
Editor’s Introduction
This forum brings together three in-depth reviews of Andrew Brooks’ Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-Hand Clothes. Published in 2015, Clothing Poverty explores some of the “hidden” geographies of the global trade in new and second-hand clothing by developing a marxist “systems of provision” approach. Both wide-ranging in its theoretical purview and also in its empirical focus, Clothing Poverty is a quintessentially geographical work. It’s therefore all the more significant that on its publication, the book was engaged with by both an academic and a popular audience, featuring on the BBC, within The Guardian and The Globe and Mail. In a lively Author Meets Critics session of the 2015 AAG conference, Mike Goodman, Josh Lepawsky, James Sidaway and Bradley Wilson offered their thoughts on the book: three of their reviews are brought together in this forum. Goodman first provides a personal account and challenges Brooks to take another critical look at ethical consumption; Lepawsky then interrogates Brooks’ positionality in the production of the text; and, finally, Sidaway explores the book’s popular contribution. Responding to his critics, Brooks offers a brief conclusion to the forum.

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Review 1

A few months back, I took a bag of old clothes (that we could not “regift” to friends) to my local recycling centre. I found the imposing metal box that supported the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution), stuffed my bag into the slot, lifted it up and felt very satisfied as I heard it slide down to the bottom of the chute. As I was closing the lid, I distinctly remember asking myself two things: first, where exactly do these items–no longer of value to me and my family–end up? A local charity shop or as rags and repurposed cloth? Or somewhere else? Second, will someone actually like the button-down shirts in the bag I was donating? And what would they look like wearing my clothes? I thought, with a happy chuckle, that they had better be large in stature or it would look like they were wearing a ridiculously outsized tent. In effect, my charity-induced geographical imagination was kicking into overtime thinking about the next material and social life that these clothes would be taking up.

No matter where they ended up or who ended up wearing them, though, I was in the privileged position to feel good about donating to a worthy cause, keeping items out of the landfill and perhaps clothing someone who might have less than I do, large stature or not. Little did I realise at the time, however–as Andrew Brooks’ so carefully and thoroughly documents in his sobering Clothing Poverty–I was seemingly positioning myself as complicit not only in the burgeoning global networks of the second-hand clothing trade but there was a distinct possibility I was working to suppress local clothing industries in parts of Africa. My local ambitions and intentions–what Raymond Bryant and I have explored as the “spaces of intention” in moral economies (Bryant and Goodman 2014)–of doing “something good” with these “worthless” items of clothing connected me into a series of contemporary globalised assemblages of power, (re)value, and (un)development that have a rather long and storied material and socio-economic history.
In an unabashed critical political economy of the fast-fashion industry and that of the second-hand clothing trade between the UK and Africa, Brooks lifts the lid off these assemblages and begins to question the on-the-ground impacts in the African locales where much of this clothing ends up. In taking what he calls the “long view”–indeed, starting the clock in the prehistoric era and bringing us up to the London Fashion Week going on outside his office window–Brooks has produced a deep spatial and socio-economic archaeology of the production, circulation and consumption, and then re-circulation and re-consumption of the worlds of clothing. Impressively, this archaeology rides across not only the more diffuse moments in clothing’s global history and its connections to the African colonial experience, it also then touches down at just the right moments to give us analytic detail that makes Brooks’ approach to political economy as much an art as it is a rigorous study of historical and contemporary economic geographies. Through the eyes of particular individuals like Mario in Mozambique, the book’s multiple narrative arcs link up the everyday experiences of buying and selling second-hand clothing in different African markets to the economic structures that created the commodity geographies of those Calvin Klein and Levi jeans that Mario imported from the US and Europe. This is a kind of ethnographically-grounded political economy many of us can only hope to aspire to.

