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In Their Shoes: using fashion objects to explore the duration and complexity of wartime experiences

Abstract

Experiences of conflict rarely adhere to the historical confines of defined dates. Although the Second World War was officially brought to a close on 2 September 1945, the emotional legacy of the conflict lingered. Drawing on objects from the Museum of London, this article investigates how fashion objects can be used to highlight the long-term impacts of conflict. By looking at how people reused, saved and fetishised wartime objects in peacetime, it shows how emotional reactions of hope, disappointment and lingering resentment manifested themselves through practices of dressing, as well as demonstrating the uneven impact of conflict across class and gender boundaries.

Key Words: fashion, museum, Second World War, austerity, emotion

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My grandmother kept her wedding shoes at the back of her wardrobe, encased in yellowing tissue paper, for over sixty years. After she died, my mother found them concealed under a stack of well-worn cardigans, and did not initially realise what they were. It was not until a few days later when she removed a framed photograph of my grandmother and grandfather's wedding day in 1943 from the wall that she noticed the similarity and went to retrieve them from the box, by then ear-marked for the charity shop (figure 1).

Grandma never discussed the shoes with (or even revealed their existence to) anyone in the immediate family. However, the varying ages of the shoe trees, tissue and box they were found in proved that she must have unwrapped and repacked them multiple times over the years, taking great care over their preservation. As we sorted through the rest of the boxes that contained the remaining ephemera of her life, it seemed impossible not to speculate about why she had kept the shoes and what exactly they had meant to her.

The wedding photographs show my grandmother standing next to my khaki uniform-clad grandfather at the alter in a maroon suit and matching low-heeled suede shoes–a stereotypical picture of a war bride from the era. However, for all the hope contained in those smiling faces in the fading photographs, my grandmother's marriage was to be neither long nor particularly happy; my grandfather died shortly afterwards in an air crash, leaving her a widow and single mother. Her diaries from the period rail against the army for giving her so little time to be a 'whole' family, and her anger at the impact that the conflict had on her personally can be glimpsed in her stubborn refusal to return her husband's military uniform–in spite of the many demanding letters from the authorities, which she defiantly stored alongside the uniform itself, wrapped in a decorative ribbon.

Although it is tempting to see the preservation of the shoes as a similar memorial to her husband and lost family, a closer look at the shoes themselves suggests that she wore them on many subsequent occasions (figure 2). The heels are worn down on the instep, the leather soles are deeply scuffed and the suede interiors have molded to the shape of her foot. Family photograph albums show the shoes were worn until at least the mid 1950s on occasions including her siblings' weddings and church garden parties, refuting the idea that these shoes simply served as a memorial to the loss of her husband or a memory of a happier time. And this tight knot of emotions is a complicated one: the materiality of my grandmother's shoes, sitting worn and wrapped in my lap as they did in hers, demonstrate the enduring role that fashion objects have to play in simultaneously processing and making tangible narratives of loss and the legacy of conflict. In their worn materiality, Grandma's shoes embody varied emotions and uses that speak of the complex personal impact that the Second World War had on her life, while raising more subtle questions about the nature and duration of wartime loss and new ways to think about the changing impact of conflict over time and place.

In recent years there has been an increased interest in both emotional history and the relationship between emotions and historical objects (Boddice 2018, Plamper 2009). Textiles and fashion objects are seen as being particularly fertile research subjects due to the intimate nature of the interactions between bodies and the making and wearing of garments and textiles (Dolan and Holloway 2016). Investigating the ways that bodies have shaped and marked objects can provide a means of exploring historic emotions in a way that gives the historical subject agency (Fisk 2019, Sampson 2018). As Sara Ahmed has argued, it is important to focus on what emotions do, rather than what they are (Ahmed 2004, p.4). Exploring how people used objects can provide an insight into the way that emotions shaped

actions. In turn, repeated acts of stitching, wear and use can indicate how interaction with fashion objects shaped the emotions of individuals over time. This dynamic emotional relationship between people and things suggests the need to look again at how fashion objects were used over time in order to construct a deeper understanding about the complex emotional impact of the Second World War on women like my grandmother, particularly on the home front.

