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Manifesto for a study of denim*

This paper considers the challenge to anthropology represented by a topic such as global denim. Using the phrase 'blindingly obvious', it considers the problems posed by objects that have become ubiquitous. While there are historical narratives about the origins, history and spread of denim, these leave open the issue of how we make compatible the ethnographic study of specific regional appropriations of denim and its global presence in a manner that is distinctly anthropological. Ethnographies of blue jeans in Brazil and England are provided as examples. These suggest the need to understand the relationship between three observations: its global presence, the phenomenon of distressing and its relationship to anxiety in the selection of clothes. As a manifesto, this paper argues for a global academic response that engages with denim from the global commodity chain through to the specificity of local accounts of denim wearing. Ultimately this can provide the basis for an anthropological engagement with global modernity.

Key words denim, jeans, clothing, global, anxiety, anthropology

Why denim?

To claim that denim is an appropriate subject for a manifesto may at first appear frivolous, almost a parody. The word 'manifesto' is generally acceptable with respect to either some critical political or social agenda, or alternatively a philosophical or art movement. By contrast, we propose a particularly anthropological field for the manifesto, based on anthropology's belief that philosophical insight can be grounded in the experiences of ordinary people as observed through ethnography. So, an anthropological manifesto will be one that makes manifest what otherwise is implicit in the practice of populations. The term 'manifesto' is justified by the evidence presented in this paper that denim is such a grounded analogue to philosophy; one that is employed by populations to resolve major contradictions of living within the modern world and associated forms of anxiety. Our manifesto is a call to make manifest the profound nature of that response. It is pitched against the established philosophical sense of ontology that assumes being always resides in depth, and that things of the surface,

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such as clothes, are intrinsically superficial, a concept of being that is by no means shared by all peoples (Miller 1995).

The term manifesto is also justified by the claim that global phenomena require a new form of global anthropology. In the conclusion we will call for an anthropology based not on a single project or author, but a larger communal movement of academics that emulates the global nature of the object of enquiry. This should complement more established approaches such as the ethnography of the local appropriation of global forms, or multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995).

But why of all things denim – blue jeans? Denim is clearly a global presence, it not only exists in every country in the world, but in many of these it has become the single most common form of everyday attire. In preparing this paper we counted the proportion of persons wearing denim blue jeans out of the first hundred to pass by on random streets in sites such as Istanbul, London, Rio, Manila, Seoul and San Francisco. This proportion ranged from 34% to 68%, suggesting that soon, at any given moment, more than half the world will be wearing this single textile. Although there are many other global forms, ranging from foods such as Coca-Cola through to car brands, we will argue that denim is special, being as much a refusal as an acceptance of capitalist pressures such as fashion. Also, a major part of the explanation of its growth is that it connects intimacy and personalisation to ubiquity in a manner that is perhaps unique, even within the genre of clothing.

How should anthropology, and especially material culture studies, respond to phenomena that seem intended in their own right to create bridges between the most personal and the most global? We are not seeking to rehearse all the prior anthropological debates on global issues, which have ranged from much earlier concerns within economic anthropology such as formalism against substantivism, to more contemporary debates about globalisation *per se*. It does, however, seek to reverse one trend: the tendency to cede the terrain of accounting for global phenomenon to a meta-sociology, and the habit of citing upwards to figures from Giddens to Bauman, from Beck to Baudrillard. This may lead anthropology to be constructed in opposition to meta-sociology as an appeal to the most parochial and specific as exemplified in ethnography. Anthropology is thereby reduced to cultural relativism; the degree to which a particular population does or does not correspond to any given sociological generalisation. Instead, anthropology needs to construct its own form of generalisation, or meta-commentary, about the contemporary world. In our response this is composed of ethnography rather than opposed to it. The approach we are suggesting is very different from that of others, which interrogate the global from within their discipline's own intellectual constructs, such as claiming that there is, for example, a global post-modernity (Hutcheon 2002).

In meta-sociology, the observation that the majority of the world's population might wear the same thing is likely to lead to an appeal to some grand trend of modern life: the dynamics of capitalism perhaps, or the rise of individualism. Anthropologists, by contrast, would expect to negate such contentions through ethnographies that demonstrate that, in each instance, people wear denim for reasons specific to that particular context. Even the terms used by meta-sociology, such as 'capitalism' and 'Americanisation' (Campbell *et al.* 2004), would be subject to anthropological claims that we actually confront plural capitalisms (e.g. Miller 1997; Blim 2000). However, if the grounds for wearing denim are always specific to that region or population, then how can anthropology contribute to the other factor that needs explaining; that is,

the global ubiquity? In this paper we attempt to overcome this dualism, and produce a genuine dialectic that starts from the evident situation that people are wearing jeans simultaneously for global and local reasons. In order to occupy even the starting gates, it is necessary to take denim to be a serious candidate for such an ambitious transformation, and the problem that we face is the problem of the blindingly obvious.

The blindingly obvious

Anthropology, which grew up in cousinhood with archaeology, takes to the analysis of the minutiae of practice in a manner akin to that of an excavation. Anthropologists often discern within activities and customs either a rule like behaviour or at least a sign of a larger order which acts as explanatory context. There is also a delight in exposing unexpected or unnoticed behaviours excavated through painstaking long-term fieldwork. However, the term 'blindingly obvious' represents an apposite challenge to such an anthropology; it implicates another source of anthropological knowledge that is anything but hidden. The phrase suggests that some things are so evident, so ubiquitous and taken for granted that they are indeed blinding. That in taking them for granted we find it more difficult to take them seriously or as important evidence for the nature of what we have uncovered. A recent example would be Wilk's (2006) study of the quite extraordinary global trade in bottled water.

