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A Stitch in Time: Changing Cultural Constructions of Craft and Mending

By Anna König

Abstract

Over the course of the twentieth century, the availability of cheap, mass-produced fashion has contributed to a decline in everyday domestic mending skills. Indeed, as mass-manufactured goods have become cheaper for the global population it has become normative consumer behaviour to dispose of any item that is less than perfect, even when the damage is entirely superficial, leading Clark to claim that: 'mending has died out' (2008: 435).

However, in recent years there has been an apparent revival in domestic mending, aided and evidenced by the emergence of sewing and mending groups in the UK, mainland Europe and North America. This has coincided with a growing interest in more sustainable material goods (McDonough & Braungart 2002; Fletcher 2008), and a small body of academic work around the notion of craftsmanship (e.g. Sennett 2008; Crawford 2009). Of particular interest here is the history of mending of clothing and household goods, as well as recent incarnations of mending as both an individual and group activity. In the past year, researchers from diverse theoretical backgrounds have also highlighted the role of mending in everyday material goods providing further insights into the subject (Laitala & Boks 2012; Middleton 2012; Portwood-Stacer 2012).

An examination of mending reveals a complex picture in which gender, class, aesthetics and social motivations interweave with the imperatives of consumer culture. Whilst historically it is generally constructed as a feminine activity, and carried connotations of material deprivation, contemporary mending is often motivated by environmental concerns and a desire to reduce consumption. Ultimately, mending is demonstrated to be an under-researched subject loaded with cultural meaning, and ultimately, is shown to be anything but a trivial activity.

Keywords: Mending, domestic work, gender, sustainability, labour, leisure, skills.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, few activities might be classified as quite so trivial as those concerned with the repair of domestic household goods. With its archaic associations, the very concept of mending evokes homespun wisdom and a cautious, thrifty attitude to living that seems to run counter to the established values of a capitalist consumer society. This conclusion is reflected in the assertion made just a few years ago by Hazel Clark, in the context of a discussion about sustainable fashion, that 'mending has died out' (2008: 435). As cheap, mass-manufactured goods are now available to the majority of the global population, it has become normative consumer behaviour to dispose of any item that is less than perfect, even if the damage is superficial or remediable. In short, as people become wealthier, the imperative to mend commodities for oneself diminishes, and the knowledge and skills that enable this to happen subsequently fade away through lack of application.

However, in recent years there have been signs of a revival in interest in the repair of domestic goods, aided and evidenced most significantly by the emergence of mending groups in the UK, Europe and North America. How, then, does this apparent revival sit in relation to contemporary ideals of perfect, box-fresh commodities, excessive material consumption, and a society in which we are encouraged to prize our leisure far more highly than our labour? This resurgence of mending provides a timely opportunity to revisit a subject area that is as neglected by cultural historians as it has been by consumers.

In a very straightforward sense, this apparently humble subject area is profoundly important in the context of environmental sustainability. As a growing body of work recognises, it is essential that commodities have long and purposeful lives if global rates of consumption are to be reduced (see McDonough & Braungart 2002; Fletcher 2008). However, slower cycles of consumption are also dependent upon the attitudes and behaviours of consumers. It may be desirable for commodities to be designed in such a way that they can be mended, but consumers need to have the capacity and desire to repair and maintain these goods once they are in circulation. An investigation of mending therefore has literal, practical applications that can make a contribution to the sustainability agenda. After all, understanding consumer behaviours is an essential component of changing them.

But a study of mending reaches far beyond concerns with environmental sustainability: it provides the opportunity to consider how mending activities have been conceptualized and practised from pre-industrial times to the present day. As this paper demonstrates, an examination of mending reveals a complex picture in which gender, class and aesthetics interweave with the imperatives of consumer culture. Here it is demonstrated that far from being a trivial pursuit, mending is in fact an activity that is loaded with cultural significance. Of specific interest is the mending of household items such as clothing, bedlinen, furnishings, as well as

small electrical or mechanical items and furniture. Whilst there is some overlap with theoretical work on craft and making more generally, the focus here is specifically on mending, fixing and repairing household commodities, not least because they are subjects that so rarely garner any academic attention.

