

Take Care, Repair, Rewear:
Using Creative Methods to Evaluate the Practice of Upcycling in Managing Textile Waste

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Abstract

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Overconsumption in the fashion industry leads to large volumes of accumulated textile waste moving through global commodity chains. This textile waste moves through global hierarchies, established under colonialism and maintained by processes of racial capitalism, to end up in the Global South. In this way, countries which import secondhand clothing in the Global South act as a sacrifice zone, absorbing the unequal economic, social and environmental harms caused by textile waste. However, participatory fashion practices such as making and mending have been identified as an important tool for possibly generating a sensibility for sustainability and for potentially combating the harms associated with political economies of fast fashion. Making and mending practices which use secondhand clothing items, or textile waste, are forms of upcycling. In turn, upcycling is positioned as a key design strategy for circular economies. This dissertation employs a fragmented ethnography approach of the UK and Ghana to understand the ways in which textile waste moves through global commodity chains. Interviews and a making-as-method approach explore the role of upcycling as a strategy to manage textile waste in both London and Accra. This dissertation highlights the importance of community networks for creating and sustaining circular economies at local and global scales. Therefore, care ethics and sustainability literature are drawn upon to theorise new global relationalities which might

better support circular economies for textiles which then have the potential to reduce the economic, social and environmental harms which are perpetuated under the current geographies of textile waste.

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Key Terms

Fast Fashion:

The inexpensive and easily available clothing that is characteristic of most of the fashion industry today. “Fast” describes the speed by which new designs and items are made available to consumers (Bick et al., 2018).

Slow Fashion:

A lexicon used for practices in the fashion industry that break away from the values and goals of a growth based industry (Fletcher, 2010: 262).

Textile Waste/Clothing Waste/Secondhand Clothing:

I use clothing waste and textile waste interchangeably to talk about clothing items which have been discarded by their initial consumer, otherwise called secondhand clothing. Outside of this dissertation, textile waste could refer to a larger range of waste items including furniture or other home accessories (e.g. curtains, rugs). But, waste streams are not always just one thing or another. In some ways textile gets combined in the donation and/or sorting process. Some textiles that are not clothing (e.g. sheets), or things like shoes will be mixed in with clothing waste items. While it is probably more accurate to say textile waste, I am interested in the specific angle of clothing, rather than things like furniture waste.

Charity Shop:

Charity shops are not for profit store fronts which sell donated items (primarily, but not exclusively) clothing. Any profits that are made go towards a charity.

Upcycling:

Upcycling, the (re)production of discarded items into a new product of higher value, can be used on materials beyond clothing. Most material products could be upcycled if the upcycler can find a way to reuse the original item. But within circular economies, certain materials might be better suited to commercial recycling, or “downcycling”. Downcycling is the reuse of materials for “less demanding applications” such as road construction or insulation (Ogwu and Kosoe, 2025: 243).

Waste Economy:

I use waste economy to refer to the range of (formal and informal) economic activities that have emerged to support the management of clothing waste that arrives in Ghana. In this dissertation, any discussion of a waste economy is specific to my focus on clothing waste. However, waste economies could emerge for any material which has been discarded or considered ‘waste’ and then becomes imbued with new exchange value, being sold in a new market place.

Social Practice Theory:

I engage with a Shovian social practice theory (e.g. Shove et al., 2012) which understands any social practice as made up of three elements - materials, competences and meanings.

“Sew-cials”:

Social groups for crafters. People can socialise with other like-minded community members while engaging in a craft. These groups usually do not teach workshops for craft skills, but members of the community often learn from each other.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

My dissertation addresses the ways that people deploy practices of making and mending clothing to manage and even subvert the economic, social and environmental harms caused by fast fashion waste¹. These social and ecological problems have been well established (e.g. Clarke-Sather & Cobb, 2019). Capitalism, which I understand as always racial (Melamed, 2015), creates the conditions for these harms to be unevenly globally distributed. Secondhand clothing often moves along routes established under colonialism (Manieson and Ferrero-Regis, 2022), likely due to the role that religious organizations initially played in the redistribution of clothing between the Global North and Global South. Now a \$96 billion dollar industry (Ogunmefun, 2024), commercial textile recyclers in the Global North play a significant role in transforming textile waste into a “graded range of commodities” (Norris, 2012, p. 131) which are then redistributed within a global system. I draw on my fieldwork in Accra and London to contend that this movement of textile waste between the Global North and South is a mechanism used to sustain global inequality.

Textile waste arrives in Ghana in bales from a wide range of countries, yet the UK remains the largest exporter of the secondhand clothing that arrives. In 2022, \$64.7 million of textile waste being imported into Ghana arrived from the UK; in 2023 this rose to \$69.5 million ([Observatory of Economic Complexity](#), nd). For comparison, China and Canada are the two next largest sending countries of textile waste with Ghanaian import values of \$40.8 million and \$10.6 million respectively in 2022. In Ghana, a waste economy² has developed to respond to

¹ In this dissertation, I use clothing waste and textile waste interchangeably to talk about clothing items which have been discarded by their initial consumer. Outside of this dissertation, textile waste could refer to a larger range of waste items including furniture or other home accessories (e.g. curtains, rugs).

² I use waste economy to refer to the range of (formal and informal) economic activities that have emerged to support the management of clothing waste that arrives in Ghana. In this dissertation, any discussion of a waste economy is specific to my focus on clothing waste. However, waste economies

the estimated 15 million items of post-consumer textiles arriving each week. Yet, this labour is undervalued by the Global North. In addition, Ghana's practice of importing clothing has made Accra, especially the neighbourhoods around Kantamanto, one of the most polluted places in the world (Cleasby & England, 2024; Picarelli, 2022).

Waste is an oft forgotten aspect of commodity chains. Studying the commodity chains of fashion waste as a "grounded framework" (Bair, 2005: 159) has allowed me to research "multi-dimensional geographies" (Crang et al., 2022: 542) which consider global processes and the local realities that impact, and are impacted by, these global systems. I understand this approach as similar to Tsing's (2011) fragmented ethnographies approach, which combines smaller ethnographies along a commodity chain to get a more realistic perspective of processes which occur at the global scale. Upcycling, changing discarded items into new products of higher value through creative (re)production (van Hees et al., 2025; Vicdan et. al, 2025), has emerged as an important practice for generating a sensibility for sustainability among upcycling practitioners (particularly in the Global North), and for potentially managing textile waste (Hackney et al., 2022). If consumers engage in upcycling their clothes through making or mending, then they may better understand the value of their clothing, the labour involved in producing items and may be attentive to what they discard. A broader "sensibility for sustainable clothing" can develop when consumers realise that their garments embody labour and time from many vulnerable actors globally (Willet et al, 2022: 231). Upcycling has also emerged as a key design strategy for producing circular economies³, particularly in the case of textiles⁴. A "cradle-

could emerge for any material which has been discarded or considered 'waste' and then becomes imbued with new exchange value, being sold in a new market place.

³ Circular economies are the opposite to a linear production model, or a "cradle to grave" approach (Gregson et al., 2015). Instead of a produce-consume-discard strategy for engaging with commodities, circular economies rely on (re)producing items that would otherwise be discarded, and having these products reenter global value chains. This is otherwise called a "cradle-to-cradle" approach. Circular economies will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter and throughout this dissertation.

⁴ Upcycling, the (re)production of discarded items into a new product of higher value, can be used on materials beyond clothing. Most material products could be upcycled if the upcycler can find a way to

to-cradle” production ethos is key for any circular economy to overcome more prevalent linear production models which so often operate under a “cradle-to-grave” production model (van Hees et al., 2025).

Seeking to understand the dialectic that textile waste creates between the Global North and South, I ask: (1) *how are people in both sites of high consumption (London), and sites of lower consumption (Accra) managing textile waste?* (2) *how does textile waste circulate through global commodity chains?* and (3) *what skills are needed in the Global North to produce more equitable forms of managing fashion waste in place?* These questions are designed to give me a better understanding of the geographies of textile waste, how individuals can begin to engage in more sustainable clothing practices within these geographies, and how far these practices intervene as a form of textile waste management.

In the rest of this chapter, I give an overview of the theoretical touchstones that appear throughout the dissertation. Large theoretical framings are addressed first, followed by framings that were important for my fieldwork. Then I outline the structure of each of the following substantive chapters. I end the introduction by discussing the literature that this research contributes to, and some of the broader impacts of the work outside of academia.

Theoretical Touchstones

The Political-Economy of a Global System

The broadest context for my research relies on understanding current world-systems which dictate the ways in which waste is made and moved globally. Waste is a “dynamic and relational category”, embedded in the social, political, economic and moral order (Schlehe and Yulianto, 2020: 43). Capitalism produces unequal relations across space (Harvey, 2001).

reuse the original item. But within circular economies, certain materials might be better suited to commercial recycling, or “downcycling”. Downcycling is the reuse of materials for “less demanding applications” such as road construction or insulation (Ogwu and Kosoe, 2025: 243).

Spatially, there is increasing distance between the material and social worlds which are exploited on the one hand, and the financial centres at the centre of capitalist processes (Tsing, 2011). This physical distance between spaces of accumulation in the Global North and spaces of exploitation in the Global South permits a cognitive dissonance in the Global North about who is managing the world's waste, and the significant environmental damage that the waste causes. Socially, capitalism must produce and move through "relations of severe inequality" in order to accumulate profit (Melamed, 2015: 77). Systems of difference such as racism enshrine the values of inequality that are required by capitalism. Many of these unequal social relations were established under colonialism.

Global hierarchies established during colonization and continually reproduced through capitalist world systems inform the movement of textile waste. The particular geographies of global clothing waste reproduce "colonial dependence among countries" (Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2022). Moreover, the global second-hand fashion industry erodes Ghanaian culture, causes destructive environmental pollution (Manieson and Ferrero-Regis, 2022; Picarelli, 2022), and has a devastating effect on local fashion industries (Sarpong et al., 2011). The Global South acts as a "sacrifice zone" (Lerner, 2010) which absorbs the Global North's waste, and ensures that the status quo is maintained there. This wasting is a "technique of power" (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022: 3), making fashion waste one arena over which the inequalities between the Global North and Global South play out.

The Global South accepts physical waste in the form of secondhand clothing, but the industry that has emerged around this waste in Accra also continues to reproduce social and economic inequality between the Global North and South. Waste is an inherent by-product of capitalist production (Yates, 2011). Even labour can take on the form of a commodity, meaning that labour can be subsumed and discarded within the capitalist process (Yates, 2011). Fernández (2023: 51) describes this as a process of "racist wastification" where racism becomes a means of producing wasted lives. Upcycling and other roles associated with selling

secondhand textiles can be physically demanding. The Kayayei (head carriers) in Kantamanto market most exemplify this process whereby capitalism uses workers until their bodies can no longer withstand the work that they must undertake, so they become discarded. A large surplus of poor workers from the rest of Ghana and surrounding countries such as Burkina Faso props up this process of racist wastification under racial capitalism.

Care-based Sustainability

Having grown up among the high volumes of textile waste in Accra, and among the Adie-yie culture which prioritises textile reuse, one of my Ghanaian interviewees noted, “Fashion is an easy entry point for the whole sustainability conversation” (Nina). Therefore, I begin my dissertation by thinking about sustainability. In Chapter 4 (paper one), I suggest that sustainability theory and practice should be grounded in a caring ethic. Ethnographic fieldwork in Kantamanto market, Accra, grounds my observations about the ways in which care theory has already been incorporated into particular discourses of sustainability, such as commoning⁵, and the work that this is or is not doing in improving economic, social and environmental inequalities in Accra. I question whether more fully integrating care ethics into any understanding of sustainability would improve the type of interventions that are made in Accra on behalf of workers in Kantamanto and residents of the city.

A care-based sustainability calls on academics and sustainability advocates to remember that the foundation of sustainability work is caring for people and the planet. Sustainability is often employed in particular ways to reflect the values and goals of those using the term (Basiago, 1995). For instance, this means that as sustainability has been taken up as a task of some governments and corporations, it has become neoliberalised (Tulloch and Neilson,

⁵ Commoning is a theory of sustainable resource management which refers to the ongoing practice of, and necessary social relations needed to, govern the commons (Federici, 2019). The commons can refer to any resource that is held in community ownership, rather than individual ownership.

2014) and depoliticised (Chipango and To, 2024; Banerjee, 2003). I respond to these critiques of sustainability suggesting that all understandings of the term should more seriously incorporate care ethics.

Care ethics are counterposed to the notions of private competition, independence and personal responsibility that occur under neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberal individualism situates poorer populations as responsible for their own “vulnerabilities to state exclusion and capital exploitation” (Cacho, 2012: 19). Yet care is always relational. Premised on meeting peoples’ needs, care is concerned with creating the conditions for people to feel safe in the world (Tronto, 2015: 4). Beginning with care ethics allows me to situate workers in Kantamanto within global webs of care, which forge multidirectional relationships of responsibility between consumers in the Global North and those that manage the world’s textile waste in the Global South (Cleasby & England, 2024; Bellacasa, 2017). An ethic of care can also be linked to the justice-based orientations of sustainability (Bond & Barth, 2020). Both an ethic of care and a sensibility for justice are foundational for achieving more equal and desirable futures for everyone in a climate changing world.

Circular Economies

Interviewees in both Accra and London identified circular economies as a structure necessary for consumers to have access to pro-environmental clothing choices, which I discuss more in more detail in Chapter 6 (paper three). Circular economies have emerged as a strategy for reducing the environmental harms associated with textile waste (Manolchev et al., 2024). But uptake has been slow; by 2019 only about 9% of the global economy incorporated circular components (Manolchev et al., 2024). Even when they are taken up, circular economies often still rely on principles of growth maximisation and efficiency. Rather than departing from the neoliberal logic that underpins linear production models (which have allowed textile waste to

proliferate), circular economies still rely on commodifying waste (Vicdan et al., 2025). Despite these current challenges which have impacted the uptake of circular economies, they can be part of more diverse economic structures which exist both within the parameters of capitalism in some capacity, and outside of it in others (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In my ethnography of Kantamanto market, I saw examples of both traditional economic exchanges as people paid for secondhand or upcycled clothing items. But I also saw non-capitalist exchanges premised on gift giving such as workers buying food for each other which they shared as they discussed their problems and socialised. In the UK, I also experienced several “non-capitalist” exchanges. For example, I was given fabric I needed to finish a project as a gift at a “sew-cial”⁶ and many attendees gave me advice or suggestions on the best way to upcycle my item. Within diverse economies, local level upcycling in both Accra and London is embedded within caring networks which facilitate the sharing of the materials (e.g. secondhand fabric, upcycling tools like sewing machines) and competences (skills needed for various upcycling strategies) of this social practice (social practice theory is introduced in more detail later in this chapter). Engaging in making-as-method alongside research participants during my ethnographic fieldwork exposed the nature of diverse circular economies in the UK context. But from my ethnographic observations, I also know that the same “sew-cial” group sell their upcycled goods within a capitalist system, to raise money to keep their upcycling space. My findings are aligned with Vicdan et al. (2025: 568), who suggest that the circulation of waste and practices of upcycling produce important “social, cooperative and caring relationships” which contrast capitalist accumulation and the associated, harmful waste management practices.

Within textile circular economies, upcycling has also become an important design practice (van Hees et al., 2025). Upcycling is the reduction and revaluation of waste which

⁶ “Sew-cials” refer to social groups for crafters. People can socialise with other like-minded people while engaging in a craft. These groups usually do not teach workshops for craft skills, but members of the community often learn from each other. This term will appear frequently throughout my dissertation.

occurs as practitioners engage in the creative (re)production of an item from materials which would otherwise be disposed of. As a form of prosumption, upcycling is based on *consumers* engaging in (re)-producing items that they themselves have consumed (Coppola et al., 2021). Prosumption as a concept could be an important characteristic which re-situates the consumer who has been alienated under contemporary consumer society (Collins, 2018). Therefore, upcycling is positioned as a potential strategy to generate a sensibility for sustainable fashion practices among consumers, because people are more likely to take care of objects that they have been involved in the (re)production of (Collins, 2018).

Creative Methods

As part of a larger creative re/turn in geography, creative practices have gained prominence as a valuable tool for geographic knowledge production (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017). Creativity is the process of transforming a concept, idea, place, object or person into something new (Cleasby & Monnier-Reyna, forthcoming). Any process of creation relies on a desire for experimentation and in turn, engaged decision making based on the tools and skills at the creator's disposal, and the broader socio-spatial context that they are creating within. These creative practices are vast, but creative methods generally refer to an expansion of tasks which can be considered data collection, being open to unexpected findings and using methods across disciplines to ask new questions (Woodward, 2019). The rise of creative methods can be understood as a response to geographers' orientation towards embodied and practice-based research topics, which requires methods which can "engage, research and re-present the sensory experiences, emotions, affective atmospheres and flows of life." (Hawkins, 2015: 248).

Examples of creative methods for human geography include Woodward's (2007) wardrobe ethnographies, Peterle's (2017) use of comic books to think about cartography, Ruth Flanagan's (2023) use of hairdressing as part of their method, and Mary Flanagan's (2003) use of The Sims to ask questions about domestication and feminisation in digital space. Wardrobe

ethnographies mean that the researcher works through processes of clothing selection and discard alongside their participant, gaining a detailed and embodied understanding of fashion detachment (Woodward, 2007). Comic books use a narrative composition which is inherently spatial. Peterle (2017) uses the spatial organization of comic books to understand the ways in which narrative geographies are constructed and re-activated through the reader's engagement with the comic itself. In this sense using the comic book as a method can challenge our understanding of how we construct various cartographies. Ruth Flanagan (2023) uses a creative method to overcome the challenge of researching the sensitive topic of sex and religion in Northern Ireland. Young catholic women were reluctant to talk about their (lack of) sex education. Ruth Flanagan (2023) drew on her skills as a hairdresser, and conducted her qualitative interviews with participants while doing their hair. The lack of face-to-face contact during the interview, and the social precedent of gossiping at the hairdressers, allowed Flanagan (2023) to collect data on a sensitive topic more comfortably. Finally, Mary Flanagan (2003) turned to the digital space within The Sims video game, to ask how a game centred on simulating the home and social reproduction tasks might constitute a process of feminisation and/or domestication. Expanding the spaces which geographers consider important to study can also be considered a creative method.

While less frequent, creative methods can also be used in physical geography. For example, John Thornes used John Constable's landscape paintings to understand meteorological conditions from a particular historic time frame (Marston and de Leeuw, 2013). Bergan and Koenig (2024) use lace knitting to connect information archived in the tree rings from Pleistocene-aged underwater forests to the present day, and give the researchers a new way to process and analyse the data that they are studying. In both instances, there is a broader understanding of what counts as data and how geographers come to know elements of the physical environment.

In Chapter 5 (second paper), I apply the creative practice of making to questions about the management of textile waste in Accra and London. Making-as-method brings the practice of making to geographic data collection. In Mann's (2018) introduction to this framework, she uses the practice of knitting to reflect on her archive as she studies practices of Shetland lace knitting. By knitting from the Shetland lace knitting patterns in her archive, Mann is able to understand how the practice of knitting has evolved over time. Engaging in making exposed new lines of inquiry that she let guide her archival research. Other geographers have engaged in making activities as part of their methods. For example, Holdsworth (2024) upcycled an old duvet into bags and kept a sewing diary. In this instance, making was paired with autoethnographic methods to study the temporalities of making practices. Yet, creative methods sometimes are critiqued for their small sample size. Therefore, I consider my work as closer to an application of Mann's (2018) framework because I also use making in combination with other well-established qualitative methods - ethnography and semi-structured interviews. While my making practices still produce situated knowledge about upcycling in London and Accra, their primary function is to add nuance to my ethnographic observations, and to guide the interviews that I conducted with upcyclers in both sites.

Social Practice Theory

Within the social sciences, research concerning sustainability and consumption often seeks strategies for pro-environmental behaviour change. A social practice theory framework is often the overarching framework for this research. Social practice theory generates a particular understanding of routinised behaviours (practices) which is useful for informing policy (Shove, 2014). The approach considers the materials needed for the practice to occur, the skills or competencies that practitioners need to partake in the practice, and the meanings for both those undertaking the practice and the meanings associated with the practice in the socio-temporal context that it is undertaken. Materials, competences and meanings are considered the three

elements that make up every social practice. A thorough view of any practice makes it easier to identify any hurdles to promoting particular desirable behaviours by policy makers. People might struggle to engage in a practice because they lack access to the necessary material elements, or they might lack the necessary skills and not have any avenue to upskill. Using social practice theory also exposes why people engage in specific practices, which might allow researchers to find other avenues for encouraging the pro-environmental behaviour at the centre of their research.

I pay attention to the practice of upcycling. In this dissertation, I consider upcycling to be an umbrella practice under which there are multiple upcycling strategies (e.g. sewing, painting, screenprinting, crochet etc.). I study upcycling, rather than any of these specific strategies for upcycling because upcycling as a practice more specifically engages in textile waste management. In Chapter 6 (third paper), my interview data shows that upcyclers in the UK are primarily motivated to engage in the practice of upcycling out of their desire to build community with other crafters or upcyclers. Therefore, if policy advocates in the UK were trying to encourage upcycling as a pro-environmental behaviour, my data shows that it might be easier to motivate people by focussing on the community building aspects rather than encouraging the practice with a pro-environment message. Beyond my research, Saunders et al. (2024) use social practice theory to encourage workshop attendees to move towards more sustainable fashion practices. They note that embedding desired behaviours in sets of practices such as making, mending or modifying clothing was useful in overcoming hurdles to pro-environmental behaviour like social norms, context or infrastructure (Saunders et al., 2024). Pre and post workshop surveys proved that this approach was successful at generating pro-environmental clothing practices. Due to this desire for social and behavioural change, there is often a political orientation to academic work drawing on this framework, which is also why I employ this framework.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is comprised of seven chapters, three of which form substantive journal-article style papers that I am in the process of submitting for publication. Slightly longer versions of these submissions make up chapters 4, 5 and 6. To give the necessary context to my dissertation research, Chapter 2 details my overall methods for data collection. Chapter 3 gives more detail on my case studies, particularly the Ghanaian context which experiences more of the economic, social and environmental challenges associated with textile waste, and which might be more unfamiliar to those of us in the Global North. Then I have included my three papers which are in various stages of being submitted to peer-reviewed journals. I end the dissertation with a conclusion (Chapter 7) which considers the additional papers that will emerge from this research, and future directions for research on upcycling and the global geographies of textile waste.

My first paper (Chapter 4) uses ethnographic data from Kantamanto market to explore the ways in which different discourses of sustainability produce particular interventions and material realities. This paper begins to answer my first research question: *how are people in sites of lower consumption (Accra) managing textile waste?* I think through resilience, a paradigm of sustainability based on neoliberal logic, and commoning, an intervention based on care ethics, to understand which versions of sustainability are best attending to the economic, social and environmental inequalities in Accra. Different definitions of sustainability highlight different sustainability practices within Kantamanto, but neither discourse has improved the environmental pollution and associated health risks that have been caused by the volume of imported second hand textiles. Instead, I suggest that *all* sustainability interventions must seriously engage with care ethics, because care ethics are responsible for producing democratic citizens, shaping what we think is important, how we understand responsibility and how we respond to the world around us (Tronto, 2015). Care ethics emphasises relationality

between far places, forging a sense of responsibility and care, which might be an opening to rethink the power imbalances that produce the unsustainable economic, social and environmental realities not only in Kantamanto, but elsewhere too.

My second paper (Chapter 5) discusses three experiments in making-as-method, with the hope of understanding the specific elements of upcycling practice in Accra and London, and gaining a deeper understanding of how far upcycling actually manages textile waste in each site. For my first experiment, I screen-printed T-shirts in Accra and London. For my second experiment, I created a crochet bag using yarn made from secondhand T-shirts alongside upcyclers at the *Kokrobitey Institute* in Ghana. My final experiment was using upcycling community spaces across London to (re)produce an old shirt. I evaluate what I learned from each of these experiments. In the process, I add to the sparse literature which explicitly considers the role of making-as-method of data collection within geography and contribute to the growing sub-discipline of creative geographies.

My third paper (Chapter 6) discusses the social practice of upcycling, highlighting the similarities and differences in the elements of the practice between practitioners in Accra and London. Social practice theory allows me to understand what motivates people to begin upcycling and what materials and competences they need in order to be successful upcyclers. Employing social practice theory means that the data collected could be used to inform policy makers (Shove, 2014). Producing knowledge conducive to making policy changes is important because it offers a pathway from academic research to potential material improvements around managing textile waste in London and Accra. Upcycling has emerged as a key strategy for circular economies, and my interview data shows that circular economies are desired by textile upcyclers in both Ghana and the UK. Yet, robust circular economies are still lacking in practice. Understanding the elements of upcycling practice begins to expose barriers for people who might become upcyclers. If upcycling is a key design feature of circular economies, these barriers might be important to understand as the scope and scale of these circular economies

grows. By examining the elements of practice in each location, I hoped to uncover the *skills needed in the Global North to produce more equitable forms of managing fashion waste in place (my third research question)*. However, my ethnographic and interview data indicate that perhaps circular economies for textiles are a more desirable outcome for producing more sustainable fashion futures in Ghana and the UK, rather than prioritising opportunities for the UK to manage their textile waste in place.

Contributions

My work attempts to establish a link between textile consumption, disposal and clothing (re)production practices in the Global North and South. I put forth an argument about the role of textile waste in maintaining global inequality. These geographies of textile waste operate within world systems established under colonialism which are currently maintained using racial capitalist logics. Global inequality produced by textile waste has economic, social and environmental facets. Throughout this dissertation, I document the ways in which these inequalities affect people who live in Accra, a key site for disposal in textile waste commodity chains. Following a pedagogy of hope (Lopez, 2023), I move beyond studying unequal global structures, to focus on the ways in which people manage or even subvert the inequalities produced by global geographies of textile waste. Therefore, most of my work focusses on the practice of upcycling in Accra and London.

Upcycling is a strategy that individuals and small communities can begin to engage in which necessarily reduces textile waste since secondhand clothing is a key material for the practice. There are more opportunities to redress the harms associated with textile waste if upcycling were scaled up to be a significant feature of globalised circular economies. Therefore, my dissertation is an initial attempt to understand the practice of upcycling, to highlight barriers to engaging in the practice and to identify key features which may impact how circular

economies for textiles are operationalised. For example, at the local scale, upcycling relies on strong networks of connection in both Accra and London. This can be seen in the ways that upcycling operates within both capitalist spheres and within more diverse economic practices such as gift giving. These diverse economic practices rely on the creation and maintenance of caring relationships. This leads to questions around how these caring relationships might be integrated into global circular economies.

Upcycling has emerged as a possible strategy for orienting people towards more sustainable fashion choices overall (Hackney et al., 2022). Within my own making-as-method experiments, I learned that upcycling is a skilled practice which can be messy and time consuming. Some upcycling strategies could impact the health and wellbeing of upcyclers if they had to continuously undertake the same strategy to (re)produce items. In this way, I contribute to an embodied understanding of upcycling practice. This approach expands applications for a making-as-method approach within geography.

Broad Impacts

While my research findings remain largely academic in nature, I am motivated by improving the unequal conditions that are perpetuated through the movement of textile waste under current global systems. In Chapter 4, I suggest a new way of thinking about sustainability by incorporating care ethics, to produce an understanding of sustainability which might offer a framework for better sustainability interventions in Kantamanto market. In Chapter 5, I participate in upcycling practices, such as making and mending, with market vendors in Kantamanto, designers at the *Kokrobitey Institute* and social enterprises and non-profits in London. I show that Accra should be considered an important location for thinking about sustainable fashion futures. I collected data which is sensitive to the labour and lives within Accra's fashion discardscape (Crang et al., 2022). I hope that this data could be a step in

promoting economic, social and environmental justice for Ghanaians managing the world's textile waste. In Chapter 6, I use a social practice theory framework which can be useful for informing policy. Outlining the elements of upcycling practice in Accra and London offers avenues for policy makers to encourage this pro-environmental behaviour and identify any possible hurdles to the practice.

CHAPTER 2

Methods

This chapter serves as a more complete accounting of the data I collected. This includes three waves of fieldwork and a combination of ethnography, interviews and making-as-method. These methods will be discussed as they pertain to the argument in each substantive chapter (Chapter 4, 5 and 6). Understanding the full scope of the fieldwork I engaged in will also help contextualise the following chapter (Chapter 3), where I discuss one of my research questions that I was unable to answer in sufficient detail, and my directions for future research which I outline in the conclusion (Chapter 7).

Fieldwork Overview

I conducted three waves of fieldwork between field sites in Ghana and the UK. These waves took place in winter 2024 (Wave 1), autumn 2024 (Wave 2) and in winter 2025 (Wave 3). A combination of ethnography, interviews and making-as-method allowed me to address three research questions: (1) *how are people in both sites of high consumption (London), and sites of lower consumption (Accra) managing textile waste?* (2) *how does textile waste circulate through global commodity chains?* and (3) *what skills are needed in the Global North to produce more equitable forms of managing fashion waste in place?*

Waves of Fieldwork

Dates	Location	Activities
WAVE 1: January - February 2024	Accra, Ghana	• Ethnography of Kantamanto Market. ◦ Informal conversations with upcyclers in Kantamanto market. • Making-as-Method: screenprinting T-shirts in the market.

March 2024	London, UK	• Pilot ethnography of secondhand shopping spaces such as charity shops, vintage shops & makers spaces ◦ Croydon - Textile Repair Cafe ◦ Brick Lane Vintage Market ◦ Rokit Vintage (Covent Garden) ◦ Charity shops in Camden & Kensington/Chelsea & Clapham. • Making-as-Method: screenprinting T-shirt.
WAVE 2: September - October 2024	Accra and Kokrobite, Ghana	• Ethnography of <i>Kokrobitey Institute</i> in Greater Accra Region • 18 interviews with upcyclers in <i>Kokrobitey Institute</i> and at Kantamanto Market • Making-as-Method: used old t-shirts to make bags, ties and other accessories with the <i>Kokrobitey Institute</i>
October - November 2024	London, UK	• Ethnography of maker spaces ◦ Repair Cafe, Croydon - 1x per week (7 times total), free/donation ◦ Sew-cial Club, Surrey Quays - 1x per month (2 times total), free/donation ◦ Private Upcycling Workshop in Kensington (1x total), £20 (goes up to over £100 if I wanted to attend again) ◦ A craft club, Brixton - 1x per week for November (3x total), free ◦ Battersea Arts Centre - event - 1x per week for 4 weeks (3x total), free/donation ◦ Brompton Library Clothes Swap - (1x total), free ◦ Upcycling Workshop in Elephant & Castle - (1x total), donation • Informal conversation with upcycling businesses • Making-as-Method: Upcycled an old shirt using only materials (e.g. fabric, sewing machines) available to me in community upcycling spaces.
WAVE 3: January - March 2025	Online*	• 15 interviews with upcyclers in London, completed over Zoom or WhatsApp call.

