A Maker's Perspective of Materiality: Observing Material Change Through Legacy Craftsmanship, Maker Intent, and Contemporary Manifestation

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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August 2020

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Dedication

Dedicated to my wife, Kendall, for our walks, our laughs, and our companionship. Kendall is an excellent nurse and holds a creative spirit that never ceases to inspire. I also dedicate this project to my parents, Greg and Shelia, for their love and support throughout my life, and instilling in me virtues of faith, patience, perseverance, and hard work. To my grandparents, Barbara and Dennis, Nora, and Jean, to my mother-in-law, Joanna, all of whom give me more love than I know what to do with—this is for you all.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my impressive and diverse committee members, Lisa King (my invaluable committee chair, who has been a source of encouragement, wisdom, and sincerity since the very beginning, and pushed me to pursue this exciting project), Sean Morey (an inspirational and non-traditional thinker who urges his students to think beyond the boundaries of what the field of rhetoric is known for), and Russel Hirst (the most upbeat, spirited professor and mentor I have ever known, who always puts others before himself and wants the very best for all of his students). Thank you all for everything.

I also want to thank Russel Hirst for the opportunity to serve as the Davis Editor for the *International Journal of Nuclear Security*. It was an honor to learn under your leadership, and I know that experience will be impactful for my future.

A special thanks to the Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics program within the Graduate English Department. This program is demanding and conditions its students to think in ways that encourage development of advanced rhetorical scholarship, leaving lasting impressions in the field. I learned that these lasting impressions take shape through a variety of methods, driven by numerous perspectives.

Abstract

Simple handmade objects have important stories to tell about the hands that made them and the environments they pass through. This project observes the thinking, materials, and process involved in craft work through the lens of materiality. I wrestle with materiality by presenting a personal making project, in front of L.C. King Mfg. Co., a Tennessee workwear company that maintains century-old manufacturing practices and values. With the interactive – and interdisciplinary – perspective of cultural rhetoric as the guiding theoretical framework, this display of both freshly created (the leather bag project) and progressively experienced (the chore coat) material realities aims to bring readers into the lived materiality of the craftsman. These displays of textual analysis provide valuable insight into *materiality* as it relates to the objects around us, *DIY* (do-it-yourself) culture and its implications for deep appreciation for artisanal-quality goods, maker *identities* and how they become sewn into the work they do, how *value* is determined based on individual *values*, and how current digital channels continue to reshape how craftspeople approach circulating their work. Additionally, this project aims to provoke deep thought into what makes an object 'handmade,' and the importance of slowing down to recognize these attributes in a culture that generally flattens the genuine efforts of craftspeople and the value ascribed to these efforts. All of these pieces join together – personal making, characteristics of inherent quality, and lived material existences – to form a maker's rhetorically guided definition of materiality.

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Introduction
The How and Why Behind My Materiality

I like to think everyone is called to do something. Origin stories for these callings are like people; constantly unique. When it comes to theorizing and conceptualizing how people carry out a craft, which I define generally as a person creating a finished object by carrying out a process of careful construction, the mental or verbal conversation can quickly lose focus because of the many variables that come into play. These variables – a few immediately known, others more difficult to nail down – include, materiality, values, identity, 'handmade' (as a blanket term), and DIY (do-it-yourself). This project is aimed at exploring these terms and what they mean together by placing my personal leather making project next to the time-proven work of L.C. King Manufacturing Company, a company with rich Appalachian heritage still making things essentially the same way for the last century.

I arrived at this topic to learn more about my personal craft and connect it to another craft context, which is where L.C. King enters the analysis. When I started my undergraduate studies, I also started to notice the smaller differences in things I wanted to purchase on my own. I began to wonder what made some objects, such as a leather bag or wallet, vary so much in price. Through this curiosity, I began to learn about the differences in materials and construction techniques employed by the companies that interested me. In addition, I also learned why knowing the origin story of any object was more important than popular American consumer culture allows most to believe. This was a transformative time for me, because for my entire life, up until this point, I had taken everything at face value—even though I had been subtly taught the contrary.

With this fresh, more accurate, understanding of how quality handmade objects look and behave, I made a few purchases over the course of several months. This included a leather wallet, a leather camera strap, and a leather key lanyard. But simply buying these higher quality items did not totally satisfy my curiosity with the materials. I continued to gain interest in the making processes and the difference in materials used by brands keeping to a higher standard for their products, often times directly in charge of the crafting process either with their own hands or helping to support skilled artisans (or a team of artisans, depending on the volume of the brand). This is what led me to learning how to make my own leather goods.

As a college student with limited amounts of extra cash, and being raised by parents who taught me the value of working for the things I desired, I purchased a small natural leather[1] side[2], a small spool of thread, and a few basic tools in order to get started, and I proceeded to start my first small leather project. As my skill and technique expanded, this foray into leather working blended nicely with my experience with photography, so I often shared my own photographs of the items I made on my social media accounts and gained a small following. Riding on this momentum, my girlfriend (now wife) and I came up with some possible company names and ended up establishing a named company, along with an Etsy store where people from around the country could order my leather goods. With the Instagram account and Etsy store, I fulfilled orders for over a year while continuing work on my undergraduate degree.

It was around the year-and-a-half mark of making mostly small leather goods that I was contacted via my brand's Instagram account by Chris. Chris turned out to be a

[1] Undyed and/or minimally processed.
[2] A portion of an entire leather hide, usually half.

marketing and branding consultant contracted by L.C. King Mfg. Co., out of Bristol, TN. This point of contact was incredibly significant for me personally, because during the development of my knowledge of quality leather goods, the broader market of quality garments caught my interest. L.C. King was one of the top companies on my list to eventually purchase something from, because the company is based less than an hour from where I did my undergraduate studies and represents a rich regional history that caught my attention.

Chris's offer to me, to make small leather goods to be sold in L.C. King's Factory Store and on their website, was undoubtedly an exciting offer. In the end, I decided the offer was a bit out of the realm of possibilities for me because I was still in the midst of working on my undergraduate degree and did not have the proper workspace or tools to fulfill the volume of orders required. Knowing this, and sticking by my decision, I think we could have figured out those issues, but the main reason I did not pursue the opportunity was rooted in how I would have to inherently modify the *how* and *why* behind my leather making processes. This specifically meant transitioning from a handstitched construction method, to using a sewing machine. From slow and thoughtful, to fast and profitable. My goods would take on a different extended meaning from why I started my leather craft in the first place. That was a change I decided I could not make.

At the time, the opportunity to collaborate was not at the forefront of my mind—instead, all I could think about was whether or not I would be able to make the goods to the same standard I had been doing up to that point. I was afraid, with the transition to

working with machines that both quicken and automate the construction process, that my goods would lack the ‘piece of myself’ that I symbolically weave into my work.

To this day, I continue to stay true to what I value in my making processes that have shaped me into who I am today, and L.C. King continues to embody the golden age of American manufacturing. These two facts lay the groundwork for why I chose to explore this topic, and my basic hope is to shine a small spotlight on both my making processes, and L.C. King as an anomaly in the contemporary garment industry. While I understand that my perspective and method of approach to this conversation will not cover the entirety of what every scholar is interested in exploring, I do hope placing these two distinct but related experiences adjacent to each other can expand this broadly applicable thinking into materiality and how it deeply influences modern culture.

This project is acting as a contemporary adhesive between the practical side of craftsmanship and personal making, and the theoretical side of these actions which are deeply influenced by dynamic material realities determined and experienced by individuals, objects, and large entities alike. Collectively, the personal theorizing, making, and usage perspectives work to clarify the quiet and mysterious inner workings that become romanticized by broad culture shifts, and flattened to the point of what appears to materialize as meaningless steps and material sensitivities in the eyes of uninformed bystanders. The following exploration into materiality as it relates to, 1) the significance of craft work, 2) evolving popular perceptions, 3) object preservation, 4) materiality shifts, 5) maker and object identities, and 6) parallel tracks of materiality, is presented in the form of four main chapters, along with this introduction and a

conclusion. These chapters are summarized in the following paragraphs of this introduction to transition the reader into the rest of this project.

The first chapter presents the building blocks of my understanding and perspective of materiality. This chapter gives the reader a look into the excellent scholarship informing broader understandings of materiality both within and separate from the field of cultural and material rhetorics. My approach to this chapter is shaped by key terms, where I define the terms and put them in conversation with how other scholars have theorized and practiced with and through them.

Chapter two is straightforward in that it reveals my methodology and more in-depth reasoning behind my rhetorical approach for this project and what sort of benefits result from that approach. Carole Blair's thinking and approach to her own survey of materiality, roughly two decades ago, holds up as an effective foundation for how I designed my personal inquiry into materiality. You could say, her approach is timeless in the sense that it initiates critical thinking into the actions and reactions of ubiquitous objects around us all the time, and with some slight tweaks and the addition of a consideration not as immediately relevant or obvious to Blair's project – digital rhetoric and materiality – her overall approach complemented how I ended up stitching together this project.

The third chapter brings to life my personal making perspective, drawing from scholarship and methodologies I outline in the preceding chapters. To begin chapter 3, I walk through the process of making a leather tote bag completely by hand and provide a brief overview of my three main concerns when it comes to my leather projects: design, material, and construction. I include detailed photographs and informative

discussion about the materials and construction methods that I hope can be both educational to readers and act as an appropriate springboard into the profound conversation of materiality that makes up the remainder of the chapter. This conversation is structured by providing thorough answers to six questions I adapted from Carole Blair's influential work on materiality.

Similarly, in the fourth chapter, I center the conversation around an object, but in this case, I am considering the material existence through the experience of using the object, as opposed to making it. My Chore Coat, made by L.C. King Mfg. Co., is observed as a meaningful object that embodies inherently different material realities due to its heritage-inspired design, materials, manufacturing processes, and permanent place in the lives of many individuals. By including visual aids, as I do in chapter three, I bring the reader closer to my descriptions of how an object's materiality changes with time, in addition to the use of the same six guiding questions that outline my inquiry in the preceding chapter.

The concluding remarks anchor on the six main points that guide much of the discussion in the two chapters that precede it to bring all the pieces back together one last time. Using these familiar points, the leather bag and the chore coat are figuratively placed next to each other to summarize how the two important objects differ and relate to each other in their materiality. Importantly, this is also where mention of future research endeavors, broad project aims, and a discussion about the accountability involved with making things takes place.

Chapter 1
Traversing Terminologies

To illustrate the state of scholarship discussing materiality, DIY, handmade, identity, and values, allow me to set a scene. When it comes to talking about how things are made, the discussion can get messy. Everyone is raised in different environments, afforded opportunity in varying degrees, and either taught or self-taught to 'do' or 'make' with virtually endless methodologies. For example, a leather craftsman living and working in Southwestern Texas is going to have a much different concept of his craft than a leather craftsman in the Blue Ridge mountain range of the Appalachians. One can assume there will be overlap in these two differing concepts of craft, but the deep sense of purpose and intention inside both makers will be decidedly different in surprisingly complex ways. Think of it as a four-lane highway—parallel to some extent, inevitably splitting off into completely different environments. Therefore, I've chosen to explain and expand upon the following terms because they represent an honest attempt at bringing together scholarship that contributes to the dialogue on how *material manifestation* (my own guiding term, but I do not claim to be the first to use it in the 'materiality' context) happens in a range of contexts from the personal, to the regional, to the institutional.

This project approaches materiality and observance of materials through the lens of rhetoric. While traditionally this might imply a strict emphasis on words, oration and their larger social implications, such as analyzing a 'text' and determining what it says and does and how this affects the environment around said 'text,' I am using a widened understanding of rhetoric that affords objects and material 'making' practices to the conversation. As a growing amount of recent scholarship reveals, the things around us

and the things we make are, in more senses than one, *alive*, and react to us and their environment just as much as we react to them. In the “Introduction” to *Places of Public Memory*, edited by Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, the authors declare this widened understanding to include “discourses, events, objects” and specify that “practices are, for rhetoric, consequential” or at the very least have the capability to inflect consequence, positive or negative (4). This is integral to understand when grappling with materiality, especially upon the realization that practices, as the authors above put it, have “attitude” (4). While it is important to understand rhetoric as the foundation for how I am stepping into the conversation of materiality, taking the audience beyond this foundation towards possibly unexpected considerations of personal making practices, looking beyond the material and into the materiality of objects scattered throughout our world, and realizing how preservation and reproduction manifests itself differently as contexts and materialities change over time are all ideas I work from in this project.