Consideration is given to existing literature on the subject before briefly outlining the scope of mending within a historical context. Having done so, some contemporary manifestations of mending are presented in the form of details taken from websites and blogs associated with specific mending groups or individuals who specialize in mending skills. Having thus introduced the material, it becomes possible to explore it thematically, addressing the subject from a variety of perspectives. Particular attention is given to: the gendered nature of mending; mending as a way of understanding relationships with commodities; knowledge, skills and labour; the social and interactive dimensions of mending; and mending as a lifestyle choice. Appropriately, this paper aims to fix the hole in existing work on the subject, drawing together a variety of theoretical perspectives and diverse bodies of research as a means of making sense of mending in both a historical and contemporary context.

Invisible Mending?

Historically, fixing has inhabited the interstices of domestic life, so mundane, so commonplace as to be rendered invisible. Moreover, it might even be regarded as a slightly grubby subject, associated with poverty, material want and low socio-economic status. In terms of academic literature, the scarceness of material suggests that it is a subject that has never really been of interest to anyone. Curiously, a search for the term ‘mending’ in scholarly work reveals that it is more likely to appear as a metaphor in psychoanalytical or medical studies than in de facto investigations of mending, whether in a historical or contemporary context. This suggests that there is an issue of low status at play here, one which sweeps the practices of mending from cultural visibility. One of the aims of this paper, therefore, is to explore why this might be.

Some cultural references to mending can be found in art and literature, especially in that which is concerned with depicting household scenes, or the private sphere of women. Indeed, one might say that the feminine ideal in the nineteenth century, as represented in visual and literary forms, was that of an industrious, domestic woman, her head bowed over her pile of mending. Furthermore, Burman writes that such work was emphatically feminine and collective in nature:

> Tasks using the needle were shown as moments when women could talk together. Their sewing was depicted as soothing in times of crisis and as an occupation combining thrift, domesticity and sociability. (1999: 40)

These attributes of mending – the social, bonding elements, combined with the virtues and skills of good housekeeping – are themes that will be revisited later in this paper.

So where, then, does the subject of mending make an appearance in academic work? It is primarily found in historical studies relating to clothing and textiles. For instance, Gordon (1992) looks at the writings of New England women in the nineteenth century and finds the practices of sewing and mending to be a prominent subject whilst Campbell and Brandt (1994) look at clothing consumption on the American frontier during the same period. Work by Barker and Hamlett, meanwhile, touches on mending within the context of living arrangements and familial relations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (2010). What they note is that during that period it was seen as an incredibly private practice, requiring the same kind of segregation of the sexes within the home as washing. Thus it might be concluded that in theoretical terms, mending – in so far as it does manifest – tends to be contextualized and discussed within a female, domestic and resolutely historical domain. It should also be noted, however, that in each of these studies, the subject is never more than a minor detail, mentioned only in passing: mending appears never to be the central focus of research.

Recent literature on the subject, however, offers alternative contexts in which to consider the practice. Jonnet Middleton (2012) talks about mending in relation to studying the lifespan of vintage clothing, a technologically oriented project with a decidedly subjective narrative, located within the United Kingdom. For Portwood-Stacer (2012), mending is identified as belonging to a range of anti-consumption practices with specific political and socio-cultural motivations. Her work is concerned with subjects in the United States. Laitala and Boks (2012), meanwhile, examine motivations behind the disposal of clothing, and their paper includes a small section on empirical data gathered that relates to actual mending activities carried out by the participants of their Norwegian study.

It is interesting that these three recent studies have emerged simultaneously from researchers based in disparate geographical locations. This may be regarded as evidence of the transglobal presence of a heightened interest in mending in contemporary life. Moreover, the contextual repositioning of the subject of repair in the 2012 papers helps illustrate growing recognition of mending as a complex and culturally relevant phenomenon that can be understood in a variety of ways.

A Brief History of Mending

In the pre-industrial era, knowledge of fabrics and textiles was regarded as a valuable component of the domestic economy, and was invariably the cultural property of women (Lemire 2005). Writing with reference to the second hand clothes trade between 1600 and 1850, she notes that: ‘a basic knowledge of textiles and their qualities was commonplace within the wider public, especially among wom-

en who took care of these items in the home,' (2005: 34). She goes on to say that for hundreds of years, the items most frequently taken to pawnbrokers were garments or household linens, and that the transactions that took place functioned as an 'alternative currency system' (2005: 35). Clothing and household textiles at this time were evidently seen as durable items that were, because of their potential exchange value, worth caring for and maintaining.

