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Convivial Clothing: Engagement with Decommodified Fashion in Portland, OR

by

Sarah Guldenbrein

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
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ABSTRACT

In a capitalist system demanding perpetual accumulation, producers invest significant resources into proving the superiority of new products over existing ones. When the normative concept is "better" rather than "good," consumers can never reach a sense of sufficiency. One countermovement is that of *degrowth*. Degrowth scholars advocate for a voluntary and democratic transition to a post-growth future. This thesis contributes to the emerging literature on degrowth by examining alternatives to "fast fashion," an industry with a huge environmental impact and notoriously high turnover. Drawing on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with participants in Portland, Oregon's clothing swaps and Repair Cafés, which are free, volunteer-run repair pop-ups, this paper brings citizens' understandings of their engagement with fashion into the degrowth framework. It asks the following research questions: **How do participants in RepairPDX and clothing swaps conceptualize their participation? To what extent do these understandings align with the ideals of degrowth and decommodification?** I discuss the themes of expense, pleasure and community, and consumption and waste, and argue that mending and swapping are decommodified practices that run counter to capitalist market society, maximizing autonomy and equality, and minimizing the market's tendencies towards environmental degradation. This study addresses gaps in the literatures on mending, alternative consumption, post-purchase consumer practice, and contributes to the growing body of degrowth literature.

For Aaron Fellman,
who listens to all of my big ideas,
props me up when I’m falling down,
and who puts up with my sense of humor.

For Ross Guldenbrein,
who shaped my sense of humor,
inspired me to teach,
and who’s been living a degrowth lifestyle for at least fifty years.

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INTRODUCTION

> The order that I usually go is clothing swap, thrift shop, and then buy online… Because I am well aware of the fast fashion epidemic...and how it's damaging the environment. And unfortunately, a lot of the clothing brands that participate in fast fashion, they also tend to target middle to low income folks, and I'm not made of money, so I try not to buy from them, but at the same time, I can't afford the more ethical brands just yet, so that's why I tend to go to clothing swaps and thrift more, because environmentally I feel better about it, and it's also in my budget, and it's also a way for me to give back to the community (Christine, 30, swapper).

Few industries have been as successful at compelling ever-increasing demand as fashion. So-called "fast fashion" retailers are multinational clothing producers who have optimized their production chains such that they can produce and distribute new designs in an extremely short timeframe. Some well-known examples are H&M, Zara, and Topshop. Fast fashion companies typically have higher profit margins than traditional fashion retailers (Joy et al. 2012). A Marxist perspective would hold that these profits come from the exploitation of labor and the environment. Producers like these have driven the normalization of high turnover and immediate obsolescence, but rarely do fashions change because the new clothes are functionally better than what was available before (Fletcher 2016). Some researchers go so far as to suggest that fashion may act as the pace-setter for overall consumption (Holroyd 2017; Schor 2011). They argue that as fast fashion retailers have increased the speed with which they can turn around inventory, other industries have followed the model developed by the fashion industry.

Ivan Illich (1973) reminds us that in industrial production, innovation and change are costly for producers, who demand sure proof that an expensive investment in new technology will produce profits. Thus, producers throw significant effort into proving to consumers (who are sometimes producers themselves) the superiority of the new product or process. Illich believes that over time, the effect of this constant effort has been to create a societal belief that anything new will de facto be better than that which came before. When the normative concept is “better” rather than “good,” a sense of sufficiency can never be achieved. Consumers can never be fully satisfied, and will anxiously seek to expand their means in order to increase their ability to consume industrial goods and services, which, once consumed, can always be replaced by “better” ones. Fast fashion in particular “fosters an unhealthy dissatisfaction with what one has and anxiety about falling behind” (Schor 2011:41).

Increased consumption has been accompanied by increased product abandonment. As industrial products have gotten cheaper, people have responded by buying more, and by holding on to their products for a shorter period of time (Schor 2011). The speed of turnaround on store shelves creates a sense of scarcity, which encourages frequent shopping and impulsive purchasing (Joy et al. 2012). In the U.S., Schor (2011) estimates that textiles make up 4.7% of American annual municipal waste, or 78 pounds per capita. This increased speed of consumption creates greater burdens of waste, not only from discarded consumer goods, but from the production process as well. More significantly, however, increased consumption requires the further extraction of scarce environmental resources and continued exploitation of global indigent labor. Reducing the consumption of new textiles could have significant positive environmental and social impacts.

In response to the growth imperative pushed by industrial capitalist society, countermovements have arisen that are calling for a society that is based on human and environmental well-being. In particular, the *degrowth* movement is a network of scholars and activists who are developing critiques of and alternatives to the dominant narrative of the capitalist growth regime. The declaration of the 2008 degrowth conference in Paris defined degrowth as a

> voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society...the objectives of degrowth are to meet basic human needs and ensure a high quality of life, while reducing the ecological impact of the global economy to a sustainable level, equitably distributed between nations. (Research and Degrowth 2008)

Within the fashion industry, a "slow fashion" movement has been building momentum in response to the environmental and social harms that accompany "fast fashion" production. The term "slow fashion" is derived from the Slow Food movement; it has gained some currency in the online fashion community, and is being studied by a small but growing group of scholars (Fletcher 2016; Gwilt 2014; Holroyd 2017; König 2013). In this paper, I hope to show that Slow Fashion is also complimentary to the degrowth movement. The degrowth movement has already embraced the Slow Food movement, as easily recognized by the two movements' mutual embrace of images of snails. Both degrowth and the Slow movements emphasize that industrialization has had detrimental effects on people and environment, and that to benefit both, society should shift its focus away from production and profits, and towards wellbeing and care.

The Slow movements seek to promote a higher quality of life by rejecting quantity-over-quality consumerism and the accompanying insatiable desire to consume (Harvey 2010). Slow Fashion encourages alternatives to clothing consumption like extending wear through mending, and encouraging emotional attachment to garments (Fletcher 2016; Souza 2016). These practices delay or reduce the need to purchase clothing from the market, and are thus *decommodifying* processes. Vail (2010) argues for the use of the term decommodification as “any political, social, or cultural process that reduces the scope and influence of the market in everyday life” (p.313). Vail describes five facets of decommodification: boundary protection, enhanced public goods provision, decommodified economic circuits, social protection, and market transparency. In this thesis, I argue that Slow Fashion fits into the category of decommodified economic circuits. The concept of decommodification has significant but not complete overlap with the degrowth project, and I argue that the two have much to offer each other. Decommodification can lend a focused theoretical aim to the highly pluralist degrowth network, which itself represents an active and growing academic and non-academic community.

Entering the field, I wished to gain insight into ways that those who may be interested in fashion, but who are concerned about its environmental impact, attempt to engage this interest while minimizing their environmental footprint. This paper seeks to address the following research questions: **How do participants in RepairPDX and**

clothing swaps conceptualize their participation, and to what extent do these understandings align with the ideals of degrowth and decommodification?

I approached these questions through the use of participant observation in two decommodified clothing systems: 1) RepairPDX, a monthly event where volunteers offer free repairs of small appliances and textiles to the general public, and 2) clothing swaps organized by volunteers and publicized by the website Swap Positive, as well as a larger, more heavily publicized clothing swap organized by local sustainable fashion nonprofit Modify Style. I supplemented my observations with 20 semistructured interviews with organizers, volunteers, and participants in these three sites.

Looking at these two sites through the emergent themes of expense, pleasure and community, and consumption and waste, I argue that mending and swapping are decommodified practices that run counter to capitalist market society, maximizing autonomy and equality, and that are rooted in social needs rather than profits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the environmental literature, there is a debate about whether voluntaristic, individual-level consumption choices can effect the sort of change that is needed to move our path away from human-induced environmental catastrophe. Schnaiberg (1980) concludes that the state must be the agent that regulates the treadmill of production. Likewise, Foster, Clark, and York (2010) argue that "a socialist concept of ecological plenitude" would reduce the dominant focus on voluntaristic solutions and instead promote a structural transformation (p. 397). Szasz (2007) argues that access to individual consumption choices even *prevents* consumers from advocating for systemic change. Voluntaristic solutions alone are inadequate to produce structural change.

However, voluntary approaches such as participation in Repair Cafés and clothing swaps offer insights into social movements that are attempting to produce structural change. One of these social movements is building among a group of scholars who promote the concept of economic degrowth. I will begin my review of the literature with the current state of degrowth scholarship.

Mending and swapping are voluntary practices that are rarely if ever supported by any sort of state-level incentives[1]. The second half of this review will overview the literature on mending, swapping, and Slow Fashion, and show that these activities are underresearched, and have great potential as part of the project of building a post-growth future.

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[1] WWII "Make Do and Mend" campaigns are a notable exception, as are proposed laws in several states that seek to preserve the right to repair from the encroachment of copywriting and monopolization, particularly by the auto and tech industries (repair.org).

