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Anthropology in blue jeans

I begin this article with a brief history of the use of the normative in anthropology, starting with Kant and concluding with discussion of the concept within theories of practice. This is followed by an account of an ethnographic study of blue jeans wearing in North London. The importance of becoming ordinary is exemplified in that study by migrants' experience of being comfortable in blue jeans. I argue that jeans are the first postsemiotic garment, an antithesis to identity. I end by considering the challenge represented by the concept of "the ordinary" for anthropology's foundational presumption of the normative. [*blue jeans, ordinary, normative, denim, migration*]

At the core of contemporary and most historical anthropology lies an assumption of normativity. By *normativity*, I mean simply the expectation that actions within a social field are likely to be judged, as right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, proper or transgressive. Such judgments imply norms into which populations are socialized (Eriksen 2001:59). My intention in this article is to make this assumption more explicit and to demonstrate that alternatives to it are available for anthropological theory. One such alternative is the concept of "the ordinary," which builds on an intellectual trajectory that has developed through practice theory and through a tradition of material-culture studies. I highlight it here not only because the ordinary is emerging within anthropological discourse but also because it corresponds to an actual trend, that is, a greater emphasis on the ordinary in the practice of at least some populations studied by anthropologists.

The evidence for this claim comes in the second half of this article, which summarizes part of an ethnographic study Sophie Woodward and I carried out of blue-

jeans wearing among the population of three connected streets in North London. In many areas of the world, blue jeans are what more than half the people are wearing on any given day. Not surprisingly, jeans may be found to signify almost any aspect of social and cultural difference, from gender and wealth to style and circumstance. But the blue jeans worn in the London streets we studied are dominated by nonbranded, cheap, supermarket or high-street-retail varieties. These jeans have a remarkable capacity to enable their wearers to escape from the burden of such signification or of identity more generally. Instead, they demonstrate a struggle by much of the population to inhabit a category identified as the merely “ordinary,” although the idiom through which this is most fully expressed is that of “being comfortable.” This category is particularly attractive to some migrant populations and is well suited to the heterogeneity of London. Before making the case ethnographically, I review the history and significance of the concept of “the normative” to anthropology. My intention is to demonstrate that the stress on becoming ordinary is important not just for the interpretation of our North London ethnography but also for the challenge the struggle to become ordinary represents to a foundational principle behind the discipline of anthropology itself.

#### [h1]A brief history of normative anthropology

Modern social and cultural anthropology became established partly through the rejection of Victorian concepts of “evolution” and “diffusion” but equally through the adoption of a more relativistic and empathic engagement fostered by participant-observation. Implicit in this transformation was a concept of “the normative.” The normative, as a facet of social practice, has no point of origin, in that it is hard to imagine any religion or moral order to which the normative has not been in some sense central. But when it comes to the more abstract or philosophical discourse around the concept of “the normative,” anthropology has been influenced by a tradition that derives in some

measure from the writings of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. It is perhaps unfortunate that Kant wrote a book actually called *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (2006). This book, the most popular of his works in his day, is today considered somewhat trite and among his least effective philosophical endeavors. The claim that Kant had a major influence on the discipline comes from elsewhere in his corpus (e.g., Kant 1999). It is Kant's, and, more generally, the Enlightenment's, understanding of morality as based on reason that became central to anthropological work. For Kant, moral order is normative not just by virtue of constraint and the obligations of duty. Moral action will follow when people act according to a rationality, understood as a well-reasoned action, given the particularities of the situation in which they find themselves.

The influence of Kant's ideas on morality and norms may be traced through the two figures who are probably most often identified as the founding figures of the discipline. Anthropologists can still attest to the abiding influence of Emile Durkheim for the development of anthropology in Europe and Franz Boas for its development in North America. Gregory Schrempf suggests that "Kantian philosophy figured centrally in the perspectives of both Boas and Durkheim" (1989:28). For Kant (1999), human beings' knowledge of the world derives not simply from its objective form but from a priori categories by which we both perceive it and develop the capacity for reason. Both Boas and Durkheim seem to be seeking some equivalent to Kant's notion of "a priori categories," as is apparent, for example, in the way Durkheim (1976) sees the social manifested as history prior to the individual. The social, then, becomes the a priori form through which systems of categories are realized. Boas, meanwhile, takes on more of Kant's ideals of scientific exploration and envisions a separate cosmological sphere that transcends science.<sup>1</sup> Both seem torn between the study of society as the particular and Kant's universalism.

In examining the trajectory that follows on the influence of Kant, it is important to recognize the growing differences as well as continuities that lead toward the emergence of the concept of “culture” in anthropology, a concept that includes other mediating influences, such as the work of Edward B. Tyler and Johann Gottfried von Herder. The concept of “culture” starts to open up what appears to be an irreconcilable difference between anthropology and Kantian philosophy. For Kant, the vision of anthropology is simultaneously individual and universal. The idea of “reason” implies a direct link between the two, as each individual carries within him- or herself the potential for a universal and cosmopolitan morality. This link is sundered by the anthropological discovery of cultural relativism. For anthropologists, the world is organized not by a universal reason but by the much more parochial vision of cultural values specific to different populations. This view effects a repudiation of universalism through an alternative emphasis on a collective that is bigger than the individual but smaller than the universal.

Nevertheless, anthropology retains something of the Kantian ideal in its presumption of the normative as the ruling principle that exists within each and every cultural vision. The normative is a presumption that is articulated by but not derived from Kant, precisely because it was equally central to those moral orders and debates that preceded him. Anthropologists, in the main, assume that all people have, as Kant argues, an essentially moral vision of the world linked to reason but that this vision takes shape within each specific cultural context rather than within a universal humanity. Even within his original formulation of anthropology, there is a crucial contradiction between what Kant saw as the anthropological aspect of his vision, essentially an empirical investigation of the causes and conditions of people’s moral actions, as against an insistence in much of the rest of his work that our moral sensibility is transcendent, that

is, irrespective of the empirical (Frierson 2003:3). But Kant's anthropology was also intended to promote those conditions that fostered morality. This is quite different from the basic cultural relativism claimed by anthropology. Not all anthropology is besotted by cultural relativism. In some instances, the discipline retains a clear predilection toward its own moralism. Some anthropologists also assert that we can and should distinguish between universal and particular moralisms (e.g., Merry 2001; Scheper-Hughes 1995).<sup>2</sup> In general, though, we mostly ascribe to a Kantian vision when it comes to our intracultural view, especially when it comes to the society we identify with, but not when it comes to the pluralities of culture seen as peoples other than our own, toward whom we may feel obligated to abstain from moral judgment. Within such cultural relativism, it seems that Kant's anthropology cannot be our anthropology. As I argue below, however, new developments around the concept of "the ordinary" may have led to a potential rapprochement.