As the nineteenth century progressed, processes of industrialisation facilitated the emergence of mass-produced goods, but concurrent with the burgeoning variety of new products were industries based around the repair and maintenance of them. Whilst clothing and textile items would most likely have been mended within the domestic setting, in a city such as London, a whole network of enterprises existed solely to deal the repair of a range of items of apparel from boots to umbrellas. Thus, there was still an expectation that all goods would be mended: the poor would do this themselves whilst the wealthy would pay for someone else to do it. Either way, items were not regarded as disposable: they were constructed using materials and methods that made their repair viable. Even as factory-made clothing became cheaper and more widely available household goods would be mended rather than simply replaced and people continued to be employed in such trades.

Evidence of this can be found in my own family history: my great-grandfather's listed occupation on my grandmother's birth certificate is that of 'boot repairer' whilst my grandmother herself found work in the 1930s as a ladies sewing maid. Though domestic service was in decline during this period, London was home – then as now – to very wealthy families who could afford extensive teams of domestic staff. What is of note is that my grandmother was not employed as a dressmaker – that work would have been undertaken by a specialist outside of her employer's home. Rather, her duties were solely concerned with ensuring that items of clothing and household linens were kept in good repair, a task deemed important enough to justify this being a live-in position. Though she had little formal education, her knowledge of mending gave her a route out of an economically impoverished life in London's East End, reinforcing the idea that skills of this type were simultaneously commonplace and very much of the people. I recount these biographical details not because my grandmother's work was remarkable, but because she was in many ways a very typical working class woman of her time. Moreover, this kind of work tends not to be formally documented, so family histories – admittedly, with their subjectivity which can be problematic in scholarly terms – are where details are most likely to be found.

The 1940s was the time at which mending attained a very particular cultural prominence in the UK. This was due to extreme shortages of raw materials as all available resources were channelled into supplying the military campaigns of WWII. Detailed advice in the form of Government-produced publications was given on how to refashion garments so that fabric could be used effectively, as

well as instructions on how to carry out repairs. Not only was mending and imaginative re-use of materials seen as practical and economically essential during wartime and in the subsequent years of rationing that followed the end of the war, but to do so was effectively a display of patriotism. The 'Make do and Mend' campaigns of the British Board of Trade entered the popular imagination and are now regarded as the benchmark of a 'waste not, want not' culture in the UK. It is interesting that the aesthetics of these campaigns are often evoked in contemporary discussions of mending, despite the reality that it was a time of severe deprivation and economic hardship for most people. Rather than being seen as a symbol of historical national crisis, the cheery but utilitarian imagery through which the values of mending were communicated continue to resonate, albeit in a peculiarly British way.

As postwar austerity gave way to economic regeneration across Europe in the 1950s, mending came to be seen as both old-fashioned and unnecessary. Industrial production evolved so as to render the imperative to mend redundant. Specifically, it was the availability of cheap mass-produced goods – whether clothing or household items – that signalled the decline of mending as a widespread domestic practice. Crawford writes about the loss of these skills in relation to the increased availability of new goods: 'what ordinary people once made, they buy; and what they once fixed for themselves, they replace entirely or hire an expert to repair.' (2009: 2). It is easy, therefore, to see how and why mending fell away as an activity for all but the very poorest of people. Even now, there is no expectation that goods are made to last or that we would want to mend them, much less that we have the skills to do so.

Moreover, as significant populations – such as those in China, India, Brazil and Russia – are only just starting to develop their consumer markets, it seems unlikely that these countries will limit their opportunities for economic growth by turning away from the undeniable appeal of 'the new'. In this context, mending might even be regarded as the very antithesis of progress, economic development and consumer capitalism. Indeed, Portwood-Stacer (2012) identifies it as one of the practices that is undertaken by self-identified anarchist activists in a deliberate attempt to counter mainstream consumption activities, and this idea of mending as a political act or lifestyle choice is one that is revisited towards the end of the paper.

It might be argued, then, that mending is re-emerging as a consumer practice as a response to straightened economic circumstances, and certainly Laitala and Boks find in their study of contemporary repair practices that 'more mending occurs in lower income families' (2012:132). However, Gibson and Stanes point out that 'practices of mending clothes (and thus extending their lifecycles) vary enormously through time, from place to place, and among demographic groups.' (2011: 175). This paper similarly argues that the emergence of repair cultures in

contemporary life cannot be read in one straightforward way: there are varied motivations for mending and numerous ways of understanding these practices.

