

The discussion over the secondhand clothing trade in developing countries has long been a heated and complex conversation. As western consumers donate more clothing than charitable organizations can sell in retail, most of the donated items are disposed and sold at bulk prices to secondhand clothing dealers or wholesalers¹. This transaction has been criticized negatively as originally donated clothing turns into extra profit for western charities. Yet, overwhelming pressure from environmental concerns cloud the criticism with current trends of “textile recycling”. Viewing the trade of secondhand clothing as positive way to reuse and keep garments out of landfills.

Such “textile recyclers” sort the purchased bulk material into grades of clothing, exporting higher quality material to Central American countries and lower grade materials to African and Asian countries. Once sorted, the shipments are then compressed into bales ranging from 100 pounds to 2,000 pounds. The bales are wrapped in waterproof plastic, tied with plastic straps, placed in containers, and shipped². Upon arrival, local secondhand clothing street vendors examine the bales. Usually unable to open any of the waterproof plastic, buyers purchase at risk. Given the higher price for a sorted bale verses that of an unsorted bale³. These street vendors will then display the secondhand clothing at the local market or shopping area.

This process of packaging and compressing mass quantities of clothing rendered some interesting visual aesthesis which initially sparked my curiosity in the trade of secondhand clothing. This interest in the packaging lead to the creation of poly-filled vinyl t-shirt forms. These forms are lined with printed fabric which displays web searched images of the secondhand clothing trade. Then puckered with plastic zip ties to emulate the plastic straps used in the shipment of the clothing. By constructing these “t-shirt bales” with traditional apparel techniques, I hope to cast a light upon the secondhand clothing trade and its negative economic effects on local textile industries in developing countries.

As the secondhand clothing trade has expanded hugely both in economic power and global reach. Its popularity has allowed for clothes to be bought and sold cheaply and provides a desperately needed jobs for many in developing countries. However, the trade has been criticized as another factor in slowing development and economic growth. Secondhand clothing trade creates small, non-formal businesses which are not taxed and rarely employs more than one person per vendor. While a thriving local textile business would contribute to the economy in many ways: formation of a workforce, pays taxes which can be invested in local infrastructure and education, and moves countries away from being dependent on western aid⁴.

Giving aid and promoting growth in developing countries is very complicated and there are no simple answers. But what is evident is that the trade of secondhand clothing often has more negative impacts than good on the local economy. Many times Westerners feel an urge to move away from mass consumption and think that giving to

a lesser country is the progressive answer. Yet, as proven above, physical donation tends to be more harmful than helpful.

¹ Jenss, Heike. "Secondhand Clothing." In *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: West Europe*, edited by Lise Skov, 232–237. Oxford: Berg, 2010. Accessed April 25, 2016.

² Ibid, 233.

³ "Global Thrift Store." *Journeyman Pictures*. Wild Angle Productions, 14 Apr. 2014. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

⁴ Griffin-Angus, Mariah. "Why Sending Your Old Clothes to Africa Doesn't Help." *The Huffington Post*. The Huffington Post, 25 June 2012. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.