*Wave 3 took place online due to concerns about international travel for non-citizens in the US during President Trump's immigration policy changes.

Table 2.1: Three Waves of Fieldwork

Key Collaborators, Positionality and Strategies

My research is guided by an ethic of care, placing me in relationality with my participants in each site, and forging a sense of responsibility from me (and my position of power which will be discussed throughout this section) towards them, including in what I write. In this section, I acknowledge key collaborators, discuss my positionality to my research and detail some of the strategies which kept an ethic of care at the forefront.

Across waves of fieldwork, I had key collaborators in Accra and London who provided community for me during my fieldwork and who shaped the data that I was able to gather. In Accra, this included upcyclers and community figures from *The Revival* and the *Kokrobitey Institute*. *The Revival* is a Ghanaian non-profit which aims to “create a resilient, sustainable fashion ecosystem while addressing the global impact of fashion waste.” (therevival.earth). They achieve this primarily through upcycling practices and education in Kantamanto market. The *Kokrobitey Institute* is a “a dynamic inter-cultural learning space in Ghana dedicated to celebrating the intelligence of traditional Ghanaian culture as they relate to education, environmental sustainability, resourceful design, and social entrepreneurship.” (kokrobiteyinstitute.com/about-us). One of the ongoing projects at the Institute centres textile upcycling using textile waste from Kantamanto. Upcyclers at the *Kokrobitey Institute* work systematically to transform this waste into fashion collections which mirror more typical production and consumption patterns of the fashion industry. In London, my most frequent field site and collaborators were the women at a Textile Repair Café in South London. The repair cafe is part of a larger initiative which supports “a range of environmental and community linked activities” in south London (greencroydon.co.uk). These collaborators will appear frequently throughout this dissertation.

Before I provide a more comprehensive account of my methods of data collection, I want to address my positionality to the research and to my field sites. Visweswaran (1994) suggests

that reflexivity must go beyond discussing identities and locate the scholar within broader systems of power that represent their practices of knowledge production. I am a White, British, English-speaking researcher completing a PhD at a large university in the USA. I research textile waste as a mechanism which reproduces inequality between the Global North and Global South, which requires an acknowledgement of the role of colonialism in creating current global hierarchies, and the ongoing stake that processes of racial capitalism have in reproducing these global inequalities. Given that the UK was the last coloniser of Ghana prior to their independence in 1957, my British identity additionally requires me to recognise this context in order to engage in equitable, justice-based research in the Ghanaian context.

I began my field research in Ghana, at Kantamanto market. This was a personal political choice which allowed me to centre any knowledge that was shared with me by my Ghanaian collaborators and allow these findings to guide the overall project. As a researcher from the Global North, I valued having flexibility to overcome my own assumptions and shape my project based on my first wave of Ghanaian fieldwork. Yet, I must acknowledge that my Whiteness placed me in a position of power, as did my position as the person conducting the research (Faria and Mollett, 2016). Additionally, in the Ghanaian context, I sometimes encountered language barrier issues. Even though the national language of Ghana is English, some upcyclers in Kantamanto did not feel confident speaking in English, as their primary language was Twi (or another local language such as Ga). Luckily, I was still able to include the perspectives of non-English speakers through the generosity of other nearby vendors, upcyclers or collaborators who kindly translated for me.

Being a White woman in Ghana also meant that I had to find new strategies to conduct my ethnography in Kantamanto. I had expected to be able to observe the market through daily observations, falling into the background. In Wave 1 of my fieldwork, this was quite challenging because my Whiteness made me stand out in the marketplace. Significant global inequality and the sharp depreciation of the Ghanaian cedi against currencies like the US dollar (particularly in

2022) meant that my Whiteness was interpreted as a visual signal of wealth. Being a White woman in a market made me a very overt presence, a desirable customer. Consequently, I had to move through the market a bit more quickly than I had planned, making it a little harder to observe the repeated socio-spatial patterns that occurred in the market everyday.

To overcome this, I hired key male Ghanaian collaborators to tour the market with me, including members of *The Revival* and other prominent figures who work within the textile waste industry in Accra. Not only did this allow me to slow down as I walked through the market, it also allowed me to contextualise what was happening, ask questions about my observations, and draw on their Ghanaian knowledge about the broader context of my observations, and establish my credibility with *The Revival's* community network in the market. Understanding Ghanaian perspectives on my observations in Kantamanto provided more context and helped me move beyond my own Western assumptions about meaning making in Kantamanto. I found that I often needed corrections to what I 'thought' I was seeing. Directly engaging with perspectives beyond my own in Ghana helped me address some of the problems with ethnographic fieldwork namely, that it is a colonial discipline. Ethnographers are encouraged to reduce imposing Western thoughts and analytics onto the research site (Smyth & Peake, 2024). As a British researcher conducting fieldwork in Ghana, redressing power imbalances is necessary to reduce an ongoing coloniality between the two countries which is continually reproduced through the work of individuals.

Feminist geographers hope to change the conditions at the centre of their research (England, 2015). Therefore, I was conscious of the broader impacts of my fieldwork and research during the research process. Leading with an ethic of care, I paid all of my Ghanaian interviewees the same compensation as my interviewees in the UK. This was a significant amount of money in Ghana, and I hope it was an initial small step to reduce inequalities between people on either end of textile waste commodity chains in the Global North and South. I was also able to use money from my research grants to ensure that my main Ghanaian

collaborator, *The Revival*, received additional funds to continue their support for the communities of creatives in Kantamanto market. I felt that it was important to continue to support more equitable management of textile waste, since this is the condition that I seek to understand and change through my research. This material support ensured that current support infrastructure, largely facilitated through organisations such as *The Revival*, continued to be funded after I left Ghana. With the same motivation of aiming to promote equity and reducing power inequalities between the Global North and South, I also engaged in community events such as Beach Clean-Ups with *The Or Foundation* in Accra, which attempt to clear dumped textile waste (see Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1: A photo taken on Osu Beach in Jamestown, Accra during *The OR Foundation's* Beach Clean Up on February 23, 2024.

In the UK, I participated an event series at the *Battersea Arts Centre*. Volunteers who attended these events were given yarn and asked to knit or crochet specific sized squares. At the end of the workshop series, these squares were joined together to make blankets which were then distributed to unhoused people across London (see Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2: Photo of a craft meetup in Battersea Arts Centre depicting the squares I made to add to a blanket. Taken by Ellie Cleasby in November 2024.

Fieldwork Wave 1

Ghana, Winter 2024

In January and February 2024, I conducted two months of ethnographic field research in Kantamanto market. During this time, I spent several days per week in Kantamanto. Sometimes I would walk the market alone, more often I would go on tours of the market with *The Revival* or other community members who were connected to textile waste management in Accra. In this way, I acted as a consumer while I was in Kantamanto. Ethnographic methods require researchers to immerse themselves in a particular space to understand the socio-spatial practices and patterns that create the social space (Herbert, 2000). Social space is a social product, created as people engage in social relations and as they create meanings about space (Lefebvre, 1974 [1991]). People create the social and spatial conditions which determine the socio-spatial relationships that can occur within each particular place. Repeated observation,

necessary for ethnographic research, is useful for gathering data sensitive to the processes and meanings at the centre of sociospatial life (Herbert, 2000).

Alongside frequent, repeated observation over two months, informal conversations with different stakeholders in the market from the chairman of the secondhand clothing association, to bale importers, vendors, tailors and upcyclers informed my ethnography. These participatory conversations (Swain & King, 2022) began with me explaining why I was in Kantamanto, and from there, the conversations took on many different topics, guided by the context of the conversation, my recent observations and whatever the participant wanted to tell me about Kantamanto or textile waste in Accra. I took notes during the conversation or immediately afterwards and then revisited these notes once I left Kantamanto each day to edit them for clarity. The conversations and observations fed into each other over repeated visits to the market, with the conversations prompting me to pay attention to particular things happening in the market, and then these observations guiding some of my questions during the participatory conversations. The “small talk” provided cultural context to my ethnography (Driessen and Jansen, 2013).

I understand my ethnographic data as part of a feminist geo-ethnography. Smyth and Peake (2024) explain that feminist geo-ethnographies are distinct from ethnographies in five ways. They: are place based; address the everyday; think across power and scale; are embodied; and engage feminist activism. I use my ethnography of everyday activity in Kantamanto to keep “the planet and all of its humans in the same conceptual frame” (Hecht, 2018: 135), thereby taking a multi-scalar approach which considers power relations. Mountz and Hyndman (2006) refer to this as a “global-intimate” approach and Anderson (2012) coined the “extralocal” to also make ethnographic connections between local scale practices and the processes that these local practices contribute to which might operate at larger scales. Throughout my ethnography, I considered the ways in which the everyday practices I observed might constitute broader processes of coloniality and racial capitalism.

My ethnographic encounters in Ghana extended beyond time spent in Kantamanto market. As part of my commitment to feminist social justice, I also engaged with the polluted environments that are central to this research. With research collaborators, I was able to access the Korle Lagoon, a dumping ground for all kinds of imported waste, located near Kantamanto market (see Figure 2.3). Having a clear, indeed visceral, view of the stakes of the problem at the centre of my research project exerted an influence on my remaining ethnographic data collection. Primarily, it shaped my commitment to care ethics to highlight Ghanaian, bottom-up solutions to the issue of post-consumer textiles. I also attended the organised beach clean ups at Jamestown Beach (see Figure 2.3) run by *Won Bee Ga* and *The Or Foundation* for the two months I was in Ghana. My motivation for attending the beach clean up was to firmly embed myself within a web of care with Ghanaians who are dealing with the world's textile waste (see Cleasby & England, 2024). However, I also gained embodied ethnographic data about the difficulties of reversing the environmental damage caused by textile waste.

From my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork during Wave 1 of my time in Accra, I drew a map which depicts and contextualises several key sites for my data collection (see Figure 2.3). Obviously, the map excludes many roads and other key features of Accra which were not relevant to my research. The map also depicts areas of economic exchange which form the overlapping marketspaces of Makola market, Kantamanto market, Agbogbloshie market and the overspilling economic activity from each. I feel that this is important to show because it more accurately acknowledges the communities and infrastructures that Kantamanto market is embedded within. Kantamanto market is a covered market space, but the secondhand clothing trade spills out onto all of the surrounding streets (see Figure 2.4). The map also shows the Korle Lagoon, which formed part of my ethnographic observations during this wave of research, and Jamestown Beach, where I participated in *The Or Foundation's* beach clean-ups.

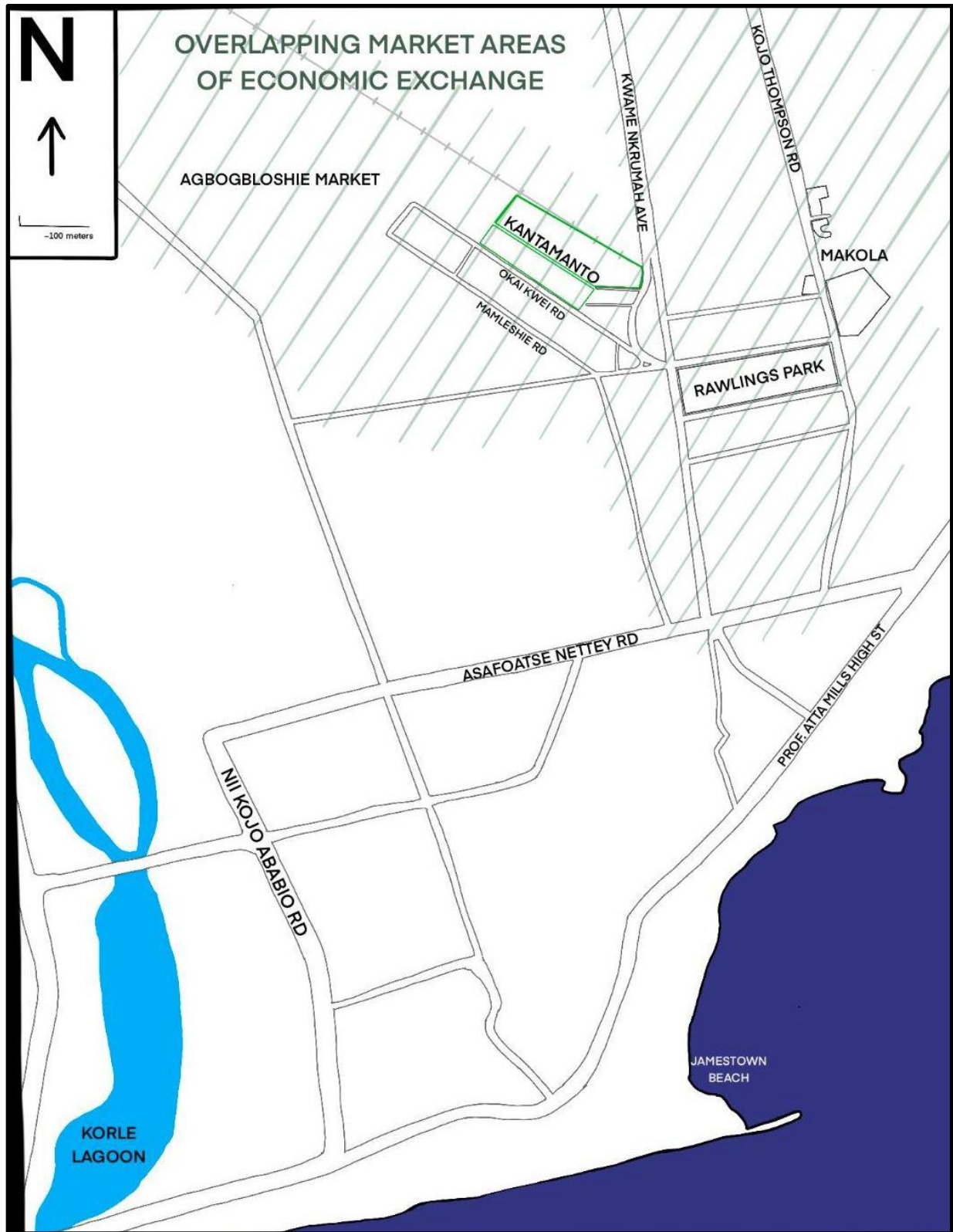


Figure 2.3: A hand drawn (to scale) map of southern Accra, depicting key sites of my ethnographic fieldwork during Wave 1 of my data collection. Map drawn by Ellie Cleasby in February 2024.



Figure 2.4: A photograph of Kantamanto market, taken from a structure on Okai Kwei Road. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 12th, 2024.⁷

Some of my planned ethnographic strategies for observing upcycling in Kantamanto market were unsuccessful. For example, I had hoped to work with an upcycler to produce an item made of textile waste that I had sourced in Kantamanto market and another item made of new fabric. Then I hoped to sit with the upcycler while they were making my items, asking them questions about the challenges that they experienced and the differences between working with secondhand fabric compared to new/virgin fabric. I was able to source both kinds of fabric, and I found a tailor who was willing to make dresses for me out of each. However, I was not able to sit with the upcycler while they made my items. This lack of observation meant that I missed a lot

⁷ I should acknowledge that Kantamanto market has experienced several fires since this photo was taken, including a catastrophic fire in early January 2025 which burned down the majority of the market. The market structure has since been rebuilt.

of the context around the practice of upcycling. As with any skilled practice, a lot of knowledge is not spoken, but communicated through routinised behaviours and choices (Marchand, 2008). The tailor I worked with chose to make my items after their regular workday, from their home. I was not invited to observe the process. Once my dresses were made I tried to ask about any challenges they encountered making the dresses, about the differences working with the fabric. But the upcycler just said both were fine (fieldnotes, February 26th, 2024). This challenge inspired me to work more directly with the *Kokrobitey Institute* in Wave 2 of my Ghanaian fieldwork so that I could more directly engage with upcycling alongside my research participants.

My ethnography of Kantamanto was also shaped by one-off experiences. For example, on February 20th, 2024, I was able to go on a tour of *The Or Foundation's* buildings and see their ongoing projects. One of the projects turns T-shirts that cannot be worn into fibreboard. T-shirts that are 100% cotton can be shredded and combined with a natural, plant-based starch to create a board. *The Or Foundation* is using these boards for soundproofing and has been able to turn the boards into flat pack furniture⁸. Another project is experimenting with bioengineering as a means of reducing the harms associated with micro and nano plastics which enter the environment when synthetic fabrics break down. *Or Foundation* scientists are working to see if they can use bacteria to break down fabric. This is particularly important for managing synthetic textile waste since many of their upcycling strategies work better with fabrics made from biodegradable materials. Yet, synthetic fibres make up significant portions of global textile waste.

UK, Spring 2024

In London, my first wave of fieldwork in March 2024 was a pilot study to understand the scope of secondhand clothing distribution and upcycling taking place across the city. I spent

⁸ The flatpack furniture was part of a collaborative project with a US university.

time in a variety of charity shops⁹ distributed across London. I also chose to visit more high-end boutique consignment stores for secondhand clothing which sell used designer items for a premium. The purpose of this part of my fieldwork was to find appropriate places for my more in-depth ethnographic fieldwork during Wave 2. I identified the *Textile Repair Cafe* in South London as a useful site for a more in-depth ethnography focussed on people who are actually working on making and mending.

Making-as-Method

During this wave of fieldwork, I undertook a comparative experiment upcycling T-shirts via screenprinting in both Accra and London (see Figures 2.5, 2.6 & 2.7). I explain this experiment in more detail in a later chapter (see Chapter 5). Broadly, I sourced secondhand T-shirts in Kantamanto and used infrastructure in the market to upcycle these T-shirts, taking note of the time, money, energy and skills needed to engage in this mode of upcycling in the same place (see Figures 2.8 & 2.9). This infrastructure included access to screenprinters who took over the process of printing the T-shirts for me (see Figure 2.9). The upcycling infrastructure in Kantamanto is vast, and spatially dense. Within one market space, I was able to find second hand T-shirts, get a screen made with my design, and get my t-shirts printed. All of these steps were facilitated by *The Revival*, who helped me navigate the market. Alone, without years of knowledge of Kantamanto, I would have struggled to find each of these sites. Working through the steps of selecting T-shirts, making a design and getting a screen made, and then getting my design printed onto the T-shirts gave me a better understanding of the decisions and embodied processes that upcyclers in Kantamanto experience. Additionally, I gathered data about the everyday realities of this work, such as the time each process takes, and the financial implications for the upcycler. Then I was able to compare my experiences to the information I

⁹ Charity shops are not for profit store fronts which sell donated items (primarily, but not exclusively) clothing. The profits from these sales go to the specific charity which is the patron of each particular shop. Examples include Cancer Research UK, Mind (a mental health charity) and The British Heart Foundation.

gained from my observations and informal conversations over the months of fieldwork. In the UK I tried to complete the same steps, sourcing the secondhand T-shirts from charity shops across London (see Figure 2.10). Smyth and Peake (2024: 215) argue that geo-ethnographies must be embodied, because your data must contain details about “what it *feels* like at the research site”. I understand this to mean that embodied data collection is needed in order to undertake a place-based ethnography, or geo-ethnography. Therefore, incorporating making as part of my method strengthened the data that I was able to collect for my feminist geo-ethnography of Kantamanto market.



Figure 2.5: The designs that I printed on T-shirts. On the left is a design that represents my fieldwork in Ghana, and was put on the T-shirts sourced there. On the right is the design I used for the T-shirts sourced in the UK.



Figure 2.6: A photo of the T-shirt I upcycled in Ghana using infrastructure in Kantamanto market in February 2024.



Figure 2.7: A photo of T-shirts that I upcycled using screenprinting in the UK. Many of the T-shirts document imperfections from my earliest attempts at screenprinting. Taken in August 2024.



Figure 2.8: A photo of me sourcing T-Shirts from a vendor in Kantamanto market. Taken by Yayra Agbofah in February 2024.



Figure 2.9: A photo of screenprinters in Kantamanto market. Taken by Ellie Cleasby in February 2024.



Figure 2.10: A photo taken of a T-shirt I found for this project in a charity shop in London. Taken by Ellie Cleasby in March 2024.

Fieldwork Wave 2

I undertook my second wave of fieldwork in September-November 2024, spending one month in Accra and two months in London. This wave included deeper ethnographies of each site, particularly in the UK where I had only previously undertaken pilot research. I also conducted interviews with my Ghanaian participants, and built the necessary connections for my UK interviews, which were completed during a third wave of fieldwork.

Returning to Ghana, Autumn 2024

I spent one month working alongside upcyclers at the *Kokrobitey Institute*, which is located about fifteen miles away from Kantamanto market. Unlike during Wave 1 of my Ghanaian fieldwork, in Wave 2 I was able to take on the role of an upcycler, rather than a consumer. I would go to work with the design and upcycling team from 9am Monday-Friday. I would normally leave around 5pm, but many of the upcycling team would work until 6pm. During this work time, I was able to sit in on design team meetings (see Figure 2.11), use natural dyes (e.g. turmeric) to dye clothing (see Figure 2.12) and contribute to the team's upcycling projects (see Figures 2.13 & 2.14). My main task was to crochet a bag made out of yarn made from waste T-shirt scraps and hems. I would sit in the room with other upcyclers who were mostly working at sewing machines while I completed this task. I give more details about this upcycling project in Chapter 5.



Figure 2.11: A photo of Reneé (Founder and Chief Creative Director for the *Kokrobitey Institute*) at a team meeting in the Alero Olympio Design Studio at the *Kokrobitey Institute*. Taken in October 2024.



Figure 2.12: A photo of me and a lead designer at the *Kokrobitey Institute* dyeing T-shirt fabric in a turmeric dye bath. Taken in September 2024.



Figure 2.13: A photo of me working on a collective upcycling project for the *Kokrobitey Institute*'s "Nipa Dua"¹⁰ collection ahead of their trip to Lagos Fashion Week. Taken in October 2024.

¹⁰Nipa Dua is the Twi word for body. It literally translates to "human tree", which inspired Reneé Neblett (creative director at the *Kokrobitey Institute*) to create an upcycled clothing collection based on a deep understanding of peoples' connection to the natural environment. The relationship between people and the environment is explored through the designs which often imitate patterns/textures/colours in the



Figure 2.14: A photo of a tie that I made by weaving with T-shirt yarn, dyed with turmeric. Taken by Ellie Cleasby on October 3rd, 2024.

During this wave of fieldwork, I conducted an ethnography of the *Kokrobitey Institute*, which I situate as an upcycling space that is closely linked to Kantamanto market. All of the textiles which are upcycled at the *Institute* are sourced from Kantamanto. Contributing to upcycling there allowed me to get a more consistent understanding of the regular socio-spatial practices which make up this design studio and their upcycling practice. My ethnography of the

natural environment. The design also makes a material intervention in the textile waste which is polluting natural environments in Ghana.

Kokrobitey Institute overcame some of the challenges around accessing the space as a background observer that I experienced while collecting ethnographic data in Kantamanto during Wave 1 of my fieldwork. During the workday, I often acted as a member of staff, quietly working on my project while observing the rhythms that made up everyday life for a team of upcyclers preparing to take their designs to Lagos Fashion Week.

	Pseudonym	Location of Interview	Description
1	Nina	Kokrobitey Institute	Upcycler and founder of an upcycling non-profit that operates in Accra.
2	Yeshua	Kantamanto market	Community leader and upcycler
3	Elle	Kokrobitey Institute	Designer and upcycler
4	Edwin	Kantamanto market	A tailor
5	Dean	Kantamanto market	Upcycler
6	Caroline	Kokrobitey Institute	Seamstress/Upcycler
7	Jane	Kokrobitey Institute	Seamstress/Upcycler
8	Lola	Kokrobitey Institute	Seamstress/Upcycler
9	Yadid	Kokrobitey Institute	Designer, tailor and upcycler
10	Calvin	Kokrobitey Institute	Tailor/Upcycler
11	Ramona	Kokrobitey Institute	Lead upcycling designer and creative coordinator
12	Matthew	Kantamanto market	Upcycler
13	Kenneth	Kantamanto market	Upcycler
14	Kamilla	Kantamanto market	Upcycler
15	Gideon	Kantamanto market	Upcycler
16	Marcus	Kantamanto market	Upcycler
17	Andrew	Kantamanto market	Upcycler
18	Patrick	Kantamanto market	Upcycler

Table 2.2: Ghanaian Interviewees

I also conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews with upcyclers in Accra, with participants from Kantamanto and the *Kokrobitey Institute* (see locations in Table 2.2). I followed an “elite” interviewing methodology which allows the interviewee, as the expert, to control the conversation (Dexter, 1970). Within feminist research this leads to the research participants being treated as experts of their own experience, and equal to the researcher in the production of knowledge (England, 2015). Ethnography and interviews pair well together as methods because ethnographic observations give the context within which to situate the interview and allows the research to go beyond people’s “self-report” and understand the “extra-interview realities” (Wengraf, 2011: 59).

I had a framework of broad interview questions which allowed me to learn more about the specific practice of upcycling, following a Shovian social practice theory (Shove et al., 2012). These questions included:

- (1) What prompted you to start making or mending clothing?
- (2) How have you developed your skills in mending or changing clothing?
- (3) What resources have been available to support your making or mending activities?
- (4) Have there been any challenges for you as you have engaged in this practice?

Each question seeks to uncover an element of a social practice, from the materials (Q1) to competences (Q2) to the meanings underpinning the practice (Q3). Question four seeks to understand some of the broader context that the practice operates within. The same interviewing strategy was used in the UK, where I undertook fifteen interviews with upcyclers during Wave 3 of my fieldwork.

Returning to the UK, Autumn 2024

In London, I conducted an ethnography of makerspaces across the city (see Figure 2.15). Unlike in Ghana, there is not a centralised neighbourhood or area where most upcycling work takes place. I initially found upcycling events through my pilot study during Wave 1, or via

Eventbrite, or I attended other events which I learned about during my ethnographic fieldwork and informal conversations with upcyclers. Some of these upcycling events were one-off workshops. Some of the events were ongoing “Sew-cials” which met on a regular cadence, whether that was weekly or monthly. Other events took place weekly for a set period of time, usually with four meet-ups total in the series of events. Monthly upcycling sessions with access to sewing machines take place in Canada Waters. My most frequent ethnographic fieldsite was a *Textile Repair Cafe* in South London because their “Sew-cials” take place once per week (see Figure 2.16). While attending these events, I took notes on my phone or found a place to write down my notes immediately after leaving the event. I reviewed these notes once I got home and added any additional details that I remembered.

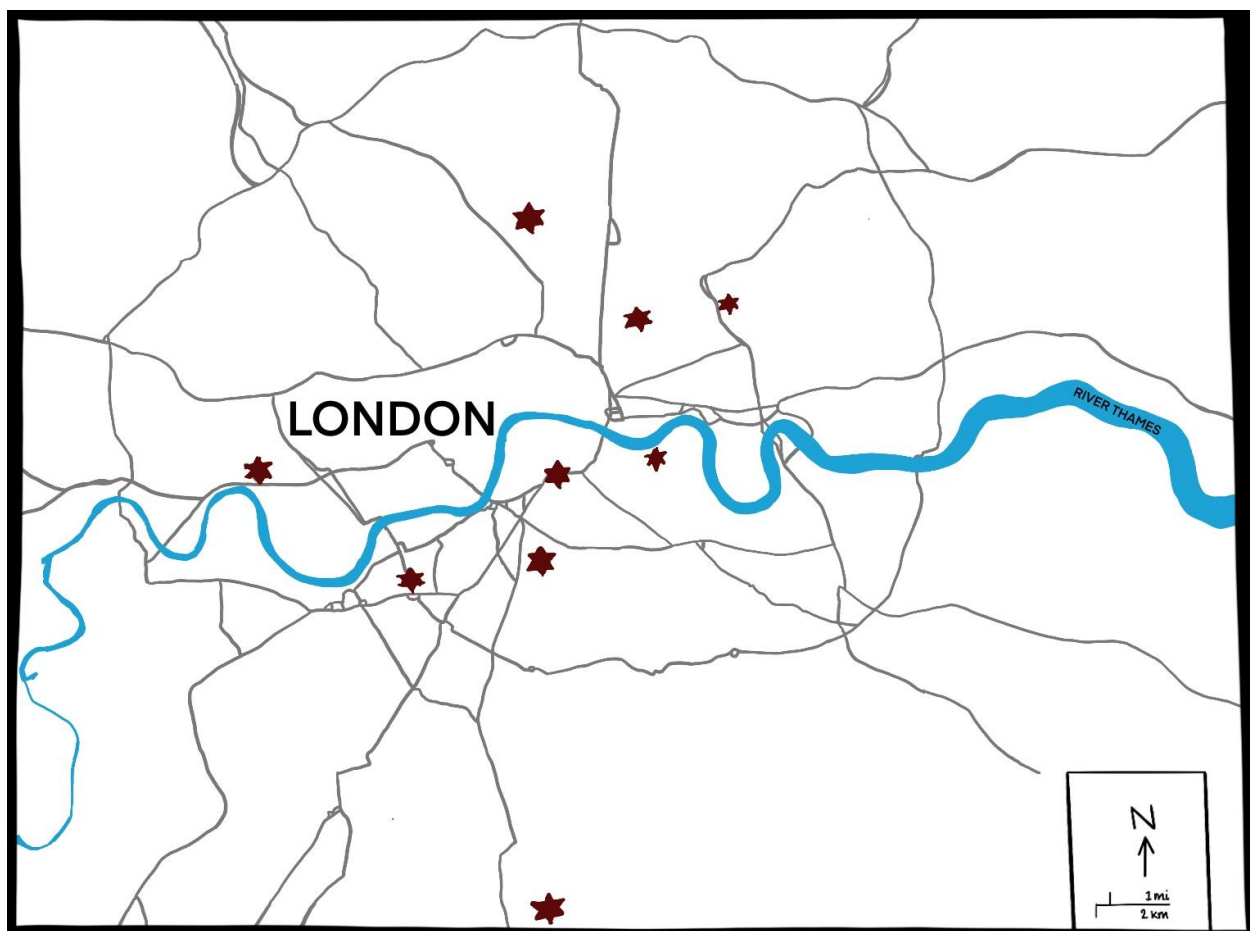


Figure 2.15: A hand drawn map of London, with sites of my ethnographic fieldwork shown through red stars. Drawn by Ellie Cleasby in January 2026. (Larger version in Appendix 1).