Materiality Makes Sense

Materiality as a theoretical concept is best observed through different perspectives and maker contexts. Think about it as an archeologist, clearing the buildup layered over a buried artifact. In other words, I employ materiality to clarify the foggy space between a maker’s intentions (why am I making this, and for what?), a maker’s methods (how am I making this and with what materials?), a maker’s identity (what does this say about me, the maker, and the communities I affiliate myself with?), and a maker’s values (who will find this useful and/or beautiful, and for how long?). Taking this approach leads me to the necessary step of exploring several key terms that will help

guide the reader through this project, while simultaneously presenting observations from a number of scholars in different, but related, fields of work and research, who also write from different moments in time. Treat this section as a reference point if there are terms that seem out of place or are being used in contexts not usually seen.

Scholars and practitioners coming from a range of fields, influences, and interests understandably provide audiences with many avenues of insight similar or otherwise related to each other. This is observed when looking at ‘heritage’ from the perspective of Robinson and Silverman in their edited collection, *Encounters with Popular Pasts: Cultural Heritage and Popular Culture*, a conversation grounded in materiality and how “heritage sites” manifest themselves in the context of the tourism industry. Looking at Robinson and Silverman’s “Introduction” alongside Carole Blair’s essay, “Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric’s Materiality,” a piece that considers the symbolic consequences of U.S. memorial sites since the Vietnam Memorial was constructed, reveals this interesting overlap that lays itself down when traversing the murky waters of materiality across disciplines, which proves useful for thinking about making practices and the blending of new making perspectives and techniques with mentalities of the past.

Materiality an abstract yet immediately available ‘thing’ this project aims to help define, which Amber Buck and fellow editors of the 2015 special issue of *Harlot* note in the foreword titled, “Doing It Our (Dang) Selves: Making, Experimenting, and Becoming through Craft,” by talking about how craft is “just as easily dismissed…as it is admired.” This becomes especially apparent later when I discuss my making processes, where I engage in “thinking, troubleshooting, rethinking, and reflecting” on my own processes,

which is an awareness developed through material manifestation (Buck et. al.). I choose to bring materiality into the equation because it invents new angles of thought in how we conceptualize and look at objects, or 'texts,' and how they function with, next to, and without human interaction, a space I refer to as the *material environment*. One of the main goals here is to exemplify that objects we make are more than just objects we pick up in the morning and set down in the evening, for example—they are reflexive things that have their own materiality and affectivity in the environment in which they reside. As will be seen, the leather bag I make, also 'makes' me, which is an emphasis I see echoed in the *Harlot* piece, Blair's work, and Nicole Starosielski's characterization of materiality that I discuss in the following chapter.

Before I get there though, I need to include Malea Powell's perspective on how materiality fits into this scholarship, which proves to be incredibly helpful for illuminating the way I think about materiality and look at 'texts' in this project. Powell, in a lecture presented during Purdue University's Hutton Lecture Series in 2010 titled, "Rhetorical Powwos: What American Indian Making Can Teach Us About Histories of Rhetorics," describes how she had to develop her own "methodological orientation" for her scholarly work where she considers the "rhetoricity" of things, or objects, as opposed to the traditional behaviors of rhetoric scholars who survey written 'texts.' This tricky reality of her project, in the footsteps of which my work seems to follow, manifests in the often avoided (or ignored) "space between textualization and discernability/signification" (Powell 6). Importantly, Powell finalizes this denotation by clarifying that this "place is where story and thingness meet," making this hard-to-reach idea of materiality a bit easier to grasp in the context of a handmade object, for example (6).

The 'Do-It-Yourself' Dilemma

DIY, short for 'Do-It-Yourself,' remains a focus point throughout this project because of my experience in the strange world of DIY as a countercultural-turned-corporatized-movement, not to mention the surprising ways DIY culture is analyzed through different scholarly lenses as a 'maker' movement and online community, the latter of which has mostly deteriorated. The DIY movement that my grandparents might remember, originating out of the 1970's as a response to widely-practiced consumerism, is quite different from the resurgence of DIY soon after the Recession in 2008-2009[3]. The reason I differentiate these two historically fueled perceptions of DIY is to encourage movement past them. By unflattening DIY, we can determine more about its materiality and how 'Doing-It-Ourselves' is a contemporary understanding and practice of 'craft,' albeit without the inherent backings of traditional understandings of craft that prioritize quality of material, construction, and use value, as opposed to aesthetic value.

For the DIY community, figuring out their place in both scholarly and popular circles has proven to be a critical next step for how people generally understand 'making' and 'craft' as a personal privilege in our modern world of cheap goods, yet simultaneously as a necessary action in various contexts. Andrew Wagner, in his honest introduction to *Handmade Nation*, "Craft: It's What You Make of It," cuts straight to the point by asking "aren't all makers, to some extent, doing it themselves?" but then brings it back to the conclusion that "craft is not linear" and demands a more nuanced characterization (1). Wagner stresses his uneasiness with the human instinct to define

[3] As noted by Chamberlain in "Buy-It-Yourself."

DIY (or craft) as a “singular activity,” because of its inherent complexity and ties to ideologies of the makers and their own view of the world (2). This extra notch of thought that Wagner offers is what makes his perspective so valuable to the larger conversation of materiality and how these complex craft realities require looking beyond the materials themselves and towards the material’s affective power in its environment and to all who might be affected by its existence.

Putting Wagner’s perspective, which comes more from a design and editorial background in the world of what I would call ‘craft talk,’ next to Elizabeth Chamberlain’s discussion of the corporatization of DIY, in “Buy-It-Yourself: How DIY Got Consumerized,” offers an engaging interplay of how DIY made its way out of a countercultural response to consumerism into its own type of commodity. Chamberlain expands on this phenomenon by pointing out that “when a resistant online movement goes mainstream, it can become co-opted by corporate forces,” which led the DIY resurgence after the 2008 financial crisis down a road paved with much different intentions than some involved figures would like to admit (“Buy-It-Yourself”). After all, when we develop inventive ways to profit from an idea, especially when it allows individuals to avoid ‘normal’ requirements for holding jobs and providing for their families, why would they stop? The truth is, “getting popular means getting potentially profitable, and the mainstream likes money” (Chamberlain). This reality is better realized by bringing materiality into the conversation, which Chamberlain hints at when, later in her online publication, she reveals the hard truth of DIY as a movement in that “the rise of the Maker movement hasn’t led to less consumption…but rather a new DIY-themed version of consumption” (“Buy-It-Yourself”). This “flattening” of DIY and the

original intentions it held reveals that it has always been more about the materials used to make things (a leather bag, a workwear garment, an archive), and the effect the finished product has on the people interacting with them.

Handmade vs. "Handmade"

Before talking about objects that are handmade, it makes sense to clarify what that word means in this project. In the world of marketing, "handmade" is slapped onto a lot of commodities with the intention of adding a moniker of 'lasting quality' or signifying the item is inherently better than another physically similar in appearance or function. There are all sorts of issues that can be discussed here regarding contemporary use and perception of what it means for something to be handmade, but I am thinking about it through this definition: an object constructed or prepared by human hands, as opposed to being constructed by operating an automated machine that produces an end product with minimal human interaction or effort during the actual 'crafting' process. I also note that there can be different levels of 'handmade-ness,' but I reserve that conversation for later.

One way to get deeper in to what it means for something to be handmade is by looking at Kavita Parmar's emotional discussion, "Look Back to Move Forward," in which she claims people are "unwittingly redefining" humanity through new technologically-driven production methods that are employed every day (Texto). As a maker myself, I share many of the same sentiments that Parmar expresses, such as how getting "society to understand that the true protagonist of the supply chain is the Artisan producer" and the reality of how "there was no awareness of what was happening: people were so inebriated with the shiny new they didn't notice the

impoverishment of values" (Texto). By "impoverishment of values," she appears to be referring to a type of desensitization of what true artisanal qualities look like, thanks to how value systems have shifted over time. While I appreciate Parmar's perspective and eagerness to reign in the directions that mass production habits have taken, more perspectives are needed for reliable and concrete understandings of how to achieve this goal. As Andrew Wagner reminds us, "finding that balance on the precarious cliff called "craft" can be a struggle" (2).

Interestingly, a quick Google search of the word "handmade"[4] reveals some striking data. Based on the results, term appears to be widely used; but the meaning has been stretched due to the range of products labeled as handmade. With the influx of free-to-use social media sites and apps and storefronts such as Instagram and Etsy (often used in tandem with each other for promotion and customer communication purposes), what we consider to be 'handmade' becomes even more left up to the millions of users of these websites. While something might be considered handmade by the person listing an item for sale, there is no guarantee that this is the case. Perceptions of what a handmade item is, what it is supposed to look and feel like, is determined by what people are exposed to around the internet and who they spend time with. Consequently, these understandings are variable and often driven by price tags as opposed to the inherently higher levels of quality that are part of what gives handmade items such attractive characteristics when held in hand—not to mention the heart and soul craftsmen put into the items.

[4] A visual representation of the term 'handmade' as it has shown up in a corpus of books, according to the Google Books Ngram Viewer. See more by googling "handmade" and clicking on the graph shown under the Oxford definition for the word.

Identity and Objects

It would be difficult and possibly counterintuitive to talk about materiality and making without a focus on identity. Identity goes hand-in-hand with much of the discussion here, which is revealed in conversations later on when observing the materials at the heart of this project. Identities are often realized through materiality and the many ways in which this experience manifests itself. I think about material manifestation along with other scholars and the process of creating identity, for many reasons, which relates to what things like 'handmade' and 'DIY' mean to individuals or institutions and how fostering certain identities drives so much of what we do.

Identity is a term that has seen use in many recent contexts, usually in reference to social justice or related issues, but examining identity is not the main purpose[5] of my project. Instead, I think about identity in relation to materiality, similar to how Diana Fridberg's discussion takes shape in her online article, "The Social Life of Things," which also serves as a helpful perspective for breaking down the difference between materials (physical pieces) and materiality (effects because of the physical pieces, joined or separate), and how identity is shaped as a result of how we use or otherwise interact with these things. Fridberg uses the simple example of how people build houses in that "houses…help shape human experience," since the physical manifestation of houses, how we maintain them, and how we furnish them "convey social messages about the identity of the occupants"[6]. Fridberg considers this relationship with things

[5] Other passionate scholars, such as Malea Powell, whom I rely on for helping me shape my understanding and analysis of materiality, focuses much of her work on making practices and thinking, Native American rhetorics, and alternative ways of conceptualizing 'textual analysis.' Betsy Greer, with her book, *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism (2014)*, explores this topic in the context of social activism, spurring a significant community of makers who use their craft skills to advocate for social change, tying into the broader conversation of the relationship between people, objects, and identities.
[6] From "The Social Life of Things."

“reflexive,” and while she is thinking about applications for archeological contexts, it applies to materiality quite nicely (which she acknowledges towards the end of the essay).

Valuable ‘Values’

Value occupies the last critical space for the needs of this project. Value in the monetary meaning, and values in the meaning of assigning priorities in our personal lives, both serving as important pieces of the puzzle I am working towards in this project. Their influence on people’s perceptions, achievements, consumer and maker practices, and in the same vein as identity, formation of underlying beliefs, cannot be ignored. Understanding, or at least talking about, value(s) in this way is absolutely a determining factor in how we personally make things (art, written works, technology) that are valuable to one another and possibly other people, whether or not to preserve certain things (practices or individual objects) from the past, and how we place monetary value on some objects but not others.

Where to Next?

Speaking admiringly about a leather bag and articles of workwear might resemble something someone’s grandparents would do about during visits over Thanksgiving or Christmas. Thankfully, in the case of this project, these objects serve as a springboard into finding out how the things people use every day function with us (because of us) as sources of identity, markers of fluctuating intentionality, and notations of value. By stopping to consider these variables, I work towards mindsets that encourage specificity and careful attention when challenged with a text’s material

manifestation, instead of juking this veiled ‘chamber of secrets’ in favor of *only* practical perspectives.

Taking this approach affords me a toolset for understanding the ‘why’ and ‘how’ behind the progression of objects being observed in this project – going beyond “blue collar workers wore this jacket” or “this fabric is woven in a twill pattern” – which can be (and is) applied in other contexts. This perspective comes out of a goal to be ethically coherent and responsible in covering as many bases as appropriate for the given research. Hopefully this resonates with other researchers, in or out of the rhetorical perspective, to arrive at broader conclusions for the benefit of those who come after us.

Moving into Hand-Shaped Materiality

The problem with wanting to focus on just a few specific materials and/or objects for this type of research—such as leathers and fabrics—is that virtually everything is made up of…well, *everything*. The logical approach is to research the history of these materials and how they have been used by various cultures through time and focus on the specific periods when the first leather bag, or chore coat, was made and used. But the outstanding gap in this approach is summed up in one word: materiality. There is not just one type of leather bag, made one type of way, for one reason.

