The little black dress is the solution. But what's the problem?

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INTRODUCTION – 'LEACHED ON THE BEACH'

Salman Rushdie's wonderful children's book *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is based on the premise that there is some evil mechanism that is taking away the vital stream of stories that course through the veins of our world. My paper is based on a kind of adult equivalent to this story. During my lifetime I have been witness to a similar dreadful loss and in this paper I want to don the mantle of the anthropologist as detective and see if I can locate the culprit. The crime is evident all around us. There has been a gradual leaching out of colour and print from the world of Western women's clothing. Just like in Rushdie's story it is as though somewhere there is a vast hole through which colour and print is leaking out leaving an increasingly grey and black world of clothing that makes for a drab colourless environment, only partly compensated by a few exceptions such as sports wear and the little red dress (Steele 2001) . I feel personally affronted by this assault on my own world and the threat that my sense of colour is being atrophied by my environment, since I too suffer from this same affliction. When I started lecturing I was still wearing a bright orange jersey and a necklace of shells retained from my fieldwork in the Solomon Islands. But already I was already looking the anachronistic `hippie'. Of course being a hippie was itself merely conventional to that time and I have shifted with all the subsequent movement towards the colourless. Today I have adopted the general conventions of male clothing based around indigo and black, which is constructed along a vague polarity with `classic' Armani emulating cuts for more formal wear, and jeans materials for the more informal. About the most existing possibility left to me is to discover a new shade of grey.

Further more I am particularly sensitive to this shift having just completed (along with Mukulika Banerjee) a book about the sari in India (Banerjee and Miller 2003), a garment which retains a glorious rainbow of colour and an effusion of print. Recalling my life as a sartorial hippie, the last major explosion of colour in women's clothing is probably precisely that time now lovingly recalled in the Austin Power's movies which pay proper homage to the clothing of the 1960's and 1970's. It was a time when as a child I earned holiday money working in a `Carnaby Street' style boutique and was enthralled by the coral sea of clothing, while festooned in my own purple flared trousers, beads and floral shirt. Since then it seems that each year has seen a gradual reduction in permitted levels of colour and print.

It was men's clothing that declined most precipitously. Women's clothing's while slower now looks pretty much as deep. I write this having just been on a shopping expedition for Christmas 2002 with some female friends which really did consist entirely of a discussion about shades of grey, in a shop `Muji' which seems to thrive essentially on a kind of Western amalgamation of the minimalism associated with stereotypes of the Japanese, now manifested almost entirely in grey. In the clothing sales following New Year I sat in the younger women's section of Selfridges in London faced by rows of grey to black, facing off against white to cream, with various shades

of red seeming to stand in for `colour' in general. An extraordinary number of the shoppers seemed passed by in almost interchangeable combinations of blue denim jeans and black tops.

The title of this paper is in essence a reflection of the role of the little black dress in particular as the vanguard of these developments. This is not a work in any sense on fashion history. Edelman (1998) provides such a history defining a starting point for that dress with the designer Chanel in 1926 and examining the role of different influential women that have worn these dresses as much as the designers, women such as Wallis Simpson, Audrey Hepburn and Jacqueline Kennedy (see also Ludot 2001, and for black fashion more geneally Mendes 1999). If the term little black dress is used colloquially rather than as it is employed in more academic circles of fashion history then it evidently plays a major role as a cliché for women talking about clothing generally. As noted there are several books concerned with the little black dress, there is even a book called *The Little Black Dress Diet*(Van Straten 2001). Similarly the internet reveals sites called thatperfectlittleblackdress.com, littleblackdress.co.uk, and even lbdtogo.com.

The literature provides various psychological theories for the popularity of the dress, but as a social scientist my concern is rather with this dress in its specific aspects as a vanguard for the which culminated in the issues of leaching which I am concerned with here. So it is the contemporary black dress that is the issue here and I will not assume that it is necessarily popular for the same reason as in earlier times. I have represented it as iconic in my title as much in respect to this history as to my own encounter with the problem of leaching. My material comes largely from the ethnographic work carried out by myself and Alison Clarke in London. Although the title refers to one exemplification of this trend, this paper is actually concerned with the trend as a whole and as it appears in the ethnography. Quite apart from this dress, grey and black have marched to the fore. Indeed black itself is equally iconic as the backdrop to modern dress. If by chance any other colour tries to get a look in, the fashion magazines will say oh `brown is the new black' or `green is the new black', actually though its now become pretty clear that for most of the time black is the new black.

