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Non-specific: ubiquity, invisible labor and the moving blanket
By Callen Zimmerman
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“A textile is not simply a binary system of spun, twisted or spliced fibres, but first and foremost a result of complex interactions between resources, technology and society.” Eva Anderson Strand

The crash of metal on asphalt as the back of a truck lowers its lift, a grunt of exertion, a buoyant step on the platform, the shuffling of work boots in calculated motion, the crumbled sigh of fabric folding falling on itself. This observed situation is typical to the daily ins and outs of the moving blanket, a complicated dance to aid objects of importance in transit. Even if the name doesn’t ring a bell, you’ve seen it, perhaps even admired a neat stack of colorful blankets flanking the open back of a U-haul, providing visual respite amidst the labor and chaos of transition. If you count yourself among the 50 million Americans who will move this year, perhaps you have found aid in a moving blanket or two. Moving blankets, known by many different names, elevator pads, moving pads, are most commonly found in an ultramarine blue paired with a requisite white zig zag top stitching and a ¼” polyester binding.

While living abroad in France, I found myself entranced by a stack of them while traveling the streets of Paris. I stood, mouth agape, eyes fixated on simple column of red blankets in the open back of a truck. This moment of recognition, although personally striking to me, is not unique, but rather a common experience; admiring something simple in a new light, partaking in the pleasure of reflection on that which we did not consider before. This moment allows the viewer to encounter the frame and lense with which they view the world. What do we notice, what fails to catch our eye, what do we care for and why?

The study of materiality is at once a compounding of these moments, and a delving into the deep work of unearthing how material “works as a mechanism for social reproduction and ideological dominance” as Daniel Miller writes in Material Culture; Why Some Things Matter. Culturally, humans understand the affective power of textiles, through the development of individual relationships with material goods, perhaps we have favorite shirts, inherited family heirlooms, or we have stood too long ogling at blankets. I am moved to consider ubiquitous textiles because they are often located in a utilitarian context, noticeably absent from the holdings of museums they are tasked with polishing, protecting, and reinforcing. Used domestically and in the workplace by those who ensure safe passage of art objects, by musicians who sound proof their garages, by filmmakers wrapping their equipment to travel to the next set, moving blankets exist outside purview for “care”. Serving as a modern day utilitarian quilt, moving blankets are often taken as unremarkable. They exist in a canon of ubiquitous textiles, akin to common objects one might find in a dollar store; the white crew T-Shirt, assorted white athletic socks, cut-end cotton wet mop-head, size 24. The aforementioned goods are defined only by their basic product type, belonging to sub-set of consumer textiles I will refer to as non-specific textiles. These textile items lack defining characteristics from each other, thus transgressing common categories and definitions.
**Nonspecific** (adj.) “Not particular, specific or definite.”

The term nonspecific was first used in the Journal of Sociology in 1968. Specific, on the other hand, was first recorded in use over 300 years before, in 1651, and stems from the Latin *specie* (noun), “in respect of specific form or manner, as opposed to generally.” Under these definitions, nonspecificity as applied to textiles can be understood to be a modern phenomenon.

Delineations of specificity are elucidated through use, coupled with cultural connotations of appropriateness; one would be hard pressed to find a moving blanket adorning a bed in the way an heirloom quilt might, or in a upscale boutique, featured amongst covetable items and decor for the home. With a lack of defining characteristics that establish one from another, the nonspecific object transgresses common categories such as luxury or workwear. Nonspecific items may also be classified by their relative ubiquity, for instance; everyone has a white T-Shirt. Semantically, these objects can be referred to using the same terminology for both grouping and individual items. Categorization of non-specific in turn affects the way the object is intellectualized, how it is produced (and by whom), who it is visible to, and ultimately, how it is disposed of. Nonspecific objects seem to be little noticed or considered, as the things that populate the backdrop of commonplace life, but do not craft deeper relationships with.

**Moving, Quilt**

The word quilt stems from the Latin “culcita” meaning ‘mattress’ (so ancient it has no date of origin), and was transposed to the Old French “cultie” in the 13th century. Quilts have often abetted humans through their wanderings, as elucidated through a close study of ancient objects. Some notable examples are an ivory carving of an Egyptian Pharaoh sporting a quilted mantle from the Temple of Osiris, Abydos circa 3490 BCE, and a quilted linen carpet uncovered from a Mongolian tomb from 100 BCE. The first use of quilts being used to aid objects in transit may very well be found in the practice of *Bojaki*, an ancient Korean art from the 14th Century (1392). During Korea’s Choson Dynasty inception, the practice of *Bojaki*, or the crafting of patch-worked covers devised to store and transport items, became widespread. The rich tradition includes precise and infinite methods of wrapping bolstered cloth with string. It history barrels on from there, as Beverly Lemire writes, “the evolution of the Western quilt culture is part of a broad global dynamic, beginning with the export of Indian quilts to Europe in the 1500s.”