The other major contribution of anthropology was its rejection of evolutionary and hierarchical orderings of cultures in favor of a respect for society as a collectivity on a par with its respect for both individuals and universals, something that is retained in contemporary discussions of identity. An appreciation of the mindless killings in the trenches of the First World War at least muted any simple assertion of the moral superiority of the civilized West. In particular, a tradition from Boas through Melville Herskovits developed a powerful normative relativism based on the commitment not to judge other peoples by one's own moral viewpoints but to appreciate that they will see themselves in terms of their own situated logic. This relativism between populations was also implicated in a concept of culture that supposed that, within a given population, people did judge each other according to a normative framework that was not, for them, relativistic. So the anthropologist as ethnographer is faced with at least some of the same

questions posed by Kant about how a population creates either consensual or imposed moral judgments, at least with respect to intracultural behavior.

As anthropology became more committed to the minutiae of ethnographic particularism and the explanation of social order, the issue of the normative became increasingly an implicit assumption rather than the source of a general theory. Durkheim's ideas about social order developed through a consideration of the role of religion as that which effectively ensures adherence to the normative. The functionalism espoused by Bronislaw Malinowski also presupposes mechanisms that corral people into following the normative order that expresses cultural values.

Within some subfields of anthropology, normativity has remained relatively explicit and in others it has become increasingly implicit. The normative foundation for culture is clearest in fields such as the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of law. But in other genres of anthropology, norms are often derived from statements about organizational principles. So kinship theory, as a core to anthropological studies, is not just a system of categories by which people recognize their relationship to each other. It also specifies the forms of behavior expected of the persons who occupy a given relationship, such as a mother's bother and a sister's son, and thereby incorporates normativity. Within economic anthropology, to cite another example, we teach about the disputes between formalism and substantivism, but, in effect, what is at issue is whether one regards a single set of economic principles as pertaining to all peoples or subscribes to an alternative, more relativistic, sense of situated economic expectations. Either way, the assumption is that these positions represent norms and principles by which actors are judged and disciplined. More or less the same argument goes for any other branch of anthropological investigation; at root, they all assume normativity.

So normativity is the other side of the coin to cultural relativism. Anthropologists may vary considerably as to whether we want to identify culture with bounded or regional cultures, and most of us today would wish to acknowledge the heterogeneity of both practice and ideology that exists within populations, to recognize that habitus is heterodoxic and often reflects people facing different situations as well as possessing different moral cosmologies. Nevertheless, anthropology remains committed to empathetically engaging with an extraordinary diversity of practices, from derivatives trading to cannibalism, and with vast mythic structures. This engagement is achieved by trying to comprehend the extraordinary diversity of moral universes in terms of their own normativity, such that inside any given system of values are expectations of and constraints on individual action. The first thing an anthropology student is usually taught is that, although any given set of observable behaviors of another society, such as menstruating men (Hogbin 1970), might appear at first bizarre relative to the expectations and beliefs of the student's upbringing, these behaviors would be regarded as moral duties within the society being investigated. It is outsiders' refusal to countenance such actions that would be seen as bizarre by that population.

The high point in the study of culture within this relativist tradition may well be the work of Clifford Geertz, who stayed close to these questions of normativity to the end of his career. His immediate concerns had originally been more the repudiation of the paradigm that preceded him: functionalism, with what he regarded as its simplistic and mechanistic assumptions as to what provided for the normative. As he notes in *Available Light*, for functional analysis, “‘religion’ holds society together, sustains values, maintains morale, keeps public conduct in order, mystifies power, rationalizes inequality, justifies unjust deserts, and so on” (Geertz 2000:15). Without this concept of “functional religion,” there clearly needed to be something else to serve the normative. In his work,

this tended to be shared frames of meaning, whose consequences were in some ways analogous to those of functionalism. So the last section of this book is actually called “What Is a Culture if It Is Not a Consensus?” (Geertz 2000:246–260). More recently, anthropology has tended to disown the study of culture per se as it has repudiated the idea of bounded and homogeneous cultures. But if, instead, the focus is on, for example, women, or ethnicity, or subcultures, it is not clear how this does more than downsize the problem of culture as normative. If one undertakes an ethnography of, for example, an antistate, ex-hippy, radical collective, the result would still be the ethnography of a community structured around the normative values of antistate, ex-hippy radicalism (see, e.g., Malaby 2009 on how technoliberationist ideals were put into practice through the creation of Second Life). My concern here is not with the concept of “culture,” which has spawned a huge literature, but with my belief that both “culture” and alternative constructs (such as “society” for the writ-large, and “identity” or “resistance” for the writ-small) imply a concept of “the normative” that is comparatively unexplored. The topic would be more prominent, perhaps, if we had taken a sociological route through Talcott Parsons (1951) and the study of norms. Norms are a little less highfalutin than culture per se.

I have suggested that the presence of the normative as the foundation for anthropological presumptions about social reproduction is most often merely implied and scattered within the subdisciplines of anthropological studies and the minutiae of ethnographic reportage. Studies implicate rather than explicitly discuss the sanctions, promises, or pressures that may be applied against those who fail to properly accord with group norms. An exception to this is one of our discipline’s classic and exemplary ethnographic monographs, Nancy Munn’s *The Fame of Gawa* (1986). One of the reasons that this particular monograph serves so well as the quintessence of what anthropology



has achieved in its attempts to understand the world is that it makes explicit the workings of relative normativity.

For Munn to understand why the people of Gawa behave the way they do, she must first outline the systems of value that determine what an individual Gawa should strive for in life and what he or she should avoid. Cultural forms, then, elaborate the possible paths to both the achievement and destruction of value. For example, in a separate article, Munn (1977) traces how various kin relationships are objectified through exchanges of labor and food to facilitate the construction of canoes. The canoes are then launched into the kula, which one could see as the alienation of these relationships and the labor that went into their production. But, in return for the canoes, their makers receive valuables, which are the products of similar processes elsewhere. These valuables are then traded downward back through the same sets of relationships that produced the canoes. This elaborate journey outward and then inward is what expands what we think of as culture and what is understood by the people of Gawa through a concept Munn translates as “fame.” Kula exchange is part of an intricate and elaborate system by which people can achieve this value of fame.