It was, however, specifically the little black dress that started my own ruminations upon the topic. I guess my desire to write such a paper started when as a parent organising my daughter's birthday parties. If you have a 12 year old girl and you are organising some kind of a party or a disco in London you can pretty much bet that they will all, and I mean all, turn up in very similar little black dresses. This might simply be a reflection of how 12 years olds are very anxious about getting embarrassed and lack confidence. But are these the factors that apply also to the degree to which other older women seem to rely upon this foundational garment? Certainly when it comes to wearing black more generally, there are days when colleagues, friends and other groups of older women seem almost as beholden to this colour as do these children

But what finally prompted the writing of this paper, was a further extension of these observations. Having become reconciled to the evidence that both men and women had collapsed into drabness for everyday wear I still expected a kind of `Hawaiian shirt' lifting of these constraints when on holiday, with the expectation that here at least there people would relax their sartorial codes and embrace a more adventurous field of colour. Well for a while this seemed true, but then I was starting to find that my fellow tourists were bringing out the same dull drab clothes on holiday that they were wearing

at home - just more interesting messages on the T shirts. But at least I felt that if holiday clothes had also become drab, the last refuge of colour would indeed be the beach and the swimsuit, with at least some desire to `fit in' when snorkling over a coral reef. So the decision to write this paper can be precisely timed. It came when taking a family holiday on a beach in Mexico. I had my novel and my drink and was relaxing under a beach umbrella. This was quite a European resort and the people around me were probably Dutch, Swedish and English with a few Americans. Anyway, after a while, I started looking around me and what actually caught my eye was that every single bikini or swimsuit as far as my eye could see was – you guessed it - black. At that point I decided that surely if the anthropologist could turn detective, I might not be able to stem this tide, but might at least find the culprit.

INTERROGATING THE FIRST SUSPECT – CAPITALISM

The vast majority of books on clothing are concerned with fashion, and thereby with the fashion industry. So the history of fashion is often collapsed into the history of the industry itself. The model underlying such works is made clear in the general argument of Fine and Leopold (1993: 93-137, 219-237). Each major commodity such as food or clothing exists within a vertical system by which to understand consumption we must also understand production. In the clothing system, fashion is the primary link between them, both driving demand and driving supply. Books certainly exist on the industry itself as a commercial form (e.g. White and Griffiths 2000, Rath 2002), but by far the largest group of writings is based on the history of the fashion designer as an influence again on both production and consumption. This is where the `little black dress' is hunted down and attributed to the influence of key individuals, usually from Paris, or part of some particular trend as with simplicity (e.g. Arnold 2001: 17-22).

The problem with this argument is how to establish its credibility other than as simplistic conclusion based upon deju vu? That is to say, having seen that the world has gone black, we simply locate particular designers who promoted this trend and assume they are responsible for it. The problem being that this does not allow for the possibility that this trend developed despite rather than because of design. A more credible way of examining this question is to acknowledge that we are indeed looking at a huge business, a major element of modern capitalism, and that to make the case a convincing one we have to find some logic that links the interests of this industry with black as a result or effect of this trend. This is precisely where the argument starts to look much less plausible. Indeed the evidence against it can be seen on every high street. If the fashion business was a largely monopolistic concern and if there were efficiency gains to be had by simplifying the products themselves then one could envisage such a logic, analogous to the famous claim of Henry Ford for his model T cars `they have any colour they like as long as its black'. But irrespective of whether this quote is apocryphal for Henry Ford, it simply doesn't reflect the fashion industry today. So far from being monopolistic, this is one of the most diversified industries of the modern world, and it is relatively easy for small outfits with limited capital to start up either as producers or retailers. The main chains and designers may dominate, but there are quite a few of them, and they exist in a state of clear competition one with another.

In such a distributed and competitive market the struggle for each is to find some niche, some element, that will give them a particular character. It is fine for one or two

firms such as Armani to establish themselves with a certain ideal of the classical that is indeed largely grey to black, but precisely because companies such as Armani occupy this niche, it is necessary for others to find alternatives. On the whole the high street is full of companies, ranging from the `united colours of Benetton' to the creative and provocative mix that festoons a shop such as Morgan or Zara. In short, the fashion industry has to be based on difference rather than homogeneity. From Haute Couture to prêt a porter to the smallest independent producers and retailers there is a desperate desire to find something, preferably different and novel, that can capture the market and lead to shoppers feeling there is missing from their wardrobes an item of clothing that this company can supply. So the primary evidence for this industry not being the culprit here is simply a comparison between what is on sale and what is being worn. I have not met anyone as yet who would disagree with the general qualitative assessment that the styles and colours being worn as one goes to work each day, or looks around the street, or even goes out in the evening are far more homogenised that what is available in the shops. The shops have become more homogenised over the years, as in the retailscape at Selfridges mentioned above. But this seems to follow rather than force the trends in what people wear. It is simply that attempts to create distinction in colour and printing do not sell sufficiently over the long term.

