

An Exploration of Origins and Appropriations:  
How Workwear Has Traveled and Transformed

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## Introduction

In the 21st century, we have seen workwear travel and transform from their origins. Garments that have historically been innovated for utility and safety, and that have history rooted in the working-class, are now being re-imagined as couture and leisure wear. Workwear has become a staple of subversion for many high-fashion designers and a versatile go-to within “streetwear”. Uniforms, a prominent type of workwear, are meant to institute solidarity and conformity within a group and system. These garments signify the occupation and the institution that a person is affiliated with. Ultimately, the wearer is representing how their trade falls on a hierarchy of value and power; historically, socially, and culturally speaking. Yet, the work uniform is inherently different from the concept of fashion, so why are we seeing it so enthusiastically copied and appropriated? This paper will attempt to answer this question.

In conjunction with this paper, I am producing a mini-documentary that will explore the origins and appropriation of workwear, specifically clothes that construction workers, factory workers, postal workers, and other manual laborers, wear to work. Through the production of this project, I learned more in depth about how these types of garments have entered the space of leisure, where it’s purpose and meaning has been transformed. Young people all over the world are wearing work jackets, coveralls, even the uniforms of postmen and construction workers as a fashion statement. A large reason for this is the desire for an authentic item of clothing, which translates into the consumer embodying authenticity as a lifestyle. Consumers today have an admiration for recreating old styles and repurposing old garments, making them their own in their new time and space. These types of items are often sold at vintage and thrift shops. This avenue of consumption has become very popular and desirable due to the appeal of authentic and

historical pieces of clothing. It has been observed through the fashion industry at large and within consumer spaces like vintage and thrift shops, that garments and styles are inevitably recycled. In our culture of recycling and repurposing, we can fall into habits of misappropriating clothing that have ties to different classes and cultures. Some instances of appropriation are so subtle and nuanced that the fashion industry and the general public have become blasé about it. This production is a project that encourages people to be wiser when recycling and repurposing, by educating them on the stories behind what they're consuming, the spaces in which they are buying, and the significance of educating yourself about where your clothes come from.

### **What is Workwear?**

**“Clothing is the armor of our physical, social, moral, and cultural condition” - Olivero Toscani**

*Workwear: Work, Fashion, Seduction* (2009), defines workwear as basic clothing, protective garments, and a type of dress that was developed around the fundamentals of labor, clothing, and industry (Toscani & Saillard, 2009). This definition aligns with my research because it covers the items of work clothing that have been fetishized in the fashion industry, as well as the type of work clothing that have transformed over time to gain new meaning. It covers clothing that firefighters, construction workers, welders, ranchers, mechanics, postal workers, and sanitation workers wear (Toscani & Saillard, 2009). This text does not exclude how the high fashion world has appropriated the uniforms of health care professionals like nurses, but my research will exclude these types of work because currently the types of workwear being transformed within the fashion industry and worn by average consumers are that of the aforementioned. In an interview with the owner of the popular Manhattan workwear shop Dave's

New York, he attests to the fact that the work clothes of “hard-core manufacturing, construction, brick layers, demo crews, electricians, etcetera” have an appeal to the every-day audience (*Who Are You Wearing*, 2020). This will be touched on later, and although the gendered aspect of workwear is important and interesting, it won’t be discussed in depth in this paper.

Workwear was originally made of animal skin, and as it evolved, naturally there was still a desire for tough textiles for hard work. Denim was one of the first tough fabrics that gained mass appeal when it hit the market. It was affordable, light, but also very resilient. It was used to develop work pants and overalls. Two people at the forefront of this development were Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis. In 1873, the work pants being made were not flexible to the constant physical activity workers were doing, they ripped often so they did not maintain longevity. That year, Levi Straus and Jacob Davis patented the process of putting metal rivets on the weak points of work pants for the first time. These pants were known as “waist overalls” and later coined jeans, over the decades jeans became a staple in workwear (“The History Of”, 2019). Later down the line, more brands looking to break into workwear wanted to apply the metal rivets to their work pants but until 1900, the end of the patent, other brands would have to find alternate ways to distinguish themselves in the market. In the 19th century, we also saw complete outfits solidified for various types of work, these outfits are considered



[Carhartt zipper jacket from 1959 (left), Carhartt ad from 1957 (right)]. (n.d). Retrieved from <https://gearpatrol.com/2020/03/17/carhartt-detroit-jacket-explainer/>

uniforms. From 1850 onward, the clothing industry began producing cheap outfits such as aprons, overalls, work pants, and smocks. As these items became mass-produced, uniforms developed for grocers, butchers, and cooks. With the industrial revolution and urbanization gaining speed, workwear for builders and jobs in factories were also in high demand (Toscani & Saillard, 2009).

In 1889 came the brand Carhartt, a workwear brand that made utility garments for manual laborers, since their conception the brand has stayed prevalent. Detroit, Carhartt's birth place, has had a booming clothing industry for decades, as more demand for work in Detroit rose due to the expansion of industry, so did the demand for those who made workwear. Carhartt followed suit of Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis, and acquired the textiles and the guidance from local train conductors to develop the perfect overalls. By 1925, Carhartt was operating across states and countries. Through the 1990's Carhartt expanded, acquiring other workwear companies like Headlight Overalls, Gross Galesburg Co, and a sewing plant from OshKosh. They became a company that offered materials to create all kinds of uniforms for a diverse population of workers across the United States. They also expanded overseas, where a whole new line of workwear with roots in fashion rather than work was created (Warnett, 2016).

The clothing developed for working not only assisted the body in specialized types of work but it also produced a collective consciousness around what different types of workers look like. Blue collar and workwear began a relationship together and they are still linked as a representation, this has led to workwear becoming a way to read class distinctions between people (Warnett, 2016). For the first one hundred years, Levi's market was a wide variety of American laborers and jeans became the go-to work pants ("Levi Strauss &"). Carhartt originally

branded themselves by the strong men who worked for them, garments “for hard-working men by hard-working men”. At the time, in the 1920’s, the term blue collar was coined as a phrase that represented manual occupations. Blue collar workers represented the very opposite type of look from their clean cut and crisp white collar counterparts. Though, over time, as concepts around different types of dressing changed, workwear in turn entered new spaces. Real workwear has durability, longevity, and because of its history, it has a rich narrative behind it. All of these aspects have become desirable for many types of consumers, whether it is someone who is a fashion enthusiast, someone in it for the historical value, or someone who finds they need durable clothing, workwear has landed in many hands. As workwear has traveled through time and space, its origin stories have become lost. In current contexts, those who get their hands on workwear assign new meaning to it, and sometimes this can be a cause to be critical.

### **Contact Zones: Where Workwear Travels & Transforms**

Workwear has infiltrated many spaces, these spaces can be thought of as *contact zones*. The term, coined by Mary Louise Pratt, means a space in which people geographically, historically, and culturally separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of inequality or conflict (Pratt, 1991). Although this term was developed for literary and pedagogical situations, I think it can be applied to the spaces in which a thing like workwear comes into contact and creates ongoing relations with new groups of people. Workwear is informed by the laborers who need it, and it has traveled, met new people, and transformed for new purposes in spaces such as some subcultures. Workwear has also entered spaces in which it has met conditions of inequality and power conflict, such as the

fashion industry and vintage and thrifting consumer culture. In this paper I will examine the travel and transformation of workwear within these spaces..