While it is tempting to read my own imagined emotional responses in to the way my grandmother used her shoes, it is important to remember that emotions can neither transcend time and space (Tarlow 2012, p.179), nor can I assume that we would feel the same emotions in response to the same events (Ahmed 2004, p.10). Grandma's shoes do not provide concrete answers about the daily mundanities of her wartime experiences, nor speak to us now as uncomplicated memorials to a bride's joy or a later widow's grief. But seeking to understand her changing emotional relationship with these objects can provide insight into the complexity of her emotional reactions to the momentous changes thrust upon her by the Second World War. Moreover, their continuing use and preservation indicate that the emotional experience of conflict was something she negotiated for decades after the armistice.[i] Through this, my grandmother's shoes demonstrate that telling histories of war through fashion objects broadens our understanding of who was affected by conflict and how individual lives were altered in complex and even contradictory ways through the relationship between wartime destruction and creation.[ii]

Emotions have potential as analytical devices through which we can explore the impact of past conflicts (Langhamer, Noakes and Siebrecht 2020). Uncovering the stories of how individuals responded to ongoing challenges and mourned both personal and public losses in a society deeply changed by conflict is vital if we are to understand how responses to conflict varied by circumstances such as class and gender (Damousi 1999, p.2). Through examples of fashion objects from the Museum of London's collections, this article explores how the materiality of worn clothes and shoes can indicate the different ways fashion objects were used by London women to negotiate wartime experiences of loss, violence and destruction. It also explores their role in helping women rebuild and create new lives and, by extension, shape wider society in the aftermath of the conflict. By focusing not on when clothes were produced or purchased, but on tracing the emotional impact of war through the full duration of their use across the divide of war and peace, this article highlights the power of material fashion objects to challenge the existing narratives and tight periodisation present in many public histories of the Second World War. It concludes by considering how material fashion objects in a museum context could be used to open space for discussion about the various ways in which emotions arising from conflict shape actions and reactions in peacetime. By looking beyond the display of military uniforms and simple references to the creation dates of objects, it considers how museums could use a wider variety of the material fashion objects in their collections in order to question how the lingering emotional impact of the Second World War reshaped society.

Material Creation and Destruction in Wartime London

For London's inhabitants, heavy aerial bombardment during the Second World War blurred the distinctions between battlefront and home-front.[iii] Material evidence of the destructive power of war was abundant to Londoners as they moved through the city in the final months of war; over 50 per cent. of the buildings within Greater London were damaged by aerial

bombardment between 1940 and 1945 (Mellor 2011, p.1). The war made alien landscapes of once familiar streets and vanished homes and workplaces overnight, without warning. It distorted domestic routines and rewrote social conventions, including familiar cycles of fashion, slowing the pace of fashionable change and breaking learned consumption habits for years after the armistice. Clothes rationing was not abolished until 1949, and between 1942 and 1946 the government controlled the design of clothing through the Making of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) orders (more commonly known as austerity design restrictions) (Howell, 2013, pp.99-108). Looking at this multi-faceted destruction of familiar fashion habits, locations and types of clothing also provides insight into an inevitable creativity that grew from these circumstances, with wartime shortages and limitations requiring London's inhabitants to remake, adapt and reimagine their relationships to clothes.

In order to explore this relationship between loss, destruction and creation in material fashion objects, this article draws upon the Museum of London's varied collection of worn and everyday fashion objects, tracking clues in the shapes of wear and use. Worn fashion objects provide an important insight into female experience by revealing how women whose individual voices are otherwise lost to history have manipulated and shaped the materiality of the world around them (Daly Goggin and Fowkes Tobin 2009, p.1). Family remembrance has long been seen as women's work, achieved through the manufacture of textile objects including samplers and quilts (Dolan and Holloway 2016, p.117). But worn textile and fashion objects can offer a more intimate emotional insight. The material properties of leather and textiles make them extremely powerful communicators of experience as they are shaped and worn by use, and as such contain clues about how objects were used in changing ways, sometimes over long periods of time, to negotiate change and trauma, often indicating shifts between different stages of grief, loss and recovery (Hunt 2014).