Before the quilt was so strongly imbedded in American culture, it was itself an object wrapped up in global markets, traded across continents, its own history so obscure and so ancient it to is hard to dismantle. America’s adoption of the Quilt, as an object and symbol, is perhaps due to the fact the coincidences and certain technological advances, such as the expansion in the printed

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3 Ibid.
cottons industry during the 1870’s alongside the growth of the young nation. It is important to note that although quilts, and in particular patchwork quilts, are seen as historically frugal crafts, this was not always the case. Moreover, it is the “psychological appeal that no machine-made object could rival” that contributed to their popularity beyond the Industrial Revolution. Ironically, the moving blanket resembles one of the most opulent type of quilts, the whole cloth quilt. These large expanses of cloth were made up of laboriously produced cloth, then painstakingly hand quilted, and would have been available only to the illusoriously wealth.

One can credit the aforementioned technological developments of the Industrial Revolution with the sparking of a certain socio-economic mobility in newly settled European families, which, when paired with the desire for Western expansion in the United States via the Intercontinental Railroad, helped to develop the moving industry. Moving thus become “display[s] of the success of an emerging middle class.” What role did quilts play in this newly mobile generation, colonizing the American West? While providing physical comfort to families experiencing new climates and challenges, bits of cloth covered family heirlooms and wrapped remainders of European lineages. Despite this impressive and ancient history, the quilt was only seen as legitimate enough entity to have been given historical inquiry in the mid 20th century.

Quilts, (in instances outside of mass production for late capitalism) are not objects of the non-specific variety, they are particular and singular items that hold emotional charges, and carry histories through decades. Often bemoaned as craft or folkloric items, the 21st century has seen quilts contextualized within the purview of the art world thanks to exhibitions such as The Quilts of Gee’s Bend at the Houston Art Museum in 2002. Quilts are now artifacts worthy of study, (as evidenced by the four annual International Quilt Conferences held in the US alone), scholarship and academic inquiry. Also considered items of ‘utilitarian’ nature, they provide warmth in the colder months, and poised for symbolic utility, are often given as gifts to punctuate celebrations, births and marriages. Road maps of identity and lineage are built by the generational wear, tears and repairs of these objects as they serve their users in a multitude of ways. The potent combination of both process-heavy and object based production have resulted in a popular niche world of “art quilts”, whose purpose lies in their aesthetic quality, as well as a number of increasingly complex techniques.

Along these lines, quilts are also regarded as valuable tools with which to understand history, collected as anthropological artifacts in museums and used by scholars to understand class, royal families and alliances, and help to unearth histories of technological achievements as evidenced by the dyes, fibers, types and sizes of the fabrics used. Patchwork quilts tell stories, providing a reliquary of elements that describe individuals and communities from older times. Patches of cloth intended for quilts were sent and traded amongst friends and family members, often making their way in the mail alongside a story of the garment from whence they came.

9 Ibid.
11 Ibid, 11.
Throughout history, the implicit and explicit use of patterning has enabled quilts to subvert utility and occupy idle imaginations as well as serve as items which convey important information, from textiles that serve as Wedding Bands to those signaling safe passage for those on the Underground Railroad. Somewhere along the timeline of quilted material, the utility of movement emerged as a primary category for these objects. When comparing the hyper specific quilt and the non-specific moving blanket, I wonder if we can we trace the path from textiles as sacred objects, once so revered and cared for, to an era of disposability where ubiquitous textiles become so enmeshed in the fabric of our material world, that they become barely visible.