The ubiquity of blue denim as a global clothing is precisely such a blindingly obvious presence in the world. No-one today is going to be surprised by the fact that shamans or hunters wear blue jeans. Anthropologists have bored themselves silly with such anecdotes for the past 30 years. Furthermore, denim seems to rule not just in breadth but in depth. In heartlands such as the United States, the average American woman owns 8.3 pairs of jeans (Cotton Incorporated 2005) and over half of the adults in the UK 'usually' wear jeans (Mintel Market Research 2005). So this paper will not waste time demonstrating the ubiquity of denim. These figures are all that we need to make clear our starting point.

The problem is that this is blindingly obvious. What precisely we are blinded to is simply the question: why denim? The aim is to imagine a specifically anthropological answer to this question. At present it is history rather than anthropology that is likely to be most people's first port of call. Yet even if we can read a narrative that documents step by step the journey from a world prior to denim to a denim-saturated world, a historical narrative is a story, a sequence of events, but not necessarily an explanation of these events. The prehistory of this narrative is already well recorded, thanks largely to Balfour-Paul (1998) tracing the roots of blue jeans in indigo. Ironically, the rise of denim has mainly preserved the look of indigo through artificial dye over more or less the same period that saw the decline of the once global use of indigo itself as dominant because it is one of the least fugitive of natural dyes.

Whilst there exists no comprehensive scholarly history of denim, there are multiple popular histories of denim and blue jeans (e.g. Finlayson 1990), which range from discussions of blue jeans and iconography (Marsh and Trynka 2002) to the specific brand history of Levi-Strauss (Downey 1996). The most useful of these popular histories is James Sullivan's (2006) *Jeans: a cultural history of an American icon*, which outlines both the history of the singular form of blue jeans and also the history of its form as fashion. First, the book sketches out the story of indigo and of denim fabric, situated in

the histories of slavery and the American Gold Rush. Sullivan outlines the formation of a standard indigo warp and white weft, twill fabric and the critical intervention of Levi-Strauss in the 1870s through the patenting of the rivet to prevent tearing, which creates the core style of denim jeans. The presence of these rivets, and the densely wound fibres that constitute the denim fabric, mean this hardy material clothed the working population that built the United States through agriculture and industry. These work-wear overalls mutated to become an icon of the struggle by the next generation born of that working population, which wished to assert itself against a suffocating parental and national ideology of normative order. This was exemplified in the Marlon Brando of *The Wild Bunch* and the James Dean of *Rebel Without a Cause*. Alongside this dominant masculinised history is a lesser trajectory associated with women in general, and women such as Marilyn Monroe in particular. From there we can trace its presence through the influence of US popular culture to the rest of the world, for example, how the fall of the Berlin wall appeared on our TV screens as if it was being toppled by a sea of blue jeans. Sullivan's narrative gives us a satisfactory sequence of significant moments and critical actors and actresses that are precisely a cultural history of an American icon.

In turn, Americanisation was part of what inspired people, or even at times prevented people from appropriating blue jeans as a global form (Miller 1990). But this wider context immediately raises more complex issues of the relationship between local trajectories. So while Sullivan recognises that the 1960s was a major period of re-commitment to blue jeans, a recent study by Hammer (2007) shows that within a socialist setting such as Hungary this has a quite specific political inflection which utilised the way in which clothing could 'speak' for what otherwise might be politically unacceptable aspirations of the time. Though in practice this evolved as much through parent-child conflicts, just as it had in the 1960s generation within capitalist societies.

Sullivan also provides us with the second aspect of the narrative, the agency of capitalism embodied in the designers, marketing agents and interests of firms. The development of blue jeans is as firmly attached to brands as the rivets of the pockets that make Levi-Strauss the sire of blue denim. Subsequent firms established their own resonance with feelings of authenticity and American-ness. Lee and Wrangler attach themselves to the romance of the cowboy manifested by John Wayne. Otherwise, a British label, Lee Cooper, is re-vitalised by the allure of London's Carnaby Street in the 1960s. What then follows in the 1980s is the history of designer jeans and the race as to who can create the first \$100 and then \$200 dollar jeans. Today we can cross a few metres of a shop such as Macy's and see blue jeans leap from \$30 to \$230 with little instantly discernable difference in texture and style. Anthropologists may be somewhat bemused to find the extra couple of hundred dollars come with labels such as 'Citizens of Humanity' or '7 for all Mankind', or more prosaically Joe or James. Designer jeans might delude us into thinking that some capitalist designer engineered not only the jeans but a gullible jeans-wearing population. But most jeans are not designer jeans.

After reading such accounts as Sullivan we may feel that we have cut through the blindness of the blindingly obvious, and that we now have tales to tell about how and why, when and for whom. In the least, we have a story of how blue jeans came to conquer not just the US, but the world. The historical narrative of blue jeans and 'Americana' could easily be appropriated by the meta-sociology often used in cultural studies. The story can become an example of Americanisation, or 'the signifier' or 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000). Denim seems to fit well onto theorists of late capitalism, becoming merely pretty obvious rather than blindingly obvious. However, there is

an equally evident anthropological response: the negation of this general explanation through ethnographic specificity. We now provide two such examples, since it is only in the relationship between these different kinds of account, that of universalism and relativism, that we might come to envisage another possibility, around which we could unite, as under a manifesto.