I also visited craft shops, fabric shops and “scrapstores”¹¹ across the city as part of my ethnography. These sites allowed me to gather data about the broader infrastructure which may or may not support upcycling as a form of textile waste management across London. I was interested in the availability of craft tools, and how financially accessible these tools were. I paid attention to any workshops that were advertised or kits that aimed to teach consumers some basic upcycling skills. I observed how far the fabric that these shops sold encouraged consumers to work with scraps or waste materials, compared to new or virgin materials.

My ability to knit, crochet and understand the basics of using a sewing machine, alongside my identity as a British woman, made it easy for me to participate in these events as an “insider”. In a later chapter, I describe my making-as-method experiments. But I also used my skills in making and mending to access field sites across London, and to blend in as I observed the socio-spatial patterns taking place in each one. Being able to engage in these upcycling practices also made it easier to build rapport with other upcyclers, which in turn helped as I asked people if they would undertake an interview with me.

¹¹ Scrapstores are specialised fabric shops which sell remnants and scraps of fabric. They only sell fabric which would otherwise end up as waste.



Figure 2.16: Photo of the “Sew-cial” Club in the Whitgift Centre in Croydon. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby in October 2024.

Fieldwork Wave 3

Online Interviews with Upcyclers in the UK

I initially planned to return to the UK to complete interviews with upcyclers in Winter 2025. However, changes in immigration policy were taking place in the US during this time. Since I am an international student in the US, I was advised to remain in the US while these changes were taking place. Therefore, I conducted my interviews online over a WhatsApp video call or Zoom, depending on the preference of my research participant. I conducted fifteen semi-structured online interviews with upcyclers in London (see Table 2.3). I followed the same strategy and used the same four guiding questions that I used in my interviews with Ghanaian upcyclers.

	Pseudonym	Description
1	Eugenie	Upcycler and community leader.
2	Helen	Upcycler and business owner who creates textiles from waste materials.
3	Sian	Upcycler who will mend items for a fee.
4	Avery	Upcycler for a charity shop.
5	Lillian	Upcycler and community leader.
6	Blythe	Works for an upcycling platform who strive to make mending services more accessible.
7	Cathy	Upcycler with experience making and mending items.
8	Diane	Upcycler.
9	Sue	Upcycler who organises ongoing community workshops.
10	Rebecca	Upcycler.
11	Autumn	Upcycler and head of a craft based non-profit in London.
12	Nadine	Upcycler.
13	Fiona	Upcycler and owner of a textile business which relies on vintage clothing and using waste textiles.
14	Anna	Aspiring upcycler who attends upskilling workshops and is building a personal community with other people interested in reducing textile waste.
15	Sandra	Upcycler who grew up in Colombia, but now lives in London.

Table 2.3: UK Interviewees

Online interviews are an established method in the social sciences (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Lacono et al, 2016; Madge and O’Conner, 2004). They offer benefits such as increased participation and a reduction in the power dynamics between the researcher and participant (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Lacono et al, 2016). That said, I benefitted from having already established rapport with most of my interviewees during my ethnographic fieldwork in the UK during Wave 2 of my study.

Data Analysis

I used my fieldnotes to reconstruct my ethnographic observations. Having a material archive of upcycled items and photographs taken during my fieldwork allowed me to make strong connections back to my fieldwork when I was writing my ethnographies. I transcribed my interviews and coded them in Atlas.ti. I collated data from Ghana and the UK separately. I coded the data according to the elements of social practices: materials, competences, meanings and broader context (e.g. Shove et al., 2012). Then I went back through the transcripts and added qualitative codes for other key themes that were repeated. For example, many interviewees, particularly in London, discussed resources and challenges of upcycling based on the questions that I asked.

Conclusion

Together, my ethnographic observations, experiments in making-as-method and interviews allowed me to address my first research question about how people in both sites of high consumption (London) and sites of lower consumption (Accra) are managing textile waste through practices of upcycling. I was also able to learn a lot about the skilled practices which can be used to manage textile waste. However, as I discuss in a later chapter, managing fashion waste in place in the Global North (my third research question) might not be the most equitable solution to managing textile waste. Many Ghanaian interviewees were interested in thinking about how they might be able to sell their upcycled products in a global circular economy for textiles instead.

Based on this combination of methods, I was not able to substantively answer my second research question: how textile waste circulates through global commodity chains. The chains of waste which dictate how it moves around the world are so complex that I was not able to learn the nodes along this chain from their site of origin (the UK) or their final destination

(Ghana). I address this research question and the extent to which I can (not) answer it in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

How does Textile Waste Circulate Through Global Commodity Chains?

Commodity chains are a spatially dispersed system of relationships and social values through which consumer goods are produced and dispersed to consumers (Brooks, 2015). Textile waste moves through global chains, particularly via commercial textile recyclers in the Global North (Norris, 2012). These textile recyclers are responsible for sorting and grading discarded clothing and in doing so, they are able to create value from unwanted clothing (Brooks, 2012). Commercial textile recyclers turn textile waste back into a commodity which is traded within a globalised economy through “intricate and perplexing supply networks” (Brooks, 2025: 5). As one of the world’s largest economic sectors, the textile industry has complex geographies which can be difficult to study (Brooks et al., 2017).

In my previous chapter, I acknowledge that I was not able to fully answer my second research question from the data that I collected during my fieldwork. It was difficult to understand how textile waste moves through global commodity chains, either as waste arriving in Ghana or as upcycled items reentering global commodity chains as part of circular economies. In this chapter I outline the evidence I was able to collect and analyse that goes some distance to addressing this central research question.

Thinking about primary textile production, geographers have used frameworks such as Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) or following a particular consumer good through its particular commodity chain. Commodity chain analysis seems to begin with a consumer product and work backwards to understand how it was produced (Leslie and Reimer, 1999). Other approaches include beginning with factors that might influence consumption such as advertising, and paying attention to the broader circuits through which consumer products typically move through (Leslie and Reimer, 1999). Life Cycle Analysis is a focussed on how a product is made, consumed and

discarded, and the myriad of ways that it may contribute to environmental harm along this journey. Life Cycle Sustainability Assessments which evaluate the economic, social and environmental sustainability of a commodity have also emerged from Life Cycle Analysis literature (Mälkki and Alanne, 2017). I had hoped to construct the commodity chain of textile waste backwards from ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana, and then work forwards from information gained during my fieldwork in the UK. Much like recent work by Brooks (2025), I found my qualitative research did not produce sufficient data about the global geographies of secondhand clothing (which I use interchangeably with textile waste in this dissertation).

Informal conversations with upcyclers, secondhand clothing vendors and textile bale importers in Kantamanto during my ethnographic fieldwork did provide some information about the ways in which textile waste moves around the world and arrives in Ghana. I also spoke to three community members who run Ghanaian non-profits focussed on promoting upcycling as a strategy to reduce the harmful effects of textile waste in Accra. While their information was helpful, I was not able to reach a stage in my data collection where I encountered the same information from several different actors in Kantamanto market or associated upcycling actors. Therefore, I am unable to answer the question: *“how does textile waste circulate through global commodity chains?”* in any of my three papers. Tsing (2011) shares a way of studying commodity chains as a series of fragmented ethnographies. This chapter is an initial attempt to document the information I was able to gather about the ways in which textile waste moves through global commodity chains. I was not able to complete ethnographies all along the commodity chain of textile waste. Instead I present a constellation of fragmented ethnographies from my fieldwork in Accra.

Where Does Textile Waste Come From?

Visual Clues

From the earliest days of my ethnographic fieldwork in Kantamanto market in winter 2024, there were signs about where the huge bales of textile waste were arriving from. My first observations I recorded in my fieldnotes are the reusable tote bags that I saw, all of which implicated the UK as a contributor to this textile waste.

“I try to follow some people in front of me to get a sense of the pace and pathways of the market. It seems like a maze of people, stalls, things, exchanges. On this walk, I see a Sainsbury’s bag for life, a pink Liverpool bag for life, a sports direct bag for life.” - Fieldnotes, January 9th, 2024.

Sports Direct, a high street shop, and Sainsbury’s, a supermarket, are both based in the UK. While Sports Direct has expanded into European countries and begun to enter markets in other continents, the largest presence of the stores remains in the UK and Europe. Sainsbury’s primarily serves the UK market, and a “Liverpool” bag can probably be traced back to the UK. On this particular walk, I also noticed that some items were still branded with UK tags from where they were (meant to be) sold initially.

“On my way back out towards the road, I see men’s underwear still in Zara packaging. There is Dorothy Perkins¹² costume jewellery also in its original packaging.” - Fieldnotes, January 9th, 2024.

So, my earliest impression of the clothing in the market is that it is invariably being sent by countries in the Global North, particularly the UK, and that fast fashion clothing items, which

¹² Dorothy Perkins is a UK-based clothing retailer which used to be a prominent storefront on the high-street. Since joining the BooHoo group in 2021, it now exists as an exclusively online retailer.

tend to be lower quality, are contributing to the waste items that need to be sold by Kantamanto vendors.¹³

Walking through the marketplace along Okai Kwei Road, vendors would ask me where I was from (see Figure 2.3, or the map in Appendix 1).

“Germany?”

“No, UK”

They would excitedly show me that the items they were selling had also come from a UK bale. Despite the UK being the most common origin of a bale (since the UK is the largest sending country of secondhand clothing arriving in Ghana ([Observatory of Economic Complexity](#), nd)), having a UK bale seemed like a point of pride. UK bales were considered good quality in the hierarchy of textile waste that flowed through the market.

The packaging for the bales might also be emblazoned with a flag or country name (see Figure 3.1). The bales often sit next to vendors' wares along Okai Kwei Road so that any unsold items can be packed up and stored at the end of the day. For upcyclers who had a covered, individual space inside Kantamanto market, bales could be stored and locked up there overnight. Several key informants in Kantamanto told me that you can also tell where a bale is from based on its size. Most countries send 55 kilogram bales (see Figure 3.2). However, “China bales” are larger at 89 kilograms¹⁴ (see Figure 3.3).

¹³ The *Or Foundation*, a non-profit operating in Kantamanto, operates beach clean ups to remove textile waste “tentacles” from Jamestown beach in Accra. I worked as a volunteer in these clean ups. During each clean up, they collected any remaining brand tags from the clothing they removed. Every month, they counted how many times each brand appears and ran a “Tag Ur it” campaign over Instagram calling out brands for producing clothing that ultimately ends up as waste in Ghana. This is an idea that I will return to later in this chapter when I discuss my beach clean-up experience with *The Or Foundation*.

¹⁴ Some vendors think that “China bales” are less desirable because they are more difficult for Kayayei (head carriers) to carry around the market and, as several vendors told me, the clothing is too small for many Ghanaians to wear.



Figure 3.1: Photo of textile waste bales taken by Ellie Cleasby in Kantamanto market on January 15, 2024. Presumably they originated in Scotland and the US.



Figure 3.2: A photo of textile waste bales in a textile waste Importer's shop/storage area in Kantamanto market. Taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 17th, 2024.



Figure 3.3: A photo of the larger 89 kilogram bales of textile waste in an Importer's warehouse in Kantamanto market. Taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 18th, 2024.

If you know a secondhand clothing vendor, or have a keen eye for spotting things on the floor of the busy market, you might also be able to find the small pieces of paper that come inside the bale. During a tour of the market with *The Revival*, Yayra picked one of these labels up from the floor and explained to me that these pieces of paper are inside every bale. These documents let you know the type of item in the bale, the weight of the bale and the country of origin (see Figure 3.4). One of *The Revival's* projects is to collect more accurate data about Kantamanto market, so Yayra collects these kinds of documents as he finds them, hoping to show policy makers and sustainable fashion advocates in the Global North who exactly is contributing to the volume of clothing that runs through Kantamanto market. During the same tour, he also found a homework worksheet written in Chinese characters next to a stall selling children's backpacks. This also became part of Yayra's collection of material artefacts from Kantamanto market.



Figure 3.4: A photo of the paper that comes inside a bale of imported secondhand clothing, documenting the type of clothing, origin and weight of the bale. Taken by Ellie Cleasby in Kantamanto market on January 18th, 2024.

The secondhand clothing items themselves can also provide more specific information about parts of its journey through global chains before it arrived at Kantamanto market (see Figure 3.5). Some of the textile waste is branded with locations associated with the clothing item. For example, I saw tourist tops with “Naples Florida”, as well as a fraternity T-shirt and a “Wisconsin Dad” T-shirt, both likely from US higher education institutions. Finally, a stall of caps had items labelled “Vietnam Veteran” and “Toronto, Canada”, suggesting that they originated in the US and Canada respectively.



Figure 3.5: Four photographs of secondhand textiles in Kantamanto market, all depicting specific place names or organisations. Photos taken by Ellie Cleasby in January and February, 2024.

My final strategy for trying to unpack the origins and potentially the more specific commodity chains that items move through before coming to Ghana involved googling the company names that sometimes appeared on bales. For example, a vendor selling items from a UK bale in Kantamanto sent me a picture of the label of his bale, which included the company name “SWD - Suzieland-Manchester” (see Figure 3.6). Googling this name led me to a Facebook group for a company based in Manchester, England, which sold clothing bales. However, the Facebook group was centred around seeking UK-based consumers for the secondhand clothing bales. More recently in early 2026, I tried to google search this term again. This time I could not find the Facebook group, but I could find the company website (<https://swdclothing.co.uk/sustainability>) which suggests that bales are shipped from northern England to other parts of the UK, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Overall, this inquiry

was not very helpful for answering my research question - “how does waste circulate through global commodity chains?”.



Figure 3.6: A photo of a secondhand clothing bale, taken by a vendor in Kantamanto and sent via WhatsApp to Ellie in January, 2024.

A Conversation with a Bale Importer

On January 18th, 2024, I met Daniel¹⁵, a bale importer, who was a friend of Yayra. What follows are reflections from my fieldnotes taken during our conversation, and then edited for clarity later that day.

Yayra, Daniel and I sat on plastic chairs in Daniel's bale warehouse on the outskirts of Kantamanto. Our conversation was wide ranging. Daniel noted that the quick production windows for fast fashion¹⁶ items means that there are three month cycles of clothing trends which can be seen through the secondhand clothing inside the bales in Kantamanto. He notes that fast fashion brands do this to maximise their profits, but that clothing should be made to last longer. For him, recycling in the fast fashion industry is a global necessity.

Vendors in Kantamanto are engaging in this recycling activity by reselling secondhand clothing and transforming items through various upcycling strategies to ensure that as many items as possible can be sold (and considered fashionable) to a Ghanaian market. Kantamanto's upcycling business strategy has been viable for a long time but fast fashion is making their business model more difficult. The prevalence of stained items in particular can cut into profit margins. Daniel advocates for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)¹⁷, noting that these policies are equivalent to campaigning for human rights. Any clothing producer who makes profit every three months should have to establish recycling centres in Ghana. He notes

¹⁵ Pseudonyms have been used to protect my participants' identities.

¹⁶ Fast fashion refers to the linear production cycles used by prominent (and unsustainable) clothing producers. Often this kind of clothing is sold cheaply and requires large quantities of clothing to be sold regularly in order to make a profit. Examples of companies producing fast fashion are Shein, Boohoo, Temu, Zara and Primark.

¹⁷ Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) laws are one possible solution which could produce a centralized fund to create infrastructure for circular economies. These policies are intended to 'stop producers from externalizing the cost of waste' (Ricketts & Skinner, 2023: 4). Currently France is the only country implementing these laws, but the amount of money being charged to the clothing producer per item is still low. *The Or Foundation* in Ghana also received a USD \$15 million grant from fast fashion giant Shein, which could also be considered a form of EPR. Many upcyclers in Ghana are still unclear how these funds might be managed and distributed so that they would actually benefit.

that there should also be an insurance strategy for Ghanaians to be able to return bales that cannot be sold. This might change the sorting process that occurs when the bales are packaged.

Daniel is also sensitive to the environmental impacts of the secondhand clothing that is imported into Ghana. With synthetic clothing, where does the plastic go? This is a bigger concern when synthetic textiles are dumped or burned as waste, rather than upcycled. During extreme weather events such as flash flooding, anything from textile scraps to fabric waste to whole items might be washed from the gutters or floor of the market into the ocean. This can cause problems for marine organisms¹⁸.

The interlinked global economy means that the world is now very circular. While Ghana is politically independent, it is economically enmeshed. Rising interest rates in the UK has made it very expensive to take out a loan in Ghana. This can be a problem for some upcyclers or vendors in Kantamanto who are borrowing money to buy their first bale, or whenever they are unable to make a profit from their previous bale. Yet, bale importers also have to balance their own rising costs, with making sure the bales are still in a price range that is accessible to the vendors. Shipping prices had increased in late 2023/early 2024 linked to prominent global events. For example, Daniel notes that the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine meant that many ships were unable to use the Suez Canal, a key shipping route. While not all bales coming to Ghana need to use the Suez Canal, most shipping companies have spread this increased cost of shipping across all of their ships, pushing some of the cost onto Ghanaian upcyclers and secondhand clothing vendors.

From this conversation with Daniel, I was able to understand that secondhand clothing is always understood in relation to global processes and practices in Ghana. Textile waste is

¹⁸ Unfortunately, I did have several other experiences during my time in Accra which supported this conclusion (some of which will be discussed later in this chapter), including experiencing a turtle dying on one of Accra's beaches.

moving through global commodity chains. Given the amount of sorting and grading that goes into producing bales, it is still unclear what route the clothing takes between Global North sites such as the UK and Canada and Global South sites such as Ghana.

Later that day, I had an informal conversation with a key informant in Kantamanto market, who has also travelled to the UK to try and understand the mechanisms by which textile waste comes to be in Ghana. They suggested that charity shops in the UK only sell around 10% of the clothing donations that they receive. The remainder is given to sorting places which may take out any remaining good quality items based on requests from their customers. What is left after all of the sorting is a lot of poor quality clothing. Clothing sorters in the UK might mix these items in with other items they have collected to make additional bales of clothing. This allows them to create and sell a lot more bales. Workers are usually paid per bale, so they will take measures to make the bales up to 55 kilograms. My informant had even seen stones placed in the bales to increase their weight. They suggested that Dubai is another main sorting hub. The clothing from the UK might even end up in Dubai before coming into Ghana. Then people in the Middle East will also take out the clothing that they want. Australian textiles get sorted in Malaysia and the rest comes to Ghana potentially via the Middle East where they take what they want. These data were difficult to verify. So few of my interviewees are able to take the time to explore how clothing is moving from Global North (e.g. the UK) to Ghana. This specific information about the path that the textile waste may take around the world did not come up in any of my other ethnographic conversations or interviews.

Why are Secondhand Clothing Items sent to Ghana?

During my second wave of fieldwork, while I was based at the *Kokrobitey Institute*, I was chatting with two key informants about the volume of textile waste arriving in Ghana. While this conversation did not lead to any information about how textile waste comes to Ghana, I was

encouraged to question why Ghana was such a significant location for receiving secondhand textiles. In particular one informant encouraged me to do my own research on the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA). From secondary research, I was able to understand that international trade policy plays a significant role in keeping Ghanaian borders open to receive textile waste despite this process causing environmental destruction and keeping Ghana trapped in a colonial economic trading system (Picarelli, 2022; Manieson & Ferrero Regis, 2022).

The US African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) act is a trade agreement between the US and certain eligible African countries. This US trade deal gives eligible African countries duty free access to US markets to sell around 6,800 types of products ([AGOA.info](https://www.agoa.info/)). The policy was enacted in 2000, and the US Congress re-authorised the policy in 2015. This trade agreement ensures that any African countries which use these trade benefits must continue to accept imports of textile waste, despite the environmental harm caused (Ogunmefun, 2024). In July 2018, Rwanda increased tariff barriers on used clothing imports from the US, so their AGOA benefits for apparel exports were suspended (Wong, 2025). So, Ghana is likely to remain a key site for absorbing the world's textile waste in order to continue to have better access to markets where consumers have higher disposable income. Access to US markets, particularly duty-free access, could be important for future circular economies for upcycled textiles, although more research is needed to properly address this relationship.

The Movement of Textile Waste: Clues from Accra's Landscape

Realising that it might be difficult to construct the global geographies of textile waste, I started to look for clues in the landscape which might tell me anything about the way that textile waste enters Ghana, or moves around Accra.

On another tour of Kantamanto market, Yayra told me that clothing is moved from the port of Tema to Kantamanto in large trucks between 2am and 6am, before the market opens

and the roads get too crowded for these trucks to easily navigate the roads. I saw that importers operate from spaces along Okai Kwei Rd and Malmesbie Rd selling bales to those who work in Kantamanto (see map in Appendix 1). Yaya tells me that the bales will also be moved into wider second hand markets spanning Accra and West Africa. Once the bales are purchased, the geography of the post-consumer textiles gets more complex, with different vendors moving items across the city, the country and the region.

I saw this in other parts of Accra during my own ethnographic observations. I spent an afternoon in Labone, a neighbourhood in South Accra, where I encountered three different secondhand clothing vendors all within half a mile of each other. Many secondhand clothing vendors sell clothing from a bale or select items that they have found in Kantamanto from their home or a storefront (see Figure 3.7). Deirdre was selling items, which were all on individual hangers and displayed on the front gate of her home. She told me that she buys a bale for around 2200 cedis (approximately US\$183 at time of research). She kept many of the clothing items in her house, and just replenished the stock hanging on her gate each day if something sold. She explained that she has to sell her items for 30 cedis (USD \$2.52 at time of research) because she is buying them at 25 cedis a piece. She cannot afford to barter with customers or else she will lose her profit/wages, and she definitely cannot afford to lose money. Since she is making such little profit, she sells every item. She noted that everything gets sold eventually, and since she is working out of her house, she can keep the items for as long as necessary.

Storefronts offer different experiences to the consumer. One more robust shop had clothing displayed in the window, and a combination of air conditioning and a fan inside the shop, making it cooler (see Figure 3.8). However, from my ethnographic observations, it seems like the more amenities the shop has, the higher the price of the secondhand items. For example, I purchased a pair of shorts from Deirdre for 30 cedis, and then further down the road I purchased a pair of shorts from the more robust shop which were nearly identical (see Figure 3.9). Other than the colour difference, and being one size different, the shorts were identical.

They were the same brand and product. Yet in the store, the shorts cost 70 cedis (USD \$5.88 at time of research).



Figure 3.7: A photo of a secondhand clothing stall in Labone, Accra. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 16, 2024.



Figure 3.8: Two photos of a more established secondhand clothing shop in Labone, Accra. Photos taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 16, 2024.



Figure 3.9: A photo of two similar pairs of shorts, both from the clothing brand Next. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 16, 2024.

The owner of the shop (Figure 3.8) explained that he typically sells around 10-15 items per week, but this is not enough. He does not buy his clothing in bales; he selects items that he wants and buys them individually. Generally, this means he doesn't get many items he needs to mend. But if he does need to mend the items, he will pay a tailor to do this work. Much like Deirdre, they do not throw any items away. They need to keep all of their items until they sell in order to make their business profitable.

Weeks later in February 2024, I was back in Kantamanto and I once again observed this movement of secondhand textiles described by the Labone shop owner. I sat across from Vidash's stall in Kantamanto early on a Wednesday morning and watched her strip two bales of secondhand clothing. Two other women sat with her, sorting through the bale to decide which items they will take to their own stall elsewhere to sell for more money. The sorting process and exchange between Vidash and other secondhand clothing vendors took hours due to the flurry of chatter, shared meals and regular trail of people coming to greet her. Within a few hours at

least half of each bale has been sold with most being taken by these other vendors who intend to sell the clothing beyond the busy Kantamanto market space.

During Wave 2 of my fieldwork in Ghana, I experienced yet another perspective of this same relationship. All the white T-shirts and white men's shirts which were upcycled to form the Nipa Dua collection by the *Kokrobitey Institute* were sourced from Kantamanto market. Yet, the upcyclers themselves stayed at the institute to actually engage in their design and upcycling work. Other vendors were responsible for bringing the clothing items the 15 miles to the *Kokrobitey Institute*. It is unclear to me whether these vendors were selling whole bales or particular items to the *Kokrobitey Institute*.

These observations demonstrate that secondhand clothing is moving through multiple particular commodity chains even once it has entered Ghana. Secondhand clothing flows both in and out of Kantamanto market, with many vendors seeking any opportunity to earn some money from this industry, even if profit margins are extremely small.

Environmental Destruction

Other clues from the landscape in Accra gave me data about the environmental harms caused by textile waste. My ethnographic fieldwork showed that some of the secondhand textiles arriving in Ghana are dumped, particularly ending up in the Korle Lagoon or in the ocean and on the beach.

One example is during my early fieldwork in Accra, when I spent an afternoon with Shannon, an upcycler in Kantamanto market. She showed me how she made children's clothing items from an adult top. There were common shapes that she used in the absence of having formal sewing pattern pieces, as would be more common in the Global North (see Figure 3.10). A few days later, I participated in beach clean up activities on Jamestown Beach, Accra with *The Or Foundation*. The beach is choked by textile waste (see Figure 3.11). I asked other clean

up volunteers how the clothing ended up on the beach. Many tried to tell me that it was not coming directly from Kantamanto market. Yet, I found many smaller pieces of fabric cut into the shapes that I had been shown as I sat in Shannon's stall in Kantamanto (see Figure 3.12). This anecdotal evidence helped me contextualise the information I gained through my ethnographic activities.



Figure 3.10: A photo of upcycler Shannon demonstrating how she makes baby clothes from a woman's T-shirt. Photo taken by Beverley Cleasby in Kantamanto on January 17, 2024.



Figure 3.11: A photo of textile waste “tentacles” on Jamestown Beach in Accra. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby during *The Or Foundation*’s beach clean-up event on January 19th, 2024.



Figure 3.12: A photo of textile waste on Jamestown Beach in Accra. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby during *The Or Foundation's* beach clean-up event on January 19th, 2024.

While I was conducting my first wave of fieldwork in Accra, *The Or Foundation* ran monthly beach clean up events with Won Bee Ga, a Ghanaian beach clean up and environmental education organisation. I attended two. Clean up volunteers could choose from one of several roles. I joined the team who were tasked with checking if any clothes still had labels which indicated the clothing brand. As we wrestled with the items of textile waste to bring them out from the sand covered “tentacles” of plastic and clothing waste, we searched for clothing tags and cut them from the fabric before adding the rest of the textile waste into large

sacks. The tags were kept by members of *The Or Foundation* who then used them as the data behind their “Tag Ur It” campaign on Instagram, calling out brands whose clothing ends up as waste on Accra’s beaches.

Once large sacks were filled with textile waste, volunteers had to carry them up steep steps to the street, where bags were weighed and put into a garbage truck. Removing textile waste from the beach is extremely difficult work. Sand gets into the hems of clothing, making every item heavy. Carrying sacks full of this textile waste up steep stairs to remove it is challenging. This is yet another example of how the inequalities between the Global North and South are perpetuated. People in the Global South become responsible for undertaking difficult labour to remove textile waste, largely from the Global North, from their coastal ecosystems. This can be considered part of capitalism’s “racist wastification” (Fernández, 2023: 51), whereby certain people become waste under capitalism by undertaking physically demanding work until they are no longer able to, thereby losing their source of income. Whose lives become subsumed by difficult and undervalued work within capitalist structures is determined by racism under racial capitalism.

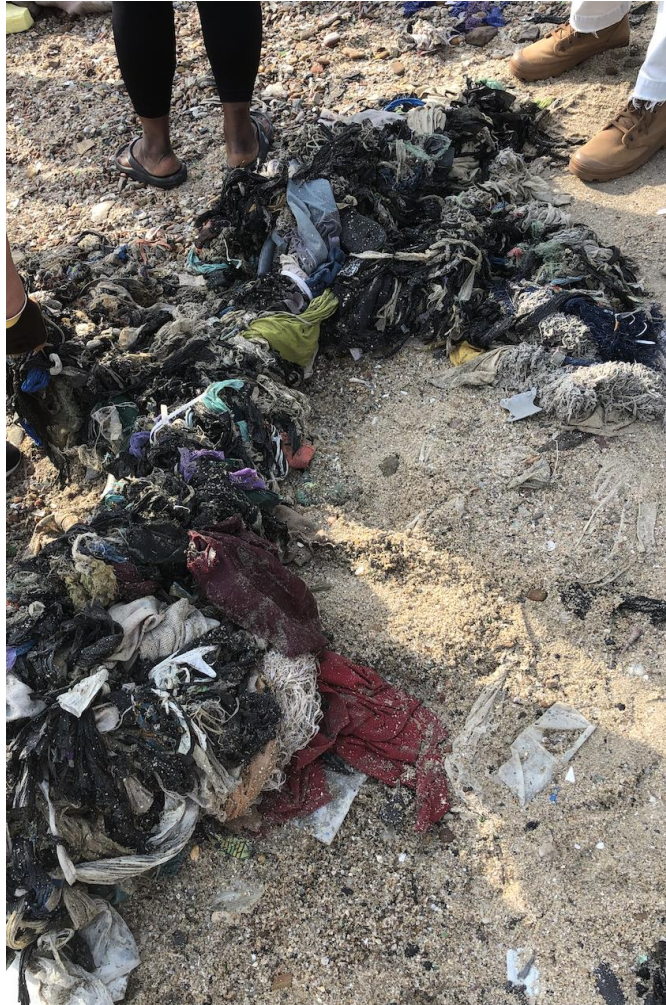


Figure 3.13: A photo of a textile waste tentacle on Jamestown Beach in Accra. Taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 19th, 2024.

Estimates for how much clothing is unsellable vary, with the Ghana Used Clothing Dealers Association (2024) estimating that this is about 5% of clothing that enters the market. Picarelli (2022) puts the figure at up to 60% of the clothing entering the market leaves as waste. One of my key informants suggested that the waste leaving the market amounts to less than one container (or 180-200 bales) per month. Yet, no matter the percentage, the damage to Accra's environment is undeniable.

Particularly around the Korle Lagoon and the Old Fadama, the largest informal settlement in Accra, there are huge mounds of dumped waste, piling so high that some of the poorest members of the population build houses on them (see Figures 3.14, 3.15 and map in

Figure 2.3). This dumping reflects the high price of waste removal in a country with over-burdened waste disposal infrastructure, largely as a result of the importation of textile waste (Asamoah et al., 2022; Ricketts & Skinner, 2023). I walked through Old Fadama and witnessed the overwhelming amount of waste accumulating there. Not all of the waste is made up of textiles, but significant portions of the waste is. People live their lives amongst this textile waste. Children play here. Animals graze here (see Figure 3.16).



Figure 3.14: Photo of Old Fadama informal settlement and the Korle Lagoon in Accra. Taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 30th, 2024.