Inspired by Tim Ingold's (2007) call to recognise that the materials that make up objects have been shaped by multiple people and processes, and as such material objects can be read as stories of how human agency shapes the surrounding material world, this article traces the changing use of objects over time in order to demonstrate that they play an active and creative role in navigating emotions of loss. In doing so, it looks both to the moments of creation, exchange and display that are considered to provide particular insight into the emotional relationships between people and things (Holloway 2016), and to the more everyday and repetitive actions of use and preservation over time, asking what these can further tell us about the shifting relationships between grief and acceptance, and public and private forms of conflict remembrance. Understanding objects as materials in constant transformation through repeated, everyday actions provides a lens through which we can begin to unpick how individuals use fashion objects to negotiate how their world has changed as a result of conflict, and how emotional responses to conflict shape individual and collective actions in a way that actively impacts historical events going forward.

Reading wartime loss and destruction in material fashion objects

The role of objects in making, preserving and negotiating memories and emotions is well established, particularly in relation to experiences of loss (Hallam and Hockey 2001). As Daniel Miller (2008, p.91) has discussed, there is often a tendency for people to use their accumulated possessions to root themselves in a collection of positive memories that can provide comfort during experiences of loss, but objects can also be emotionally unsettling (Dolan and Holloway 2016). Although the emotional significance of many of the garments in the Museum of London is not officially recorded, the material properties of these objects can

still indicate how they might have been used by their wearers to navigate emotions of loss and destructive change. Since even low quality, mass produced fashion objects are molded by the individuals who wore or used them, the marks left in these items provide clues as to how their personal experiences of war were shaped by the specificities of their environment.[iv]

This connection between wear and emotion is especially apparent when comparing the difference between garments purchased for museum collections and those donated to them. The collections of the Museum of London contain a number of objects purchased during the Second World War by what was then the London Museum. Acquisition records show that the Museum specially petitioned the Board of Trade for extra clothing coupons so it could purchase garments from London shops to record how the extraordinary times had shaped the items available to buy, their cost and the processes by which Londoners could obtain fashions. This foresight has left the Museum with a broad range of items made under the wartime Utility scheme, accompanied by an unusually complete record of their retailer, price and coupon allocations. When looked at as a stand-alone collection, these garments seem to demonstrate many of the familiar narratives of both shortages and the democratisation of quality and design in ready-to-wear fashions, from rationed pieces produced under the Utility scheme to an unworn example of the ubiquitous Demob suit.[v]

However, the tidy narrative these garments tell stands in stark contrast to the bulk of the other items in the collection that date from this period. These items were donated, and their materiality reveals evidence of how they have been circulated and used between their creation dates and the time they were deposited in the Museum's collection. Unlike the purchased, unworn garments, they hint at a wealth of different and individual experiences and provoke powerful emotional reactions for researchers privileged enough to investigate them. Since the emotional power of objects is realised through moments of encounter and well-worn clothes are rarely on public display, museum visitors typically miss out on the thought-provoking ambiguity offered by such objects. Even moves to make collections more digitally accessible fail to address this deficiency as online collections databases reflect the structures of museum catalogues, in which fashion objects are easily searchable by production place and date, but not by the duration or multiple locations in which they may have been used. For example, searching the Museum of London's 'Collections Online' feature for the year 1945 will show you a Utility fur coat that was purchased in Ilford and is clearly stylistically rooted in the exaggerated, wide-shouldered fashions that spread from Paris after the city's liberation. But the donor records, which are not publicly available, record that this coat was worn regularly until 1955, and so was invested with a range of memories and meanings as London emerged from austerity to celebrate the Festival of Britain and embrace a new monarch. Yet the coat does not appear under searches for these subsequent years, therefore losing its power to speak to how wartime fashions persisted and their emotional significance changed in peacetime.