### ***Workwear As A Subcultural Staple***

Workwear has been a big part of subcultures since the '80s. One major subculture that workwear is a part of is skate culture. Considering the countless falls skateboarders take onto concrete, it makes sense they chose Dickies pants as their go-to. The Dickies company began in 1922, it was founded by C.N. Williamson and E.E. Dickies, both of whom started out in the “vehicles and harness” business. In 1918, they decided to move into the garment sector and established The US Overall Company, but later renamed it Williamson-Dickie Manufacturing Company. They entered the industry during the Great Depression and World War II, and their first developments were uniforms for the armed forces. In the '50s they focused on workwear, expanding their market to Europe and the Middle East, where “Texas oilmen introduced the Dickies brand to Middle Eastern oil fields” (History, n.d). In the '70s they opened their market by opening stand alone retail shops.

The goal was to offer a showroom and one-stop uniform shop for their traditional customer base. Uniformed workers like postmen and police officers could stop in for replacement clothing. With shops like such, the brand gained exposure and it was adopted by everyday casual wearers. Dickies has since become a brand that is workwear and leisure wear (Gallagher, 2019).

Dickies pants are durable, comfortable, and are relatively inexpensive depending on where you buy them today. In the '80s and '90s, skate culture was lusted after by mainstream consumer



culture, and their styles began gaining attention and praise from the world of high fashion.

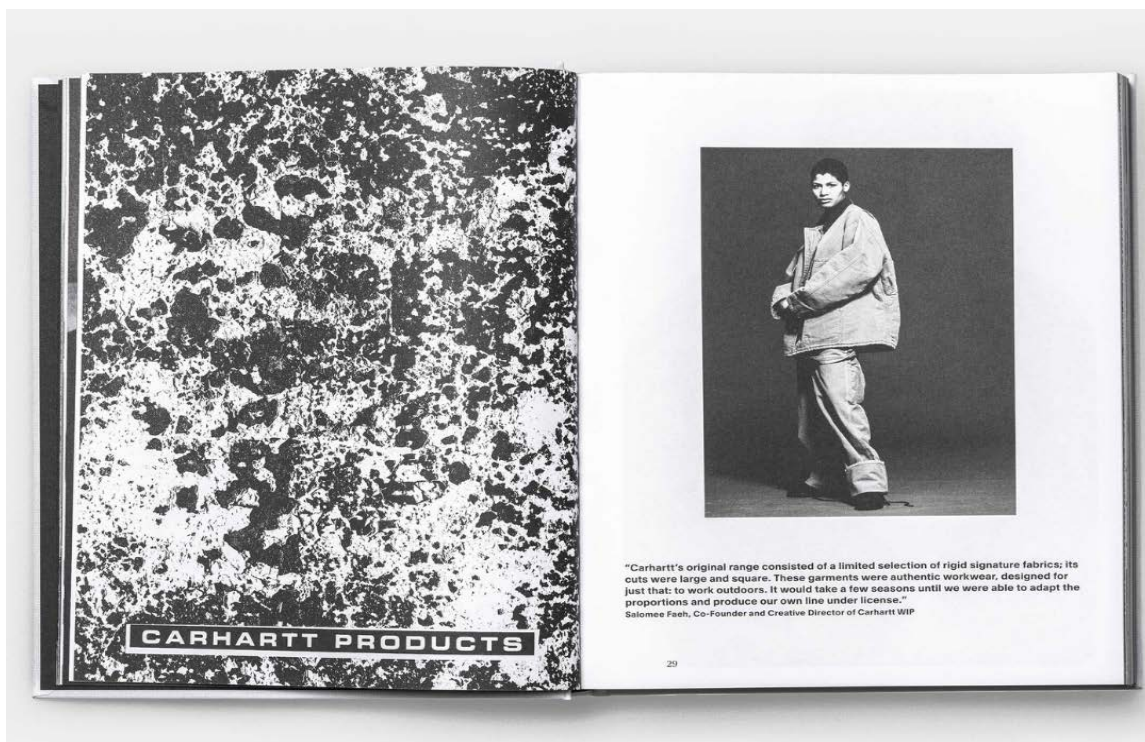
Inevitably, their styles attracted a market of people that were not skaters nor were they workers.

The same type of influence occurred within the music scene, especially hip-hop. “When your music reflects the grit of the streets, your wardrobe needs to do the same”, John Kek Cici, fashion and culture writer of Medium, has a point. The same way labor workers in industrial and agricultural fields needed durable garments made for utility and longevity, so did those who worked in the thick of urban environments. Similar to how the skaters looked to workers in construction for durable uniforms, rappers who grew up in the inner cities took pointers from another kind of street worker (Cici, 2018 & Warnett, 2016). It was those grinding on the streets of the city who brought Carhartt to the forefront of hip-hop, a culture that is known for being rich with grit, resilience, and hyper-masculinity. Carhartt didn’t market their brand heavily, so it came by surprise when their clothes entered the inner-city space. Their outerwear was warm, resilient, had ample pockets, and the build of these garments were sure to add a layer of machismo to any wearer. The durability helped on long-cold nights and the many pockets assisted in carrying and concealing drugs or weapons. In many ways, these jackets were providing protection to those grinding on the streets, an affordance they couldn’t go without.

Carhartt workwear permeated various environments because it was also very affordable for such high quality clothing. Artists coming up in the music scene who wore Carhartt, and who later gained fame, entered spaces that cross-pollinated with celebrities. As Carhartt entered spaces where high fashion existed, so began their coexistence. Over time, Carhartt maintained a widespread appeal and became a staple for hip-hop cultures on each coast (Cici, 2018 & Warnett,

2016). It was the expansion of Carhartt's demographics and style into a whole new line of workwear that really catapulted their transformation into a fashionable garment.

Carhartt WIP, or Work in Progress, was conceptualized in the 1970's by Edwin Faeh and his wife Salomee Faeh. Edwin Faeh and his two brothers were on top of the jeans trend when they decided to get ahead of the curve and open their own shop in Europe called 'Jeans In'. As the store gained attention, they decided to go one step further and found their own brand called Big Star based in Switzerland and Germany. They began importing denim from the US and experimenting with the idea of an "All American" concept. On their search for more items that had an authentic American background, among those selected was Carhartt. When Salomee Faeh joined the Big Star design team in the mid '80s, she knew the brand had potential for mass appeal, so she encouraged the team to approach the Carhartt brand directly. The Faeh's took a trip to the U.S, visited the Carhartt warehouse in Detroit and proposed they represent Carhartt in



[The Carhartt WIP Archives]. (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.carhartt-wip.com/en/men-gadgets/pos-point-of-sale-the-carhartt-wip-archives-book>

Europe. A few years later, they acquired a license to produce their own Carhartt garments in Europe under the name Work in Progress (Warnett, 2016).

The way the Faeh's approached the brand was very off-beat in comparison to how the original American Carhartt did things. As a designer, Salomee Faeh was first inspired to adapt the bulky proportions of Carhartt's original items but she also had a strong desire to establish culturally rich traditions and associations for the WIP line. In a way, the Faeh's were romanticising the strong culture and tradition behind the 'all-American lifestyle' that propped up Carhartt. The Faeh's approached their new line as one that had no boundaries in terms of space, time, and culture. In a branding guide, their ideal consumer was described as "individuals with their own identity, their own life...key words are mentality, way of thinking, living in a changing community, and subcultures" (Warnett, 2016). As Carhartt WIP began crossing borders in Europe, the brand started to infiltrate many communities and subcultures in France, Switzerland, and Germany. In Paris, WIP was carried at *Le Shop*, a famous shop and meeting point for people involved in the art and music scene. They sold mixtapes, they hosted DJs, and they invited artists to paint on their walls. Carhartt WIP happened to be there, as Stephane Graziani notes, then employee of Le Shop and current WIP sales and marketing agent for France, "musicians made their own decisions to wear the clothing" (Warnett, 2016). Carhartt WIP soon began collaborating with art collectives, music groups, and skate coalitions, the brand "would gradually grow into a hub for street culture, operating outside strict disciplinary drawers, to promote diversity" (Warnett, 2016). Carhartt WIP gained mass appeal as a swaggy version of workwear in Europe, but later they would also reach out to artists in the American music scene.