Figure 3.15: Another angle of the structure in Figure 3.14. This photo depicts a house in the Old Fadama informal settlement, Accra, which is built on top of a textile waste “mountain”. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 30th, 2024.



Figure 3.16: A cow grazing on a “mountain” of waste in Old Fadama, Accra. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 30th, 2024.

The Korle Lagoon, swimmable in living memory, is now barely visible under the textile, plastic and electronic waste which pollute the area (see Figure 3.17). This environmental pollution is both the obvious, immediate violence of a polluted landscape and a form of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). While walking next to the Korle Lagoon, I watched a baby goat who had been using the waste to walk over the lake, slip and fall into the water, unable to get out. Recounting this to one of my key informants in Ghana, I explained how upset that experience had made me feel. My informant reminded me that people live like this everyday, and I should take the experience as a reminder that the system is broken. The immediate change to the landscape wrought by the dumping of multiple forms of imported waste has direct impacts on the lifestyles of local residents. This is an immediate and obvious form of violence, facilitated by

uneven global power structures of ongoing coloniality particularly as it is exercised through racial capitalism.



Figure 3.17: A photo of the Korle Lagoon, Accra, choked by textile waste. Taken by Ellie Cleasby on January 30th, 2024.

Practices such as burning plastic-filled textiles contributes to significant air pollution in Accra (Quashie-Idun, 2024), constituting a form of slow violence (Nixon, 2011), which will continue to harm the community. A recent report from Greenpeace found that 89% of the garments they sampled from Accra's beaches contained fossil fuel based synthetic fibres (Quashie-Idun, 2024). Further, they took air samples in Old Fadama's washhouses, where textile waste is burned to heat the baths, and discovered that the air and surfaces of the washhouses are contaminated with hazardous chemicals far exceeding European acceptable limits (Quashie-Idun, 2024). Polyester is made from polyethylene terephthalate (PET). Since plastic does not decompose, both micro and nano plastics can enter soil, water and the air. In particular, microplastics and nano plastics are released into the air when synthetic textiles are

burned, contributing to both climate change and detrimental impacts on human health (Acquaye et al., 2023). PET can cause many serious health effects due to its ability to cause stem cell stress and a generalised inflammatory response¹⁹. This can lead to serious medical complications such as skin rashes, liver dysfunction, respiratory disease and cancer (Dhaka et al., 2022). PET is also an endocrine disrupting chemical (EDC) which enables it to disturb normal hormone signalling, leading to birth defects, infertility and abnormalities in metabolic function (Flaws et al., 2020). Any dyes or other chemical based additives can increase the impacts of textile waste when it is dumped or burned, as many of these additives are also EDCs. As Nixon (2011: 59) asserts, “[d]iscrimination predates disaster”. The lack of investment in appropriate recycling infrastructure by the Ghanaian government, or other strategies to manage the disposal of textile waste (e.g. education on disposing of synthetic fibres) by exporting countries, reflect a lack of consideration for Accra’s urban population, particularly the poorest members. This constitutes slow violence. The additional exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals and the significant associated health impacts exemplify the embodied reality of the inequalities between the Global North and Global South which are perpetuated with the trade of textile waste.

Nixon (2011: 46) explains that the environmental pollution that leads to slow violence is facilitated by a “neoliberal ideology that erodes national sovereignty and turns answerability into a bewildering transnational maze”. Due to the global nature of the primary clothing supply chains, there is an extensive network of “national laws, international standards and best industry practices” that regulate the labour and ecological practices in the fashion industry, permitting the lack of personal responsibility and making it difficult for this industry to become better regulated (Brewer, 2019: 4). This complexity affects the management of both primary textile production and textile waste.

¹⁹ Thank you to Dr. Charlotte Cleasby for helping me understand the specific mechanisms by which micro and nano plastics, prevalent after burning synthetic fibres, would impact the human body.

Taking clues from the landscape in Accra, it is clear that textile waste does work its way through commodity chains to end up in Ghana. This data does not reveal too much about the specific geographies of this textile waste prior to it entering Ghana. But my ethnographic data shows that the end of these commodity chains in many cases is coastal and marine ecosystems around Accra.

Upcycled Items Moving Through Global Circular Economies

Since upcycling is so prevalent in Accra, there are a few examples of textile waste re-entering global commodity chains as new items. One example of this is *The Revival*'s denim tote bags which are sold at The Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in London. *The Revival* diverts denim that would otherwise end up in Accra's landfill and makes denim tote bags (therevival.org; see Figure 3.18). This project is a collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, allowing *The Revival* to sell their upcycled items for a greater profit in the UK market (see Figure 3.19). In particular the large tote bags pictured below are sold for £90 (USD \$114.30 at time of research). The V&A Museum has facilitated a global circular economy for these denim tote bags.

Through this project, *The Revival* demonstrates how a circular economy approach could put upcyclers in Kantamanto and across Accra in relationality with the Global North in a way that offers to produce material compensation to the Ghanaians who manage the world's textile waste. These alternative relationalities have the potential to produce fairer wages for labourers in Kantamanto, and to reduce the amount of fashion waste that accumulates in Ghana, often producing negative environmental impacts.



Figure 3.18: Photo of a denim tote bag made by *The Revival*. Taken in Yayra's Home Studio in Accra in February 2024.



Figure 3.19: A photo of *The Revival's* upcycled large denim tote bags in The V&A Museum in London. Taken by Kim England.

Conclusion

While I did not gather data that allowed me to exhaustively answer my research question “how does textile waste circulate through global commodity chains?”, I was able to understand certain nodes on this commodity chain from my ethnographic fieldwork in Accra. My observations showed that clothing waste is arriving from countries such as the UK, Canada, the US and China. From here the route the clothing takes before arriving in Ghana is difficult to

trace, although it might move through other sorting hubs, perhaps in Dubai and/or the Middle East. Once the clothing arrives in Ghana certain steps of the commodity's journey are clear.

Textile waste arrives in Ghana packaged as bales in a container and transported by ship. Importers buy bales and transport them from the port of Tema to Kantamanto market. From here, clothing may be resold quickly, or upcycled and then resold. Some of these sales might include other secondhand clothing vendors who will in turn sell the clothing for a higher price elsewhere in the city, country or region. However, not all of the clothing is able to be resold. Anywhere between 5-60% of the clothing leaves the market as waste (Ghana Used Clothing Dealers Association, 2024; Picarelli, 2022). This figure may err on the higher side when events like flash flooding sweep items from Kantamanto into coastal ecosystems through the gutters. Heavy rain or flooding might also contribute to stored clothing becoming mouldy faster, which might also lead to increased dumping of the secondhand textiles.

It is undeniable that textiles from the secondhand clothing industry end up polluting parts of Accra. The Korle Lagoon is choked by waste. People who live in Accra's largest informal settlement, Old Fadama, live among and on top of waste. In both instances, this waste is significantly composed of textiles. Textile waste tentacles are also prevalent along Accra's beaches. While local organisations such as *The Or Foundation* and *Won Bee Ga* are working on cleaning up these beaches, this work is physically demanding.

Finally, there is evidence that some upcyclers are able to participate in global circular economies. *The Revival* sends upcycled tote bags made from denim diverted from landfill in Kantamanto to The V&A Museum in London. These bags are sold for higher prices to a consumer base in the UK. Not every upcycler can or will be able to access the necessary infrastructure to engage in global circular economies in this way. But, it is clear that some textile waste is moving through commodity chains, having been (re)produced into a new consumer product. The upcycled item finds value as a commodity for a third time (from when it was first

produced, then for a second time when it is sorted and graded as textile waste, and a third time when it becomes a new product by way of upcycling).

CHAPTER 4

A Caring Sustainability

In this chapter, I contend that sustainability practitioners and advocates must remember that the goal of sustainability is to care for people and the planet. Waste offers a useful empirical lens to think about the links between sustainability and care, because as waste is moved and managed, important “social, cooperative and caring relationships” are produced (Vicdan et al., 2025: 568). Within global geographies of textile waste, the Global South absorbs large quantities of the world’s textile waste and therefore takes on an outsized responsibility for managing it compared to populations who actually contribute to the over consumption of clothing.

Sustainability’s Need for Care: Invoking the Commons to Imagine More Just Futures for Workers in Kantamanto Market

Abstract: In Kantamanto market, Accra, workers manage global post-consumer textile waste through upcycling practices. Kantamanto’s workers are embedded in webs of care, which see them performing much of the global caring labour for post-consumer textiles, but with little economic benefit and to the detriment of their local environment. I imagine more care-full futures for those living and working with this textile waste. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Kantamanto, I draw on care theory to argue that the language and politics of the commons can be expanded to better attend to the multiple scales at which wasteful, polluting practices are both produced and experienced. The commons, as a sustainability theory, is often utilised to imagine more equitable uses of shared resources. At the same time, I find that care theory is vital for situating Kantamanto workers in global webs of relationality within clothing consumption

and disposal because it makes visible the many different scales at which acts of commoning can be practiced. Locally, textile waste is a resource to manage. Yet the simultaneous destruction of their environment means that Accra can no longer provide healthy environments for its inhabitants - a key goal of any commons. At the scale of the global commons, the Global North uses unequal structures such as colonialism and racial capitalism to produce uneven harms. Once the Kantamanto workers' devalued labour is understood in relation to global processes and practices, more realistic strategies for imagining more caring futures that improve their social, economic and environmental conditions become possible.

Key words: sustainability; resilience; the commons; Kantamanto market; care ethics

1. Introduction

Despite its obvious and multifaceted normative concerns about improving human-nature relationships, the sustainability literature has an inchoate conceptualization of care. This is ironic because by its own account the very point of "sustainability" is to care about people's relationship to their community and the environment. The exclusion of care within sustainability discourse and practice leads to significant oversights of opportunities to produce more economically, socially and environmentally just futures. I address these themes by considering the case study of Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana.

Sustainability is a chaotic concept which is employed in particular ways to reflect the values and goals of those using the term (Lake and Hanson, 2000; Basiago, 1995; Alhaddi, 2015; Ramsey, 2015). This flexibility has led to sustainability being widely employed by governments, businesses and international organisations. Despite the lack of a cohesive definition, normative sustainability literature and sustainability practitioners seem to agree that a combined consideration of economic, social and environmental factors will promote more

liveable futures (Caradonna, 2018; Vehkamäki, 2005). Therefore, sustainability offers a more tangible approach for thinking about the nexus of economic, social and environmental justice. While I centre the term sustainability for its inclusion of economic justice, I find it important to think with environmental justice scholars who have already lent a critical approach to the study of more liveable, healthy and care-full futures. For example, Pellow (2016) calls for studies which incorporate difference across a variety of axes, and which pays more attention to power. Combining the systems-thinking of the term sustainability (Caradonna, 2018), with the attention to power relations that are foregrounded by critical environmental justice scholars opens an important space to think through more just futures for workers in Kantamanto market.

In Kantamanto, the world's largest secondhand clothing market (Menash, 2023), workers manage global post-consumer textile waste through upcycling practices. Upcycling practices include sewing, mending and redyeing old clothing to produce usable items. Kantamanto's workers are embedded in global webs of care, which see them performing much of the global caring labour for textile waste, but with little economic benefit and to the detriment of their environment (Cleasby & England, 2024). Positioning Kantamanto's workers within a web of care with consumers in the Global North encourages a caring relationality to be established between distant people and places that foregrounds a "thick mesh of relational obligation" (Bellacasa, 2017: 120). Within sustainability literature, similar attempts to foster international relationality and solidarity have been made using the concept of the *global commons*. However, a care-full sustainability is still lacking in practice, so I join other scholars in their more recent attempts to theorise around this nexus of sustainability, justice and care ethics (Cox, 2020; Moriggi et al., 2020).

Much like Bond and Barth (2020:1) I think of justice as "co-constituted with an ethic of care that is reciprocal and relational". Both an ethic of care and a sensibility for justice are foundational for achieving more equal and desirable futures for everyone in a climate changing world. Care has received increased attention in geography over the last 20 years (e.g. Lawson,

2007) for its P/political potential (Cox, 2020). Therefore, it is a useful exercise to ask what reintegrating care into all sustainability frameworks could do for producing more useful global sustainability interventions. While I choose to use the term sustainability for its prominence in governance and its attention to systems thinking, neither that, nor environmental justice can accurately capture the type of intervention that would deliver healthier, safer and more fulfilling futures for workers in Kantamanto. As with any work on sustainability, some additional labour is required to describe the kind of intervention that is actually being sought. Throughout this paper, I join other sustainability scholars who have begun to think about the ways in which care theory or ethics could be a useful part of the “substantial rethinking” that must be brought to bear on our current models of development (Moriggi et al., 2020: 281). I begin by critiquing particular neoliberalised and depoliticised versions of sustainability and then turn to sustainability theories which incorporate an ethic of care, such as commoning, to demonstrate that they open up useful frameworks for providing more just and care-full futures.

In section 2, I review the normative sustainability literature and the popular critiques of it. Then I turn to commoning in section 3, demonstrating the potential of incorporating care ethics into sustainability literature, by drawing on already established links between care ethics and the concept of commoning, or the global commons. In section 4, I apply these different definitions of sustainability to the case study of Kantamanto market. I highlight the ways in which neoliberalism and depoliticised discourses of sustainability, in particular, do not leave room to address the global structures that produce unequal economic, social and environmental conditions in Ghana. I also address the reality that, discourses of commoning, built on care ethics, do highlight valuable resources for achieving sustainability. But, only using discourses of the commons cannot fully address the unequal outcomes produced by the movement of textile waste either. In section 5, I suggest that a broad understanding of sustainability which draws on care ethics offers even better opportunities to produce more just futures for those working within Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana.

2. Defining Mainstream Sustainability

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission's report 'Our Common Future' provided the seminal definition of sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". This definition is notably lacking any defining spatial scale, or actionable agenda. The definition is more of a guiding principle rather than a precise definition. Scholars thus posit 'sustainability' has achieved broad acceptance due to this flexibility, even though it creates a lack of clarity around its parameters and goals (Sze, 2018; Elliott, 2012; Caradonna, 2018). McKibben (1996: 19) goes further, arguing that sustainability was designed to lack specificity, partly in an effort to obscure the obvious tensions between conserving natural resources and generating economic profit.

Ideas around sustainability or sustainable development are usually traced back to the 1970s. Basiago (1995: 109) pinpoints 1972 when the "notion of 'sustainability' emerged in *The Ecologist's A Blueprint for Survival*". Also in 1972, the UN Conference on the Human Environment was the first to focus on the links between humans, the economy and the environment and has been credited as the beginning of the concept of sustainable development (Shi et al., 2019: 5). Ruggerio (2021) dates 'sustainable development' to the 1970s when there was a surge of new literature concerned with the limits around the Western development model. For example, Rachel Carson's book "*Silent Spring*" was published in 1962, prompting people to have more concerns about human impacts on the environment (McCool, 2013), and Paul Erlich's "*The Population Bomb*" was published in 1968, raising public awareness over the links between economic, social and environmental concerns (Vehkamaki, 2005). These narratives of sustainability support Caradonna's (2018: 11) analysis that sustainability is concerned with "systems-thinking" which focuses on "the ways in which human societies have conceptualised, dealt with, and responded to the relationship between the natural environment, human

wellbeing, and economic systems". Elkington (1997) articulates this as a triple bottom line framework.

Yet, sustainability has been neoliberalised (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014). Equally prioritising economic and ecological parameters of sustainability means that ecological sustainability became confined by economic systems (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014). Sneddon et al. (2006) note the inherent contradictions between calls for both economic development and ecological preservation within a neoliberal global economy. Moore (2016) has made a similar critique, labelling our era the "Capitalocene" to highlight that it is the exploitative practices of neoliberal capitalism and the logic of mass consumption which have caused the biggest environmental destruction. The privileging of neoliberal logics means that sustainability becomes increasingly uncaring, because capitalism inherently relies on inequality to function (Melamed, 2015). This means that universal human and environmental wellbeing goals can never be achieved via capitalist logic.

The shift towards neoliberalism also created a depoliticised version of sustainability, which is uncritical of the role of capitalism in environmental harm and sustainability agendas. Tulloch and Neilson (2014) trace this shift to the Brundtland report, where economic growth, social wellbeing and ecological integrity were framed as both equally important and mutually interdependent. When sustainability is depoliticised, there is a lack of critical attention to power relations within sustainable development projects (Chipango and To, 2024). Banerjee (2003) argues that sustainable development agendas have failed to address current environmental problems, failed to deliver "freedom" to many people and have even perpetuated imperialism. Neoliberal sustainability has created an unequal system for who gets to undertake sustainability projects, who has control over these socio-spatial arrangements, and who gets to benefit from these projects.

Sustainability agendas have strayed from their initial intent when the term gained notoriety in the 1970s - to care about people and their relationship to the environment. Since the

publication of the Brundtland Commission's "Our Common Future" global economic inequalities have dramatically increased (Sneddon et al., 2006). Sneddon et al. (2006: 254) note that the environmental governance goals which were developed at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, following the Brundtland report, remain in an "institutional incubator" and had not been realised almost 30 years later. Even as recently as 2024, The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Progress Report acknowledges that "only seventeen per cent of SDGs targets are on track to be achieved" by 2030 (UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council, 2024: 2). This can be understood within the timeline of neoliberal capitalism becoming fully operational as the means of organising the global system and with the associated rise of "liberal environmentalism" which placed environmentalism as something for states to address through financial logics (Bernstein, 2002: 1). Ehrenfeld (2019) suggests that we must sustain something and in the case of normative understandings, following the Brundtland definition, this something becomes growth, rather than ecological integrity or social flourishing.

2.1 Resilience

One iteration of mainstream sustainability is the discourse of resilience, which is used to justify certain kinds of sustainability interventions. This discourse of sustainability has its roots in social concerns about population growth and related economic theories about the limits to growth that would be caused by resource scarcity (e.g. work by Thomas Malthus) (Mebratu, 1998). Much like other normative understandings of sustainability, resilience does not ask practitioners to be critical about solving environmental or social problems through neoliberal logics. Resilience has become a pervasive feature of global governance, to cover the ability of a community to respond to anything from economic depressions to climatic events (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012). Vulnerability to these external shocks is seen as the problem to be solved, and resilience is presented as a loose antonym (Adger, 2000).

Despite being pervasive in policy, resilience discourses have been critiqued for disregarding power, culture and history (Bell et al, 2019), as is the case with broader understandings of sustainability. Resilience discourses evoke notions of scarcity to present the need for competition in securing safe and healthy futures. But it is an effective tool for public policy within current global systems because top-down strategists can delineate desirable outcomes and then enforce their strategies to achieve these outcomes (Derickson, 2018). Community engagement is not necessary to successfully implement resilience programs.

3. Care and Commoning

Alhaddi (2015: 7) notes that at its core, sustainability remains an issue of needs vs limitations. Sustainability, whether articulated as part of the development discourse or not, is concerned with resource management. Resilience is one articulation of sustainable resource management, another is the idea of the commons, or commoning. Feminist political ecologists and economists have turned their attention to the commons, and practices of commoning, as a more inclusive and just form of environmental politics compared to the market solutions that have been prevalent under neoliberalised “sustainability” (Clement et al., 2019). Commons are “antipodes to private property”, making them a productive way of undermining privatisation and commodification (Wichterich, 2015: 89). As Gibson-Graham et al. (2013: 127) explain, the commons are motivated by the question: “Can we take back property and better care for the resources that sustain all who inhabit this planet?”. Whereas neoliberal versions of sustainability have been criticised for becoming depoliticised (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014; Banerjee, 2003), the commons is closely linked to a demand for direct democracy (Wichterich, 2015).

The move to the term “commoning” reflects the process of participatory democracy desired by proponents of the commons (Wichterich, 2015). Commoning is the ongoing practice of, and necessary social relations needed to, govern the commons (Federici, 2019). Elinor

Ostrom's (1990) seminal work on the commons documents the ways in which communities care for, and create rules to, manage a common pool of resources (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). Far from the well-known narrative of the "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968), which refers to the overuse of common-pool resources when the resources are unmanaged, feminist political economists have instead focussed on the political subjectivities produced through acts of commoning. Commoning creates relationality between people and environments at multiple scales (e.g. Cleasby and England, 2024). For example, Garcia-Lopez et al. (2021: 1202) assert that those who engage in commoning have to undertake practices of caring and "doing with others", which open up "other ways of being and belonging". Commoning offers a more explicit reflection on our connections to other people and the environment compared to neoliberalised, depoliticised framings of sustainable development. Much like critical environmental justice approaches advocated by Pellow (2016), commoning forces practitioners to consider the role of power, difference and participatory approaches.

Zheng (2020) situates care as a primary motivation for acts of commoning. Care labour describes the ongoing work of commoning (e.g. Wichterich, 2015). The work of caring can also become its own common resource to be managed by a community (Dengler and Lang, 2022). I am particularly interested in linking commoning to care ethics. Care ethics is using care as a value, which is "dependent on and defined by care as practice" (Raghuram, 2016: 520). Feminist care ethics understand caring as relational, in order to expose the underlying power relations (Tronto, 2013). Compared to other sustainability-based theories, commoning recognisably draws on care ethics, because it is concerned with relationalities between community members and their environment. Deploying care ethics as the foundation of commoning creates a discourse of sustainability premised on an alternative logic to capitalism. The commons distance themselves from the logics of capitalism by not identifying with a narrative of scarcity, as is the case with resilience. Instead, the commons framework assumes that sharing resources leads to increased buy-in from the community and consequently

increased productivity (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). Despite being widely studied, particularly by feminist scholars, commoning has not yet achieved widespread acceptance within formal governance structures.

Commoning, as a form of sustainability least aligned with neoliberal capitalist values, has not been integrated into global governance structures under the banner of “sustainable development”. But, framing sustainability through the commons can be one way of promoting a more democratic form of community flourishing, particularly within social and ecological metrics. Now I turn to the example of Kantamanto market, Ghana, to show how neoliberalised versions of sustainability such as resilience discourses and a more care-centric, commons discourse can each be applied to this case study. Each discourse of sustainability creates the logic for a different suite of sustainability interventions. Some of these interventions are better suited to make a material difference in the lives of Kantamanto workers.

4. Case Study: Kantamanto Market, Ghana

4.1 Methods

I conducted two waves of ethnographic fieldwork in Kantamanto market in Accra in 2024, each lasting several weeks. As a White, middle-class, educated, British woman, I approached the field aware of the power relations that might impact the interactions I had. In the Global South, whiteness comes with a relative position of power, which can be amplified through the position of ‘researcher’, because I had control over what questions are asked and how the knowledge is presented and disseminated (Faria and Mollett, 2016). Scholars such as McConnell (2016) and Sabhlok (2020: 140) call on researchers working with groups who have often been disempowered in knowledge making processes, to be attentive to the “dynamism, ambiguities and creativity” as we represent people’s labour and lives. This aligns with

Visweswaran's (1994) call for reflexivity to go beyond just stating identities and to further locate scholars within systems of power that represent their practices of knowledge production. Since I am from the Global North, I felt that it was important to conduct fieldwork in Accra to properly account for the problems and possibilities that our textile waste is causing in Ghana. To reduce the power inequities between my perceived positionality and my research participants, I worked with key informants who facilitated my ethnographic data collection in Ghana.

Since ethnography is a useful method for thinking about the meanings and processes of everyday life (Herbert, 2000), my key informants ensured that I was properly interpreting the cultural context of the socio-spatial phenomenon I was experiencing. In Kantamanto, I often walked the market with Yayra Agbofah²⁰ through paid tours. Yayra is the founder of *The Revival*, a Ghanaian non-profit with a goal of creating “awareness, art and jobs with upcycled global textile waste” (therevival.earth/about). These tours took place across different days and times, in order to observe the flows of the market. Occasionally I would walk the market with other guides or alone, to observe the difference in what data I could collect. Yayra's prominence in Kantamanto, and his connections with market leadership and vendors were integral for seeing the commons of Kantamanto market, which, as an outsider, I would have struggled to participate in.

Informal conversations with a variety of stakeholders in Kantamanto market also informed my ethnography. These “participatory conversations” (Swain and King, 2022) were an active exchange of conversation with market vendors, leaders and upcyclers, which included sharing everyday experiences, understanding their perception of the market and they asked me lots of questions about why I was there. This “small talk” became part of an iterative process of observation and conversation. Their perspective provided the cultural context of my

²⁰ Yara's real name is included here, with his informed consent.

ethnographic observations, which in turn affected what I paid attention to in future participant observation (Drissen and Jansen, 2013).

The contradictions raised through the discussion of different strands of sustainability literature reviewed above became more obvious to me during my field research in Kantamanto market. The potential for Kantamanto to be understood as sustainable may look very different depending on whether discourses of resilience or of the commons undergird the discussion. Since sustainability often informs the material support that different projects, particularly in the Global South, may receive (e.g. funding), it is important to think about the ways that certain discourses produce different representations of that place, and to what end.

4.2 Process, Practice & Meaning: Kantamanto Market

Kantamanto market is among the world's largest secondhand clothing markets (Menash, 2023). Approximately 15 million secondhand items are imported to the Port of Tema each week in the form of clothing bales (Picarelli, 2022). The clothing in the bales comes from the Global North, with the UK, China and Canada being the largest sending countries as of 2023 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.). The bales then get dispersed across Accra, other regions of Ghana and surrounding countries such as Burkina Faso, largely facilitated through importers in Kantamanto market. Vendors buy bales, which are priced mostly according to the type of item. For example, a bale importer in Kantamanto tells me that 55kg denim bales cost around 2000 cedis (US \$160 at the time of research) for about 200 items, whereas dress bales are more expensive (he sells these for 3500-5000 cedis or US\$280-400 at the time of research). Vendors may engage in upcycling themselves, they might outsource upcycling to fetch a higher profit for their items, or they might sell items which the customer can then upcycle or have upcycled within Kantamanto. Repairs began at 1 cedi (~\$0.07 at time of research). The collection of skilled workers within such a dense marketplace means that there is a strong

community contributing to building a local waste economy. Barber (2021) suggests that the make-do-and-mend attitude in Kantamanto signals an ethos of sustainability, yet Manieson and Ferrero-Regis (2022: 3) disagree, suggesting that this practice is only seen as sustainable from the perspective of those in the Global North, who are creating the problem.

Workers in Kantamanto typically spend up to 12 hours per day, 6 days per week in the market. Interpersonal relationships are forged between workers due to the long hours they spend at work. During my first wave of fieldwork, Yayra gave me a tour of the market and many vendors and upcyclers stopped him, shared their concerns or hopes with him in a flurry of Twi, asked him about his family, or a recent injury. A few months later during my second wave of fieldwork, I visited *The Revival's* new upcycling studio which Yayra had just opened, located in the inner back corner of Kantamanto. The new studio space offered upcyclers and young community members looking to develop their technical skills a place to congregate, share ideas, complete projects and learn. In other instances, a strong level of familiarity can be observed between vendors, or with customers through the sharing of food. Therefore, the community in Kantamanto can also be understood as a socio-emotional commons, where a community holds social resources in common with a general principle of reciprocity (Isaksen et al., 2008). The social resources include the skills of vendors and upcyclers. This community of workers is sustained in the absence of formal government support.

4.3 Clothing Waste & Environmental Degradation

Due to the large volume of low-quality clothing that arrives in Kantamanto, some of the items inevitably become waste. The exact amount of clothing that is unsellable is contested, with estimates ranging from 5% (Ghana Used Clothing Dealers Association, 2024) to 60% (Picarelli, 2022). *The Revival*, through their waste collection research, estimate that about 10 tonnes of clothing waste leaves the market each week (Personal Communication, January 30th

2024). This waste might be dumped along the banks of the Korle Lagoon in Accra's Old Fadama informal settlement, or it might be burned by vendors so that they do not have to pay for waste removal. The burning of waste, particularly plastic-based fibres, creates noxious smoke, and leads to significant environmental and health concerns (Quashie-Idun, 2024; see Figure 4.1). The dumped textiles form waste mountains, often being combined with food, plastic and e-waste. Those who reside in Old Fadama may scavenge for items to eat or sell in these waste heaps. Cows even graze on top of the more recent waste mountains. Once a new mountain begins to form, houses are built on top of older waste piles (see Figure 4.2). Particularly during extreme rainfall or flash floods, a lot of this waste enters the Korle Lagoon. Once swimmable in living memory, the lagoon is now barely visible under the debris. Either from Kantamanto directly, or via the Korle Lagoon, textile waste eventually enters the ocean, causing further disruptions to marine ecosystems. Textile waste tentacles wash up on the beach, and local community organisations such as *Won Bee Ga* and *The Or Foundation* take on the responsibility of removing this waste. So, even if Kantamanto can be understood as a hub of sustainable clothing production, the practice of importing waste is currently contributing significantly to environmental pollution and has implications on health for those living in Accra.



Figure 4.1: A photo of the Korle Lagoon, with Old Fadama in the background. Taken by the author on January 30th, 2024.



Figure 4.2: Photo of a textile waste mountain with a house built on top. Photo taken by author in the Old Fadama informal settlement in SW Accra on January 30, 2024.

4.4 Sustainability in Kantamanto

Individual upcycling practices are essential for managing the textile waste that is continuously imported in Ghana. The clothing that is produced in Kantamanto can be considered as sustainable, because it was produced from clothing that would otherwise be in landfill. However, as Michael²¹, a bale importer, told me, even if you are a good upcycler, there is still waste. Describing a frequent upcycling strategy in Kantamanto, sewing two t-shirts together, he explains the arithmetic of this upcycling strategy. You do produce one wearable garment from two unwearable items. However, you are still producing up to one T-shirt's worth

²¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of my research participants.

of waste. Returning to the idea that sustainability is foundationally a form of needs versus limitations, or resource management (Alhaddi, 2015), the case study of Kantamanto is a good example of sustainability as it pertains to producing sustainable clothing. Waste is an ample resource that skilled workers have been able to develop a robust waste economy around. Those supporting a neoliberalised form of sustainability might label the community in Kantamanto “resilient” for being able to respond to the external pressure of large volumes of textile waste (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014; MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012). Even if not all of the textile waste is used, the Kantamanto community have found ways to earn money from this resource that would otherwise just pollute the environment or fill up landfills. Yet, this unused textile waste does contribute to environmental pollution and associated health risks in Accra. When sustainability is defined by systems-thinking (Caradonna, 2018), these negative externalities cannot be divorced from any analysis about the sustainability of Kantamanto.