The ethnography of denim: two versions

Our two case studies derive from ethnographies of jeans as a fashion item in Brazil and as everyday apparel in England. Sullivan may account for the construction of an American icon, but anthropology asks for the cultural relativism implicit in accounting also for a South African, Slovakian or Argentinean icon. Ethnography suggests narratives other than that of Americanisation that account for each regionally situated relationship to denim.

Brazilian jeans

The possibility that some regions and populations may have a very specific relationship to denim is most persuasive when that region has given rise to a particular variant of denim. This is the case in Brazil. In many countries the denim cognoscenti would recognise a specific genre called Brazilian jeans. Fortunately, thanks to extensive research by a Brazilian anthropologist, Mylene Mizrahi, the history and consequences of this specific form is now well established. In brief, Brazilian jeans are a response to the degree of emphasis within Brazil on the female buttocks that seems to be generally acknowledged by Brazilians as characteristic of the region. In order to accentuate this feature, manufacturers devised a material that looks from a distance like denim, as it is inevitably within the general blue to indigo spectrum of conventional denim, but in terms of the material is actually quite different from conventional denim. Although the constituents of the material as pure cotton with a small elastane component of under 5% is the same as much contemporary conventional denim, the material seems to be spun more like a jersey material rather than produced through more conventional weave, and the elastane content creates stretch in both horizontal and vertical dimensions. The material is also very thin. As a result, the jeans can be purchased in small sizes and effectively stretched over the body. They then accentuate the shape of the body almost in the manner of a body stocking. In Brazil they are often described as a 'bra for the bumbum', that it is actually giving lift to the buttocks, although in practice it is more that it holds and reveals rather than lifts.

As Mizrahi (in preparation) shows, this material is first made popular by a firm called Gang, with which it is still most commonly associated in Brazil. Although Gang originally sold its products to a largely *nouveau riche* market, these jeans came to particular prominence following their appropriation for use at Funk balls, a form of popular culture associated with the dance and music of the favela slums of Rio. The meaning of 'Brazilian jeans' develops both through its materiality and associations. The jeans, along with the tops and shirts that accompany them, are extremely elastic, adhering to the body and enhancing the rounded female form, especially legs and

buttocks, and give comfort to the dancers, who accomplish extreme movements with their legs and hips, almost touching the dance floor (Mizrahi 2007). The jeans are integral to an overall 'Funk wardrobe', where the physical quality of the garments and their relation of opposition to male clothing play a central role in the prevailing atmosphere of seduction at these Funk balls. In her Master's thesis, Mizrahi (2006) situates the use of the stretch denim within the wider context of women's Funk outfit, observing their extensive preparations and exchanges of clothes. Creating the right impact means employing this 'calça da gang', that is various versions of stretch jeans, with appliqués and embroidery and colours, to create a more complex ambiguity of sensuality and chastity than the alternative short skirts.

These Brazilian jeans in a wide range of cuts and embellishments were very much in evidence in 2006. The next stage develops when Brazilian jeans become associated with the high-value middle-class firms who are appropriating the transgressive popularity of Funk but in such a manner as to distance themselves from many of the attributes of Funk. The story seems to provide a clear analogy with the US trajectory, which passes through a moment of transgressive rebellion giving it the quality that is normally termed 'edgy' by the expensive designers who subsequently appropriate it for their own purposes. The trajectory in Brazil passes through a specific context of class and race associations that have parallels with, but are also distinct from, those identified by Sullivan for the US. They also add particular qualities in relation to sensuality and sexuality, such that Brazilian jeans now take their own place as an international genre that can now be exported to Paris or California as a material commoditisation of Brazilian sensuality and sexuality more generally.

Most Brazilians, however, do not wear 'Brazilian jeans', which form a relatively small proportion of the actual blue denim jeans sold at the markets in Rio and elsewhere. So this kind of anthropological investigation is complementary to another which focuses upon the ubiquitous and the ordinary wearing of jeans rather than its place within the mutual exploitation of the fashion industry and the semiotics of class or sex. As an instance of this other kind of anthropology, we briefly present some of the findings of Woodward's ethnography of women selecting their clothes while dressing in the morning in London and Nottingham.

Security in ubiquity

Woodward accepted the rather daunting challenge of how to construct something analogous to traditional ethnography in the study of the clothing of a contemporary metropolis such as London. For this, she studied the wardrobe of clothing, both in its entirety as a collection and in its active form, by observing the daily act of getting dressed (Woodward 2005, 2007). She spent time in women's bedrooms watching how they chose what to wear. This proved essential, because it transpired that it was more through seeing what women rejected than what they finally wore that revealed the contradictions and ambivalences which are core to women's clothing choices. Irrespective of women's social positioning or background, the pivotal dynamic which underpins how women choose what to wear is between clothing that is 'easy' and 'safe', and clothing that allows women to transform themselves.