The same can be said for a chore coat. My goal here is to reveal the importance of looking into the different types of intention behind the things people make, and what experiences or conditional circumstances allowed them to end up with a particular result. I think of very different things when I think about chore coats and leather bags when contrasted with what my grandfather thinks of. The reality of an object’s existence cannot be fully understood by simply looking at its linear history on a timeline. Through

a rhetorical lens, not only is more detail found, but also a comprehensive look at the object's existence through consideration of its materiality. In this exploration, I focus on the material and how it moves through the world—manifesting itself in different contexts by way of social movement or deliberate, *personal*, reformation.

Chapter 2
Methodology

The Six Questions for Materiality

In order to achieve the goal of this project, I will need to follow through with several different tasks ranging from the observation of scholarship surrounding my interests to physically interacting with and interpreting the materials I treat as objects of interest. First, I dive into my own personal project where I introduce my perspective and first-hand experience of making a leather bag and why it is important for me to deeply consider the intent behind every item I craft from hand. After this, I take a closer look at a widely used utilitarian garment, the L.C. King chore coat, still being made today by the same company and in the same manner as practiced for several decades. This chapter serves as an important overview for how I will achieve my intended goal of making meaning out of these objects in question and add to the body of scholarship known as material rhetorics.

Within the two following chapters, I model a significant portion of the discussion around a set of questions, derived from Carole Blair's, "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality," prompting focused inquiry intended to

expand the understanding of the materials I am observing. For reference, Blair's original five questions[7] are as follows:

1. What is the significance of the text's material existence?
2. What are the apparatuses and degrees of durability displayed by the text?
3. What are the text's modes or possibilities of reproduction or preservation?
4. What does the text do to (or with, or against) other texts?
5. How does the text act on person(s)?

Blair's application of these questions operate in the context of modern U.S. memorial sites, where she examines symbols that resonate out of these sites. She refers to this "material articulation" as the "means of transport to its *telos*—its meaning" (*Rhetorical Bodies* 18-19). Blair ends up concluding that while many people, scholars or the average person, are aware that "rhetoric is not exclusively about production" and has "consequences that exceed goal fulfillment," there are few who come up willing to look deeper and ask questions specifically addressing rhetoric's materiality (22). This extra step of inquiry, Blair thinks, is where we can learn more about the mysterious gray area often encountered when trying to talk about the process of what I refer to as *material manifestation*. This can be visualized as weaving a fabric, coding a website, stitching a leather bag, baking a cake, or however you think about your own process of making something that was not there before following through with the appropriate creative action.

[7] It is important to note that Blair does not list these questions in her work as they appear here. She formats the questions as subheadings within her essay, "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality," published in the edited collection, *Rhetorical Bodies* (1999), found on pp. 30, 37, 38, 39, and 45.

Carole Blair's questions prove to be a critical starting point for how I envisioned my approach to this project from a methods standpoint, which helps immensely in quantifying the materiality of specific materials or objects. Since my contextual use is different, some of the words and phrases were shifted to drive appropriate concerns and afford specific inquiry into materials and objects and how these have specifically changed over time, in addition to the sixth question, which is needed to survey the influences of digital rhetoric on materiality. My six adapted questions are as follows, and will be applied to the appropriate objects in both of the following chapters to address the specifics of the materiality in question:

1. What is the significance of the text's material existence?
2. What evolution to the text's environment shapes popular perception of its use value?
3. What allows the text to be worth preserving or reproduced?
4. How does the text represent a materiality shift?
5. In what way(s) does the text embody the identity of its user(s)?
6. What parallel track of materiality corresponds to digital spaces and/or manifestation?

Since this project aims to add to the rhetorical perspective that Blair is discussing in her project, it is important to ask the right questions *and* draw robust conclusions, not just provoke interesting scenarios or assumptions. Notice the focus on material value, material progression, and identity (identity of the material itself and to the people engaging in an action with said material). These three variables serve as recurring points of interest that place the materials I observe into the larger conversation started by others, as seen in the literature review chapter. These six questions cover a

respectable amount of ground, but are not intended to cover the entirety of the material rhetorical perspective. As usual, more work will need to be done beyond the scope of this project.

What is now common in rhetorical and other humanities-centric lenses, overlap with other fields of study, referred to as interdisciplinary scholarship, is at the heart of this project. The affordances this type of research gives a student like me, who is interested in many facets of DIY culture and material rhetoric (among other things), cannot go unstated. If I were taking a traditional rhetorical approach, for instance, I would rely more directly on the narrow amount of contemporary rhetorical discussions that might mention material rhetorics and their importance in comparison with more historical perspectives. But in order for me to look deeply into how material embodiment changes over time, I need to rely on more than a rhetorical perspective, or conversely, a practical perspective. This gap is where materiality presents its usefulness and its challenges, respectively.

As a whole, scholars grapple with materiality in a few different ways and are essentially thinking about and discussing the same 'thing,' but due to the intimate nature of how materiality manifests, almost every perspective is capable of contributing dimensions that others might miss or ignore. I lean on Starosielski's quite literal description of materiality as the "physical properties and conditions of a space, including atmospheric, geological, biological, and thermodynamic systems," which she uses in the context of her international project where she explores and visits with communities connected via the undersea cable network that is responsible for keeping the world 'online' (*The Undersea Network* 228). I revisit Starosielski's definition later when I talk

about how materials respond with and to the their user(s) and their environment(s), but beyond *defining* materiality, I was fascinated by how she *uses* it. By highlighting cable laborers[8] and the responsibilities that come with their roles, for example, Starosielski brings forth the materiality associated with the systems they interact with and their unpredictability. In the experience of the cable workers, she reveals, the unpredictable materiality is a negative hurdle they have to deal with, while the unpredictable nature of materials I showcase later in this project is a resounding positive of the craftsman's experience.

In that same vein, change over time is a broad research endeavor. There are many different lenses to look through and objects of interest to critically observe, but my research seeks to explore the area of ambiguity that thrives, as noted by Blair, Starosielski, Brooks-Gillies and others, within objects of particular historical periods, that hold particular materialities across time. It is all too easy to fall off the rails with such a project and follow the countless paths of interest that reveal themselves. Consequently, my goal is to offer a focused perspective that combines the work of scholars who have explored this question in similar ways, who may have contrasting conclusions than me, but who help with the overwhelming task of defining a text's material reality. I offer up this piece of the puzzle, and maybe those reading can help contribute to the progress of this extensive conversation and offer additional pieces to the puzzle.

The point about approaching issues from a rhetorical perspective is this: such a large amount of what we do every single day involves rhetorical thinking and critical problem solving. It is right in front of us and miles away simultaneously. A perfect

[8] *The Undersea Network*, 128.

example of this translucent phenomenon happens to include how a skilled craftsman approaches their craft. I say translucent because it helps me visualize the reality of learning and growing with one's craft, in addition to how the things being made by hand manifest with endless variability. The rhetorical approach being taken here could, in theory, include very different 'objects of interest' and be shaped by different scholarship that ends up at a similar conclusion to mine. At the end of it all, I am assessing how my making processes and the materials involved produce a desired object, which represent how these processes and objects have changed over time.

As far as trying to conceptualize a linear material rhetoric framework, Blair discusses the paradoxical dilemma by highlighting the inconclusive assertions offered over the years by the likes of Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Michel de Certeau—all failing, for different reasons and contexts, to produce rhetorical frameworks in respect to materiality (17). Blair concludes, quite helpfully, that in order to make sense of rhetoric's materiality, we must look beyond a text's meaning (*Rhetorical Bodies* 23). It is easy to forget that 'texts', which can be defined as more than written content on pieces of paper, are actively functioning in the world in which they exist. In other words, to actually bring definition to a text's material reality, we have to look at what it's doing, and consider *how* it is functioning beyond its original rhetor's intent (*Rhetorical Bodies* 23).

The human act of creating objects out of raw materials that represent different meanings and use cases is a centuries-old practice. As a consequence of this, the scholarship surrounding ideologies and practices that theorize and define histories of craft, DIY, and consumerism, are in need of contemporary reorganization. I am under

the impression that spending the intellectual capital conceptualizing ‘changes in meaning over time’ should be a widely understood practice, particularly in the context of materiality and the rhetoric that reveals itself in objects we take for granted—simple objects like a canvas work jacket or a leather bag. Since time has yet to stop, we, as a culture, need to be mindful of the ways in which we preserve (or destroy) the past, and using the approach I outline here is an attempt to carry this action out.

Thankfully, as I have now shown, there are scholars that share this sentiment and denote how critical it is for developing our attribution of value to objects and how these attributions are vulnerable to personal biases, constant shifting of cultural priorities, and the abandonment of tradition, to name a few. As many scholars appear to have found out over the years, rhetoric requires us to ask difficult, sometimes unanswerable, questions—questions that demand peeling off the surface and considering minute details. Sometimes those details have quite a bit to say. My hope is that through this approach, readers see how materiality manifests itself in these different contexts and environments, which speak to the complexity and importance of material investigation regardless of the materiality in question.

Due to the material and visual nature of this inquiry, detailed photographs were captured and provided here to showcase the physical attributes of the materials I discuss. Keep in mind that even with the most detailed photographs, to fully appreciate the complexity of a material, especially particular fabrics, leathers, and metals, you must touch it in real-time. I intend to do my best to overcome this limitation and hope it does not distract from the purpose of my research. The photographs were taken by me with

my personal professional-grade digital camera. Since I own the rights to the photographs, no permissions were required in that regard.

While I recognize that these methods may not embody what every scholar sees as necessary or traditionally acceptable for other approaches to materiality, I am confident that the influences I draw from and the overall aim of the project achieves what it sets out to do by bringing forth simple objects and discovering their material complexities that build the foundation for their materiality. Using the interdisciplinary nature of rhetoric as a field and discipline, which inherently allows for overlap in scholarship and methods, I can better serve the purpose of this endeavor. I hope my intentions shine through this work as genuine and reveal or add to pockets of knowledge that may not appear to get the attention it deserves.

Chapter 3
Personal Making and a Progression Towards Materiality

This chapter is effectively a narrative of how I made a leather tote bag and how I theorize the making process from a personal practice perspective. I explain how this perspective guides my values and how making represents a meaningful progression towards realizing how objects manifest their own materiality with and without us and our direct interactions with them. The decisions involved in how things are made is tightly woven in the materiality that is lived, similar to how every decision we make as people will always have some level of influence for what happens in the future, whether we realize it or not. Through careful synthesis of important scholarship, detailed photography and description, and thinking about answers to six important questions that help flesh out materiality as a rhetorical concept, I argue the importance of considering

materiality and how it manifests itself in the things we make. My objective is that after considering this key concept, the deeper meaning of even simple objects, such as a handmade leather tote bag, will become a little more tangible and applicable across different material contexts.

Have you ever wondered what a craftsman is thinking as he engages in his practice? Every craftsman will provide a different answer. True masters think mostly at the subconscious level after years of practice. The designing, the selection of materials, the measuring, the marking, the cutting, the punching, the stitching, the finishing, the delivery. Is it more than just learning some basic techniques? How does a leather bag shape a craftsman while simultaneously being shaped by a craftsman? In this initial chapter I am stitching my personal making practices and theories together to form a structured claim aimed at offering answers to these questions and looking into their material realities and how materiality plays a critical role in my personal projects.

Personal Making: Design

Before anything is actually made, whether that means mass producing a t-shirt or investing a painstaking amount of effort into singular handmade garment, it must be designed. Designing this type of bag happens by way of pen and paper, specifically by sketching out basic shapes and approximate dimensions I have in mind and in Field Notes booklets. Over the years, I have accumulated several booklets full of design ideas and other thoughts while thinking about project designs. I have difficulty conceptualizing some designs and end up finding more success after materializing a design even if I have yet to fully consider every measurement or other design specifications. This process does not set me up for success every time I make

something, but since I am a hands-on learner, it is my design process. As such, this project is a culmination of experience with making several other leather tote bags, but I would not consider it perfect by any means. I continue to learn different methods when it comes to making any leather item, which speaks to my interest in speaking about making practices in the first place—the materiality of the things I make vary widely based on material characteristics, construction technique, intended use, and the space (and place) it occupies. These once-animate materials live on in their inanimate manifestations by traveling through different hands, environments, and generations. This consideration goes into everything I design.