As noted earlier in this paper, neoliberalised discourses of sustainability have been critiqued for failing to pay attention to power relations (Chipango and To, 2024), perpetuating imperialism (Banerjee, 2003), and continuing to perpetuate global economic inequalities (Sneddon et al., 2006). Yunita et al. (2022) even suggest that the apolitical approach to sustainable development is a key reason why progress towards policy interventions have been slow in the Global South. Textile waste is one arena over which the inequalities between the Global North and Global South are perpetuated, being characterised as “waste colonialism” by *The Or Foundation* (Ricketts & Skinner, 2023). A mechanism which facilitates the movement of textile waste into Ghana is the US African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), first passed in 2000 and renewed in 2015. The AGOA act is a trade agreement between the US and several African countries which ensures that in exchange for access to US markets, those African countries accept imports of textile waste, despite the environmental harm that this trade causes (Ogunmefun, 2024). Consequently, Ghana effectively remains in a colonial economic trading structure characterised by economic dependence (Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023). Exporting

textile waste is an invisibilising act, where those in the Global North are able to have cognitive dissonance about the harms that this waste causes when it is dumped (Cleasby & England, 2024). Depoliticised discourses of sustainability might overlook the role of power imbalances in perpetuating economic, social and environmental inequalities, despite the inherent relationality between practices of wasting in the Global North, and the harms faced in the Global South. Therefore, a depoliticised, neoliberal version of sustainability seems to uphold the current trading system, without being able to improve the unequal power relations which actually lead to the unsustainable social and environmental outcomes.

By comparison, a care-based approach to sustainability might highlight the ways in which practices of commoning take place in both Kantamanto and more broadly in managing the environmental pollution in Accra. For example, within Kantamanto, the sharing of food, joys and hardships between workers can be characterised as a socio-emotional commons where social support is seen as a resource that the community has access to and in turn must also reciprocate (Isaksen et al., 2008). Similarly, community organisations such as *Won Bee Ga* and *The Or Foundation* who engage in beach clean ups are contributing to managing a common physical resource - the beach and marine ecosystems. In both examples, Kantamanto community members work together to sustain their workplace, livelihoods, broader environment and each other. I do not intend to over romanticise Kantamanto as a perfect, harmonious workplace. Like any workplace, it is subject to complex, daily socio-spatial negotiations. However, the often overlooked interactions between stakeholders in Kantamanto are a vital resource for sustainability work there. Workers would not be able to engage in upcycling or reselling clothing without varying levels of community support which comes from the socio-emotional commons to which they belong. These practices are grounded in a care ethic.

As an alternative discourse of sustainability, the commons or practices of commoning promote “doing with others” to open up “other ways of being and belonging” (Garcia-Lopez et al., 2021: 1202). Commoning requires collaboration between community members to sustain a

common resource and therefore, it is a potentially more democratic sustainability intervention. In promoting collaboration, there is an inherent attention to the relationality which is missing in more normative sustainability literature. Yet, in the absence of a globalised, caring community to contribute to a global commons, the uneven structural conditions which continue to use locations in the Global South, such as Ghana, to dump clothes will continue. And it continues with little simultaneous investment in local recycling or circular economy infrastructure. Therefore, even commoning cannot overcome the lack of attention to power relations within mainstream sustainability literature and practice. In the next section I consider the ways in which a care ethic can and should be incorporated more broadly into any definition of sustainability, and the potential opportunities for producing more equitable futures for those in Kantamanto.

5. Articulating Sustainability as Care

Care ethics have been linked to particular discourses of sustainability such as commoning. However, linking care ethics and orientations to sustainability more broadly is also not entirely without precedent. Bellacasa (2011: 95 & 100) argues that caring is a matter of survival because “nothing holds together in a liveable way without caring relationships”. McEwan and Goodman (2010: 106), while reviewing Bellacasa’s scholarship, note that the ethics of care and ethics of sustainability do seem to be compatible. In the context of African scholarship, Chipango and To (2024: 2) link the African idea of Ubuntu, which is grounded in “care for, and having responsibility to the other”, to sustainability (particularly energy transitions). Bond and Barth (2020) and Chipango and To (2024) both make connections between justice and care ethics. So if we understand sustainability as interested in economic, social and environmental *justice*, then there are several calls to incorporate care ethics. A care-based framework “connects diverse communities, such as feminists, environmentalists, pacifists, antiracists, and it is best understood as a search for an ethos, rather than a universal ethics.”

(McEwan and Goodman, 2010: 109). This flexibility makes care a useful analytic in combination with sustainability, because it can be used to create locally specific interventions. Within the context of Kantamanto market, I situate workers within a web of care to foreground the relationality between distant places and to forge a sense of responsibility and care. This is one example of one way in which care, justice and sustainability can be brought into conversation in the context of Kantamanto market.

Foregrounding caring relations promotes a politicised, democratic set of sustainability relations, attentive to power imbalances. Care ethics may also help overcome the neoliberalisation of sustainability (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014). Like the commons, care ethics stand contrary to the globalisation discourses which imagine the whole world will be incorporated into capitalist modernity. Federici (2019) understands the commons as a challenge to the hegemony of capital because the commons are an affirmation of human interdependence and capacity for cooperation. Commoning in particular has not been widely engaged with by globalised sustainability practitioners. However, beyond commoning, there is a lot that sustainability can learn from care ethics (Moriggi et al., 2020; Bond and Barth, 2020). Any iteration of sustainability built on care ethics would foreground community collaboration because of the attention to relationality between people, and people and the environment. Even though practices of commoning can operate at scales from the local to the global, global commons can be hard to manage because they go beyond sovereign jurisdiction (Vogler, 2012). Yet, as seen through policy such as the UN development goals, international cooperation is key to achieving sustainability. Therefore, opportunities for international stakeholders to collaborate and negotiate sustainability policies is a necessary step to produce equitable outcomes for people both in the Global North and Global South. Foregrounding care ethics as a necessary feature of global sustainability governance could be a path to achieve this.

Care can produce new subjectivities grounded in community cooperation (Held, 2005). Discourses of commoning already incorporate this logic via care ethics (Federici, 2019). This is

inherently a politics, which could help mainstream sustainability move past the limitations that remaining apolitical has caused (e.g. Chipango and To, 2024; Yunita et al., 2022; Sneddon et al., 2006; Banerjee, 2003). Care shapes what people pay attention to, how we understand responsibility, what we think is important and how we respond to the world around us, all of which are necessary to engage in as full-functioning members of democracy (Tronto, 2015: 8). Increasing crises under neoliberal governance have led to new theorising about “care, its social and spatial organisation and, most importantly, the possibility of a new social imagination able to radically challenge the fierce attack on life inherent to capitalism” (Sánchez, 2022: 551). Bringing care ethics to bear on sustainability as a whole could reveal strategies to generate more democratic and participatory approaches to sustainability policy and practice.

As of 2025, Kantamanto market is at the centre of several conversations about sustainability and textile waste, appearing in Greenpeace reports, on BBC news and in Vogue magazine. Yet, the ways in which sustainability discourses are currently operationalised to produce more economically, socially and environmentally just futures have not improved outcomes for those working in the market. Mountains of waste choke the banks of the Korle Lagoon, often polluting marine ecosystems after heavy rainfall. When workers cannot afford to pay for their textile waste to be removed, plastic-filled textiles end up being burned, releasing noxious gases. Greenpeace found that air samples from three public bathhouses in Old Fadama contained chemicals which are carcinogenic, mutagenic and/or toxic for reproduction (Quashie-Idun, 2024). Workers also undertake 12 hour days, six days per week just to generate an income that is likely at the subsistence level. Assuming that the goal is healthier, more equitable futures, something needs to change within sustainability policy and practice.

One path to achieving more just outcomes for workers in Kantamanto is to give Ghanaians more agency in decision making around the importation of textile waste. Shifting power from disposers of clothing in the Global North and giving it to those who manage textile waste in the Global South could overcome critiques of mainstream sustainability, and produce

materially improved conditions for those undertaking the world's caring labour for clothing in Ghana. Giving Ghanaian's more agency would inherently be a politicised intervention and it would be less likely to perpetuate imperialism, and more likely to deliver freedom (Banerjee, 2003). Care ethics provide both a motivation and a set of practices to achieve more equitable global relationships based on sustainability. Grounding any (or all) definition(s) of sustainability in care ethics could provide a more democratic, non-capitalist set of international relations.

6. Conclusion

Sustainability is a chaotic concept. On the one hand there is huge buy-in from businesses, governments and non-governmental organisations due to the ambiguous definition of the term sustainability. However, the nebulous use of "sustainability" to operationalise certain policies or initiatives can lead to a wide range of outcomes, both positive and negative.

In the first part of the paper, I described how two particular discourses of sustainability, resilience and commoning, can produce different understandings of sustainability. Then I considered the case of Kantamanto Market, under each definition. Different definitions of sustainability highlight different practices within Kantamanto. In the end, neither discourse of sustainability has been operationalised well enough to improve the environmental pollution and associated health risks that have been caused by the volume of imported second hand textiles. The secondhand industry in Kantamanto is also still largely just producing subsistence wages. Of the current discourses of sustainability, commoning, built on care ethics, offers many opportunities to overcome critiques of sustainability such as a lack of attention to power relations and the neoliberalisation of the term. However, the discourse of commoning has not yet improved the unequal power relations which actually lead to the unsustainable social and environmental outcomes. This is because commoning has yet to be fully taken up by global sustainability practitioners. Therefore, I suggest that *all* sustainability interventions should take

seriously the contributions of care ethics. Care ethics are responsible for producing democratic citizens, shaping what we think is important, how we understand responsibility and how we respond to the world around us (Tronto, 2015). Care ethics emphasises relationality between far places, forging a sense of responsibility and care. This presents an opportunity to restructure the power imbalances that produce the unsustainable economic, social and environmental realities not only in Kantamanto, but elsewhere too. Care is a form of relation which requires collaboration between community members, therefore it is a potentially more democratic sustainability intervention for producing more equitable futures at multiple scales. Current sustainability interventions have failed to produce safe, healthy and equitable realities for workers in Kantamanto. In short, a sustainability as care framework could be a better framework from which to generate more equitable, desirable and healthy futures for those living and working in Accra.

CHAPTER 5

Creative Methods: Making-as-Method

Cultural geographers have been interested in expanding the range of tasks which can be considered forms of data collection (Woodward, 2019). In this chapter, I provide more details about the ways that I incorporated making activities, which constitute forms of upcycling, into my own data collection. I detail three experiments which I undertook across my first and second waves of fieldwork in Accra and London. The goal of this chapter is to add to the growing literature around creative methods in geography, which are part of a larger creative re/turn for the discipline (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017). I end the chapter by thinking about how the data from my creative methods can help me to answer my first research question: *how are people in sites of high consumption (London), and sites of lower consumption (Accra) managing textile waste?*

Making-as-Method: Understanding Textile Waste Management in Accra and London²²

Ellie Cleasby

Abstract: A large proportion of global post-consumer textile waste is imported into Ghana, arriving at the biggest second hand clothing market in the world, Kantamanto. This trade is one way inequalities between the Global North and Global South are perpetuated and experienced. In this paper, I advance a making-as-method methodology to uncover the role of upcycling clothing in reducing textile waste in Kantamanto market. Combined with ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, my experiments in making-as-method provided embodied data about upcycling practices and systems in Accra and London. This article provides more

²² This is an extended version of a paper that I will submit to *cultural geographies* shortly.

examples of using making-as-method. In turn, I use the embodied data I collected to demonstrate that Kantamanto market is a skill-dense workplace with opportunities for using upcycling as a way to manage this textile waste. In London, I uncovered the importance of community support for upcycling. Following Ingold (2013) and Mann (2018), I employ the practice of upcycling to understand both the practice itself and the broader cultural and economic landscape of the practice in Accra and London respectively. The additional data collected by incorporating an embodied practice provides specific insight into the ways in which craft skills offer the potential to reduce textile waste, that might otherwise be missed through alternative qualitative research methods. The first step in promoting environmental and economic justice for Ghanaians managing the world's textile waste is to value their labour, innovation and robust waste economy infrastructure, which can be properly understood through a making-as-method approach to data collection.

Key words: making-as-method; textile waste; upcycling; embodied ethnography; Ghana; UK

1. Introduction

Creative practices are important facets of geographic knowledge production. They have the ability to remake people, places and socio-spatial relationships (deLeeuw and Hawkins, 2017). Geographers have begun engaging in these creative practices as a form of data collection (e.g. Mann, 2018; Hawkins, 2015; Moreton, 2005). While there is rising interest from geographers in these methodological forms, there is still a lack of robust literature demonstrating how these methods become incorporated into the process of data collection, and how this data supports broader conclusions about people, places or their interrelations.

In this paper, I present a series of experiments in making-as-method as part of a broader project to understand the role of upcycling in reducing textile waste. This project relies on data

from Accra and London. I ask: (1) *how are people in sites of both higher consumption (London) and lower consumption (Accra) engaging in upcycling?*, and (2) *how far are these upcycling practices working to reduce textile waste?* Trading post-consumer textiles is now a \$96 billion dollar global industry (Ogunmefun, 2024). A large proportion of global post-consumer textile waste is imported into Ghana, arriving at the well-established secondhand market, Kantamanto. Practices such as cleaning, redyeing, mending and otherwise upcycling the imported clothes are common in Kantamanto because a lot of the incoming clothing is low quality (d'Arnaud van Boeckholtz, 2020). Upcycling describes the ways in which old, secondhand, or waste items are transformed to add or renew the value of that object. Most of the secondhand clothing arriving in Ghana is exported by the UK (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023). This is typical of global geographies of fashion, which see both environmental and work-related liabilities shifted to low-income countries (Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023). Despite clothing being more easily disposable in the UK, there are increasing opportunities to engage in upcycling. Social enterprises and community spaces have emerged across London. The ease of clothing disposability in the UK, combined with the presence of upcycling activities makes it an interesting case study to compare to Ghana, where upcycling becomes a necessity to manage the volume of imported secondhand clothing.

Through ethnographies in both Ghana and the UK, I engaged in a variety of upcycling activities, often alongside other upcyclers, which I present as valuable forms of data collection. I found that learning and engaging in practices of making alongside upcyclers provides significant insight into the ways in which craft skills offer the potential to reduce textile waste. Using London, UK as a site of comparison contextualises the data that I collected in Kantamanto market and associated upcycling spaces in Accra, highlighting how far upcycling might be a means of textile waste reduction in each site. These insights might otherwise be missed through alternative qualitative research methods such as ethnography or semi-structured interviews. I build on scholarship by Mann (2018) who uses the practice of knitting to expose new questions

which she can apply to her archival research on the practice of Shetland lace knitting. I apply Mann's (2018) concept of making-as-method, to demonstrate the ways that making can be a productive exercise when paired with other qualitative methods, such as ethnography.

In the following two sections of this paper, I situate Accra and London within the broader geographies of post-consumer textile waste. In Section 4, I reflect on past studies of creative practice within geography. In Section 5, I describe my waves of data collection and offer three different reflections on using creative methodologies of making and mending. In particular, thinking through what these modes of data collection can add to my field research in Ghana and the UK. In Section 6, I discuss the value of incorporating making-as-method into my modes of data collection, and the data that I was able to access by engaging with practice-based and embodied methods. I end the paper by reflecting on how the data that I collected via making-as-method could inform our understanding of upcycling in both London and Accra.

2. Situating Kantamanto Market: Power, Policy and Post-Consumer Textile Waste

Commercial textile recyclers in the Global North are the “lynchpins of the global trade” who transform textile waste into a “finely graded range of commodities”, supporting a substantial global industry - the movement of textile waste (Norris, 2012: 131). From this movement of textile waste, Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana, has emerged as the largest market for secondhand clothing in West Africa (Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023), and likely in the world (Menash, 2023). This situates Accra, and Kantamanto market in particular, as a key node in the global disposal and management of post-consumer textile waste. Much of the post-consumer textile waste that arrives in Ghana is then altered before being sold on. Kantamanto market is a hub of this upcycling activity, which has been in operation since the 1960s (Manieson and Ferrero-Regis, 2022).

Kantamanto is located in central Accra, between Makola and Agbogbloshie markets, all of which somewhat sprawl into one large area of economic exchange (see map in Appendix 1). Technically, each market focuses on different products, although across all three are people seeking economic opportunities, creating zones of overlapping commodities for sale. These densely packed markets are a cacophony of noises, smells and tight spaces. They can be hard to navigate unless you have spent a lot of time there. Makola is predominantly a fabric wholesalers, Agbogbloshie a food market, and Kantamanto has the infrastructure to manage the secondhand clothing that arrives through the port of Tema. Beyond the market space(s), other sites for managing textile waste have developed. One example is the *Kokrobitey Institute*, an upcycling thinktank situated about fifteen miles from Kantamanto market which uses materials from Kantamanto. The density of skills, people and materials creates the conditions for robust upcycling activities.

The attraction of “cheap labour” in Kantamanto market has made it a site where clothing waste from the Global North is absorbed, despite garnering little economic benefit for the workers and significantly contributing to environmental issues (Picarelli, 2022). Secondhand clothing has historically moved along prior colonial routes, so clothing has moved between the UK and Ghana for some time (Manieson and Ferrero-Regis, 2022). At present, textile waste arrives in Ghana from a wider range of countries, with the three largest sending countries being the UK, China and followed by Canada as of 2023 ([Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023](#)). This waste amounts to about 15 million items per week (Manieson and Ferrero-Regis, 2022).

Importing secondhand clothing creates both challenges and opportunities for Ghanaians. High volumes of secondhand clothing arriving in Kantamanto mean that a significant quantity is dumped as waste. The dumped items might be damaged beyond repair, unfashionable to the Ghanaian market, or cannot be sold quickly enough to be cost efficient. Yet over 30,000 vendors have created businesses by upcycling many of these secondhand textiles. Additionally,

non-profits such as *The Revival*, run by Yayra Agbofah, and *The Or Foundation* have emerged to support workers in Kantamanto, and identify strategies to manage this textile waste more equitably and at a larger scale. Practices of upcycling and mending counter some of the harmful effects of the textile waste that are imported to Kantamanto, by diverting items from landfill, or being dumped. Upcycling also allows vendors to sell secondhand items for a greater profit than if they did not alter the items. Therefore, importing textile waste has created a range of economic activities around managing waste, which provide opportunities for Ghanaian workers to earn money. These imported post-consumer textiles are also the main source of garments for many people in the Global South (Brooks, 2012). So, the commodity value of waste when it arrives in the Global South has created an important, localised economy and associated spaces, like Kantamanto market (*cf.* Whitson, 2011).

3. London's Upcycling Landscape

The UK is a large consumer of textiles, and contributes significantly to textile waste. As a node on global waste chains, the UK is exemplary of the logic of mass consumption and the associated virtues of replaceability and exchangeability that accompanied production shifting towards economies of scale (Singh et al., 2019). London in particular is one of several “global fashion capitals”, which have shifted to a post-industrial economy focussed on design and creative activities, rather than textile manufacturing (Casadei and Gilbert, 2024: 483). Yet, the fashion industry still contributes around £5.5 billion to the city's economy (Casadei and Gilbert, 2024). Within the global fashion ecosystem, London's strengths are considered to be creativity and artistic value, rather than manufacturing (Casadei and Gilbert, 2024). As a case study London offers an opportunity to explore upcycling where there is a lack of working space, equipment and skilled labour (Singh et al., 2019), compared to the vast upcycling infrastructure in and around Accra.

Large scale textile production is difficult in London, and the UK more broadly, due to the high costs associated with labour and manufacturing, and the lack of specialist skills and equipment in London (Casadei and Gilbert, 2024). Despite London being one of the earliest cities to deindustrialise, since the 2010s there has been a surge of upcycling activity there, primarily motivated by concerns for the environment such as the volume of waste and resource availability (Singh et al., 2019). In London, there are increasing numbers of social enterprises and community spaces which either directly manage textile waste in order to create other marketable products, or which encourage community members to use the space to both learn craft skills and generate an environmental sensibility for textile waste reduction. London has shown commitment to reducing textile waste primarily through the work of localised Waste Authorities and organisations such as *ReLondon* and the *Ellen MacArthur Foundation*. In combination all groups promote behaviour change around textile consumption. Many waste authorities, such as the *North London Waste Authority* have community funds to distribute to local grassroots organisations addressing waste challenges ([North London Waste Authority](#), n.d.). *ReLondon*, with funding support from the UK government and political support from the London Mayor's office, offers small businesses in London expert, practical support. They also have about £1.4 million (around US\$1.83 million at time of research) to help businesses to move toward circular economies ([London.gov.uk](#), n.d.). Not all of this funding will go towards textiles, but the multitude of upcycling activities taking place across London indicates that textile waste is a prominent feature of London's circular economy designs. So, despite having other textile waste disposal options, the UK, in particular London, seems to be also choosing to engage in upcycling.

4. Researching (Creative) Practices

In the following section, I articulate the logic for incorporating making as part of my data collection as I study the creative practice of upcycling in Ghana and the UK. Examining the precedent set by other social scientists, I show the ways in which making activities have been generative in textile-based research. Later in this section, I also address the enduring questions that accompany the use of creative methods within geography, evaluating the possible limitations that might accompany this form of data collection.

I apply Mann's (2018) making-as-method framework to questions about the global management of textile waste. While Mann's work is much more attentive to the nature of Shetland lace knitting as both the research method and the direct subject of her research questions, I experiment with other ways of using these kinds of creative methods. I bring creative practices to bear on the power relations that govern the global geographies of textile waste. deLeeuw and Hawkins (2017) critique creative practices in geography for rarely engaging in critical geographies which are attentive to power relations. Therefore, my scholarship is a direct attempt to demonstrate some ways in which creative practices can be a generative mode of data collection for doing critical geography. The following section demonstrates why qualitative geographers should continue to explore the value of making as a form of data collection.

4.1 The Case for Advancing Making-as-Method

When a cultural researcher studies making, Ingold (2013) posits that the only way to understand the phenomenon being studied is to engage in the practice itself. Engaging in the practice that is being studied shifts the research process from one of knowledge extraction, where knowledge is reconstructed after the fact, to a knowledge of the research topic from the inside (Ingold, 2013). Studies that "engage bodily in the world" are an attempt to understand

what people do and not just what they think (Marchand, 2008: 246). Without engaging in the practice itself, researchers store their understanding of the practice as images. But there is a difference in being able to recall how an expert practitioner did something, and understanding the logic and techniques that guided their practice (Marchand, 2008; Prentice, 2007). There is a difference in understanding the skill at hand from the perspective of a skilled practitioner compared to the knowledge you can gain from observing that practice. Practice-led research can bring value to the process of geographic knowledge production (Boyd and Barry, 2020).

Skill can be understood in at least five ways. (1) First, skilled practices such as making and mending are “highly creative forms of thinking-acting-responding” (Patchett and Mann, 2018: 24). Skills are a practical way of engaging critical thinking skills. Even if practices become habitual, they never become routinised. The practitioner is never separated from the conditions which surround their practice. (2) Therefore, skill is “processual” (Patchett and Mann, 2018: 25). Practitioners are constantly responding to the broader context and their materials. (3) Skill is technical. Tools that enable skilled practice, such as a sewing machine, store embodied knowledge, inviting practitioners into collaboration to bring about particular socio-spatial practices. (4) Therefore, the study of skill often requires an ecological approach, because skills are developed and made possible by the entire field of relations that they exist within (Ingold, 2013; Mann, 2018). (5) Finally, skill is P/political²³. Labelling something a “skill” assumes a certain level of achievement which is inherently Political because someone has to decide what counts and how this skill will be assessed. Also, skill is also (small p) political as it produces an everyday, lived politics whereby skills are assessed by the practitioner themselves and the wider community of practice that they are embedded within (Patchett and Mann, 2018). I consider these five understandings of skill as components of a whole, rather than distinct and diametrically opposed standpoints.

²³ Political (capitalised) refers to top-down legal frameworks or broader social structures and norms, while politics refers to the everyday, lived decisions that constitute their own kind of politics (Cox, 2020).

Like Mann (2018) and Ingold (2013), I primarily rely on an ecological perspective of skill because it is the most well suited to studying relational geographies of skilled practices within broader socio-spatial contexts. Focusing on skills within their broader context is useful for my research on the skilled practice of upcycling to understand its role in textile waste management in the UK and Ghana. Craft and skilled practices are “dynamic, distributed and relational” (Patchett and Mann, 2018: 24). Therefore, paying attention to why certain upcycling skills are located in specific locations can reveal the nature of globalised processes which see textile waste moved around the world to perpetuate power imbalances between the Global North and Global South. This dual concern for the “mundane” or “trivial” with the “remarkable and significant” is the energising force of contemporary cultural geographies (Crang, 2010: 197). Additionally, understanding the particularities of the craft skills in both Accra and London could be useful for thinking about future infrastructure investments for a globalised circular economy for textiles.

Creative practices are useful to study as a feminist geographer who seeks to change the conditions of the social world that are at the centre of their own research (England, 2015). This is because creativity is a necessary problem-solving skill to come up with alternative solutions to a problem (Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015). Gibson-Graham (2011: 2) discussed Plumwood’s notion that imagining another way of living will be an important creative exercise if we want to survive the environmental crises of the 21st century. Their discussion shows the importance of doing, rather than over theorising how to live better with and on our planet. This leads Gibson-Graham (2011: 5) to advocate for a “piecing-it-together” approach which they call “adventures in living”. In breaking the boundary between theory and practice, Gibson-Graham reminds us of our political responsibilities as researchers to improve the conditions of the world we study and are creating possibilities for material change. Therefore, practice-based research and knowledge production could be an important task for geographers as we experience increasing inequality and extreme climate or environmental events.

With upcycling practices such as making and mending, there is a deep relationship between the cloth and fingertips on a material and bodily level (Middleton, 2014). Therefore, engaging in the material practice of upcycling becomes important for understanding it. In other disciplines, embodied or skills-based research has been used to study textiles along a variety of axes. For example, a historian made five costumes based on Victorian era patents for women's cycling outfits, noting that making the garments allowed them to wear the clothing (unlike anything they could find in a historical archive) and that this gave them a deeper understanding of the makers, artefacts and time period (Jungnickel, 2015). In sociology object interviews allowed participants to narrate specific material changes in their denim jeans, then designer Karen Shah disassembled the jeans and created a new garment (Woodward, 2016). The new garment highlighted the wear of the denim that was narrated in the object interviews, and the process of material change through reassembling a garment exposed qualities about the fabric itself, allowing for a deeper understanding of how clothing items are worn (Woodward, 2016).

Within geography, despite a broader move towards embodied and practice-based methods (Latham and Wagner, 2021), there are fewer examples of making-as-method. Holdsworth (2024) turned old bedding into bags and documented her autoethnographic process of making through a sewing journal. This project allowed her to think about the active history of the materials (old bedding) that she was using and to document the temporalities of making practices. However, I apply Mann's conceptualisation of making-as-method, because she is able to combine making with a more widely used method - the archive. Mann (2018) uses knitting as a skilled practice to uncover changes to the practice of Shetland lace knitting over time, demonstrating that skill is dynamic, processional, practical and situated within broad contexts. Her incorporation of making as part of her research method provided a unique and embodied insight into the archival documents she studied. The skilled practice of knitting allowed Mann to assert that skills actually endure across time and place due to small instabilities into the ways that the skill in question is practiced. Applying making-as-method, I

suggest that there are benefits to studying making practices to make claims about distinct places, Accra and London, moving beyond using this method to understand the skill itself. In this way, perhaps the nature of intervention I am proposing in this paper is more aligned with Morton's (2005: 668) "experimental approach to ethnography" where she actively experiences the performances she studies by undertaking her own performances. Similarly, my making is an active attempt to be in relation to my field sites, and to understand the embodied experiences of my research participants.

4.2 Enduring Questions and Concerns of Embodied, Practice-Based Methodologies

Geographers have experimented with ways in which the researchers' corporeal form can be a means of generating social scientific knowledge (Latham and Wagner, 2021; Morton, 2005). Some of these engagements have been criticised for lacking "empirical procedural formalism" (Latham and Wagner, 2021: 92). The lack of procedure is permitted when the methodological interventions are framed as experiments, which is why I use this language later in my paper. However, I hope that my own experiences of conducting research will contribute to the conversation about engaging with skilled, practice-based methods, and perhaps provide some insights into the ways in which these creative methods can be useful forms of data collection.

Through artist Nikki S Lee's work, Latham and Wagner (2021) think about "bodily becoming" as a research method. The authors begin from the premise that as humans everything we know comes from an embodied engagement with the world. Our own ways of knowing and being are inherently bound up with our embodied experiences. Lee's book "Projects" is a photographic series from 1997-2000, documenting the artist becoming a member of different skills-based groups over a period of time. The authors acknowledge that an artist is not necessarily upholding a formal methodological procedure to become a skilled practitioner in

the same way social scientists would. Yet, documenting her integration into groups of skilled practice through photographs can tell viewers quite a lot about the nature of the practice itself including the outfits, accessories, spaces, and general demeanour associated with each group. Several academics have also focussed their analytical attention to the embodiment of learned skills, attempting to incorporate a more formal procedure for collecting data (Latham and Wagner, 2021).

Rachel Prentice (2007) investigated surgical skills using embodied methods. She spent two years observing surgeries in teaching hospitals to understand both the technical and social lessons that are required to teach the practice of surgery (Prentice, 2007). Other social scientists have used their body as instruments of reflection to learn about skilled practice, for example Lois Wacquant learned to be a boxer (Wacquant, 1995), and Trevor Marchand learned to be a builder (Marchand, 2008). Clare Holdsworth (2024) used her pre-existing knowledge of sewing to document the practice of upcycling and the material histories of her fabric. All of these scholars are to some capacity engaging in skilled practice, and reflecting on this tacit knowledge. But the nature of the reflections that researchers are able to make could be varied. This might be influenced by their prior knowledge, or their embodied identity which would inevitably shape both their experience and what the researcher is likely to pay attention to. This is further compounded by the small sample size, often limited to one researcher's experience. While this is an undeniable limit of embodied, practice-based methods, there are similar concerns about qualitative methods because they can only produce partial and situated knowledge. Embodied, practice-based methodologies can be paired with enduring methods in the social sciences such as interviews or ethnography. This can move the data collection beyond concerns about small sample sizes.

Embodied, ethnographic fieldwork can also be very time consuming, possibly limiting who is able to engage with these methods of data collection. For example, Prentice (2007), Wacquant (1995) and Marchand (2008) all spent several years embedded within the groups of

practitioners that they study. Dedicating this amount of time might be challenging for academics who have large teaching, service or care taking roles and cannot spend this long engaging in sustained participant observation. On the other hand, Holdsworth's (2024) autoethnographic reflections on the skilled practice of upcycling emerged from necessity, when the COVID-19 pandemic meant that she could not do the participatory project that she had planned. Perhaps autoethnography is a more accessible way for scholars to engage in skilled practice for their data collection.