Woodward discussed this in terms of habitual clothing, i.e. those items of clothing that women know how to wear through wearing them all of the time. These contrast

with non-habitual clothing, i.e. those items that involve a self-conscious engagement with women's image as they use clothing to interrogate 'could this be me?' On a daily basis, women rely on their habitual clothing. Whilst either for a special occasion or when trying to distance themselves from the sense that they are becoming boring, or because of the demands of work or a party, they will attempt to create new combinations from non-habitual clothing. For most women, their 'active wardrobe', that is items that women consider wearing on any regular basis, comprises less than 38% of the clothing they own. The remaining clothing that hangs in the wardrobe includes the creative possibilities of who women could be, and have been in the past. On any actual occasion of choosing what to wear, more often than not, women experience these other possibilities and apparent choices as a constraint. Therefore this relationship between habitual and non-habitual clothing rests upon the tension between anxiety and possibility, creativity and constraint.

It is this tension at the core of women's clothing choices that in turn sheds light on the role that denim occupies in the wardrobe. The finding that all women owned and regularly wore jeans would hardly seem like a 'finding' at all. However, what an ethnography of getting dressed shows is how denim jeans have become absolutely pivotal in how women make clothing choices: women wear jeans so often because they both resolve and encapsulate this core dynamic between anxiety and possibility. This can be illustrated by two examples from the ethnography. The first case, Theresa, is a woman who orders her clothing in order to minimise the chances of having any wardrobe dilemmas. This ordering extends to her jeans, which, as something she wears almost every day, she has organised with the aim of ensuring that she has the right pair of jeans for any occasion. This includes six pairs of jeans that she wears regularly; spending most of the day doing household chores alone, or in the presence of her two small children. Her choice of denim for regular day wear is governed by the hardness of the fabric, meaning they will not be ruined by gardening or playing with the children. One pair worn regularly is now characteristic of such old worn jeans. The fabric has abraded through wearing and washing, and as the white cotton fibres become visible, the jeans soften in touch and in appearance. Not only are these old jeans one of her most comfortable items of clothing, but this comfort is simultaneously physical, as the denim fabric softens, and personal, as this process of aging and softening is experienced alongside changes in the wearer's body.

While her most regular day jeans are unadorned pale blue, suffering a fit of boredom, she recently purchased three new 'fun' pairs. They are each in a similar style: low waisted, resting on the hipbone, and slightly boot cut. They include 3% elastane fibres, which makes them slightly stretchy. Unlike the worn, standard jeans, these new jeans are embroidered, covered in glitter, or in one case bleached down the centre and then dyed pink. These are then still clearly blue jeans, but equally clearly differentiated. Jeans are thereby not only a staple of her practical day wardrobe, hardy, easy to wash and 'go' with everything, but they are also a key item of 'going out' clothing, where they can become 'special' and different. Every evening when her husband returns home from work, Theresa dresses for dinner; often by changing from her 'day' jeans into her 'evening' jeans. In common with almost all of the other women that Woodward worked with, the result is a pattern where the wearer feels sufficiently personalised through the 'fun' and 'fashion' details on her evening jeans while remaining within the relatively safe and easy category of blue denim itself.

Theresa's strategy seems to allow her to avoid many unwanted wardrobe crises. For other women, denim jeans emerge more as the sole solution to such crises. Louise has ten pairs of jeans, and she wears jeans almost daily. However, unlike Theresa, they are not as clearly divided into domains, occasions and functions, but more subtly into the jeans which make her bottom look perter, jeans which can be worn with heels and jeans which flatten her stomach. As with many other women, Louise values and orders her jeans into the body that they give her. On one occasion, outlined in Woodward (2007), Louise is invited to a party of friends she has not seen for a long time. These friends all have high-powered, well-paid jobs. Louise is unemployed and unable to afford much by way of new clothes. Intimidated by the invitation, a wardrobe of clothing she normally feels comfortable with now feels alien to her, as the usually unselfconscious habitual clothing now has the spotlight cast on it. She panics as even her trusty pairs of jeans now appear boring to her, dreary and uninteresting. In that moment it becomes inconceivable that these items of clothing could ever have been so reliable. She imagines the fashionable, expensive clothing that her friends will be attired in, relegating her own clothing to drab anonymity. On this occasion 'safe' and 'easy' will not do.

She despondently tries on everything, toying with the idea of wearing one of her mini-skirts, but she has neither the confidence nor the inclination to wear them. Despite her impoverished state, in the end she feels there is no option but to buy something new, on credit. Yet notwithstanding the ten pairs of jeans already in her wardrobe, when confronted by the apparently endless choice within myriad high street stores, Louise ends up buying yet another pair of jeans. Albeit in a slightly different style: cropped, low-slung and with buckles at the side. In buying and wearing these jeans to the party, she feels comfortable, yet at the same time sufficiently interesting and different, thanks again to the extra detail.

In both these examples jeans transcend the fundamental divisions of the domestic wardrobe. They are not just the habitual, un-thought out items of clothing; they also allow women to be 'noticed'. They internally resolve the tensions between conformity and individuality that have been central to theories of fashion since Simmel (1957). As Nedelmann (1990: 223) suggests, one definition of fashion as experienced is the 'exchange of reciprocal ambivalence'. Denim jeans are not only the most generic item of clothing; they are at the same time the item women state they felt the most comfortable in, that women feel is most 'me'. Jeans allow women to comment upon, exemplify and critique this conformist self. Through this ethnography we can start to analyse the relationship between this phenomenon at the micro level of individuals and the macro level of a global response.