One music group was repping Carhartt for more reasons than to just up their swagger. The Detroit techno group, Underground Resistance (UR), had been wearing Carhartt their entire careers. One of the members of the UR, Mark Flash, made a statement that their founder has been wearing Carhartt since the '80s, and that he wears it to his other jobs in construction and as a mechanic (Ryce, 2017). When Carhartt WIP collaborated with the UR, ironically enough, this faced some backlash despite Carhartt running rampant through the music scene as simply fashionable wear (Ryce, 2017).

This feedback, and Mark Flash's comments illustrate the dynamic politics around who can and cannot wear workwear. Mark Flash makes the point that their group had more valid reason to wear



**Mark Flash**  
about 2 years ago



**TOO ALL OF YOU WHO SAY UR IS SELLING OUT TO CARHARTT!**

Been using Carhart since the 80's for Construction, Truck Driving and Auto Mechanic work. They are considered work clothes for most of us here in Detroit. They are by far some of the warmest and most durable if you're a hunter or work outside in the winter. Don't forget Detroit is a working class city, full of blue collar citizens and we like to get our hands dirty. I can almost guarantee that Mike is wearing Carhart right now at this moment. Some of you muthafukkas don't know that Mike is a Mechanic and still does Construction on a daily basis. So those of you yakking on about selling out can suck the shit outta my ass!  
Some of us do more than just Dj and make music.

[Underground Resistance's Mark Flash defends Carhartt clothing line]. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.residentadvisor.net/news/40469>

workwear and collaborate with Carhartt than other DJs that have never met any other trade in their life besides DJing. The Underground Resistance's collaboration exemplifies how Carhartt still has a strong and lasting relationship with its roots. Although they have expanded overseas and have developed a line that is for nonworkers, Carhartt still brings their clothes back to their original market, the working class.

Currently, the influence and appeal of Carhartt's traditional and WIP lines have stayed strong. Carhartt WIP has store locations in New York City, L.A, London, Madrid, and Tokyo, and their American line is still sold in workwear shops such as Dave's New York in Manhattan.

In an interview with Adam the owner of Dave's, he described how workwear has an appeal "to the everyday audience", and that many young people that come into his shop to buy workwear, "turn it into something else" (Who Are You Wearing, 2020).

### ***Workwear As Streetwear***

The hype around workwear in these realms influence consumers on the ground to go out and buy these garments. Some buy from workwear brands like Carhartt, Dickies, and Ben Davis and some buy workwear-esque clothing sold by non workwear brands, many do both. We can find this type of wearer in the streetwear scene. In cities across the world, "streetwear" has made its many homes and has inspired generations of young people. "Streetwear" is a transcultural style that has crossed over into the mainstream and become a multibillion dollar industry in the last decade (ADZ & Stone, 2018). It often incorporates revival of old trends that become appropriated, subverted, and re-contextualized. The term was first coined by an African-American designer named Willi Smith to describe the 'oversized and casual' silhouettes he was designing in the 1970's. Streetwear is special to many young people because it is the "human reaction to the wounds of growing up in the sub/urban environment" (ADZ & Stone, 2018). The suburban and urban environment has always contained young people who are experiencing first-hand poverty, domestic violence, racism, discrimination due to gender and sexuality, and other forms of systematic oppression and disadvantage. The multitude of identities and the desire to bond over shared experiences led to groups of young people creating communities to express their values and what made them unique through how they dressed.

The late '60s was a period defined by youth expressing their discontent with political, social, and economic systems. Young people began rejecting the formal styles of dress and

conformist consumer culture of the '50s, and with this we saw a shift in young people not wanting to look the part of the upper class. This era is marked by the oppressed and their supporters who fought against systemic constraints by expressing their multiplicity through mobilization, protest, and through creative expression such as arts, music, and dress. During this time, style became a concept that was more openly available to everyone and people became a lot more selective with their style. As more groups of people like the Black and LGBTQ community gained representation and power, more agency in style was expressed. Similarly to current street style, people combined styles and apparel, simultaneously reinforcing some social ideals while undermining others, often mixing old trends with new (Buckley & Clark, 2017). Initially, streetwear was born out of sportswear, workwear, and combat-wear. Clothing for sport, for work, and for combat were made for those activities and those activities only but as the movement towards casual wear caught on, these garments being casual, comfortable, and versatile became everyday wear. Casual wear's mass appeal led to blurred distinctions in terms of division of time, and of class and power.

This phenomenon is still happening today, as more people wear casual wear, the way society reads social cues from the body changes. As described, streetwear incorporates a type of blending and re-contextualizing. While this breaks ground for interesting innovations, collaborations, and virality, especially now that street style is a virtual culture, some types of appropriations can be called into question.

An aspect of street style I have gained a critical perspective of is the upcycling and appropriation of working-class uniforms. The work jackets and shirts of public service workers such as construction workers, postal and delivery men, even food couriers, are having an

interesting but questionable moment in fashion. PAQ, a popular platform about fashion and streetwear, developed a Youtube series about streetwear in which they talk about street style and popular streetwear brands. They also host challenges where their team competes to achieve the best streetwear look. In episode three of their series, they are on the hunt for the best “uniform fit”. In this episode they are quite literally on the hunt, chasing food couriers and postal workers down the streets of London pleading that they will pay up for their work jackets. One of the show contestants who was having the worst luck scoring a uniform remarked, “the other dons that didn’t want to help me out, when they see this they’re gonna be like ‘I could have got paid...I could have been on TV...I could have been online!’” (PAQ, 2017). This lack of respect for workers doing their jobs and simply, their personal space and rights, indicate a bigger problem about young people's obsession with consumer culture and the need to hop on every trend. This also says something about streetwear, a movement that is supposed to celebrate different walks



[Hustling Uniform Fits From Deliver, DHL Workers \PAQ Ep #3\ A Show About Streetwear]. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjMMzAEGa98>



of life, is also one that commodifies them. The fashion industry at large is participating in the same phenomenon.

### *High Fashion*

High fashion in particular has taken a keen liking to workwear. Some designers adapt workwear in ways that are subversive and satirizations, and others simply copy, re-contextualize, and add their creative spin to it. Many designers have looked at the urban work environment to loosely inform their work while others have romanticised and fetishized the space and the uniform of laborers of the street. For example, Moschino's Spring 2016 Ready-to-Wear collection was a line that was not so much an homage to the urban street environment as it was one that satirized and subverted the space. Moschino's designs certainly embodied symbols and garments associated with construction workers who work on city streets. It was flashy, high-vis left and right, and if the line lacked depth at its start, it certainly lacked depth when the runway came alive with twirling car scrubbers and bubbles as it closed with models wearing car wash themed



[Moschino Spring 2016 Ready To Wear]. (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2016-ready-to-wear/moschino>

evening wear. The line was a play on the models working their day job in construction and their night job at the car wash. It also contained a hint of satirical commentary on consumer culture,



models dresses containing signs that read “caution couture ahead” and “shop” instead of stop.

While the designer may have been trying to be experimental with his designs, especially in terms of textiles, the line fell short in terms of real representation of urban street workers. Construction workers who work night shifts at the carwash are certainly not interested in couture nor could they realistically afford it. There was dramatic disconnect in terms of its luxury and that it was a line tailored to the bodies of thin women in the modeling industry. It ultimately lacked social, economic, and cultural awareness but this was probably past the point of the collection (Berthelier & Palermo, n.d).

