

BUYING INTO THE NEOLIBERAL TRAP: VINTAGE NOSTALGIA AND THE SHOPPER'S DILEMMA

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Let's imagine Sally, the twenty-first-century American consumer. This shopper is equipped with individual likes, dislikes, a developing concept of her own personhood, and a natural inclination toward wanting to wear this concept well. She is out clothes shopping and meanders into a small thrift store. A flannel shirt catches her eye from its spot between other items three sizes too large, or else some strange color of brown or gray. She tries it on for size, and it fits perfectly. More notably, though, she's never seen anything quite like it. The shop is independently owned rather than a chain—not to mention this was their only shirt in this design. She won't see herself coming and going. This is Sally's shirt.

Imagine her a week or two later. This time, she enters a chain store like Urban Outfitters or Brandy Melville and finds their Vintage Line: that is, clothing manufactured to resemble that of thrift stores or smaller, boutique-like businesses. Amidst the throbbing bass of pop music and buy-one-get-one-half-off signs, there is a section of the store in which twenty-five different iterations of Sally's shirt hang. The flannels are faded, the jeans are reminiscent of 1970's and 80's silhouettes, and only one article of every piece is sold, simulating the "authentic thrifting" experience she had but a week ago. One might expect her to be turned off by such a conspicuous counterfeit of her experience, with small-brand aesthetics blithely adopted by big-brand designers. And yet, these clothing lines thrive. Vintage simulation seems to be contemporary fashion dynamite. I find myself noticing the trend nearly everywhere, popping up in more and more chain stores, worn by more and more of the Sally's of today's marketplace. And I feel it in myself—I like it too. There is something so distinctly appealing and cool about this big-brand trend from the position of an American consumer. I can only wonder why, despite our relative cognizance of the pretend game, do we like it so much?

It's worthwhile to explore the appeal of vintage clothing in the first place before we come to an understanding of why its big-brand simulation thrives. This appeal, while manifested in the high-waisted jeans and graphic T-shirts, is one I suspect goes beyond physicality and taps into a deeper-rooted nostalgia.

It thus becomes important to consider just how far our economic environment extends into our collective psyche. In the article "Neoliberalism and Psychological Ethics," psychologist Jeff Sugarman introduces the idea that our new economic sphere is doing nothing short of "reformulating personhood, psychological life, moral and ethical responsibility, and what it means to have selfhood and identity" (104). The economic shift Sugarman refers to is neoliberalism, the breed of capitalism

characterized by a “radically free market in which competition is maximized, free trade [is] achieved through economic deregulation [and] privatization of public assets . . . and monetary and social policies [are] congenial to corporations” (104). But, as Sugarman contends, neoliberalism is much weightier than just economic policy. By extension, the state of the modern Sally is such that she views *herself* as enterprise cascading into what Sugarman, using Richard Sennett’s words, says is a “corrode[d] character” (103). By jumping from one career to the next and not forming character “through discovering and defending communal values and civic virtues” (106-107), we forgo the possibility of ever truly developing a “sustained narrative” (106) of ourselves.

Neoliberalism within the clothing industry seems to have, in fact, generated a paralleled loss. As Sugarman states, citing Susie Orbach, “The buying and wearing of brands has become our way to belong, find our place, and lend coherence to our identities” (106). Less and less often, clothes shopping gives the experience of an individualized “sustained narrative,” in which we let our likes, dislikes, and inklings play until we find our way to a special item. The feeling that Sally experienced—we’ve bought our shirt—is fading. Instead, we’re buying *everyone else’s shirt*, living everyone else’s narrative, walking everyone else’s footsteps into a store that looks the same and plays the same pop track in all its five hundred locations. Our narrative is neither individualized nor sustained. As neoliberalism extends into shopping, our primary activity is to jump from promotion to promotion of what’s trendy in order to polish the marketable enterprise of ourselves ad infinitum.

The appeal of vintage clothing becomes clearer. Collective gravitation toward vintage is more than fashion “coming full circle;” it is fashion coming full circle for a reason. Indeed, I am inclined to believe that things do not boomerang back unless here is some collective yearning for them. It seems that the “sustained narrative,” the feeling that we possess a coherent self-identity, is exactly what we’re missing as people in today’s shopping world. Vintage and boutique-like style has made its way into the current American imagination by means of nostalgia for a sense of individuality that economic environments of the past once offered. It does not even matter if we were alive for such a time. An invocation of nostalgia for an age without neoliberalism is inherent in the pieces themselves. The single-copy flannels and the faded or strangely cut jeans offer a sense of personalized choice and uniqueness that can appeal to anyone living in today’s market. Buying into this trend is our way of satiating such a nostalgia: we temporarily lay our mourning to rest by clinging to a sense of identity that was once more accessible.

And yet, it seems necessary to take one step further in order to gain an even broader vantage point on the landscape of neoliberalism. Another fundamental element of the developing definition of neoliberalism is its very elusiveness (an elusiveness which stems in part from trying to define an era while we’re living it). Jeremiah Moss, in his book *Vanishing New York*, admits that he himself didn’t fully understand neoliberalism before he began writing. Moss describes neoliberalism, referring to Rebecca Solnit’s

language, as “that shadowy shark devouring cities across the globe” of which “few of us are aware” (103). In the gradual post-Reagan shift in policy, the scholarly effort to pin down neoliberalism has been hazy because “[n]eoliberalism has managed to make itself invisible” (Sugarman 104). It is what Political Theorist Wendy Brown, citing Alexis de Tocqueville, calls “gentle despotism” . . . even as it continues to travel under the sign of democracy and imagine itself “free” (179).