Distressing – reconciling global and local responses

Woodward's findings relate closely to a suggestion by Clarke and Miller (2002) that we re-think our starting point for a theory of fashion. That is, if, as Woodward shows, most people's primary point of reference is not to the fashion industry but to their personal state of anxiety about what to wear, then a theory of fashion should also not start from the fashion industry, but from a study of this anxiety. Woodward's larger ethnography suggests that we can specify the local genres of anxiety, and their specific reference points in issues of gender, the body, sexuality and individualisation. For anthropology, this raises the question of how one could generalise such an ethnography so as to

account for the global phenomenon. Should we presume a myriad array of local forms of anxiety? Though these might differ considerably between London, Delhi and Sao Paulo, they might also be related. A series of ethnographies could ascertain the degree to which in each region the increasing reliance upon denim follows an increasing difficulty in choosing alternative attire.

Even without such an investigation, this evidence helps us refute current generalisations. Denim does not emerge as merely the creature of the fashion industry expressing the wider interests of capitalism. We do not live in a Fordist age in which capitalism profits by having us all wear the same thing. Of all industries, it is the fashion industry which is most steadfastly devoted to trying to persuade populations to regularly change their wardrobes in line with what is defined as 'in fashion' at any one moment. It is this constant change that drives fashion, and makes the industry more profitable and dynamic. Even given its internal diversity, denim is a slap in the face for this desire for continual change. For example, listening to a speech by one of the major designers for a label, Hugo Boss, Miller could hear the frustration represented by items such as denim that simply refuse to accord with the fundamental tenets of the fashion industry and its drive for difference and innovation.

The constancy of denim starkly contradicts the assumptions of economists such as Fine (Fine and Leopold 1993), who would argue for a relatively seamless fashion industry that creates demand based on the requirements of fashion production. While there is designer denim and fashion within denim, most denim is surely the single most conservative item that we commonly wear. The best-known brand of Levi's has pretty much always been the best-known brand. The basic denim jeans of faux-indigo cotton twill with double stitching and rivets are almost identical in markets from Laos to Turkey to Mexico. Despite pundits constantly claiming the death of denim, it simply pushes on relentlessly. So, while commerce finds ways to make denim profitable, we cannot see the specific choice of denim as a product of the mechanisms of capitalism. The study of capitalism may help account for designer denim, but for denim as a whole it contributes very little. Similarly, Americanisation is central to understanding the original global spread of denim, but there are many reasons for thinking that denim has now transcended its earlier history and has to be understood in relation to concepts of the global and the local, neither of which is particularly American.

Denim's contemporary ubiquity, unlike its earlier history, cannot be explained through the study of either capitalism or Americanisation. Our approach, by contrast, emerges from developments in anthropology and in particular material culture studies. These emphasise the diversity of experiences represented by wearing clothing (from Weiner and Schneider 1989 through to Küchler and Miller 2005). For example, Woodward's informants have an entirely different relationship to clothing than the one found by Banerjee and Miller (2003) in relation to wearing the sari in India. As Keane (2005), Henare (2005) and many others have now established, clothing and by extension fashion are increasingly significant to an anthropology that recognises that in studying patterns of selecting and wearing clothes we are studying the constitution and not simply the representation of persons.

To re-focus on denim in particular, we now have two distinctive features to work on. The first is its extraordinary global ubiquity, even though this always has its local version as in the story of Brazilian jeans. The second, which we derive from Woodward's observations, is that denim jeans seem to have the ability to provide a sense of security, of relief from the burden of mistaken choice and anxious self-composition, if not for

everyone, for a clear majority in a country such as Britain. But in order to understand the relationship between these two observations, we need to consider a third, which once again starts from a blindingly obvious observation. If we walk through Macy's or Selfridges or any other major store that stocks denim, then we would find that denim is unique in an entirely other respect. There is no other item of clothing which appears to have been speckled with bleach, torn at the knee, stained with rust, worn out with rubbing, ripped and frayed at several places and been subjected to a whole series of processes to which we give the general term 'distressing'. If we saw signs of such abuse on any other clothing we possess, we would ourselves become pretty distressed.

If anything is even more extraordinary than that half the world's population should choose one single textile, it is that that textile should be sold so often as though it had already been worn, almost to death, before we even buy it. Workers in Italy or Mexico spend their time simulating years of wearing as part of what is sold to the consumer. Once again, this both is and is not a mystery. If we just accept historical narrative, it is not hard to give the story of how this came to be, but whether that of itself constitutes a sufficient explanation for what we see in the shops is another matter. The story can be told personally, in that Miller was of the generation whose behaviour is being copied by commercial distressing of pre-sold jeans. As a teenager, Miller hitchhiked around free rock concerts, wearing blue denim flares and flowered shirts; jeans that were worn so much, in such rough conditions, and with so little attention to washing and care that after a while they became naturally abraded and frayed in just the manner that is simulated by commerce today.