Degrowth and Voluntary Simplicity

One of the leading degrowth scholars, Giorgos Kallis, defines degrowth as the "equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions" (2017:10). While rooted in ecological economics, degrowth has a broad field of inquiry. The transition to a post-growth future has far-reaching concerns and implications. Several scholars have positioned degrowth as a rallying slogan that comes with deep theoretical and practical import (Bonaiuti 2012; Kallis 2017; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017). It is not necessarily a clearly unified theory, plan, or political movement, but rather a "concept in the making" (Haucke 2017).

Importantly, these scholars advocate for a voluntary and democratic transition to a post-growth future. While some scholars in the degrowth network recognize that there would be a need for a strong state to enforce egalitarian policies, the degrowth movement also encompasses individual-level voluntary actions such as urban agriculture, eco-communities, and voluntary simplicity (D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015).

For many degrowth scholars, voluntary simplicity is a central mechanism for rejecting the capitalist growth imperative. To these scholars, voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle that consciously reduces wasteful and resource-intensive consumption, while also seeking non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning (Alexander 2015; Schor 2011). Voluntary simplicity can also be understood as a way of merging personal ideals with everyday practices, allowing concrete solutions to begin without waiting for transformations in the political or economic sphere. It implies “changes of your way of life in every area of your existence” (Bossy 2014:191).

However, many in the degrowth network also argue that voluntary simplicity must be accompanied by the imperative to *transform* rather than to *escape* capitalism (Alexander 2015; Bossy 2014; Cattaneo 2015; Kallis 2017; Trainer 2015). In this view, individual voluntary simplicity actions are useless without accompanying engagement in the political field. Instead of being a form of disengagement from society, voluntary simplicity must become embedded in society as part of a movement towards “creating *a new ecological hegemony* within civil society” (Foster, York, and Clark 2010:397, original emphasis).

Because voluntary simplicity is largely concerned with reducing consumption, a discussion of this concept must be accompanied by one about the social meanings of consumption. A social conceptualization of consumption asks not *what* people consume, but *why* they consume. One answer to this question is that consumption builds identity. Special and cherished objects are used and displayed conspicuously, with the knowledge that others will draw inferences from these objects (Bourdieu 1984; Deutsche and Theodorou 2010; Jackson 2005; Schaefer and Crane 2005). Since many consumption acts occur in the presence of others, consumption can be seen as a mode of communication and as an expression of relationships (Schaefer and Crane 2005). Consumption of things with the “correct” symbolic value in the presence of others communicates taste, and reproduces and maintains social status and class (Bourdieu 1984). Fashion, especially changing fashions, would have no meaning if this were not the case (Willis and Schor 2012).

Therefore, when advocating for reduced consumption, it bears consideration that consumption fulfills certain sociological functions. To ignore these social facts in a call to categorically reduce consumption would be futile. Any attempt to coerce a population to forgo a commonly employed means to construct identity, strengthen social bonds, or seek hedonistic pleasure would be problematic (Schaefer and Crane 2005). However, the social functions commonly fulfilled through consumption are fulfilled in part by the *symbolism* of commodities, rather than their purely material forms. Since symbolism is socially constructed, the value attached to the symbol is under constant renegotiation (Jackson 2005). This suggests that social needs currently met by consumption could be met by less materialistic pursuits (Jackson 2005; Wapner 2010). This supports the view that voluntary simplicity is an avenue for reducing consumption without necessarily feeling deprived or wanting. It could very well increase a sense of wellbeing.

In a degrowth society, some market consumption could be replaced by non-market alternatives. Gibson-Graham (1996) argue that if the dominant discourse presents capitalism as hegemonic, then alternative processes are relegated to the margins of society and the imagination or rendered invisible altogether. Vail (2010) uses the concept of decommodification to unify the diverse political, social, and cultural sets of practices or processes that reduce dependency on the market. Decommodification is a step beyond individualist solutions – it consists of many small movements that, when unified, can have significantly more power. Unifying many diverse non-capitalist processes under the uniting concept of decommodification allows for their visibility as a "cognitive and emotional counterweight" to assumed hegemonic capitalism (Vail 2010:314). Decommodified practices promote social justice over market rationality and profit, and privilege autonomy, creativity, and democracy.

Importantly, like the politicization of voluntary simplicity, decommodification is not only about recognizing the presence of non-market alternatives, but about the progressive spread of these alternatives. As I will discuss, Repair Cafés and clothing swaps do indeed displace some consumption on the market, but it is unclear whether the influence of these sites expands or merely maintains a small amount of decommodification.

Mending

One essential mechanism for reducing consumption is by prolonging the life of existing commodities. The practice of mending clothing, once an economic necessity when clothing and textiles were very expensive, has largely disappeared. Once a common skill set for all, but especially for women, the disappearance of mending can be explained by the rise in women's participation in the workforce and increasing working hours, as well as the increased availability of cheap, mass-produced clothing (Fletcher 2008; Gwilt 2014; Schor 2011). However, in recent years, mending has been enjoying a revival among online and offline craft communities, as demonstrated by the growth of repair groups such as RepairPDX, a phenomenon highlighted by a small group of academics (Gwilt 2014; Holroyd 2017; König 2013; Middleton 2014, Souza 2016).

This body of work has shown mending to be loaded with cultural significance. König (2013) argues that mending is gendered and politicized, carries intrinsic reward as a result of the satisfaction that comes from the long process of skillbuilding, and is sometimes one of a number of practices employed in an effort to align everyday practice with environmental values. Holroyd (2017) interviewed participants who mended out of a desire to avoid supporting sweatshop labor. She also found menders who enjoyed the physical practice as a reprieve from digital deskwork, and sees mending and making as forms of “everyday resistance.” Gwilt (2014) interviewed menders who found the social aspect of mending groups valuable, and Souza (2016) writes of the satisfying human connections she developed while running her own mending group. This previews the theme of pleasure and community that emerged in my own data. This small body of mending literature shows that mending has unrecognized social value.

The practice of visible mending, where mends are made intentionally conspicuous in order to draw attention to the skilled handwork that produced them, could replace some of the symbolic function that consumers get from fast fashion (Holroyd 2017). Fast fashion producers have conditioned consumers to regularly seek out small, non-functional changes in clothing, such as pant shape, or seasonal color, or fabric textures. These small, non-functional changes have been leveraged by producers to breed a sense of insufficiency in consumers and spur continued consumption (Fletcher 2016; Schor

2011). Visible mending could potentially provide the novelty and regular small changes that fast fashion producers have conditioned consumers to seek out. Mending makes non-functional changes (or restores functionality) while also *preventing* consumption. Mending makes things “new” again, while using only minimal new material inputs. Mending alters our goods, and importantly, also changes their symbolic meaning. Investing time and effort into an object can imbue it with deeper personal meaning, even political meaning (Holroyd 2017).

According to König (2013), “mending can be understood as a transformative interaction with the material world: it is a practice with the potential to change the way that we view and engage with commodities” (577-578). König also positions mending as one of a number of practices performed by people who are concerned with environmental sustainability and who want to take action on an individual level. Middleton (2014) writes, “the perceived need for a new product is actively dismantled...Within the very intimacy and humility of mending lies a deep political power” (p. 267). Like König, Middleton also sees mending as anti-consumer activism and a mode of resistance to unsustainable fashion. Mending conjures associations with domestic knowledge and thrift (König 2013), natural allies to voluntary simplicity. The practice of mending could therefore fulfill some of the social functions of fast fashion while consuming few resources. Mending, and craft in general, “creates slow space, a speed at odds with the imperative toward hyperproduction” (Bratich and Brush 2011:236). For all of these reasons, I argue that mending is a decommodified practice that runs counter to capitalist market society and is worthy of attention and inclusion within the degrowth movement. Being underresearched, undervalued, and predominantly practiced by women, I also see mending as an inherently feminist issue.

Decommodified Fashion

It is not my intention to argue that all market activity should be abolished or displaced. Rather, we should look for and celebrate the places where non-market activity is able to coexist with market activity in a way that maximizes autonomy and equality, and minimizes the market's tendencies towards environmental degradation, instability, and social inequality (Vail 2010). I argue that public repair events and clothing swaps are important components of Slow Fashion, and offer an alternative to some fashion consumption on the market, reducing consumers' dependency on market systems.

Volunteer-based repair and clothing swaps fit into the category of decommodification that Vail calls "socially embedded, decommodified circuits." This encompasses "any form of economic activity (broadly defined) that influences and reorients the motivations, incentives, interests, values, priorities, and behavior of economic actors to promote social priorities and egalitarian objectives rather than market rationality" (2010:329). The Repair Café website clearly states that the central aims of the organization are to reduce waste and utilize the repair skill sets that the market undervalues (Repair Café 2016). Similarly, the Swap Positive website, which coordinates and publicizes local swaps, mentions the importance of sustainability and thrift, and explicitly forbids swap participants to resell clothing acquired at the swaps; it requests that this clothing be gifted or donated if the swap participant decides not to keep it (Swap Positive, n.d.).