I just can't see any commercial logic in the clothing business as a whole which makes black the way to profit - the industry needs a diversity of niches to exploit, not just homogeneity. If anything the entire population going into black is more likely to put business finances into the red! Sure, they can probably cope with it, Armani does pretty well out of grey, but if this is some kind of business plot, its not an obvious one. The problem in decoding clothing is that it is simply too easy to argue that what people wear must follow from what commerce supplies. We have to be dragged into the opposite corner of seeing what is supplied as a surrender to what people are prepared to wear, but the logic of modern women's clothing with respect to its ever increasing homogenisation represented in the decline of colour and printing certainly seems to imply that the driving force has been the customer not the couturier.

INTERROGATING THE SECOND SUSPECT - HISTORY

So it looks like the simplest and most deterministic theory, that a shift in consumption merely reflects a shift in production will not do. We need to find some other candidates in the literature. Is there perhaps some historical precedent, some other period in which clothing leached out colour and print? Fortunately there has recently been published a volume which seems as though it could be a clear precedent for our current situation. The book is called *Men in Black* and was published by John Harvey in 1995. Firstly this is useful because it discusses some other theoretical accounts. Flugel (1976) it seems had already argued that the move to black was a kind of egalitarian, democratic response rejection of the ancien regime by the bourgeois of the period. This sounds credible, but unlikely to work for the contemporary case. If anything the colourful years of the 1960/70s were a genuine repudiation of traditional class hierarchies, and in parallel with this earlier case led by the bourgeois middle class rather than the working class of the time. In general we have seen a return to a political conservatism since then and more recently a return to greater inequalities in countries such as the UK and US. There is a more subtle version of this argument, in which we can see men through the 18th and 19th century giving up the overt display of wealth and power and adopting the measured and perhaps more menacing uniform of a generic

power that does not need to be specified. Once again, however, there is little reason to see the little black dress and subsequent general adoption of black by women as related in any way to this. There might be a few `power suits' within the black genre but those little girls at their parties, and the adults at theirs neither seem to desire nor achieve this sense of menacing empowerment.

These are not, in any case, the theories that Harvey uses for the period of his concern. His book is devoted to the rise of black amongst men in Victorian Britain. Just as we might finger key designers today as having a certain influence, the dandies of that time seem to have adopted a certain ascetic and minimalist appearance which made black fashionable, the elaborations being in style rather than colour. But Harvey also rejects the idea that the mass adoption of black by the middle class was particularly influenced by the stylistic antics of the elites. He sees a greater legacy in the centuries of adoption by the church of an association between black and sobriety and seriousness, that gave black a certain gravitas, which is reflected in Shakespearean characters such as Hamlet and Othello and evident in the sobriety of the male figure in Dutch art. In effect there is a kind of Durkheimian movement whereby the social norms of the middle class take on in a secular version the values of the church (Harvey1995: 147). But the catalyst that really crystallised the association with black was, according to Harvey, the bridge between the secular and the religious that emerged in the Victorian cult of the funerary. This is evident in the obsessions of Tennyson and other cultural `spokespersons' of the period, but importantly these reflect a genuine social pressure, such that men were the gender that attended funerals with some frequency occupying a significant place in many people's lives at that time.

The concern in this book is largely with men rather than women, since he argues for this period that in general `in the protestant countries especially, it appears, strains of asceticism were liable to blanch women as they darkened men'. (ibid: 1995:211). Thanks to many television reconstructions of novels written during this period we have become increasingly familiar with scenes from this time composed of men in black dancing with women in white who appear, in general, rather cold embodiments of a certain wifely virtue. Although this white has a rather ghostly aspect, at least in funerary custom the genders blend, since Victoria herself embodied the vision of endless mourning that gave rise to that quintessence of black we think of as `jet black' as jet dominated as an accessory for mourning. What this book demonstrates is that there are clear precedents for the phenomenon this paper is concerned to explain. There are indeed other periods in which clothing leached and bleached.