5. Experimenting with Embodied Creative Methods

In the following section, I share my own experiments with using making activities as part of my data collection. The experiments described in this paper were undertaken during multiple waves of fieldwork in Accra and London in 2024. I spent a cumulative total of three months in Accra, and 3 months in London. In each site, I conducted ethnographies of maker spaces, 15 semi-structured interviews with upcyclers in the UK, and 18 semi-structured interviews with upcyclers in Ghana. During these waves of fieldwork, I engaged in skill-based upcycling practice to enhance my understanding of the knowledge generated using other qualitative methods: ethnography and interviewing.

During my time in Ghana, key collaborators guided my ethnographic fieldwork, in particular Yayra from *The Revival* (a Ghanaian non-profit in Kantamanto) and upcyclers at the *Kokrobitey Institute*. Ethnography is “uniquely useful” for “uncovering the processes and meanings that undergird sociospatial life” (Herbert, 2000, p. 550). However, as an outsider, it can sometimes be difficult to fully understand the meanings that are underpinning the plethora of activities occurring in such a bustling marketplace. In Kantamanto, Yayra's long standing and ongoing presence made him an excellent key informant. During our tours, I was able to contextualise what was happening, ask questions about things I had seen during my own visits

to the market, draw on his wealth of knowledge about the socio-spatial arrangements of the space, and interact with large numbers of people who worked in Kantamanto. Engaging with Yayra and members of *The Revival* consistently during my fieldwork had multiple benefits. Being visibly associated with Yayra in and around Kantamanto helped establish my credibility with his network of friends and colleagues in the market. Perhaps most importantly, Yayra's perspective on the practices in Kantamanto also helped challenge my own Western assumptions about meaning making, overcoming some of the problems with ethnographic fieldwork. At the *Kokrobitey Institute*, I worked along a team of upcyclers five days per week for a month. This close working environment meant that these upcyclers influenced my understanding of textile waste management in Ghana. As a White, English researcher, these collaborations provided cultural context for upcycling in Ghana that I lacked. Ethnography has long been criticised for being a colonial discipline. Therefore, a key task of ethnographers, including me, has been to reduce imposing Western thoughts and analytics onto the research site, particularly as a researcher from the Global North in the Global South (Smyth & Peake, 2024).

5.1 Upcycling T-shirts

My first experiment with the skilled practice of upcycling was screenprinting T-Shirts. I started this practice in Kantamanto market, where there is vast upcycling infrastructure and a skill-dense upcycling workforce. I had already made these observations through six weeks of ethnographic observations in January and February 2024. I then repeated the experiment in the UK in March 2024, where the activity provided a useful introduction to the available upcycling infrastructure in London. The parameters of this experiment were: (1) to use secondhand T-shirts, to ensure that the upcycling practice I was undertaking actually intervened in post-consumer textile waste streams; and (2) to upcycle the clothing in the most cost-efficient way

possible. From there, I compared the cost of each upcycling project, the time each upcycling project took and any challenges that I faced in engaging with the upcycling practice.

5.1.1 Screenprinting in Kantamanto Market, Accra

In January and February 2024, I spent several days per week in Kantamanto market. Some days I would visit the site alone, but more often I would go with Yayra²⁴, the founder of Ghanaian non-profit *The Revival*. Yayra and *The Revival* not only provided cultural context to my ethnographic observations, they also helped facilitate this upcycling practice within Kantamanto market. First, we went to the far northwest corner of Kantamanto, near where it borders Accra's train tracks (see map in Appendix 1, or Figure 2.3). Here, on tarps were large piles of T-shirts, being sold for 5 cedis each (about \$0.41 at the time of research). The vendor tells me that these T-shirts came from Canada bales. Squatting down, I sorted through these T-shirts, pulling out plain ones, with minimal stains. I also opted to only select black T-shirts, as I noticed that other colours showed stains and sweat marks more easily. Many of the T-shirts had rips and tears that caused me to not purchase them. Other considerations were whether the necklines were still intact, or if they had been stretched out. The gender and size of the T-shirts became secondary considerations once I had identified items which I felt were of high enough quality to be reworn. The process was very quick, and across two trips, I was able to find 15 T-shirts, spending 20 minutes with the vendor each time. I purchased 15 T-shirts because it was a significant enough quantity to assess the upcycling infrastructure in Kantamanto.

I drew my design, which I sent to *The Revival* via WhatsApp as a high-resolution PDF. They created the silk screen I needed to print my own design onto the T-shirts, which cost 62 cedis (US\$4.98). Yayra was able to bring this screen to me when he introduced me to the screenprinters. However, *The Revival's* upcycling studio is located in the far western bounds of

²⁴ Yayra's real name is used with informed consent.

Kantamanto, close to the central path which runs parallel to Okai Kwei Rd, within the covered area of Kantamanto market. From sending my design, it took about 3 days for me to receive my screen. Walking to the eastern side of the market, near the entrances off Kwame Nkrumah Ave (See map in Figure 2.3, or Appendix 1), Yayra takes me through a maze of small paths to find the screenprinters. I hand them my T-shirts and screen, and they tell me that each T-shirt will cost 5 cedis to print (US\$0.42). Returning an hour later, my 15 T-shirts were printed, and heat treated to set the ink in my design. They even offered me a discount for having so many T-shirts printed, so the cost was 50 cedis (US\$4) total.

Overall, producing 15 T-shirts, and diverting this waste from landfill, cost 187 cedis (US\$15.58). With some advanced planning to coordinate getting a screen made, it would also be possible to complete all of these upcycling steps within one morning in the market. This is a very inexpensive and efficient place to upcycle clothing. However, this upcycling was only possible with detailed knowledge of the spatiality of resources in Kantamanto. With Yayra facilitating this process, I was also able to build on his existing knowledge and relationships with upcyclers in Kantamanto. He was able to show me where to get the best value T-shirts and printing.

5.1.2 Screenprinting in London

In comparison, I attempted to upcycle secondhand T-Shirts in London as I began my ethnographic fieldwork there. As an English researcher, I already had a good understanding of the cultural context. I knew that there was not a centralised site of upcycling or one market which specialised in selling large volumes of affordable secondhand clothing in the same way as Kantamanto market in Accra. Yet, there were certain smaller locations across the city which do focus on selling secondhand clothing and/or upcycling such as Brick Lane (East London) and Camden Market (North London). I began my search for secondhand T-shirts in Camden.

Before reaching Camden Market, I found secondhand T-Shirts in two charity shops on Camden High Street - Mind and Triad. I was able to find two plain T-Shirts in *Mind*, for a total cost of £12.75 (USD \$16.18). Then in *Triad*, I was able to find five T-shirts for £20 (USD \$25.38). I found that I was limited by different factors compared to Kantamanto market. All of the T-shirts were clean, and none had holes or worn out necklines. But it was harder to find plain T-shirts. I had to limit my purchases to light or dark garments so that I could print all T-shirts with one colour of screenprint ink. But there was slightly more flexibility in being able to ensure that I had selected a range of sizes here. The limited number of plain T-shirts in each charity shop meant that I had to travel further distances to find garments to upcycle. The prominent secondhand markets in London were more focussed on expensive vintage goods, or upcycled products, so I tried to source my items from charity shops. The next day I travelled to Clapham in South London to another Mind charity shop, since I had found good quality T-Shirts in that charity shop the day before. I was able to find another 4 T-shirts here for a total cost of £16.96 (USD \$21.53). Finally, on a third journey, I was able to find 4 more T-shirts in a Cancer Research charity shop in Surbiton, in suburban London. Here, I sourced the final 4 T-shirts for £18 (USD \$22.84). Overall, 15 T-shirts cost £67.71 (USD \$85.77). This meant that the average T-Shirt cost USD \$5.72.

After sending multiple emails to screenprinters in London, it became apparent that no studio would accept my upcycled T-shirts to print on. Many were happy to produce T-shirts for me, but all required that I use the new T-shirts that their company had sourced. Instead, I turned to getting a silk screen made. I had to use an e-commerce site which was not actually located in London. It took several weeks to expose and then receive my screen. The screen, ink and image exposure service cost £89.87 (USD \$115.14). Unlike in Kantamanto, I had to print these T-shirts myself. I used towels, parchment paper and an iron that I borrowed from friends and family in London to print the T-shirts. Since I did the upcycling labour myself, I did not factor this into the final cost of the garment. However, as a novice screenprinter, the process took about

three hours and then I had to clean up. I spent time learning how to spread the ink over the screen without getting ink splotches on the T-shirt. It is a messy process, and the ink has a strong, unpleasant odour. Therefore, a lack of space or ventilation might make screenprinting an inaccessible upcycling strategy for most people in London.

Each upcycled T-shirt in the UK cost USD \$13.39. Overall, upcycling secondhand T-shirts was not an efficient upcycling strategy in the UK, and was perhaps less necessary, since the lowest quality clothing is not being disposed of in the UK, but is instead being shipped overseas to locations like Ghana. Each upcycled T-shirt took more time to produce and cost more in the UK. Upscaling this kind of upcycling project would be difficult since the labour of screenprinting the actual T-shirts would require the upcycler to access increasingly larger upcycling spaces.

5.2 Building Waste Management Systems in Accra

My second upcycling experiment took place in September and October 2024 at the *Kokrobitey Institute*, Ghana. The *Kokrobitey Institute* is a design institute and living laboratory (kokrobiteyinstitute.com, n.d.) located about 15 miles away from Kantamanto market in Accra. While I was staying at the *Kokrobitey Institute*, they were preparing a fashion collection called “Nipa Dua”²⁵ which was entirely produced from waste white T-shirts and men’s shirts from Kantamanto market.

²⁵Nipa Dua is the Twi word for body. It literally translates to “human tree”, which inspired Reneé Neblett (creative director at the *Kokrobitey Institute*) to create an upcycled clothing collection based on a deep understanding of peoples’ connection to the natural environment. The relationship between people and the environment is explored through the designs which often imitate patterns/textures/colours in the natural environment. The design also makes a material intervention in the textile waste which is polluting natural environments in Ghana.

5.2.1 Crocheting Accessories

As an avid knitter, and proficient crocheter, I was quickly put to work when I arrived at the *Kokrobitey Institute*. One of the collection designers showed me a bag that she had conceptualised and asked me to try to make it. She gave me broad instructions that the bag would be made out of multiple crochet panels which would be woven together. We discussed the dimensions of the bag and some of the design features (see *Figure 5.1*, from my notes). Due to the tools available at *Kokrobitey Institute*, the whole bag was designed to be crocheted. No one had been taught to knit, and they did not have knitting needles available.

Other members of the *Kokrobitey Institute* team had already made yarn from the scrap materials that were not otherwise being used from the white T-shirts. The body of the T-shirts were used to assemble larger sheets of fabric (which were dyed in different colours/patterns and/or texturized using a variety of techniques). The hems were used to emulate ruffles, a distinctive design feature in the Nipa Dua collection. None of the material went to waste, so scraps were cut into strips, tied together and wound into the yarn that I was given to assemble this bag. This mode of production is facilitated by the large scale of clothing that the *Kokrobitey Institute* team are producing for this collection. They are able to use every part of the post-consumer textile in a systematic manner.

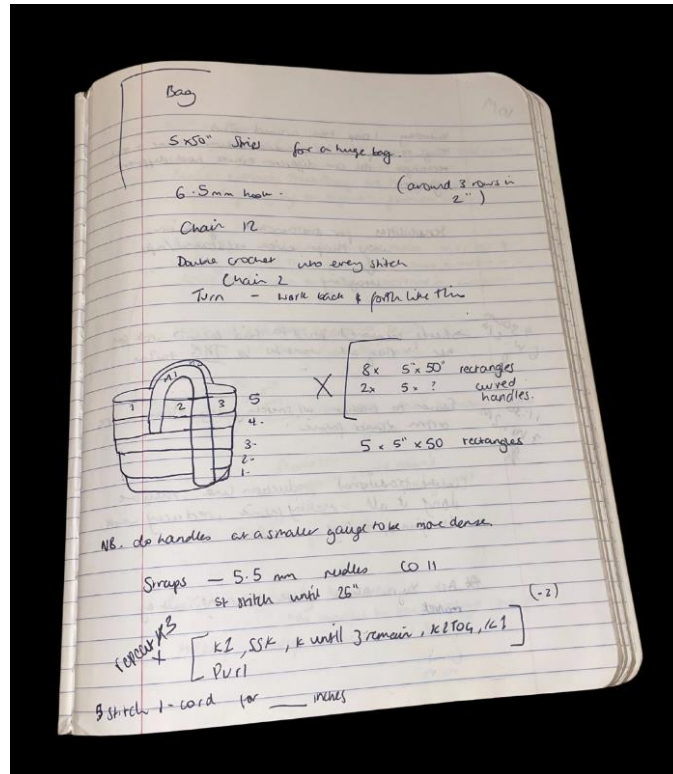


Figure 5.1: Ellie's notes from a meeting with *Kokrobitey Institute* designer, detailing an initial attempt to turn the design into repeatable instructions.

Compared to my experience of knitting and crocheting in the US and UK with industrially produced yarn, I found the T-shirt yarn difficult to work with. It was thick, uneven, and provided a lot of friction against my crochet hook. These features of the yarn are necessary to assure that no fabric is wasted; everything is included in the yarn balls as these are the end of the production line. This is where the fabric that has not otherwise been deemed useful is put to work. Eventually, I used my own knitting needles to knit portions of the bag, hoping that this might be an easier process, and less painful for my wrists. While the thinner nature of a knit fabric compared to crocheted fabric did make the yarn slightly easier to use, on the whole the yarn was still thick and uneven. Not having to pull the yarn through the thick crocheted fabric each time I crocheted a row did reduce the friction that made working with this yarn so taxing on my wrists. However, the yarn was consistently messy to work with because the microfibres in

the T-shirt (particularly along the cut edges of the yarn) were regularly dislodged as the yarn was manipulated through the crocheting or knitting process.

Through ethnographic observation, I was able to understand the benefits of creating textile waste management systems, like the production system at the *Kokrobitey Institute*. Every piece of the fabric had been considered and utilised as they planned their fashion collection. However, I could only understand some of the challenges of this upcycling work by engaging in making as part of my method. Upcycling T-shirt scraps and making this bag (see *Figure 5.2*) demonstrated that using post-consumer textiles can be difficult. The material might be less well-suited to a straightforward production process. In this instance, that was evident in the difficulty that I experienced using this yarn, the wrist pain that came from working with high friction and dense yarn, and the mess that accompanied working on the project.



Figure 5.2: Assembling the pattern pieces of the bag that Ellie created based on *Kokrobitey Institute* designs.

5.3 Using Waste Materials in London

My third upcycling experiment took place in London in October and November 2024 (see map in Appendix 1). London doesn't have centralised upcycling infrastructure in the same way as Kantamanto market, Accra. Therefore, I conducted ethnographies of multiple smaller maker spaces dedicated to upcycling. I also attended upcycling events, such as the "Fast Fashion Therapy" in Brixton, south London. Some of these community spaces were supported by the local councils of their respective neighbourhoods. Both "sew-cials" operate as non-profits, with a donation expected (but not required) to attend. In each case, attendees can work on their own project, or they can use waste materials that are donated and stored in the non-profit space. For locations I attended multiple times, I observed the same community members attending each time. Upcycling communities seem to be well-established and offer space to forge strong bonds based on care and companionship. The "sew-cials" act more as spaces of education and community engagement, as opposed to being primarily guided by textile waste management practices.

5.3.1 Upcycling a Shirt

I upcycled an old shirt of mine during several of these "sew-cial" events (Figure 5.3). The shirt still fitted me in several areas, but not in others. At an upcycling event at *The Remakery*, I was able to chat with other participants who helped me think about how to change the shirt so that it would fit me again. We decided that panels along each side would work. The other participants and session facilitators also helped me think about the kind of material I would need to source, how far to seam rip up the sides of my shirt, and the rough dimensions of each panel. I struggled to find appropriate fabric at any "scrapstores" in London. These are stores which sell fabric remnants or deadstock. I attended the weekly "sew-cial" event at *Green Croydon*, and spoke to the people who run the event. I asked them where they think I might find appropriate fabric to make the panels. They pulled several storage containers from the back of the space

and helped me find a matching green fabric with appropriate properties. This was fabric that had been donated to them, and they let me take it for free. However, I did not have regular access to a sewing machine to fix the panels to the shirt. So, I attended a monthly “sew-cial” with *Time and Talents*, where I could use a sewing machine for several hours. Here, other attendees asked what I was working on, gave some suggestions and helpful sewing tips. I was able to complete my sewing project during the two hour period.



Figure 5.3: A photograph of the shirt that I upcycled across community upcycling spaces in London. Photo taken by Ellie Cleasby in November 2024.

6. Valuing Making-as-Method

Embodied methods which engage with skilled practice are not new (e.g. Waquant, 1995). However, there are ongoing questions about how geographers can continue to experiment with using their individual body as an instrument of research, while also producing social science research. The main concern is how this kind of research can offer robust and less solipsistic findings (Latham and Wagner, 2021). In the following section, I reflect on each of my experiments in making-as-method, which can be considered a subsection of embodied methods within geography. To evaluate the value of each experiment, I ask if I could only make situated claims, or is this data generalisable to some degree? What did I learn from engaging in this upcycling practice?

6.1 Experiment 1 - Screenprinting T-shirts

At the simplest level, I learned that upcycling T-shirts is quicker, easier and cheaper in Kantamanto market in Accra compared to London. Going through the process of upcycling in both locations gave me specific insight into the steps that upcyclers need to take to engage in the practice of upcycling in each site. Undertaking the task of upcycling exposed key challenges in each site. I also was able to gain specific figures about the cost imbalances of upcycling in Ghana and the UK. In Accra, each upcycled T-shirt cost USD \$1.04, compared to USD \$13.39 in London. The density of the Kantamanto market made it easy and fast to source 15 T-shirts. The support from *The Revival* meant that it was easy and affordable to have a screen made, and it was very quick and affordable to work with the screenprinters in the market. By comparison, the spatially dispersed secondhand clothing providers in London meant that acquiring 15 secondhand T-shirts was more time consuming. The rent that many of these charity shops are paying for locations in central London is high, therefore the price of the garments that I purchased was still significant. For example, I purchased a branded T-shirt from

a charity shop which cost more than it would have to buy a new version of that same T-shirt. Also, the lack of skill-based infrastructure dedicated to upcycling items in London extended the time it took to upcycle these T-shirts. The distribution of secondhand clothing provision across each city and lack of available upcycling infrastructure in London contributed to the different times it took to complete these upcycling projects.

In the UK, I had to be more directly involved in the practice of upcycling by screenprinting my own T-shirts. Engaging in the skilled practice of upcycling in this way gave me a deeper understanding of the challenges of the practice. The screenprinting ink smells. The process of using the ink can be messy if you are not deft at moving the ink around the screen or if you do not have a dedicated workspace to place ink covered items while you are in the process of screenprinting.

The knowledge I gained from engaging in the processes and practices of upcycling is situated. If other researchers tried to repeat the experiment, it is unlikely that they would get the same results as I did, or have exactly the same experience. Yet, without undertaking the process of upcycling in Kantamanto market, I wouldn't have understood the web of relationships that often underpin upcycling in Ghana. For example, my connection with Yayra and *The Revival* enabled me to get my design put on a screen. Yayra used his knowledge of Kantamanto to take me to screenprinters who would transfer the design onto my secondhand T-shirts. In fact, Yayra had even trained the screenprinters who made my T-shirts, signalling that community and relationships are significant for understanding upcycling in the Ghanaian context. The process of upcycling in the UK looked different. Making-as-method in the UK allowed me to understand the difficulties of sourcing secondhand T-shirts, and the lack of uptake for upcycling among screenprinters in London. Consequently, when I had to engage in the practice of upcycling in the UK, where I learned that screenprinting as a means of upcycling is likely limited to people who have access to larger spaces with good ventilation.

6.2 Experiment 2 - Crocheting with T-shirt Yarn

Crocheting with T-shirt yarn allowed me to gain an embodied understanding of upcycling using waste materials. The embodied knowledge means that I now avoid romanticising the idea of upcycling as a sustainable fashion practice. While the upcycling practice was a meaningful part of a system which is reducing the amount of textile waste sent to landfill in Ghana, incorporating making-as-method allows me to confirm that this upcycling strategy is difficult work which is taxing on the body of the worker. By engaging in making-as-method, I was better able to understand the techniques and logic that guided the upcyclers practice (Marchand, 2008; Prentice, 2007). As a researcher, I had a level of power and privilege which meant I could take breaks when my wrists hurt. The workers employed by the *Kokrobitey Institute* were expected to work on garments all day from around 9am until 6pm.

The tacit knowledge that I gained is situated and specific. It is best understood as providing additional context to my ethnographic observations. It is very unlikely that another researcher would have the exact same experience as I did using T-shirt yarn. Yet, I think that the understanding of handmade, upcycled T-shirt yarn as messy, dense and uneven would be consistent across many upcycling projects where the upcycler commits to using every piece of the waste fabric.

From my ethnographic observations alone, I would conclude that upcycling systems are a feasible solution to manage global textile waste. My ethnographic observations at the *Kokrobitey Institute* allowed me to understand that designing to use all of the secondhand fabric requires a detailed design process, out of the box thinking and more labour-intensive sewing techniques. However, engaging in the embodied practice of making alongside the skilled upcyclers at the *Kokrobitey Institute* gave me additional insight into how taxing and difficult this upcycling work can be for those who are undertaking the practice. Upcycling might be undervalued work, but it relies on a skilled labour force. Making-as-method means that my understanding of upcycling is now tempered by questions about who is doing the upcycling work

and whether their physical health is being protected during the process of upcycling textile waste.

6.3 Experiment 3 - Upcycling a Shirt in London

Upcycling my old shirt in London was also very specific and situated. This exact procedure would not be repeatable because the research steps were tied to my specific upcycling needs with this garment. However, using making as part of my method here once again enhanced my ethnographic work. Engaging in making and mending was necessary to access the maker spaces that I was studying. The making-as-method allowed me to expose the

This upcycling project showed me the ways in which upcycling spaces in London are driven primarily by community, rather than reducing textile waste. This is evidenced by the amount of support and advice I received in each maker space. The upcycling events and “sew-cials” provided opportunities for people to meet and craft together, with some members of the group being motivated by an environmental sensibility to reduce textile waste. Most people regularly attend their particular “sew-cial” groups, meaning that long lasting relationships are forged there. These relationships become a means of sharing fabric, tools, ideas and skills. Upcycling a shirt within community repair cafes exposed and embedded me within these upcycling networks during my London fieldwork.

6.4 Strengths of Making-as-Method

Combined with my ethnographic fieldwork, each of my experiments incorporating making (or upcycling) as part of my method have exposed the differences in upcycling between Accra and London. Like Prentice (2007) engaging in processes of upcycling, particularly through screenprinting T-shirts, allowed me to understand the ways in which people become upcyclers in both Accra and London, and the necessary steps undertaken to engage in upcycling items in both sites. In this way, much like Moreton (2005), engaging in the upcycling that I studied alongside upcyclers at the *Kokrobitey Institute* and at “sew-cials” across London, allowed me to

understand the very upcycling that I was studying. This led to three findings that would have been challenging to understand without engaging in making-as-method. Engaging in embodied methods led to embodied conclusions.

First, upcycling can be a messy process. Upcycled materials can be challenging to use. I gained this understanding through my first experiment in the UK, having to screenprint my own T-shirts. The process required a lot of time and space to undertake. The ink was difficult to manage for a novice screenprinter. I also gained a similar understanding from crocheting with T-shirt yarn at the *Kokrobitey Institute*, where the yarn often shed micro-fibres, making it a messy alternative to other forms of crochet.

Second, the flesh-and-blood body of the upcycler might deteriorate over time if they have to engage in certain kinds of upcycling. Some upcycling strategies are physically demanding on the body of the upcycler. Through my experiments crocheting with T-shirt yarn, my wrists hurt because the fabric was rough and there was increased friction between layers when crocheting each loop. Any future work on upcycling must consider the health and general wellbeing of those who are undertaking the practice, especially if upcycling continues at a larger scale to integrate into circular economies for textiles.

Third, I was able to understand the temporality of upcycling practices and the role of community through upcycling a shirt in the UK and screenprinting T-shirts in Kantamanto market, Accra. In the UK, my upcycling was supported by the communities that I was embedded within as part of my broader ethnography. I had to travel between a lot of different scrapstores and community “sew-cials” to find fabric to use for the panels I added to my shirt. I also gained a lot of different advice, and access to different tools at these various “sew-cials” to complete my project. The community element of this upcycling project made the overall outcome more successful. However, it also meant that the project took longer to complete. Screenprinting T-shirts in Kantamanto market similarly exposed the reliance that upcyclers might have on a community network. Within Kantamanto, I drew on *The Revival’s* community networks to

complete all of the necessary steps in the upcycling process. While the process of upcycling T-shirts was quicker in Kantamanto compared to across London, using a community network requires a longer time to establish and maintain relationships built on care.

Important for geographers, making-as-method gives the researcher the ability to engage with the context of the practice you study. Following Mann (2018) who understands skill as ecological, my making-as-method experiments allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the socio-spatial contexts of upcycling practice in Ghana and the UK. My second and third upcycling experiments gave me a deeper understanding of the broader context of upcycling practice, including the necessary skills and materials and the meanings brought to the practice in each site. My making experiments also helped me gain acceptance in the necessary spaces to conduct my ethnography and guided the follow up questions that I thought to ask during my interviews with upcyclers in each site, much like how Mann (2018) used making-as-method to ask new questions of her archive.

In this paper, I have attempted to combine advancing an argument for making-as-method and showing how this method provided specific insights into upcycling in London and Accra. In the final section, I discuss some of the broader impacts of the data I collected for thinking about upcycling in both sites.

7. Using Making-as-Method to Understand Textile Waste Management in Ghana and the UK

This paper has primarily attended to data that I was able to collect by engaging in making-as-method, which was beyond the scope of other qualitative methods such as interviewing and ethnography. However, there are additional implications for both sites at the centre of my fieldwork. Upcycling T-shirts in both Kantamanto, Accra, and in London demonstrated that the spatially dispersed secondhand clothing provision and the lack of skilled upcycling infrastructure in London made it an inefficient site (both financially and temporally) to

engage in upcycling. The densely packed upcycling infrastructure and skilled labour force make upcycling in Kantamanto both affordable and efficient. Creating a bag with waste T-shirt yarn at the Kokrobitey Institute exposed some challenges of working with waste materials. Namely, the homemade T-shirt yarn was messy from the microfibres that fell off the yarn. The yarn was also dense, uneven and sometimes difficult to work with. I was able to understand that many upcycling strategies are physically taxing on the body of the upcycler. Finally, upcycling my old shirt in London demonstrated that community spaces and networks are at the centre of upcycling practice, and are a key site for learning skills, accessing waste fabric and other upcycling tools. These findings would not have been possible or as deeply understood without incorporating making as part of my method to complement my ethnographic observations and interview data.

CHAPTER 6

Sustainable Fashion, Upcycling and Circular Economies

This chapter represents an attempt to answer my third research question: *what skills are needed in the Global North to produce more equitable forms of managing fashion waste in place?* However, my ethnographic and interview data indicated that perhaps advocating for global circular economies is a more equitable solution to manage the geographies of textile waste, compared to encouraging people in the Global North to manage their own textile waste.

Upcycling has emerged as a key strategy for circular economies, and my interview data shows that circular economies are desired by textile upcyclers in both Ghana and the UK. Yet, robust circular economies are still lacking in practice. In this paper, I employ a Shovian social practice theory (e.g. Shove et al., 2012) to understand what motivates people to begin upcycling and what materials and competences they need in order to be successful upcyclers. Other academic work on consumption which is motivated by a desire to encourage pro-environmental behaviour often used social practice theory because the information is well-organised to inform policy makers (Shove, 2014). Upcycling is a strategy that individuals can engage in to reduce textile waste, build communities and express their creativity. But, scale is an important consideration when evaluating how far upcycling could be a form of textile waste management. There are more opportunities to redress the harms associated with textile waste if upcycling were scaled up to be a significant feature of globalised circular economies. Therefore, my dissertation is an initial attempt to understand the practice of upcycling, to highlight barriers to engaging in the practice and to identify key features which may impact how circular economies for textiles are operationalised.

The Social Practice of Upcycling: Differences Between London and Accra

Ellie Cleasby

Abstract: Upcycling is seen as a key design strategy within the circular economy. In turn circular economies are presented as important for delivering sustainable fashion futures. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews in Ghana and the UK, I examine the practice of upcycling in two very different political-economic and cultural contexts. I use a Shovian social practice theory framework to understand the similarities and differences in the elements of upcycling practice between these sites. From understanding upcycling practices in each site, I demonstrate the ways in which upcycling could support circular economies. However, the current lack of uptake for circular economies of textiles, despite interest from research participants in the UK and Ghana means that questions and new areas of inquiry have arisen.

Key words: upcycling; circular economies; social practice theory; textile waste; Ghana; UK

1. Introduction

In South London, Eugenie²⁶, a community member in charge of a textile repair cafe, exuberantly declares that she wants people to understand the circular economy because we need to understand it if we want to live a sustainable life. Just months before, upcyclers in Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana, expressed similar sentiments. In particular, a member of a community organisation working on behalf of upcyclers in Kantamanto noted that circular design will require materials which can be recycled, and that this is a long term sustainability goal (Yeshua). These community leaders and upcyclers share a common goal despite different

²⁶ Pseudonyms are used to ensure research participants remain anonymous.

socio-economic, cultural and environmental contexts. Yet, there remains a lack of uptake in circular economic strategies that they are each calling for.

Overconsumption in the fashion industry is often described as “unsustainable”, with reduced consumption touted as the most effective way to reduce the environmental impacts (Mellander and McIntyre, 2021). The economic, social and environmental harms associated with fast fashion are of increasing concern as the volume of clothing produced and then discarded increases. Hackney et al. (2022) offer *participatory fashion practices* as an important tool for both generating a sensibility for sustainability and for potentially combating the harms associated with political economies of fast fashion. The ways that people care for, adapt, mend – or even make – their own clothes outside of the formal structure of the fashion industry, contributes to reduced consumption, yet has received less critical attention. Many participatory fashion practices can be understood as forms of upcycling, a practice of changing discarded materials through creative reuse into a new product of higher value, and reducing waste and resource extraction in the process (van Hees et al., 2025; Vicdan et. al, 2025). Consumer upcycling (undertaken by individuals) in particular has emerged as a potential pro-environmental behaviour that is of interest to academics and policymakers alike. Practices of upcycling take place around the world, engage with many different waste streams and operate at many different scales. In this paper, I begin by interrogating the nuances in practices of consumer upcycling to evaluate their differing potential as a textile waste management strategy in Ghana and the UK. I demonstrate that many elements of upcycling practices are consistent between the UK and Ghana, yet the broader context and the meanings undergirding the practices differ. These differences are important considerations for evaluating the potential of upcycling as a strategy to manage global textile waste. I finish by discussing the role of circular economies in producing more sustainable fashion waste futures through the practice of upcycling.