The study of fashion objects also offers an opportunity to broaden the definitions of loss in relation to conflict (Ahmed 2004, p.13). The language of loss is primarily related to bereavement in museum displays and literature related to the Second World War. However, unpicking the way that objects were used by individuals demonstrates that the scale of change that Londoners had to adapt to during the Second World War demanded many different types of sacrifices from a vast array of people. They experienced a range of emotional losses extending far beyond familiar themes of bereavement, from lost jobs and circumstances to the loss of their built environment and sense of place. All of these situations represented very real losses to individuals, and this article seeks to recognise this by better

understanding how Londoners expressed emotions of grief and performed processes of mourning through their use of material fashion objects.

Nowhere is this plurality more evident than in the variety of ways that objects narrate experiences of loss during the 1940s. Although rituals of mourning dress had largely broken down after the First World War, and the wearing of black garments outside of funerals was increasingly rare by the 1940s (Taylor 1983, pp.266 and 277), the way fashion objects were preserved, used and discussed suggests that people still used clothes to mourn not just the death of loved ones but also other types of personal losses arising from conflict. Looking beyond more familiar stories of bereavement, extant objects hint at the diversity of ways that the war changed the lives of Londoners and, in doing so, provoked emotions of loss.

It is clear that the way fashion objects were used often contains more information about the emotional experiences of London women than the design or construction of the objects themselves. For example, acquisition records reveal that donors of homemade garments from this period were often keen to emphasise that these items exemplified 'Make Do and Mend' ideals. Yet, in spite of the fact that many donors explain in detail the practices of careful mending, or the innovative use of old bedspread fabric to make a new dress, such items are often very lightly used, suggesting that they have been kept as reminders or examples of wartime shortages, even though their very physicality reveals that those shortages were experienced by the donors as a cultural narrative rather than personal problem.[vi] The way that these garments have been preserved can be understood to express a desire to memorialise wartime experiences, and even a reluctance for some people to 'move on'.

Other garments imply that 'moving on' was easier said than done due to lingering austerity during this period. Worn garments that were used between the early and late 1940s speak particularly strongly of the frustrations women experienced at both their changed material and physical circumstances and, frequently, the lack of recovery apparent in their day-to-day lives as war turned to peace and yet the impacts of conflict, and its resulting austerity, lingered. Although there was much talk of new beginnings in the immediate post-war years, the pace of reconstruction was frustratingly slow and there was little appetite for radical change on either an individual or institutional level. For all the talk of social restructuring and renewal, in reality public interest in such notions diminished rapidly after the war and Mass Observation concluded that, compared to the war years, a 'striking' number of people were thinking predominantly in terms of their own wellbeing when considering what kind of post-war world should be built (Cowan 2012, p.79).[vii]

Londoners were preoccupied with the very real difficulties of life in the post-war city. A combination of rising taxes and inflation after the war resulted in materially diminished circumstances for many, with one government report concluding that over 70 per cent. of those surveyed found their finances more squeezed in 1948 than a year earlier (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2000, p.85). The persistent difficulties of austerity, notably the continuation of rationing and the high cost of living, left many feeling that life in post-war Britain was 'a constant struggle' (Kynaston 2008, p.296). Even after Harold Wilson did away with much official regulation governing the manufacture and retail of fashion objects between 1948 and 1949, devaluation of the pound meant that the majority of Britons still felt left behind and denied life's material comforts at the end of 1949, nearly five years after the end of the war (Kynaston 2008, pp. 353-354).

The impact of these circumstances on fashionable middle class consumers can be seen in the way that high-end garments from the early to mid 1940s have been mended over time. Although the expensive nature of such garments makes it unlikely that they were ever subject to particularly rough use (such as manual or household labour), they contain large numbers of mends. Often these mends are starkly crude in comparison to the quality of the garments, as can be seen on one fine wool dress purchased from Huppert's on Regent Street (figure 4). The rough, unskilled nature of the mends on this dress indicates that they were performed by an individual unused to having to mend their own clothes, and the speed at which they have clearly been executed further indicates that the sewer did not consider mending to be a pleasurable or particularly worthwhile pursuit. It is also revealing that the donor decided to erase the memory of these mends in the acquisition letter she wrote for the museum, instead choosing to remember the garment as it was when new, complete with a velvet bow, before the conditions of shortages she experienced under post-war austerity altered its materiality.