What does not follow, however, is the conclusion that these precedents give us the key to explaining the current example of these shifts in acceptable sartorial codes. To take the specific instance of Harvey's book, this obsessive funerary concern is an unlikely candidate for the little black dress today. I doubt that the women I meet at parties are trying to dress as though for a funeral - some of the parties I go to are bad, but not usually that bad! Rather what we have to learn from these works is that there are likely to be some quite specific factors at play in any particular instance of this phenomenon and that we should not assume that there is anything in common between any two such instances as separated by time and space. One legacy of the extensive writings that once dominated the anthropology of clothing based on semiotic theory (e.g. Barthes 1985 Sahlins 1976) has been the acknowledgment that in a world in which some societies adopt black for funerals and others white, it is the internal logic of the clothing system that has to be accounted for, and not at all some deep `psychological'

predilection based on the property of any colour for humanity as a biological species. It is perhaps more sensible to recognise that black is a colour that is going to have many diverse connotations and periods of ascendancy. There is not necessarily going to be a strong link between the sartorial habits of Dickens and of the modern teenage Goth, even if both do favour black.

INTERROGATING THE THIRD SUSPECT – MODERNISM

For my third candidate I want to turn to the wonderful title of what unfortunately turns out to be a slightly disappointing book *Chromophobia* by David Batchelor (1999). The great thing about the title is it makes a direct case for a recent decline in colour, a leaching out of colour from the world that can apply to the rise of both white and black, and also that it points the finger at one clear culprit, which is the rise of modernism and modernist minimalism. It provides a number of instances both in literature and art which seems to suggest this pervasive fear and dislike of colour and its increasing condemnation as vulgarity. The book also does a usefully job of noting that there exists opposing tendencies, a Chromophilia, that can be found for example in a certain film tradition stretching from the *Wizard of Oz* to the recent *Pleasantville*. Beyond this, however, the volume lacks the convincing scholarship that can be used to explain the phenomenon.

Fortunately, in contrast to *Chromophobia,* there is a book with a less succinct title, but quite excellent in its substantive content called, *White Walls and Designer Dresses* by Mark Wigley (1995). This makes precisely this argument for the centrality of leaching to the modern movement, but does so with considerable and impressive scholarship and through making an unexpected, but convincing, link between the histories of clothing and of architecture. Wigley starts from the pervasive presence of white walls in modern architecture. His argument is that these are supposed to be neutral and silent but actually speak volumes about the attempt to assert certain hegemonic values through modernism. He shows how white, and I think we can add black, is not a neutral absence but often an assertive presence. Tracing back its source, he sees a powerful influence upon architects such as Le Corbusier to be found in earlier dress reform movements. It was in dress reform that there developed a clear ideal of rationalism applied to aesthetic form. Rationality seen as both the ends and means of civilisation itself proclaims white as a form of purity, the hygenic, the pristine. This allows for a pure utility, that which is assertively functional to emerge from mere decoration. But behind this in turn lies another set of oppositions. The dress reform movement proclaimed an opposition that was repeated in the architectural literature between decoration and function.

While this is common to both genres, there are also specific associations within the field of clothing. Decoration in dress is associated by the reformers with the phenomenon of fashion, and this in turn with superficiality and with women. These associations formed part of a larger logic by which rationalism as the civilising tendency is seen as a robust male endeavour that needs to overcome a whole series of what in contrast are seen as primitive and superficial tendencies. Indeed in its more extreme forms, colour and print become associated not only with a kind of non-civilised and irrational world, as illustrated in naïve or primitivist art assumed to be analogous with the pre-modern, but also with the dangerous, the uncontrolled, the images of the drugged and the bestial (also in Batchelor 1999). Women are seen as the conservative force retaining a less civilised and superficial fascination with colour and the decorative.

So the key modern thinkers and writers within modernism such as Loos, Gropius and Le Corbusier all claim function as precisely that which fashion is not. Function is deep and universal and impervious to the frippery of the decorative `the Modern movement is the architectural equivalent of the masculine resistance to fashion' (Wigley: 1995: 119). So both by direct influence and by analogy modernism is seen as the nineteenth century dress reform movement applied to architecture. It is then in turn the modern movement as applied to architecture that consolidates a certain minimalist aesthetic which is fostered by white and black and appearance reduced to its basic elements and functions which also is the means to escape the transience and vulgarity of mere fashion.