Vail reminds his readers that there are challenges to decommodified circuits, namely that the ubiquity of market rationality may inform the incentives, values, and behavior of users. Similarly, there is no easy answer to the issue of the unequal power of monopoly capital (Baran and Sweezy 1966). If decommodified circuits were to gain enough traction to measurably displace consumption of industrially produced goods, monopoly capital could throw huge sums of money and intensive lobbying efforts towards ensuring its own continued market dominance.

In response to these limits, Vail suggests that the real power of decommodified circuits is not just in their establishment, but in their spread over time. In this sense, the Repair Café organization is exemplary. Founded in 2009, the organization now boasts of over 1,400 registered Repair Cafés world wide (Repair Café 2016). I was unable to locate comparable statistics for clothing swaps.

Clothing swaps are underrepresented in the literature, possibly because their often informal nature and the lack of a central organization make them difficult to track. The present research will begin to close this notable gap in the literature, and build on two notable swap studies. Matthews and Hodges (2016) using participant observation and interviews, argue that the most important aspects of clothing swaps are the social aspect, as well as their utility as a simultaneous site of acquisition *and disposal*. Albinsson and

Perera (2012) also emphasize the importance of community in their study of anarchist alternative marketplaces called Really Really Free Markets.

Repair Cafés have been studied through the lens of social movements, environmentalism, and gender (Rosner 2013; Rosner and Turner 2015). Rosner and Turner (2015) found that repair volunteers associate their actions with environmentalism and sustainability, and view their acts of repair as interventions in wider social processes. Rosner (2013) observed that in two Bay Area repair organizations, textile repair jobs were given to women, while men took on the repair of consumer electronics. Though she argues that public repair events "complicate" gendered practices by blurring the distinctions between repair and care work, nonetheless she portrays a distinctly gendered milieu, in which women's competencies are viewed as nontechnical and trivialized.

Rosner primarily focuses her attention on electronics repair, and spares few words for the sewing repair at her field sites. I propose to build on Rosner and Turner's work by turning an academic eye to the women's sphere of the repair event. Rosner (2013) does indeed find that repair volunteers view their participation as a form of politicized activism.

CONTEXT

RepairPDX

In 2009, Martine Postma organized the first Repair Café in Amsterdam. It was so successful that she went on to found the non-profit Repair Café Foundation, which supports local groups starting their own Repair Cafés (RepairCafé.org). Jessica, one of the founding members of RepairPDX, encountered Postma's original Repair Café in Amsterdam, and upon returning to the U.S., Postma connected her with several other Portlanders who had contacted her to express interest in the Repair Café concept, and together they established RepairPDX in 2013 ("Jessica," personal communication, October 10, 2018). Since then, RepairPDX has held 54 repair events and fixed over 2,600 items (January Repair News. email newsletter, January 14, 2019).

RepairPDX events are held approximately once per month, typically last two to three hours and are entirely volunteer-run and free to attend. The events take place in various community centers across the city – places like church basements, senior centers, and libraries. The types of repair offered at each event are dictated by the available volunteers. At most events I attended, there were at least four sewing volunteers, who were all women, and at least six or more volunteers repairing small appliances, who were all men. Some events also included bike mechanics, who were also all men.

The age range at repair events was markedly skewed towards middle age. The average age of those I interviewed from RepairPDX was 59.29, and at 32, I often had the impression of being the youngest person in the room during repair events. In the case of the volunteers, I suspect that this had to do with skills built over time, combined with a desire to keep skills sharp and stay active after retirement. I asked one of the younger volunteers, Jason (37), why he thought the Repair Café skewed older, and he suggested “it’s not cool. It’s not fun.”

Before a repair event, the room is set up by the volunteers, with the mechanical repair set up in one area, and the sewing repair set up in a different area. This separation of space makes sense when one considers the informal tool sharing that often happens among the sewing volunteers, and the need to keep textiles clean and safe from sparks or sharp objects. However, another unintended effect is the gendered segregation of the repair volunteers. Because of the separation of space and the shared desire to serve as many attendees as possible, I found that I rarely interacted with the mechanical repairers. When I arrived, I would enter the space, visually scan the room, and then bring my sewing supplies over to the side of the room where the other sewing volunteers had gathered and begin setting up. Often I was among the last to finish my repairs and leave, and so had little interaction with other volunteers after the event.

Once the space has been set up, members of the public (attendees) bring items in need of repair to the “clinic” to be fixed. Attendance rates vary, but at the busiest event I observed, in May 2018, over 80 unique objects were repaired. At past events I personally repaired a broken backpack strap and a stuck zipper, hemmed a new pair of pants, and patched holes in pant legs, bags, blankets, sheets, coat pockets, and a child’s dress. Depending on the amount of work required for each specific repair, I was able to work with about two to five attendees at each event. Attendees usually remained close by while their goods were being repaired, to watch the proceedings and converse.

The Repair Café Foundation emphasizes helping people attempt their own repairs. The “About” page of their website begins, “Repair Cafés are free meeting places and they’re all about repairing things (together). In the place where a Repair Café is located, you’ll find tools and materials to help you make any repairs you need” (RepairCafé.org). However, Rosner and Ames (2014:327) found that “empowering participants to do repairs themselves was an ideal state that rarely emerged in practice.” My own participant observation was consistent with this finding. I was often surprised to be met with ambivalence when I attempted to explain my process as I sewed, or tried to include the owner of the textile in design decisions (such as machine darning vs. patching) that I thought were centrally important to the finished product.

Clothing Swaps

The large clothing swap run by Modify Style serves as a fundraiser for the organization’s annual sustainable fashion show. Modify Style seeks to support Portland’s sustainable fashion community and minimize the environmental impact of the fashion industry by inspiring creativity (modifystyle.org). The swap required a small ($8-$12) fee to participate, but no money is exchanged for the clothing itself. This swap is organized by Modify Style’s board, and seemed to be staffed by extra volunteers on the day of the swap (“Regina” and “Caity,” personal communication, October 22, 2018).

I attended this swap in October of 2018, when it took place in a popular concert venue in downtown Portland. There were perhaps 40 people in the room at a time, but attendees arrived and left freely, so total attendance for the swap was much higher. This swap seemed more polished and to have a wider draw than the other swaps I attended for this project. I presume this is because of a conscious marketing effort by the organizers, and because it serves as a fundraiser for Modify Style's yearly fashion show.

I also attended two swaps publicized by the volunteer-run website Swap Positive. Swap Positive acts as a clearing house for 17 free clothing swaps. These swaps were smaller than the Modify Style swap, and instead of a rolling entry system, all attendees arrived at the start time and waited at the perimeter of the room until the organizer announced that they could begin swapping. These swaps ranged from around 12 to 35 attendees and usually lasted under two hours. I attended a women's size petite to medium swap at a grocery cooperative once, and a women's size medium swap at a community church twice.

The swaps advertised by Swap Positive do not ask for a participation fee, and explicitly ask that clothing procured at swaps not be resold, but rather swapped again or donated if the attendee decides not to keep it (Swap Positive, n.d.). The volunteer who maintains the Swap Positive website, and who founded one of the swaps that the website tracks, said that she thinks of her work with the swaps as a game, in which she wanted to challenge herself to see how much she could do for free. She went on to say,

> When I started this, I was the mother of young children. So often mothers do stuff for everyone but themselves. There's never money leftover for them, there's never

> time leftover for them, and I thought it was important to have a place where women could go where they would be safe, and they could bring things that they no longer needed, and they weren't taking care of kids, and they weren't going, 'oh husband, what do you need'… they were just able to think about themselves. They could go and treasure hunt, and anything in the center of that room was theirs, and there was no economic impact. They didn't have to say, no, I can't afford that today. They could just take it. ("Sue," personal communication, August 25, 2018)

Sue in particular viewed the swaps as an important part of her community, in which overburdened mothers could find reprieve in the fun and play of consumption without monetary cost, but many of the other swappers also echoed the importance of being in their community during the swaps. The community theme is reflected in the very small swap literature, where it is described as an important motivator for participation (Albinsson and Perera 2012; Matthews and Hodges 2016). The social nature of these sites aligns them with Bourdieu's conceptualization of *fields*: the social and spatial arenas in which agents negotiate their status (Bourdieu 1984).

Additionally, Matthews and Hodges (2016) conceptualize clothing swaps as being simultaneously sites of acquisition and disposal. Swaps allowed participants to both acquire new clothing and act as gift-givers, while cleaning out their closets and recycling their unwanted clothing in an appropriate way. This emerged as a strong theme in my own interviews with swappers.

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

The present study is based on six months of participant observation in part of Portland, Oregon's slow fashion community, centered on participating as a mending volunteer at approximately monthly repair events organized by RepairPDX. I also attended one large clothing swap hosted by the sustainable fashion nonprofit organization Modify Style, and four clothing swaps coordinated by a loosely organized group of volunteers who communicate via the volunteer-run website Swap Positive. I chose the swaps and repair events for their relation to fashion and their status as activities that occur outside of the capitalist market. I also interviewed twenty-one volunteers and attendees from across the field sites.