The question behind all this is, frankly, why do the Gawa bother? Why not just sit at home and watch television, or at least sunsets? After all, the goal clearly is not just to give research material to anthropologists. Munn elaborates on this necessity. A couch potato (or couch yam) among the Gawa people would be someone who just wants to grow yams for his or her own personal consumption, without all the kula-ring palaver. The Gawa have a pretty effective response to this. They accuse their couch yams of witchcraft. Central to Munn’s argument is that, if you just grow food and eat it, then no value, fame, or culture is created. If, by contrast, you grow food, exchange it in complex networks that create canoes, and send these canoes out to be exchanged for valuables

from other islands representing other networks, then something big happens. What comes back is fame, interpreted by Munn as value. An elaborate field is created through which people and islands grow more than just food; they grow reputation, they can become argonauts and have adventures, tell stories, describe things they have heard about and seen. Life is richer. Witchcraft is that which shrinks and shrivels, not just bellies but also horizons, whereas exchange, such as kula, allows people to grow fat with fame and fortune. Through exchange, people learn how to “get a life.”

So it is not just that the people of Gawa have the capacity for culture and its elaboration as fame. Through her analysis of witchcraft, through her examples of the rhetoric of encouragement and threat, Munn makes clear that there exists a normative pressure for each and every member of that society to be fully engaged in culture as an enterprise. “The importance of obtaining consensus is stressed by Gawans in connection with all significant group activities” (Munn 1986:264) and is often expressed in terms of spatial order and synchronicity. Most of what one gleans about value from *The Fame of Gawa* suggests that the normative is as much carrot as stick. One of the achievements of this book, following on Malinowski’s (1922) original study of the “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” is how it conveys the attraction, indeed, adventure, of participation in kula and the quest for fame. But, at the same time, this drive to fame may also be experienced as a form of pressure that very likely is felt as oppressive by some people, who might well prefer to remain couch yams. If there were no such people, then there probably would be no sanctions of witchcraft. The underlying implication is that we cannot presume that all peoples of the world happily and without thought correspond to our anthropological descriptions of their habitus. Social rules are social pressures. Although, as made clear in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977:3–9) rethinking of gift exchange, but also evident in other ethnographies, such as F. G. Bailey’s (1969) book on stratagems and

spoils in South Asia, social rules as culture are also individual opportunities (for a wider discussion of the place of the individual within the normative, see Miller 2009).

So, in Munn's analysis and implicit in most anthropological monographs is the idea that social norms are reproduced by an individual's sense of duty bolstered by his or her understanding of value and often by sanctions against deviance. This does not necessarily extend to more explicit and extreme presumptions of power and power objectified in discourse that may be found in positions influenced by Michel Foucault (see Rabinow 1999 and, for a critique, see Brown 1996). Other trends in anthropology have emphasized a heroic struggle against any given norm. We tend to celebrate critique, marginality, struggle, and terms such as *resistance*, as though all cultural norms are inherently oppressive and all heterogeneities are inherently liberating. This tendency ignores the equal desire by people who regard themselves as progressive to actually create and extend global norms. For example, most anthropologists think of feminism as generally a good thing. We do not assume that it is intrinsically oppressive and that every good anthropologist has, as a kind of birthright, a duty to resist the moralities of feminism and refuse its constraints. Indeed, we might feel that we are insufficiently close to its strictures and wish to come closer still to its norms and expectations, creating a wider body of sameness. In short, we may feel that conformity to feminism is something we should aspire to and welcome the possibility that it will become a global norm. Other examples of norms we might wish to extend include welfare, equality, rights to freedom, and access to power. This tension between advocacy of and opposition to norms is only partially resolved through various fashionable notions of heteronormativities or multiple ontologies.

[h1]From norms to practice

A more satisfactory route, which brings this excavation of normativity up to date, would take note of anthropologists' increasing reliance on a theory of practice. Whereas, with Geertz, we still find a sense of a moral system of expectations, when we come to Bourdieu (1977), we confront something more like a banal system of socialization through the engagement with embodied routines. Habitus does not seem to require either religion or function, but, as Sherry B. Ortner (1984) noted early on, there is still a great deal to work out in terms of how practice contributes to social reproduction more generally. A starting point may be that "practice theories are motivated in substantial part by Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's criticism of normative regularism, which identified the understanding of norms or meanings with grasping and following rules" (Rouse 2007a:668). But if people are not following rules, does this mean there is some underlying or implicit normativity that explains why we do what we do?

The implications of a theory of practice for implicit normativity have recently been subject to heated debate within philosophy (Rouse 2007a, 2007b; Turner 2005, 2007; see also Honneth 1995; Zurn 2005). As Stephen P. Turner (2007:66–67) notes, the problem with seeing something as merely given is that it seems to place it outside of causative explanation. For Turner, this is not acceptable. A key example is his discussion of anthropological debates concerning the Maori *hau*. Most readings suggest that the *hau* does not exist merely as a description of the practice of giving something back. For the Maori, the *hau* itself is a causative explanation implying magical processes. But, then, says Turner, Marcel Mauss is, in effect, supplying an alternative, demystified account of the *hau* as his contribution to social science, through his own explanation of its existence and consequences. Mauss's analysis confirms for Turner that, one way or another, people have to understand why they should do something. That is, either we propose the Maori

have to have reasons for their beliefs or, at least, Mauss has to propose an anthropological explanation for their existence. Otherwise, we do not feel we understand the hau.

My own position, would, however, be closer to that of Joseph Rouse (2007b:47), in his critique of Turner. Rouse argues, firstly, that we can retain an idea of implicated normativity within practice theory and, secondly, that this does not require those forms of explanation Turner insists on. For Rouse, the discussion of the hau is exceptional rather than typical. Anthropologists, and quite possibly the Maori, explicitly debate the hau, but most things are not like that. With regard to much else about observed social or individual actions, we do not assume that those engaged have necessarily developed a pseudocausative account for those actions. More often, they merely regard them as customary, as routines, or as bloody obvious. If we do not presume that the Maori require a causative account of their actions, then perhaps we also may not need an alternative social-science version, a “demystified” causative account based on an implicit normativity. In some ways, a theory of practice obviates each of these requirements.

Instead, actions may often be regarded as an expression of the merely familiar that makes people in shared social processes feel comfortable. In London, eating your dessert before your main course is subject to normative pressure, not because anyone would regard it as immoral but because it would be judged as making those in the vicinity feel uncomfortable. It is possible that those involved could come up with an ad hoc folk explanation for their feelings of discomfort. Perhaps eating a sweet before a savory dish might make you feel sick. It is also possible to come up with an account from social science. Following Mary Douglas (1978), we might regard the order of meals as symbolic of some deeper social order. But following Rouse, we do not have to presume either of these cases. Practice is merely socialized routine. Routine may, in turn, become subject to normative critique. Figures such as Theodor Adorno and Henri Lefebvre (Slater 2009;

Wilk 2009) railed against routine, especially the routines of contemporary consumer culture, as a betrayal of the kind of consciousness people should aspire to. It has taken quite some time for social science to empathetically engage with the study of routine in its own right (see Shove et al. 2009).