Fashion as a form of creation from destruction

Conversely, objects from the Museum's collection also provide evidence that some people used the changing materiality and meanings of fashion objects as symbols of hope and progress. The period of intense shortages of textiles and fashion products that lasted from 1942 to 1947 drove people to reimagine and alter garments in response to changing circumstances. The emotional narratives lost through donor and curatorial reluctance to discuss the full lifespan of a garment can be glimpsed in a rather ordinary looking brown herringbone wool coat in the Museum of London's collections (figure 3). Originally purchased in 1945, the design of the coat is, at first sight, a little curious. It generally complies with the stylistic restrictions imposed by 'The Making of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions)' orders, which regulated the designs, cuts and embellishment of commercially produced clothing between 1942 and 1946.[viii] The only anomalous design feature is the fifth and sixth buttons—two beyond what restrictions allowed. This strange detail is explained through the donor's letter in the object's acquisition file, which tells how these extra buttons were added to this otherwise classic Utility coat when it was altered in the late 1940s to bring it more up-to-date with changing styles and, in particular, the New Look silhouette inspired by French fashions after 1947.

A closer look reveals further alterations to following changing fashions through its worn life. The coat was modified to give it softer shoulders, a more fitted waist and a longer hem to keep pace with late 1940s fashions. To achieve this effect, the large shoulder pads were removed. The waist was taken-in by putting in new darts and an extra set of buttons was added below the existing two rows in order to further define the waist. Finally, the hem was taken-down to make the coat longer, and the 'CC41' Utility label, which had become an unfashionable reminder of continuing austerity, was removed. It is questionable how much these alterations would have made this classic Utility coat look up-to-date since there was still a large amount of fabric at the shoulders, and the austerity restrictions the coat was made under only gave a narrow seam allowance meaning that the hem could not have been lengthened by a great deal. However, the fact that these alterations were undertaken is a reminder that, while affording and purchasing the New Look may have been exclusive, experiencing the emotions of renewal and fashionable change that it was associated with it was not the sole privilege of those that could afford to buy new clothes.

The donor's letter frames this act of adaptation as both practical (a wool coat was a high-value and hard-wearing item that needed to last) but also hopeful. There is a strong

suggestion that that ability to adapt a garment that was so stylistically rooted in the restrictions and controls that originated from wartime allowed her emotional relationship with the garment to evolve and become dissociated with her memories of conflict. However, few material hints of the donor's act of emotional separation survive since, buttons aside, the changes she made to the coat were reversed by curatorial staff after the coat was acquisitioned. It is unlikely this undoing of a garment's history would be undertaken today, but the desire for garments to tell simple narratives, neatly divided between austerity shortages and New Look affluence persists in many museum displays. This coat provides a challenge to such periodisation and a warning of what can be lost when preconceptions of what the past should look like are allowed to shape an archive or collecion.

If displayed in a way that allowed visitors to understand how they had changed over time, even the most seemingly unremarkable items in the collection could provide a valuable means of raising questions about the plurality of meanings contained within wartime fashion objects. Take, for example, a pair of snakeskin-effect pumps, made by large-scale shoe manufacturer Steplite (figure 5). Featuring the medium heels and built-up soles typical of the period, these shoes were made sometime between 1942 and 1944 under the wartime Utility scheme, but took on a new emotional role in peacetime when they were purchased second-hand on 18 October 1945 by a woman called Gladys Sandford, to wear to her wedding the next day.