Feminist Methodology

Following a central principle of feminist methodology, I aim to "bring women in" to scholarship on Repair Cafes, which has previously focused on men's concerns (DeVault 1996; Rosner 2013). I also seek to create social change with my research, another principle of feminist methodology (DeVault 1996; Hesse-Biber 2014[a]). Finally, I recognize that the presence of the researcher cannot be ignored, and must be recognized as a part of the data (Alcoff 1991; Buch and Staller 2014; Hesse-Biber 2014[b]).

Feminist methodology uses the practice of reflexivity to help reveal how power relations and social position affect the production of knowledge (Hesse-Biber 2014[b]). Feminist standpoint theorists hold that for research to achieve strong objectivity, researchers must acknowledge the role of power and social location in the research process (Harding 1991; Naples and Gurr 2014). The positionality statement that follows is my attempt to report how my social position could have influenced my data, while also emphasizing that my presence contributed to the data, rather than contaminated it (DeVault 1996).

Positionality

Because fashion is often construed as a feminine interest, my position as a cis woman may have been an advantage when trying to encourage participants to reflect on their fashion practices in interviews. As a white millennial woman, I blended in with the sewing volunteers and swap participants, who were also predominantly white women. At the repair events, however, I was often among the youngest of the volunteers. I suspect this is due to the fact that mending was once a widely taught skill, but now takes special effort to learn (Holroyd 2016; Palmsköld 2015; Rosner 2013).

My participation at the Repair Café was also aided by my able-bodied privilege of having steady hands and good manual dexterity. Additionally, I developed my mending skills while working a well-paying job that was full time but never required overtime, and that was challenging but did not allow for creative expression. I sought creative outlet in my mending practice, and was supported in this by artistic and environmentalist partners, friends, and housemates. I recognize that my abilities, interests, and social supports are not universally shared.

I also recognize that I benefit from white privilege, which allowed me to assume that I would be allowed to safely participate in and research my chosen field sites. My privilege may have blinded me to racial dynamics that went unreported in my field notes. I interviewed four participants of East Asian or Pacific Islander descent, plus two participants who self-identified as ethnically Jewish (the latter of which I mention to respect participants' identities that they feel are salient, but I also acknowledge that in most cases they likely benefit from white privilege). It is possible that some of these participants chose not to report their racialized experiences to a white interviewer, and that I lost important data due to my positionality. Whether or not this was the case, my findings are necessarily a partial view of my field sites.

Participant Observation

Immediately upon return from my visits to all field sites, I documented my experiences with extensive field notes, which were partly informed by occasional hand-written jottings taken while in the field. In total, I observed approximately 25 hours of events, over a total of ten distinct observations, and recorded fifteen single spaced typewritten pages of field notes.

RepairPDX

To gather a sample of attendees at RepairPDX, I initiated conversations about what brought attendees to the event while I mended their goods, and then explained my project and requested interviews (that were scheduled offsite at a later date).

I began participating as a sewing volunteer at RepairPDX out of personal interest several months before the study began to take shape. Once I had decided to turn my researcher's eye towards the organization, I contacted the program coordinator via email and explained my project and received written consent to continue participating as both a volunteer and a researcher.

I continue to volunteer and have attended several more Repair Cafés since concluding the data collection phase, but took on the role of researcher and recorded field notes for five events totaling twelve hours of observation.

I have remained in dialog with the organizers throughout the project in order to ensure ongoing consent, and have sought to increase my responsibilities within the organization as a way to both give back to the community and to deepen relationships. Paying attention to relationships and continuing to build rapport with participants during the research project are part of an ethic of feminist methodology (Bell 2014; Buch and Staller 2014).

Clothing swaps

I attended five clothing swaps, totaling around thirteen hours of observation. I requested and was granted interviews of three of the organizers and two attendees of Modify Style. As these were more widely publicized events, with a larger public attendance, I did not seek consent from the organizers before beginning to recruit interviews, but I did approach and recruit them first, before recruiting attendees. I was perhaps able to make the assumption that I would be able enter the site and conduct research in large part because I share the positionality of a white, cis woman with nearly all of the volunteers and most of the participants.

To obtain consent to research the smaller, more intimate clothing swaps advertised by Swap Positive, I approached the organizers in person before the start of the first event I attended to propose my research and obtain permission to continue. I explained that all participants and informal conversations would be anonymized in my field notes and thesis. My research topic seemed to be met with enthusiasm by many of the organizers.

Here, as at the repair events, I used convenience sampling in which I initiated conversations about what brought attendees to the event, and solicited interviews from there. At one very small swap (around a dozen attendees), I was able to speak to the room at large and recruit four interviews at once. At larger swaps, I waited until the initial swapping activity had slowed down a bit, and then approached those who lingered helping to clean up.

After interviewing the volunteer who runs the Swap Positive website, she invited me to attend a very small swap in her home that she organized after being contacted by a Japanese television news program that was interested in alternative economics. At this event, there were three swappers other than myself and the organizer (two of whom I interviewed), and three crew members from the TV show.

Interviews

In addition to the convenience sampling strategy for interviews with attendees described above, I also sought interviews with all of the sewing and coordination volunteers that I encountered in the field, both at repair events and swaps.

Interviews took place in libraries, cafés, participants' homes, and one took place over Skype. Before each interview, I obtained written consent to participation. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by myself. All respondents are identified by pseudonym. I designed the interview questions to gain a deeper understanding of participants' reasons for attendance, and how the events support participants' worldviews regarding consumption and the environment. Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to two hours, with most lasting one hour. While interviewees were not compensated, I offered the option of being contacted after the close of the study so that I could share the finished product with them. Almost all enthusiastically accepted.

I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with twenty-one individuals. I interviewed eight people from RepairPDX: four volunteers and four attendees. I interviewed thirteen swappers: five volunteers and eight attendees. Only three interviewees were men, and these were all from RepairPDX – all other interviewees were women or nonbinary. The sample was about 75% White, and 80% college educated. The average age at the swaps was 36, and the average age at Repair PDX was 59.

Analysis

I used the qualitative analysis program Dedoose to organize two types of coding. During the first stage of analysis, each interviewee was considered as an individual, and open coding was driven by their words, my observations in the field, and themes from the degrowth literature. In addition to the themes developed during open coding, I looked for data that fell into themes of sufficiency, environmentalism, political views and activism.

These themes emerged from the literature as central concerns to the voluntary simplicity aspect of degrowth (Alexander 2015; D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015; Demmer and Hummel 2017). Second, I analyzed the data as a whole, making connections between individuals and creating a narrative that "[transcends] the individual...stories without losing the [individuals'] voices" (Dobscha and Ozanne 2001:204). The themes that emerged from this process were expense, pleasure and community, and consumption and waste.

RESULTS

Expense

Clothing was perceived as expensive by many participants. To those at the Repair Cafés, the expense of clothing was part of what made them worth repairing. However, professional repair services were also seen as prohibitively expensive. One RepairPDX user who had me replace the broken zipper of her rain jacket, was shocked by the cost of repair being nearly as much as the original price of her garment: “Because I did talk to people about my zipper. And god, I got quotes that were almost as much as the jacket to put a new zipper in. Well, maybe not as much as the jacket, but it was a lot!” (Elizabeth, 59). Another RepairPDX user, who brought about seven small mending jobs to one repair event said:

> And the other thing is it's expensive. Before I was really into going to [RepairPDX] I went to a seamstress. Expensive stuff. I took like, I don't know, four items, maybe less than you repaired for me, and it was like 35 bucks. It’s spendy, so cost is definitely something [I consider] (Lucy, 65).

When asked why he thinks people come to RepairPDX, one volunteer offered:

> My first guess is that they don’t want to pay. All my experience with the Repair Café and all of my interactions with people who I’ve talked about the Repair Café with was about money. Money is a thing (Jason, 37).

When faced with a choice between paying for expensive professional repair or purchasing an expensive replacement, the additional inconvenience and uncertainty of seeking out repair, compared with the relative ease of purchasing a replacement online (often further incentivized by free shipping), may prevent some people from bothering to attempt professional repair. Because the Repair Cafés offer free repair services and also the added pleasure of a warm community atmosphere, they may help keep materials in use that would otherwise be replaced.

For the swappers, swaps enable the pleasure of fashion consumption without monetary restrictions. Several swappers said that even thrift stores are expensive, which is understandable considering the more selective second-hand stores in Portland sell at similar prices to the cheapest fast fashion retailers.

> I think honestly, thrift shops in Portland aren't that cheap...I think my expectations for what something should cost has really lowered, too. Especially if I'm out shopping for new clothes, I feel like I'm getting ripped off if it's not on sale. And I feel like if anything costs more than ten dollars, then I really have to think about it (Shima, 28, swapper).
>
> Sometimes [thrift stores are] still pretty expensive and sometimes you still can't find what you want...and you have to pay like ten dollars for it. Or you go to some vintage store and you're like 'oh $100 for this jacket.' And then you find it at the swap, and you're like 'this is way more worth it!' (Holly, 29, swapper).