Manifestations of Mending in Contemporary Culture

Each of the five examples of mending introduced here has a slightly different identity, reflecting the diverse values that might be attached to repair cultures.

www.scrapiana.com is the internet home of a UK mending enthusiast who lives in the city of Bath. On this website, she describes her subject matter as being that of 'scraps: mostly how to recycle textile scraps and the alchemy of making lovely new things from old.' She also clearly identifies herself as being concerned with environmental sustainability: 'We Brits still bin a worryingly vast (and growing) quantity of textiles. My latest quest is to get the nation mending, darning and patching again.' Through the site, the free monthly mending group, 'The Big Mend', is publicized as well as details of mending and darning classes that participants pay for. The tone of the site is that of the up-beat enthusiast, and written blog posts are interspersed with carefully selected visuals, often depicting vintage sewing materials.

By contrast, www.therestartproject.org, is decidedly utilitarian in terms of both purpose and representation. Presented as a collective, the website says: 'Repair and reuse of small electrical and electronics have been neglected for a long time, replaced by a throw-away culture and often wasteful recycling. In just over a year, with almost no funding and no paid staff members, we have demonstrated that a different approach in not only possible, but it is necessary and a lot of fun too.' This suggests that the primary motivation is a concern with environmental sustainability, although the site is free from any clichéd 'green' imagery. The tone used on the site is neither formal nor is it subjective or indicative of the views, tastes or aims of any one specific individual. Information is presented in a very functional form with few images and a monochrome colour palette, reinforcing a stereotypically masculine visual identity.

One blog that is emphatically personal and biographical is www.mymakedoandmendyear.wordpress.com. The project is intended as a year-long experiment in not buying first-cycle (i.e. new) goods. Whilst mending forms only one part of this challenge, the frequency with which the blogger posts updates (also dispersed via social media) makes it a useful case-study for looking at not just the frequency of mending activity, but also the motivations for doing so, as well as any material difficulties encountered in the process. The blogger also organised a mending group in her local area in 2013, and posts many links to other mending-themed sites and organisations.

The website www.tomofholland.com – though the work of an individual – is primarily focussed on the actual techniques of mending rather than the narratives of the mender per se. The images and detailed descriptions of materials used re-

flect specialist expert knowledge – especially of wool, knitting and crocheting – rather than that of an interested amateur. The blogger describes the intention of his work thus: 'By writing this blog, running darning workshops and taking repair work commissions I provide mending inspiration, skills and services to people and hopefully persuade them that shop-bought clothes deserve care and attention too, just like a precious hand-knit.' His work and website are particularly interesting given how few men seem to be involved with – or indeed interested in – the mending of clothing and textiles.

In the Netherlands, meanwhile, a number of 'Repair Cafés' have been established which bring together people who have mending skills with those who wish to learn them (Sharpe 2012). These Dutch groups tackle all forms of mending, including clothing and electrical goods, and appear to aim for a balanced gender mix. According to Sharpe (2012), 'Almost 40 groups across the Netherlands have started their own Repair Cafés to date, and the Repair Café Foundation has brought in over $500,000 from the Dutch government and other sources to support its operations.' The www.repaircafe.nl site has links to sister organisations in Germany, France, Belgium, the UK and North America. The European sites in particular suggest that repair cafés take place regularly and frequently.

Gendered Mending

Scarce though it may be, literature on the subject shows that domestic mending is positioned, almost by definition, as a female activity. Yet this notion of mending as an exclusively female concern is a misplaced one. Archive images from the early twentieth century indicate that the mending of clothing was an activity that was taught to boys in schools, often out of material necessity. Yet writings on men and mending are even more scarce than those that focus on women.

It should be noted that running parallel to this cultural imperative for women to mend, there is also a long history of female *resistance* to needlework. The following quote suggests that for some, the domestic work of sewing has been regarded as an actual obstacle to education: 'Needle-work and intellectual improvement are naturally in a state of warfare,' writes Mary Lamb (as Sepronia), in *The British Lady's Magazine* 1815 (cited by Appignanesi 2008: 30). This is an idea later articulated by second wave feminists, not least because it was yet another example of the unpaid labour that has always been expected of women.

The work of mending, implicitly regarded as 'women's work', can also be understood as work that women don't really want to do anymore. In fact, for recent generations of women there has been a form of pride in being able to say 'I can't sew a button on' in the same way that claiming not to be able to boil an egg is indicative of a rejection of a traditional domestic role. For many, the widespread availability of cheap commodities has offered them the opportunity to reject any obligation to carry out this particular form of unpaid labour whilst simultaneously

disassociating themselves with apparent material want. But this dismissal of skills which are seen as domestic, mundane and low-status becomes a class issue: many middle-class women will happily pay another woman a very low wage to do this work for them. In a broader sense, there has been a tangible shift in what is considered to be 'useful' knowledge, with domestic skills generally not seen as relevant in a high-tech age.