In response to the difficulties of stock shortages and reduced coupon allowances, ever increasing numbers of Londoners turned to the second-hand clothing market for their sartorial fixes in the mid-1940s, since these purchases were not subject to coupons. As a result, sales of second-hand clothes peaked in London not during the war itself, but between 1945 and 1946.[ix] Street markets of all kinds—both official and unofficial, and selling a mixture of both new and second-hand clothes—provided an important source of fashion in post-war London.[x]

Although obtained second-hand, Mrs Sandford's shoes likely represented an important purchase for her due to the significance of the event for which they were acquired. It is this emotional attachment that perhaps explains how a pair of practical shoes with multiple owners has remained in such good condition, with soles and heels exhibiting only minimal signs of wear. These shoes demonstrate that the life cycles of fashionable objects in 1940s London were complex. From the old clothes remade into new outfits, to the multiple meanings bestowed on second-hand clothes by their various owners, austerity challenged people's conceptions of newness in relation to fashion, and highlighted that one person's unwanted garment could be prized and take on a whole new emotional meaning when used by another.

Fashion objects can also demonstrate how the impact of the Second World War varied across different demographics. Unlike their financially diminished middle class counterparts, the immediate post-war years were a time of genuine hope for many working class women who saw an increase in employment opportunities, their optimism reflected in magazine articles about better job prospects, more holidays and greater influence for women across society (Wilson 1980, p29, Giles 2004, pp. 67, 157 and 134). In tandem with increased employment opportunities, the war had also changed the garments available for lower-income women to buy. While the impact of war on fashion often focuses on shortages and rationing, the Utility scheme encouraged the production of inexpensive fashions by both improving the quality of cheaper ready-to-wear garments and the efficiency of their production (Boydell 2012, p.28).

In doing so, it increased the availability of well-designed inexpensive garments and gave more women on lower incomes the opportunity to participate in fashionable consumption. Evidence of the way one Londoner embraced this newfound consumption ability can be seen in a printed cotton jacket and rayon skirt in the Museum of London's collections (figure 6). Although these items were donated as a complete outfit, looking closely at the two pieces reveals that it is unlikely this skirt and jacket were originally made as a pair. The pattern of their fabrics may be virtually identical, but one is cotton and the other rayon. Furthermore, differences in stitching implies that they were made in separate factories with different types of machines. Both items, however, were low-cost, made fast and with maximum efficiency. The patterns were cut to require the least amount of construction possible—for example, the jacket has a shawl collar, constructed from an extension of the fabric at the garment front, and the seams have been finished using overlocking machines.

Whether the wearer obtained these items separately or as a pair, the way they combined these two pieces to make an inexpensive yet stylish outfit is a reminder of the democratic opportunities offered by the new ready-to-wear processes that emerged out of post-war austerity and how, for all their broad impacts on the city's businesses, they also afforded women with smaller disposable incomes greater opportunities to cultivate their own individual fashionable tastes. The fact that this inexpensive outfit was kept long after it ceased to be worn by the donor is a reminder that, although the war diminished London's traditional tailoring and making cultures, for many people it also offered new materials with which they could shape their identities. As such, this garment provides a counterpoint to the palpable sense of a lost making culture that haunts many accounts of how the war had changed London fashion, such as Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness* (1951).

Curating emotional experiences in museums

The increasing popularity of fashion exhibitions—and their obvious revenue potential—has caused museums to reevaluate how they use the fashion objects in their collections and driven new acquisitions. For some museums of conflict, this has involved a process of broadening their collection remit, such as the extensive acquisition project that the Imperial War Museum embarked on ahead of its 2015-2016 exhibition 'Fashion on the Ration: 1940s Street Style', collecting not uniforms but a range of civilian clothes that showed how the war impacted every-day lives. The breadth of objects acquired and borrowed for this exhibition allowed the Imperial War Museum to display a more nuanced understanding of Second World War fashion than was apparent in a previous exhibition the museum held on this subject in 1997 (McDowell 1997). Displaying different types of fashion objects—including worn objects—together allowed 'Fashion on the Ration' to acknowledge that experiences of fashion during wartime are no less classed, gendered or individual than at peacetime. However, although the worn garments on display hinted at the stories of the lives lived by the bodies that wore them, the exhibition's labels focused on information about the origins and materials of the garments instead of highlighting how these objects had been used over extended periods of time, adapted and reused. In this, the exhibition fell somewhat short of utilising these garments as resources to explore how these garments contained multiple emotional experiences that changed over time and circumstances.