There are other cases of collaboration between fashion designers and labor that fall somewhere in the middle of brand awareness, high fashion, and philanthropy. For example, Heron Preston’s partnership with the New York Sanitation Department. Preston, best known for his work with Kanye West and Nike, created a line called “Uniform” in which he repurposed old sanitation-worker uniforms. The line was produced in cooperation with the New York Sanitation Department, proceeds from the line went to the Foundation for New York’s Strongest, and the line was also made to raise awareness for the “0x30” campaign, an initiative which aims to reduce landfill waste from New York City by 2030 (Safronova, 2016). Although the line paid homage to New York’s strongest, the line as well as its promotional event, didn’t raise much needed awareness around the work and life experiences of sanitation workers. The event indeed brought sanitation workers and those in the fashion industry together, but in the reports linked on NYC’s sanitation site, none of them indicated that any sanitation workers formally spoke or shared at the event. In one report, a sanitation worker at the event was quoted saying, “I have thirty years’ worth of those clothes at home...wish I’d known I could bring them here and make

some money” (DenHoed, 2017). When Heron Preston was asked about the inspiration for the line, he recounted a time he was in the oceans of Ibiza and a plastic bag brushed his arm, “and it all kind of clicked”. A friend who attended the show also commented that some people would be “scared to express themselves as far as really wanting to wear it (the repurposed uniforms)” (DenHoed, 2017). Preston’s comments on the inspiration for the line further illustrate how fashion designers hype up workers, without shedding enough light on their experiences and his friends’ comment alluded to the stigma behind being a sanitation worker. The thought that the buyers at the event might not want to wear the repurposed sanitation uniforms, also presents the dichotomy of fashion versus work. If buyers are just throwing these repurposed uniforms in their closets, never to be worn and potentially thrown out, then the lines’ initiative isn’t very successful. Might as well have donated them back to the Sanitation Department if they really wanted to prop them up and show support.

While the postal uniform trend has come up within streetwear, the trend really took off between 2015 and 2016 when the high fashion brand Vetements sold a DHL t-shirt for a whopping \$245. When Vetements’ S/S collection was revealed on the Paris runway in 2016, the DHL t-shirt stole the show. Some critics deemed it as ridiculous and others deemed it akin to the approach of Andy Warhol or the technique of *détournement*, heralded by the Situationist International. The irony and brazenness of it all is that the only difference between the designer version of the DHL shirt and the real version worn by couriers is a stripe that goes around the back and a smaller fit. Someone could buy 40 of the original DHL shirts made for couriers on their website for the price of one Vetements DHL shirt (Ahmed, 2017; Cochrane, 2016). What is very interesting about Vetements’ use of DHL is that DHL welcomed it, their CEO Ken Allen



interesting, another reason also being that these uniforms have not been repeatedly copied or romanticized in high fashion the same way other manual labor uniforms have been. Such as high-vis suits, coveralls, and chore coats, all work outfits that are favored as fashionable workwear, over different types of courier uniforms.

### ***Vintage & Thrift***

While DHL and Amazon had their moment, other postal uniforms are not appearing on the runway so much as they are coming up through the thrift and vintage scene. Over the past year, I have seen mail uniforms like UPS and USPS jackets and shirts being sold in thrifting and vintage spaces. These spaces are also great for finding old work jackets and pants that are broken in and slightly dilapidated. These types of pieces can be considered more appealing options because they are items that are more original and authentic rather than copies and iterations of workwear.

Vintage and thrift shopping have gained mass appeal in the last few years for a few reasons. One being that, authenticity as a lifestyle goal is being marketed across every social media influencer's platforms, so consumers want to ensure what they buy is authentic to ensure how they present themselves is too. So why is authenticity so important to everybody? It keeps circling around to the rebellious and free-spirited youth of the '60s. They rejected old schools of thought and conformist consumer culture, and they lamented the political powers at be for oppressing various groups of people. So young people consumed in new ways and developed their identities differently. This influence has stayed strong, and young people today want to embody the same mentality when they buy and dress. Now you can see young people shopping for styles from the '30s through '90s, because "consumers value engaging with the past in their

present, in a way it helps inform our understanding of who we are now and it provides us with feelings of belonging” (Jenss, 2015).

Some retailers are even branding their recycled and repurposed clothing as vintage because of the value vintage garners. For example Urban Outfitters, a major retailer for millennials, has been buying their “vintage” items from yard sales and flea markets for years. The catch in cases like this is that because of the durability, longevity, and nostalgic aspects of vintage, Urban Outfitters can take their thrifted goods and mark it up as vintage, often for triple the value (Lutz, 2012). Thrifting on the other hand attracts consumers because they have the opportunity to buy something of high quality for much less. The second hand market is growing exponentially, millennials and Gen Z are driving the growth, thrifting and resale has grown to become a \$51 billion dollar industry. Another appeal of shopping thrift and vintage is that it is more ecologically friendly, and for the social aspects (Reinhart, 2019). Shopping vintage and thrift is also a rich experience. The required patience and attention to detail that thrifting takes, and the way vintage generates nostalgia makes for a fun shopping experience that many young people bond over.

This experience even crosses over into the online sphere, one popular vintage and thrifting space that exists online is *Depop*. The online thrifting and vintage app was founded in London, where vintage and street style is huge. Like in the US, shopping thrift and vintage is extremely popular in London and many Londoners share the same reasons for shopping vintage and thrift over luxury and fast fashion (Cassidy & Bennett, 2012). It has also been observed that Londoners too have been embodying working class culture in how they dress, “fetischizing the streetwear of inner city black youths and wearing brands that were originally associated with the

working class and deemed scummy” (Todd, n.d; Diss, 2016). The app is targeted to, and used primarily by, millennials and Gen Z’ers. “The company said that about 90% of its active users are under the age of 26, and the US is on its way to becoming their biggest market” (Lunden, 2019). The app was initially created to provide users with an easy platform to snap pictures of their clothes and other used items to post for sale, it quickly became a hub for people to buy curated vintage and second-hand, limited edition clothing, or just currently hot trends (Lunden, 2019). Many sellers use the app to set up additional platforms for their thrift or retail business, and some just use the app to sell used clothes from their personal closets. I found that a variety of these sellers had their hands on workwear and were hyping up the workwear as a “look” and a “fit”, reinforcing how workwear has transformed into a form of fashion and achievable aesthetic. Vintage and thrift spaces are excellent examples of contact zones, not only do people of many walks of life enter these spaces to buy, but the clothes do too. As highlighted throughout this paper, we must not forget how our clothes are filled with rich history and ideology. It is in popular spaces like these, whether they are online like Depop or on the ground, that young people could be doing a better job of educating themselves on what they buy especially considering they are coming into contact with clothing that has had past life before them.

### **Fashion & Work**

Fashion is deeply ideological and we aren’t always aware of it. A way in which we tell people about ourselves is directly tied to consumption and the exhibition of what we consume. Clothing can be considered signs that we use to communicate different things about ourselves. Our clothes have a mental representation, a concept, attached to it. These concepts produce meanings that impact the way that thing falls on a hierarchy of value and power, historically and

culturally. As social beings, the way we dress communicates shared commonalities and differences in our lived experiences. Through fashion we can communicate our time, place, socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, our subculture, and more. It can unite and separate people through these communications. The German sociologist, George Simmel, put forth that fashion does not exist in classless societies. In his popular work called 'Fashion' (1957), he described how fashion “differentiates one time from another and one social stratum from another” (Simmel, 1957). This can be true when looking at the differences between what people wear to work.