I begin this paper by outlining the global movement of textile waste, and the logic for comparing the practice of upcycling in the UK and Ghana. In sections 3 and 4, I review the

literature on circular economies and upcycling. In section 5, I discuss my methods of data collection and analysis, and the social practice theory framing which guided my data collection. In section 6, I explain my findings about the elements of upcycling practice in both Ghana and the UK respectively. In section 7, I turn to discuss the role of the circular economy, as it relates to the practice of textile upcycling, in order to assess whether upcycling could produce sustainable fashion futures through reduced textile waste.

2. Global Movement of Textile Waste

The global movement of textile waste is informed by processes such as colonialism and racial capitalism, which means that the harms associated with textile waste are unevenly experienced (Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023; Menash, 2023). Using Ghana and the UK as case studies offers insight into these uneven harms, and the ways in which different political-economic and cultural contexts engage with upcycling, to different ends. These sites are also connected through the geographies of textile waste, whereby clothing often moves along to prior colonial routes. The largest secondhand clothing market in the world is Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana (Menash, 2023). The high volume of bales of used clothing arriving means that the market is flooded. Up to 60% of the products cannot be sold because they are either damaged beyond repair or unfashionable to the Ghanaian market (Picarelli, 2022). Therefore, practices such as cleaning, redyeing, mending and otherwise upcycling the imported clothes are common because a lot of the incoming clothing is low quality (d'Arnaud van Boeckholtz, 2020: 4). In the UK, clothes are considered disposable and there is little recognition of the crafts(wo)manship involved in their production or upkeep. Spending time in community spaces and general environmental sentiments seem to drive engagement in the practice of upcycling, creating a wide range of small, volunteer-run community spaces to engage in upcycling across London.

In the textile industry, waste circulation has become very profitable, valued at \$96 billion globally (Ogunmefun, 2024). The geographies associated with primary production are flipped, as the Global North becomes the site of resources (waste) within circular economies (Crang et al., 2015). In the Global North, there is generally a lack of skill which allows practitioners to transform the waste into new, usable products. Therefore, sites in the Global South such as Ghana become key nodes in the management and (re)production of textile waste at a global scale. While the geographies of sourcing raw materials are flipped, the inequalities are not. Currently, the attraction of “cheap labour” in Kantamanto has made it a site where clothing waste from the Global North is absorbed, despite garnering little economic benefit for the region and significantly contributing to environmental issues (Picarelli, 2022). In the Global North, fashion detachment is now a “fundamental facet” of the fashion industry which encourages consumers to make space in their wardrobes by clearing out undesired garments or having a general apathy towards the garments they already own (Mellander & MacIntyre, 2021, pp. 343-344). The falling cost of new garments in the Global North in the 1980s and the liberalisation of African markets led to a large increase in clothing being sold to commercial textile recyclers and an expansion of clothing reuse markets (Norris, 2012). The added labour of sorting, grading and moving the clothing through these global hierarchies in bales imbues the textile waste with value in new markets in the Global South (Brooks, 2013). In practice, the Global South acts as a global “sacrifice zone” (Lerner, 2010) which absorbs the Global North’s waste, ensuring that the status quo is maintained in the Global North. This geography of textile waste which sees waste exported to the Global South is a “technique of power” (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, post-consumer textiles are one arena over which the inequalities between the Global North and Global South are perpetuated.

3. Circular Economy

Circular economies are the opposite to a linear production model, or a “cradle to grave” approach (Gregson et al., 2015). They seek to intervene as commodities become discarded and return them to the production (“cradle”) part of a new commodity chain. Circular economies are considered one of the most effective potential strategies for achieving sustainability in the textile sector (De Felice et al., 2025). Instead of waste materials being discarded in landfills, circular economies try to reduce material flows and eliminate waste from the production process by reusing items which have become waste post-consumption (Manolchev et al., 2024). Therefore, they are a popular strategy for ameliorating the environmental harms associated with waste produced by the textile industry (Manolchev et al., 2024). However, as of 2019, only about 9% of the global economy incorporated circular components (Manolchev et al., 2024). Also, in practice, circular economies often still rely on growth maximisation, notions of efficiency and the commodification of waste (Vicdan et al., 2025). While more research is needed to assess these inherent tensions within circular economies and the relative lack of uptake, the idea has taken on a popular appeal among makers, menders and engaged publics.

Circular economies offer multiple opportunities to work within diverse economic structures, particularly when degrowth is prioritised in the (re)production process of upcycling items. Extending a product’s lifecycle through circular economies proposes a complete transformation to the foundation of capitalist political-economies and the associated consumption culture (Gregson et al., 2015). Gibson-Graham (2006) documents the ways that economic diversity, that is political-economic forms outside of capitalism, are already occurring. For example, gift giving, donations and ‘pay what you can’ schemes are all examples of non-capitalist transactions (Werner, 2015). Transitioning to a circular economy specifically based on degrowth requires a culture of care and an ecological consciousness (Vicdan et al., 2025). But

this is not guaranteed. Global circular economies could incorporate these diverse economic practices on the one hand, or they could become neoliberalised.

4. Upcycling

Upcycling has emerged as a key design strategy which can fulfil the “cradle to cradle” approach which is central to a circular economy (van Hees et al., 2025). There have been multiple attempts to make sense of sustainable fashion practices from eco-fashion which foregrounds anti-fur campaigns, to ethical fashion focussed on fair working conditions and environmentally friendly material certifications, to the slow fashion movement (Gurova, 2024), which positions itself as the antithesis of the hyper-accelerated production models of fast fashion (Fletcher, 2010). In all of these conceptualisations of sustainable fashion, consumer behaviour is seen as particularly important in the move towards more environmentally, economically and socially just fashion futures. “Participatory fashion practices” is a broad term which refers to individuals being engaged consumers who know what they have in their wardrobe and choose to shift toward more pro-environmental behaviour by mending, making, sharing or swapping clothing, with the overall goal of them buying less. In particular, the craft or DIY based practices are positioned as “quietly revolutionary and ethically sustainable versions of how we might live...” (Hackney et al., 2022: 112). Under this umbrella, I am particularly interested in the practice of upcycling, the ability to transform secondhand clothing into new items, usually through a variety of craft or artistic interventions, and stop these items from becoming waste. This is a smaller subset of participatory fashion practices which is associated with making and mending.

Upcycling is both the reduction and revaluation of waste. Upcycling is an umbrella practice under which practitioners can engage with multiple upcycling strategies (e.g. sewing, painting, screenprinting, crochet etc.). Upcyclers are generally understood to be motivated by

environmental concerns (Coppola et al., 2021). However, when studying consumer upcyclers in Europe, Coppola et al. (2021) identified: the high financial cost of new items; finding creative solutions to household problems; the desire for unique items; waste reduction; awareness of environmental issues; a sensibility for thrift; object attachment; skill development; a sense of satisfaction, and joy, as the range of motivating factors for upcyclers. Shi et al (2022) make similar observations of upcycling practice in China, suggesting that upskilling, inner peace, thriftiness, object attachment and a desire to maintain relationships might all be key meanings underpinning the practice of upcycling.

At a larger scale, Vicdan et al. (2025) see upcycling as an opportunity for degrowth in the fashion industry. They posit that the circulation of waste produces important “social, cooperative and caring relationships” which contrast capitalist accumulation and the associated, harmful waste management practices (Vicdan et al., 2025: 568). This is supported by the meanings practitioners associate with upcycling outlined by Coppola et al. (2021) in Europe and Shi et al. (2022) in China. Even though there are obvious positive environmental benefits from engaging in textile upcycling, Coppola et al. (2021) suggest that the more unifying meaning underpinning the practice of upcycling in a European context is a tendency to resist high consumption. Shi et al. (2022) indicate that new caring relationalities with friends, families and even strangers is a key meaning behind Chinese upcycling practices.

Upcycling can occur at different scales. *Individual upcycling* is undertaken by private individuals or small and medium enterprises who hope to sell the items that they (re)produce (van Hees et al., 2025). *Social upcycling* refers to a wider range of actors including citizens, professionals and volunteers. This term speaks to the importance of collaboration and interactions in the practice of upcycling (van Hees et al., 2025). *Consumer upcycling* is distinctly undertaken by consumers of clothing. Because this kind of upcycling occurs at the product-level, the integrity of the overall item is likely to be prioritised in comparison to industrial upcycling which might break the waste product back down to the fibre level (Shi et al., 2022).

Consumer upcycling is considered a form of prosumption because *consumers* engage in (re)-producing the items that they consume (Coppola et al., 2021). Prosumption could be an important characteristic which re-situates the consumer who has been alienated under contemporary consumer society (Collins, 2018). Small-scale making practices allow practitioners to directly shape their material world. Therefore, upcycling aligned with the human desire for social connection, and simultaneously a rejection of passive consumer culture (Collins, 2018). Additionally, people are more likely to take care of objects that they have been involved in the (re)production of (Collins, 2018). Thinking about upcycling as a form of prosumption does seem to also support Vicdan et al.'s (2025) conclusion that upcycling could be an important practice to promote degrowth in the fashion industry. Since upcycling relies on prosumption, or (re)producing items from clothing that has already been purchased by consumers, the practice necessarily engages a circular production model.

5. Methods

The goal of this study was to understand practices of upcycling in both London and Accra. Ethnographies of upcycling or maker spaces in both Ghana and the UK gave broader context to upcycling in each site. I spent approximately three months in Accra and three months in London, across two waves of fieldwork in 2024. I use social practice theory in combination with theorising on circular economies to explore economic and social alternatives to current fast fashion practices which are environmentally harmful. I consider the ways in which individual practitioners in Accra and London engage with textile waste through practices of upcycling in order to produce new, usable products, as part of a broader process of textile waste reduction.

5.1 Social Practice Theory

I draw on a Shovian social practice theory to understand the elements of upcycling practice and in turn evaluate the practice as a form of textile waste management in London and Accra. Social practices are the building blocks of everyday life (Maller, 2021). In this framework, practices are recognisable entities that depend on practitioners more or less carrying out a series of elements consistently over time and space (Shove, 2014). These elements consist of the materials, competences and meanings which guide the practice. In this paper, I discuss the elements of upcycling practice to show the similarities and differences in the practice in London and Accra. Upcycling is guided by different motivations in each site, which impacts the overall outcomes and political possibilities for upcycling practice to be a means of reducing global textile waste.

Other behavioural theories centre rational individuals as the primary agent of change. However, social practice theory acknowledges that competences, materials and meanings develop from historically and culturally specific contexts (Shove et al., 2012). Practices depend on the interconnection between these elements (Reckwitz, 2002; Pantazar and Shove, 2010). Individuals are treated as “practitioners” who use resources and their skills and draw meanings from being involved in practices (Røpke, 2009). These practices create patterns of social relations which contribute to social systems. This framework allows geographers to think between scales from localised practices to global social systems. Therefore, social practice theory is useful for thinking about the ways that upcycling in particular localities might be able to change the global social system whereby increasing amounts of textile waste are circulated within a world-system. Suski et al. (2024) note that social practice theory offers a systems perspective which is well-suited for considering social innovations and transformative changes, both of which are essential for creating circular economies and a sustainable society.

5.2 Field Site 1: Ghana

Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana is a hub of upcycling. Clothing has moved between the UK and Ghana for some time. Improvements to clothing production in Europe between the 1700s and the 1850s increased the exchange of secondhand clothing between Europe and its colonies (Manieson and Ferrero-Regis, 2022). The arrival of large volumes of clothing, particularly in the late 20th century, led to the creation of Kantamanto market around the 1960s. Kantamanto market is the biggest secondhand clothing market in the world (Menash, 2023), where lots of upcycling practices take place in order to sell the secondhand clothing that is imported into the country. Currently around 15 million items arrive each week (Picarelli, 2022). In the absence of robust laws and regulations, individuals in Ghana use practices of upcycling to manage these textiles and counter some of the harmful health and environmental effects of this much secondhand clothing.

In Kantamanto market, Ghanaians are selling upcycled products to other Ghanaian consumers. Most of the upcycling that they engage in is undertaken to make the secondhand items fashionable to their Ghanaian customer base, for example dyeing jeans so that they are not faded, patching rips in jeans and altering the fit of items to fit their customers better. However, if workers in Kantamanto are able to sell their products in a global circular economy, they would be able to build more robust businesses within the textile waste economy and seek maximum profits. Many upcyclers in Kantamanto market, particularly younger practitioners, consider themselves as fashion designers. Many began upcycling to make themselves unique clothing items, and when they finished high school, they moved into upcycling to sell to others. Upcycling is a well-developed practice in Accra. Locations beyond Kantamanto such as the *Kokrobitey Institute* use resources from the market to create fashion collections made out of exclusively upcycled materials.

During two waves of fieldwork, I conducted an ethnography of Kantamanto market and the *Kokrobitey Institute*. In Kantamanto I acted as a consumer, walking the market several days per week over two months. At the *Kokrobitey Institute*, I was able to work alongside upcyclers in the design studio every weekday for one month. In both sites, I engaged in upcycling practices. In Kantamanto this meant sourcing T-shirts and getting them screenprinted using the skilled workforce and dense upcycling infrastructure there. I also had a new dress made from secondhand fabric by a tailor in Kantamanto, to try and get a better sense of the range of upcycling skills that practitioners employ there. At the *Kokrobitey Institute* I followed instructions to make a crochet bag out of T-shirt yarn made from secondhand T-shirts.

5.3 Field Site 2: UK

In the UK, clothing is increasingly seen as disposable. It is a site of high consumption, and in turn high disposal of textile waste. Significant portions of this waste are exported to Ghana, with the UK remaining the largest sending country of textiles to the country as of 2023 ([Observatory of Economic Complexity](#), nd). In the UK, upcycling is a choice, because the national infrastructure permits a culture of disposability. However, new forms of connectivity such as the internet (and online videos) have allowed for a resurgence in craft based upcycling activities in the UK (Collins, 2018).

There are many textile makerspaces and repair cafes across major cities like London which encourage residents to get involved in the practice of upcycling. Makerspaces are community run, communal spaces dedicated to making or repair practices. Most are located in commercial spaces such as shopping centres, or on neighbourhood high streets across London. These spaces are “embedded facilities” which are well suited to “favour production activities with a smaller footprint and lower levels of nuisance” such as knitting, sewing or other handheld crafting options (Debowski et al., 2024: 16). These makerspaces play an important role in skill

development, allowing practitioners to troubleshoot challenges with more experienced upcyclers compared to online learning formats such as YouTube (Collins, 2018). Makerspaces may have different goals. Some one off events might be more attentive to skill development while others are more focussed on building community. This social element underpins a lot of maker activity in the UK (Collins, 2018).

I undertook seven weeks of ethnographic research in these “embedded” makerspaces across London (see Map in Appendix 1). I attended “sew-cials” and built relationships with upcyclers who regularly attended these events. I engaged in upcycling as part of my ethnography in order to access the spaces that I was studying. However, I also was able to draw on the networks of connection between upcyclers and across community repair cafes in London to gain access to fabric, skills and advice as I upcycled an old school shirt.

5.4 Interviews

I conducted 18 semi-structured interviews in Ghana and 15 semi-structured interviews in the UK to understand the similarities and differences in the practice in each site. In the UK, seven of the participants are consumer upcyclers, two are individual upcyclers who sell upcycled products or services and six are both consumer and individual upcyclers (they upcycle products for themselves and to sell). “Elite” semi-structured interviews allow the interviewee, as the expert, to control the conversation, making it a useful method for my research (Dexter, 1970). Craft skills such as making, mending and upcycling have historically been considered women’s skills, and have consequently been devalued (Hessel, 2023). Similarly, geographic knowledge production continues to perpetuate unequal global power relations that have roots in colonialism (Jazeel, 2016). So, positioning the interviewee as an expert of their own upcycling practice was useful in empowering my research participants, and to not reproduce gendered or racialised power dynamics.

In Ghana, interviewees were recruited from Kantamanto market, particularly with support from *The Revival*, a Ghanaian non-profit focussed on upcycling support and environmental education around clothing waste in Accra. Other interviewees worked at social innovation hub and upcycling studio, *The Kokrobitey Institute*. These interviews took place in person in Kantamanto market and at *The Kokrobitey Institute* in September and October 2024 (see Table 2.2 in Chapter 2). In the UK, interviewees were recruited from community making or mending events that I attended as part of my ethnography in October and November 2024. These events took place across London. Some events were weekly or monthly “sew-cials”, while others were one off workshops. Interviews with London participants took place over Zoom or WhatsApp call in February 2025. All participants were paid US\$25 for their time (see Table 2.3 in Chapter 2).

In an attempt to understand their upcycling practice, interviewees in both sites were asked four guiding questions. (1) What prompted you to start making or mending clothing? (2) How have you developed your skills in mending or changing clothing? (3) What resources have been available to support your making or mending activities? (4) Have there been any challenges for you as you have engaged in this practice? These questions roughly correspond to the elements of practice, as outlined by Shove and her colleagues (e.g. Shove et al., 2012). Question one seeks to understand the motivation for engaging in the practice, or the ‘meaning’. Question two uncovers the competences necessary to engage in upcycling in each site, and how these skills might be developed over time. Question three allows interviewees to speak to the materials which are necessary to engage in upcycling. In Question 4 I was asking participants to help me further understand their upcycling practice. Social practice theory acknowledges that the specific historic and cultural context of the practice is important to consider (Shove et al., 2012). This broader context is what I was hoping to learn through question 4.

6.5 Data Analysis

Content analysis of the interview data was conducted in Atlas.ti. Data from interviews in the UK and Ghana were collated separately to understand similarities and differences between the practice in each site. Using a social practice theory framework, the data was sorted into the categories: materials, competences, meanings and broader context. This allowed me to understand the three elements of upcycling practice in each site (Shove et al, 2012). Once I had assembled the building blocks of the practice in each site, the content was analysed separately for each site to identify any other key themes.

6. The Elements of Practice

In the cases of Ghana and the UK, often upcycling practitioners begin making or mending garments for themselves or their immediate community, and then some of them may move into creating small businesses. I do not see these different types of upcycling as mutually exclusive. I will use the term consumer upcycling to describe this upcycling practice because predominantly, the upcyclers started as consumer upcyclers, making clothing for themselves. However, in reality, most upcyclers included in my data collection exist somewhere in the nexus of individual, social and consumer upcycling.

6.1 Accra

In Ghana, most upcycling is possible because of access to large volumes of textile waste which arrive in large 55-kilogram bales²⁷. There is also a lack of a ready to wear clothing market, increasing the popularity of secondhand clothing items which are very accessible in Accra, and across Ghana. Kantamanto has been in operation since the 1960s, meaning that

²⁷ Bales from China are unique in that they are packaged into 89 kilograms bundles instead.

upcycling is embedded in the local culture. Circulating clothing as “hand-me-downs” has long been a common practice in Ghana, perhaps indicating why they have been so successful at embracing principles of sustainability and practices of upcycling. As Nina, an upcycler and non-profit leader noted, “I grew up in the *Adie Yie* culture, so you always hear the click, click, click”. She is referring to the click of scissors and the sewing machine, two key material elements of upcycling practice. Combined with access to secondhand fabric, notions (e.g. zippers, buttons etc.), we see the most enduring elements of upcycling practice. Interestingly, I noticed a dearth of reliance on dress-making patterns to upcycle in Ghana. This is usually because upcycling activities are constrained by the amount and type of fabric or other material elements of the practice which are available. Yet, in the UK, five interviewees, including Cathy and Autumn, still noted the importance of patterns as a material in their upcycling practice. Across both sites, there was agreement that due to the (aforementioned) limitations of working with secondhand textiles, having the competence to “just figure it out” “explore creatively”, or as Elle (Ghana) put it “just figure it out”, were somewhat more important.

Many upcyclers learn skills from family members, in Ghana there are plenty of three year courses to train seamstresses and tailors, or upcyclers learn by working in the market. The prevalence of formal training and apprenticeships which take 3 years to complete mean that some tailors are engaging in upcycling using very polished tailoring techniques. This may slightly shift the kinds of materials involved in upcycling. For example, Edwin, a tailor in Kantamanto, used horsehair braid hems to finish dresses he made for me. These are more advanced elements and competences of the practice of upcycling that not every upcyclers has the ability to incorporate. Creativity remains one of the most important competences at the foundation of the practice of upcycling. Dean (Ghana), an upcycler in Kantamanto exemplifies this, telling me:

“I’m an artist. I loved to paint on anything I could see around me, and I thought maybe clothes... I was trying to find something to do with my skills. I went to the market and I realised, there’s some kind of creativity here.” (Dean, Ghana).

Upcycling is so well developed in Accra. Over one month of ethnographic fieldwork, I observed upcyclers at The *Kokrobitey Institute* tackle one of the biggest challenges associated with upcycling: gathering enough materials to make multiple versions of the same design. In her research on Gen Z sustainable fashion consumption in Finland, Gurova (2024: 301) suggests that upcycling seems to be an individual task, not a “practice that is employed systematically”. Upcycler Elle (Ghana), a lead upcycler at the *Kokribitey Institute*, remarked that when shifting upcycling into a systematic practice, time and patience are important because you have to think about what you are doing and process your materials from the beginning (fieldnotes, October 2024).

Even individual upcyclers producing one-off items seem to be working with a broader network in Kantamanto market. For example, I watched some upcyclers working on the item themselves, and others going to collaborate with people with specific upcycling skills who work in Kantamanto market, such as screenprinters, clothing dyers or tailors. While all of the upcycling practices are possible in the UK and Ghana, a greater diversity of upcycling practices seems to take place in Kantamanto market. After visiting Kantamanto market for several weeks, I noticed many young upcyclers focus on painting on clothing, or on novel ways of tie-dying clothing to produce unique designs. Since secondhand clothing is so prevalent in Accra, the density of upcyclers seems to have generated a broader range of upcycling options compared to locations like the UK, where most upcycling is done in the home or in “sew-cial” groups. In London, these embedded facilities perhaps limit the kinds of upcycling practices that practitioners engage in because the spaces have a smaller footprint and require production activities to be quieter so that nearby residents are not disturbed (Debowski et al., 2024). In Ghana, most practitioners are using upcycling as a means of earning money. Therefore, there

are a lot of workspaces dedicated to these practices which upcyclers have access to such as Kantamanto market and the *Kokrobitey Institute*.

Upcycling in Ghana is primarily a means of earning money. Secondhand textiles are readily available and there are several pathways to gaining the necessary competences to engage in various forms of upcycling, particularly the more technical elements such as sewing. However, many Ghanaians are shifting to articulate a sensibility for environmental protection as a motivation for upcycling. Messaging from organisations such as *The Revival* and leaders at the *Kokrobitey Institute* seems to be encouraging many upcyclers to think beyond their local scale upcycling practices, to consider what is at stake for their regional environment, and understand possibilities for more globalised circular economies.

6.2 London

The materials needed for upcycling remain reasonably consistent between the UK and Ghana, with a sewing machine being one of the more valuable materials grounding the practice. Across the upcycling workshops and “sew-cials” that I attended across London (see Map in Appendix 1, or Figure 15 in Chapter 2), I noticed that access to a sewing machine was an important draw to the community spaces, particularly for newer practitioners who did not have their own machine. Other common materials include fabric scissors, secondhand fabrics or clothing, crochet hooks, yarn and thread. While Kantamanto market in Ghana provides a centralised source of secondhand clothing or fabric, in the UK, charity shops, online resellers like eBay and marketplaces which sell deadstock (leftover) fabric are common options for sourcing the necessary materials to engage in practices of upcycling. Materials diverge between sites following the specific kinds of upcycling that are popular in each site. For example, due to differences in climates and fashion trends, knitting is more common in the UK, leading to materials such as knitting needles being more common in London compared to Accra. Patching

clothing is fairly common across both sites. But redyeing clothing was more prevalent in Ghana to deepen the colour saturation of denim.

Similar skills are needed to upcycle in each location. Key skills include creativity, a knowledge of the fabrics that you are using, learning to use various upcycling materials such as sewing machines and crochet hooks are also important. In the UK, there was a greater focus on having patience and building confidence compared to upcyclers in Ghana. For example, Nadine (UK) told me that she “wouldn’t have had the confidence to do things, even though [she’s] been sewing for donkey’s years”. But once she joined a “sew-cial” group, she was able to ask more experienced upcyclers to brainstorm ideas, and they helped her pick an appropriate upcycling strategy for her item. In the UK, these skills are acquired in a myriad of ways, most often from family members or through online resources like YouTube videos. Others pointed to the role of workshops or short courses, and of friends or community members in sharing embodied upcycling knowledge. Fewer people learned at school or through college/university (see Table 6.1).

How do people learn to engage in the skilled practice of upcycling in London?	Number of interviewees who mentioned this method of upskilling (out of 15 interviews)
Family members	11
Workshops or short courses	10
Online resources e.g. YouTube	9
Upcycling community networks/friends	7
School	5
College/University	5

Table 6.1: How people gain upcycling skills in London, based on interviews with upcyclers, undertaken in winter 2025.

Motivations for consumer upcycling in different places have been well explored (e.g. Coppola et al., 2021 in Europe, and Shi et al., 2022 in China). In the UK, I found a range of meanings which encouraged people to begin and continue to upcycle. These include being in a

strong community network with other upcyclers; a desire to reduce waste; a sensibility for sustainability; concerns about overconsumption; a sense of self-satisfaction around doing something good; having children; having an emotional connection to certain items; it can be cheaper to upcycle; needing to alter clothes to fit, and a sense that doing upcycling within a broader community is good for an individual's well-being. For many upcyclers in London, the skilled practice is bound up with multiple meanings (see Table 6.2). During my ethnography, I noticed that while upcyclers might primarily join "sew-cials" or workshops to gain confidence to upcycle a specific item they have an emotional attachment to or do not want to waste, many enjoy the communities that they become embedded within by attending these events regularly.

Meanings underpinning the social practice of upcycling in London	Number of interviewees who mentioned this meaning (out of 15 interviews)
Strong community networks	11
Desire to reduce waste	10
Sensibility for sustainability	9
Concerns about overconsumption	8
Self-satisfaction	7
Being a parent	7
Emotional connection to items	6
Cheaper to upcycle	6
Wanting clothes to fit well	5
Well-being	4

Table 6.2: The meanings underpinning the social practice of upcycling in London, based on interviews with upcyclers, undertaken in winter 2025.

Of these meanings, I find the prevalence of parenthood as a motivation to begin upcycling interesting. Perhaps my findings are skewed because most of my interviewees were recruited at upcycling events which took place during standard working hours. This means a significant portion of the interviewees are older and have children, and all of my interviewees in

the UK are women. Many interviewees noted that the amount of clothing children need encouraged them to upcycle both to reduce the amount of clothing that they needed to buy and to reduce waste. Other participants began upcycling because their child asked them to make something specific. In this sense, an ask from a child for a specific item seemed to allow parent upcyclers to overcome a relative lack of confidence in their own skills. One of Nadine's earliest upcycling projects was a star-shaped bag for her daughter made out of denim scraps. When her daughter asked for a specific upcycled item, Nadine was able to overcome her own lack of confidence in her sewing skills.

Several interviewees addressed challenges around engaging in upcycling in the UK (see Table 6.3). Finding time to upcycle was the biggest challenge. Fewer participants discussed constraints around space, but this is a problem for some upcyclers in London. Affordable access to the material elements of the practice such as sewing machines and secondhand fabric was also a significant hurdle. Perfectionism might be a barrier to engaging in upcycling for some practitioners. Thinking about upcycling as a practice of textile waste management, several interviewees noted that not everyone likes to upcycle. This sense that not everyone likes to upcycle indicates that in the UK, upcycling is largely a choice guided by internal motivations, rather than a necessity. This is consistent with other literature on upcycling and pro-environmental behaviour in the Global North (e.g. Hackney et al., 2022; Vicdan et al., 2025).

Challenges that upcyclers face in London	Number of interviewees who mentioned this challenge (out of 15 interviews)
Finding time to upcycle	8
Affordable access to the material elements of the practice (e.g. sewing machines, fabric)	6
Perfectionism	4
Not everyone enjoys upcycling	4
Access to space big enough to engage in upcycling	3

Table 6.3: Challenges upcyclers face in London, based on interviews with upcyclers, undertaken in winter 2025.

Overall, upcycling in the UK has many similarities to Ghana, down to upcyclers often using the same brand of sewing machine in each location. The similar materials mean that the competences needed to use these materials remain similar. For example, learning to use a sewing machine or a crochet hook and understanding the properties of different fabrics. But importantly, in London upcycling is a choice made by individual practitioners because they want to find community, reduce their own waste and have a general sensibility for sustainability. Upcycling communities and access to resources such as repair cafes or libraries with sewing machines are important for encouraging people to engage in upcycling in the UK.

6.3 Upcycling Practice in Accra and London

In this paper, I demonstrate that the similarities and differences in upcycling practice could be important to distinguish, so that sustainability advocates can understand which practices offer the most transformative potential for textile waste reduction. Practices of upcycling in Ghana and the UK are evaluated for their potential to combat the large volumes of textile waste which are currently polluting landscapes predominantly in the Global South (e.g. Cleasby, forthcoming; Cleasby and England, 2024).

Assessing the practice of upcycling between Ghana and the UK demonstrates that there are key similarities. Materials like sewing machines, secondhand fabric, notions and scissors are key in each site. Competences such as creativity, a desire to figure things out and patience seem to be important across practitioners in Ghana and the UK too. While specific challenges seem to be linked to the broader cultural context, including the prevalence of waste and accessibility of secondhand textiles, practitioners in both Ghana and the UK referenced that upcycling takes time.

The differences in upcycling practice between Ghana and the UK can largely be understood through the broader context of waste, wasting and disposal. For instance, Helen (UK) told me that in the UK

“we are just so disassociated from where your clothing is going to go after you have finished using it. And we don't. Culturally... I don't want to say we don't care, but we're just so disassociated from it” (Helen, UK).

The high volumes of waste mean that people in Accra cannot experience any cognitive dissonance from secondhand or waste textiles. In London, the disposability of clothing leads to cognitive dissonance and turns upcycling into a practice that individuals can choose to engage in or not. People in the UK who are engaging in the practice of upcycling seem to have a strong desire for community, a desire to reduce waste and a sensibility for sustainability. This is congruent with upcycling literature based on Europe and China, which show that in China relationships with friends, family and other crafters is the primary meaning behind the practice of upcycling, and in Europe the desire to resist high consumption and reduce waste is more prevalent (Coppola et al. 2021; Shi et al., 2022). In Accra, most upcyclers are primarily motivated to upcycle because it is a job that is accessible to them. Despite their primary motivation being rooted in survival needs, many upcyclers in Ghana do value the role of upcycling in reducing environmental harm from waste, supporting Coppola et al.'s (2021) statement that upcycling practitioners seem to be driven by environmental concerns.