Personal Making: Materials

When it comes to the types of leather available to craftsman, there are more options than most people care to know about. Personally, I find learning about and working with a variety of leathers a fascinating opportunity. Unfortunately, most of the leather people encounter is not of particularly high-quality standards and is often actually a synthetic material or a bonded form of leather that feels and acts very cheaply. It ends up not being something capable of or worth preserving. This is not to say there cannot be uses for such materials, but they are by-and-large misleading consumers if they marketed to hold leather-like qualities (which they are). This may not immediately seem important to a leather craftsman, but the material reality of imitation (or even ultra-low quality) leathers has a profoundly negative impact on how consumers interact and perceive craftsman who work with full-grain, natural leathers, and do most or all of the crafting process by hand as opposed to cheap, automated manufacturing

processes that fail to stand the test of time. This discussion is expanded on in the subsequent chapter.

The leather used here is sourced from the Wickett & Craig tannery in Pennsylvania. Founded in 1867, Wickett & Craig is known for their vegetable-tanned leathers, one of the last remaining companies in the United States that practices this type of tanning at a commercial large scale. The actual leather I use, referred to as “russet harness,” was primarily intended for equestrian goods, but has more recently been ‘split,’ or thinned, to be used for general leather goods such as wallets or bags (*Fig. 1*). In this bag’s case, the leather is around the 4-6oz weight, which is above average for this type of product when looking at mainstream offerings, and ensures that the bag will retain its inherent qualities as it ages, also referred to as ‘patina.’ Most designer bags use leather that is in the 2-3oz range, with varying levels of inherent



Figure 1. Wickett & Craig leather side. This is a rolled-up portion of their Russet Harness leather. Notice the natural dispersion of the oils and waxes, along with the natural breaks and scars.

quality. Aesthetics and surface-level quality are generally the top priorities. The difference in material philosophy here is important to understand. The things I make are intended to serve a purpose and cultivate stories and experiences for their users *and themselves*, for many years.

Personal Making: Construction

When it comes to the construction techniques of a leather tote bag, there are plenty of options. The bag here was completely handstitched using the saddle-stitch method, which is a very old method of leather item construction that demands an entirely different way of thinking (*Fig. 2*). Without getting too technical, saddle-stitching requires attention the craftsman to specifically pay attention to not only the direction of

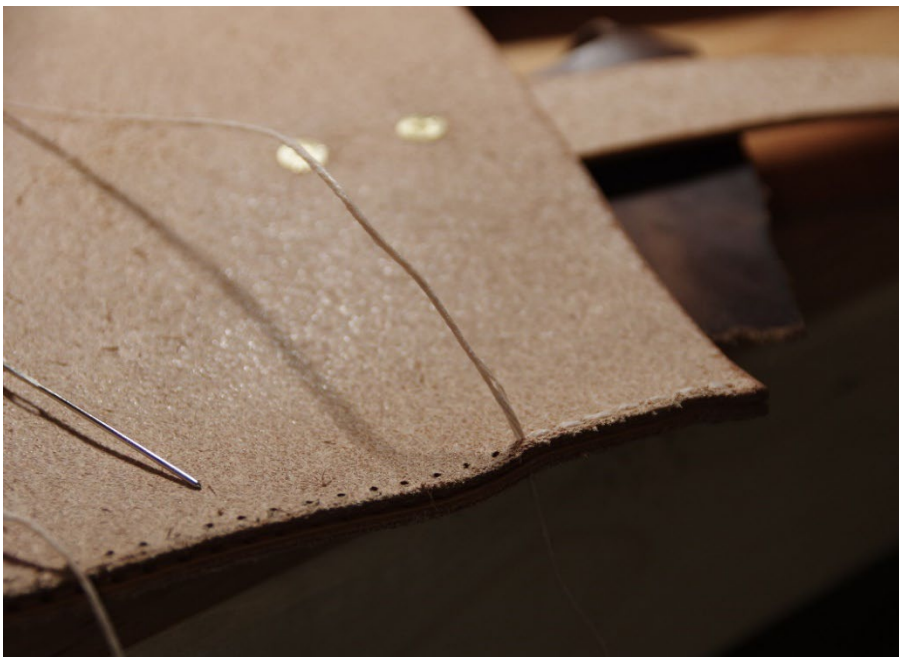


Figure 2. Saddle-stitch method.The craftsman maintains 2 blunt-tip needles on either end of the thread. The stitch ensures that, even if a stitch comes loose, the remainder of the stitching line will not unstitch itself. It is its own fail-safe system.

each stitch, but also the side of the thread he enters the needle on in order to create a uniform stitch throughout the project. As one might imagine, this takes much longer than other types of hand-stitching and significantly longer than machine stitching.

The other important aspect of the bag's construction has to do with the handles, made of the same leather as the bag's body and attached by way of solid brass saddler's rivets (*Fig. 3*). This is more significant than most realize, because saddler's rivets essentially ensure the handles are as strong as the leather itself. This consideration, along with the stitching method, determines the inherent longevity of a leather item and its probability of being preserved over time. Longevity, durability, and preservation are prioritized values in the materiality conversation, which influence both the singular user, and the culture at large.

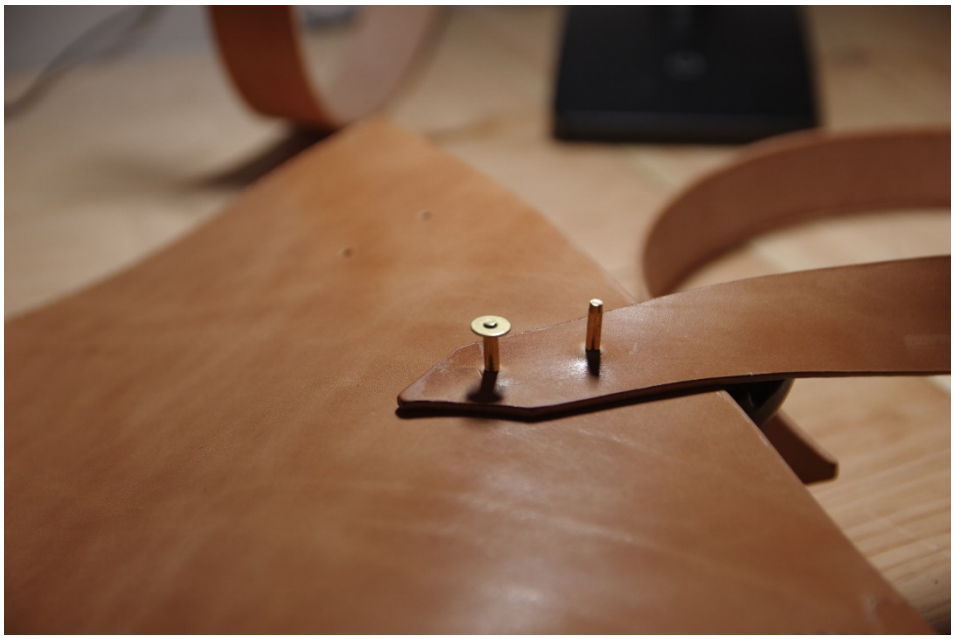


Figure 3. Setting brass rivets. This bag's handles are attached via 2 hand-hammered saddler's rivets on either end of the handle, cast out of solid brass. Using solid brass rivets ensures there will not be any rust over time and the metal will age beautifully along with the rest of the bag.

This is exemplified by looking at classic design languages and materials that remain throughout history—materials such as canvas, solid cast metals, and full-grain leathers.

The Six Questions: Complex Simplicities

The following exploration into materiality attempts to answer six questions that will provide insight into the making process provided above. Practically-speaking, making things is very simple. In the case of the leather tote bag, it only required three baseline materials, not including the tools of the trade: leather, brass rivets, and waxed sewing thread. But the simplicities of practical understanding often hide the complex processes happening within the maker, through his tools, mental and physical actions, and the environment in which he works. By blending these theoretical considerations afforded by the conversation of materiality, the passionate and valuable insight into the craftsman's practical actions and the determination of his worth by individuals on the outside will become more conclusive and representative of what it is really like to sit at the seat of the craftsman's workbench and design, cut, punch, sew, and burnish to achieve a finished product. Godspeed, makers!

Question One: What is the significance of the text's material existence?

The answer is dynamic and changing all the time and appears to lie in the text's variance and aging potential. I think about it in terms of how light fills a space. As the Earth makes its way around the Sun, the light fills in dark, abysmal spaces, radiates objects with its ultraviolet rays, and changes the material existence of everything it reaches in some unique way. When it comes to naturally-tanned, full-grain leathers I used for the tote bag, sunlight has a particular effect on its materiality, because of how high concentrations of sunlight will darken lighter leathers. The naturally-occurring oils

that rise to the surface of our skin contributes to this process as well. Light causes reactions just as much as it responds to other reactions, and so does leather. The fact that I stitched together the leather from what was a living and breathing animal, creates a whole new materiality in the form of a leather tote bag. Blair thinks about this question by considering "what is different"[9] about the contexts that the text moves in and out of. While Blair thinks about these 'texts' in the context of US memorial sites, the text I refer to is a handmade leather tote bag designed and made with my two hands.

The interesting thing about materiality is how it can be applied to essentially any object or space depending on how one would like to contemplate how the space exists and reacts to interaction with humans and other objects. Since Blair applies her knowledge and theory in a meaningful way to US memorial sites, does that make applying a similar frame of mind to a leather tote bag any less meaningful? I argue that it makes no difference because at the end of it all, *everything* is meaningless if we avoid ascribing meaning to it. This is equally true when comparing the worth of a 'priceless' ancient Egyptian artifact and a pebble on the side of the highway.

The idea of significance in a materiality context has much to do with space. A leather tote bag occupies space in an interesting way, and its significance is dynamic because of the inherent 'use value' of a tote bag. To be clear, when I say use value, I am thinking about the Marxian concept of "qualitative" value, where there is a "concrete way in which a thing meets human needs"[10]. A tote bag is a simple open-top bag, contemporarily marketed as purse alternatives for women or for unisex general use, such as an overnight bag or briefcase alternative. The intended use for the bag I

[9] *Memorial Sites*, 34.
[10] *Capital*, Section 1.

designed is to carry books, a small computer, and small accessories or essentials. Due to the shape and probable use-cases, the bag will likely appeal to a woman as a purse alternative, but I do not intend it to be used by a particular gender over the other. However, for whatever reason, tote bags do carry a feminine connotation in American culture.

The material existence of the bag is significant because it, as an object, always changes. The inherent qualities of materials used mean that the physical shape of the bag changes with the habits of its user. The leather darkens, softens, and reveals – yet also hides – the unique environments it encounters. The brass rivets oxidize as moisture makes contact and sinks into place. The handles quietly relax into their place on the shoulder, or in the hand, of its user. The materiality is layered both literally and internally as it reacts to its movement through different contexts. Some companies market this material change simply as a surface-level ‘story’ that a consumer creates, but it is a much deeper – sometimes obscure – reality.

The expand on this point, I will argue there is more inherent value in carrying a handmade leather bag made that has been crafted by a skilled artisan using naturally-tanned leathers and time-tested construction techniques. Various companies will argue for this point as well, since they want to make money and foster loyal customers. But there is a key point of differentiation between these two parties that I want to make clear, and that is the perception of quality and value, and what solidifies these perceptions. As someone who has made leather items by hand and tried to figure out how to market such items to random people on social media outlets (free advertising), this battle quickly becomes difficult to win. The inherent quality of the items I made were

high – full-grain leathers, quality thread, strong stitch work – but placing a so-called ‘sticker price’ on my items not only made me uncomfortable, but I was told by different people that my prices were too high, while others advised me to increase my pricing. To this day, I still go back and forth on pricing models, and many craftsmen, in a number of professions, will say the same.

I include this personal perspective relaying my own experience around perceptions of value and quality to say that these two words do not hold the same weight on the end of most mainstream fashion brands, which in turn has a negative effect on how people perceive the products that are marketed with the words “quality” or “genuine leather” or “handmade” that end up failing after little use or have inherent flaws in overall design, materials, and construction. I will talk more specifically about this topic in the following chapters.

In addition to the consideration of space, is an often mischaracterized conversation of *place*. Starosielski brings materiality and place into conversation with each other in a tangible way, especially when she describes the environments where the worldwide cable network that keeps the world connected to the internet functions as a member of local economies, a tourist attraction, and controversial spots of political interest. She mentions how the massive monetary demands experienced by cable companies at critical points in the undersea network help unearth how “cable routes remain resistant to change, and information flow, funneled through such pressure points, continues to be affected by the materiality of the world it traverses” (169). When thinking about connecting to the internet (which most of the objects people use on a daily basis are), most people think about the little network icons on their phones or

computers, indicating a wireless connection. But as Starosielski reveals, there is much to consider when it comes to the material existence of the undersea cable network, and as many communities around the world can confirm, the infrastructure makes international digital communication possible while leaving behind a very tangible footprint. This simultaneous relationship with the digital and material is important to understand, because these realities create their own materiality that has an effect on all who come into contact with it. Without that shared existence between the two, digital and material, the digital would never manifest itself into something we can interact with and response to.