How then does this apply today? Well so far from being explained by this account, in some ways the little black dress seems to be an ironic mockery of the pretensions of modernism. The greatest fear of the modernists would be that their ideals would themselves be turned into mere fashion. Yet today the minimalism associated with modernism no longer retains its connotations of science, universalism and rationality, rather it has become almost entirely identified with style. As Wigley points out the modernist were simply unable to see that white walls are also a form of decoration, that architecture as also dress, is always also the production of surfaces (ibid: 362). The little black dress, though not white certainly does exploit the stylistic cool of modernism. But it does so unashamedly as surface, as fashion and as female, in complete repudiation of the now failed quest for scientific modernism. Unlike the arguments from historical precedents such as Harvey, we can acknowledge a considerable direct impact of modernism on the instance of colour leaching that is the subject of this paper. The success of the modern movement through the twentieth century has surely considerably impacted upon the acceptability of the little black dress as stylish. The sense of Italian cool that may have helped in the vanguard of these developments was one of a number of variants of the modern movements impact upon popular culture.

So we need to tease out here a complex effect. On the one hand accepting that modern leached clothing is experienced as stylish partly through the influence of modernism in general, but at the same time clearly distancing ourselves from some of the possible correlates of this trajectory. What we have is clearly modernism in its aspect as style and fashion and not at all an expression of the values of the modernist theorists, such as rationality and utility. Furthermore we have to be careful of the dating here. The modernist movement was established as an architectural style from the 1920's. In furnishing, for example, we see a rapid manifestation of these ideals in the kind of chrome and glass functional look that remains largely unchanged as the style of `modern' furniture in the high street today. When we turn to clothing, by contrast, we can see a whole series of changes and shifts over the last eighty years all of which had modernism available in the background. So it is not at all clear why the specific changes that are the subject of this chapter, that is developments in the last thirty years, which were preceded by a riot of colour and decorative form in clothing, should have occurred at this particular time. There is nothing in the links to modernism that account for it. So with modernism we have a relevant background applied in an almost ironic and unexpected manner, but one that does little to explain the specific questions posed by this paper.

INTERROGATING THE FINAL SUBJECT – THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF CONSUMPTION

It was important to interrogate these earlier suspects because it was otherwise quite plausible that what we see today should best be understood as the outcome of certain deep historical transformations, the expression of some clear set of values, or simply an outcome of the interests of industry. But what if none of these suspects seem sufficiently guilty? If they all have alibis that suggest they are largely, though perhaps not completely, innocent, then we need to instead focus upon the phenomenon itself. Instead of looking elsewhere, we need to encounter the phenomenon directly and see if this encounter provides insights that can be the foundation for a more satisfactory explanation. As is commonly the case if we want to understand some aspect of contemporary consumption, then it is that activity itself we need to explore. Most of my own work on consumption has been centred upon this larger argument for the benefits of an ethnographic approach to the topic

In a recent article in the journal fashion theory (Clarke and Miller 2002) Alison Clarke and myself presented some findings based on an ethnography that we carried out in North London during 1994-5. The fieldwork was conducted for a year mainly around a single street (called here Jay Road) in North London (for the setting see Miller 1998, 2001, Clarke 2000, 2001). The research methodologies included participant observation relating to both formal shopping (Miller) and informal provisioning (Clarke) and supplementary interviews. In this more recent paper we focused upon the specific topic of shopping for clothes. We argued that the starting point for accounting for contemporary clothing seemed to be an experience common to most of those we worked with, which was a considerable anxiety with regard to selecting them; best expressed by the image of a woman confronting a well stocked wardrobe before getting dressed, with a despairing sense of `not having a thing to wear'.

One of the extended examples presented in Clarke and Miller 2002 was a woman – Charmaigne who sets out to buy a floral dress, in a deliberate attempt to expand out of her conventional wardrobe and to try and associate herself with this other genre of clothing. By following her around the shops we can actually watch her increasing anxiety when it comes to making a choice that will lead to her expressing a more distinct sartorial identity in public outside of the arena of what are experienced now as simple and safe minor variants upon the core of printless and colourless clothing. What emerges from cases such as this is that there remains a considerable desire to wear different colours and prints, and yet at the moment of purchase women seemed unable to bring themselves to fulfil their own desires. The general anxiety about what to wear increases to the degree to which the clothing appears at all distinctive and thereby unconfirmed by all the other clothing being worn by one's peers or even the strangers that form the crowd.