Through this project, I learned more about the nuances of representation behind workwear by seeing how it was being worn in circumstances where there was no work being done. Through my research on who wears workwear for its intended purposes, I gained a more critical opinion about how contemporary brands and trends *copy* the iconography of some aspects of the working-class. In the video, “We Are a Working Class Family” (2019), published by the Trade Union Congress in the UK, the idea presented is that you don’t have to say you’re in the working class to understand someone is in the working class. Those actively working in the video were wearing high-vis vests, one group of couriers were represented wearing a uniform, what they shared was working long days for low pay in their work uniforms (Trades Union Congress, 2019). This exemplified the iconography of the working-class. Iconography is like ideological meaning, it tells you the circumstances under which the object was created, and the theology, mythology, and conventions it is associated with. Through this you can get to the representational meaning of an object (Jewitt & Leeuwen, 2001). Workwear has history, representation, and connotation associated with class, power, discipline, race, and gender

attached to it, making it's representational meaning very dense. When looking at someone walking down the street in jeans and a high-vis vest it is appropriate to assume they may be coming from or on their way to a job. It can also lead to assumptions around the type of job that person is doing, their socio-economic status, and a representation of their lifestyle.

Fast forward to our current realm of fashion, the distinctions between who wears what, and what that tells about them, has become very conflated. A recent and noteworthy example is the advent of “athleisure”. Clothing like sweatsuits, and brands such as Champions, that are made with cheap textiles and that have a totally informal style, were once associated with poorer people and it was viewed as clothing one should not wear out because it did not present put-togetherness. Now, it is not uncommon to see the top 1% of earners in the United States



[We're a working class family]. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEkdeK5TGc4>



embracing these styles, not only because they are very comfortable but because the meaning behind these styles are changing, and they're catalysts to this change (Netflix, 2019). This type of phenomenon is happening with workwear/uniforms. Workwear has been in the process of transformation for a new population of people for some time, like the phenomenon of athleisure, work clothes that were designed for activity are now worn for inactivity. An example that isn't as widely spoken about, and is quite unique, is the appropriation of work uniforms specifically.

Uniforms have historically been tied to the production and regulation of an easily read identity, while fashion on the other hand is linked with agency and creativity over many self-expressions (Tynan & Godson, 2019). One reason for the uniform's conception was to create a physical manifestation of the "unity created by certain types of authority". The uniform represents the power of the institution that sets the wearer of the uniform to work. It also puts those who are not in uniform at ease because the uniform helps legitimize how and where the wearer is situated within an institution (Tynan & Godson, 2019). While it communicates this, it also presents distinctions between occupations, classes, and social status. The uniform of someone working at a car factory might look very different from that of a postman, and the postman's uniform looks different from that of a doctor. These differences in design, and in some cases differences in branding, communicate social differences to non-wearers but also across wearers.

Considering how uniforms communicate differences in the regulation of time between groups of people, it is interesting to see how work uniforms have entered the leisure space. The ways in which different people spend their time is one of the very reasons a variety of garments are on the market (Tynan & Godson, 2019). Without the divisions of time and class, there would

not be a thriving commercial clothing trade, or the music, arts and entertainment industry. To see how garments marketed towards specific populations are adopted by others might indicate potential for businesses to gain a larger demographic and profits. Yet, from the social and cultural side, it calls into question why the garment was marketed to a specific group in the first place and how it is being adopted by another group. To understand why the transformation of workwear is a cause for critical thinking, it is beneficial to learn about where workwear came from, who workwear was intended for, and how it has carried on through time and space.

### **The Ways of Work**

The labor that workers put in for decades is what has led to the divisions of time between work and leisure that have enabled industries like the arts, fashion, and entertainment to prosper. Before these industries could thrive, the workplace and the workforce went through dramatic changes between the 19th and 20th century. “The American workforce was shaped by many factors—immigration and ethnicity, slavery and racial segregation, wage labor and technology, gender roles, class, as well as the ideals of freedom and equality” (The National Archives, n.d.). Americans began working on farms and in small towns, but through the mid 19th century the spaces in which American’s worked changed and grew more multiplicitous. Due to the industrial revolution and urbanization, small towns became booming industrial centers that needed thousands of workers. Many people who worked on farms, mills, and small shops transitioned to working jobs in urban environments. By the late 19th century and early 20th century, factories, construction zones, skyscrapers, offices, stores, and restaurants were desirable work spaces (The National Archives, n.d.).

Despite the new sector of jobs, with mass migration to urban centers came the kind of high demand for work which resulted in workplaces providing low wages and bad working conditions. To maintain growth and accelerate a prosperous future, and with the development of new and powerful technology, factories could run 24-hours a day, seven days a week. People were taken advantage of and worked grueling hours for the bare minimum. Due to the inhumane conditions that the labor sector was facing, workers banded together to fight for safer working conditions, better hours, and higher wages. By banding together to strike they eventually created unions to help meet the needs of the worker. Through unions, workers could come together to collectively bargain shorter work days, days off, safety regulations, and higher wages in their workplaces. Before strides were made in the labor movement, people were working up to 100 hours per week. By 1938, due to the hard work of the labor sector, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed. This act put a 40-hour work week, minimum wages, and overtime pay into place. Over the next decade, workers were able to negotiate health benefits. Some unions that grew were not only concerned with the common needs of one workplace but they were interested in creating a united working class, a union in which workers can come together to represent and help all different types of workers. Without the workers who went on strikes and unionized, there would not be a collectively strong working class as we know it and we would not have the work-life balance that exists today (TIME, 2015; HISTORY, 2017).

The working class makes up about half of the U.S population, since the '70s between 40% and 50% of Americans identified as working class. According to the think tank *Demos*, the jobs that make up the working class are mostly service jobs such as delivery workers, cashiers, and sanitation workers, and caring jobs such as elder care. The proportion of those in blue collar

and manufacturing jobs no longer dominates the percentage of workers in the working class (Draut, 2018). The working class has grown bigger and bigger but their lifestyle has had little representation in the media over the decades. When they are represented, men in the family were those with blue collar jobs and women were working inside the home. In reality, it is more common for both spouses to be working in a working class family and oftentimes they still face financial struggle with two incomes. On television characters worked as bartenders, fast food workers, construction workers, factory workers, and mechanics (Skidger, 2013). The working class does not have a static definition because labor changes and evolves over the decades but the concept of the working class remains strong.

It is peculiar to see how high fashion brands romanticize the working-class, incorporate it's iconography into their fashion lines, and endorse that their products are for a diverse population of people when in fact, they are only affordable for luxury buyers. This type of representation is not doing much for real working class people, but the fast pace nature of the fashion industry provides a need for more labor jobs to help keep fashion brands running. Fast fashion giants such as H&M, Topshop, and ASOS meet their quotas by outsourcing, contracting work, and accelerating labor. These fashion companies, and others like them, outsource their production to the point that the source of production is so far removed from the company that they do not have any legal obligations to ensure decent pay or working conditions. Most of the time, big American companies outsource their production to developing countries and within those countries, areas that have very low minimum wage. What exacerbates this issue is the sky-rocketing demand for new lines multiple times a season, which puts workers in positions where they must work incredibly fast. In today's media climate, we see things we want to buy

constantly, so brands and retailers must keep up with fleeting trends everytime they pop up (Stafford, 2018). Oftentimes, retailers carry only a small amount of different garments that are trending which creates higher demand on the customers' part, and enables companies to price their clothes sky high.

Luxury fashion brands are also participating in the same type of removed global supply chain as fast fashion brands. *KnowTheChain*, “is an organization that has developed a scoring system to identify how large apparel and footwear companies fare in terms of their global supply chains and worker treatment” (Segran, 2018). Their scoring system indicated that many of the brands we buy from are not monitoring their working conditions closely enough nor are they disclosing them. Even though there is a conception that luxury and high fashion brands are of higher quality, thus higher ethical standards, brands such as the Prada Group and LVMH Group were the brands that scored the lowest. They scored especially low in their recruitment practices



**Note:** Higher scores indicate more disclosure of labor standards and practices [KnowTheChain Apparel & Footwear Benchmark Findings Report]. (2018). Retrieved from [https://knowthechain.org/benchmarks/comparison\\_tool/6/](https://knowthechain.org/benchmarks/comparison_tool/6/)

of workers and the traceability and risk assessment of their suppliers of raw materials such as cotton and rubber (KnowTheChain, 2018).

