Recycling and Reincarnation: the Journeys of Indian Saris

LUCY NORRIS

Department of Anthropology, University College London, UK

Abstract. The paper addresses the consumption of recycled sari clothing by Western tourists in India. Second-hand saris are traded across north India, and re-made into new styles of clothing for the Western market by local tailors. The saris are cut up, destroying both the Indian form of the garment and the structure of patterns across its surface. These are then transformed either into copies of their own clothing or into hybrid forms favoured by backpackers travelling across Asia. It examines the potential of these decorative silk fabrics to translate images of the traveller's transcendence and impermanence through their own adaptability and change in form, while enabling various nuanced perceptions of belonging. It is argued that such feelings of association simultaneously work on the level of opening up an avenue for individual self-expression, for fitting in with other tourists through the creation of a specific sartorial culture, and for referencing at a distance the host culture through which they are travelling by the re-use of local aesthetics. Finally, it points to the potential for new research into the consumption of these garments in their native countries, and incorporation of such clothing into the wardrobes of travellers once they return home.

Key Words: India, clothing, recycling, sari, tourism, souvenirs

Every day, over 2,000 old-clothes dealers buy and sell used Indian clothing in a wholesale market in north-west Delhi. Of the thousands of cast-out indigenous garments in circulation each morning, perhaps five per cent are silk saris with gold borders and decorations. The market is replicated across the large mega-cities and regional towns of India, a thriving economy of old cloth largely unseen by Indian consumers or Western tourists. Moral concern is growing in the West about the growing consumption of textiles and the problems of their disposal, and policies of reuse and recycling are becoming more important for UK government agencies.¹

Such debates take place within a growing world economy of used textiles, exported and imported around the globe. As a comparative example, it is timely to highlight markets in India that provide a means to process unwanted indigenous garments, but are operating within a very different realm of social beliefs and cultural
contexts. Through their manipulation by skilful designers, these saris move into new realms, their journeys enabling the parallel mobility of their new wearers.

This paper describes the re-use of silk saris from India by two groups of people: the Indian urban elite and Western tourists travelling through the country. It analyses a particular series of material translations that these silk saris make through various technologies of reuse, and seeks to relate these to strategies of self-making through their adoption as dress and furnishings. By drawing on differing cultural understandings of materiality, pattern and style, the acts of both cutting up and reassembling textiles and clothing allow for translations between cultural registers, and the entwined mobility and generative mutability of cloth and personhood.

These examples of the everyday and the ephemeral present alternatives to more established ideas of the mutual constitution of the material and social hierarchies in India, whereby the passing on of material remains, or ‘leftovers’, necessarily engenders the threat of ritual pollution and thereby constructs the recipient in a lower social position. The commodification of used clothing and its subsequent consumption through alternative regimes of value show that such recycled cloth and clothing can in fact pass up the social hierarchy through appropriate complex, contextual sets of ideas being brought to bear through their design and marketing to different socio-cultural groups. The first example shows the channelling of goods to an alternative group of consumers with Western cultural perspectives; the second demonstrates the marketing success of re-fashioning particular orthodox Indian beliefs concerning reincarnation with emerging concepts of environmentalism.

In both cases, the parallels between material and social mobility are striking; the transient tourist picks up and sheds ephemeral recycled clothing while passing through a series of places, while the elite urban woman continually refashions herself to maintain her position at the top of the social hierarchy. The paper’s aim is to juxtapose projects of social mobility, physical journeying and the operations of identity as necessarily intertwined at the level of the everyday fashioning of the self, whether the consumption of recycled clothing takes place within the normal social milieu or in the liminal spaces of travelling. Hence it provides a contrast to other contributions in the volume that focus on the material culture of refugees, exiles and immigrants (Kaiser, Burrell), often moving away from places of origin for uncertain futures. Rather than dwell on the durable, the iconic, the precious remnant, the research here points to the constant fashioning of the social body as a series of incremental temporary performances, and thus has links to Löffgen’s paper on the development of railway stations in Denmark. The difference here is that in the realm of fashion, most consumers have more scope to choose and create their own self-image than the traveller responding to new monumental architecture and moved through spaces of power which show him or her how to behave. Despite the pressure of social sartorial norms, it is the ontological space created by this temporality that permits an element of play and creativity.

In an essay entitled ‘Signs are not the clothes of meaning’, Webb Keane discusses the anthropological assumption that material things are always illustrative of something else, whereby it is claimed that they need to be dematerialized in order for their immaterial meanings to be understood (Keane, 2005). Following several recent contributions to the field, he too suggests that in the analytical process we lose sight of objects’ actions, consequences and possibilities, rendering them as signs mediating social relations that often problematically serve to both reveal and conceal some underlying meaning. Citing Nick Thomas’ account of the adoption of ponchos by Polynesian Christians (Thomas, 1999), he stresses that these garments did not merely express their new modesty; rather, they made it actually possible, a focus that hinges upon placing their materiality, their forms, qualities, the practices they mediate and the interpretation to which they give rise within a world of causality.

In order to go beyond a semiotic approach that links signs purely with communicating meaning, Keane refers back to Peirce’s model of the sign (Peirce, 1955) whereby signs can be iconic (resemblance), indexical (causal) or symbolic (arbitrary), and notes that indexical signs are located within a material world of consequences, and that the logic of signification is always vulnerable to contingent factors and further consequences. Of particular interest here is Keane’s reference to Nancy Munn’s qualisigns, which are certain sensuous qualities of objects that have a privileged role within a system of value, such as ‘lightness’ or ‘fluidity’ (Munn, 1983). Munn’s work suggests that significance is borne by certain sensual qualities beyond any particular manifestation. This leads to an understanding of icons as unrealized potential, a means of discovery, and together with indexes, these signs open up new futures, to the effects and suggestions of material qualities. Actual realization upon the contextual and contingent bundling of certain signs or qualisigns, and the realization of one potentiality in turn depends upon the subordinating of another possibility through processes of selection according to the image or design required.

Clothing presents a prime example of the bundling together of various material qualities that have contextual value; hence I want to suggest that in studying the disposal and re-use of clothing in India, the concept of un-bundling and disaggregation of properties is of crucial importance, and is an intrinsic part of the manipulation of fibres during recycling technologies. While I have elsewhere drawn attention to the relational subjectivities of disposal and their role in the dynamic re-construction of the self (Norris, 2004b, 2005), here I would like to bear these in mind when considering the implications of a growing international trade in old clothes. In the largely unacknowledged and invisible world of global recycling, I suggest that these material transformations create fluid connections that resonate with the migration of people across cultures. In the case of cloth, the propensities of fibre and textile become an ideal medium by which these flows and their consequences are realized.