So the paper starts by presenting the ethnographic evidence for this state of a pervasive anxiety with regard to selecting clothing and the conclusion that the more women departed from this core safety net of jeans and black clothing the more anxiety and lack of confidence emerged. Secondly the paper followed through the various forms of support that women find in order to give themselves confidence in making their particular selections of clothing. These start from intimate family support such as the opinions of sisters or within mother-daughter relations, and extend to taking a

friend shopping and getting advice from peers. The ethnography suggested that where these were not available or sufficient, women might turn to the development of semi-institutional support, such as catalogues and companies. An extended illustration is given of the reliance upon one such company `Colour Me Beautiful' (see also Grove-White 2001) which claims to have developed a kind of science of colour that tells an individual which colours it is appropriate for them to wear and how to construct a wardrobe based around mixing and matching these specific colours and not others.

So based on an ethnographic encounter we come to a perhaps not terribly surprising result, that the increasing emphasis upon black, grey and plain unadorned clothing at the expense of colourful, decorated or printed fabrics is based on consider anxiety about making any kind of fashion statement that strays too far out of what has become conventionally accepted norms. Red seems the only colour `robust' enough to survive this decline since other colours leach or bleach to form either dark versions such as brown or grey that shades off into black, or pastels that shade off into white. But in a way this tells us more about how these changes have come about than why. Finding anxiety at the root of this refusal of distinction does not tell us anything about why women are so anxious, and why this might be more the case now, than say thirty years ago.

For this reason the conclusion to that paper turns to a much more general trend that may properly constitute an explanation of the phenomenon. We argue that what we have uncovered is the combination of two forces; one long term and one short term. The long term trend could be identified, not so much with modernism, as with modernity. The condition of modernity as analysed by Habermas (1987) is one in which we become decreasingly convinced by the authority of institutions and rules that previously determined how we should act. We can no longer say simply that this is our 'custom' or our 'religion' Instead we have to face up to the degree to which we are making up our own moral rules. We become, as individuals, increasingly burdened with the task of creating normativity for ourselves. This is even more difficult given our increasing self-awareness, that this is what we are engaged in. All of this pressure to create our own normativity in turn produces a tremendous desire for self-reassurance (for details of this argument see Miller 1994: 58-81).

In other words where we can no longer rely on conventions to tell us what to do, and have to decide this for ourselves, we turn increasingly to each other for reassurance and support that we are making the right choices. The more these choices are important to us, the more we seek this support. Parents for example can be seen to spend a considerable amount of their time and energy trying to find out what other parents do in similar circumstances to themselves, and therefore to see if their actions as parents re typical. They may then decide to do something different, but it is almost always with reference to a norm that they have established exists. In some countries such as Norway this is particularly clear, as in Gullestad 2001 ethnography of this activity. In other countries where social appropriation of previous moral forces such as religion are less evident, there is a more an individual quest for support over choices to be made, often using commercial sources such as magazines and media representation to shore up ones individual decision making in the absence of sufficient social networks.

With respect to the recent world of fashion and clothing, we can see all these general trends and their consequences exemplified in microcosm. The last three decades have seen a clear decline in what had become the traditional form of fashion authority that is an authoritative claim as to what fashion is, for a given year, in terms of lengths of skirts or colours of the season. This went together with a democratising of individuals' relationship to fashion and greater freedom to create particular niches by the population of consumers rather than merely the industry; a trend manifested in punk and other sub cultural movements. This has coincided for women with the period in which feminism has become gradually accepted as a movement by which women feel entitled to reflect upon and reject assumed authority, particularly male authority, as a determinant of who they should be and what they should do. Feminism asserts the right to determine for oneself the choices to be made about one's life as an individual woman.

These more recent struggles for freedom and emancipation are very much in the tradition of the whole modern movement as a child of the enlightenment which has had at its core the constant struggle for emancipation from customary authority and an assertion of the rights of the individual as found in liberal philosophy. As is commonly the case, however, such positive movements tend to have unexpected and unintended consequences and in this case the more recent freedoms of the feminist movement exacerbate the effects of longer struggles which can be characterised as the condition of modernity. This brings us back to Habermas's point about the increasing dependence upon ourselves to make up the criterion by which we live and the burden of this freedom in increasing anxiety about whether we are doing this right, given the loosening of previous forms of authority that we relied upon to take such decisions for us.

