, especially as an entertainer challenged by antiquated notions of what a female entertainer should be. While entertainment is a haven of different forms of gender expression, it is not without effort and defiance of the status quo. My jacket, like a pair of boyfriend jeans, begs no gender identity on its own, waiting for the owner to imbue such qualities. Another woman, wearing hand me downs courtesy family, allows “her to become part of a woven network of the narratives of a series of people (Woodward, 2011).” While my connection to my jacket is not familial, and although I seldom speak to the previous owners, I feel inextricably connected and grateful to them. The relationship to wearing hand me down clothes was often defined by feeling less than my middle-upper class cohorts, especially in my formative years. Over time I have come to feel less embarrassed and more pride; as my disdain for the implications of fast fashion grew with self-education and social activism, so did my deepening relationship to the wearers of my denim jacket’s past. Interwoven in the wear and tear are stories rife with diversity of experience, deepening connections and meanings.

The rise of fast fashion is embodied by the Gap, from their ad campaigns employing rock stars and at times creating new waves of pop culture, to its entrenchment in dismal and deplorable labor practices in order to facilitate cheap, quick labor. Over my own life’s trajectory, I have felt I also embody this dichotomous existence growing up poor and white in affluent communities. I looked the part, I wore the clothes, but on closer inspection and investigation I was not of the same means or methods of procuring my wardrobe. Appearances are often deceiving, like the jovial ads displaying people of all colors dancing in their Gap uniforms contrast against the real life working horrors, collapsing and overcrowded buildings collapsing on human life. I may

have those jeans from the Gap, but most likely I bought them post-season or fished them from a garbage bag of clothing left to me by a friend or family member.

As I grew out of the acute sense of stigma in adolescence, my early twenties ushering in, my jacket and I embarked on an artistic journey in the world of music and entertainment. The jacket was part of my “look,” and this was a very conscious effort. As a singer-songwriter who is also the vehicle of performance for my songs, denim always seemed to lend to the genres I covered, especially country and folk. There are countless stage photos, including promotional materials of me wearing my jacket, and it always imparted a sense of individuality and safety. Like a favorite pair of shoes, or a ritual to calm pre-show nerves, it is and was my safety blanket, the cool thing to wear without the risk of attempting fashion trends as a way to costume myself. Like being a singer-songwriter who plays personal material in public forums, I am both exposed by and comforted wearing the most familiar piece of my wardrobe in the most public way possible.

Denim, as we know it in twenty-first century America, originated in Nimes, France. Also known as “serge de Nimes,” this dense weave of cotton has been manufactured since the late sixteenth century, gaining popularity in the United States in 1870 (Salazar 2010). Denim is as diverse as it is popular, “insinuating itself across the performative ensembles of class, race and gender while also emerging as one of the most pervasive fashion commodities in the global marketplace (Salazar 2010). Originally, rivet-reinforced jeans, or “jeans,” were tailored by Jacob Davis in Nevada at the behest of a frustrated wife unable to find durable pants big enough for her husband. Using fabric for horse blankets, Davis fashioned the pants with little thought, unaware of the mass consumption this article of clothing would incur in its future (Salazar 2010). Davis was appealing to the utilitarian need of manual laborers, and represents the girth associated with working the harsh lands of mid and western America, a look constantly being recaptured and reinvented to represent how the west was won.

Denim production would later be based on the capitalist model of consumerism. Levi Strauss is in part responsible for the marketing and subsequent proliferation of all

things denim in the United States. In fact, Levi's are often used as a synonym for jeans, much in the way asking for a Kleenex is another way to ask for any tissue at all. Rebranding itself as a mainstay of American fashion, Levi Strauss and Co. originated as a dry-goods wholesaler (Salazar 2010). With smart marketing appealing to America's down-to-earth, work hard-get far mentality, Levi's honed in on commodifying utilitarian materials as both American as well as dressing the anti-war, feminist, and anti-capitalist movements of the 1960's (Salazar 2010). Given the context, the ubiquitous and ambiguous nature of denim can take many forms, both as political statements or dressing one's environment. Displayed next to items such as Thomas Jefferson's Bib;e and Susan B. Anthony's Shall is a pair of Levi's jeans as part of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History's permanent collection (Salazar 2010). While a pair of jeans in a museum might evoke a scratch of the head, especially next to items more obviously relating to American history, its placement states its importance. Often when an object has been replicated to the point of mass production, it loses its value to consumerism while increasing its presence and cultural importance. It is like asking one to identify a specific species of tree after they have spent years in a forest surrounded by said trees; the person may have a lot to say after a moment to think, but likely has not considered the trees out of habituation.