Question Two: What evolution to the text's environment shapes popular perception of its use value? This question is made up of multiple dimensions. I focus on the dimensions involving the wider *cultural environment* alongside the more *individualized environment* people either create or end up in by other means. Still, the possibilities are plentiful—yet never identical. For this reason, popular perceptions that influence use value, especially for such an open-ended object like a leather tote bag, are never linear. Robinson and Silverman shed light on this perspective, albeit with an emphasis on 'heritage', by stating "the old, the ancient, and the "traditional" are accorded value partly as having "survived" over time and partly as having generated and accumulated a certain reverence with regard to their historical significance" (4). This connection to durability and preservation, topics I revisit later, is closely affiliated with both cultural and individual environments and the materiality involved with objects or practices considered to be – or influenced by – heritage.

It is useful to refer to Robinson and Silverman's questioning as an illustration of how influential heritage, or the façade of *a* heritage, is towards how we perceive value towards everyday objects like a leather tote bag. Since we are selective with the type of heritage that reaches popular status, this reflects a culturally representative attitude that in turn determines material realities for not only people, but also objects and spaces around the planet (Robinson, Silverman 4). This reality changes the cultural environment that surrounds every interaction between object and human, and thereby shapes perceptions.

Living within the confines of popular cultural heritage leaves little in terms of control to individuals, but this is where environments crafted for singular people become an interesting variable to consider. The environment in which I craft my leather projects has a much larger impact on the design, materials, and construction process than it is possible to fully describe due to the subjectivity of the experience and the space in which it happens. Transfer this scenario to the user of the item—not only does the environment (temperature, light, humidity, physics, sound, touch, vibration) influence how an item is used, it also influences how the materiality is shaped by the object. When a hand holds the leather tote bag by the handles, it is simultaneously transforming the materiality of the bag as the bag travels with the user through time and space, parallel to completely different materialities. As noted earlier, human hands produce natural oils, which react with the leather by shaping it, darkening it, and softening it, growing the bag's use value (in addition to its exchange value) as it is used. This aesthetically pleasing aspect of quality leather goods has become a top selling

point for many companies since the market is saturated with low-quality look-alikes that use the same or similar marketing language.

As has been made apparent by now, evolving environments, both cultural and individual, determine the ebb and flow of goods and services throughout history. When it comes to a text's materiality, the consideration of environment can complicate the conversation. Why is one style of shirt on trend one year, while a completely different shirt is on trend the next? In a lot of ways, this is a cycle.

Question Three: What allows the text to be worth preserving or reproduced? The most interesting part of this question, which is quite culturally significant, is the consideration of worth. Deciding what something is worth can be one of the easiest tasks, or the most difficult. The question of worth, especially in a modern understanding of the idea, brings underlying values and ideologies along with it—often in a way that is not immediately obvious to the prescriber of worth. When a craftsman charges a specific amount for their time and efforts to produce a finished product, how does one determine what it should be worth? Like I said, this will likely be influenced by underlying values and ideologies, but most people, informed consumers or not, could agree that a small-batch, handmade product utilizing notably higher quality materials than what is used in the mainstream markets is inherently worth more of their hard-earned dollars. But even if something that is objectively valuable, like a handmade leather bag, that does not guarantee its path towards preservation, and definitely not reproduction (or imitation, as another way to think about what I mean by 'reproduction').

Now allow me to bring the bag I made back into the mix. At the core of everything people use on a daily basis, is some level of 'use value' to the user, an idea I've already

introduced. Before I go on, take a look at the ‘text’ being referred to in this project, or rather, the tote bag I made. Something to note about the way I think about design, especially when it comes to bags, is overall shape and the way the object sits in a space (on the floor, in a chair, placed in spilled coffee), how it rests on a shoulder (passing through a coffee shop, shaking hands at church, brushing up against the aluminum sides of the metro car), and how its handles mold to a gripping hand in between all of these various movements and habits in the daily life of its user.

From my making perspective, what makes a text worth being preserved and/or reproducing through time is a design philosophy that carries an intent of general use and an understanding of cultural evolution. This is where materiality can enter the conversation. Looking at the bag, focused on its material manifestation as represented in the photograph, a few things can be deduced. First of all, it lacks perfection in a



Figure 4. Finished leather tote bag. Notice the intentional contour to the overall shape, along with the crease points showing the variation in color. This happens when the bag is turned right-side-out after being sewn together.

beautiful way. The handles are slightly off-center, and the shape of the bag appears to become narrower looking from top-to-bottom at the side-view vantage point the photo was taken. One of the things I struggled with when I first started making leather goods was trying the make all dimensions and lines and stitches perfect and symmetrical. To be clear, I am not justifying critical design and construction errors made by a craftsman; but rather how I soon realized, this was the whole point of truly handmade goods—the imperfections often become part of the personality of the objects.

Secondly, the bag was designed with simplicity and function in mind. Drawing on



Figure 5. Leather tote bag functionality. Here is a showcase of the bag's function, not to mention the natural beauty of the leather in natural lighting.

my past experience with making tote bags, I know that once the bag is loaded with several pounds-worth of personal items, such as books, tablets, or computers, and held by the handles with hands or on the shoulder, the bag's shape begins to conform to the way in which it is used. By narrowing the sides, I am implementing predictive design elements that improve with the bag the more it is used, as opposed to the deterioration most other bags suffer from. The material manifestation continues with thoughtfully designed handmade items, instead of ending the moment the final stitch is pulled.

Being able to admire, appreciate, and reflect on the life an object has lived is what makes it worth holding on to. And when stepping away from the literal meaning of reproduction – thinking about it as a new material manifestation based on something from the past – quality goods that have been preserved can live additional lives with those who follow he original user(s), transcending literal reproduction.

Question Four: How does the text represent a materiality shift? As one might imagine, broad shifts in materiality are largely determined by the track of culture. Values and ideologies come firmly adhered, especially when generations of values start synthesizing and, inevitably, clashing. Sometimes this happens in violent ways, but that is not within the scope of this project. Instead, the goal here is to connect a personal making story and heritage-driven making stories to the meaningful shifts in how people (as consumers and makers) interact with and create material meaning with the objects and materials around them. A determining factor to this survey is allowing particular attention to how people perceive and assign value to goods of higher or artisanal levels of quality.

I define a materiality shift as a deeply rooted chasm that forms in the broader representation of cultural values and ideologies that determine how people, objects, and everything in between interact with each another. Derived from Starosielski's definition of materiality mentioned earlier, this includes everything in a space from the specks of dust floating around to air pressure levels to a living human to a leatherworking tool on the workbench (228). It is *everything*—yet 'it,' or portions of 'it,' so often escape unnoticed, or at the very least, ignored. When explained, even in simple terms, a materiality shift (or materiality in general) is difficult to visualize, which is admittedly quite ironic since what is being described is always in front of us, on either side of us, above us, underneath us, and behind us. For these reasons, these shifts will always happen as time continues to pass.

The bag showcased here exemplifies one of these materiality shifts because of what consumes mainstream understandings of quality materials and products. This is especially true for a variety of objects in general, but leather goods are some of the most ubiquitous products across world markets—which is why imitations of quality have caused artisans of the craft to end up as a sort of minority for who, or what, is making these items. If someone out in public notices a leather object I made or purchased through another skilled craftsman, they are not conditioned by current mass culture to ask, "who made that bag?" but rather, "where did you get that bag?" or "what brand is that bag?" and then they proceed to look up the item on the internet and decide if they want to spend their money to purchase it. Frankly, this is what people do now. Since communities are not nearly as close-knit as they used to be, and since the structuring and valuing of labor shifted to prioritize occupations that require skillsets centered

around our digital networks, among others, the skilled trades are not integrated in society like they were a century ago.

By allowing easier public access to rapid means of communication that reach across the globe, individuals with basic levels of privilege can learn crafts that previously would have required intense apprenticeships and a life-long commitment to one's craft. This fact also points back to how the DIY movement gained so much traction in such a short amount of time—and why it fizzled out with a large portion of that community. Culture, the people within it, just moved on to something else. But these types of ins-and-outs in a culture have long-term effects for the people who either rely on or commit to a life of genuine craftsmanship. People assume that they understand – because they took up woodworking as a hobby for a year or two – the seasoned practicalities and difficulties of a person who makes things for a living, as they go back to their secure income and office job every day. Through materiality, an alternative story of the craftsman is revealed, and it is not a story that can be fully respected or understood by individuals on the outside of the craftsman's space.

Yet, by holding a finished product in the hand, and recognizing the level of expertise, patience, and use of materials embodied by the handcrafted object, the outsider suddenly becomes aware of the difference in materiality between an object they perceived as quality and what they now hold in their hand. The old saying goes "seeing is believing," but I conclude that it takes more than just one of the senses since materiality considers every particle in a space. It is through this blending of theoretical thinking and 'what ifs' that craftsman can push their practices even further, and continue to transcend each materiality shift they come up against. With the leather tote bag

discussed above, that is what I am doing. Through that practical and theoretical work, I am telling culture that “this is real, this is quality, this is *my self*.”

Question Five: In what way(s) does the text embody the identity of its user(s)? The previous question transitions nicely into the enigma of identity. Identities are shaped by many hands, so to speak, but the goods we decide to invest in are what others often see and make inferences based largely on the visual characteristics of the item being observed. Depending on the observer, and depending on the object(s), someone can assume anything about me, from working a certain occupation or holding certain ethical values—both of these assumptions, among others, can be made just by someone looking at the leather tote bag on a shoulder, the leather boots on a pair of feet, or the leather wallet open in a hand. More importantly, the user of the ‘text’ in question is choosing to live their life with the chosen object based on how it fits into their carrying habits, aesthetic framework, and investment framework.

For example, the tote bag I made to be represented in this project would be sold at a relatively high price, comparative to what is available on the mainstream market in the leather tote bag segment, but still lower in the price tier compared to high-end designer brands such as Gucci or Chanel. However, due to the top-quality materials and construction techniques I employ, the bag will appeal to two probable buyer segments, both of which belong to the female demographic. This includes a buyer who would lean more towards to idea of having less options, but options that are of higher inherent quality, fly under the radar because of limited branding, and expect to use the bags for many years—possibly with the intention of passing it down to their children or other family members. The other buyer lives a life where the monetary value of the item

is not a concern, but appreciates either the bag's aesthetic, artisanal connection, or overall material characteristics (or a combination of these attributes). Importantly, this aforementioned buyer is also more likely to form their identity around the bag, since their concern with the bag is more rooted in a *story* connected to the bag, as opposed to actually *using* the bag as it was intended to be used. I would like to think every person that ends up with one of my goods is someone who combines these two concerns.

I mentioned earlier, when addressing the material significance of the bag, that it is important to understand what makes a quality bag, as opposed to an *imitation* of a quality bag. The materials were chosen by me, the craftsman, specifically with the intention that the bag will be used and will shape to the user's daily carrying habits. It is impossible for any craftsman to account for every single scenario their goods will experience, but daily carrying habits vary immeasurably. No one can always predict when they will have to walk in a rainstorm, stand in direct sunlight for extended periods of time, or have to take a seat on the gritty sidewalk waiting for their friend to pick them up after work. The tote bag here is meant to embody as much of the life of its user as the user will allow.

Another interesting angle to reconcile with is how a leather tote bag can act as a drive, perhaps a type of compass, for how its user lives their life and makes other purchases, based solely on how much value the bag adds to their identity and what they want to project to the world as an individual. This type of thinking is very modern, but it shapes reality for many people.

Question Six: What parallel track of materiality corresponds to digital spaces and/or their material manifestation? My arrival to the world of leather craft

would not have happened without the relationships and other points of contact realized through digital spaces. In fact, digital spaces, namely Facebook and Instagram, are now host to many thriving communities of craftspeople—communities made up of members from around the world. In addition to the communities of people making things are communities of family-owned material suppliers, that often do not have the budget for large advertising and marketing teams and campaigns, able to maintain a consistent stream of business through these online channels.