The significance of this intensity of wearing was not simply that the jeans become worn; it was much more that in doing so they became intensely personal. This point is made clear in Woodward's example of Theresa, whose most comfortable item is her most-worn pair of jeans. This was not just appreciated by women. For Miller, too, those worn cotton jeans became markedly softer than any other garment. In addition, in those days, he also followed the instructions of manufacturers to wear the jeans in the bath after purchase, so that they shrunk to the particular shape of the particular body. This individuality of fit was accentuated by the subsequent long periods of wearing, as the jeans wore to the body. So denim jeans became the most personal, the most intimate item of clothing that anyone had yet experienced. The degree to which this could be the case was wonderfully exemplified in Hauser's recent paper (2004) on how the FBI could solve a robbery by identifying an individual through focusing upon the identifiable pattern of the individual's interaction with a specific pair of denim jeans. Denim can also become a kind of embodied record of the particular movements and contours of the particular body, as noted by Candy (2005) using visual interviews and photography to locate characteristic patterns of wearing denim. Today there is a new equivalent to this sense of the self and the body in the growing phenomenon of women and their skinny jeans. Many women have in their wardrobe the memento of the thinnest that their body ever became, as judged by the jeans size they were able to wear at that time: an image popularised in an episode of *Sex and the City* but found ethnographically by both of us in our respective researches in London. The latest denim fashion is male skinny jeans.

This personal relationship to jeans is clearly what commerce has attempted to replicate and then pre-empt through the phenomenon of distressing. Even if this is starting to spread to a few other garments, distressing was invented specifically in

relation to denim. At this point we have reached the appropriate point to return to the initial idea of a manifesto. Our starting point is that it is extremely unlikely that the three unique properties of denim exist merely by co-incidence. We have found that firstly, denim is the most ubiquitous textile in the world; secondly, it has become the most personal and intimate of all items of clothing, as reflected in distressing; and thirdly, at least in some areas, it has become the secure base of most women's anxious relationships to their wardrobe and a common solution to the task of getting dressed on a daily basis. Our manifesto starts from the suggestion that by considering these three observations in combination we may have discovered a vicarious route into researching some of the fundamental contradictions of modern life. The remaining link is to indicate how we can use the study of denim to release its philosophical potential.

Towards an anthropological manifesto

One of the justifications for a manifesto was that instead of a dualism of global generalisation and local specificity we need to examine how each becomes the explanation of the other. We do not want to merely assert some general condition called 'global anxiety' analogous to meta-sociological terms such as capitalism or individualism. Instead we want to use denim to ground us in a more specific set of studies that show how global and local features help account for each other. To do this we also need to transcend a more immediate anthropological response that comprises the mere juxtaposition of relatively disconnected instances of ethnography. Through denim we hope to see how each ethnography has to contain its exemplification of a global phenomenon.

The length of this paper allows for only a sketch of the problem and of the solution. If we have found that denim draws within itself the extreme polarity of the most global and the most intimate, then a very similar claim may be made for anthropology. If denim is the most intimate clothing in respect to personalisation over time, and yet the most global, anthropology is the most intimate social science, yet with claims to characterise humanity. A second strand also links denim as a topic with anthropology as a discipline. Anthropology often claims that, rather than impose solutions, it is the subject that tries to learn from the way people attempt their own resolutions to their own problems. If denim is here understood as just such a form of resolution, for example, to certain anxieties, then anthropology is the subject that should attempt to recognise and learn from that practice. Furthermore, by repudiating established notions of ontology (Miller 1994), we can start with an appropriate respect for denim as potentially profound rather than superficial. We suggest two stages in the anthropological task. The first is an innovation in how to learn from these practices and the second in how to make them explicit as philosophy through anthropological writing and discourse.

In the first place, we want to suggest that no single study or single anthropologist can deal in isolation with a phenomenon of this scale. Traditionally, anthropologists chose their topics of study through a process of territorial dispersion, as supervisors discuss with students topics that have either not been studied or at least not in some particular way. Each PhD signifies the unique presence of this specific emergent anthropologist. As such, there is an institutional dialectic between the generality of anthropology as a discipline and the specificity of the individual anthropologist. However, with

respect to denim we could at least imagine something quite different. We could imagine anthropologists drawn to a topic precisely because other anthropologists were simultaneously pledged to research the very same topic. Social anthropology could thereby become for the first time a 'social' anthropology instead of institutionally individualising. This is precisely what the topic of denim and its dialectic of universality and specificity requires: a comparative anthropology that previously has been most often honoured in the breach.

Our aim then is to commence with a loose configuration of autonomous academic projects over the next five years. At present we have ourselves begun (July 2007) a joint ethnography of denim wearing in three streets in North London. Woodward is developing a comparative research project into denim as 'street-style', as part of the *Fashionmap* project (at Nottingham Trent University) which may include collaborative projects in Korea, Japan and India. Miller will also be initiating some more limited fieldwork in India, Trinidad and the Philippines. But under the auspices of a global denim project we also aim to collaborate with autonomous projects or in some cases joint research. In the pipeline are studies by Alex Hughes (Nottingham) on the rise of ethical trade in denim and corporate ethics, by Eminegul Karababa (Exeter) on denim branding and distressing in Turkey, by Mylene Mizrahi (Rio) on 'Brazilian' jeans, by Roberta Sassatelli (Milan) on denim, sexuality and the body in Italy, and by Fiona Candy (Central Lancashire) on denim and body movement. Other discussions concern possible post-doc programmes on denim in Korea and Japan, and potential exhibitions. We would encourage as many anthropologists as possible to consider such collaborations during the period 2008–2013 (see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-denim-project>). So the first stage is to create the conditions for a deliberately collaborative global research strategy. This is intended to produce a global mapping that incorporates local specificity.