Within anthropology, thanks to the work of Ortner, Bourdieu, and many others, socialized and embodied routines are no longer seen as a static set of rulelike behaviors. We understand that they can incorporate considerable variation that provides much of the dynamic force to society. This variability is also what makes habitus compatible with social change. But we still need to understand how routine is linked to the normative. For Rouse (2007b:53), social action as performance is normative because it is accountable by reference to a common stake in social expectations. So practice should not be seen just as regularity among people but as a “pattern of interaction among them that expresses their mutual normative accountability” (Rouse 2007a:669). To put this simply, we have moved from the idea that people have to feel a sense of duty to one that merely suggests they are sensitive to what makes other people feel comfortable.

So, with Rouse, anthropologists have an argument that seems to bring our concept of “normativity” into alignment with the increasing preference for a theory of practice and, equally, with the particular approach to material-culture studies with which I would wish my own work to be associated. This form of material-culture studies has for a long time sought to distance itself from the more romantic elements of traditional anthropology that were, in some measure, partly responsible for an emphasis on the normative, especially in its earliest forms that stressed moral holism. The idea of material culture as representing “the humility of things” (Miller 1987) implied that objects as practice often tended to be “below the radar” of normative surveillance. This made them a particularly powerful tool for an anthropology that was itself seeking to understand practice through

roots other than the traditional emphasis on the normative. Because much of material practice consists of routine or remains unselfconscious, it is less subject to moral pressure or legitimation. So, although the emphasis in the ethnography that follows is on the unprecedented nature of the ordinary, it is excavated not just through what people say, explain, or justify but, above all, through attention to the ubiquity of blue jeans and the plausible explanation of this as practice. The ethnography is also intended to exemplify this tradition of material culture, with its focus on how people are materially constituted (Miller 2010).

The larger reason for turning to ethnography at this point is that the trajectory that has just been outlined is not merely a reflection of debates within the discipline but is, to some extent, reflective of shifts in the wider world. Observable material culture often shows perspicacity that our intellectual thought has yet to catch up with. It is, therefore, through the ethnography of material practice that we may find how society has now moved beyond that which we have captured in current debates about theories of practice: not through any explication of norms, or philosophical conjecture, but directly through people's actions, what people routinely choose to do, or, in this case, wear. Surprisingly, perhaps, I argue that some of the deepest philosophy of the modern world is to be found in blue jeans, and it is in our jeans (rather than in our genes) that we can find evidence that accounts for crucial aspects of contemporary behavior.

## [h1]The Global Denim Project

In 2007, Woodward and I set up a website called the Global Denim Project (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-denim-project>), and together we published a paper called “A Manifesto for the Study of Denim” (Miller and Woodward 2007). We suggested that instead of anthropologists choosing their subject of study by trying to locate a topic no one else was studying, they, instead, commit to carrying out projects on a single topic, in

this case, the anthropology of denim, for at least five years. Our hope was that other people would join us in examining this topic, drawn to it precisely because of the prospect of multiple studies being carried out simultaneously. The website illustrates the approximately twenty independent projects that have so far developed in response to this call.

The reasons for selecting denim as the subject of this loose, “open-source” collaboration were several. Firstly, our counts of street wear in many regions suggested that, outside of the admittedly rather large exceptions of China and South Asia, on any given day, nearly half the world’s population is wearing blue jeans. We felt this required explanation. We argued that it could not be a result of capitalist pressure because denim’s general conservatism and durability made it inherently less profitable than other commodities and less subject to fashion than alternative garments. Of course, selling denim is profitable, but replacing it with short-term and more varied fashions would be still more so. It is also evident from ethnographies at different points in the world that jeans are no longer associated with Americanization, and some areas that are now adopting blue jeans have no idea denim was ever associated with the United States. More generally, we wanted to complement the many important historical works on denim (e.g., Comstock in press; Sullivan 2006) with an ethnographic perspective (Miller and Woodward in press).

We also noted two important traits of denim. First, it is the only fabric routinely subject to distressing technologies such as fading and tearing. Second, as Woodward (2007) has shown, denim often acts as default clothing. For example, women who try and dress in the morning in more varied clothing may lose confidence in their choices when they look in the mirror and return to denim as an antidote to their anxieties. In our manifesto paper, and in a further edited volume (Miller and Woodward in press),



Woodward and I argue, on the basis of our growing corpus of historical and anthropological studies, that there is a direct relationship between the tensions of universalism found in denim's global ubiquity and the intimate personalization represented in distressing technologies that replicate the long-term effects of denim wearing on the body. The combination of these three facets—its ubiquity, distressing, and default status—makes denim an expression of people's attempts to resolve the tensions between the universal and the individual.

Following this initial work, Woodward and I decided to carry out our own ethnographic study of denim in London. Specifically, we followed a technique I had previously used in the study of, first, people's accumulation of and, then, their divestment from material culture (Miller 1998, 2008): randomly selecting streets and working with whoever happened to be living there. Initially, we intended to work on the problem of jeans' relationship to anxiety (Clarke and Miller 2001; Woodward 2005), but as the study developed, we came to appreciate that even more important was the capacity of jeans to objectify a state best understood as the ordinary. In our forthcoming book (Miller and Woodward n.d.), we argue this idea through a number of different aspects of jeans wearing. Given the constraints of a short article, I focus here on just one of those arguments, which is concerned with how migrant populations relate to jeans.

### [h1]Migration and jeans in three London streets

London has an exceptionally high percentage of migrants and is even more exceptional in their diversity and degree of dispersion within the metropolis (Johnston et al. 2002; Peach 1996; Simpson 2007). In fact, the three streets in North London where Woodward and I conducted our fieldwork were unusual in that they did seem to show a relatively high concentration of migrants from one region, South Asia, who made up a quarter of our sixty participants. But, on closer inspection, this percentage is misleading

inasmuch as these participants included Hindu Indians, Muslim Pakistanis, and Sikh Punjabis as well as people from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, which makes the category “South Asian” no more the designation of a single community than the category “European.” So it is better to recognize that the population of these streets is highly dispersed in origin, with people from West Africa to Latvia, from Croatia to China and the Caribbean, as well as from different parts of the United Kingdom, each area of origin essentially represented by one or two households. Taken as a whole, migrants, or their children, represent two-thirds of the participating population, making migrants typical rather than atypical of our participants.