For makers like me, who do not have large amounts of capital in the bank to invest in stockpiling materials, the ability to connect with and order supplies from various family-owned leather distributors is a door I was surprised to find open. These digital communication channels allow real human connections to be made, which in turn allow for novice and veteran craftsmen to develop their craft and continue their journey through materiality—whatever that might look like. Many modern consumer decisions are overwhelmed by the amount of available choices – magnified by algorithmically-driven online shopping – but in the case of the modern craftsman, these choices represent a level of control and power in how they see their craft evolving with the passage of time.

This meshing of the new and old ways of creating human connections with the people close to us, which can now theoretically include people who are not physically close to each other, allows new strands of materiality to manifest. People used to the ‘old’ way of doing things are sometimes lumped into the perspective that the ‘digital’ is less meaningful than that of something you can immediately see and/or touch, but it is becoming clear that this is not as clear-cut, which can be observed by the resurgence in

people (young and old) who take up hand crafts as their way of life. These two materialities seem to exist better in tandem with each other, instead of the digital completely erasing immediately physical spaces. An immediate illustration of this material manifestation through digital tools and spaces is when a leather craftsman provides a livestream of their making process, in which online followers can directly interact through chat features.

While my personal approach to making does not yet include such direct interactions with online observers, I find the online space to be invaluable for sharing images of my process and finished projects. I prefer to keep most of what I do as a maker to myself, because I think that ‘heart’ is somewhat lost in translation from the person making something when it is being directly shared. It involves an entirely different awareness that I feel I have not developed yet.

In summary, the leather tote bag, both as an object of interest, and the process of constructing it, demonstrate how there is much more to an inherently quality leather bag than immediately assumed. The surveying of materials is especially important to have in mind before diving into the questions of materiality-driven insight. The goal of the bag itself is to portray the spatial experience of the craftsman’s process and the material manifestation that takes place. The tote bag’s materiality brings in considerations of preservation, changing environments, and shaped identities, a process that can be applied to essentially any object of interest if an individual is interested in the materiality behind the things occupying (and reacting to) the space around them.

Chapter 4
Timeless Materials, Timely Materiality: L.C. King Mfg. Co.

After theorizing my personal making perspective and exploring the practices involved with crafting an item designed to manifest its own unique material reality, it makes sense to broaden that horizon to beyond a single craftsman and project. That is the goal of this chapter: to discuss and theorize how workwear garments made the same way over the past century come against changing times, use values, and material realities. The same six questions adapted from Blair's project used in the previous chapter are employed to aid in making real sense of often hard-to-explain phenomena. The garment company is a fourth-generation, family-owned operation out of Bristol, TN, called L.C.



Figure 6. A view from outside L.C. King Mfg. Co. As you can see, they are very proud of what they stand for as a company and the history that comes with the name.

King Manufacturing Co. Known for their overalls and chore coats, many would recognize the white and red square ‘Pointer Brand’ logos on their items. However interesting the company’s history may be, I focus this discussion around the idea of change in meaning over time, the affordances and complications with ‘selling’ heritage because of these changes, and how the materiality of L.C. King’s garments – with a specific focus on their chore coats – endures through timeless design, materials, construction, and finds its utility realized in ways the founder, Landon Clayton King, probably did not conceive.

To keep the discussion focused and meaningful towards adding to the pool of scholarship on materiality, the Brown Duck Chore Coat acts as the ‘text’ in which I will closely examine in this chapter. L.C. King as a company and brief mentions of other products will be included, but mainly to reinforce points I am making about the Chore Coat with respect to the materials used and relevant background information as it relates to materiality, values, heritage, and the larger cultural links that come from this discussion. Also note that all photographs included are meaningful due to the visual and material nature of what I discuss in this chapter, and I did my best to represent the materials as accurately and successfully as possible. If you ever find yourself in the Tri-Cities (Kingsport, Bristol, Johnson City) area in East Tennessee, I highly recommend stopping by the L.C. King factory store in downtown Bristol to see their products, not to mention the historic building, in person. I will briefly offer an overview of L.C. King, as it is both interesting and influential towards shaping perceptions about the company during my deep dive into the materiality of the Chore Coat.

Landon Clayton King, who raised “champion bird dogs in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains,” wanted tough wearing garments that had the endurance and functionality to be worn while hunting quail or working on the farm[11]. This perceived demand that King noticed led him to leave his brother’s dry goods company in order to establish L.C. King Manufacturing Co. in 1913. Initially inspired by his dogs, he named the first clothing line manufactured by L.C. King, “Pointer Brand,” which remains an iconic name today[12] in the world of heritage workwear. After surviving many challenging hurdles throughout history, such as the Great Depression and NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) trade deals, the company remains under family ownership and operation, with Jack King, Landon King’s great-grandson, carrying on the family name into this very different garment industry existing today.

Sewn with Heritage: Design

The L.C. King Chore Coat is a staple in the wardrobe of many types of people, but its roots date back to the pre-WWI days when Clayton King saw a need for workwear suitable to withstand the demanding conditions that farmers and blue-collar workers experienced. Garments like the Brown Duck Chore Coat were not only standard issue for most of these types of workers for nearly the entire 20th century, they became ubiquitous. These design influences are still apparent today, even as people from many walks of life find new ways to make use of the simple yet functional design. As it turns out, the useful pocket design and overall silhouette of the ‘chore coat’-style jackets works just as well for farmers and blue-collar workers as it does the modern

[11] From L.C. King’s “About Us” page.
[12] Within the past few years, L.C. King phased out their iconic ‘white label’ or ‘Carolina Bill’ tag, seen above, which was the tag associated with Pointer Brand. This change caused resale values of the ‘white label’ variations to increase dramatically.

man out on the town or working around the house. The versatility of such a utilitarian design has proven itself to adapt to changing times and be applicable in for a variety of use-cases. As a craftsman who wears an L.C. King Chore Coat during almost every project, I can attest to the usefulness of the design elements that are specifically tailored to improve the condition of the wearer. In recent years, everyone from celebrities[13] to the everyman has been seen out in public sporting a version of the L.C. King Chore Coat.



Figure 7. Aged Chore Coat. A banded-collar version of the unlined Duck Canvas Chore Coat. This coat has seen nearly two years of consistent wear, and a few washes. The leather elbow patches were added by the owner for added impact protection in that high-stress area of the coat.

[13] Observed by following L.C. King's official Instagram account @lckingmfg. Celebrities seen in variations of the Chore Coat include: actor Ewan McGregor, musician Benjamin Haggerty (aka Macklemore), actor and comedian Adam Sandler, and musician and actor Andrew Heissler (aka Pokey LaFarge).

Sewn with Heritage: Materials

The materials that make up the Chore Coats are all of a very high quality and sourced *entirely* domestically within the United States. In the current world's economic structure and mainstream methods of sourcing materials, this fact appears to be some type of miracle. But beyond the sheer time-warp qualities in how L.C. King continues to source their materials, they are chosen because of their inherent level of quality.

The first piece to the coat puzzle is the cotton duck canvas. Duck canvas, generally speaking, is renowned for its hard-wearing qualities, but most companies will wash down the fabric before sewing together a garment—essentially defeating the purpose for using such a rigid fabric in the name of initial comfort. That being said, L.C. King does use washed fabrics to provide options to their customers, but the popular raw duck canvas is the cream of the crop for a few reasons. First and foremost, when worn from the raw state, the fabric begins to mold to the shape of its wearer and move more



Figure 8. Closer view of the cotton duck canvas fabric. In its worn and washed state, along with the brass hardware with the classic "Pointer" branding. This fabric is produced by Mt. Vernon Mills in Trion, GA, established in 1847, while the hardware is out of Stoughton, MA.

directly with the body. Secondly, the look of the fabric dramatically evolves if worn (and worked in) for a span of time and then thrown in the washing machine, turning the hue from a bright, almost orange, to more of a faded khaki. Lastly, the technical weave pattern that makes duck canvas what it is creates a fabric that is incredibly tear resistant and able to handle repetitive friction to areas such as the knees (for pants) and elbows (for top-block garments) while still allowing for comfortable, full-motion movement. Duck canvas truly is a timeless fabric in the sense of it having found an almost innumerable amount of applications, which L.C. King has explored though its history with their line of work pants, overalls, tote bags, wallets, and more.

The other major piece to the coat puzzle is the hardware. In a similar vein to the fabric used, the quality of the hardware (which usually includes rivets and snaps) needs to be inherently high. For these reasons, L.C. King uses time-tested offerings from veteran companies that still make hardware out of solid brass and other corrosion-resistant metals. The hardware L.C. King uses will age alongside the fabrics after being touched by the wearer's hands, rubbed up against hard surfaces, and being exposed to the elements.

Sewn with Heritage: Construction

Why would you use quality materials and heritage-inspired designs if the construction is an afterthought? For L.C. King, the answer is, you do not. This is yet another reason why the company is so incredibly rare in the modern manufacturing climate of what is economically feasible for most companies. Something is usually given up in order to cut costs and reach a set profit margin, such as choosing inherently lower quality materials or outsourced labor, but for L.C. King, this is not an option. As the only

remaining family-owned and operated “cut-and-sew” clothing company still run by a member of the founding family[14], they are in an incredibly rare position to be able to support their own in-house design, cutting, and sewing team. Many of the employees are generational, meaning they are following in the footsteps of their parents or grandparents who worked in the factory most of, if not their entire life.

While at some level analyzing the quality of construction of a garment is a subjective experience, and would ideally be done by holding the garment in one’s own hand, L.C. King puts a huge emphasis on the fact that they still make their garments to



Figure 9. Comparison of an aged Chore Coat next to an unused example. Two years of wear and a couple washes, next to a brand new, unworn Chore Coat with the duck canvas still in its ‘raw’ state. Note the creasing in the elbow region along with the overall distressed, worn-in look the duck canvas develops over time.

[14] I must note that this claim is made by Cathy Horyn (and other reporters and journalists, but none offer data references to back it up), author of the *New York Times* article, “A Tennessee Clothing Factory Keeps Up the Old Ways,” that covered the inner-workings of the factory by the request of Jack King, the current Chief Executive and great-grandson of Landon Clayton King. From my thorough research, the claim appears to hold up, but the term ‘family-owned’ appears to be used loosely—technically, multi-billion-dollar corporations like Ford and Walmart are considered ‘family-owned,’ but the operations are obviously not being conducted by the owners like Mr. King, who works out on the sewing floor with his employees. It is difficult to classify L.C. King among other family-owned and operated garment manufacturing businesses because most were forced to close by the late 1990s after NAFTA trade agreements were put in place (McDonald).

the same standards that were in place over a century ago. When looking at the stitch work, placement and installation of rivets, and consistency of the fit, it does not represent perfection. And that is the point—perfection in the world of hand-cut patterns, sewn together using machines that are decades (some over a century) old guided by human hands, is not the goal. In an Interview with Meghan McDonald for *Tennessee Home & Farm*, Jack King proudly mentions how customers will send in worn garments for repair and that "a lot of people have had [the] overalls or jeans for 20 years…That shows the craftsmanship." Mainstream consumer culture, being surrounded by cheaply-made goods that are outsourced and made to appear perfect or durable on the surface, is precisely what L.C. King is pushing against. King is very clear about the company's values when he asserts "we are solely focused on giving the customer a 100 percent made-in-the-USA jean, overall, jacket or coat," even when the mainstream markets and trends are telling them to go a different direction (McDonald).

The Six Questions: The Chore Coat as a Text

This project is exciting because it presents the opportunity to step back and evaluate objects that are not usually given the space to be immediate subjects of materiality analysis and the effect they have on people and other objects. While the previous chapter applied the six questions seen earlier in this project to a personally significant leather tote bag project that I determined to be representative of broader cultural shifts and ramifications, this chapter considers the L.C. King Chore Coat – personally worn by me – as a text that has immediate and lasting value to many groups of people across the century of its existence, beyond what the founder envisioned. I aim to provide answers to the following questions by looking through the lens of rhetoric and

materiality, with a particular interest in the years of sewn together heritage that significantly impacts the direction of L.C. King as a company.

What is the significance of the text's material existence? The Chore Coat carries simultaneous realities of significance that influence its materiality. On the one hand, there is the personal connection fostered through the use and engagement with its wearer, an example of which is observed through photos included here. On the other hand, there is the historical significance that comes with the L.C. King and Pointer brand names, especially for residents in the Southeastern regions of the United States, but more recently, the rest of the country and parts of the world, particularly the West Coast, Japan, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, where 'workwear' or 'heritage wear' subcultures[15] have formed. The signature utilitarian design of the Chore Coat is a marker of quality and American manufacturing, and the recently discontinued 'white label' coats seen in the pictures above carry even greater weight because of the following L.C. King has rekindled. The layers of heritage surrounding both the company and its products are a major driving force behind why the Chore Coats exist as a mainstream icon in workwear and popular culture.