Whether dealing with the mass production of cheap export clothing or the handcrafting of a silk sari, anthropological studies of Indian textiles have rarely gone beyond the contexts of production or the social significance of sartorial choice and consumption patterns, ending the story of the social life of a garment long before its relegation to the back of the wardrobe. How might we try and understand the relationship between various means of riddance, the values that they elicit and the projects of self-making they activate?

The fieldwork on which this paper is based was mainly conducted among middle-class households, second-hand markets and recycling factories in Delhi, and visits to
Pushkar, Rajasthan, during a year’s doctoral research from June 1999 to May 2000, with several short return visits in 2002, 2003 and a month in 2004. The method of research was largely to follow the social lives of Indian clothing, beginning with their role within the wardrobes of middle-class households, their status and possible disposal and subsequent fate, whether domestic recycling or commodification.

An oft-repeated phrase was clearly true – in India cloth is never simply ‘thrown away’. Less often voiced but frequently alluded to is the fact that unwanted clothing never travels up the social hierarchy, given the cultural importance of new clothes and their association with ritual purity. But what I quickly discovered was that (out of sight of most of the middle and upper-middle classes) houses, markets and warehouses are literally overflowing with heaps of used cloth and clothing: one might say, mountains of rags waiting to be turned into riches. From this mass of saris and _shalwar kamiz_, dealers and fabricators create new products and niche markets through entrepreneurial recycling, both producing clothing for the local poor and exporting fashionable furnishings and street wear for Western markets.

When considering the scale of spheres of exchange and recycling of clothing from the individual to the domestic, and from the regional to the international, it may be helpful to keep in mind an image of personhood described by Gell in _Art and Agency_, quoting from Ibsen’s _Peer Gynt_ (Gell, 1998). The person is likened to an onion, composed of a succession of concentric layers, but without a core or ultimate basis – as a relational entity, s/he is made up of layers of biographical experience accreted together, an aggregation of external relations linked through successive layers to an interior person. This accords with the anthropological analysis of the person in India as a relational entity, the _individual_ (Marriott & Inden, 1977), connected through the exchange of material substances. However, as Busby has pointed out, such exchanges are conceptualized as flows between persons that are internally whole and permeable rather than internally divided and partible as in Melanesia (Busby, 1997, p. 276; Strathern, 1988); persons are coextensive with their skin boundary yet that boundary is permeable, enabling connections to be made (Busby, 1997, p. 275).

Cloth is often likened to a second skin, forming semi-permeable boundaries between inside and outside (Steele, 1996; Wilson, 1985), and studies of textiles continue to focus on cloth’s predominant function of creating connections between biological and social selves, and of weaving, knitting and tying people and things together. These properties are evident in both the construction of textiles themselves, such as the weaving of warp and woof threads, and the processes through which they are acquired through exchange. Through constant buying and gifting, the flow of cloth through the household makes visible the construction of networks of relationships between kin and close friends around the world, just as international trade constructs global webs of sociality.

__Purging, Recycling and Materiality__

The attributes of cloth itself have been central to the perception and subsequent use of cloth as an agent of transformation in South Asia, as demonstrated by Chris Bayly’s historical insights (Bayly, 1986) and contemporary studies such as those of Pnina Werbner (Werbner, 1990). Cloth can absorb the spirit of the wearer: for example old saris and dhobis of venerated elders are still used for wrapping babies, making quilts, and children’s clothes. Cloth in India is used and reused, often until it literally falls apart and disappears. Since considerable value is located in cloth, old clothes constitute an important resource, which can be continually reinvested with new meaning for as long as materially possible. Although trousseau items are kept as inalienable objects by many women, a strong aesthetic of smartness and newness prevails; favoured cottons soon start to fade in Delhi’s climate, silks tear and stain, and older clothes seen on earlier occasions no longer have the social impact they once had. One might conceive of the wardrobe to be a nodal point in the flow of cloth exchanges, a contained collection forever threatening to overspill its boundaries, to be constantly inspected, sifted and evaluated in terms of its appropriateness as indexes and icons of the relational self. As social relations need continually reinforcing through exchange, so clothes, the material agents that help to constitute them and yet are always in a process of decaying, also need to be renewed.

Old clothing may be hoarded as family heirlooms or preserved as emblems of group identity. Cloth is valuable as a result of sentimental attachment and its role in memory work: domestic strategies of reuse aim to capture and conserve these values of love, protection and continuity to maximum effect. Most used clothing is usually handed down to younger relatives or offered to servants as part of a strategically negotiated obligation to provide for them, an obviously inclusive and exclusive device, for they are both materially robbing them in the transformative garb of the family and yet constructing them as social inferiors (Norris, 2004a, 2004b). One might say that this practice is structurally reminiscent of the gift of imperial robes or the _khilat_, during Moghul times (Cohn, 1989; Maskiell & Mayor, 2001). Although domestic recycling is now less common as more women work full time, favourite pieces of cloth are still cut up and reused in quilts, as dress trimmings and furnishings, while soft cotton clothes become baby wraps and dusters.

Clothing, with its strong association with the body, ought to be kept within the domestic sphere, or handed down the social hierarchy to trusted recipients. Its intimate personal associations and cast-off nature make it potentially polluting for those holding beliefs in caste purity who fall outside the domestic sphere, while equally difficult to negotiate can be offering old clothes to one’s neighbour, which might be deemed offensive as part of the jostling for status, especially amongst the middle classes in new housing estates where people often do not know each other’s background well. Owing to the move to smaller flats, the increasing distance from relatives, and the built-in obsolescence of the accelerating fashion system, a growing surplus of clothes is increasingly perceived: the flow through the household is being blocked by the inadequacy of customary strategies of disposal. Clothes once treasured but now worn are unsuitable for relatives, and are often perceived as ‘too good for the maid’. Unwanted clothes constitute both a burden and a burgeoning potential resource for which new avenues must be found.

As questions arise as to an object’s continued status in the home, the object may be placed in varying conceptual holding categories, often removed from the main
collection in the wardrobe, and literally placed in a corner or under the bed. Kevin Hetherington suggests that disposal is about the mobilization, ordering and arrangement of the agency of the absent, and he has likened such conduits of disposal to primary and secondary burial (Hetherington, 2004). At first, objects are placed in an avenue, such as in boxes, display cabinets and attics, as a way of making things representationally absent while physically present. The secondary burial involves making the object physically absent; for him, it is in the gap between the first and second burial that the object is stripped of its value, akin to the body being separated from its soul.