There is a huge literature on migration and identity, and that, in a sense, is our problem. Identity implies an issue of identification, which situates migrants in arenas of choice: either to conform to and blend into a culture representing their host society or to retain something of the cultural values of their place of origin. Alternatively, they can take their stance from the radical politics of Ken Livingstone, until recently the leader of the Greater London Council, with its avowal of a positively ascribed multiculturalism and antiracism, including an appreciation of various forms of syncretism and fusion. For many years, London was regarded as a center for progressive politics regarding migration, identified specifically with the left-wing aspirations of Livingstone.

Having now carried out five ethnographies in London, I have become increasingly aware that, for many migrants, the presumption by others of this valorization of identity can be experienced as a burden and an imposition. Migrants are supposed to retain roots or to represent an identity. But many of them say that one of the major advantages of living in London, with its unusual degree of ethnic dispersal, is that it offers a superior opportunity for escaping from identity. For example, when I recognized that a participant in an earlier project was from Brazil, I became interested in knowing about the aspects of

his life that pertain to that Brazilian identity. I embarked on conversations by asking him when and whether he eats Brazilian food or if he has Brazilian friends, to which he responded by saying, “If I wanted to be fucking Brazilian I would have stayed in fucking Brazil” (Miller 2008:179–185). The great advantage of London, with its combination of diversity and dispersal, is that when migrants decide to loosen an affinity with a place of origin, they do so not because they feel under pressure to identify with London itself or with being British, which they might feel if living in another part of the United Kingdom. After all, in the streets Woodward and I studied, having an origin in London is a minority, not a majority, position. To the chagrin of many more conservative or right-wing politicians, there is in the United Kingdom relatively little explicit valorization of a specific identity as being either British or English, compared, at least, to identification with a local football team. By the same token, migrants may not feel anything but a remnant or token association with the place where they spent their childhood or where their parents were born. Many do, indeed, have an intensely strong relationship with a place of origin, one that may grow even if they were born in the United Kingdom. But the growing tendency for many people is simply not to identify with identity.

In this struggle against identity, perhaps one of migrants’ most valuable allies is denim blue jeans. This is because blue jeans have become perhaps the first ever postsemiotic garment, in the sense of marking nothing other than their own ordinariness, which corresponds to some ideal of the global ecumene.<sup>3</sup> For this to happen, jeans had themselves to undertake a series of transformations from a time when they certainly were a semiotic garment, drenched in symbolism and meaning (e.g., Comstock in press; Sullivan 2006). Woodward and I collected some wonderful stories from some of our older informants. One thinks he was among the first men in the area to obtain a pair of blue jeans, from a U.S. soldier during the Second World War. Another told us how his aunt

was beaten up by other women around 1958–59 because she had the effrontery, as a woman, to wear a pair of jeans. The first core semiotic marker was the association of jeans with the United States. But this is now seen as merely historical. People do not wear jeans in London today to appear more American, even if that association is essential to understanding how jeans first became ubiquitous. From a later period, we find the remains of jeans' association with transgressive or rebellious youth. The authority to pronounce on this came from one of our participants who works with the police. He was quite clear whom he would keep an eye out for today: kids in hoods, tracksuit bottoms, and so forth. Once, jeans might have meant someone to look out for—but no longer. So the link with transgression is lost. Then, to become ordinary, jeans needed to lose their association with particular kinds of people or, equally, become disassociated from certain groups. One hugely important achievement with regard to British society was for jeans to move from just being an affectation to classlessness to genuinely losing any correspondence to class. This has pretty much been accomplished. Indeed, today the maid is just as likely as the mistress to wear an expensive Victoria Beckham brand of jeans.

All of this pertains to the majority of jeans but not to a still highly significant minority, which remain clear semiotic markers. A woman notes of her husband, who constantly equates being in fashion with wearing such jeans:

[ex]My husband was crazy. As soon as my son was born he went and bought him some jeans that were this size. They were so uncomfortable for a baby, but he wanted to see his son in jeans right away. So he had this big nappy and this little bottom and he looked really strange. And my sister kept saying, “You’re silly, don’t be silly.” The only thing babies should be in is in a baby grow or something. We even bought him designer ones. I think it was a really expensive pair. Ralph Polo Lauren or something. And this is when he wasn’t even walking. There was

no point. You couldn't even see the jeans. He was at six months I think. But they did grow out very quickly and never got to wear them.

At the other end of the spectrum, a woman talks of her 61-year-old partner who always wears jeans because he is trim and no one else his age seems to be as trim. He clearly sees jeans as the perfect garment for showing off his body. So, even at 61, he does not so much wear jeans as use them to flaunt his body. "Twice, he said, if you ever wanted to make an advert about older people in jeans, he'd be the person to make the advert with. And that he never wears anything else." Then there is the semiotic signification of wearing particular kinds of jeans. The most obvious is the wearing of designer jeans. Or, if not brands, then there is signification through styles, such as extremely skinny or extremely baggy, as in hip-hop-inflected styles. Wearing a specific style often has a desired effect on others, as illustrated by an older man who comments, "Mind you, I hate the look, you know when they wear them and they're halfway down there." So we retain abundant evidence and examples for the continued capacity of some jeans to remain significant markers of particularity.

But the underlying trend that dominates our research is the way that, bit by bit, most jeans are losing these semiotic markers and thereby attaining a status no other garment has ever achieved, which is postsemiotic, able to mark the state of being unmarked, something that corresponds to the majority of jeans found on the streets we studied. Designer jeans are far less common there than standard supermarket jeans or jeans from the most common high-street retailers. Such jeans are not particularly skinny or baggy or fashionable or anything else. They are just cheap, regular jeans. Compared, for example, with jeans worn in Italy or Brazil, where they tend to be much more tightly fitted and sexually expressive, jeans in London are comparatively loose fitting, even shapeless. In London, we find jeans that have no designer label, and many people neither

remember nor care where they bought them. When they have no distinguishing features but seem only to represent the generic idea of “blue jeans,” then we can say that jeans are approaching a state of semiotic nothingness, characterized by an absence of symbolic status. One sign of this is that jeans are constantly picked out as the one garment now viewed as unsuitable for an occasion or a context that is understood to be itself marked or significant and where people are expected to have made an effort in their dressing. The most often cited examples are a wedding or a job that involves representing a company or profession to the public.