Upcycling in both Accra and London is built on broader community networks. In London, community is built through regular attendance at “sew-cials” at repair cafes across the city where upcyclers can brainstorm ideas together. In Accra, these networks are primarily visible through upcyclers' workspaces such as the *Kokrobitey Institute* and Kantamanto market, which are central resources for sharing skills and ideas, and collaborating to produce an upcycled product. These are the important “social, cooperative and caring relationships” which Vicdan et al. (2025: 568) suggest are created waste materials.

Consumer upcycling has become trendy as a possible quick solution to unwanted clothing. This cognitive dissonance from consumers facilitated by the movement of textile waste to the Global South means that the human labour involved in the (re)production of items is still largely invisible to individuals in the UK (Holdsworth, 2024; Cleasby and England, 2024). Those who choose to upcycle gain a rare understanding of the practice of the skill, labour and materials that are needed to keep textile waste out of landfill, and know it is hard work. Thinking about consumer upcycling at the practice level allows us to understand the nexus of materials, skills, time and labour that is invested in upcycled products. Consequently, upcyclers in London are more likely to be understood as engaging in prosumption, because they are directly involved in (re)producing items that they have consumed (Collins, 2018). This kind of upcycling by individuals is seen as an important step in increasing recognition of the benefits of circular economies (Shi et al., 2022). While upcycling practices may remain relatively small-scale in London, increasing support for pro-environmental behaviours is considered one of the key benefits of upcycling in the Global North. Perhaps this explains why across both sites, there are common discourses about waste, environmental destruction and circular economies. In particular, community leaders in both London and Accra see great potential for circular economies to produce more sustainable fashion futures, noting that “the circular economy will be good for your soul” (Eugenie, UK) and that circular design and in turn circular economies are a “long term goal” for sustainability (Yeshua, Ghana).

7. “The circular economy will be good for your soul” (Eugenie)

Within the purview of textiles, upcycling has emerged as the key design process to facilitate a circular production model. With mending this relationship is more straightforward. An upcycler who is paid to mend clothes in London notes that “every repair adds about 1-3 years to the life of the garment” (Sian, UK). However, other interviewees in London remained

unconvinced about the inherent link between the practice of upcycling and their ability to produce sustainable fashion futures. Avery (UK) noted that she could turn a blanket into a nice jacket but she only thinks that the practice becomes sustainable when it is evident that someone wants to buy the product that you have created. As a keen volunteer upcycler for a charity shop in London, she admits that this hurdle is where she “stumbles a bit”. But in reality “everything has the potential to be sustainable or unsustainable” (Nina, Ghana). As Nina notes:

“ultimately, what it comes down to for me is resourcefulness and reusability, and whether it challenges the linear mode of consumption”. (Nina, Ghana).

Due to the way that waste is moved globally from the Global North to the Global South, localised upcycling is not inherently contributing to a circular economy at the scale necessary to address all of the economic, social and environmental harms associated with textile waste. Thinking about how the UK manages textile waste and UK upcycling practice, a UK interviewee notes that there is “still not a circular economy” for global textiles (Lillian, UK). Yet, Ghanaian upcyclers in particular had a strong sense of the interventions that would be needed to support the development of circular economies where they could sell their upcycled pieces.

“I do think that these people also need to be better supported to ensure continuity and just the viability of what they've started. That looks like some capital injection, that looks like training” (Nina, Ghana).

Since both countries are involved in shaping the current relationality between the Global North and South around textile waste, collaboration is necessary to develop circular economies which could redress the current power imbalances and unequal distribution of textile waste.

“We could be collaborating together with different organisations to be able to solve this, because we can't do it alone” (Dean, Ghana).

Upcycling in Ghana has been operating on a large scale since the 1960s, making it a key site to incorporate into any textile circular economies. Also, as Nina acknowledges, training for upcyclers and access to the materials of the practice “they just cost less in Kantamanto, or in

the areas where the waste is.” (Nina, Ghana). The commonalities between the practice of upcycling in the UK and Ghana means that there seems to be ample opportunities to work together.

In order to develop a circular economy, there needs to be a shift in thinking about the secondhand textiles which remain the material at the center of upcycling practice.

“If we were to consider circularity and circular economy principles... they would probably advise us to work with the waste and see it as a resource and opportunity” (Nina, Ghana).

In the UK, Helen agrees:

“(T)o appropriately redistribute waste or textile waste, we have to add value to it. We can't take it for face value. So if we treat it as waste, we are treating that material simply as waste and trying to turn it into something new. But I think if we sort of go like this is a resource, how can I make this into something better than it is? I feel like that's an answer as to how we can increase its value, and therefore make it valuable enough to redistribute” (Helen, UK).

This shift is necessary to ensure that upcyclers could sell their products for a high enough price to reflect the skilled labour that they have contributed to the (re)production of an item. Elle, a designer and upcycler at the *Kokrobitey Institute* acknowledges:

“If you're selling things that are made from waste, you're going to need to sell them for quite a bit of money. Yeah. And to some specific people, because I think the sustainable fashion world hasn't been recognised” (Elle, Ghana).

Reflections on the global circular economy by interviewees in Accra and London seem to assume that it will operate within capitalist logics. However, current examples of localised circular economies, driven by the practice of textile upcycling, can contribute to more diverse economies. Caring networks underlie most practices of upcycling, even in paid labour based locations such as Kantamanto market. In Kantamanto I observed vendors sharing food,

socialising and discussing their problems. These community-based interactions are all building communities of care between workers in the market (Cleasby & England, 2024). So the workers in Kantamanto are engaging in multiple different economies at once. They sell products within capitalist structures, seeking the highest profit for their goods. But they also engage in non-capitalist interactions and transactions such as gifting food. Similarly in the UK, upcyclers engage in diverse economies. Many “sew-cials” or other making and mending events offer a “pay what you can” structure. In many cases, the organisations will receive donations, and they share materials (e.g. upcycling tools and fabric) with the group free of charge. But, in the case of some making groups, the organisation will produce products to sell under capitalist structures to make enough money to continue funding the group. So, while not all forms of circular economies are post-capitalist or contributing to diverse economies, those based on textile upcycling have the potential to be. Given concerns from sustainability advocates about the neoliberalisation of sustainability (Tulloch and Neilson, 2014; Cleasby, forthcoming²⁸), this potential for circular economies to operate within and beyond capitalist structures is important for thinking about sustainable fashion waste futures.

Upcycling can be a sustainable practice. Practitioners in both the UK and Ghana support the development of circular economies for textiles, which can address the problem of textile waste at the global scale. Despite this interest from upcyclers in both sites, significant global circular economic infrastructure is still lacking in practice. Future research is needed to understand these infrastructural hurdles, and challenges that face upcyclers and consumers within a circular economy.

8. Conclusion

“Fashion is an easy entry point for the whole sustainability conversation” (Nina, Ghana).

²⁸ See Chapter 4 for this work.

Sustainability in the fashion industry has received significant attention by academics and organisations alike. Circular economies are seen as one strategy to reduce the economic, social and environmental harms associated with fast fashion, particularly as it is discarded. This disposal is globally unequal and contributes to the material inequalities that exist between the Global North and South.

Upcycling is considered a key design strategy for circular economies. In this paper, I outline the practice of upcycling in London and Accra. There is significant overlap in the materials and competences of each practice. In particular, sewing machines and the availability of secondhand textiles are the grounding elements of most upcycling practices. However, the broader context informs many of the meanings for the practice in each site. In the UK, the desire to connect with community members is the largest factor, with a desire to reduce waste and be sustainable also being significant motivations. In Ghana, upcycling is often an accessible job path due to the prevalence of secondhand textiles. Yet, many upcyclers in Ghana feel like their work is important for reducing the environmental damage caused by textile waste.

The role of community networks in both London and Accra cannot be overlooked. These networks are essential for upcyclers to access waste fabric, develop skills, brainstorm ideas and continue to develop a sensibility for sustainable clothing. A call for a greater presence of global circular economic practices exists in both London and Ghana. These circular economies will rely on networks of relationality between those with upcycling skills and consumers with the desire and means to purchase these (re)produced sustainable clothing items. Any relationship which serves as the foundation for producing globalised circular economies for textiles will have to be built on care. People in both the Global North and South will have to care about forging and sustaining the networks of relation necessary to allow (re)produced, upcycled items to circulate in global markets.

Upcycling has the potential to deliver sustainable fashion futures. But at present, the global circular economy is not robust enough to support upcyclers in Ghana, who manage most

of the world's textile waste. If a global market to support circular economic activities such as upcycling emerged, perhaps some of the power dynamics which are reinforced as clothing waste moves into the Global South could be weakened as Ghanaian upcyclers would be able to sell their products for a higher price. Upcyclers in Ghana have many ideas about the strategies that are needed to produce substantial circular economies to address textile waste at the global scale. More research is needed to find strategies and hurdles to implementing circular economies, because those involved in managing textile waste in both Ghana and the UK are already expressing a desire for this kind of infrastructure and economic opportunity.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

This dissertation explores the role of upcycling as a form of textile waste management in different contexts, namely Accra and London. Fashion scholars in the Global North theorise that participatory fashion practices (Hackney et al., 2022), which include making and mending, could generate a sensibility for sustainability amongst those who engage in them because people are more likely to take care of objects that they have been involved in creating (Collins, 2018). Yet, geographies of clothing waste operate at a global scale. So, I draw on notions of care more broadly to try and forge a sense of responsibility between places of high consumption (Global North) and the places where most clothing waste is disposed of (e.g. Ghana). An orientation towards sustainable fashion might also develop out of consumers understanding the time and labour that vulnerable actors commit to making their clothing (Willet et al., 2022). I extend this argument to think also about the labour that goes into the (re)production of clothing waste. While I found it difficult to piece together the whole commodity chain that textile waste moves along, my data shows that whatever the route, clothing waste is arriving in Ghana from Global North countries such as the UK. I hope that presenting Accra in relation to sites of high consumption such as London will encourage readers in the Global North to think more critically about what happens to their own clothing after they discard it, and hopefully choose to engage in different modes of clothing consumption moving forward.

I tried to understand the role of upcycling at multiple scales, from the level of the practice in both Accra and London, to its broader context within the global geographies of textile waste. These geographies see textile waste moved through relations of severe inequality. Indeed, the movement of textile waste is a facet of racial capitalism, reinforcing and exacerbating these social, economic and environmental inequalities. Following Tsing's (2011) fragmented ethnography approach, I try to understand the role that upcycling plays within communities in

Accra and London and use this ethnographic information to think about the role of upcycling globally as a strategy for managing textile waste within circular economies. Through situated, or grounded, ethnographies, I attempt to uncover the on-the-ground realities that construct global commodity chains. Understanding the practice of upcycling at both scales allows me to gain a better understanding of how far the practice of upcycling goes to manage global textile waste.

In Accra, upcycling necessarily emerges from the amount of textile waste which arrives. The notion of reusing items, particularly clothing, is embedded within many Ghanaian traditions. For example, my interviewee Nina talks of growing up in the *Adie Yie* culture where clothing would be passed down between community members, and the sounds of the sewing machine were common. Many upcyclers in Ghana are working in Kantamanto market, or nearby upcycling spaces such as the *Kokrobitey Institute*. Many upcyclers upcycle items for personal use, but all of the upcyclers I engaged with in Ghana sell the items that they have (re)produced too. Consequently, many upcyclers in Ghana are interested in thinking about possibilities to sell their items within global circular economies, with the hope of having access to a larger market of consumers and access to consumers who can pay more for their items. Currently only a few upcyclers in Ghana have access to these global consumer markets. For example, *The Revival* were able to build connections with *The Victoria and Albert Museum*, where they sell their upcycled denim tote bags.

In London, upcycling is driven by a desire to build community, followed by a desire to reduce personal waste. Building community through repair cafes, “sew-cials” and online spaces is the key way that upcyclers learn or develop their skills, and continue to be motivated to engage in the practice. Compared to Ghana, the lack of other accessible community spaces in the UK may attract people to upcycling as a practice. This seemed particularly pronounced with new parents. A motivation for upcycling that only appeared among practitioners in the UK was the role of having children. Interviewees expressed concerns about the amount of clothing that gets wasted as children grow and the economic pressures that can accompany the need to

continually buy new clothing. Also, “sew-cials” may provide opportunities for new parents to socialise and build community. In London, my interviewees, and most of the attendees of the “sew-cials” or upcycling workshops were women. So, upcycling could be a useful way to build community networks for mothers. However, more research is needed on the relationship between parenthood and upcycling that began to emerge throughout my interviews in London.

Beyond differences in meanings, the basic elements of upcycling are the same in both London and Accra. Sewing machines and secondhand clothing/fabric are the most common materials of the practice. Creativity, the ability to use a sewing machine or other upcycling tools such as crochet hooks are key competences upcyclers need to engage in the skilled practice of upcycling. Also, networks are key to practicing upcycling in both London and Accra. In London, these networks are primarily built through community repair spaces such as “sew-cials”. In Accra, these connections are largely built through Kantamanto market. The networks allow for the sharing of ideas, skills, advice and secondhand materials, all of which make upcycling easier, or the final product better. All these networks require ongoing maintenance in order to sustain the webs of connection that underpin upcycling practice. In this way, caring relationships can be understood as central to upcycling practice.

Advancing Making-as-Method

I advocate for making-as-method for data collection within geography. This skilled, embodied, practice-based approach for data collection has been explored by other social scientists including Prentice (2007) who engaged in surgical training to understand the process of becoming socialised and trained as a surgeon. Wacquant (1995) learned to be a boxer and Marchand undertook apprenticeships to understand the unspoken elements that make up each skilled practice. Mann (2018) used knitting to gain a deeper understanding of the differences between the practice of knitting in the late 19th Century and the present-day practice. Moreton (2005) engaged in performance art as part of her ethnography to understand the social practice

of performing Irish traditional music. Despite these examples of embodied, practice-based methods to understand distinct social practices, they are still not a widely established method in geography.

I share my own experiments in making-as-method, which I employ to gain an embodied understanding of the practice of upcycling. Making-as-method allowed me to understand the practice of upcycling at a deeper level in both Accra and London, including the specific challenges for upcyclers in both sites. Gaining an embodied understanding of upcycling made me more sensitive to the difficulties of using waste materials, particularly for the body of the upcycler. Understanding both the processes that upcyclers have to go through from identifying a waste material to producing a new item, and the embodied practice of various upcycling strategies such as screenprinting or crocheting, gave me a more expansive understanding of the practice of upcycling in each site. Particularly in Accra, being a part of the practice of upcycling alongside practitioners gave me a greater understanding of the context and range of strategies that upcyclers use, which in turn shaped my ethnographies and interviewing strategies.

These creative experiments were important for my research because they provided a deeper insight into my research question about upcycling as a textile waste management strategy. But I also hope that this chapter and these experiments contribute to the creative re/turn in cultural geographies and add to conversations about how geographers can increase their understanding of the socio-spatial worlds that they study.

Is Upcycling a Useful Practice for Managing Textile Waste?

The practice of upcycling is necessarily a practice of waste reduction. One of the main materials underpinning the practice is secondhand clothing, so waste reduction will always be an outcome. However, the extent to which waste is reduced depends on the specific strategies

employed by the upcycler and the nature of the secondhand fabric that they have access to. For example, some upcycling strategies based on creating one garment from two clothing items might produce up to one article of clothing as waste which will enter landfill. However, all of my upcycling experiments outlined in this dissertation produced very little waste. The T-shirt yarn that I crocheted with was made up of scraps from other waves of upcycling. Upcyclers at the *Kokrobitey Institute* created this upcycling strategy so that none of their fabric would enter landfill. The shirt I upcycled in the UK at community “sew-cials” did not create any waste. I used scrap fabric from The *Croydon Textile Repair Cafe* to add panels to an existing shirt. Any scrap fabric that I didn’t use entered my own collection of scraps to be used in future projects. Finally, there was no leftover textile waste from my screenprinted T-shirts in Accra or London. The structure of the T-shirts didn’t change at all for this upcycling strategy, so no waste was created.

Beyond its potential to reduce environmentally polluting clothing waste from entering landfill or being dumped in natural ecosystems, upcycling can be understood as a sustainable fashion practice for its ability to foster networks of connection. Community networks based on caring relationships underpin the practice of upcycling in both Accra and London. In London, these community networks provide valuable opportunities to connect with other people, and the community repair cafes are a key site for upcyclers to improve their skills, access fabric or other upcycling materials and workshop ideas for their projects. In Accra, these community networks allow upcyclers to draw on other community members’ skills to upcycle items. For example, in Kantamanto I was able to have my T-shirts upcycled by skilled upcyclers. Some upcyclers in Ghana rely on these collaborations to produce their final designs. The network of community members in Kantamanto is also central to how the market functions. Kantamanto can be understood as a socio-emotional commons where the community hold social resources in common and operate under a principle of reciprocity (Isaksen et al., 2008).

Upcycling can be a useful practice for managing textile waste. However, individuals and small communities of upcyclers need more infrastructural support for upcycling to become a

strategy for managing textile waste at a larger scale. Kantamanto market in Accra provides some of this infrastructure at a local and regional level in Accra. But, since the movement of textile waste is a global system involving large volumes of clothing, a more global solution is necessary to ensure that as many clothes as possible could be (re)produced through the practice of upcycling.

In both Accra and London, globalised circular economies are popular amongst upcyclers. Yet they are not yet robust enough to manage textile waste at the necessary scale. Around 15 million items of secondhand clothing enter Accra each week through the port of Tema (Picarelli, 2022). Yet, the majority of upcycled items in Ghana are sold to consumers in Ghana, rather than on global markets, where Ghanaians might have an opportunity to earn greater profits from their upcycling practice. To be considered a sustainable clothing practice, upcycling must provide avenues to living well for those who choose to engage in this practice as paid labour within circular economies (rather than consumer upcyclers producing items for themselves). This means that any upcycling strategy that is serious about addressing textile waste must consider upcycling as skilled labour, and pay upcyclers accordingly.

Overall, upcycling can be understood as a sustainable fashion practice. It can be a means of reducing the amount of textile waste which ends up in landfills. But more work is needed to ensure that upcycling is an economically viable clothing (re)production practice within global circular economies.

Future research

My research has exposed multiple areas for future inquiry. There were many findings that I could not fully address within the scope of this research and which could be better explored through future projects. One example of these projects is the role that being a parent plays in motivating people in London to take up upcycling. I detail some other future research directions below.

Much of the upcycling literature acknowledges that a challenge to upcycling on a larger scale is making a system to create a line of products, rather than just individual items. For example, in her research on upcycling among Gen Z in Finland, Gurova (2024: 301) positions upcycling as an individual task, not a “practice that is employed systematically”. Yet, my ethnographic data and time spent working with upcyclers at the *Kokrobitey Institute* indicates that there are strategies for overcoming this challenge. At the *Kokrobitey Institute* designer and creative director Reneé produced an upcycling strategy that was based on using every part of a T-shirts and men’s white shirts to produce a fashion collection that mirrors primary fashion consumption practices. In this way, upcycled items are more accessible and more easily marketable because multiple versions of the same (or similar) items can be produced in a variety of sizes. At the *Kokrobitey Institute* upcycling is employed systematically. The next step in understanding upcycling as a practice within a circular economy is to understand how the practice can become more efficient and reduce as much landfill-bound waste as possible from the process. If upcycling is a key design strategy for circular economies (van Hees et al., 2025) then understanding how the practice can become a cohesive design system, like at the *Kokrobitey Institute* could be important.

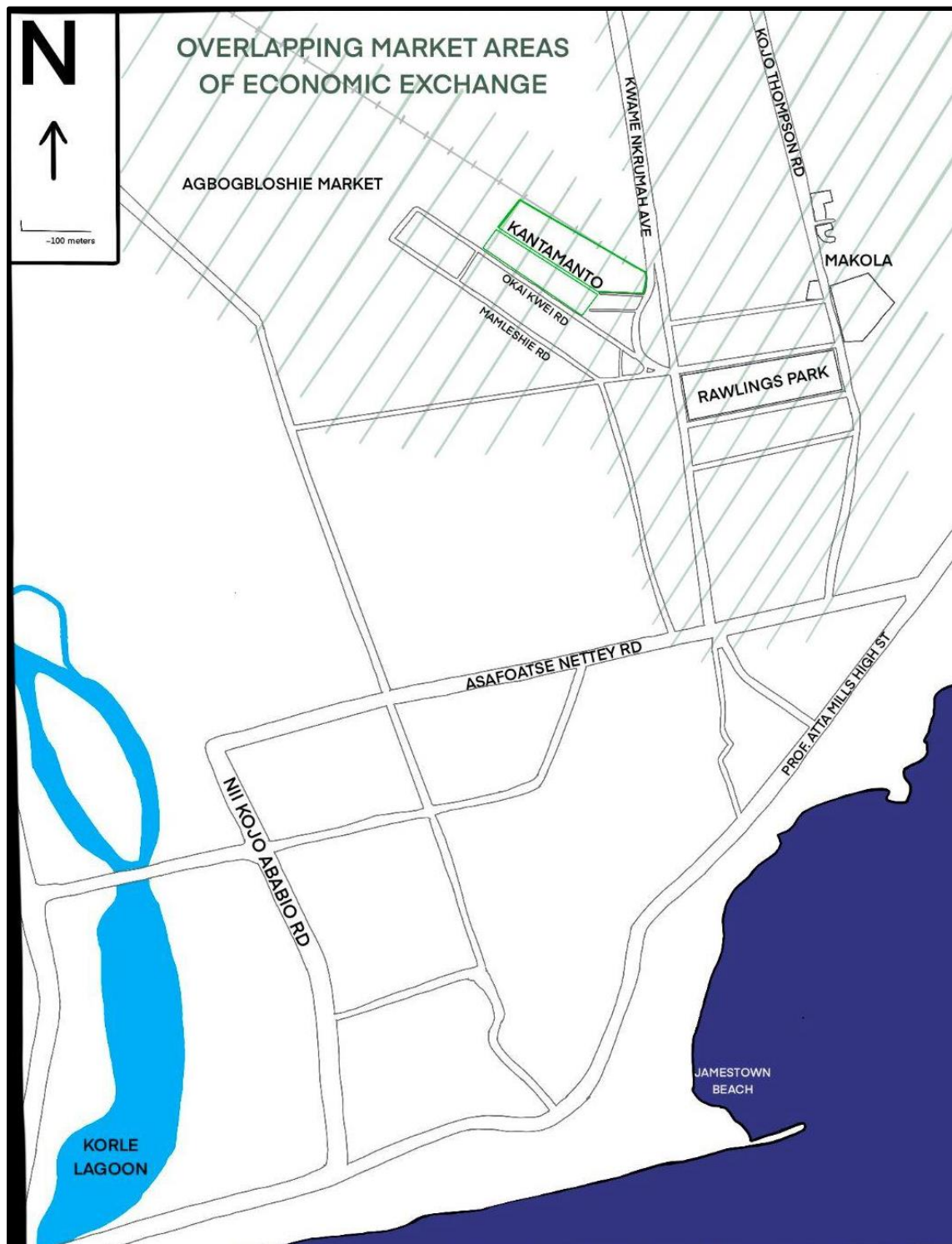
One of my upcycling experiments, crocheting with T-shirt yarn, exposed the physically laborious nature of some upcycling strategies. The dense yarn led to significant wrist pain as I tried to crochet with it for many hours per day. Wrist pain is a significant concern for upcyclers who rely on knitting and crochet because if the pain becomes too significant, it can stop practitioners from ever engaging in these activities again. As noted above; to be truly considered a sustainable clothing practice within global circular economies, upcycling must provide pathways to well-paid jobs. This is particularly true for workers in Accra who currently take on an outsized responsibility to manage the world’s textile waste (Cleasby and England, 2024). Under capitalism, labour can be consumed and members of the workforce can be discarded once their body can no longer sustain the work they are tasked with (Yates, 2011).

Fernández (2023) coined the term “racist wastification” to describe the ways in which this process of discarding workers is uneven, with race becoming the organising factor for who gets discarded and who does not. Future work which pays attention to the health and well-being of the upcycler will be important, especially if the practice becomes a key source of paid labour within global circular economies. Some circular economies can contribute to diverse economic practices such as sharing knowledge and giving gifts (Werner, 2015; Gibson-Graham, 2006); but at the global scale, it is equally likely that capitalist logic will subsume circular economies. Therefore, under racial capitalism, circular economies could continue to contribute to racist wastification of upcyclers in Ghana unless equity is a central principle of those building the relationships necessary to create a circular economy. This is why I argue in Chapter 4 (paper 1) that an ethic of care must underpin sustainability strategies.

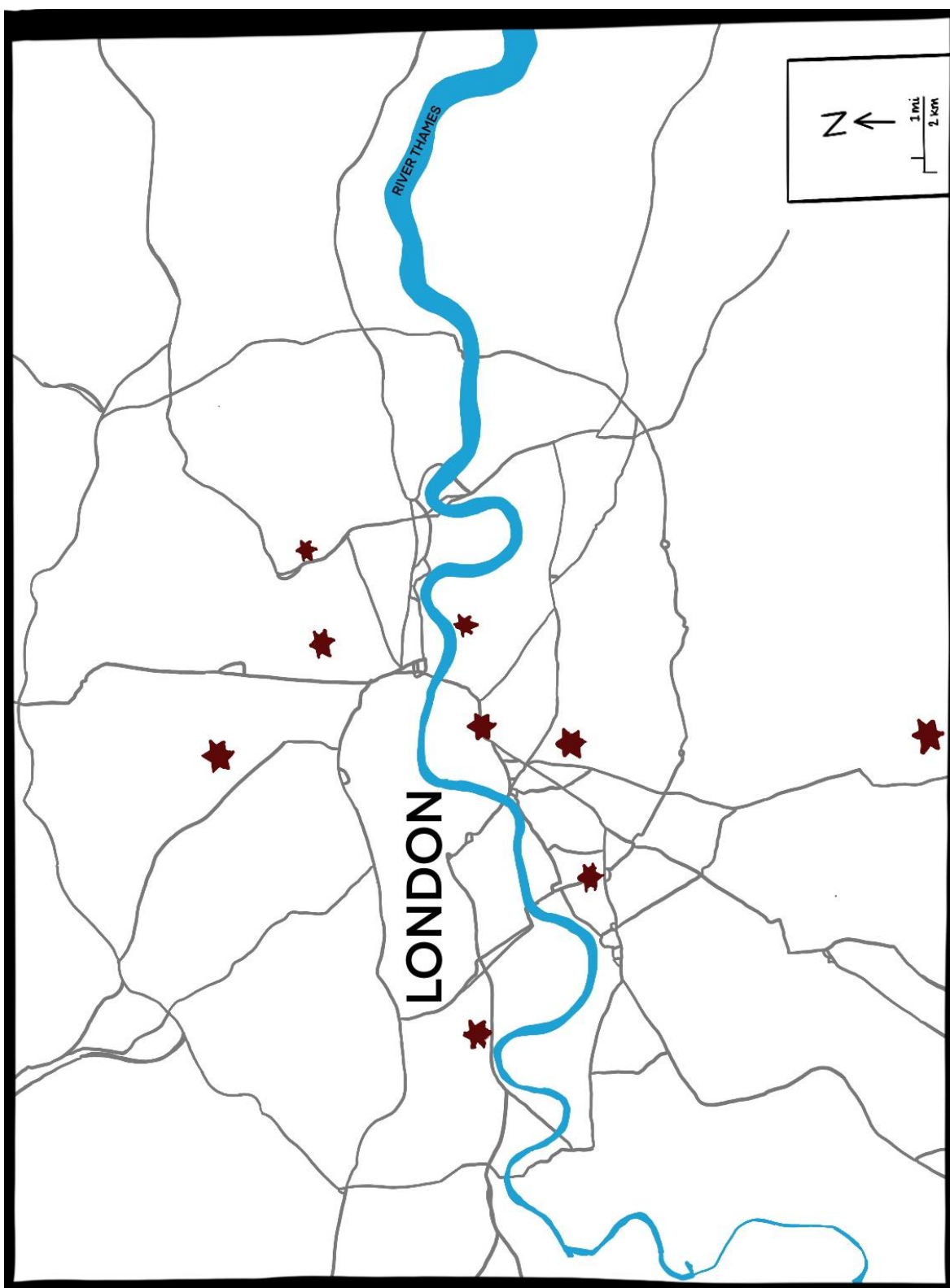
My third dissertation paper addresses the desire amongst upcyclers for a global circular economy as part of a broader strategy to manage textile waste. However, the circular economy is still not robust enough to support people who are currently upcycling. Therefore, for my next project, I want to explore hurdles to the implementation of circular economies for textiles. I would ask: “What local or global infrastructure is needed to promote the reduction of textile waste?” and “How can we ensure that these interventions include expert practitioners in Accra, Ghana?”. Policies such as Extended Producer Responsibility laws are one possible solution which could produce a centralised fund to create infrastructure for circular economies. Currently France is the only country implementing these laws, and upcyclers in Ghana are still unclear how these funds might be managed and distributed so that they would actually benefit. Organisations such as *The Or Foundation* in Ghana, and *The Fibre Lab* in the UK are producing marketable strategies to use textile waste in new products such as furniture or paper. But more support is needed to transform these findings into profitable businesses. Using creative methods, I hope to work with upcyclers in Kantamanto to try and sell products on global markets, through e-commerce sites. I would partner with *The Revival*, who have been building

an early e-commerce platform to support the circular economy in Kantamanto market. Through this embodied ethnography and qualitative interviews, I would engage in the upcycling and online selling practices alongside upcyclers, noting the constraints and opportunities that they experience. I would use this data to establish possible infrastructural hurdles or gaps for upcyclers in Kantamanto to engage in global circular economies. In the UK, I would ask participants to purchase an upcycled product from Ghana, and then ask questions about the process, particularly any challenges that they experience. Combining perspectives from upcycled clothing producers and consumers will allow me to understand specific challenges or cultural practices which influence how and why people engage in the global circular economy.

Appendix 1



A hand drawn (to scale) map of southern Accra, depicting key sites of my ethnographic fieldwork during Wave 1 of my data collection. Map drawn by Ellie Cleasby in February 2024.



A hand drawn map of London, with my fieldsites located with red stars. Drawn by Ellie Cleasby in January 2026.

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