It seems that the expense factor would constrain swappers' ability to express themselves through fashion if they did not have access to the swaps. However, the ten dollar price point, which Shima and Holly both cited above as a sort of cognitive tipping point, is less than the cost of a dinner out. It's possible that the overabundance of free clothes found at the swaps lowers the perceived value of any and all clothing for swappers like Shima and Holly. In the Slow Fashion literature, researchers cite attachment and high perceived value of clothing as important factors for keeping clothing in use longer, thus reducing turnover and the need for further extraction of resources (Konig, 2013; Holroyd 2017). The swappers quoted above regarded clothing as having little value, possibly making disposal more emotionally available. Yet on the other hand, if the free swaps make even fast fashion prices seem too high, then participation in the swaps incentivizes continuing participation, and may prevent cash-strapped swappers from resorting to fast fashion retailers.

However, Hannah (26) questioned whether the swaps are doing good for those who most need it:

> I feel like the people who show up at swaps aren't often the people who would need it the most. I feel like they're often in the know, people who are cheapos. Like, I'm perpetually broke with my career choice, but I'm not systemically poor.

Hannah seemed to suggest that most swappers are not in great economic need, and could probably afford to buy clothes if the swaps weren't available. My observations support this claim. Many swappers arrived at the swaps with more clothing than they left with, as evidenced by extra clothing being donated to local charities after every event. Nearly all of the swappers seemed reasonably well-dressed, and many were particularly fashionable. My sample of swappers was overwhelmingly college educated. This points to the swappers having high cultural capital, if not necessarily very high economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). This leads me to conclude that swappers are participating by *choice* more than economic *necessity*, even though they complain about the price of clothing. Swappers are able to use and maintain their high cultural capital at the swaps, potentially making up for some deficiency in economic capital, or allowing them to spend it elsewhere. This supports my argument that the swaps are a form of degrowth in action, because those who could afford to buy clothing if they needed to, are choosing to opt out of some consumption on the market.

Hannah may be right in accusing the swaps of being exclusive to those who need them most. However, a core tenet of a degrowth transition is that those who consume the most are those who must reduce the most. Since swappers do seem to be using the swaps to displace some of their consumption on the market, and many spoke of buying second-hand when possible, they are perhaps not among those who most need to reduce their consumption. However, if their participation is accepted as normal among their middle-class, college-educated peers, their participation may contribute to expanding the acceptance of this form of decommodified consumption. The swaps are thus an example of the degrowth principle of a voluntary and democratic transition.

Pleasure and Community

Swaps and Repair Cafés offer an opportunity to connect with like-minded members of the community, and act as a field for enacting ecological habitus (Haluza-DeLay 2008). Haluza-DeLay applies Bourdieu's habitus to environmental movements and writes that in "an environmentally unsound society an ecologically oriented *habitus* will be a misfit...social movements are fields in which can develop an internalised orientation more consistent with movement practice" (2008:205). Participating in swaps and Repair Cafés allows those with an anti-waste or ecological mindset to interact with others who will affirm the cultural status of their slightly unorthodox practices.

Nearly every participant mentioned the pleasure of community, and swappers often spoke of the joy of experimenting with fashion. One swapper said:

> I go to swaps because it's fun to be exposed to clothing options that I might not think of, and I like doing it amongst people that I have some shared values, that are

> in my community. Maybe I don't know them necessarily, but they're part of my community. So there's a social aspect to it. It's exciting to see how different people use fashion and clothing. A big part of it is that it's outside the economic system (Kathy, 62).

Kathy finds pleasure in the clothing, pleasure in the community, and pleasure in engaging in non-market activity. She consciously expressed a link between valuing community and rejecting capitalism. She seems to indicate that the swaps are part of her everyday embodied practices, not a remarkable performance of activism. Bourdieu emphasizes that the practices that make up habitus don't take any particular effort, because habitus is naturalized (Bourdieu 1984). Likewise, Kathy goes to the swaps because they are pleasurable, and because they are a way to enact her internalized ecological habitus. Similarly, Jordan (35), a swap volunteer, said:

> The meeting of new people of course is always great, because it's like-minded people… And I'll say I've probably gotten my coolest items from swaps. At least among my top ten, I'd say like at least half of those are from swaps. And it's kind of like the ultimate shopping thrill, because you're not spending any money, but you're getting that shopping high.

Jordan describes swaps as the "ultimate shopping thrill," yet this form of "shopping" doesn't consume any newly produced clothing, nor contribute to any producers' profits. The swaps thus fulfill the same function as shopping, but have the added social benefits of community engagement and opting out of the market. Elsewhere in their interviews, Kathy and Jordan both expressed anti-consumerist mindsets, and described pro-environmental behavior, like washing and reusing disposable plastics or mending socks. The swaps are fields in which these participants, who try to live their values and not engage in conspicuous consumption, are still able to enjoy the pleasure that consumption can bring while remaining true to their ecological habitus. This view aligns with the principles of voluntary simplicity, where followers see themselves as living out their values and providing a positive example that they hope others will follow.

Participants of RepairPDX also frequently cited the pleasure of community engagement. Mark (62), who had me mend some holes in the pockets of his grandfather's coat, said of his participation, "well, I think one reason is in solidarity, and meeting other people. Same attitude, same mindset." Attendees and volunteers alike described pleasure in attendance. Describing a previous repair, Patty (62), a sewing volunteer, said:

> But her gratitude, and her husband's gratitude, was enormous. It's like a contact high. You feed off that. It's positive, it feels like a blessing. Those are the small, important things in life that I think you can easily miss, and at the Repair Café it's just one after another like that.

Patty was more effusive than most about the joy of community, but most of the RepairPDX participants echoed this sentiment in some way, showing that just like at the swaps, the affirmation of enacting ecological habitus in the presence of like-minded others is a motivation for continued participation.

In addition to meeting people in their community, the volunteers have the extra pleasure of exercising their specialized skills.

> I think one of the things that makes the Repair Café concept work is that there are so many people who love repairing things. Because it wouldn't be a movement otherwise. There wouldn't be 1,400 Repair Cafés around the world and growing if it wasn't… It's people who love repairing things (Jessica, RepairPDX volunteer).

Jessica suggests that the Repair Cafés, which she considers to be part of a wider movement, are successful because of volunteers' love of repair practice, and a desire to share this practice with others in the community. Her observation is consistent with Haluza-DeLay's argument that social movements create a "'community of practice' which can shape the internalizations of members and potential members" (2008:206). She suggests that volunteers participate because of their love of repairing things. Repair just makes sense within the logic of an ecological habitus, and by making repair into a free public event, volunteers hope that others will learn and subsequently embody this ecological habitus.

When asked why she bothers to repair her items rather than replacing them, Elizabeth (59) stated, "I guess I don't really see it as an inconvenience. It's more like a challenge." Elsewhere in her interview, Elizabeth also described a pleasant interaction with a stranger as they were both waiting to be helped. Rather than viewing repair as a bothersome task, she views it as a challenge, perhaps even a personal competition, and one which comes with the additional pleasure of being involved in one's community.

Participants of both sites find participation to be enriching and enjoyable. Part of the pleasure is the satisfaction of consumption or repair, but another significant pleasure is interacting with like-minded members of their community who are enacting a similar ecological habitus. Importantly, they don't view their participation as a sacrifice. Voluntarily spending time and meeting needs outside of the dominant capitalist market are essential components of a post-growth future. Enforced austerity may indeed be one part of post-growth, but effortless pleasure, love and community are all essential parts of what will make a degrowth society desirable and sustainable.

Consumption and Waste

Nearly all participants viewed their participation as a form of positive action. However, perceptions of the significance of their participation varied widely between interviewees. Some didn't seem to have given the topic much thought before, but cited keeping things out of the landfill as a positive outcome of their participation. Others stated confidently that their participation was a form of activism. While not all participants said that they thought about the environment when making clothing purchasing decisions, almost all participants seemed to share the view that we live in a throwaway society. This view is summed up by RepairPDX user Elizabeth (59):

> Well, one thing I can't stand about our society is we're a throwaway society. It drives me crazy. My mom...[lived] through the depression, and just taught us – from an early age I recycled. And it's always just been part of what I do. And so it just drives me crazy how people, if something's wrong with something, just throw it away, buy a new one. So that's probably the main thing, is just fix what you have and not buy new. I try not to buy new stuff.

Another RepairPDX user, Lucy (65) also acquired an anti-waste mentality from parents who lived through the depression:

> Well, you know, you grow up with parents from the depression, and there's a few things that you're instilled with growing up that aren't that wonderful, but there are a few things that really stayed with me. My parents didn't waste. My mother cared for things, and...caring for things, the environment, caring for the items that we buy, I think it's important.