But what does *Clothing Poverty* actually stitch together? First, Brooks offers up a detailed, Callon-like description and analysis (e.g. Caliskan and Callon 2009) of the “marketisation” and “re-value-isation” of both fast fashion and used clothing. Indeed, we come to learn just how peculiarly different clothing commodity cultures and chains are from those for other commodities in the ways that the clothing economy induces the continual and rapid moves of buying and “shedding”, reselling and reusing through the processes of overproductionism that are baked into the fast-fashion industry. This is what Holt (2012) calls the “cultural lock-in” of un-sustainability which is on full display in Brooks’ clothing assemblages: the quick turn-around of in-fashion/out-of-fashion means more consumption,
which, in turn, means more to be shedded, resold, reconsumed and reused. In painting this “economic life of things”—with a bit of social life thrown in for colour (cf. Appadurai 1996; Cook et al. 2004)—one of the most striking aspects of the book’s marketization story is that of the role that luck plays in facilitating (or not) the ability of African used clothing re-sellers to eke out their tenuous existence. In this, the very livelihoods of these re-sellers depend on the luck of choosing the right bundle of clothes—most of which they cannot see as they are buried deep inside the tightly wrapped and closely packed bales—with the right styles that will sell well in the places and markets of resale. Without this luck, many resellers go out of business and remain in poverty on the economic margins of both local and global economies.

Second, in showing off his geographical chops, Brooks details how this marketization of second-hand clothing is facilitated by and creates what we might think of as one trade route of the “new mercantilist” relationships and pathways of the global economy. Here, cheap cotton is grown in Africa, shipped to China or Bangladesh to be turned into clothing, traded and sold in the US and Europe to then be, once worn and/or no longer wanted, shipped back to Africa where these items end up in local markets. And, as he argues, the relatively cheap and easy access to used clothes then works to mitigate against and dampen any domestic production capacities around the clothing industry. In this way, uneven geographical development, much like overproduction and overconsumption, is also baked into modern clothing assemblages as corporate and charity capital seeks rents and re-rents, value and re-value, across space and place.

Third, Clothing Poverty has at its centre an important and sustained critique of the spaces of intention of both charity-focused used clothing networks and those badged as ethical consumption. Brooks thoroughly complicates the charity model of the used clothing trade in its seemingly unintended depression or out-right destruction of local clothing manufacturing in Africa. As he describes, charities in the UK have had to become more “business-like” in organisation, connections and processes given the revanchist austerity
politics that have worked to gut public funding to charities and other progressive institutions. Thus, in conjunction with this overproduction and overconsumption of clothing, charities have had to work to mainstream the used clothing trade, monetize it, and facilitate it in order to develop income streams to do the broader progressive work they wish to continue to do. This is evidenced in the joint Oxfam and clothing retailer M&S “Shwopping” campaign: the public can bring in used clothes to M&S shops which are turned into vouchers for further “new” consumption in the store; the collected used clothing is either then sold through Oxfam shops or goes into the global used clothing trade through a company known as Wastesaver. Intention here begets not just funds for Oxfam and more items for the global used clothing trade, but, weirdly, novel moments of further (over)consumption.

Yet, it is in working through and analysing instances of ethical clothing production and consumption that Brooks really makes his mark through sustained critique. Variously described as a set of “myths”, “slacktivism”, “self-serving”, “minimally disruptive”, “tepid”, and a “petty-bourgeois indulgence”, a series of different ethical economic forms are explored and critically discussed: from Toms shoes (buy one pair, another goes to Africa), ethical recycling (e.g. Shwopping), fair trade and sustainable fashion, to the “Made with Love in Nairobi” ethical fashion line manufactured in Kenya and organised by the celebrity fashion maven Vivienne Westwood. As argued in the book, “ethical production systems alter rather than eliminate the exploitation of labour and nature, especially in the global South” (p.230) at the same time they “offer a limited acknowledgement of the inequalities at the heart of capitalism [and] still depend upon the market and ordinary practices of commodity exchange” (p.224). Moreover, ethical consumption is “an individualised form of ‘political consumption’ which represents a limited force for social change that focuses only on convenient topics” (p.231). For Brooks, ethical production and consumption systems are just one more arrow in the quiver of a neoliberal capitalist system, albeit now somewhat more marbled with a “Northern-person’s burden” at the shopping till. The much harder and deeper work of altering
the social relations of production in the favour of poor and (still) exploited African market-traders and textile workers is left to the wayside in a burgeoning neo-colonial moral economy that flips the script from naked socio-economic and ecological oppression to one of “help” and “care” in a kind of enlightened or conscious capitalism that, like capitalism more generally, is also for Brooks clearly pants.