In light of this history, what role does gender play in contemporary versions of mending culture and how are lingering negative connotations negotiated? Regardless of the problems of constructing mending as 'women's work', some recent incarnations of mending groups often seem to be geared specifically towards women, implicitly if not explicity, as reflected in the decorative and arguably feminine aesthetic identity of scrapiana.com. By contrast, the more general mending groups such as Repair Cafes and The Restart Project seem to be aesthetically neutral in the case of the former, and masculine and the case of the latter. Whilst none of these groups make any explicit statements about gender, they all reflect gendered values and ideals through the design of their websites.

One might conclude that it is, therefore, not the act of mending that is gendered, but the specific commodities in question that are gendered. Thus clothing, fabrics and furnishings become the 'natural' focus of women's mending groups whereas electrical or mechanical goods are seen as belonging to a masculine culture, a division that is reflected in the divergent identities of the mending groups and blogs. Yet this is an incomplete explanation even on the basis of the examples discussed here, as Tom of Holland deals with a traditionally 'feminine' set of commodities but in a palpably different way to that of the female menders associated with other groups or sites.

The worth ascribed to work of this type reflects changing gender roles and notions of valued versus unvalued labour. Historically, mending was typically unpaid, invisible work, usually carried out by women in a domestic setting. But in recent incarnations of mending groups, these negative associations appear to have been shaken off. How might this be explained? Perhaps the very act of carrying out mending in a public space, as a social leisure activity liberates it from negative associations of unpaid domestic labour: work is literally reborn as leisure. A second reading might come from the application of Burman's ideas when she positions domestic sewing as 'an act of self-sufficiency and ingenuity' (1999: 41). In this way, the act of mending becomes a positive, active form of engagement with commodities – an idea that is discussed in the following section – as well as a forum in which knowledge and skills can be exercised.

Transforming Commodities Through Repair

The act of mending can be understood as a transformative interaction with the material world: it is a practice with the potential to change the way that we view

and engage with commodities. This is an idea explored by Middleton when she writes that:

> Visible mending reminds us of the materiality and the temporality of the thing. The delicate patchwork of repair is the narrative of its suffering and endurance. Each new darn declares the thing's power; humans think it worth mending, it should not be thrown away. (2012: 15)

The relationship between mender and object shifts from a passive one to an active one. Whilst mending and repair has a role in making commodities more sustainable, this is dependent upon the item being valued enough to justify further investment in its maintenance rather than throwing it away or giving it to a charity shop. It also depends upon there being sufficient people who have the skills to carry out the repairs. Crawford writes that 'the craftsman has an impoverished fantasy life compared to the ideal consumer; he is more utilitarian and less given to soaring hopes. But he is also more independent.' (2009: 18). It is this independence that makes mending so central to sustainability – one quite literally learns to see material goods in a different way, to value them and want to keep them in circulation, an idea also articulated by Gauntlett, when he writes that:

> One becomes more aware of the details and decisions which underpin everyday things and experiences, and therefore more able to gain pleasure and inspiration from the appreciation of things. (2011: 60)

For the most part, we purchase mass-produced commodities and these new objects come into our lives replete with the meanings ascribed to them by their producers. Not, it should be added, by those invisible, nameless workers who actually make the goods, but by those who market, advertise and sell the goods. It has been argued that these 'signs' have little to do with the functional use of the objects – they are about what any given item represents (Baudrillard 1970). But when one starts to tinker with any given commodity – as necessitated by the very act of repair – those meanings start to unravel and a transformative process opens up in which the commodity takes on the imprint of the fixer. They might also start to provide a kind of biography in ways that mass-produced shop garments cannot, for as Crawford writes: 'shared memories attach to the material souvenirs of our lives, and producing them is a kind of communion, with others and the future.' (2009: 15)

These conceptual ideas start to become tangible when looking at the 'visible mends' that appear on the websites of Tom of Holland and Scrapiana. There is no attempt made at hiding the work that has taken place – it may even become a design feature of the 'new' garment. By contrast, in their research Laitala and Boks found that 'very few informants used the repair as a decorative element.' (2012: 132). There are, therefore, multiple possibilities for intentions in mending, and in each instance the repairer makes a choice: to return the commodity to its original identity, or to rework it in a way that changes its meaning. This latter option might also be understood as a way of fostering a playful, inventive relationship with

material commodities, one through which the personal identity of the mender might be expressed. A hand-mended object also raises the rather more philosophical question of how to deal with imperfection. Industrial processes have all but eliminated the very concept of imperfection: we rarely accept 'seconds' in the world of mass-produced consumer goods. Mended commodities might therefore be seen as a thorn in the side of that contemporary tenet – they puncture illusory perfection and reveal both the labour of the mender and the patina of life.