Bourdieu argues that habitus is conservative and resistant to change (Bourdieu 1984). Thus, it makes sense that certain anti-waste practices have crossed generations and been considered the natural thing to do for 90 years.

A younger interviewee viewed social media as a driver of overconsumption:

> I think social media in general, and the way that these people are making money off of it with their looks and their designs…. give the younger generation the impression that these people don't wear the same thing over again ever, not even once. And that's not true. They totally do. And so it gives people a false impression of how fashion really is… But fashion doesn't have to be fast… I think people just have the wrong impression about fashion in general. (Juliana, 26, swapper)

Waste was viewed by many as a heinous lack of awareness, and they did not see themselves as people who waste.

> It's thoughtless. People don't think about finite resources. The consumerist mindset, it's terrible. I actually personally think that we're headed to something sooner rather than later that will be devastating for all of humanity. It's already touching every other species, and it's in large part because of a consumerist mindset. The idea that resources are infinite, that humans can do whatever we want, and keep doing it. And it's just very unconscious, it's very shortsighted in my mind. It breaks my heart, but I can just do what I can do (Leah, 52, swap volunteer).

Elizabeth and Leah both express frustration at the "thoughtless" waste they see happening in the world, and try to act in a way that is consistent with their anti-waste and anti-consumerist values. The swaps and Repair Cafés offer a way for participants to enact their values in a pleasurable way. Participants are given a social outlet for expressing their pro-environmental and anti-consumer ecological habitus by participating in a community event that *displaces* shopping. This makes the swaps and Repair Cafés perfect examples of degrowth and decommodification in action.

Degrowth scholars and adherents to voluntary simplicity are concerned with not only escaping, but also with *transforming* capitalism (Alexander 2015; Bossy 2014; Cattaneo 2015; Kallis 2017; Trainer 2015). Several participants spoke of changing the dominant consumerist mindset. Leah said:

> I really think it should be based more on generosity. Like if you want something, you can take it, but if you don’t want it, you should pass it on. And try to feel like if you need more, you can come next month, and there will be more for you. Trying to increase abundance in the world. So maybe that’s a more subtle, sophisticated form of activism.

She suggests that the recurring nature of the swaps increases a sense of abundance and satiety; that repeated attendance and exposure to free clothing will reduce feelings of scarcity. She links this change in mindset to a “sophisticated” form of activism. Another swapper mused that the more swaps there are, the less stigma there will be about wearing used clothing.

> I’m constantly getting notifications about other swaps that are happening, and it makes me so happy to see those and know that other people are seeing those, and the more that becomes commonplace, the more that we start to overcome that stigma... it’s like vinyl coming back with a vengeance. It’s trendy, and it’s not just that it’s used, it’s that it’s old and that collector feel applies to it. (Aislinn, 36, Modify Style volunteer)

Jessica, a RepairPDX volunteer, also spoke of changing mindsets in order to spur action:

> And changing people’s mindset about before you throw it away, just think first if it can be repaired. And then having an experience of having it repaired, perhaps they’ll take that into other parts of their life...It’s not just about reducing waste, it’s also a little bit about empowering people to do stuff themselves.

Jessica hopes that by providing a positive experience of repair, that the Repair Cafés will increase the cognitive availability of repair. In doing so, she hopes that participants will be encouraged to try repairing other types of things, or to have a go at repairing things themselves, rather than throwing away broken items. The Repair Café movement is essentially attempting to alter habitus, making repair the natural, logical thing to do. Changing mindsets is a dominant theme in environmentalist consumption literature, as well as an important theme from the degrowth literature (D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015; Haluza-DeLay 2008; Schaefer and Crane 2005).

Some saw not only volunteering, but merely participating, as a form of altruism. Sue, a swap volunteer, said:

> So here's these women like you and I going to free swaps. You don't know who just lost their job. You don't know who just won the lottery. It's just people swapping. It wasn't built on an 'us-them,' we're gonna help some people. It was built on, we're going to have some fun and play… I realized that what we're doing is really important in this economy because it's showing an 'us-we' model.

Sue describes the swaps as a model of "us-we" thinking that could have use beyond the world of clothing swaps. She views the swaps as a level playing field, where all participants are equal, regardless of circumstances outside of the swap. She hopes that the fun and pleasure of the "us-we" model will reverberate throughout society in a time of economic uncertainty.

However, one swapper questioned the limitations of participation as a way of doing good.

> People say we welcome everyone, but they're not actively reaching out to those communities, so it's kind of more lip service... if you think it is philanthropy, and you think it is inclusive, you need to make it really easy for everyone to find out about. But then, sometimes people have like these biases that they don't want some element coming to the swap (Hannah, 26).

Hannah argues that the swaps serve those who can afford to buy clothing if they chose to, but exclude those that might truly be in need of free clothing. The small body of swap literature fails to address this critique (Albinsson and Perera 2012; Matthews and Hodges 2016).

While Hannah makes a fair criticism, this aspect of the swaps is not necessarily incompatible with the principles of degrowth. Degrowth calls for the affluent to voluntarily lower their environmental footprint in order to allow greater access to material goods to those who are involuntarily under-consuming, while still keeping overall consumption within planetary bounds. Greater participation in the swaps by the affluent may not increase access to free clothing to those in need in the short term, but with significant enough participation, there is the potential for the maturation of non-market economies, and a larger societal transformation that would benefit all. Aislinn (36), a Modify Style volunteer, noted that participation in the swaps allows her to decrease her market participation: “It’s very, very rare that I go shopping now. And I love that... in talking to some of the other board members and friends of mine who consistently come to the swap...very few of us ever shop anymore. When I do, it’s absolute necessity.” The swaps are allowing for some amount of decommodification in Aislinn’s clothing consumption.

Hannah further clarified, “It has to be an active form of promotion if you’re going to see it as a form of activism and not just a way to get free clothes.” Hannah seems to doubt the efficacy of passively offering an example for others to follow. Indeed, in a market that is arguably controlled by producers, individual consumption habits are unlikely to have a significant environmental effect without politicization and collective action. Moreover, some scholars would argue that the ability to opt out of fast fashion on a personal level may prevent individuals from agitating for collective action (Szasz

2007). However, the swaps do offer a viable alternative to the market as a site of consumption. Politicized or not, the swappers are opting out of the clothing market, and at least partially decommodifying their wardrobes.

However, Hannah also expressed an awareness of her embeddedness in a market system that limits her ability to opt out:

> I don't have the money to get something that's made by people working in humane conditions. And so [the swap] is kind of one of my few options that's not continuing to exploit those people. And...we live in a consumerist society, there's no way I'm stepping out of that. I'm still part of the machine, especially being in the US...like you can't just "oh, I'm so anti-consumerist." I'm still a cog, even if I don't like it. But I can try to do my part to cut down on my impact. (Hannah, 26, swapper)

Similarly, Shima expressed doubt about the efficacy of the swaps in a system controlled by producers:

> And like all of the polyester in the ocean. Eventually it's all going to end up there, but maybe we can help lessen that by lowering the manufacture of clothing? But I don't know how to help that situation. I think every time I buy something I'm encouraging the sale and the manufacturing of new clothing. But maybe they'll still manufacture clothing anyway, I don't know. I guess if everyone in the country did swaps more often, then that would affect the manufacturing. I don't really see that being a thing though, 'cause a lot of people see it as below them." (Shima, 28, swapper)

Shima poses the fundamental question of consumer choice: can consumers affect change when producers wield such unequal capital and power? Some degrowth scholars suggest that degrowth can *only* stem from voluntary decisions that contribute to developing reciprocity and social capital (Andreoni and Galmarini 2013). This would have the effect of reducing alienation, which could limit producer power. What my data can contribute to this question is that swapping and repair fulfill the social role of consumption just as well as consuming on the market. They are pleasurable activities, and participants reported enjoying their participation more than they do a traditional in-store buying experience. The sites also expand the buffet of choices available to consumers, so that consumers are not subjected to a “radical monopoly” of consuming newly produced clothing made from virgin materials and environmentally harmful production methods (Illich 1973).

Despite Hannah and Shima’s reservations, I argue that the swaps and Repair Cafés are sites of degrowth and decommodification in action. At these sites, non-market activity coexists with market activity, allowing some consumers greater autonomy over their consumption choices, which is part of Vail’s (2010) characterization of decommodification. If these sites were more inclusive, however, they could potentially displace even more market activity, among a broader population.

DISCUSSION

Clothing swaps and Repair Cafés are both parts of a larger Slow Fashion scheme, that also includes buying second-hand, making things oneself, and seeking satiety over novelty.