While rummaging under beds and through piles in corners in Indian homes, it became clear to me that there are indeed many stages of preparing an object for disposal. Where clothing cannot be contained within the family or given to servants, it must be properly got rid of; one hopes that one's 'rubbish', once finally properly discarded, will not return to haunt one. It is this one-way flow away from the household and into the anonymity of the urban market that enables the destruction of the subjective relationality inherent in the object, and leaves the garment as a mere material resource for recycling.

No longer desirable, these discards are peeled away from the body, as a snake sheds its skin, through routine practices of detachment and riddance. To be worn and used up or lost in exchange as the ultimate detachable personal effect, cloth visualizes most clearly what is common to all remains of consumption; that is, materially and iconically, these remains bring to mind the underlying cycles of decomposition and re-composition that occur through regular acts of exchange. This decomposition is analogous to the disintegration of the tangle of relationships which it made manifest (Strathern & Strathern, 1971; Strathern, 1992, 1999). Remarkably little work has been done on the actual processes of casting out (though see Gregson, 2007 for example) and the mimetic sacrifice of objects once dear to the ontological project (Küchler, 2002; Loisy, 1920; Valeri, 1985). Riddance entailed renewal, and death is the prerequisite for reincarnation. Indian women purg their wardrobes of undesirable clothing in order to create for themselves a return to a new ideal state, both for their own person and their family represented in the fabric of the garments themselves.

The 'remains' of a sacrifice are those things that have been taken out of circulation, constituting a surplus. As Pelizzi notes, 'set aside, but not consumed, remains are not the end of value, but the starting point of its creation' (Pelizzi, 1995).

It is the phenomenal, perceptual qualities of fibres, textures, colour and pattern that are of value, Munn's 'qualisigns' such as shininess, absorbency, and draping tendency. They can also have characteristics of both passive decay, through fragility, impermanence and vulnerability, and at the same time of active regeneration and reconstitution through their ability to be re-made into new configurations of material form and surface design.

As Bayly points out in his essay on the origins of *swadeshi*, in the emerging proto-capitalist markets of Moghul India, the spirit of the gift, or the perception of 'evil' (i.e. pollution), clung to cloth through its production and circulation in the market (Bayly, 1986). But if consumption does not mark the end of the production of meaning and value, then how do potentially polluting, cast-off clothes re-enter cycles of exchange and eventually the market? The constitution of social hierarchy and cosmological order and its link to exchange and concepts of purity and pollution is central to Parry's work on death (Parry, 1986, 1994), Raheja's on gift giving (Raheja, 1988), Eck's on sight (Eck, 1985) and so on through to the substantiality of Marriott's transactional analysis (Marriott, 1976, 1990; Marriott & Inden, 1977). However, used cloth does not necessarily simply pass down the social hierarchy. Rather, there are complex mechanisms through which it can be cleansed and reintroduced into the market through the unbinding and re-bundling of its contextual qualities, opening up the possibility for the 're-engagement' of pieces of old cloth and their new owners (Gell, 1992). This in turn is intimately connected with the re-making and re-ordering of social identities.

**Re-commodification**

An increasingly popular option is to commodify clothing through a system of bartering them for shiny steel kitchen utensils, thought of as 'getting something for nothing' or akin to 'pin money'. I have argued elsewhere at length that pots are suitable replacements for old cloth on many levels (Norris, 2004a, 2004b); they are part of an essentially female domestic economy, linking the management of kitchens and wardrobes, and pots are commonly given along with cloth as part of dowry payments. In addition, pots are commonly seen as symbols of fertility and productivity; replacing torn and dirty old clothes with bright sparkling new pots suitably symbolizes the advantages of the bargain; women often arrange their sets of pots and glassware artistically on shelves in the kitchens, and women are said by men to always want another pot for their collections.

The dealers who come to bargain at the doors of the middle-class housewives are Waghris from Gujarat, members of a formerly itinerant scheduled caste who go out on daily rounds across the major cities in North India, bartering for old clothing. Every morning the cast-off clothing obtained from the day before is sold in the local 'Horse Market', the economic hub of the community, each woman sitting behind a pile of the previous days' gleanings. This is the node of what is probably the largest used-clothing market in the subcontinent. Approximately 2000 dealers enter the market on any day. The role of the Waghri traders is similar to that of barbers and dhabis in Indian society as necessary removers of dirt, pollution and exuviae. Clothing, once taken off the body and divested, can retain the evidence of its former life. Through barter the identity of the individual who once inhabited the garment is stripped away (Kopytoff, 1986). The subsequent processing of used pieces of clothing in order to commodify them assists in the removal of further social identifiers from the garments, according to the sensitivity of the subsequent consumer (see Gregson et al., 2000), for examples from UK charity shops.

A crucial factor for success is the materiality of the cloth itself, its texture, colour, pattern and style, which determine the uses to which cloth can be put. The mass of worn old cotton dhotis and saris are usually turned into rags for the machine polishing industry; the same qualities of softness and absorbency valued within the home are capitalized upon in the market. However, the most common use for the goods traded at the Horse Market is as clothing for the poor, which is then sold on at Sunday bazaars or the weekly *haats*. Goonj, an Indian NGO, estimates that 50% of India's rural poor never buy new clothes: the scale of this trade is vast. Especially
favoured items for women are synthetic *shalwar kameez* suits which last longer, do not fade, and are easier to maintain than their more expensive cotton counterparts. In Indian markets, better-quality used garments from middle-class households may offer better value in terms of cost and quality than poorly made new garments; if their origins are successfully disguised, they may also offer an affordable avenue for upward sartorial mobility. For the better-off middle classes, wearing old cast-offs is unthinkable, and so there is a limit to the price the sellers can put on unaltered clothing, whatever its quality.