By learning about the turbulent history attached to working class people and their occupations, we can gain a deeper understanding of the struggle uniformed workers have. This creates a critical perspective when looking at the dichotomy of workwear for workers and workwear as fashionable wear. As workwear has popped in and out of the limelight, fast fashion and luxury fashion have been pumping out workwear-esque lines to satisfy trend chasing customers. While these companies reap the benefits of large profits, there is one cost that we must remain thoughtful of, the exploitation of working class people. Designers and fast-fashion giants who crank out fashion lines multiple times a season have been known to hire working class people. When the fashion lines are those that embody working class aesthetics but are specifically targeted to high-end buyers we should look into this critically because they are usually not doing much for working class people's quality of life. By using the iconography of the working class, designers are blatantly ignoring their lived experiences for the sake of being subversive.

### **On Authenticity & Appropriation**

Appropriation is an expansive phenomenon that applies to many types of garments tied to class and culture. As we appropriate, we are constantly reinventing in new times and spaces. A popular reason designers and consumers might appropriate a style is because of its authenticity. Authenticity is a fairly modern desire when it comes to projecting meaning and creating a representation of oneself. The recent desire to embody authenticity can be accredited in part to the modernization of mass production in fashion, as well as the modernization of media, a tool

people use to curate and manufacture the representation of a lifestyle. As Joseph Pine and James Gilmore described, we live in an “experience economy”, a part of authenticating your experience has to do with what you wear (Pine & Gilmore, 2014). Dress is a representation of space, time, value, and culture. If one desired to embody the experiences of the hippies from the 60’s, in order to do that they could put certain beliefs into practice, but it would add to the authenticity of the experience if they also took actions to dress the way they did. Anneke Smelik, professor of visual culture, describes this action as targeting cultural memories of an imagined past for the purposes of creating an aura of authenticity. “The rich heritage of the past thus offers an illusion of authenticity to products and designers, this is possible because cultural memory is not a settled or given truth, but a dynamic phenomenon” (Smelik, 2011).

The fashion industry aims to sell you authenticity, they do so by appropriating the “real” and “original”. What we deem to be the real and authentic thing has been in the process of change since the moment it has traveled from its origins and landed in the palms of an outsider who claims creative freedom over it. Some garments and styles, despite their rich origins, can be argued to become something very different from what they were originally created as. As Smelik puts it, cultural memory is not static, it is “continually subject to negotiations and renegotiations” (Smelik, p. 81). And considering our climate of fast fashion and desire for authenticity, the past we are seeking out is always being performed differently as new trends develop (Smelik, 2011). In terms of workwear, it can be an old mechanic’s shirt that ended up in a vintage shop, or a pair of coveralls being mass-produced in our climate of fast-fashion, there is a spectrum of authenticity that they each fall on. Garments made in the high and fast-fashion industry essentially mimic the idea of authenticity, while garments that were once used by another and

have traveled through time and space can have deeper cultural origins. In this last example, there is arguably thicker cultural memory to play with in current contexts. Anneke Smelik proposed that cultural memory has material and immaterial aspects to it, the garment or style is the material but the way we engage with it is an ideological process.

Appropriation has appeared to be inevitable within the realm of fashion as trends and innovation in design tend to be recycled, re-contextualized, and re-imagined over and over again. We have seen a rise in media frenzy around cultural appropriation in the last two to three years, but despite cultural appropriation being the face of appropriation in consumer culture, there are more nuanced types of appropriation that exist. If we take into consideration the dynamics of the work uniform, how the chronicle of labor and the working class experience is tied to the work uniform, and *how* and *where* these uniforms are being copied and re-contextualized, we can form a critical perspective on its appropriation. Historically, workwear has been appropriated by many groups of people, but the appropriation and copying of worker's uniform can be met with contention due to the position of power held by those appropriating it.

### **Blue Collar Stolen Valor**

**“The funny thing about workwear is the idea of blue collar stolen valor, the idea that you wear something that a welder would wear...and you might wear it to the office, to a party, or just out.” - Nolan McCarthy**

The recycling, repurposing, and copying of work uniforms from a critical perspective can be considered working class appropriation. Workwear's history within subcultures, its copying in high fashion, its reinvention in streetwear, and pop cultures normalization of such has led this type of appropriation to become quite blasé. It is interesting to observe how fashions trendiest



styles are those that embody the desire to look like other groups of people outside the circle of fashion. Typically, the way trends and movements in fashion have been recorded have been through the *trickle down theory*, shared by fashion studies scholars Bordieu and Simmel. This theory describes how trends follow a hierarchical path, where they originate within high culture and then travel down to those who must assimilate. This perspective also puts forth that the copying of trends from high to low demonstrate clear class distinctions. This theory ignores the idea that innovations in fashion could move from low to high, from lower income groups to upper class groups, which has been the case with workwear. *Bubble up theory* encompasses when innovations in fashion are created within minority groups, subcultures, and low income groups. These trends end up engaging the upper class who end up appropriating them, usually hyping them up within mainstream culture (Glück, 2019).

The way workwear has permeated so many facets of fashion, and of popular and consumer culture, illustrates the value and versatility of workwear but in some instances it demonstrates a culture at large that is participating in class tourism. The concepts that have carried on since the '60s of dressing down, and the more recent desire for the aura of authenticity, brings with it the tourism of other people's cultural practices, dress being the practice under examination. When higher income groups go out of their way to use the class markers of working class people, for example by copying and reinventing workwear, or by tracking down a vintage work uniform, they are really engaging in a performance. This performance is one in which they are trying on a new identity for size without any of the real world implications. This should be met with criticism because class, like culture, is not a

costume; those living in the working class do not have the luxury of turning their lifestyle on and off.

Workwear has an interesting relationship with class and power, and that relationship continues today. Workwear and uniforms were developed because there was a need for workers and an even more pressing need for their protection on the job. These jobs were essential to the expansion of the economy, without the hard work of those builders, iron workers, welders, sanitation workers, etcetera, we wouldn't have a thriving society. This is being especially highlighted in the wake of the coronavirus, as many of the workers represented in this story are considered absolutely essential to the stability and future of our country.

What we need to remain thoughtful of is our privilege compared to the workers that we are looking to for trivial aesthetic goals. We should be mindful about workers like firefighters and EMTs who still have to work additional jobs to make ends meet (ABC News, 2017; Bahler, 2018). We should remember that sanitation workers, postal workers, and other couriers work through rain, sleet, snow, and even a pandemic. They sacrifice their rest and their safety, those at the New York Sanitation Department wake up at 3:30 AM to work for clean streets (Haden, 2020). Postmen and couriers work all day to get us what we need when we need it. While we live comfortably in our bubbles, we are constantly setting thousands of workers in motion when we swipe our credit cards to populate our homes with stuff, when we order even more goods online, and when we take that waste out to the curb. Many of the conglomerates we buy from are also in fact employing working class people to make those things that we need and sometimes the things we have the luxury of just wanting for the fun of it.

Fashion can be considered a luxury, it is different from necessity, it is a creative pastime and a multi-billion dollar industry. An industry that has also been outed by public reports that reveal their poor labor standards and their exploitative practices. This happens overseas where companies can stay far removed from their supply chains and decrease liability, and it also happens in our own backyards (KnowTheChain, 2018; Meagher, 2020). Many of the workers we rely on to help us in our daily lives and to indulge our desire for luxuries are workers that live paycheck to paycheck, and are often subjected to working conditions that are not ideal to maintain a healthy quality of life (KnowTheChain, 2018). When the fashion industry mimics, copies, reinvents, and reappropriates the uniform of working class people it sheds light on our unhealthy preoccupation with class, our privilege when we commodify class markers, and our priorities around consumerism.