It only follows that the “shadowy” nature of neoliberalism allows it to seep into nearly all regions of our lives, even in epistemologically inconspicuous ways—that is, even into regions we *think* are immune. Yes, neoliberalism intrudes most stealthily on the very regions that house our own rebellion to it. As big-brand stores like Urban Outfitters catch on to the appeal of vintage, they gradually become our source for the trend. Temporarily laying our nostalgia to rest by purchasing an Urban Outfitters Vintage Line T-shirt is a perpetually self-defeating practice. The nostalgia that feels so distinctly *ours* in the game of neoliberalism—our own response and reaction—is in fact another foothold for big business that makes the existence of actual boutiques less and less possible. Therein is the central irony. The popularity of the vintage trend is not merely a result of our mourning for the past, but also of the suggestion that we’re challenging something. The “coolness” of the trend comes from the idea that we are part of the counterculture while we literally wear this identity on our sleeves. But, just as Brown observed on today’s “glut of information,” we are only under the “illusion of knowledge, freedom, and . . . participation in the face of their opposites” (179). What truly happens in the fashion sphere is that we inadvertently pass our urge to challenge into the very hands of our adversary, who channels that urge to make a profit.

What’s more, the profitable sentiment of wistful nostalgia is not exclusive to challengers within the fashion sphere; it comes from theorists who also have something to mourn. Brown contends that our twentieth-century education system “appears as something of a golden age for public higher education” (180). Although she makes a statement to disown the rose-colored goggles (conceding that the system did not “[realize] perfection [and] was absent the usual cruel exclusions from Western humanism” (180)), she rhetorically expresses semi-intangible wistfulness for American ‘yonder-years:’ “It was a time in which a broad, if not deep college education [became essential] . . . [when a] basic familiarity with Western history, thought, literature, art, social analysis, and science was integral to middle-class belonging” (180). And perhaps we all have something of this intangible sort to mourn. Moss’s book likewise mourns the “soul” of New York City. In a somber retelling of Mayor Ed Koch’s inauguration speech, which marked a turning point into neoliberal policy, Moss pauses to ask us to “imagine being there.” He invites us to engage our senses: “The air is cold and the sky above City Hall is pigeon gray” (107). In doing so, Moss goes beyond reporting the significance of Koch’s speech and instead bring us into the romantic, dreamlike nostalgia of a narrative experience. His process invokes a preoccupation that

approaches fetishization of a New York that, as Steve Fraser described it, “once admired the feistiness of seamstresses and stevedores and the hustling shrewdness of the family businessman” (109).

While calling on a better America of the past helps expand our vantage point, we cannot fully escape the “shadowy” mechanism of neoliberalism. Of course, this perspective does not come from the ill intentions of theorists, nor does it even seem like a fault. Nostalgia seems to have a certain inevitability, one from which we can’t expect ourselves to separate even if we tried. Even if we *could* separate ourselves, perhaps it’s not our responsibility to do so. There is truth to this intangible loss of soul for which critics lament. In fact, I conjured it myself by telling the story of Sally’s first experience in the thrift store, and I stand by the value in it. Having the sentiment may not leave us with a real burden to bear, but instead with the understanding that American nostalgia itself is a hungry emotion that clings to any semblance of the past. This becomes dangerously lucrative for neoliberalism: the past is all too easily manifested in product.

Even if we don’t hold ourselves responsible for the imperceptible way our nostalgia is turned to profit, one last item lingers. The same big-brand companies that profit off vintage lines *also* successfully sell their own branded clothing. It would seem, then, that big-brand stores aren’t wholly pretending to be something they’re not, but instead capitalizing on both identities. How is it that both vintage simulation and brand-flaunting could thrive next to each other at the same time? Thus, we come back to the initial question, which plainly concerns awareness of the pretend game. What do we have to say for the many of us who are wholly cognizant—maybe even resentful—of big-brand stores’ appropriation of thrift-store and vintage style, and yet we like it anyway? Those of us who have, like Sally, been privileged to experience both the real and the simulated, and yet we still purchase the simulated one? This is the very heart of the psycho-economic game of neoliberalism, wherein two polar opposites flourish via symbiosis. In the coexistence of the nostalgic “good old days” and sexy elitism, each gives more weight to the other. It seems reasonable to conjecture that brands like Urban Outfitters owe much of their leverage—and position as a wearable status symbol—to the appeal of their Vintage Lines. And just the same, the Vintage Line is made appealing and given fashion credibility by being in the very context of an already popular big-brand store. We are left to consider that our collective interest in the trend may not be *despite* of our cognizance of the imitation game, but in fact *because* of it. It’s not just that we miss what once was. It’s not just that we turn toward vintage fashion trends to quell this longing. It’s that we like it better when it comes in a branded box—one that tells us we are powerful, cool, and attractive, one that comes with the stamp of a pre-made identity. Even while we miss the true individuality of developing our own “sustained narrative,” maybe we also like when it’s handed to us. Maybe we would rather play make believe.

It's here that we realize that neoliberalism is much more of a barrel than we perhaps took it to be. Not only is it self-propagating, but it is also propagated by the antithesis of itself. The entire concept of a specific Vintage Line makes it so that the appeal of escaping neoliberalism is compartmentalized, sectioned off into its own special area while maintaining the ultimate reigning status of the brand. And we make our contributions endlessly, continuing to buy both. Still, however, I maintain that none of this is to say we are necessarily to blame. It is merely worth considering that our relation to neoliberalism is much beyond victimhood, even for those of us who consider ourselves challengers. In fact, we are more intimately intertwined with it than ever: in our dislikes, our likes, our oblivion, and our awareness.

WORKS CITED

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