At the market the most valuable silk saris with decorative *zari* borders are snapped up by the earliest buyers. Prices vary according to the area of decorative surface and the amount of gold and silver *zari* used in the borders and *pallu* or end-piece. These silk saris are stockpiled in local workshops and houses, and then cut up and re-fashioned into soft furnishings and tailored clothing for the local elite and Western market. The small-scale manufacturers of these furnishings are mainly those Waghris who have been developing the business of recycling Gujarati embroidery since Independence (Tarlo, 1997) and have moved into sari recycling. The market cannot supply enough saris to meet demand, and so the traders have capitalized on extensive networks across north India to buy up more raw materials, and sell on their finished products. These products are ubiquitous, on offer to foreign tourists and now local elites across South Asia, and they are now being imported in vast quantities into the West by entrepreneurial Western travellers-turned-traders, who create new networks of opportunity abroad for the local manufacturers. Sold through ‘ethnic’ trading shops, market stalls and festivals, these items have become hugely popular. Few end buyers in the West seem to realize they are essentially recycled goods, and they do not appear to be marketed as such. The tag of ‘antique’ is occasionally found, and is more likely to add value than the connotations of recycling, however positively valued in an environmental perspective – ‘antique’ suggests the fabric is much older, rarer, and perhaps more distant from the original body of the wearer.

*Sari* borders have always been saved in the practice of thrift, and either sewn onto new plain silk saris or used to decorate suits. The re-use of clothing as furnishing fabrics extends habitual domestic practices into the commercial sphere, and it is no surprise that its origins as a recycling practice are lost once international profits are at stake and continuity is more important than originality.

## Indian Elite Fashion: Recycling and Reincarnation?

During my fieldwork, informants usually claimed that Indians would never wear second-hand clothing from the market unless they were really desperate. Middle- and upper-middle-class housewives and professionals alike denied that it could ever happen, and there is a general consensus that middle-class Indians will always buy new. The fact that there is a surplus of used saris is not surprising to them – it will obviously happen when clothing wears out, while fashions change and gifting is so ubiquitous – but for them the old clothes can only ever travel down the social scale, owing to the status accruing to new clothing, ideas of hygiene and beliefs in ritual pollution. The exceptions were inherited pieces and clothing swapped and handed down among family members, which usually travel down the social hierarchy from the old to the young. However, it was indicated at times by those lower down the social scale that if people thought they could get away with it, they would. Waghri traders in Ahmedabad spoke of quietly selling clothing to the ‘Maharatis’ (the upmarket mobile middle classes, so-called after the small Japanese cars they now drive in their millions), but I never met anyone who would admit to buying clothing in this way. The exceptions are the upper classes in Delhi, who might purchase unusual ‘antique’ saris from reputable dealers to wear to special functions, generally very old pieces made through unusual, preferably defunct, craft technologies.

One interesting case study highlights the alternative calculations of value among the generations within one elite family. Shobha Deepak Singh came to my attention via a feature in *The Hindustan Times* on her growing collection of antique saris. ‘Never mind if they’re torn or stained, the 56-year-old sari collector feels they’re more precious than antique jewellery’ – a reversal of the commonly accepted value system which privileges gold as inheritance. She had been amassing an assortment of antiques, her own creations and some new pieces copied from heirloom designs, and her first large-scale exhibition was in the basement of her luxurious home in Sardar Patel Marg. Although a ‘collector’ for years, it was her only daughter’s engagement six years earlier that had really inspired her. To gather a troupeau of 100 saris, she had had to commission four of each bespoke design,斯塔特水 ⁴ that a weaver would set up the loom for four saris at a time. She therefore bought three extra saris for every one she had commissioned, and sold them on to enthusiastic friends also hunting down troupeau items. She also started buying old saris and having them restored, especially Benarasi brocades from royal families, Gujarati and Rajasthani prints, tie-dye and metal thread work. Slowly, weavers and dealers started to contact her and offer her rare pieces. She clearly had a flair for design and a strong business acumen; her designs were exclusive, often unique, having been created from rare originals, and she could adapt and modernize techniques to produce new combinations for the Delhi elite. In the exhibition, new saris were suspended from high rails and artfully back-lit, while the older pieces were folded over hangers, interlined with tissue. A coffee table was weighed down with expensive, authoritative tomes on textiles and saris, such as a publication series emanating from the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad, and international auction catalogues. Ostensibly a resource for interested clients and visiting students, their presence added gravity and value to the clothing displayed, declaring those displays to be of equal worth to those published. Although she intended to sell saris at her exhibition, she displayed a reluctance to get rid of certain pieces that she had had for years and took me upstairs to a large walk-in wardrobe overflowing with more rare textiles. It was clear that there were no established boundaries between her personal collection and what was fast becoming a successful business downstairs. She herself had received a Presidential Award in 1999 for her work as the Director of the Shri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, and had wanted to wear a favourite old sari of her mother’s which was in an unusual design and colour combination. Unfortunately it was no longer wearable, so she had managed to have a copy made. She felt that a similar desire on the part of the Delhi elite for a combination of exclusivity, aesthetics and nostalgia was a selling point for
her saris. She only wanted to sell to those who appreciated fine textiles and could afford to buy them. New saris with real zari work cost over Rs 20,000 she said, but certain people just spent Rs 5,000 on artificial zari, and got rid of the sari after a few years. As she picked up duplicates or highly unusual pieces, she put them aside upstairs. Eventually, she wanted to establish a museum of her collection and to leave all her saris to it.

Shobha was realistic about the fate of her own clothes, knowing her daughter would not want them. She was establishing a new route of getting rid of them - turning them into antiques that will become literally ‘priceless’ by being incarcerated in a museum. She purports to be in the vanguard of establishing antique textiles as an increasingly acceptable form of storing wealth, following on from the growth in collectors’ interest. Her daughter had made a successful marriage and was living in England. She never wore the saris that had been so carefully picked out for her; indeed most of them remained in Delhi for her occasional visits. Although the commissioning of the trousseau had given Shobha so much pleasure, once it was displayed and handed over, its function was complete. A prominent London dealer in high-quality Indian textiles recently informed me that he is often approached by such elite young women, who are already trying to sell their trousseau before most of the saris have ever been worn.

However, these saris are markedly different in quality and price to those that are snapped up in the Horse Market by dealers; these second-hand middle-class saris need much more work to market them successfully to elite boutique shoppers, those who wouldn’t dream of wearing someone else’s old clothes. It was therefore a great surprise to see an article in the fashion pages of The Hindustan Times entitled ‘Antique Chic’. Subtitled ‘The Millennial Woman and her Designing Man’, it featured the upmarket designs of Sonam Dubal, who uses ‘recycled’ saris to make his clothes (see Figure 1).

He is selling his clothes to an elite market whose knowledge of Indian silks and brocades is extremely discerning, and therefore uses pieces of a quality similar to the types of sari that his customers, and even more crucially, their mothers, would have worn themselves, though they are now torn, stained and can never become ‘antiques’. There is no inversion of values attached to types of sari, no ironic picking up of cheap fabrics bought by the lower classes to be remade into a quality product. Sonam himself has a deep understanding of the history of fabrics and designs, picking out expensive brocades fashionable in the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s, with designs no longer made today. This is unlike many of the Western entrepreneurs discussed below, many of whom lack the knowledge to fully grasp the subtle social differences between wearing an expensive, hand-woven silk chiffon and a mill-made art-silk one, or a high-quality Benaras brocade from a cheaper imitation; indeed these social differences become far less relevant in alternative Western contexts.