In creating displays of objects, museums act as institutional 'initiators of memory', using material objects as powerful catalysts that can help visitors recall and understand the emotions of the past (Beyen 2015, p.12 and De Nardi 2017, p.4). But more than this,

museums provide a setting in which objects are socially constructed through visitor encounters (Boddice 2018, p.179). Within a museum context, this process of constructed encounter shapes both the ongoing emotional responses and understanding of both individuals who personally experienced the objects in a past time and place as well as those approaching objects as historical artifacts. In short, museums are places which actively shape individual and collective memories (Bide 2017 and Hirsch 1997, p.249).

In light of their important role in constructing memory and understanding, it is vital when seeking out emotional narratives in museum objects that we heed Joy Damousi's warning that ideas of "grief and loss, like notions of sacrifice, have a history" that has shaped both displays and collecting policies (1999, p.1). When it comes to the use of fashion objects in displays about the Second World War, this history is closely tied to patriotic narratives of democratisation and equal sacrifice, centering particularly on the impact of the Utility scheme at reducing fashionable inequality and the ingenuity and perseverance of those who learned to 'Make Do and Mend' at a time of shortages. But this rather 'one size fits all' approach to displaying fashion objects does not fit with the large body of evidence that shows that Londoners had varied and even contradictory emotional experiences of the Second World War and its aftermath in relation to fashion, repeatedly refuting simple narratives.

The embodied nature of fashion adds a particularly individual angle to these experiential negotiations due to the way that clothes connect individuals to their wider environments (Entwistle 2000) However, museum displays that seek to evoke emotional encounters between objects and visitors are often thwarted by the ropes and glass cases that prevent visitors from having full sensory experiences of these objects. This matters because the intimate, bodily relationships we all have towards clothes means that we are used to experiencing clothes, and their emotional content, through physical sensations such as touch and smell. Indeed, there are few things as evocative as the feel of a once-familiar fabric or the lingering scent of stale perfume to evoke memories and related emotions. But if direct sensory experiences of objects plays such an important role in eliciting historical empathy, then how can we encounter emotions in clothes in museum displays which deny closer contact?

The sensory connection between emotions and objects suggests that interpreting the emotional content of things is a learned practice, and as such one in which museums must play an educational role. The descriptive labels and contexts of display narratives provide sensory direction for visitors who are unable to reach out and touch garments, but museums have historically done a much poorer job at displaying fashion objects in a way that allows visitors to interpret their materiality for themselves. This is related to the fact that museum displays have a long history of privileging garments deemed to be in a 'good condition'. This is not just a conservation concern; although of course there is a very legitimate argument for not exposing fragile items to excess strain through display, garments that have been acquired in pristine or lightly worn conditions are generally understood to be of higher value and provide greater aesthetic pleasure for visitors.[xi]

Conclusions

Looking at worn garments dating from the Second World War, it quickly becomes apparent that although clothes communicate a powerful sense of historic emotion, there was no unifying experience of loss and certainly no single way in which individuals used clothes to

express or negotiate the way they felt about the impact of conflict on their lives either during the war or in the years that followed. However, this certainly does not imply that these disparate and contradictory items should be left in the museum store room, so as not to disrupt the coherent display narrative for visitors.

The used garments discussed in this article provide important evidence of the wide-ranging and long-lasting impact of the Second World War on women's lives, but more importantly, they show the agency with which women manipulated their material surroundings in order to actively adapt to radically changed circumstances. Similarly, the multiple ways in which old clothes have been changed and reinterpreted by their wearers demonstrates that people appropriate broader cultural narratives about patriotism, loss and hope and use them to create their own memories and understandings of events and their legacies (Beyen 2015, p.3). This emotional agency is evident even in the process of donating their old clothes to museums. By transferring emotional objects from the private to public realm, donors are able to distance themselves from physical traces of the past bodies that shaped them, and in doing so to reconfigure their emotional understanding of the past (Norris 2012, p.130).