So the evidence accumulated from the ethnography when appraised in the light of certain theoretical and philosophical writings lead us to what is taken to be the final suspect and indeed the culprit behind the particular crime that is being solved. Surprisingly the culprit is the possibility and experience of freedom. For older women it was particularly the 1970-90s that brought a new consciousness of freedom with feminism's assault on traditional ideas of femininity and gender roles. As one might expect this new freedom that feminism created about who you want to be inevitably brings with it a huge increase in that particular form of modernist anxiety, of just not knowing who you want to be.

This is why the shoppers are less and less confident about making a clear choice. They want to buy something strong and bright, but they just can't bring themselves to do it. We live not in a risk society, but in what we might better call the no-risk society. What we do is pretend that choosing shades of grey is more subtle and sophisticated - an intelligent choice. We say to each other we are all very cool and sophisticated. But of course this is nonsense. We would much rather be making bold choices, but (speaking now as a man), we just don't have the balls to actually do so, because of the burden of freedom. Because we are defensive about being held responsible for the sartorial statement we have thereby made. We simply have no way of knowing if this was actually the right choice. We can only hope for social or institutional support, or otherwise rely upon conventionality itself. This is not really a moral issue, it is the corollary of a necessary contradiction. You cannot have democratic liberty and equality

without a concomitant sense of anxiety that is the precise result of that experience of freedom. It is above all the emancipation that was achieved through feminism that has left women with this huge burden of freedom and this further accentuation of much older fears and concerns over social embarrassment. But if the alternative is a return to those older forms of authority; of the constraints of officially sanctioned sartorial codes, and an unwarranted respect for the voice of industry elites about what fashion 'is', then it may well seem that an anxiety that requires still more shops to be visited before making a choice, or that makes a full wardrobe appear to have `nothing in it', may, on reflection, be a price worth paying. Contrary to the expectations of the 1960's and 1970's we have excavated a logic which explains why a free world is likely to be a drab world.

CONCLUSION

What conclusions does this case-study of the anthropologist as detective have for contemporary studies of consumption more generally? The various candidates that were put forward as possible `villains' in the line-up from which, as fashion victim, I have tried to identify the culprit, could be also described as a round up of `the usual suspects.' In most examples of contemporary consumption they are likely to make their appearance in similar identification parades. While capitalism was relatively innocent on this occasion there are countless other crimes of causation in which it stands properly convicted. History is another hardened criminal properly held responsible for all sorts of contemporary practices. In recent time modernism has become almost the archetypical villain, accused of a whole battery of crimes, many of which I suspect it is innocent of, so perhaps we are not surprised to see its association with black today as somewhat natural. Other disciplines such as psychology and consumer behaviour studies have their own `police files' of common culprits.

The argument of this paper is that, while becoming more common, a particular method of investigation is still not nearly as routine as one might expect, given that it is often evoked as important. One of the most effective means of rounding up suspects accused of crimes of consumption is surely that of ethnography. It is rather more time consuming and difficult than taking culprits that are already well documented from previous convictions. Of course we might have located `freedom' lurking in the background somewhere without resource to this particular methodology, but somehow, I think it is much more likely that clues will emerge that will set us on the right trail when we are prepared to walk the streets looking for them. Of course, which ever criminal we finger will have had accomplices. The ethnographic evidence needs to be considered in the light of other contributions. Commerce has some influence, the history of black in fashion with respect to mourning and modernity may still have some bearing on the case. The more specific and recent history traced by Edelman (1998) and others with regard to the factors that made black appear mature, chic, serious and seductive are still more relevant. But while the original move to black from the 1920s to 1950's may have been a repudiation of the `merely pretty' there are other factors behind the popularity of grey and black in our new century that cannot be understood from past and precedent, but only through direct encounter.

In this case the main evidence came from the direct confrontation with forms of anxiety that needed to be accounted for first, and are simply not the same anxieties that were prominent prior to modern feminism, before the larger questions could be answered,

and this is often the best way to proceed. If we want to understand the major trends in consumption, it often wont be from the easy and obvious suspects. Mostly it wont be from studying commerce, or modernism, or some force that determines what we buy. The understanding of consumption will come from the experiences of the population and the kind of generalisations that social science can make about those experiences and what underlies them. We can only understand consumers through coming to see the world from their point of view as a social body. Surely we have seen enough movies to know that a good detective cannot just work from an office - we have to hit the street.

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