This change could very possibly have resulted as a byproduct of a global shift in the labor and resources needed to produce goods, a crucial turning point during the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840). Increased mechanization of formerly hand tended process fundamentally altered the way textiles were made, introducing the capacity for Mass Production. Cotton was a major driver for these innovations, alongside “iron, [both of] which are always associated with the Industrial Revolution...[their] output rose by one hundredfold or more.”\footnote{Charles More, \textit{Understanding the industrial revolution} (London: Routledge, 2000), 4.} The rise in production and demand for cloth-based commodities, spurred by the transition from a sustenance economy to a global market economy where “factory-made, store-bought clothes became increasingly available... clothing became less rarified.”\footnote{Elizabeth L. Cline, \textit{Overdressed: the shockingly high cost of cheap fashion} (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012), 20.} Humans quickly lost relationships to cloth once it stepped on the scene of the free market, through the transition from a sustenance economy to a market economy.\footnote{Ibid.} In a study done by the New York Times in 2008, researchers found, “those [items whose price] that dropped the most were basics like underwear and T-Shirts, by as much as 60 percent.”\footnote{Ibid., 32.} As the items we hold close to our bodies, the ones that surround us everyday, have become cheaper and cheaper, our relationship to them has become devalued and further abstracted. Edward Song explains Karl Marx’s theory on this matter, “goods are not owned by those who produce them, and their value does not lie in their usefulness but in their exchange value. Further, the commodities produced by capitalist production are fetishized, abstracted and detached from their real use in ways that create further confusion about their origins and value.”\footnote{Edward Song Edward Song is a dissertation fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, a dissertation fellow at the Center on Religion , accessed January 27, 2017, http://www.thesis.xlibx.info/th-political/10045-1-edward-song-edward-song-dissertation-fellow-the-institute-for-ad.php.}

With the influx of consumer textiles during the industrial revolution, items were deemed fit for certain categories and hyper specific uses, and exceedingly, certain social and economic classes. As Pierre Bourdieu discusses in \textit{Distinction}, “the eye is a product of history reproduced by education.” Through Bourdieu’s lens, the eye discerns which items fall into specific or nonspecific categories, led by historical thought, analysis and cultural conditioning.

\textbf{Made, Making}
To understand the movement of this commodity, it is imperative to attempt to piece together its production. Moving blankets are produced in the same fashion as quilts, three layers held together by stitching, comprised of materials with a more dubious origin. The top cloth options consist of a variety of types and relative qualities; ranging from non-woven polyester top cloth (usually made in China) to the “top-of-the-line” 100% cotton top cloth (made in the US). The stitching on the moving blanket is one of its defining characteristics, the requisite quilting is most often found in two variations; a zig zag or chevron pattern, or a wave like pattern. The middle layer, or batting, is comprised of ‘fill’, a recycled textile material.

At the center of a moving blanket, or what we might call “the meat”, the fill, is borne from scraps and recycled bits from the textile and fashion industries. The procuring, processing and production of the ‘fill’ is the most elusive element of aspect of a moving blanket. This fill is a product of an industry run by intermediaries known as “rag and bone men”, who convert clothing and textiles deemed undesirable by one group of people into new end use products.¹⁹ “A woolen jumper which lasts seven years can be recycled into a wool coating fabric, which can be made into an overcoat that is good for perhaps ten more years. The discarded overcoat can then go on to become a blanket, which can again yield service for ten years. The blanket can then be recycled as filling for furniture or bedding or perhaps as the insulation or soundproofing in a motor car. So a wool fiber, starting life on the back of a sheep, can have a useful life of 50 years before nothing more can be done with it.” ²⁰

Clothing exported from the Global West (North America and Europe), goes through many stages before entering the fill of an item such as a moving blanket. A typical journey might take this form: a T-Shirt leaves a drawer and heads to a nearby Salvation Army, there it is deemed unsuitable for sale, then undesirable by pickers for international markets (most notably in Asia and Africa), and finally slated for use by the ‘shoddy’ (rag) industry, an industry invented by Benjamin Law in England in 1813.²¹ In shredding factories, these forgotten items become rags for machines, and fill for any number of goods, ie: car doors, furniture upholstery etc. The raw material that comprises the fill will often circumnavigate the globe several times before it's shredded into the fluff that stuffs a moving blanket. This material and the labor that surrounds it occupy a liminal space between industries, as Lucy Norris notes, “the export of used Western clothing for the shoddy industry is arguably an international trade in waste products, but those involved deny this definition and conceive of it differently.”²²

Most commonly an industry of India, this fiber filling production is the site of transfer, mystique and labor, which is concurrently subverted through its inclusion as the stuffing of ubiquitous items such as the moving blanket, “ever ready to respond to challenges in the market to create new hybrid products whose origins remain deeply obscured.”²³ This shredding “creates the basis for new materials, but also releases their symbolic and social significance, so that fragility and reconstitution are made available again as warp and weft,” or in the case of the moving blanket,

²⁰ Ibid., 92.
²¹ Ibid.
²² Ibid., 93.
²³ Ibid., 102.
its padding; the very stuff which delineates it as both a quilt and a utilitarian item. My concern here lies in the translations from objecthood to non-objecthood that are presided over in these processes of transformation. As Lucy Norris notes, “it is not that people do not recognize that clothing is often transformed back to fibre and rags, but it is assumed that that constitutes the end of our concern for the social life of clothing.”