Expense

Participants described both clothing acquisition on the market as well as professional repair services as prohibitively expensive. This perceived expense encouraged participation in these decommodified sites of acquisition and repair. However, expense did not seem to be the primary deciding factor for users, who first must have felt a strong motivation to repair rather than replace, or who had a willingness to wear second-hand clothing and delay acquisition until they could attend a swap. Given the largely college-educated makeup of my sample (which was consistent across the two field sites), I assume that most could choose to consume on the market. Particularly in the case of the swaps, the superabundance of clothing lowered the perceived value of all clothing for participants, due to the commodity fetishization of material goods. In order to participate in the swaps, attendees would have already divested their own closets of a significant amount of excess clothing. While swap volunteer Sue insisted that swappers only needed to bring one contribution in order to fully participate, in practice I saw many swappers bringing great armfuls of clothing to the swaps.

This suppression of the perceived value of commodities incentivizes continued participation in the swaps. Because swappers are confronted with great piles of clothes, unfolded, unsorted, tangled together, and all for the taking with no monetary cost, swaps create a sense of abundance that encourages experimentation, creativity, and a sense of discovery. In my own participation, I often left swaps with more clothing than I particularly wanted or needed, since there was little consequence for doing so. The possibility of the next swap remained in mind as both a place to unload excess clothing that I decided not to keep, and as another possibility for future discovery.

Based on my highly educated sample as well as my anecdotal impressions of many swappers arriving wearing up-to-date, trendy clothing, it would seem that those who might benefit most from access to free clothing do not necessarily come to the swaps. This begs the question of whether a certain devaluing of clothing must occur before the swaps become cognitively available. Despite volunteers' verbal insistence that all are welcomed, promotional materials for the swaps signal that the swaps are primarily for those who already have an overabundance of things: one swap description reads "You probably have clothes, accessories, and other household stuff you've realized just 'isn't you' anymore. Wash it up and bring it to the swap, and get some new-to-you treasures!" (Swap Positive, 2019).

At RepairPDX, in addition to the perceived expense of clothing, the expense of labor (of paid repair services) is another motivation. Many of my interviewees balked at the expense of professional alteration and repair services. When many who come to the Repair Cafés remember their mothers as competent menders who performed this service for the household for free, it makes some sense that coming around to the idea of paying for these services would be an uncomfortable cognitive shift. Several women users of the Repair Café explained to me that they could do the repair job that they brought, but that they do not have a sewing machine. This is interesting to me, as I prefer hand sewing in my own practice, and the very definition of fine couture garments is that they require a lot of highly skilled handwork. One woman brought me a garment in which she had quite competently repaired part of a hem by hand, but she wanted me to remove her hand stitching and resew the hem with my sewing machine. I believe that she perceived the machine sewing job to be stronger and longer-lasting than her hand sewing. Yet removing her hand stitching took me longer than the actual sewing, and I feel confident that her repair job would have lasted through many washes. Lucy explained to me that her mother was an excellent seamstress, who had taken care of all of her mending when she was still alive, but that Lucy had never had the interest or patience to learn to sew herself.

These women and many others that I encountered seemed slightly apologetic for bringing me their mending. They offered excuses for why they needed to bring their items to the Repair Café, and some seemed embarrassed that they could not or would not do the repair themselves. In contrast, the men who I repaired things for never offered a backstory of attempted repair or reasons they could not do the repair themselves. Nothing in their mannerisms indicated that they felt any hesitation to hand over an item to me for repair. One man, after explaining his repair job to me, put on headphones and began reading a newspaper. In contrast, founders of San Francisco Bay Area repair events interviewed by Rosner (2013) described the ideal mechanical repair as a collaboration between two actively participating tinkerers, where the volunteer provides expertise and tools for the attendee to use as they attempt their own repair.

One explanation for this could be that the men's ecological habitus is affirmed, without contradiction, by their participation in the Repair Cafés. The women, on the other hand, at some point rejected the societal expectation that they would learn to sew as part of a "proper" performance of femininity. By rejecting one form of unpaid reproductive labor, they may have been able to make symbolic (or actual) space for careers outside the home and other markers of class status. While they may have negotiated a higher class status or shed some aspects of a more patriarchal habitus, they are unable to completely ignore ongoing societal messaging that women should be responsible for most reproductive labor. Bourdieu argues that habitus can become "sedimented," meaning that even when habitus changes, older versions of habitus remain (Bourdieu 1984). By enacting their ecological habitus at the Repair Café, the women users of the service must admit to the sewing volunteers that they are deficient in a skill that society expects them to have, and also to confront an earlier habitus which at one point was also naturalized in the self (Lawler 1999). The men, on the other hand, have to make no such confession. I believe that many of the Repair Café attendees have internalized the dominant ideology that mending is women's work that should be performed for free, and that the Repair Café allows some to continue to benefit from women's unpaid labor. It also allows some women to gratefully hand over mending work to a willing volunteer rather than attempt something that they have no interest or skill in.

The availability of the volunteer labor at the Repair Café allows some to still benefit from repair services for no monetary cost. While several of the Repair Café attendees who I interviewed spoke of having limited incomes, I suspect that if they had not been socialized to undervalue women's sewing work, most could afford to pay for repair and alteration.

The Repair Café brings unpaid labor out of the private household and into the public sphere. Thus, I argue that the Repair Café perpetuates the undervaluing of women's labor even as it succeeds in its goal to reduce waste and spread repair culture.

Pleasure and Community

Participants found pleasure in their participation, which was also a powerful motivator for continued use of these decommodified clothing systems. In addition to offering an alternative to market consumption, the two sites offer pleasure, as well. Interacting with others in their community was frequently mentioned as part of what gave the sites meaning, and added to participants' satisfaction and enjoyment. Embracing non-materialistic sources of satisfaction is an important part of working towards a degrowth society, and these sites are an example of this aspect of degrowth (Alexander 2015; Schor 2011). Participants did not view their participation as a sacrifice for the good of the environment, but as a pleasurable activity that also happened to support their environmental values.

Swappers described the fun of "treasure hunting," the thrill of finding unique pieces of clothing, and the pleasure of "refreshing" their wardrobe. Swappers are able to acquire new-to-them clothing which they remix into their existing wardrobe using their cultural capital to transform the status of second-hand clothing from being read as dirty, used-up, dowdy, or uncool to vintage, unique, cool, and cachet. This transformation represents hidden labor that all of the swappers may negotiate to some degree. It is possible that the swappers with the greatest cultural capital benefit the most from the swaps. They are able to negotiate their status anxiety with no monetary penalty, and use their cultural capital to maintain or even increase their status.

During my participation, when I became aware that I was bringing home more clothing from the swaps than I really desired, I became concerned that the swaps are just another mechanism that encourages fast consumption of clothing. However, viewing fashion through the lens of Bourdieu's ongoing negotiation of status, I was able to see that the swaps do not necessarily *encourage* fast turnover, they are the *product* of it, and an important outlet (Bourdieu 1984). In a system where fast fashion producers exploit consumers' status anxiety, swappers resist the power of producers while maintaining their status. Those with the highest cultural capital are likely acquiring clothing from many sources, including purchasing second-hand on the market. Their constant negotiation of their wardrobes, as they test out and reject large amounts of clothing from diverse sources, ensures that the swaps are continually fueled with new clothing. Without this process of acquisition and negotiation, it's likely that the participants in the swaps would eventually divest of all of their excess clothing, and the swaps would atrophy.

The labor performed at the Repair Cafés is more overt and possibly more overtly recognized. As Patty described, attendees of repair events can be effusive in their thanks, which makes the labor rewarding. While the repaired clothing may still need some cultural capital to transform its symbolism into a socially acceptable form, the object of the Repair Café is not to refresh wardrobes so much as to preserve them. The older demographic of the Repair Cafés is likely a factor here. Fashion is marketed to the young, and generally conceived of as the domain of the young and hip. Status anxiety may present in other ways for the older participants of the Repair Café. For those in later life stages, fashion may be subordinate to other ways of negotiating status, such as through home ownership and improvement, vehicle ownership, careers, children's colleges, or travel destinations. For those in earlier life stages, before land ownership or lucrative careers become available (which of course they don't for many), fashion may be a primary method of expressing status and identity.

Consumption and Waste

The final theme of my results was that participants were concerned with living in a throw-away society, and did not want to add more material to overburdened landfills or the growing mass of garbage in the oceans.

In general, volunteers and users of RepairPDX were quicker to express awareness of the environmental and social impacts of consumption in general, spoke more readily of other pro-environmental practices, and especially, were more likely to conceive of their participation as a form of activism. This could be because their participation is a result of interacting with materials in a more intimate way that has to potential to reduce commodity fetishization: they noticed wear, felt attached enough to want to keep the item in use, made a judgement about whether it was fixable, and then worked closely with the item to develop a suitable repair, either materially in the case of the sewing volunteers, or by offering input and preferences to the volunteers in the case of users.

Swappers and swap volunteers also expressed awareness of the environmental and social impacts of consumption, but particularly in regards to the fast fashion industry. Swappers, more so than RepairPDX users, seemed aware of the role that fast fashion retailers have on driving the pace of consumption and also of the industry's poor reputation for environmental harm and human rights violations. This awareness is likely due to the younger age range of the swappers as compared to Repair Café participants: fast fashion retailers cater to a young consumer base, so the swappers are perhaps more cognizant of the power and ubiquity of these brands.