Some of Sonam’s brocades have origins that date back centuries to Mughal influence, while others possess even older Hindu motifs; their recurrence over time allows them to appear quintessentially ‘Indian’, drawing on a heritage of millennia. Simultaneously, the brocades nostalgically remind women of the last time certain motifs and colours were used within the fashion cycle, perhaps when worn by their mothers and grandmothers. The visual memory of such fabrics may be likened to the recent vogue in the West for 1970s textile designs, updated by colour or form for the new season, which recall childhood for a new generation of adult consumers. For Sonam, the recycling of images, colours and design motifs into unusual combinations and startling new forms allows him to represent clothing as at once new and yet familiar, to allow his customers to artfully experiment with new forms using classic cloth nuanced with layers of time. For example, a man’s coat is made from roughly woven bright saffron cotton of the type worn by holy men and pilgrims, but its lining is a bottle green silk brocade with Chinese dragon motifs. As the elite girls don their clothes for their exclusive
parties, they are putting on a performance that asserts their claim to pre-eminence; re-assembling elements of fabric, colours and motifs into new forms, reconstructing themselves in the process. His collection becomes a sophisticated articulation of being young, wealthy and Indian in a global environment, of being part of the elite, laying claim to the past and taking hold of a future that extends well beyond India.

In one of the more conservative Delhi boutique he retails in, Sonam has also sold a range of traditional women’s Punjabi suits (shalwar kamis), comprising long shirts, trousers and scarves made from used silk saris. In particular, he utilized plain silk saris that had a ‘shredded’ look, that is, old saris that had been worn or folded until creases appear, and where the weft had started to slip. These he made up as linings or as surfaces backed with a bright lining in a contrasting colour that showed through the weft. Sonam tells a story of how one woman apparently saw them and walked out in disgust, complaining to the boutique owner about the disgraceful fabric – for it is exactly the type of worn-out old sari that women in this class would not normally ‘be seen dead in’, and which find their way to the bantangan in the first place. However, after talking to her friends, she must have realized how unfashionable her moral stance was becoming and was back the next day hoping to buy one, bitterly disappointed to find they had all sold out. Sonam appreciates that his consumers will never blindly turn to the West and accept new materials and new fashions, but need to feel that the ideas are part of an Indian heritage. It is the skill of the designers and retailers that have managed to create a new fashion by reversing a deep-seated anxiety around used cloth and turned it into a desirable commodity amongst the elite; Sonam’s humorous recounting of the story to me is of course also part of the process of making something socially acceptable, and highlighting his own skilful role in achieving this.

Overcoming the usual reluctance on the part of the Indian upper and middle classes to buy second-hand clothing cannot, therefore, be taken for granted. Younger buyers are certainly happy to buy the new styles and seem less concerned, but Sonam still markets these fabrics as ‘antique silk’, cashing in on the ‘old is gold’ theory. Antique silk saris, shawls and textiles in general have long been highly prized amongst the upper classes, as they were by colonials and are still by contemporary collectors and dealers. Yet although some antique pieces have always been cut up and reused when worn or damaged, significant value is also held within the form of a whole sari or shawl. This usually prevents knowledgeable people from chopping up potentially valuable textiles, though not always. In addition, older women know well that these pieces are not really ‘antique’ in that sense, and therefore extra reassurance is required that they are not crossing unforeseen moral boundaries. This point is partly suggested by the subtle message inherent in the quality of the silk itself, which they feel must have belonged to ‘people like us’. In fact, as Emma Tarlo agrees, many of these women are plainly annoyed that they got rid of their old saris in the first place having seen their potential for transformation.

To allow these women to by-pass the stigma of using second-hand clothing and justify the use of pieces of old brocade, Sonam appeals to two strands of belief underpinning the understanding of recycling that can run counter to the fears of social disgrace and ritual pollution from material from unknown sources. One is the Indian consumer’s growing awareness of the view of recycling as an environmentally friendly practice, and the Indian precedent for this in the practice of thrift. The other belief is based upon the perception of recycling as an ancient process embedded within Eastern philosophy. All of the garments in this clothing range have this label attached:

With the dawn of the new millennium global awareness becomes: Fabric used is Antique Silk infused with the concept of recycling so flaws in fabric weave or texture are to be considered NATURAL as to any worn traditional fabric aged through the process of time...

In a feature for an early edition of the (then) new Indian ELLE magazine, Sonam’s label was advertised through an image with global appeal. A pale-skinned, middle-aged woman, perhaps an Indian or a Westerner – it is hard to determine – is wearing a silk ‘butterfly’ blouse. Her eyes are closed, and she has four or five acupuncture needles in her face. The caption reads:

We are all spirits here visiting moving on to different times. Reincarnation is the theme Sanskar is based on.

This chimes with the famous couplet from the Baghavad Gita, often referred to by informants, which reveals the transient nature of material form, likening it to the progress of the soul, atman, which periodically casts off the body:

Just as a man giving up old worn out garments accepts other new apparel, in the same way the embodied soul giving up old and worn out bodies verily accepts new bodies (Baghavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 22).

Sonam also turned to Indian philosophy to explain to me the creative process behind his clothing, revealing Buddhism to be both a personal inspiration and useful as a marketing tactic to tap alternative underlying ideas of reincarnation.

Western Travellers’ Costumes

The proliferation of recycled sari clothing made for tourists is noticeable among the backpacker destinations in India: a completely different social arena from the urban Indian elite shopper with next to no cross-over in terms of consumer identity. Pushkar in Rajasthan is a major destination for budget travellers seeking to relax by the lake and ‘recover’ for a few days or weeks from the ardour of local travel. Pushkar has also become a major clothing manufacturing site behind the scenes, with entrepreneurial Indians picking up on fashion trends brought in by numerous budget tourists and making products locally that can easily be updated.