Mary Hutchison's "The Social Life of the Denim Jacket" follows Sothea Thea and her denim jacket's journey, and eventual display, at the National Historical Collection of the National Museum of Australia (NMA). Originating in production somewhere in the Soviet Union around 1989, the jacket made its way to Australia via a Cambodian refugee in 1990 (Hutchison 2011). The interest in tracking one article of clothing lies in the narrative of its wearer, in this case an asylum seeker with probably little in contrast to the excess of many Americans, my poor self included. In this context, clothing means more than a status symbol or expression of style, it represents protection and tells a story. As the subject owning this particular jacket stated, "These my only clothes I have to wear on the boat, I keep them to remember my journey." Anthropology inherently considers human experience as integral to understanding societal constructs and

cultural patterns, and clothing is no exception. Hutchison describes the jacket as being marked by the journey, both literally and figuratively, “ The rusted buttons, the faded, thinning fabric and the tears at the waistband, bear witness to 28 days of unprotected encounter with sun, salt water and wind.” Recalling the trend of distressed denim, the journey is from manufacturer to consumer with very little journey between. The denim jacket worn by a Cambodian refugee on a twenty-eight day journey by boat tells a story of actual weathering of a painstaking journey, more in common perhaps with the humans who make garments like the one he owns, less like the suburban kid buying it off the rack.

In 2016, The Fashion Institute of Technology displayed denim in their installation “Denim: denim’s frontier.” As the best installations do, FIT wove together the story of denim that is threaded in the fabric of American culture. According to Emma McClendon, the curator, is also today’s most worn textile (Kowalski 2016). The exhibition shows denim’s trajectory from the working-class embodiment of Western Expansion to everyday wear and high fashion. Again, Levi’s are prominently displayed, whether in original form or in recreation, ranging from the 1910’s to the 50’s, as the curator aims to display denim as “a symbol of the ‘American Spirit, of youth, rebellion, sex, socio-political movements, and the ever-ephemeral quality of ‘cool’ (Kowalski 2016).” While many narratives are displayed, mostly they represent ones Westerners are overly familiar with, specifically as seen in pop culture and the Western look.

A piece of clothing accumulates value in many ways depending on the context. The instantaneous monetary value of a couture Gucci gown could be assumed fairly easily as being high. In turn, for the owner who has spent a great deal of money on the gown, imparts a particular value based on their own assessment of such. Monetary worth is not always synonymous with value, and the history of an object in its life’s experiences often outweighs new and expensive items in historical importance and personal meaning. Based on intellectual values and in the context of my singularity, my jacket is invaluable and worth more than any couture gown I cannot afford to buy anyway. My personal feelings of the insidious nature of American capitalism and greed,

even psychological research points to meaning as integral to human existence. Our stories are what bring us together and bond individuals from otherwise distant cultures, and I would like to think my denim jacket tells the journey of a twenty-first American, white and poor, who has worn many hats. Like that woman, the jacket is easily manipulated into different looks from performer, to tomboy, to my thoughtless self. Though I have not journeyed across an ocean to find a better life, I understand the sentiment of the immigrant who did. Our jackets are evidence of the lives we have lived. As Sothea Thea said, "I keep those clothes to show what my generation did. It represents our survival. It represents me, my group of boat people, other refugees and the next generation."

My denim jacket, likely made by the hands of underpaid and poorly treated workers, represents the hardships of those victim to manufacturing practices of fast fashion, a trend ushered in and necessitated by American consumerism. It represents the world of hand me down clothes, both ecologically and sociologically as reusing clothes prevents waste, but the wearing of reused clothing creates social stigma depending on social structures. It represents pop-culture and music, the rugged terrain of the west dominated by the Westerner, the cool kid, the hippie, and the anti-establisher. Embodying the meaning its owner imparts, there are few items of clothing with more diversity than the jean jacket.

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