Is it our attachment to our clothes as extensions of ourselves that prohibits us from thinking through this trajectory? The framing of our decisions about what is and is not worthy of our care is conditioned by socially constructed relationships. Personal relationship to these items, and acknowledgement of them as personal, is a learned behavior, one that is constantly reckoned with. Bruno Latour discusses this reckoning as the attempted purification between subject and object, and the relative subjectivity with which we judge an object’s worth.

Nicholas Thomas argues, that it is the ability of the object to shift and change despite its stability as material, that affects “the category to which a thing belongs, the emotion and judgement it prompts”. This capacity functions simultaneously for clothing both as an object that holds identity for the former wearer, but also an object functioning in the socialized world, and it is objects such as these that “can suggest possible future uses or interpretations.”

Susanne Kuchler notes that “clothing’s very nature seems to lend itself to such secretive, underhand transformations during its processing”. This process of transformation is inherently one that might be difficult to stomach, with the production of identity so entangled up in clothing, that the process of the ripping, shredding, reconstituting, is in itself “iconoclastic”. In the production of this lesser cloth, the clothing is decoded, serving as evidence of our “culture’s potency”, and capacity to eviscerate the objects in question from the structures of history and culture. Kuchler states, “the materiality of cloth is essential for this translation of form, for it is in ambiguities of its material properties, its colour, its strength and fragility, its capacity to absorb, to reflect, to be cut and restitched that its transformative value lies.”

Similarly, the obfuscated origins of a moving blanket, might be so hard to track down or conceive of because it is comprised of so many various textiles and infinite processing, too many to enumerate, track or follow the histories of. But this process of thinking through its production, the processes of combination and transformation of cloth into new cloth is no less fruitful for its inevitable evasiveness. Perhaps objects such as moving blankets help to expose just how the process of “secondary transformation becomes productive…”

29 Norris, “Cloth That Lies,” 90.
30 Ibid., 102.
31 Ibid., 101.
that create new connectivities that are typical of the way the world is being constantly
reconstructed.”

Kuchler writes that “we generally assume that, like language, goods too tend, over time, to
become ‘merely symbolic’ or else merely functional.” Outlining Georg Simmel’s sliding scale of
value, Kuchler describes the phenomenon where “a high degree of sensitivity distinguishes very
precisely between the amount of satisfaction that an object provides, through which it becomes
comparable and exchangeable with other possessions and those specific qualities...beyond its
ordinary effects which may make it just as valuable to us and in that respect completely
irreplaceable” These specific qualities Simmel uses to discuss fashion, can be applied to
differentiate other objects, such as a quilt from a moving blanket. Satisfaction in this sense, can
mean that an object has multitudes of meaning, existing more towards the ‘symbolic’ side. For
quilts, this is an simple distinction, as a quilt provides a physical and emotional warmth and is
associated with domesticity, homeliness, and comfort. This type of inquiry is useful when
looking at quilts from a specific time period, where discrete materials or patterns can often be
placed within particular confines of space of time. With moving blankets, no such tracing is
possible. The moving blankets that populate the U-haul warehouses of American cities are one in
the same, zig-zag after zig-zag, shoddy fill made up from hundreds of prior garments, although
one may be a marigold orange and the other a faded camo. It is true in this sense that these
objects hold similar fragments - while the quilt tells its own story, the moving blanket hides it
between layers of polyester and stitching, infinite machines presiding over a multitude of
processes. These objects bear similarity in their propensity for protection. Protection is achieved
by virtue of presence, ie; “textiles ‘ward off’ physical dangers to both people and products... this
function is psychological as well as physical.” If “clothing is uniquely capable of elucidating
ideas about how we are and how we should behave...because it brings ideas of consumption up
against the realities of production”, do items composed of disposed clothing carry the same
weight? How do moving blankets tell the stories of their past lives? Are our discarded family
heirlooms stuffed into “the meat” of a moving blanket? What happens to the ideas and values
that constituting the frame of clothing when it is eviscerated from its previous contexts,
destroyed into bits of fluff, combed, matted, and placed within the confines of a moving blanket?
Does it disappear? What then?