The second stage is to at least initially consider the analytical and theoretical approaches that can take us from ethnography to anthropology and material culture analysis. This includes the incorporation of approaches that are currently being developed and further work that at present can only be presented as ambition. An example of the former is a consideration of denim as a global commodity chain. Foster has recently provided an excellent summary of the anthropological theorisation of commodity chain analysis (Foster 2005), while a series of exemplary case-studies carried out within human geography may be found in Hughes and Reimer (2004). These include Crewe (2004), who indicated how jeans can be traced back to cotton production at one end, and to wearing fashion at the other end, but with a dynamic and reciprocal interface between producer and consumer rather than simply a linear sequence. This can include the study of denim waste and re-use, as the final moments of the commodity chain, another topic that has been initiated within the global denim project. It is hard, for example, to resist the allure of knowing that around a quarter of all US dollar bills were comprised of denim waste (Sullivan 2006: 239).

Most commodity chain analyses start with the hidden aspects of labour exploitation; for example, Bair and Gereffi's (2001) analysis of denim production in Torreon, and van Dooren's (2006) in La Laguna, both products of NAFTA trade linkages between Mexico and the US (see also Crewe 2004). Thanks to NAFTA, Europe declined from supplying 83% of US denim to a mere 7% after a massive shift to Mexico (Li *et al.* 2003: 20). As a result, blue jeans are today Mexico's single most important export (Bair and Peters 2006: 210). Equally, there has been a very rapid

expansion of Chinese denim production, with over 1,000 firms now involved (Li *et al.* 2003) and with Hong Kong developing as a major point of brokerage. The particular interest of blue jeans is that this is anything but a simple story of production-led capitalism. Production in turn has to respond to shifts in consumption. Tokatli (2007) provides an excellent summary of the adaptation of Turkish manufacturing to the new complexity of the branded market, producing 190 million metres of denim per annum, through an extraordinarily complex network of contracting and subcontracting for denim brands, the emergence of several local brands (Tokatli and Kızılgün 2004), and, as Miller noted recently in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, a fair smattering of fake brands.

A study of the denim commodity chain promises a much more nuanced and informative example of contemporary political economy and the interplay between production and consumption. We (with collaborators) are interested in chasing down the routes from cotton growing and dyeing in Turkey through the distressing of jeans in Italy, their design in Germany and their retailing in London. The hope is that normally quite neglected sites of enquiry, such as the work of retail buyers or shipping companies, become visible as part of the overall process by which raw materials end up as commodities in consumption.

If the study of the commodity chain starts at the top, then the complement to this study needs to start from the 'bottom'. Several of the proposed collaborations and associated projects deal either with local ethnographic studies of jeans wearing, or provide viewpoints from complementary disciplines, for example Fiona Candy's visual analysis of body movement and characteristic wearing patterns (see also Hauser 2004). A broad comparative approach is aimed to encompass the whole spectrum of relevant factors that might give rise to contemporary denim. Some are discussed here, but we anticipate a slew of other salient factors that might emerge from further research on why people wear jeans, ranging from family relations and kinship through to religion. A broad approach also allows for a re-integration of these issues concerned with wearing jeans, and the commodity chain approach to production and distribution. For example, many of the places where we will study jeans-wearing are places where these same factors of production, located through commodity chain analysis, may contribute to particular aspects of anxiety. New uncertainties in the labour market are linked to the breaking up of older forms of normativity that determined how people should appear in the world (see Sennett 1999), and this puts new responsibilities upon individuals to forge for themselves the medium of their presence in the world. Habermas (1987) theorised this approach to modernity, and Miller (1994) provided a case-study ethnography that explored its implications for one region.

Some suggestion of how denim might illuminate these larger contradictions comes from Woodward's initial ethnography with its emphasis upon the link between denim and security. The security represented by the choice of denim seems to somehow reaffirm an individuality precisely at the moment when individuals feel insignificant. On the one hand, jeans are the garment that most effectively re-attaches the individual to the world, precisely because nearly everyone else is now doing the same thing. Yet simultaneously, as presented by the traditions reflected in distressing, denim has become the single most personal and intimate of outer garments. The profundity of denim lies in the way it manages to be simultaneously our single most global garment and the most personal garment that we possess. Jeans can affirm our specificity and individuality in the only credible manner, that is one which simultaneously acknowledges the immensity of

this homogenising world. In Woodward's analysis of clothing anxiety (e.g. 2005), people feel as though they are being consumed by the gaze of others. Jeans protect people because they already occupy this personal intimate space and there is no empty feeling inside that can be colonised by this external gaze. Furthermore, the very anonymity and ubiquity of jeans protects from judgement. You may not be especially right, but you can't go far wrong with denim jeans. As a result, despite all the attempts by the clothing industry to broaden the appeal of more exciting, exotic, stylish, interesting, impressive and costly clothes, denim is likely to become if anything more and more powerful as the central foundation of the individual's wardrobe, and commerce has to simply try and adapt to this use of denim.

Such observations exemplify our final stage, which is to consider the more philosophical implications of a focus on denim. These start from Woodward's observation that denim-wearing is most often the only publicly evident sign of a normally private and hidden phenomenon, which is the inability to choose other forms of clothing to wear. This led to questions as to what lay behind the evident anxiety of that moment of getting dressed. In turn, the evidence suggests ways in which denim is complicit in the strategies through which contemporary populations resolve for themselves, at least to a degree, contradictions of homogenisation and heterogeneity, individualism and the collective, attachment and alienation.