The Knowledge, Skills and Labour of Mending

The activity of mending can be broken down into the separate but overlapping components of: a body of relevant knowledge about the items and materials involved; a practical skillset appropriate to the task; and the actual labour of carrying out the reparation. An attempt to mend something oneself might also be seen as a reflexive practice as one may become aware of one's own limitations in any of these areas.

In their study of clothing use, Laitala and Boks found that 'the decision to repair clothing depends partly on the handiwork and sewing abilities of the respondents,' (2012: 132), and that the most common repairs to clothing were those such as sewing on a button or repairing a seam. But they go on to say that:

> Zipper replacement is more demanding, and most of the informants did not try to do it themselves…In that case the zippers may be taken to professional tailors or family or friends (usually mothers) with more sewing competence. (2012: 132)

This provides a helpful example of exactly what is regarded as easy or difficult by menders, demanding or otherwise in terms of skills. It is also noteworthy that it is most often mothers who are regarded as the repositories of these skills. The nature of such skills is that they take time to acquire, and require practise, yet this in itself may be regarded as part of the intrinsic reward, for as Sennett writes:

> Craftsmen take pride most in skills that mature. This is why simple imitation is not a sustaining satisfaction; the skill has to evolve. The slowness of craft time serves as a source of satisfaction; practice beds in, making the skill one's own. Slow craft time also enables the work of reflection and imagination – which the push for quick results cannot.' (Sennett 2008: 295)

Contemporary menders negotiate the slowness of results by emphasising instead the value of that labour and by recognising that the requisite skills are no longer common folk-knowledge. The importance of knowledge transfer is evident in this quote from the website of Bath's 'Big Mend' group:

> If your problem is trepidation or insufficient skills, we aim to be able to help you with that too; if there isn't someone there who will know how to fix your beloved vintage dress, we will know where to look to find out.
>
> The Big Mend – Bath, UK)

Likewise, the Dutch Repair Cafés recognizes that attendees may require the help of specialists, that these are not skills that people necessarily already have:

> You'll find tools and materials to help you make any repairs you need. You will also find repair specialists such as electricians, seamstresses, carpenters and bicycle mechanics. It's an ongoing learning process.
>
> The Repair Café – Netherlands

The positive feelings generated by learning something new are also evidenced in the website of the Restart Project: 'Everyone attending a Restart Party wants to come back for more, learn additional skills and help others save devices from going to waste.' (www.therestartproject.org).

Whilst specific skills associated with particular materials are a prerequisite for mending, the task also requires the cognitive mindset of being able to assess a problem with the material object, and identify an appropriate remedy. In short, problem-solving is as important a skill in this activity as knowledge of techniques for fixing an item. A pertinent example of this appears on the blog My Make Do and Mend Year. It takes the form of a detailed blog post about the challenges of making a particular repair (in this instance, to a pair of swimming trunks). The wrong turns taken are documented as well as the successful outcome, and one gets a sense of the active problem-solving that has taken place.

> I thought that replacing the elastic would be pretty straightforwards [sic], and would just be a case of snipping into the waistband, removing the perished elastic, and replacing it. Not so. The elastic is sewn into the waistband rendering it impossible to remove… So I duly dug out some elastic, and measured it around hubby's waist and got sewing. I computed that I needed to use a zig zig stitch for elastic, but I thought it had to be a very tight zig zag, which I did, and hubby then tried them on… They were no better-arrrgghhhh! Cue lots of very tedious unpicking… I gave it another go… I used wider elastic, and a very shallow zig zag… I also used the zipper foot to enable me to leave the drawstring unstitched. The hardest thing about sewing with elastic is trying to pull/stretch it while sewing without pulling your actual sewing-any handy tips? But they are done!
>
> (http://mymakedoandmendyear.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/a-mend/)

Unless one is very fortunate, the structures of contemporary life provide limited opportunities for pride to be taken in work. In some small way, to mend something is to understand and appreciate the value of work, itself a denigrated term, usually prized only for its exchange value in monetary terms. Specifically, 'there is a pride of accomplishment in the performance of whole tasks that can be held in the mind all at once, and contemplated as whole once finished,' Crawford writes (2009: 156). Likewise, Middleton provides tangible recognition of the labour involved in mending when she writes: 'half an hour of human effort and the socks are roadworthy again for months, if not years, to come' (2012: 15).