And yet, unlike the rest of the ethnographically-informed book, these critiques of ethical clothing networks are mainly theoretical critiques derived from the normative and structural black and white-ness of the overtly marxist approach deployed here. In a way, given the book’s framing, these examples of ethical consumption and production are, from the outset, set up to never be “right” or never be “enough” because they don’t fundamentally alter the social relations of production and consumption. In some ways, it seems as if these examples were cherry-picked–especially the ridiculously naive and (not so) vaguely neo-colonial/racist “Made with Love in Nairobi” campaign–for effect and in order to provide the theoretical and empirical space to point out the deficiencies of market-led approaches like these that might dare wield consumption, consumer choice, and consumer politics as a vector against exploitation. To tar and feather any and all ethical consumption and production movements (and moments), campaigns or networks with the same structurally-ineffectual and “tepid” brush was a leap too far for me without any on-the-ground evidence (for good or ill) or a discussion about how some of these campaigns might actually open up space for structural shifts and/or cultural critique in awareness raising or other forms of collective organisation. In this, the book begins to feel slightly claustrophobic as the capitalist relations of production/exploitation are seemingly inescapably hegemonic and all-encompassing in both rhetoric and material power, with little way out, beneath, between, or behind neoliberal capitalism. Diverse economies (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2008) and/or any form of resistance to clothing capitalism are nowhere to be seen in this book.

Yet, the anti-sweatshop movement that took many American university campuses by
storm a decade or so ago (e.g. Cravey 2004; Johns and Vural 2000; Silvey 2004; see also Micheletti and Stolle 2008)–the case of which is conspicuously missing from the book–not only worked to question the social, labour and ecological relations of fast fashion and fast capitalism but, importantly, turned this into a set of production standards and joined-up clothing labels that roped both universities and consumers into what Brooks might actually consider those “authentic” politics he seems to be on the hunt for. From a different angle, the Canadian Fair Trade Network provides a specific example of an organisation who has worked to do a pretty good job at explaining the social conditions of clothing production as a kind of politically-focused, performance art. They do this by sewing long, descriptive labels into various pieces of clothing that read the following:

100% cotton. Made in Bangladesh by Joya who left school at the age of 12 to help support her two brothers and newly widowed mother. Her father was killed when a fire ripped through the cotton factory where he works. She now works in the building across the street from the burned down factory. A constant reminder of the risk she takes every day.

The label doesn’t tell the whole story.

While admittedly only a media campaign and associated with fair trade, this performance directed at the consumer through the realm of cultural politics is perhaps differentially and importantly “political” in a way that deserves to not be dismissed out of hand as is the case in Clothing Poverty.

And, what are we to do about the exploitation of fast-fashion and the unintended outcomes of the used clothing trade and its embedded geographical ethics of care? Truth be told, much of this was hard to find in the book beyond vague mentions of social justice,
collective ownership, support for labour unions and increasing wages—all important pathways to the disruption to the exploitative relations of capitalism. Yet, as an aside, some of these figure—at least rhetorically—into some of the very movements and campaigns Brooks critiques in his discussions around ethical consumption. In any case, the two seemingly concrete proposals he floats are, first, those of the “immobility of capital”, the idea that when factories are built in the locations of production in poor locales, these would have a sort of minimum time that they would have to stay put and operate. His second solution involves the collective ownership of the means of production by factory workers, which he states can and should be found “either within or beyond capitalism” (p.250). Both fit into his desire for a “post-consumption” (p.243) approach to fixing the problems, which then doesn’t need to count on the neo-colonialist approach of ethical consumption. The book, in effect, ends on a rather deservedly sour note that sees little way out of the totalising social and ecological relations of capitalism or little effectual resistance in either the real or theoretical sense, with this need to move “beyond capitalism” the central and binding conclusion to the analysis.

Because of this, at the end of the book, I was left asking myself a very different set of questions from those I formulated standing in front of the metal used clothing box that started this commentary off: Outside of us getting beyond capitalism, where might we find progressive, real and novel cracks from which to prise the kind of social justice Brooks calls for in *Clothing Poverty*? How might we harness the spaces of intention and relations of care that motivate much of the used clothing trade to develop the “missing political appetite” (p.252) the book closes on? Are there no ways at all that ethical consumption or production might be turned into sustained structural changes once cracks are made or appear in the veneer of capitalism? As you can see, I was left searching for those “geographies of hope” that might emerge from Brooks’ critique, but perhaps this might be the subject of his next fascinating book. Either way, *Clothing Poverty*’s take-down of both clothing capitalism and that associated with the spaces of intention of ethical consumption and trade leaves us
progressives in a difficult position: How do we begin to define (or at least study) socio-economic relationships that might both theoretically and practically be shaped into the “socially just” economies Brooks dangles in front of us through his research on clothes? Engaging this question, and the research that might underpin this, is up for much greater and more extensive debate and Clothing Poverty very much sets us along this fruitful and crucial path.