It is clear that workwear has a dynamic relationship with class and power. It's traveled and transformed through many spaces, leading to it's appropriation to fall on a spectrum. Subcultures like the Black hip-hop community have appropriated workwear to their own advantage but in cases like this, the power conflict isn't as glaring if you consider how this subculture is made up of systemically underprivileged people. Workwear has been recycled and repurposed in the vintage and thrift wear scene, where there is a range of consumers. Many vintage shoppers value the longevity and the historical aspect of the clothing. Thrift shoppers are very much attracted to the bargain, some thrift shoppers are working class people who are looking to buy something high quality for cheap. In the streetwear and high fashion scene, the power difference that exists between the creator and their muse is stark, the appropriation of workwear in this case is a classic example of a privileged group's motivated act of taking without

permission, and making their own. The appropriation of workwear is just one example of the appropriations that arise within our consumer culture, but what is unique about this example is its origins, its prevalence, its relationship with class and power, and the lack of education around this type of power dynamic. Across the board, it is crucial that we develop a critical consciousness around how our consumer culture is moving forward and it is essential that we educate ourselves on what we buy and wear.

### **“Who Are You Wearing”: The Production**

During a recent thrifting experience, a trend that caught my attention was the revival of the Americana trend. Trucker hats, Harley Davidson and Nascar t-shirts, as well as lots and lots of denim. On one thrifting occasion, I went to Buffalo Exchange, a shop where they sell majority second-hand and a small portion of vintage. In the thrift section, I found a light pink t-shirt with trucks on the back, the back read “Girls Play in Mud Puddles Too”. I liked the juxtaposition of the rugged country and gentle feminine aesthetic. I added the shirt to my growing pile. I wore the pink trucker shirt out in Philly one day, and as I walked down the Benjamin Franklin parkway, I started to receive lots of strange looks, I thought I had something on my face all day. I got home to realize, it wasn’t a smudge on my face or messy hair, it was a capital racial offense. On the breast of my shirt, was a logo for the Dixie Classic, and roses with the confederate flags etched into them. I was shocked, ashamed, embarrassed all at once. “How didn’t I see this, why didn’t I pay closer attention to what I was buying?” I exclaimed to my friends and family when I recounted the story.

This experience led me to question more and more trends, the trend I felt most compelled to examine was the workwear trend. I began to question: *Where do these garments come from?*

*Who was it originally intended for? What were these garments originally made for? And, what happens to the meaning and function of these clothes as they travel through time and space?*

This inspired me to pursue a project that explores the appropriation and transformation of workwear, as well as one that encourages people to educate themselves on what they are buying so they don't make the same mistake I did.

### **Pre-Production**

This phase of my production required a substantial amount of planning, organization, and research. At this point in my process, I had my sights set on highlighting vintage and thrifting spaces as a dominant part of my creative work. As a vintage and thrift shopper, I know that there is a culture involved within the community that enjoys consuming this way. Going on a thrift and vintage run is a rich and layered experience. It requires knowledge that average consumers or fast-fashion consumers might not have, and it contains in-jokes which are commonplace within subcultures and smaller communities. I can easily perceive if a piece in someone's outfit is of older origin, usually offering up a compliment to commend them on their quality find. I have had this type of exchange numerous times, and I have seen others partake in the same kind of interaction. Vintage and thrift shoppers often have go-to spots and favorite brands that they like to share within their own community and outsiders. A brand that I found popping up often was Carhartt. I began to take notice that Carhartt was at almost all of the vintage stores and flea markets that I attended. As well as loads of denim pants, jackets, overalls, and coveralls. Reflecting back on my Americana t-shirt ordeal, I questioned what was so appealing about Carhartt and all the denim outfits being sold everywhere, and at quite lofty prices. This is when I began to specifically look into workwear as a trend.

During my pre-production phase, I researched Fashion Studies Programs in Philadelphia and New York so that I could find interesting events to attend and professors to connect with. During the Fall of 2019, I attended Parsons School of Design's "Fashion & Pedagogy" Event where I had the opportunity to chat with various fashion studies professors and professionals. Here I met Kim Jenkins, a lecturer at Parsons who also happens to be a vintage enthusiast. Her work focuses heavily on the intersection of race and fashion, so when I told her about my thrifting mishap she told me about "the three S's" coined by Fashion Law Professor Susan Scafidi. The three S's, is "an easy way to think through the benefits and the perils of wanting to consume that thing," and it is in response to, "our inclination to cross-pollinate with other cultures when it comes to our material culture" (K. Jenkins, personal communication, January, 9 2020). The three S's, *source, significance, and similarity*, provided me with an excellent framework for my investigation into workwear.

I began my research by examining the last of the three S's, *similarity*. It was through observing and studying examples of workwear that are worn in spaces of leisure that I learned *what* workwear was originally intended for and *who* it was intended for. I first confronted the examination of similarity between real workwear, copies of workwear, and workwear that fell somewhere in the middle, in spaces that I frequented often. Spaces like my local vintage and thrift shops, the thrifting app Depop, and retailers like Urban Outfitters and ASOS. I found myself feeling internal conflict when I came across items of workwear in these spaces because I actually thought it looked cool, but I also felt that it was appropriative. In the first sequence of my mini-documentary *Who Are You Wearing* (2020), my sister is texting me screenshots of workwear she likes, but she admits "I kinda feel weird wearing it though" (Who Are You

Wearing, 2020). I developed this scene to mirror the exact feelings that I had through this phase of my project. In order to get to the bottom of these feelings, I had to start from the beginning and learn about the source of workwear. The narrative introduction to my film represents the very process and journey I went on to educate myself on the origins and the transformations of workwear by simulating this same journey for the audience.

### Source & Significance

The research that made up the first half of our journey towards understanding workwear consisted of various mediums, including archival footage, archival photos, and present day interviews. I began by going back in time to learn about the different types of work that arose out of the changing landscape of America. Through archival footage, newspapers, and photos I learned and in turn educated my viewers about different types of labor, the labor movement, and the livelihood of working class people. Considering how many of the underprivileged workers



[Who Are You Wearing]. (2020). Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/411239129/7929b06ebf>

within the labor movement were public service workers, I felt compelled to briefly include the essential workers that are working through the COVID pandemic as they are also dealing with working in dangerous conditions for long hours and low pay.

Another aspect of this investigation that I chose to highlight are the sources of transformation like subcultures and vintage and thrift spaces. In my interview with Adam of Dave's New York, I gained first hand knowledge around the shift of workwear for utility and workwear for fashion. Dave's New York has been in Adam's family for three generations, so Adam grew up in the store witnessing the clientele of his family's shop change, and the new ways in which workwear was being worn within subcultures in the early '90s. I also chose to represent how workwear's transformation in the '90s has a significant influence on the way people wear it today. I shot informal interviews that functioned as personal testimonies about workwear. At Dave's Workwear I was able to shadow young shoppers and see their decision making process in buying workwear. Dave's customers present workwear's new meaning as something "swaggy". They told me how much they like rap music, indicating the lasting influence of the hip hop community's transformation of workwear. The student from Temple represented someone who wears workwear because he is a part of a community that always has, that community being the skate community. The third testimony is a former colleague, Nolan, a fashion enthusiast who discussed how he is aware of the irony around workwear for leisure but wears it anyways, especially the denim jacket that his step mother passed down to him. Each testimony highlighted unique reasons for why workwear is desirable for nonworkers and



presented to the audience how far workwear has traveled and how it's transformation is still ongoing.