One might say that at its best, mending is a meaningful form of work, a subject on which Schumacher writes, citing the Indian philosopher J.C. Kumarappa:

> If the nature of the work is properly appreciated and applied, it will stand in the same relation to the higher faculties as food is to the physical body. It nourishes and enlivens the higher man and urges him to produce the best he is capable of. (Kumarappa cited in Schumacher 1993: 40)

Moreover, craft might be useful for countering the feelings of alienation that arise in a capitalist system: 'for Marx, the defining characteristic of non-alienated activity was human creativity – the artist and craftsman being ideal-typical examples,' writes Bocock (1995: 51). This is an idea similarly articulated by Portwood-Stacer when she argues that:

> The idea behind DIY is that when possible one should put one's own, unalienated labour toward producing the things one needs, rather than putting money toward practices and industries that exploit workers and natural resources. (2012: 92)

Whilst those who engage with making and mending recognise the diverse range of requirements involved in this labour, it is an inevitability of contemporary socio-economic systems that most people do not. Furthermore, because industrial processes de-skill workers by breaking production processes down into fragmented and disconnected components, the erosion of practical skills is endemic even within populations working in manufacturing industries. Low wages also lead to the erroneous conclusion that this can't be difficult, skilled work for it brings very limited economic rewards. Therefore the act of mending may even make us think twice about whether we buy the cheap mass-produced goods that are a ubiquitous feature of 'throwaway' consumer culture. My point here is not to suggest that the pleasure of mending something in the comfort of one's own home or at a social evening bears any resemblance to sweatshop labour. Rather, it can serve as a reminder that all forms of labour deserve a fair wage, regardless of whether or not they are prized culturally.

One can also formulate mending as an assertion of individual agency running counter to the prevalent consumer culture, which is the perspective of Portwood-Stacer (2012). The ability to assess value and utilise skills is similarly empowering, and these activities help raise philosophical questions about how we deal with imperfection, not just in our material worlds but also with ourselves.

Social Mending in an Era of Digital Technology

There are two social dimensions to contemporary mending: the face-to-face encounters within mending groups and the virtual, interactive dimension offered by the circulation of information about mending using new media. These two elements interweave successfully, giving menders choice in the way that they can gather information and learn repair skills.

Historically, the social value of such domestic work has been explored by Burman, who writes that:

> Time taken for buying cloth and other items, making clothes, dealing with dressmakers, mending, recycling, renovating and laundry were done with the support of mothers or sisters, who brought a wider range of skills and the opportunity to share tasks and resources. (1999: 42)

Thus we see that in the past, sewing has been an activity in which women could share skills and expertise, but also participate in a social experience. Returning to contemporary mending groups, this aspect of each is evident:

> Imagine a great big sociable gaggle of people sewing on buttons, darning, nibbling snacks and gossiping (The Big Mend, Bath, UK)

Likewise, the Dutch Repair Cafés are described as:

> Free meeting places and they're all about repairing things (together). If you have nothing to repair, you can enjoy a cup of tea or coffee. Or you can lend a hand with someone else's repair job. (The Repair Café, Netherlands)

Quite clearly, the social dimension is central to both the identity and success of these groups. Moreover, there is an overt desire for social inclusivity which is so often lacking in daily encounters, reflected in the following quote from the Restart Project:

> We are receiving offers to collaborate from retired engineers and electricians, students, green activists as well as very "normal" people, happy that someone is representing their frustrated voice, and pragmatically creating an alternative'.
>
> (www.therestartproject.org)

As well as providing an opportunity to reconnect with the values that come with mending, these groups open up new spaces and places – including virtual ones – in which intergenerational social interaction may take place, with younger menders learning from older, experienced specialists.

Rather than being retrogressive or anti-technology – which might be an assumption made about menders – contemporary manifestations of mending make very good use of social media. Indeed, the mending groups described here *rely* on internet technology in order to connect with their participants. There are numerous ways in which mending information lends itself to expression through new media.