One of the major ways in which new styles are introduced is through direct copying, often initiated by the travellers themselves. Amongst them, tailors in particular have a good reputation for their ability to make new patterns taken from favourite garments in Western styles, using local materials such as silk and cotton.
Indeed, prospective visitors to India and other Asian countries are often encouraged by returning friends to take favourite clothes with them specifically for copying by tailors. These hybrid clothes recreate travellers’ ‘backpack’ wardrobes at a fraction of their cost in the West, with the added bonuses of being recognisably fashionable one-off garments and unique in their combination of Western style and Indian fabrics. For a generation of young Western travellers largely unused to made-to-measure clothing and normally buying everything readymade in chain stores, there is an immense appeal in having garments made especially for them, where they can determine any style alterations such as design and fit, and choose the pieces of cloth to be used. The mass influx of such tourists to Pushkar since the 1960s has led to the growth of a niche market for such ‘cross-over’ products, which feature Indian materials and products developed or adapted specifically to cater for the limited pockets and particular tastes of the visitors. These fashions can then be copied en masse by local tailors and retailed in the town’s small shops.

One of the most noticeable forms of clothing on offer is Western-styled garments for women created from saris. The elements of a sari have always been available as a resource for Indian women creating home furnishings and kurtas, long shorts worn over loose trousers. Now the same elements – borders, ends and field – are being used for skirts, sundresses, skirts, shorts, halter-neck tops, pedal-pushers and drawstring trousers. As with the kurtas, cushion covers and bedspreads, sari borders are used as necklines, sleeve edging and hems, the pallu (end-piece) serves as panels, bodices, trouser legs and waistcoats, while the field makes up the bulk of the garment.

Two or three retailers claimed that Pushkar was the first place where such clothes were created, about 15 to 20 years ago. There is an ‘origin myth’ in which a young Western woman took her dress along to a Pushkar tailor together with an old sari she had got hold of, and asked him to stitch a copy for her. The tailor picked up the idea and ran up a whole batch that sold immediately; he then opened up a shop. Some tailors were used to making up kurtas out of saris, and understood how the formal properties of the sari’s components could be adapted and re-used. Combined with their well-established copying skills, it was relatively easy to make the new garments. The number of shops selling them proliferated, and manufacturing units in nearby houses were set up. One shopkeeper estimated that today there are at least 60 such units in Pushkar and Ajmer, making these clothes for sale across India and for export to the West.

Although Pushkar appears to have been able to develop a pool of labour to make these clothes, there was no ready supply of saris at affordable prices. The Rajasthani women in the outlying area wear full skirts, blouses and large veils. The town itself is small, and together with nearby Ajmer could not provide enough appropriate second-hand clothing. However, local links with networks of Waghiri traders have ensured that Pushkar is now a major market for many old silk sari traders across north India, with agents visiting the workshops to pick up orders by the thousand. In Delhi, some of the Waghiri traders sold to manufacturers in Pushkar, and one smaller trader took the train there weekly with his single bundle, hoping to get a better price outside the competition of the local dealers. When I visited Ahmedabad before the holiest festival in Pushkar – Kartik Purnima – was about to fall, I met several women who were stockpiling thousands of saris, planning to take them by bus to the dealers in Pushkar and make a pilgrimage at the same time. One woman had been buying up silk saris in Bombay over the previous months in preparation for the festival, while others used networks of local petty dealers to amass stock. Most workshops are not interested in buying the highest quality silks, and may pay as little as Rs 35 to 40 (approximately 50p to 60p sterling) each if buying by the thousand. Stains, holes and tears are unimportant, as local pattern cutters are adept at avoiding the worst of the worst. Each sari can be used appropriately depending on design and quality, either for large pieces or many smaller decorative parts of larger garments. In fact, these saris are never washed or dry cleaned throughout the whole transformation.

Ashok Bhai of the Guruditt Garment Shop has 20 tailors working for him; his whole family is now in the business, which he started about 15 years ago, and he has five shops, although the other four sell new Indian clothing (saris and shalwar kameez). He claimed that his Western customers did not seem to mind if the clothing was torn or dirty, unlike his Indian clientele, who want only ‘good clean new things’. As we were chatting, two unusual Indian girls in jeans, T-shirts and sunglasses stopped for a moment to look along his rail of skinny sari clothing on the street, apparently also unconcerned about their condition. Ashok was sure that these upper-class ‘Bombay City girls’ wanted the Western look on the cheap – ‘they want to show off their body’, but he thought they probably would not tell their parents where the clothing came from or wear it in front of them. Their curiosity fulfilled, they wandered on without buying. They were the only such ‘rich girls’ I ever saw in Pushkar; generally middle and upper middle-class Indian girls would be expected to avoid backpacker hangouts.

The attraction of second-hand sari clothing for the Western buyer seems to exist on many levels. The reuse of old saris is pre-eminently a cheap option; the styles are familiar, perhaps the long sundresses and wrap-around skirts resonate more with holiday wardrobes than up-to-the-minute high street fashion, but there are also hippies and short tops on offer. Their exotic, ‘Indian’ appeal is provided instead solely by the fabric and designs, which are normally Benarasi brocades and printed floral silks. Indian tie-dye, bandhini, hand-drawn, qalamkari, and block print fabrics once popular in the West during the 1960s and 1970s have been re-presented with silk glittering with gold and silver zari flowers, animals and stripes, the epitome of luxurious exotic fabrics suddenly available to a whole new market unaccustomed to such rich textures and designs.

These clothes fall into the category of tourist-objects defined by Celia Lury (Lury, 1997). She identifies three types of objects of travel: traveller-objects retain their meaning across contexts, and retain an authenticated relation to an original dwelling; tripper-objects have meanings that appear arbitrary, imposed by the outside through external context or final dwelling place. Tourist-objects lie in-between there and here in their journeying; they are neither closed objects whose integrity relies upon relation to an original place, nor open objects whose integrity is eroded by their final resting place (Lury, 1997, pp. 78–79). Compare this to images of Victorian and Edwardian travellers fully equipped to maintain the status quo wherever they went, or the later development of ‘wash’n’wear’ clothing for Western travellers, enabling one to ‘look smart’ in every situation (Braun-Ronsdorf, 1962). The predicament of being over-prepared is the starting point for Anne Tyler’s
humorously perceptive novel, *The Accidental Tourist* (Tyler, 1985). In contrast, there are many travellers who are more willing to clothe themselves in something with indigenous overtones while they are on the road without the potentially uncomfortable feeling of adopting the whole sartorial structure and stricture of Indian dress with which they are unfamiliar.