Not only are jeans mainly unbranded but they also cannot be readily distinguished by the eye in terms of quality. The implication is that seeing someone in jeans today reveals practically nothing about the wearer at all. Certainly it is no longer evidence of any kind of position with respect to British society more generally.

There is now no age that is pre-blue jeans; witness the newborn baby I have just spoken of. There remains some prejudice about elderly people wearing jeans, but this has almost disappeared; again, witness the 61-year-old described above. In general, older people did not wear jeans when younger but only started wearing them frequently in the last decade or two. This does seem part of a genuine shift that makes elderly persons more included within the mainstream than before. Whether this trend is helped by aging rock stars who can still be almost cool or the insistent energy of the baby boomers, it has become harder to exclude the older generation from an association with jeans.

Perhaps the final frontier in terms of exclusion from the ecumene of jeans is the remaining prejudice against jeans wearing by the overweight. This probably remains more common than not, at least from the evidence of our ethnography. But even this prejudice seems to be in decline, and anyone who has traveled to the United States knows that it is possible for jeans to become the regular attire of even those who in the United

Kingdom and continental Europe would be regarded as considerably overweight. The acceptance of jeans as maternity wear, which was evident in our study, is also a sign in this direction. When this prejudice against large-sized jeans dies away, there will be no variants of humanity who are seen as in any way unnatural bearers of the blue jean. And once they are equally open to all, jeans lose any semiotic ability to signify distinction within that humanity. So the first assertion of ordinariness is that constituted by the postsemiotic garment.

Only when jeans achieve this postsemiotic status do they become a tool available to immigrants who wish to transcend identity. The way such individuals achieve this is very rarely through any political, activist, or, indeed, even conscious trajectory. Take, for example, Odette. What makes Odette's story extraordinary is that it was so apropos our project. The reason jeans are blue is, of course, because of their original association with indigo dye, once a major plant crop throughout the world and the only dye that fixes to a garment without the use of a mordant (Balfour-Paul 1998; see also Taussig 2008). Indigo-plant dying has almost become extinct, though it is starting to be revived today thanks to its use for very expensive craftlike jeans, which also tend to be fair-trade, organic, selvage jeans. As it happens, Odette's family came from Sierra Leone and Gambia, and her mother, who now lives with Odette, was herself an indigo dyer. She gave us wonderful descriptions of how she used to extract the dye from the plant and of the various resist methods by which the cloth was indigo stamped. Odette met her husband in France; she had one child in Sierra Leone and then two more in London. She goes to a local church and is polite with her neighbors. She retains her own associations with indigo-plant dyeing. When young, she took cloth dyed indigo by her mother to sell in neighboring Liberia. She still wears her special indigo clothing, such as wraparound skirts, to family

occasions. She recently walked into Marks and Spencer and saw a set of clothes in indigo that made her feel quite homesick.

Jeans were very much in fashion in her childhood, but they came as secondhand clothes from a generic West—with both its U.S. connotations, mainly restricted to the Levi label, and its legacy of colonialism from the United Kingdom—as the place that people desired to emulate in their appearance (cf. Hansen 2000). She can recall ordering denim skirts from the catalog of an English firm and the excitement when, after a month and a half, her catalog choices arrived, and, then, the disappointment when they did not fit and had to be sent back and replaced. In those days, jeans were worn especially on weekends, when people “let their hair down.” Odette originally came to England to study at secretarial college and subsequently started to wear jeans far more often. They helped her mix in with everyone else, and she learned to dress them up for going out at night. She also bought denim skirts, jackets, and jeans to send back to her daughter in Sierra Leone. For one period of her life, she wore branded jeans with particular labels: while her children were going through that younger teenager period when brands mattered to them and they wanted their mother to be seen in brand-name jeans. But then they relaxed, and she relaxed, and jeans simply became foundational wear for her and her children, especially one child who wears jeans pretty much constantly.

Odette buys her own jeans in the United States simply because they are cheaper there. However, the main way jeans have become something she associates with has nothing to do with her relationship to indigo or much to do with her relationship to her children. Rather, she comes across as a rather typical of our study participants with respect to my discussion of jeans as merely comfortable. The jeans she has a real attachment for and identification with are the ones she has worn for ten years and that have become soft and intimate and personal. More than just physically comfortable, they



genuinely contribute to her ability to feel relaxed. But one also senses that they are part of the way she feels comfortable in the wider social sense, as just another person living in a certain North London area. She retains her marked cultural identity for those occasions when she feels this is appropriate, such as a family wedding. Her husband is a staunch Jehovah's Witness, and she does not wear jeans for church. But in her everyday life, she is content to have lost any particular regional affiliation or identity, to be mother and wife but also to have her own career and, above all, her own personality. In most respects, she regards herself as having achieved a state of the merely ordinary, though she does not reflect much on the struggle to achieve this state.

In some cases in our fieldwork, migrants wear jeans because they feel pressure to fit in with the host community, and they regard it as an exercise in conformity, or they even feel pressure to wear jeans because they are afraid of being oppressed as different. Often, such feelings are associated with an initial phase of migration, as may have happened for Odette. Such examples clearly do not support the general argument I make here, but they are rare. The broader ethnographic evidence suggests that few people feel pressure to lose identity in order to conform. If anything, the contrary is the case, as there has been a clear change toward a cultural valorization of difference as something to cherish and celebrate on marked occasions but not necessarily to allow to intrude on everyday life and the sense of self. This is evident in the remarkable changes in the representation of difference in popular media such as television and in schools, which have led to the position, exemplified by the Brazilian migrant noted above, that identity, rather than being an embarrassment, has become something of an expectation if not a burden. This is a state for which London may well represent the vanguard, as a place that is a kind of particular nowhere, that is, a place with which one does not have to identify to get away from other forms of identity. This aspect of the city's character became evident

in my previous ethnography in South London (Miller 2008). So most migrants today do not wear jeans either to fit in or as a mark of authentic difference. They see jeans wearing as outside of such issues of identity. For them, in their ordinariness, jeans have lost their connotations of assimilation or of distinction. The term that is overwhelmingly dominant in explaining jeans wearing is *comfortable*.

The concept of “comfort” is the single most effective way in which people achieve the state of the ordinary. It manages this because it conflates two quite different realms: comfort as a physical quality and comfort as a social quality. People express many arguments as to what makes jeans comfortable, among them, their increasing softness to the body with continued wear and the relaxation of fit. *Comfortable* can also refer to another means of fit, as in looking good, in that jeans may be considered to lift or hide the arse and help reduce self-consciousness of the body as well as of what one is wearing. These issues of sensual comfort, then, align with comfort as practicality: Jeans do not need to be ironed, and, people claim, they can be worn with “absolutely anything”; they can be worn for a long time before being thrown away; and, most important of all, they can be put on in the morning without one having to think much about getting dressed, with all the alleviation from stress and anxiety that this implies.