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Review 2

As I write this I am wearing, among other things: a second-hand H&M button-down shirt (made in Bangladesh), an American Apparel t-shirt (made in the US) purchased new some years ago, a pair of surplused Levi’s jeans (made in Mexico) purchased with new labels still attached at a local vintage store, and a pair of used leather Frye ankle boots purchased some years ago at the same vintage shop (I’ll save mention of my unmentionables by revealing only that they are made of cotton, as is everything else I am wearing except for my shoes). With no knowledge of the provenance of my H&M shirt except for its “made in” label, it is possible that it was sewn by one of the doomed workers of Rana Plaza which collapsed horrifically on 24 April 2013. My American Apparel t-shirt might be more hopeful. The company claims to offer fair wages and has brought employment to deindustrialized urban spaces. On the other hand, its advertising has been accused of being exploitative and the company’s former CEO is embroiled in allegations of sexual misconduct. Needless to say, things did not go well for the cow whose skin is the leather of my shoes. In Andrew Brooks’ rollicking new book, *Clothing Poverty*, the sartorial choices of readers are held up for critical analysis and found, to say the least, wanting by many measures of good decision making.

Most of what I am wearing is used or surplused clothing purchased at a local shop that helps keep alive a downtown struggling as destination malls proliferate on the edges of the city I live in. Don’t my consumption habits, at least in my choice of clothing, help conserve resources by keeping already manufactured things in use longer? Don’t I help keep a local business going? Am I not stepping outside relations of direct labour exploitation that new garment manufacturing typically relies on? Possibly, but as Brooks’ highly readable text shows, it is much more complicated than that. Cotton farming requires massive inputs of water, energy, fertilisers and pesticides; capitalist clothing manufacturing—from harvesting cotton to spinning thread to making cloth to sewing garments—inevitably relies on unequal
relations of labour and capital that are, at best, unequal but quite often also violent. No reader will be able to come away from this book thinking their clothes are innocent, whether they believe they’ve put them on for merely utilitarian purposes or as markers of personal status. This is where Clothing Poverty excels. Getting dressed is morally complicated. Whether wearing clothing that is new, used, or some combination thereof the wearer is inevitably tangled in threads of uneven power relationships and deleterious environmental impacts. There are no easy answers.

Brooks uses a systems of provision of approach to guide his analysis of the clothing trade. The approach helps to connect the various forms of value a commodity has—use, exchange, surplus, symbolic—to the network of activities that generates them. It allows Brooks to follow the journeys of new and used clothing to the labour conditions necessary for their production, the environmental impacts of cotton farming, as well as to the making of their symbolic capital in practices of taste and sartorial distinction. In this sense, it is a highly useful analytic that allows Brooks the flexibility to trace out the threaded entanglements of clothing and ethics.

Still, the systems of provision approach also has a distinct tendency toward the problem of circular explanation of the superorganic kind that Duncan (1980) brought to the attention of cultural geographers in the 1980s. The case of Japanese jeans, for example, “shows how society and culture can shape the trade in new and used goods…because of particular cultural values inscribed within the jeans” (p.196). The locus of society and culture is in two places at once: outside the jeans doing things to them (from where, exactly?) and etched into them. As sources of action, society and culture explain the systems of provision for Japanese new and used jeans. As that which is impressed into those same jeans, culture (and society? it’s a bit more ambiguous here) is the result of their own action. Later, Brooks’ claims that new and used clothes “affect different societies; yet, it is not actually the clothes themselves that are instrumental” (p.205). Instead, Brooks tells us, what actually matters are
not the clothes but “the social relationships among people...that shape and produce different modes of clothing provision” (p.205). Where do culture and society sit in relation to the systems of provision they both animate and result from? If the clothes don’t actually matter, could we take them away or swap them out, put any other commodity in their place and witness the same affects? It would seem that social relationships explain social relationships. If so, then while the book is a riveting look at the moral complications of getting dressed, its explanatory power is less satisfying.