Cathy, a British woman in her early thirties, had bought various different garments during her travels in north India. She had acquired a couple of plain cotton shirts to wear with jeans from an export surplus stall in Delhi, and an embroidered top that was an export reject from the same market. Staying with a local friend while in the capital, she had had a very plain maroon *shalwar kameez* made up, noticeably more subdued in design than her host’s was likely to have been, with no trinkings. The gold zari borders and neck embellishments commonly found on an already unfamiliar garment were ‘too much’ and ‘too Indian’, and she thought they would have made her feel self-conscious. Later she met up with friends in Pushkar, and was enjoying a stay by the lake for a week, to ‘get away from the hassle of Delhi’. She had been tempted into buying some of the 1970s retro hippie clothing on offer, and had a long orange dress which she’d worn once while there. Already the more vibrant colour was something she felt she would never have worn at home, though she may have wanted to, and she identified its bold hue with being in India, more specifically being in Pushkar in the traveller’s milieu, whose apparent freedom she was enjoying. When we met she was in a small shop buying an emerald green wrap-around sari skirt with pink and gold butti (flower decorations) and a wide gold thread border. She liked the fact that it was an easy style to wear, was lightweight and could be worked in her rucksack; she also thought that the colours were great, and not ones which she would easily find at home.

In fact, due to the limited palette of colours and designs in many seasonal fashion ranges in the West, the vibrant colours and patterns of saris were particularly appreciated. Cathy didn’t mind the slightly grubby patch which she thought would wash out, as she was only paying ‘a couple of quid’ for it, and didn’t think she would wear it once at home. Later she and one of her friends talked about the colourful clothing Indian women wear, and how the sari clothes give them the opportunity to wear some of these fantastic fabrics and bright shades without feeling like they are imitating Indian dress. Yet neither did they expect to wear them again at home, where they might seem odd and stand out too much as too ‘ethnic’. The pieces of old silk sari enable women to experiment with images and colour, to play with the boundaries between the exotic and the familiar, in a parallel social space that is constructed largely by and for the enjoyment of travellers in the heart of the Rajasthan desert.

Many of these clothes are bought for immediate use, to be thrown away as they wear out on long trips across the continent; yet donning them can be an important part of the travelling experience, whether practical or playful and experimental. The highly disproportionate number of backpackers in the town has resulted in an overlapping commercial and social sartorial arena along the main street in Pushkar, where the wearing of more revealing clothing by foreigners is now commonplace; in fact the town itself provides one of the main stages for wearing much of the clothing in the small cafes and rooftop restaurants where many while away the hours.

Using old saris also ensures that each garment is unique: no two skirts made from the same sari will ever look the same although the genre is instantly recognisable. One trader suggested that tourists might find that stains lent the garment a feeling of age, perhaps that the material was in some way ‘antique’, echoing the way in which they are sometimes described in the West. At the same time, it has become a recognized style, and buying a garment is part of the ‘fitting in’ process for the traveller. The Western fashion garment created from used Benarasi saris raises complex questions concerning authenticity and appropriation, identity and individuality. The sari itself was a unique piece of hand-woven, decorated fabric; each sari is an original, conforming to stylistic regional types or fashionable urban designs, both its form and style identifying its Indian origins. Once cut up, it is likely that the fabric and patterns are still recognisable as Indian to some, but are coming to be understood by many as simply generic, more ‘Eastern’ or ‘Asian’ than ‘Indian’, and these appear to be signified by the echoes of opulence in the fabrics, the silky shine and glint of gold. Further research into traveller’s perceptions of Indian dress could potentially reveal closer links between these material qualities and a sense of engagement with nationalist images of sumptuousness and exoticism; it would also be interesting to unpack the cultural spaces in which such contemporary imagery is generated, and the role of the imagination in constructing notions of India both before and during travelling.

The recycled sari clothes are not representative of any place or person, but have meaning only as an expression of the relationship between people, places and things. Hybrid products create images of the relationships between societies, in which one society produces for the other an image that society has of itself. Given time, the image may often be assimilated and act as a powerful element in the self-conception of that same society, since it is always a two-way process (Miller, 1991, p. 60). A striking feature is that amidst the apparent diversity of choice, there are in fact only minor variations on a few major themes in what is on offer in the hundreds of small shops and stalls. The declaration of being part of a group of Western travellers creating for themselves an image of being in India through a set of basic styles is as important as any unique qualities of a garment commissioned. Each recycled object is of a style replicated and displayed en masse rather than being presented as in some way being unique. In fact, this sameness is itself important, as Steiner has remarked (Steiner, 1999).

For just as printed illustrations and words both in the past and today have achieved visual and textual authority through repetition, so too, I suggest, does tourist art effectively produce its own canons of authenticity – a self-referential discourse of cultural reality that generates an internal measure of truth-value. And therefore, just as in Benjamin’s model of mechanical reproduction, ‘the copy becomes associated with the true and the original with the false’ (Wollen, 1991, p. 53, quoted in Steiner, 1999, p. 95).

Through wear, these clothes are incorporated into the wearer’s identity; during a period of individual change and frequent exposure to new experiences, many travellers acquire and dispose of clothing rapidly, often passing through countries wearing out the remnants of clothing from the last culture visited, before purchasing fresh ones. While some may easily discard them again when moving on (as a result of over-stuffed rucksacks, changes in climate or sheer boredom), others take them
home as souvenirs, wearing them both as reminders to the self and proof to others of the exoticism of travels undertaken. Wearing these clothes can be a powerful statement of absorption and appropriation as well as personal experience. The ephemerality of such clothing and its susceptibility to singularization through wear and tear constitute part of the travellers’ experience of journeying. This aspect sets such tourist clothing apart from other trans-national commodities discussed under the rubric of ‘tourist art’, etc. Similarly, the older ‘art/artifact’ debate and its relationship to tourist arts has largely left out the materiality of the objects themselves and the phenomenological experience of people who buy and use them (Clifford, 1988; Graburn, 1976; Marcus & Myers, 1995; Steiner, 1995).

These customers, both men and women, are doing more than just creating their own personal souvenirs; they are dressing up, recreating themselves performatively as travellers, backpackers on the road, far away from home. They are enjoying the experiences offered by the society through which they travel, but to some extent isolated from the place in which they find themselves. These travellers are wrapping themselves in different guises, in fabrics, colours and designs that proclaim their marginal identity as not being of any one place (neither India nor the West), but are in some senses staking a claim to belonging everywhere and nowhere (the ubiquitous traveller). The traveller who buys such a garment is creating a record of the ‘here and now’ when s/he is in India wearing Indian cloth, being a traveller, entering into the spirit of the adventure by imbuing the spirit of the cloth, but on their own terms. It is also new, remade, transformed, into something fashionable, and sometimes daring within its current Indian context; an old piece of cloth reinvested with meaning. It is this potentially transient quality which reflects the stopping off points in journeys made by the travellers:

Just as authenticity in an artefact represents stability and longevity by referring to the perceived moment of origin as some time in the far distant past, its antithesis, ephemerality, places emphasis on the present, that fragile evanescent moment that passes in a flash. (Attfield, 2000, p. 81).