Firstly, the knowledge base is fragmented and does not lie in one single, consolidated place. Information about the subject is held by individuals in a variety of geographical locations, and may be very specific in nature. Thus new media permits access to this shared knowledge. However, it also intersects with real life meetings and social interactions as mending sites are often there to publicize and support real-world activities. Secondly, the nature of mending lends itself well to the combination of instructions, images and embedded video clips that work so well on blogs and can thus be demonstrated in step-by-step instructions. Thirdly, the interactive nature of new media facilitates the seeking of solutions and crowdsourcing specialist knowledge. Together, these elements mean that the communication of information about the subject is both accessible, but still specialist, and

the evidence of the sites considered in this study indicates a strong relationship between online and real-life activities.

Mending as a Way of Life

One might conclude that most contemporary menders are doing so as an active and deliberate life choice. This may be partially influenced by economic imperatives, as Laitala and Boks (2012) suggest, but in some instances, participants are paying significant sums of money to learn about mending (e.g. the darning classes offered by Scrapiana), suggesting that it is being pursued for personal interest rather than out of economic necessity. Nevertheless, as Portwood-Stacer argues: 'knowing how to repair things for oneself also keeps one from having either to pay others to do it or to spend money on new things to replace the old.' (2012: 92).

Environmental sustainability appears to be a stronger motivation in most instances, and this is reflected in all of the websites and blogs considered here. Yet none of these activities are aligned to overtly politicized environmentalism. Nor would any of the individuals mentioned in this paper fit into Portwood-Stacer's definition of self-identified anarchists and anti-consumer activists (2012).

Rather, these activities might be more effectively aligned with 'slow' movements, written about extensively by Carl Honoré (2005). Whilst he does not engage specifically with the subject of mending, he very much posits reduced consumption of material goods as a component of wider, slower social and economic system. There are also some parallels with the revival of home-cooking and grow-your-own movements that have emerged as a response to disillusionment with the food industry in recent years. Moreover, the very clear social element identified in mending groups resonates profoundly with ideas about being more engaged in meaningful activities on a local level, a theme that constantly emerges in discussions about living slower, and better, lives. According to Gauntlett, this kind of small-scale, local activity brings multiple benefits to participants:

> It is worth noting that in order to feel supported and encouraged in their creative efforts, people do not necessarily need a huge audience or network. The pleasure in connecting with people through creativity, and therefore feeling more connected with the world – becoming heard and recognised, and starting to feel that there may be some point in trying to make a difference – can occur through interactions with small numbers of like-minded people, and so this kind of activity doesn't need to meet a large number of 'eyeballs' to be meaningful. (2011: 232)

Similar ideas are articulated specifically by mending groups, highlighting the social and economic benefits to the local community as well as to individuals:

> We envision a world where much less goes to waste, many more people can learn repair and reuse skills, generating local repair jobs and opportunities in their communities. (www.therestartproject.org)

Perhaps, then, mending can best be understood as one of a number of practices taken by people who are concerned with environmental sustainability, but who want to take action on a personal, domestic level.

Reflections on the Meaning of Mending

This exploration of mending reveals a subject of great complexity and demonstrates just how little we know about it. Clearly there is considerable scope for more research into the subject, whether looking at its historical context or current incarnations. In particular, it would be useful to know more about mending in locations other than Europe and North America.

Nevertheless, even within the scope of this study it has been possible to identify a range of possibilities for understanding mending. Certainly, concerns with environmental sustainability seem to be driving interest in the subject at the moment. But as discussed, there are also benefits arising from mending on personal, social and economic levels, too. Above all, mending can be regarded as a transformative process and paradoxically, rather than fixing relationships to cultural artefacts, it opens up a kind of dialogue in which the consumer becomes an active agent in their material lives.

Ultimately, then, mending should not be positioned as a trivial activity at all. It is profoundly important in environmental, social and economic terms, and not just as a metaphor, but as a democratic action that is as materially tangible as it is empowering.

Anna König is a lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at the University of Arts, London. She studied psychology at Sussex University followed by a postgraduate degree in fashion history and theory at the London College of Fashion. She has contributed to a number of academic texts on fashion and the fashion media, and has written for several national newspapers and magazines. Current research interests include sustainability, second-cycle garment use and contemporary cultures of making and mending. E-mail: a.konig@fashion.arts.ac.uk

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