To help get a better grasp on this blended conversation involving 'craft' and 'heritage' and how it relates to the material significance of the Chore Coat, I bring Robinson and Silverman's perspective back into view. They mention how the contemporary "heritage sector," which I consider L.C. King to be part of, intentionally

[15] These subcultures can immediately be found by following hashtags, such as #workwear, #chorecoat, #duckcanvas, and #heritagewear on Instagram. Quick note on 'workwear' and hashtags on social media: some bloggers and influencers (men and women) interpret the term to mean clothing or fashion meant for 'going to work' or 'the office,' which adds a curious layer to the content found when following that particular hashtag. All hashtags on social media are constantly shifting with cultural and fashion trends.

places itself in a position of stark contention against or separate from the culture at large in an effort to represent a "material world…representative of a particular historical period or culture." They go on to say how the "inherited" things being preserved today and that are labeled to "exemplify beauty, creativity, a certain level of skill and craft, and historical significance," were mass produced at one point in the past, just like the "commercially mass produced" objects they are separated from today (6). While I certainly agree with their overall point that objects from the past are sometimes ascribed surprising levels of cultural or monetary value[16], this project shows how Robinson and Silverman's claim can overlook the significance of different quality control standards and the quest for the highest profit margins while sacrificing inherent standards in quality of materials and construction. In short, the mass production of 1950s America is unfortunately not the mass production currently found in America, or anywhere else for that matter.



Figure 10. Closer view of an aged Chore Coat. The markers of use include paint stains, indigo dye transfer from work jeans, and a loss of color saturation in the duck canvas after wearing and washing.

[16] For reference, the retail price for a new Brown Duck Chore Coat, as of this writing, is $145.00 USD.

In a similar way to how I discuss the dynamic material existence of the leather tote bag in the previous chapter, the Chore Coat reacts to the environment it exists in depending on how it is directly used and outside exposures separate from the wearer's realm of control. The coat showcased in the photographs is also a product of the wearer's personal journey, in its case, home renovations, which the paint stains are obvious remnants of. Beyond that, the coat's material existence is more abstract and requires more intense reflection to make sense of. The coat has also accompanied me through countless leather, woodworking, and home improvement projects. While the leather tote bag is conceptualized and constructed by me – intended for someone else to use and enjoy for many years to come – my Chore Coat becomes a similar type of companion due to its use value and markers of hard work through the physical evolution of its material existence and the material environment it contributes to.

What evolution to the text's environment shapes popular perception of its use value? The Chore Coat, as a century-old design, has impressively resisted significant stages of change in society. Personal emotions and values build up to guide broad public opinions, and clothing is influenced deeply by the evolution that takes place in this respect. When looking at the coat in the dimension I categorize as the wider *cultural environment*, pertaining to people in general and taking cultural realities into account to arrive at generalized conclusions, it is fair to claim the garment has remained a useful article of clothing for many groups of people even as its environment continues to evolve in economic and aesthetic ways. With that being said, there are equally as interesting connections when focusing in on the *individualized environment*, which I introduced alongside the cultural environment idea in the last chapter. The

difference here, as opposed to the last chapter, is that I am not the craftsman of the text in question. Instead, I am the wearer, or user, of the Chore Coat, and the above question allows this project the rare opportunity to make meaning from both a personal making *and* use perspective—which directly influences the use value of the coat and how it operates as a meaningful object in a craftsman's use case or a casual wearer's use case. These variables play off of each other and inadvertently develop both the wider cultural and narrower individual environments.

While it is easy to get caught up the awe-inspiring stories surrounding the company, it is important to remember how L.C. King is an outlier when placed next to the hundreds of other companies making what they market as a 'chore coat.' The cultural environment has changed in a way that makes flimsy advertising acceptable and widespread, which I see manifest as modern renditions of the chore coat constructed in other countries (which is not always a *bad* thing), using very thin (non-utilitarian) materials that break down quickly, and using words and phrases that give the impression to perspective customers of a certain level of quality that is not there. To some degree, this claim is subjective and depends on how an individual actually wears and uses their garments, but the well-known designer name, Ralph Lauren, regularly releases workwear garments that have been manufactured in a way that gives the impression of many years of hard use, and charges hundreds of dollars for the item. In a similar way to how I characterize the differences in inherently high quality leather versus low quality alternatives, the L.C. King Chore Coat stands in a class of its own due to the proven heritage of the company and, frankly, the honest and transparent

representation of their sourcing and manufacturing processes, a philosophy that directly resists the dominating forces of “fast fashion”[17] prevalent in the garment industry.

In a wider cultural environment that values profit margins and crafty marketing language over the inherent quality of the product being sold, the Chore Coat remains a consistent purchasing choice for combating this unfortunate normalcy in modern consumer culture. Additionally, this breaks down the material bond people hope to develop with everything from clothes, to vehicles, to homes. So, as the majority (popular culture) continues in the direction it is going with cheap goods, it is up to the minority (independent craftsmen, companies like L.C. King) to conserve practices of the past that exhibit timeless qualities, such as using inherently high quality materials and construction techniques. Maybe, a century from now, L.C. King’s wider cultural spread will show up as a meaningful source of influence for companies or individuals that are just getting started in the unpredictable road of the garment industry.

In a more individualized environment, the Chore Coat, and quality garments in general, act as companions to their wearers—albeit with restrictions. This is a very direct form of materiality because of how the coat responds to its use and its environment. This is also closely tied to the existing cultural environment the coat exists in, as mentioned before, but for a garment like the Chore Coat the usefulness to the individual likely outweighs the wider perceptions. An example of this includes how most craftspeople who wear an L.C. King Chore Coat probably do not wear the same coat out to dinner with friends, even though the garment is currently considered a ‘cool’ jacket aesthetically. Instead, they own a second coat for these types of occasions,

[17] Defined in Merriam-Webster as “an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers.”

which is an interesting individual choice since this is intentionally hiding the markers of hard work – a core wearing intention of the Chore Coat – and recognizing that most people would not appreciate sitting next to a guy with a dusty or stained work coat in a restaurant. These social cues are, in my view, indicators of changes to the text's environment, in which the coat is adapting to appropriately since it still finds a home in the workspace, and now the streets as an article of menswear.

The Chore Coat represents significant changes to the environment it exists in. By following the framework laid out in the previous chapter, I hope the answer to this question has manifested more concretely. The Chore Coat can be as useful as the wearer wants it to be. From a pure design standpoint, the utilitarian aesthetic of the Chore Coat is imitated and reimagined repeatedly by younger menswear brands fighting for a piece of the competitive garment industry[18]. Interestingly, L.C. King avoids this competitive spirit by relying on their proven heritage and unique (in a contemporary historical context) design and manufacturing facilities continuously at their disposal. The contemporary cultural interpretation of the workwear garment proves that consumer society shapes the use value of garments like the Chore Coat. The difference is that the usefulness has shifted to include the Chore Coat as a fashion statement. The majority of wearers no longer include blue-collar workers and farmers, but L.C. King holds fast to their heritage of American quality, craftsmanship, materials, and supporting their home community of Bristol, Tennessee.

[18] This is a great thing, as is contributes to the preservation of the garment as a classic workwear design. Companies such as Apolis (which no longer makes clothing, but I own several of their pieces) and Bradley Mountain have created impressive reincarnations of the chore coat design using different fabrics and fits.

What allows the text to be worth preserving or reproduced? L.C. King continues to make their workwear garments for a number of reasons – supporting their committed employees, maintaining a company that is essentially a continuous time capsule of historical significance, acting as a 'great-grandfather' to other American clothing brands, maintaining the family name – the list could go on. But the consideration of *worth* makes people stop and really think about what they are doing and decide what needs to be done versus what they want to do. As an initial part of answering this question, allow me to construct some background. The current chief executive of L.C. King, Jack King, the great-grandson of Landon Clayton King, was forced to stop and decide the future of the company in 1999 when it was handed down to him from his father, who he claims to not have had the most fruitful relationship with. He was not conditioned to want to preserve the company, and employees initially clashed with his leadership since he wanted to take the company in more of a 'fashion' route, even though they knew the whole identity of L.C. King and Pointer Brand was overalls and other workwear. But King says he "swallowed [his] pride and sucked it up" in order to preserve and push forward and solidify the company's identity in the twenty-first century[19].

For Jack King, his family's name, his employees, his community, his suppliers, and his customers, the 'swallowing of pride' and 'sucking it up' was the right decision. The company gladly maintains their core lineup of chore coats, overalls, and jeans, while also engaging in what they refer to as "global fashion collaboration[s]"[20]. The

[19] According to Cathy Horyn in her *New York Times* piece, "A Tennessee Clothing Factory Keeps Up the Old Ways."
[20] From L.C. King's "About Us" page.

forces that allow this could be arguable, but it all goes back to the original design philosophy, quality of materials, and construction techniques. It is hard to argue with the pure act of using a garment the way it was intended and taking basic care instructions into account. L.C. King also encourages customers to send in their garments for repair through their 'lifetime guarantee on repairs,' which is further indication from the company that they want their customers to preserve and use their garments for as long as possible.

The Chore Coat I focus on here is a companion to me, not just another coat, because its inherent qualities speak for themselves and adapt to me as the wearer. During the first couple months of wear, the coat's fabric is stiff and corrosive. Initially,



Figure 11. Closer view of an aged Chore Coat compared to an unused example. For reference, these are using the exact same fabric and hardware. Notice the 'tightening' that happens around the seams. This is evidence of slight shrinkage in the fabric once washed for the first time.

this characteristic of the coat (or any garment using ‘raw,’ unwashed, fabrics) is off-putting to some who have only worn immediately-soft synthetic fabrics or processed cottons that are comfortable on the first wear. In a similar way to how I talk about the qualities of the leather I use to make the tote bag, raw fabrics were commonplace up until later in the twentieth century when companies started selling ‘pre-distressed’ clothes. But after this initial break-in period, however, the tightness of the weave begins loosening up and takes shape to how it is used, in addition to allowing easier buttoning in the front and on the wrist closures. Beyond this stage, it really depends on how the wearer continues to use the coat, and when they decide to wash it. The photos, taken of my used (and washed) chore coat versus a brand new one, tell quite the story.

When keeping in mind the design for this coat predates the Great Depression, was intended to be used by men in dog-training fields, farms, and production lines, I have a hard time getting past the fact that the garment pictured above represents a time in history when people had a job to do, and they did it. Maybe they would rather not do it. Maybe it was far from being worth their time and energy. Maybe it would be the death of them. But they did it. This is a garment that was with these people, and it shows in the determination L.C. King maintains in staying true to that heritage of perseverance. If someone inherits, so to speak, the value of their Chore Coat from a relative that grew up wearing the garment doing hard labor, they might develop a more sentimental relationship with the item. If someone else discovers the garment through social media, makes a purchase (which supports the company), and wears their Chore Coat as a fashion statement, they will think about the value of the garment differently. The key thing to understand here is neither scenario necessarily merits a more meaningful or

significant materiality, just a different lived experience. People and values change with time and growth, which allows for the possibility that either one of the above individuals' attribution of worth they give to their Chore Coat tells a different story further down the timeline.

How does the text represent a materiality shift? The Chore Coat is a garment that goes beyond its origin story, since its material manifestation has happened over such a long span of time. Looking at the materials, construction methods, and overall design language of the Chore Coat indicates a wider shift in materiality. As mentioned before, these shifts encompass pieces of our material world that often go unnoticed until later rediscovery, with the advantage of hindsight. In the case of the Chore Coat, there are the obvious inherent differences represented in its intention as a utilitarian garment when compared to other workwear (contemporary or legacy-inspired), but there are also less obvious – deeper – connections to society and its habits waiting to be revealed. One of these connections includes the intimate perspective of a maker who considers a Chore Coat his companion, while the other includes the inclination of the production industry to modify or move away from established materials and practices in an effort to develop the 'next big thing.'

Up until I began theorizing for this project, I had never thought about a workwear garment as a means of experiencing a more personally-realized materiality shift. What I mean is, through creating a meaningful bond with my Chore Coat and carrying it with me for over four years, materializing its unique story, understanding its historical significance, and frankly, how much I enjoy using it on a regular basis, I now grapple with how important it is to take notice of the inherent qualities in everything I purchase

and every leather project I engage in. This lesson, stacked on top of values – determination, earning the things I want to have, patience – instilled in me by my parents and grandparents, guides how I see and interact with other people and objects in the world. And I think this growth in foundational understanding from both a personal and broader cultural perspective is a key advantage to the rhetorical approach I use here. It allows space for objects like the Chore Coat to 'breathe' in a sense, and the wearer a chance to slow down and notice that breath.