Clothing Poverty is unafraid of making normative judgements. The book reveals, for example, that the systems of provision for vintage fashion and for the hyper consumption of fast fashion feed off of one another. While vintage clothing “is praised as an environmental alternative to the excesses of fast fashion” at the same time “old clothes influence new looks” and the two systems can be self-reinforcing (p.186). Vintage fashion relies on highly knowledgeable “pickers” with an eye for what is or will be trendy. Pickers work in sorting plants that process vast amounts of cast-off clothing. The choicest items come to vintage systems of provision as essentially free gifts to capital and realise huge profits. What remains enters into highly variegated systems of provision for used clothing that, among other things, tend to reinforce relationships of economic dependency between the global North and South.

Brooks’ analysis is highly readable and convincing. But there are competing interpretations of these North-South relations. Anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen is one important source of these (e.g. Hansen 2004). Brooks acknowledges her work but his critical analytic forces his own hand in making his case. In a telling passage on Hansen’s research Brooks (p.182) casts her findings as “opinion” in contrast to his informed facts about commodity production. So we have competing claims to knowledge about the situation, Brooks versus Hansen. As a reader, whose findings am I to trust? Hansen, the anthropologist with decades in the field? Or Brooks, the younger critical geographer? Who is trafficking in mere opinion while the other offers facts?
Here is a point where the analytical stance of critique that drives *Clothing Poverty* runs into trouble—or out of steam, as Latour (2004) would have it. The critical analytic that Brooks makes use of throughout the book presupposes being able to sort falsity from truth. For example, *Clothing Poverty* takes the self-knowledge and identity formations of the masses of consumers of fast fashion to be socially constructed. Because they are constructed, so the argument goes, they are fetishes—false beliefs that obscure concrete relations of exploitation between people. What readers of the book get, then, is a metaphysics of truth that casts the knowledge of everyone but the critic’s own as socially constructed (and therefore false). The critic, on the other hand, is in the unique position of being able to “see through the veil of the fetish” to the truth. But this is a duplicitous analytical metaphysics. It insists on constructivism for everyone but the critic who gets to be the sole proprietor of realism about his or her preferred explanatory factors (e.g. power, capital, society, culture). One of the key lessons of post-structuralism—a variegated body of work that *Clothing Poverty* dismisses out of hand—is that all knowledge is constructed. Thus constructedness does not distinguish your fetish from my truth.

With the presumption of privileged access to the truth behind the labels comes one of the book’s most provocative claims: “Consumers across both the global North and South cannot be expected, or trusted, to make good decisions” (p.241). Who among you, readers, are right now wearing clothes that are so clean that they are free from any entanglements of inequality, oppression, or environmental harm? Who among us wears clothes so clean that we could—or should—imagine ourselves in a position pure enough to demand of other consumers that they make themselves worthy of our trust and that they act accordingly? If such a pure position is an impossible one to actually inhabit, what then follows for the critical stance that presupposes such a position to be valid? What happens, in other words, if we have no choice but to live as hypocrites (Morton 2013) in the cloth of purist ideals constantly soiled by our always impure, mixed, hybrid ways of living? The politics of purity built into this claim
about other consumer's lack of trustworthiness seems a very unrealistic position from which to generate solutions to the desperate problems *Clothing Poverty* otherwise reveals so well.

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Review 3

Clothing Poverty is a highly readable book that manages to combine accessibility and sophistication in persuasive and occasionally polemical prose. It is set within a tried and tested genre of bringing academic nuance (with the apparatus of endnotes and scholarly depth) to wider readerships, be they through textbooks, or via paperbacks that reach (in the kinds of words from the days when they were pioneered by Penguin books in interwar Britain) “the intelligent layman”. Readers of Antipode will likely have many favourites that succeed in carrying this off, though relatively few get reviewed here. It is easier said than done, however, and Andrew Brooks deserves congratulations in having delivered a book that can be assigned in a classroom, pushes intellectual boundaries about the interfaces of clothing, trade and development and can also reach broad audiences. The publisher, Zed Books (themselves a workers’ collective) has done a good job too. And although a few images inside might also nicely have illuminated the arguments, a striking cover frames the book.