My grandmother's wedding shoes have been repackaged and now sit safely at the back of my own wardrobe, a reminder of her absence but also of the strength she showed in picking up the pieces of her conflict-shattered life and building new memories in her old wartime shoes. Understanding the agency with which women like my grandmother used fashion objects allows us to trace not only the impact of war, but also how emotional responses to war caused women to actively shape London culture and society with the arrival of peace. Displaying more worn, altered and damaged fashion objects and foregrounding the stories of their use would therefore provide an important opportunity to make space for more dynamic female narratives about war in the Museum (Daly Goggin and Fowkes Tobin 2009, p.2). Perhaps most importantly, it would allow visitors to understand the way they personally use fashion objects to mark their own losses and navigate processes of mourning.

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Figures

Figure 1:
Rachel and Arthur Williams on their wedding day, 1943. Bethan Bide.

Figure 2:
Worn details of my grandmother's wedding shoes. Bethan Bide.

Figure 3:
Double-breasted overcoat, adapted to conform to New Look fashions. Museum of London, 68.58.
Reproduced by permission of the Museum of London.

Figure 4:

Waistband detail of Huppert dress, showing mend. Museum of London, 64.128.

Reproduced by permission of the Museum of London.

Figure 5:
Brown snakeskin-effect Utility shoes, c.1942-1945. Museum of London, 2010.3/1a.
Reproduced by permission of the Museum of London.

Figure 6:
Cream cotton jacket and pleated rayon skirt with red dots. Museum of London, 67.108/2.
Reproduced by permission of the Museum of London.

[i] Conflict lingered and continued to impact people's lives long after the arrival of peace in Europe on 8 May 1945, challenging the neat periodisation often present in history books that divide 1940s Britain into two discrete historical times: war, spanning 1939-1945 and the austerity years of Clement Attlee's Labour government. See, for example Ziegler (1995) and Kynaston (2008).

[ii] Nicholas Saunders theorises that material culture provides a key to understanding how war impacted upon the city and its people since war is 'the transformation of matter' through a process of creation and destruction. Saunders (2004, p5).

[iii] Experiences of the Blitz clearly fulfil Sara Cobb's definition of conflict as a situation marked by actions of violence and displacement (Cobb 2013).

[iv] See Ruth Hoberman's work on disruptive objects in Ruth Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 79. See also William Tullett's recent work on the agentive properties of objects that shape our sensory experiences of the environments we live in.

[v] Running through each of these is an assumption that austerity fashion was a top-down power structure in which the acts of a benevolent, male-dominated government impacted upon British women through rationing and design regulations. Such narratives overlook individual experiences in favour of authoritative public histories.

[vi] See, for example, Museum of London, 77.122/3.

[vii] Mass Observation was a social research organization founded in 1937 with the aim of studying the everyday lives of British people. This was achieved by gathering the diary entries of volunteer writers and the findings of a team of social observers.

[viii] 1943-1944 Making of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) Order No 1, TNA, BT 64/905.

[ix] Although street markets in less affluent parts of the city continued to thrive after 1946, by 1947 West End dealers reported that demand for second-hand clothing and `accessories had fallen dramatically as shop stock rose. Mass Observation, Diarist 5250, June 1947.

[x] As Bob Collins's documentary photographs of second-hand clothing markets show, these often offered a plethora of choice in comparison to sparsely stocked stores. *Shoes at an East End street market*, by Bob Collins, 1948. Museum of London, IN37802.

[xi] This is reflected in the way that sale prices of pristine garments dating from the Second World War have grown dramatically in recent years, exemplified by the record breaking £1,700 raised by a 'typical' Utility suit sold to a museum through Kerry Taylor Auctions in October 2015, nearly ten times its estimate.