But the critical association is between this sense of physical comfort and ease of choice with feeling comfortable in society: a sense of having achieved the inconspicuous, unobtrusive, and unremarkable that attracts no unwanted gaze when a person just becomes one of a crowd. This also can lead to a relaxation from self-consciousness, to the achievement of a kind of existential opposition to the self, very different from anything espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre (1966) because, here, the desire is to lose rather than gain consciousness. This is immediately associated with the ideal of feeling relaxed, at leisure, and unmarked. As one man put it, “You may have smart trousers but they’re not as

comfortable as denim. So you may feel like, ‘I need to be comfortable for that day because I need to get to that state of mind’ and then you just put on the denim.” So, often, the term *comfort* comes wrapped in a series of grounds for preferring denim that are juxtaposed almost at random: “I think they’re really comfortable. And easy?—Yeah. And they’re quite fashionable. And everybody wears them.”

People generally seemed to assume that all of these attributes are intrinsic qualities of denim blue jeans themselves. So when they said blue jeans can go with absolutely anything, we then asked them whether another pair of trousers of a different fabric, but the same indigo color, could also go with anything; or whether a denim fabric, but in pink or green rather than indigo, could go with anything. In both cases, people usually conceded that they could not. There is, then, nothing intrinsic about indigo as a color or about denim as a textile that achieves this effect of being able to go with anything. It is a direct consequence of the way blue jeans have become postsemiotic and thereby contain nothing for other clothes to clash with. The term *postsemiotic* is now revealed as the effective ability to signify absolute neutrality.

Migrants use jeans to become ordinary in the same way that nonmigrants use them to become ordinary. To avoid status competition at school in the absence of a uniform, parents encourage their children to wear jeans. In college, when students wish to become part of a community without being marked, they wear jeans. When coming from work to relax, our participants wear jeans. Jeans can be dressed up without being too dressy but also dressed down. They resolve contradictions and deflect offense or argument. They allow people to relax into a comfortable state of ordinariness, which is not to be denigrated as a failure to become special but is an achievement in its own right. Migrants may compare this comfort with its lack in their place of origin, seeing it as something made viable by the heterogeneity of London. As a migrant from a Gulf state noted, “You

know, here you can go out wearing Asda [Wal-Mart] jeans and Tesco jeans and you wouldn't worry. Nobody would ever say anything to you. But over there it's a big thing what you wear." Many may be aware from television that jeans are ubiquitous at a global level, but they do not assume they have the same significance outside of the United Kingdom, or even outside London.

Let me be clear: I am not saying that all jeans wearing in London signifies the ordinary. If the argument that blue jeans are used to objectify the experience of being ordinary were a hypothesis, it would be a hundred times wrong. Vast numbers of jeans quite obviously are worn because they are particularly stylish, have expensive labels, or effectively represent some aspects of identity and status. There are designer jeans, extraordinarily skinny jeans, and highly decorated jeans. The point is that such jeans are a minority of all jeans worn. The same people who routinely wear jeans that are here categorized as ordinary often possess and on appropriate occasions wear designer jeans or jeans that achieve a particular effect. But none of this should detract from the significance being claimed for the majority of blue jeans, which are now worn in a manner that clearly strives to objectify a state of ordinariness. I presume that, as long as blue jeans are worn by half of the world's people, they will always retain that flexibility, such that some will be used to express the marked, the special, and, indeed, the extraordinary. For a natural science, that use would represent a contradiction. An ethnography, by contrast, can and should assert the importance of an ordinariness that can constantly be disproved but that remains the dominant usage by the population being studied.

The most comprehensive survey of jeans buying in the United Kingdom was conducted by the marketing research firm Mintel in 2007 (Mintel 2007). It shows that jeans sales increased 40 percent from 2002 to 2007. Almost all of this growth was due to a major increase in sales of supermarket and retail own-label jeans, one of the best

examples being Asda (Wal-Mart) jeans; sales of branded jeans declined. The average price of jeans has therefore dropped consistently over the last decade. Although people do buy high-end jeans for special occasions, the major increase is in low-end, cheap, unbranded jeans, which are what people wear most of the time. According to Mintel, the most important factor people cite in buying jeans is comfort. In short, the statistics from commercial sources directly correspond to and support the evidence from our ethnography.

The point of the ordinary as against the normative is that it achieves a position beyond that of moral inferiority or superiority, beyond conformity or distinction. It is, thus, no more moral than it is immoral. Moral evaluation is not an intrinsic property of being ordinary because ordinariness is subject to different consequences in different contexts. When migrants go back on visits to their country of origin, they sometimes defend as more sophisticated, clothing that their relatives regard as drab, garments that eschew fashion and designer labels. For them, the people of their home country now look garish, unsophisticated, and vulgar. In such a context, the ordinary itself is, in fact, extraordinary and marked. But when worn within London, the ordinary is something rather unprecedented. It cannot signify London or British because people in countries other than the United Kingdom wear jeans just as commonly. It does not necessarily signify gender, or class, or age or, indeed, anything at all. The ordinary represents a kind of postsemiotic global ecumene but not as an aspiration to some political or religious end. It has no sanction or discourse that makes it normative, even in the sense employed within practice theory. It is more a relaxation into the state of not wanting to be anything in particular, including not particularly ordinary.

[h1]Conclusion: Jeans and enlightenment

What, then, are the implications of these ethnographic observations for the foundations of anthropology? First, let me be clear that I am not commenting here on all wearing of denim jeans by all peoples. I am not thinking here about designer jeans or Brazilian jeans (Mizrahi in press) or the significance of hip-hop jeans (Ege in press). My concern is entirely with what I have described within a specific ethnographic context as postsemiotic jeans: those that remain close to a relatively unchanging, conventional, and unremarkable baseline in relatively inexpensive high-street jeans; the blue jeans that people claim can “go” with absolutely any other clothing, whatever the color or fabric; the jeans they claim can be worn even if dirty and without ironing and that can be worn longer between washings and longer over their lifetime than any other trousers. These are the jeans I address in this conclusion. But, then, these clearly dominate jeans wearing on the North London streets of our ethnography.