### **Similarity**

This production only briefly touches on the appropriation of workwear within streetwear and high fashion because the power conflict that the fashion industry presents at large, and the way the industry commodifies class and cultural markers is so extensive that it could be its own 15-minute documentary. As previously mentioned, the thrifting and vintage space is where I first came face to face with my consumption of problematic trends, and it was within this space that I questioned my own potential act of appropriation. I decided to focus the most heavily on this consumer space because of my personal experiences and because of the rise in popularity of vintage and thrift shopping.

Through my official visits to Philly AIDS Thrift and to Raxx Vintage, I learned the precise differences there are between thrift and vintage, and I got a behind the scenes look of what the donation process looks like. Philly AIDS Thrift allowed me to visit their third floor where they store hundreds of bags of donations, it is also here that their staff go through the bags and determine what items can make it to the sales floor. This process is very different from that of Raxx Vintage, where they curate clothing that is only vintage, meaning that it must be at least 20 years old, and they carefully clean the pieces before selling them to the public. Vintage is usually priced higher in part for its historical value, and for the service of curation and cleaning that the store provides while thrift is usually priced down.

Another important reason I chose to focus on vintage and thrifting spaces is because they are incredible examples of spaces in which clothes travel from many times and places to exist under one roof, and it is also under this roof that a wide range of customers of all different ages and walks of life come into contact with these clothes. The possibility of coming into contact with garments that have rich cultural and class ties is inevitable, and the way buyers could transform these garments is endless making it a great point to take the *similarity* of the garment into consideration. Whether it is a copy of workwear that you are buying, or an old and authentic piece that you are and making your own, it is a step in the right direction to first think about its resemblance to real class markers. While a major part of this mini documentary is to encourage viewers to educate themselves on what they buy, it is also to remind them to remember origin stories.

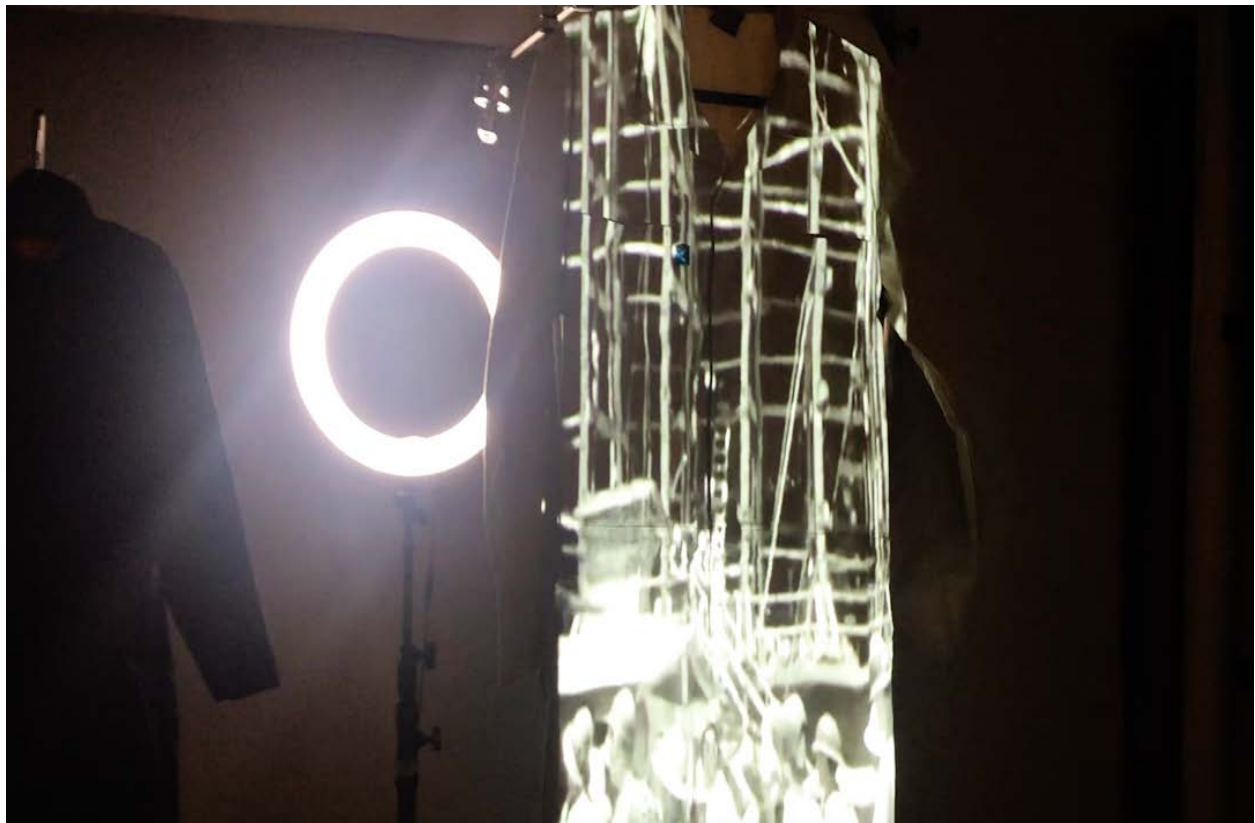
### **Projection Mapping As A Tool for Storytelling**

I chose to use projection mapping as a way to create a more interesting connection between the history and the clothes. This process gave me the opportunity to incorporate a more tangible experience to my documentary. I chose to present the audience with pieces of workwear that are closely tied to the working class such as the blue collar work shirt and coveralls, and through projection mapping I could make the garment's origins come to life with archival footage of different workplaces and workers doing their jobs. What we forget about our clothes is that they had lives before us. In some instances our clothes are literally passed down from person to person, acquiring and shedding meaning as it travels. In other cases our clothes are innovations that become recontextualized or adjusted for present contexts. In any case, the projection mapping piece of this project is meant to remind viewers to remember origin stories.

By showing the audience the origins of workwear physically attached to the garments at the end of this film, I hope to leave viewers with a strong association that will last in their minds, one that I hope they remember next time they go shopping.

### **Challenges & Opportunities**

Completing a thesis project during the COVID 19 pandemic provided many challenges, but it also presented many opportunities to try new methods for communication and creation. The pandemic dominantly interfered with the practices of film, media, and art majors because our practice requires the use of tools that we may not have and a whole lot of collaboration. The pandemic cut my production schedule short, and the required social distancing at first seemed to illuminate a big part of my project plans that involved having conversations with people. I



[Who Are You Wearing]. (2020). Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/411239129/7929b06ebf>

planned to shoot four to five workwear testimonies of people who wear workwear for fashion, and four to five more testimonies of actual uniformed workers. While I couldn't go out and speak to uniformed workers as I planned, I still had the tools to research "a day in the life" of various different kinds of uniformed workers, and rather than including this in my production I used the research in my paper. I also cut down my workwear as fashion testimonies and proposed that my last testimony subject record his own thoughts on his computer. Despite the change up in perspective, I think it worked as a stylistic choice, especially in present contexts as many media makers are using DIY methods due to the circumstances. I also decided to employ the idea of phones in my project because that is the best way that we can communicate at the moment. Initially, my project plan was to include a narrative portion of a subject shopping in a local vintage shop for workwear. Once I re-evaluated I remembered that I can shop for vintage workwear from the comfort of my own home. I decided to highlight the online thrifting and vintage app Depop because it is an app that myself and my peers actually use to buy fashionable vintage and cheap high quality clothing. I had already collected examples of workwear being sold on Depop, so I decided to use one of those examples and adapt the local shopping experience to an online one. Additionally, I adapted the confrontation and conversation around workwear to one that is virtual rather than in real life. This ended up working quite well because it still rang true and it is extremely relatable for people my age and younger. The pandemic led to some game-time critical decision making, and I believe the choices I made dramatically impacted the piece for the better.

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