It is these arguments that justify the term 'manifesto'. The ideal that anthropology could make manifest the responses that populations forge for themselves in dealing with certain contradictions of modernity. Perhaps on analogy with Simmel's (1978) *The philosophy of money*, one could eventually envisage a Philosophy of Denim, a consideration of why one material form has spread throughout the world and what it tells us about that world. A philosophy that seeks to engage with global phenomena that comprise their local aspects. How, for example, can we see anxiety as analogous between various local instances such that they do not reduce to some universalistic or psychological cause, but remain sensitive to these local forms and variations? The starting point here, as in Simmel's work, is the propensity of modernity to exacerbate certain contradictions. In this case, denim itself makes explicit the same contradictions between global homogenisation and the culturally relative that concern anthropology. Anthropology increasingly represents this very same general task of bringing back together the intimacy represented by ethnography and the abstract represented by theory. Indeed, we have suggested that denim, even more than anthropology, probably exists in its present form mainly to the degree that it helps express and resolve such contradictions. So, true to the best traditions of anthropology, the study of denim is conceived as a dialectic between academic abstraction and normative practice as it develops through the blindingly obvious.

So this is our manifesto, our call to arms. We ourselves (if funding allows) wish to carry out such studies of commodity chains, and be involved in ethnographic studies of denim from South Asia to Britain and Brazil. But we would also much rather entice other academics, whether in anthropology, geography, economics, sociology or clothing studies, over the next few years to consider adding this topic as an attachment to whatever else they are studying in the field. So that a few years from now, we can start to envisage this mapping of both political economy and the local variations of response to the contradictions of modernity. While such work would be inter-disciplinary, we have tried to suggest in this paper how it might also extend our imagination of what

anthropology, and more particularly material culture studies as an anthropological vanguard, could encompass in the future.

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Abstracts

Manifeste pour une Étude du Denim

Cet article examine le défi que représente un sujet tel que le denim mondial pour l'anthropologie. Utilisant l'expression 'blindingly obvious' ['qui saute aux yeux'], il examine les problèmes posés par les objets devenus omniprésents. S'il existe des récits historiques sur les origines, l'histoire et la diffusion du denim, ceux-ci ne permettent pas de réconcilier, au moyen d'une perspective proprement anthropologique, l'étude ethnographique d'appropriations régionales spécifiques du denim avec sa présence mondiale. Des ethnographies du 'blue jean' au Brésil et en Angleterre sont étudiées comme exemple. Celles-ci suggèrent qu'il est nécessaire de comprendre le lien entre trois observations : la présence mondiale du denim, le phénomène de l'inquiétude, et sa relation à l'angoisse dans la sélection des vêtements. En tant que manifeste, cet article

expose les arguments en faveur d'un programme de recherche mondiale qui étudierait la trajectoire complète du denim, depuis la distribution mondiale de l'article jusqu'aux spécificités locales de son utilisation. Au bout du compte, un tel programme pourrait servir de base pour un engagement de l'anthropologie dans les questions de la modernité mondiale.

Manifest für eine Studie über Denim

Dieser Artikel handelt von Herausforderungen an die Ethnologie, repräsentiert durch Themen wie globaler Denim. Mit Hilfe der Redewendung „sichtbar aber im blinden Fleck“ wird das Problem von Objekten angegangen, die allgegenwärtig geworden sind. Es gibt zwar historische Erzählungen über Ursprünge, Geschichte und die Verbreitung von Denim, aber es bleibt offen, wie wir in einer ethnographischen Studie spezielle regionale Aneignungen von Denim und seine globale Präsenz auf speziell ethnologische Art und Weise untersuchen können. Ethnographische Beispiele aus Brasilien und England werden vorgestellt. Diese Beispiele lassen darauf schließen, dass drei aufeinander bezogene Beobachtungen zu verstehen sind: die globale Präsenz von Denim, das Peinlichkeits-Phänomen und die Beziehung zur Angst bei der Auswahl von Kleidern. Als ein Manifest spricht sich dieser Artikel für eine globale akademische Stellungnahme aus, die sich engagiert dafür einsetzt, Denim durch die globale Warenkette bis hin zu besonderen lokalen Formen des Tragens von Denim zu untersuchen. Letztendlich bietet es die Basis für eine ethnologische Beschäftigung mit der globalen Moderne.

Un Manifiesto para el Estudio del Denim

Este artículo considera el desafío a la antropología representado por un tópico como el denim global. Utilizando la frase 'más que obvio' considera los problemas planteados por objetos que se han devenido omnipresentes. Mientras existen narrativas históricas sobre los orígenes, la historia y la difusión del denim, estas dejan abierta la cuestión de como hacer compatible el estudio etnográfico sobre apropiaciones regionales específicas del denim y su presencia global en una manera característicamente antropológica. A modo de ejemplo se proporcionan etnografías sobre los jeans en Brasil y en Inglaterra. Estas sugieren la necesidad de comprender la relación entre tres observaciones: su presencia global, el fenómeno de afligirse y su relación a la ansiedad en la selección de ropa. A modo de manifiesto, este artículo argumenta por una respuesta académica global que se ocupe con el denim desde la cadena global de mercancías hasta la especificidad de relatos locales sobre el uso del denim. Esto puede en el fondo proporcionar la base por el compromiso antropológico con la modernidad global.