How then does this practice correspond to the original Enlightenment ideas I discuss above and, more particularly, to that which anthropology took from Kant, that is, his approach to normativity, not the ideas that comprise *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*? There are two very different conclusions here. First, jeans wearing as an expression of the ordinary may help resolve the tension that has always existed between anthropology and Kant post–Boas and Durkheim (a contradiction also apparent within the original Kantian philosophy) (Frierson 2003; Kant 2006). This was the contradiction that arose from cultural relativism. Blue jeans, as ordinary, do not express that cultural relativism. The ordinary emerges as in some ways a suppression of culture as difference. Rather, blue jeans return us to the initial linkage between the individual and the universal in Kant. Blue jeans dominate the world today partly because they are simultaneously the most personal and the most global garment a person can wear and, to that extent, help

people feel they resolve the growing gulf between these two states (Miller and Woodward 2007).

Second, and more importantly, however, they express a fundamental break from this Kantian tradition of the normative. They demonstrate the degree to which common practice can be achieved in ways other than by sanctions and pressures to conform or through a sense of or ambition toward duty, or even by the following of practice as routine. Rather, we can start from the position argued by Rouse (2007a, 2007b) with regard to a practice theory that does not require explicit or conscious explanation for itself. Jeans are a form of material culture in which an ideal of ordinary is objectified through people as material practice, rather than as the sign of those people's intentionality or duty or even aspiration or identity. Jeans are a means to relax one's allegiance to all and any of these things.

This cannot be reconciled with Kant's ideal of the categorical imperative or its separation from what he regarded as mere practical reason. I am not arguing that people wear blue jeans because they are conscious that in so doing they move forward an ethical imperative toward equality and universality. What people say is only that jeans make them feel comfortable. What Kant hoped would be achieved through moral consciousness is here achieved through largely unreflective material culture. It is through the blue jeans themselves that equality is objectified in the sense of that term I derive from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Miller 1987). It is also evidently not the act of enlightened self-consciousness of the kind that not only Kant but also Hegel and most Enlightenment thinkers saw as central to the progress of reason as a form of enlightenment.

By the same token, jeans wearing cannot be assimilated within the implicit assumption of normativity that has been the foundation of anthropology for most of its history and that remains an implicit device even within theories of practice. Instead, the

study of material culture leads to a quite innovative understanding of how and why people engage in actions that may become ethical in their consequence, rather than through their intention. Any ethical consequence of jeans wearing is derived from the capacity of material culture for objectification. In a similar vein, anthropological structuralism examined the capacity of myth and ritual for objectification, without recourse to assumptions about, agency, intentionality, or even consciousness.

People certainly do have both a consciousness and a sense of legitimation in respect to jeans wearing that revolve around the idea of being comfortable. If this idea were essentially an expression of not making other people uncomfortable, then it would almost exactly correspond to Rouse's (2007a, 2007b) arguments for the implicit normativity of practice theory. That is to say, we could still ascribe it moral intention. But our ethnography does not confirm Rouse, because it suggests that comfort is more an expression of people's concern with themselves than of regard for others. Jeans wearing puts them at their ease before it puts others at their ease. So my emphasis is not on practice theory but on material culture. People do not wear jeans to express their desire for equality, yet, as material culture, jeans do in some small measure render people more equal. Jeans wearing is consequentially, not intentionally, moral, which is why I do not think it could be termed "normative." Thanks to denim blue jeans, people have more difficulty reading class or distinction or anything else from another person's appearance than they used to. This does matter, at least to some extent, and it is a capacity in jeans that has become valued by migrants, in particular, who look to an anonymity that is not subservience.

Wearing blue jeans obviously does not mean that class, or income distinctions, or gender, or, indeed, any other distinctions have disappeared. There remains an endless supply of cultural difference and cultural sanctions for anthropology to study. And there



remain vast disparities in life's expectations for anthropologists to oppose. For those who wish to study the anthropology of power or identity or resistance, the field remains wide open. Indeed, there is nothing in this article to contradict those who wish to argue that inequality is all the more invidious when it is hidden by implicit forms such as taken-for-granted clothes rather than expressed through overt signifiers of difference, though this is not, in fact, my position. Such academics could then use the evidence presented here to argue that blue jeans exacerbate inequalities. By contrast, I would argue that the elimination of overt difference does in some small way contribute to a potential for equality in the contemporary world, and I would celebrate this global ecumene of jeans.

We need to be more explicit about the presumptions behind our own practice as anthropologists. In this article, I hold up for scrutiny our dependence on the concept of "normativity," whether through implied sanctions and a subsequent sense of duty or the attractions of value. These remain implicit in most traditional ethnographic monographs. There also remains an implicit sense of the normative in practice theory. What the study of blue jeans, as an emergent quality of the ordinary, demonstrates is that there are alternatives that do not require such a condition of normativity. A person may wear jeans without any sense that he or she will be subject to sanctions or moral condemnation as a result of not choosing to wear something else and without any sense of having created value or achieved some goal. Yet I have argued that the objectification of the ordinary in jeans is a remarkable achievement, the kind we tend to ignore precisely to the degree that it is neither marked nor intended.

[h1]Notes

*Acknowledgments.* All the work on the Global Denim Project and all aspects of the ethnography of denim in North London that followed from this project have been conceived of and carried out with Sophie Woodard. She has been equally

responsible for our acknowledgment of the concept of “the ordinary,” which will be elaborated in a forthcoming jointly written book entitled *Denim: The Art of Ordinary*. We jointly decided that I would seek to explore the implications of our results for anthropology and she would examine its implications for other disciplines, which explains this separation in publication. We are both equally indebted to the participants in this fieldwork, who did not slam the door in our faces but often welcomed us with the gifts of tea and conversation (and sometimes biscuits). I am grateful to those who commented on earlier drafts of this article, Martin Holbraad, Webb Keane, and Rick Wilk, and to the anonymous reviewers from the journal for their very helpful comments. Finally, thanks to Naomi Braithwaite for undertaking the task of gathering the commercial statistics for our project.

1. In commenting on this article, Webb Keane has argued that I am biased toward a more European Durkheimian view of this history and that the more linguistically inflected tradition that passed through Boas and Edward Sapir was more receptive to an arbitrary logic of culture that required neither functional nor normative explanation, which would also bring it closer to some of the arguments I make about table manners and practice theory subsequently in the text. I readily concede that he is far more knowledgeable than I on this question.

2. Thanks to Richard Wilk for these and other references.

3. I would have to concede that, semantically, there can be no such thing as the truly postsemiotic, and as will become clear in my discussion, jeans do, in fact, signify a state of ordinariness. I think, however, that use of the term *postsemiotic* is justified in this case because it clarifies the way in which jeans come to signify the state of the ordinary by having escaped from all other forms of signification.

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