The materiality of the cloth itself is ephemerally, it has been cast out once and rescued; already tatty, it can now be picked up and worn for a while longer. For these clothes are markers and makers of journeys, they take on the shape of the new owner’s travels and in turn create an image that projects out into the world:

...ephemerality offers a condition resistant to closure and materialises uncertainty...authenticity and ephemerality materialise the relation between time and change in ordinary things (Attfield, 2000, pp. 86–87, 88).

The hot pants, halter-neck tops and Capri pants tailored from old wedding saris and family gifts hold the tensions of continuity and change within the very structure of the fabric. At once threatening to wear out and fall apart or be deliberately thrown out again, their hold on life is tenuous and they invite the prospect of constant renewal of self and subjectivity. Whether or not they are incorporated into wardrobes back at home, and if so, whether and how they are worn, would extend the research into the next social life of both person and cloth providing the data for how such symbiotic relationships continue.

Finally, a more recent development has seen recycled sari clothing for sale in smarter Western boutiques and online shopping sites. This new category of clothes has yet to be researched in depth, but a representative of one small company in Berlin suggested that most of the customers buying recycled sari clothing have themselves visited India, usually Goa, often for holidays and the music scene. The clothing is similar in style and fabric to those bought in India but of higher quality. The shop décor is clean and bright, and it is in a new up-coming trendy part of town (Figure 2). Clearly this blurs the boundary between everyday and holiday personas, softening the boundaries and incorporating aspects of other life experiences. The less obviously recycled fabric potentially allows for the continued expression of diverse
sartorial expressions in a more socially acceptable manner, and may mark the increasing durability rather than ephemerality of such experiences.

Conclusion

Through processes of riddance, the singular garment in the Indian wardrobe creates a new category of hybrid seriality in the marketplace, constituting and making visible a new set of relationships through the destruction of the old. The markets are overflowing with used cloth, stripped of its role as a locus of identity. The origins of such cloth may not be particularly problematic for many non-Indian consumers, indeed it may be argued that their indeterminate past histories allow an opening for new interpretations to be elicited, based upon more imaginative associations with material qualities of the fabrics. Yet for the elite home market, more subtle and complex manipulations of value are required. For these products to be accepted, a slight of hand transforms the reality of the used garment (which ought to go to the poor) into a piece of recycled cultural heritage whose reincarnation permits the continual adjustment of value systems of the elite buyer. The saris have their immediate origins concealed and appeal to buyers on grounds of being authentically linked to an older period, suitable for a higher class, correlating with Hindu cosmological values of cyclicity and reincarnation and newer concepts of the environmental desirability of recycling. The politics and practicalities of hidden transformations are essential for the translation between regimes of value and the creation of new modalities.

In essence, it is not necessarily the scarcity of Indian textile heritage that is played upon as a resource for identity formation (for example, see Harrison, 1999), but its ubiquity – the entrepreneurial trick is to be able to turn the commonplace back into the unique, working with the consumer by providing the means for the rapid creation of new self-images. The correlation between the journeys made by the saris and the transformation of the self during travelling is one of mutual aggregation and disaggregation of their component parts. The properties of cloth can be manipulated to make new garments, to be worn, wrinkled, creased and worn out once again, just as the perspectives and subjectivities of the wearer are reformulated during the process of choosing recycled sari clothing, which is at once exotic yet familiar. Further research into the Western traveler’s understanding of material properties such as shine, smoothness, silkiness and vibrancy of colour from alternative cultural perspectives might well illuminate the way in which these qualities operate as quasicons, how replacing Western clothing with a more varied, experimental wardrobe permits the peeling back of the layers of self identity and allows for new formulations to be created. These fundamental properties are in turn manipulated by the knowledge of the cloth’s social history of production and consumption, or more pertinently, the uneven distribution or withholding of that knowledge. As Bayly makes clear, the key to the ability of cloth to transmit the spirit of former owners to new wearers is dependent upon the knowledge concerning its production (in the case of new cloth coming into the marketplace) and subsequent social life (in the case of domestically recycled clothing) (Bayly, 1986). The concealing of that knowledge enables cast-offs to travel up the social hierarchy through the neutrality of the market. It also permits other material qualities in the ‘bundle’ that is a shredded textile to come to the fore (Keane, 2005), and opens up a space for the role of the imagination to play upon those properties in the creation of new identities.

Notes

2. Emma Tarlo’s earlier work on the re-appropriation of Gujarati embroidery provides a related, comparative case study, many of whose conclusions are relevant here (Tarlo, 1996a, 1996b, 1997).
4. There is a related development whereby mass-produced new ‘sari’ cushions are manufactured by high street stores selling Asian products, such as the Pier, to emulate one-off recycled products.
6. £1 = Rs 70 approx in 2000.

References

Co-venturing Consumers ‘Travel Back’: Ships’ Stewardesses and Their Female Passengers, 1919–55

JO STANLEY
Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University, UK

ABSTRACT In popular discourse, workers who travel as they work— including seafarers— have tended not to be seen as travelling in their own right. Focusing on oral narratives from interwar women seafarers, this article explores both the working conditions and the conditions of narration that could enable these women to configure themselves as ‘working-vacationers’, women ‘travelling back’, travel consumers and travellers who engage with the world, that is, as people who are ‘really travelling’ not simply servicing ‘real travellers’. In particular it explores stewardesses’ relationships with women passengers, aiming to add a new dimension to mobility studies and occupational history.

KEY WORDS: sea, women, travel, workers, consumers, stewardesses, passengers, oral testimony, travelling back, seafarers, mobility, rights

Introduction

In outlining an aspect of early twentieth-century seafaring women’s experience, this article suggests that seafaring workers, like all transport workers who do their job while travelling, could productively be re–visioned as travellers in their own right, as co-venturing consumers of travel. Conventionally, in popular discourse the travel

Correspondence Address: Jo Stanley, 6 Bank View, Mill Bank, West Yorkshire HX6 3EN, UK. Tel: 01422 823 399, 0775 280 3882. Email: j.s_stanley@hotmail.com

1745-0110 1745-0110X Online/08/030437-18 © 2008 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/17450108002376746