If the genre is vintage, the point of departure is also, taking the established procedure of asking readers to think about where everyday things that they use and consume come from. David Harvey sometimes begins classes by asking students to contemplate where their breakfast came from, thereby invoking geographies of commodities, exchange, production and consumption, as well as the historically determined cultures that bring them and their breakfast together (his own examples and stated favourites are coffee, toast and “English” marmalade made from Seville oranges). Brooks’ twist on this is to extend the question to consider where used clothing goes. He joins a developing strand of work on the waste of the world that examines how the end of one commodity chain turns out to be the start of another. In particular, he takes us to used clothing markets in Mozambique, his main fieldwork site, but also through the complex and contested fields of claims about ethical consumption in the
West. Along the way, China’s role, Central Asian markets and Western charities are connected as Brooks traces an intercontinental business every bit as fascinating and convoluted as the oil markets, illicit narcotics trade or the global production systems behind the Hewlett-Packard branded laptop on which I am writing these words in my study in Singapore. Whilst I am impressed by its achievement, I have three complaints about the book. None of them amount to fundamental objections, but they concern paths not taken or closed off that I think Brooks might have been more open to and that *Clothing Poverty* ought to speak to.

The first concerns cotton. This thread and its products are at the heart of the book and on its cover. I think Brooks could have paid more attention to how cotton’s historical geographies fold into those he maps. The introduction notes how “Africa has largely been neglected in writing on the clothing sector, yet the…continent has played an important role in the global history of garment production, especially in cotton growing. In the colonial period cotton was one of the major export crops, and through patterns of uneven exchange relationships of dependency between Africa and Europe emerged” (p.5). Other places produce cotton, it became key to Soviet development strategies in Central Asia for example, with deeply contradictory results, and Brooks hints too at how the rise of European and especially the English capitalism that formed Marx’s principal object of analysis in *Capital* displaced Asian manufacturers, only to be replaced themselves by Asian (and other Third World) weavers a century later. He notes too how, “[a]fter China, the United States is the largest producer of cotton in the world, where much investment has gone into the development of high-yielding cotton varieties and efficient production techniques” (p.22). I would not expect these stories to be anything other than a footnote to *Clothing Poverty*. And the appearance of Sven Beckert’s (2014) landmark and lauded *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* would have come too late for Brook’s book. However, the connection between Africa’s underdevelopment, the slave trade to the New World and the
making of what Paul Gilroy (1995) and others since have called “the Black Atlantic” ought to have been registered more centrally in *Clothing Poverty*, whose historical geographies seem to me to be too abbreviated and somewhat anaemic.

The second story missing is that of the movement of new and used clothing in non-Western fashions, such as abayas, shalwar kameezs and lungis worn from the Maghreb to Myanmar or for that matter the capulanas that are often worn by Mozambican women. For all his stress on shifting global divisions of labour and what he terms “new hubs of accumulation in the global economy such as Dubai and Singapore…” (p.33), Brooks’ foci are the jeans and t-shirts once worn mostly by workers, but which have since became a kind of cross-class national dress in swathes of the West. I frequently spend time in the Persian Gulf and there too are the networks of containers for depositing clothing donations that seem to crop up in many Western cities, but in the Gulf they are run by the Khartoum-based Islamic humanitarian (and proselytizing) Munazzamat al-Dawa al-Islamia, whose mission spans Arabia, Eastern-, Southern-, Central- and West Africa. Where do the clothes placed in them go and with what effects? How does their movement articulate with the circuits that Brooks follows? There are other worlds of fast fashion and second-hand clothes that don’t feature in the book.

Finally, but not least, Brooks has a peculiarly dismissive take on post-structuralism that might be mistaken as parody. A passage about how the book aspires to redress American- or Eurocentric imbalances in work on production and consumption, “through consideration of case studies from Africa and elsewhere in the global South which show how the poor are incorporated into cycles of consumption” (p.37) is followed by a claim that, “allied to this problem” of geographical biases in research “is that many academics have been diverted by post-structuralism (a philosophical movement championed by critical theorists that examines the instability and complexity of human interactions), which has led them away from the grand economic theories of Karl Marx, David Ricardo and Adam Smith…”. Yet it
seems to me that Brooks’ emphasis on the embodiment of structures, their complexity and contingency, their gendering and multiplicity seems in sympathy with rather than opposition to, for example, work that identifies itself as simultaneously political-economic, post-structuralist and feminist in the form of Gibson-Graham’s (2005) mapping of diverse economies.