I want to emphasize the fact that a materiality shift, while possibly sounding like a serious event from its designation, is not necessarily outside the ordinary chain of events in a culture. These types of shifts are imminent because advancements are made and hearty materials such as duck canvas and solid brass become 'old-fashioned' in mainstream supply chains and are therefore not as widely used as primary materials by the majority of garment companies. Synthetic materials continue to gain in popularity for streamlined manufacturing processes, a wide variety of uses, and much lower costs. This shift is closely tied to parallel realities in culture that are determined by what is valuable and what customers tell companies they want to see through the items they tend to purchase.

With today's flow of advertising pumped through virtually every social media, information, and consumer channel that tracks user habits and tailors advertisements according to what the data tells them, it becomes challenging to make purchasing decisions in the same way previous generations have—of which they were totally in control of since this idea of hyperlinking things presented in front of us only recently became streamlined through integrated web browsers and social media marketing tools.

I see this change of pace as a rearranging in responsibility, a materiality shift, that I think people are catching on to with respect to how (and where) they spend their dollars. L.C. King has adapted to these shifting material realities surprisingly well for such an old company that is still owned and operated by the founding family. They are the only company in America that still fits under this category.

In what way(s) does the text embody the identity of its user(s)? Identities are constructed and noted most immediately by looking at what is visually in front of the observer. For this reason, the clothing people choose to wear is likely to reflect at least some of their constructed identity—even if they avoid directly admitting this fact. My Chore Coat embodies part of my identity as a craftsman because I know when I put it on my intent is to create something. Other makers can agree with this type of identification with their chore coats, but there is more to the puzzle, especially now when people often wear different garments when they want to be seen in public. The Chore Coat exists on a dual-materiality condition, because of having desirable aesthetic qualities that fit into current mainstream menswear styles and wardrobes. Without getting too far into the conversation of identity specifics beyond the realm of this project, I suppose that men who dress to be seen in public that organize garments and footwear exuding timeless impressions of style and quality – even when accounting for the details – they are held in a higher regard than other men. The Chore Coat is one of these timeless garments.

The Chore Coat is a garment that not only reacts to and with its user, but also its environment, or more specifically, the space it occupies. A quality-first garment speaks for itself, while shortcomings in a profit-first garment will speak equally as loud. As a

craftsman who takes a lot into consideration when it comes to what I purchase, I expect my things to function and interact in my life in a way that makes me proud to own, and more crucially, use them. My identity is purposefully tied into the relationship I develop with my Chore Coat and other quality workwear garments that extend into the leather goods I make. In many ways, it forms a communal circle of interactive materiality that reacts to each other—which happens at a more subconscious level with time. This subconscious awareness of the things I use, especially when I am invested in a craft project, is the ideal scenario for close focus on the project at hand. The quality things – workwear, tools, materials – all seamlessly blend and fulfill their intended purposes in helping me to create an original object.

An interesting angle to consider when looking at the Chore Coat is by reading L.C. King's descriptions of the coat in their online store and comparing it to actual lived



Figure 12. View of Chore Coat among other quality garments and objects. Without saying anything verbally, this image represents the identity of the wearer. The Chore Coat hangs in the background, waiting to be put on by its wearer.

experiences and use cases. Many companies are guilty of what I will call 'over-description,' essentially hyperbolizing the inherent characteristics and supposed features of their garments to make them align with specific individuals' values and ideals that contribute to constructed identities. With L.C. King, since their materials and manufacturing processes are incredibly mature and proven over time compared to most brands (not to mention the fact that they control every aspect of it), their product descriptions keep in line with the core values of the company. The line, "the chore coat exemplifies the history of American labor and perseverance,"[21] is a powerful claim that I am not sure every individual wearing a Chore Coat understands or appreciates. But in many respects, this is to be expected and it is why I consider having L.C. King continuing to make their garments a living time capsule. The generations that make up current culture simply cannot fully understand the historical cultural context that inspired Landon Clayton King to found his company in the first place. This "pure"[22] heritage, as it has been referred to, is what molds the identities of so many loyal customers to L.C. King across the last century.

What parallel track of materiality corresponds to digital spaces and/or their manifestation? Even with L.C. King's incredibly history, proud heritage, and deep connection to the old ways of manufacturing and fostering relationships, they would not be as widely known by younger generations across America, and the world, if it were not for the communities of craftsmen and women, fashion blogs, and social media channels that feature and praise the company and its practices. These digital spaces

[21] From the "Brown Duck Chore Coat" item listing in L.C. King's online store.
[22] According to Mr. Norwood in Cathy Horyn's *New York Times* article.

have manifested alongside a reinvigorated track of preserving the material contributions L.C. King has been holding onto for decades.

I believe considering these two tracks of continuously evolving materiality (which also contributes to the development of the other questions explored in this project and beyond) is an empowering way to ensure the preservation of garments such as the Chore Coat, not for selfish reasoning or personal use, but for the advancement of contextual understanding when it comes to the individuals who have used the coats throughout history, often in misrepresented communities in the South and beyond. I know there are plenty of lost stories – or stories never given a proper voice – by the wearers who plainly wore the coat as a companion to the job they had to do.

A great example of the Chore Coat's evolving materiality propelled by online channels, specifically in relation to the Brown Duck variation showcased here, is the explosion of wearers wanting to 'wax'[23] their coat. Wearers active on Instagram started sharing photos of their waxed coats, which looked incredibly unique because of the enhanced crease marks around the elbows and more 'aged' look the coat developed after little wear. The trend did eventually die down, mainly because the waxing process on a rigid and raw fabric like duck canvas is an incredibly involved and time-consuming practice, revealing how most users just wanted to wear the coat to achieve a specific aesthetic, even though there are actual advantages to waxing a workwear garment(namely waterproofing and additional resistance to abrasions). Regardless of how the stories unfold, public digital spaces allow these stories, old and new, to

[23] Otter Wax, one of the more popular makers of natural fabric wax out of Portland, OR, created a tutorial on how to wax a cotton canvas chore coat. This trend caught on because of a combination of social media interaction, the unique 'look' wax creates, and the weather-proofing properties after completing the process.

permeate the surface and contribute to the culture at large, which is a powerful and encouraging way to honor the founder of L.C. King, and possibly more importantly, all who have found the garments he worked to design, useful, helpful, stylish, meaningful, or otherwise valuable objects in their lives.

Chris, who I mention in the Introduction to this project, was a personal connection realized through a digital space. As I manifested my own materiality as a young maker, I was unknowingly fertilizing interest in my craft by capturing the attention of Chris, who saw a demand for items that he wanted to supply to customers through the L.C. King purchasing channels. I remember him explaining how he was looking for a local craftsman able to take the opportunity to expand their product reach beyond their own channels and advance the rate at which they produced their goods. Even though, in the end, I was not the right craftsman for what he was looking for, Chris admired what I was doing and gave me some advice as I moved forward as a craftsmen. The physical action of meeting up in public – a meeting that manifested online over Instagram – was the moment that the parallel tracks of materiality became one cohesive experience that continues to influence me as a craftsman. A craftsman who enjoys and relies on the experience of wearing my L.C. King Chore Coat.

The Chore Coat is a garment worth holding on to. Its materiality continues to be shaped simultaneously by many different wearers – craftspeople, style-conscious bloggers, farmers – which ensures its preservation as a valuable garment that happens to represent a sustainment of slow, thoughtful, quality American manufacturing that the general population is not conditioned to recognize. There are not many other ways to purchase new garments, made domestically, that have such inherent levels of quality

and history behind them. Jack King recognizes that wearing their garments is a process meant to be created and experienced by how the wearer commits to using it. King comments on developing a connection with and breaking in the garments by saying, “it becomes part of you, part of your memories, and it grows with you as you live your life” (McDonald). The Chore Coat is a timeless object that goes beyond what it was originally intended to do by adapting to shifting cultural environments, expanding its use value, and physically standing the test of time. This embodied experience coming with the acquisition of a Chore Coat, or any of L.C. King’s workwear garments, is why this inquiry is so fascinating to me as a maker who has spent time enjoying my Chore Coat.

Conclusion
Materiality Encourages Growth

To bring this conversation to a close, I will reiterate the guiding points seen in the previous two chapters, which include, 1) the significance of craft work, 2) evolving popular perceptions, 3) object preservation, 4) materiality shifts, 5) maker and object identities, and 6) parallel tracks of materiality. These different pressure points were chosen for the purposes of my inquiry, inspired by Carole Blair’s intellectual progress in materiality, but I expect other scholars to apply and adapt this framework in other situations of materiality. As I state early on, an underlying goal of the thinking I do in this project is to bridge some of the understandable confusion taking place when theorizing the materiality of handmade objects, or objects in general. It is easy to reduce the actions of skilled craftspeople to simple steps carried out in order to make something. By documenting the making process, thinking beyond the immediate surface of the materials, the manner in which they are used, and the conditions of the physical and

cultural environment, I am confident I have proved there is more to talk about than the ‘simple’ steps involved in the creation and use of the leather tote bag and Chore Coat.

I urge readers to conduct their own projects – of various proportions – allowing the ‘thinking space’ for careful consideration of making practices and how everyone has the potential to consider the material consequences, as Blair might say, of what they are creating. An attitude of thoughtfulness and inherent respect for the processes of material manifestation reflects larger cultural implications and shifts in materiality. These attitudes lead to more enjoyable relationships with the objects we hold near and dear, which will serve their users well if they were created with the intention to last lifetimes, be preserved, and transcend numerous shifts in materiality bound to happen with the progression of time.

An impactful point I arrived at as I conducted my research and looked at my objects is accountability. If makers and consumers adopt an accountable approach to making and purchasing, I am confident that craftsmen will shift popular perceptions regarding their work, their processes, and how their system of values and beliefs tie into the things they make. This accountability should run deep. It should include forethought into an object’s design, a holistic approach to materials and their gradual material manifestation during and after a human-centered construction philosophy that accounts for the initial user, and those who are presumed to come after. This accountability is intertwined with all parts of human life—the things we use every day become part of us, our individual environment, which contributes and affects the wider cultural environment. And when I think about this from my perspective of continually developing my understanding and method of approach to leathercraft, an accountability for the

materials and construction I stand behind intended to last the user a lifetime and beyond.

True artisans who practice their craft(s) and seek mastery of the slow, painstaking methods they choose to maintain, have the unique opportunity to practice accountability for the materiality they contribute to. This remains true for seasoned craftsmen who depend on their craft to maintain their livelihood and provide for their family, just as much as it does for beginner DIY enthusiasts trying to learn something new. This project was meant to capture the dynamic spirit of aiming for higher standards in the things we make and purchase with the promise of accountability – understanding that the things we create have a purpose and tangible material existence – in which we create objects with legacies equal to (or greater than) that of the humans who made them or use them. This has a much higher probability of leaving positive breadcrumbs from the past leading those after us to the opportunity of learning from and about what is being done now. This is why L.C. King as a company is such an inspiration for Americans in general, and why I stick to making things with my two hands as opposed to using automated tools or machines.

I sincerely hope that bringing the rhetorical lens into this project is seen as beneficial for helping to observing the lived material realities of people and objects and all the phenomena that are revealed through these observations. Through careful exploration into how craft processes directly influence current and eventual materialities of people and objects, and recognizing how different these materialities can be from one another, I expect readers to see how meaningful the decisions and actions made by a true craftsman are—including the design, materials, construction, and anything in

between. By encountering the deeper questions attached to the material manifestation of simple objects like leather bags and workwear garments, I hope my perspective added an encouraging and relatable tone to other observers and can act as a point of inspiration or affirmation to other experiences.

This arrangement of scholarship along with my personal making narrative of materiality adds a meaningful perspective to the larger rhetorical body of scholarship that surrounds everyone working in this fascinating field. My arrival at this topic was inevitable and fruitful in many respects, but as I move beyond this project I must mention that there is still a healthy amount of work to do by me and other scholars who enter this realm of multidimensional thinking. Craft practices and materiality creates colorful possibilities, and I can see valuable investments of intellectual capital happening through conversations involving maker identities, contemporary flattening of craft practices, gendered materiality, evolving perceptions of what constitutes 'handmade,' digital channels and their impact on craftspeople and their communities, preservation of historically significant garments, and materiality considerations for garments in the museum context. There are, of course, other valuable topics I am not mentioning here, but these were unexpected or purposefully omitted topics that were left out for the purposes of remaining focused on the objects I looked at.

Now, it is time for me to start planning my next project.

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