Frame with the Frame

The effects of segmentation and differentiation of late capitalism help to devise the frame in
which we view the moving blanket in this context. Removed from consciousness, left folded in
the dark corner of a warehouse, this object is only called upon when utterly necessary, to wrap a
revered painting, to keep the scuff marks off the parlor floor, to conceal the mattress in the truck
bed. Within this idea of pure utility, objects such as the moving blanket are forcibly disconnected
from the lineage of production, severing any prior ties to people and machines that enable the
object’s willing into being, where it exists as a remarkable item in it of itself. With all of my
attempts to talk, see, and interview the factory owners and workers involved in a moving

32 Ibid., 83.
33 Susanne Kuchler, “Why are there Quilts in Polynesia?” in Clothing as Material Culture, ed. Susanne Kuchler and
Daniel Miller (New York: Berg, 2005), 175.
35 Kuchler, “Why are there Quilts in Polynesia?” 175.
blankets making, every demand was thoroughly ignored or discouraged, I believe purposefully so. Nevertheless, I can imagine all the people and their requisite stories that help bring a moving blanket into the world; their hands that process the discarded clothing, ship it out, tend to the machines that trim the thread and ship it out again. This removal of process is nothing new, in fact, it is a continuation of Marx’s nightmare, that we would be continually removed from the production and labor of the goods in our lives. Thus constituting our frame within a frame, where it becomes increasingly hard to view, interact and imagine objects outside of a commodity context, or even tether them to stable categories. Susanne Kuchler details how this relates to the specific objects at hand; “symbolic density, [Annette Weiner argued], literally weights objects down, restricting their potential or actual movement from one social or economic encounter to another, while other, often similar, objects lack density and thus ener rapid circulation as they are sold or lost... [I am interested] in the idea that objects can have relative ‘density’ or indexicality.”

The frenzied pace of our disassociation with the trivial lives of those that make our material possessions, and their afterlife of said objects is most apparent in the Fashion Industry, where hyper commodification has left human carnage and environmental destruction in its wake. With over 52 fashion seasons, and more being added every year, it is no surprise that some would rebuke the fashion system. The face, or rather non-face of this rebuttal is an adoption of nonspecific textiles, a truly ubiquitous look that makes up this burgeoning trend non-trend. Starting in 2013, the fashion world took notice of a predilection towards “nameless” and “brandless” items increasing popularity. Even iconic brands, such as Adidas, benefited from with this trend, when their most ubiquitous Stan Smith sneakers became a cult classic. As the trend forecasting firm K-hole describes, “if the rule is think different, being seen as normal is the scariest thing.” K-hole, defined this anti-fashion trend as the concept of normcore, a word that so captivated the social imagination that it was a finalist for the Oxford Dictionary’s Word Of The Year in 2014, tieing with “bae” and usurped by “vape”. When describing this word in an interview, K-hole mentions characteristics and mutability that resemble the inherent propensity of ubiquitous textiles, describing the attraction of normcore as its ability to elucidate this “new form of coolness that allows you to be as slippery and adaptable as possible”.

What does it mean that millennials (myself included) are interested in cladding themselves in clothing that is as unreadable, as ubiquitous as possible? Answers to this question are perhaps as impossible to deduce as it would be to attempt to place and understand each bit of fiber that went into the fill of a moving blanket. Perhaps this phenomenon of ubiquity and normalcy, is a radical reconstitution of Marilyn Strathern’s belief that “objects are revelatory”. I wonder if it is these encounters and reconstitutions, that allow us the awareness of the agency of these objects, as we

36 Kuchler, “Why are there Quilts in Polynesia?” 175.
41 Keane, “Signs are not the garb of meaning,” 193.
encounter secondary or tertiary iterations of the same materials, the newest commodity form at wider distances. What happens when we dismantle this frame?

The artist Patricia Belou interrogates this question with her video series, where viewers are transfixed by her hands moving swiftly as they pass over a series of what she calls Placebo Objects, her movements, calm, collected and intentional, have no real utility. Rather, they serve as a meditation on our state our conspicuous consumption, and “bring ideas of consumption up against the realities of production”.

Walking down my street in South Brooklyn, I see the hands of movers, running their fingers over the edges of a bourgeois families possessions, unfolding a blue blanket, securing it with tape, gingerly sliding objects into the back of a box truck. These movements, intentional and calculated, skilled and effective, are hard to distinguish against those of Patricia’s. I guess, looking back, the only difference is the frame.

Bibliography:


42 Kuchler, Susanne. “Why are there Quilts in Polynesia?” in Clothing as Material Culture, ed Susanne Kuchler and Daniel Miller (New York: Berg, 2005), 175