Like the Repair Café participants, some swappers also spoke of other pro-environmental practices, and expressed an abhorrence of waste. Yet unlike the volunteers and users of RepairPDX, swappers appreciated that the swaps allowed them to boycott fast fashion retailers while still affording them access to the novelty, joy, and status derived from frequent new clothing acquisition. While some swappers aspired to someday purchase ethically produced clothing from small businesses, this was perceived to be out of reach of most.

Both sites offer an alternative to high-consumption, market-acquisition norms. Swaps and Repair Cafés decenter the growth narrative, and make room for a new degrowth imaginary (Demmer and Hummel 2017). By allowing participants to reduce their reliance on the market, the swaps and Repair Cafés offer an alternative site of decommodified fashion engagement. Through the use of these sites, they are able to fulfill clothing needs or wants in an alternate economy.

Slow Fashion promises to shift the consumption of clothing from fast fashion, which is exploitative of people and planet, to more sustainable alternatives (Harvey 2010). It promises to alter production to be less exploitative and more supportive of local communities. However, some limitations of Slow Fashion are that even when the site of consumption is free as in the case of the clothing swaps, it still may be symbolically charged as only open to those of certain social groups. Hannah argued that the swaps she attended do not signal a welcome to the poor or to the LGBTQ community. Given my field observations that the vast majority of swappers were white, and my 76% white sample, I hypothesize that the swaps do not signal that they are inclusive spaces for people of color, either. Yet fashion scholar Otto von Busch (2018) argues that inclusive fashion is an oxymoron. While swaps may allow some with low economic capital to increase their status through the symbolic use of fashion, the very nature of fashion is exclusive. Some have to be excluded for it to have the symbolic power to express status (Bourdieu 1984; von Busch 2018). Those who wear second-hand and mended goods have to possess enough cultural capital to transform these goods into socially acceptable forms that don't mark the wearer as unfashionable (von Busch 2018). However, I question whether the process of status negotiation through fashion necessarily has to be *fast*.

Despite these limitations, my two Slow Fashion sites are allowing for some displacement of market consumption. While the Repair Cafés in particular perpetuate some unequal gendered labor, the sites do not seem to be increasing or spreading exploitation. They are also not accelerating the treadmill of production; rather, they are a *response* to its impact. Both sites strengthen community ties, and in a small way create local alternative economies.

The sites act as islands of decommodification that are maintained by those with the social capital, cultural capital, and free time to contribute to them. Many interviewees reported learning about the Repair Cafés and swaps through word of mouth, showing that social capital is an important aspect of participation. Neither site seems to have grown over time, showing that the populations that they serve have limits. All of the swaps that I attended had been held in the same venue for many years, without ever needing to find a larger space. The Repair Café, on the other hand, has not needed to upgrade to larger venues or more frequent events, but the organizers have helped interested volunteers start several new Repair Cafés in the towns surrounding Portland. This help has sometimes come in the form of shared access to mailing lists (to access the public as well as the roster of volunteers), use of supplies, and coaching in registration and forms. The Repair Café International claims to have grown to over 1,500 unique Repair Cafés worldwide in just ten years (repaircafe.org, n.d.). The growth of the Repair Cafés does show the expansion of decommodification over a larger geographic area, but not necessarily a higher percentage of the population.

Limitations

While my data is not representative of the entire repair and swap communities, the themes I encountered did have similarities and overlap with the small body of literature that exists on these communities (Albinsson and Perera 2012; Konig 2013; Matthews and Hodges 2016; Rosner 2013; Rosner and Turner 2015). Additionally, while I attempted to aim for a diverse sample of interviewees, I cannot claim to have a perfectly representative sample. My time in the field was limited by the length of the events, and at the swaps, I often recruited those who lingered after the initial flurry of swap activity. This could have privileged those with the most free time, for instance. At the Repair Cafés, I would have liked to pay more attention to the interactions that happened between volunteers and users other than myself. However, because the events are short pop-ups, as a volunteer I felt both internal and external pressure to work as quickly as possible so as to be able to help as many attendees as possible. My field notes were thus mostly limited to the repairs that I enacted myself, rather than many observations about what was happening in my periphery.

A weakness in the degrowth scholarship is that it offers little discussion about how much the underserved can increase their consumption. While degrowth explicitly supports policies that have the potential to reduce inequality, like universal basic income, maximum income, shortened work weeks, job sharing, and job guarantees, there is little discussion in the literature of feminist theory, critical theory, or power relations (D'Alisa, Demaria & Kallis 2015). Degrowth advocates for a greater valuing of care, and does draw from feminist scholarship, but fails to address inequality beyond gender: race, class, and the divide between the Global North and the Global South.

There is active debate in the degrowth scholarship about whether degrowth is a natural partner with environmental justice organizations of the Global South (Rodriguez-Labajos et al. 2019). However, the discussion centers on whether there are common goals and on the possibility of spreading the influence of each, rather than a discussion of decolonization and global inequality. The field is ripe for deeper sociological inquiry.

Degrowth emphasizes the need to restructure society around values other than profit-seeking, competition, and economic growth. Decommodification gives us a framework to recognize the relation between diverse non-capitalist market practices that might otherwise go unnoticed. When unified by the concept of decommodification, this wide variety of practices, including practices like swaps and free repair "clinics," can be recognized as a powerful counter to the discourse of capitalism as an all-powerful, monolithic social system. Decommodification can show that degrowth is already in action.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that mending and swapping are decommodified practices that run counter to capitalist market society, and maximize autonomy and equality. I seek to celebrate these sites in an effort to expand their hold and perhaps continue to displace some consumption on the market. Additionally, shedding light on alternative economic forms serves to deconstruct capitalism as a monolithic, all-powerful, all-consuming economic and social system. By recognizing the ongoing success of diverse non-market systems, we can see that there is room for individuals and small groups to challenge capitalism, rather than surrendering the power to do so exclusively to radical social revolution (Gibson-Graham 1996).

However, these sites are not panaceas for fast fashion consumption. We live in a system in which the cost of disposal is nearly free (except, of course, for environmental costs, but these are treated as inevitable and nearly irrelevant externalities), and users, rather than producers, must resolve their own repairs. In the case of the Repair Café, this effectively means falling back on the unpaid labor of women that are subsidizing paid labor in the capitalist market. One complicating factor is that attendees of the Repair Café are expected to linger nearby while the volunteer works on their repair. To some degree, this minimizes the exploitation of volunteers' labor, because the attendee is not using the time when their goods are being repaired to do waged labor, and the attendees are more or less required to use their time in equal proportion to the volunteers.

The swaps, in contrast, are not necessarily problematic due to capitalist labor relations, but they may be an exclusionary space. The way that they are constructed, managed, and advertised may discourage many who would benefit from the swaps. Both of these sites have positive effects, and could be important tools in a post-growth transition, but they are not utopias, and serve a limited population.

Due to the limitations of my methods, I do not have broad demographic information on who attends the Repair Cafés and swaps. I can only infer from my limited sample and observations that these sites require certain privileges to attend: namely time, but also social capital, transportation, and ownership of goods to repair or swap, among others. Additionally, my data was necessarily shaped by the questions that I asked, and these were informed by the literature, but also my own interests in craft, the environment, and social change. As a researcher, I came to this project with a worldview and a set of identities that are impossible to set aside, and I interpreted the opinions of a small sample of individuals who also hold their own identities and worldviews, and thus my findings only represent partial knowledge. However, the degrowth literature has very few qualitative research contributions at all, and this work begins to address that gap.

With more time and resources, I would have liked to offer my interviewees the opportunity to review and respond to their transcripts. However, I did ask all interviewees if they were interested in reading my completed thesis. For those who expressed interest, I will share digital access to the completed paper. I hope to inspire participants to think of their participation in the Repair Café and clothing swaps as political, and to motivate them to consider how they could increase their participation in similar non-capitalist ventures.

This study highlights the need for more centering of social justice within degrowth, and addresses gaps in the literatures on mending, alternative consumption, post-purchase consumer practice, and contributes to the growing body of degrowth literature. Despite my critiques of degrowth, I still think it is a promising movement. In a social climate dominated by doom and gloom, in which increasingly desperate environmentalists try to agitate for change through citing the worst, most dire statistics, and the most heart-wrenching stories, many feel paralyzed by the magnitude of change that is required (for an excellent analysis of climate paralysis and denial see Norgaard 2011). Degrowth offers a glimmer of optimism, and the promise of actionable change. This is why it is so important. Degrowth may not yet be quite as equitable as it proposes to be, but when the far left portrays the only other option to be large-scale anti-capitalist revolution (which is necessary but unlikely to happen in time to prevent ecological disaster), degrowth offers an intentional, convivial, and pleasurable path forward.

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