But let me reiterate, I don’t wish these critiques to be misread as dismissal. *Clothing Poverty* remains a great book that deserves a wide readership and raises lots of important questions. Track it down: you might even find a great value second-hand copy in a readily accessible market.

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Author’s Response

First I would like to deeply thank Mike Goodman, Josh Lepawsky and James Sidaway for their extensive comments, as well as Bradley Wilson and Alex Loftus for participating in a lively Author Meets the Critics session at the 2015 AAG conference. I am humbled by their thorough engagement with my text. I will keep my own responses relatively brief and focused on one key point from each review.

First, Goodman interrogates the politics surrounding ethical consumption and through his critique highlights some of the ways in which the market can be subverted to encourage consumers to seek out alternative ways of making clothes using examples from student and trade union movements. Since the publication of Clothing Poverty I have continued to think about the potential for ethical consumption to challenge many of the injustices I highlight in the book and maybe my position has softened here. Indeed the campaigning work of Fashion Revolution involving geographer Ian Cook among others clearly demonstrates how activism by consumers in partnership with scholarship can help raise the political profile of exploitation in clothing networks. Despite these laudable efforts, in a broader sense, there are frustratingly few signs of consumers, producers or others confronting the inequalities of the market through their engagement in fashion. When we do find green shoots they need to be directed towards the sunlight. Here the recent work of Kate Fletcher and the publication of Craft of Use: Post-Growth Fashion (2016) highlights existing instances of how individual people use clothing, which goes beyond the structural understanding of production and consumption that I detail in Clothing Poverty, and in so doing Fletcher provides a depth of understanding of some of the “progressive, real and novel cracks from which to prise the kind of social justice” that Goodman calls for.

Both Lepawsky and, later, Sidaway raise a more fundamental issue about the way in which the book engages with other scholarship and especially post-structuralism, the point
being that within the text there is no clear acknowledgement of the way in which I construct knowledge. This is a charge to which I can and will plead guilty, but in mitigation, it reflects the intention to keep readers outside of academia engaged in the content rather than being subsumed by theoretical discussion. At times this meant I was actively polemical in my discourse and maybe abused my position as an omnipotent narrator. Indeed in other places where the book has been reviewed critics have argued there is too much “academic speak” (Wallis 2015). Perhaps “the intelligent lay reader” would have been better served by no overt discussion of post-structuralism and a more subtle use of Marx to support the analysis? While hopefully in my future work on consumption, for a purely academic audience, there is room to bring the vibrancy of the analysis of Gibson-Graham, among others, into conversation with the work of the heterodox economist Ben Fine, whose system of provision analysis underpins Clothing Poverty (see Brooks 2015).

All three reviews have framed their responses by drawing upon their own relationships as consumers with networks of exchange and circulation: Sidaway discusses his HP laptop; Lepawsky his own clothes and shopping habits; and Goodman a recent trip to the recycling bank. This narrative device was something I avoided when writing Clothing Poverty, but the text is implicitly biographical and draws on my experiences throughout my twenties of the places I’ve visited, studied and lived–from volunteering in Papua New Guinea, Masters fieldwork in Zambia, PhD research in Mozambique, and work in London, as well as my own patterns of clothing consumption. As such the mosaic of case studies that are drawn together provide a very fragmented and partial view of the geographies of the global clothing trade. Yet these perspectives are inflicted with exactly the types of vignettes that are present in the reviewers’ comments, the book is intensely personal. This brings me to my final point from Sidaway’s review about the value and place within geography of what are sometimes known as “bridging books” that stretch between an academic and popular audience. When preparing the proposal for Clothing Poverty this is the readership that I had
in mind, precisely because it is the type of text I most enjoy reading myself. Working against this intended strength, of drawing upon my own experiences, is what Sidaway identifies as one of the weaknesses of the book, that it neglects key trade relationships that are not associated with Western fashions, something that reflects my own bias of experience. While there are examples from outside of the Western experience within the book, representation is limited. Here I would direct interested readers towards Lucy Norris’ (2010) work on second-hand clothing cultures in India, which provides insights into some of the “other worlds” of fashion which Sidaway asks for.

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