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'Made in Cambodia'

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Submitted in accordance with requirements for B.A. Single Honours in Geography

I confirm that the number of words is 10000, excluding abstract, acknowledgements, table of contents, references, bibliography, appendices and quotations from interview material

I declare that this piece of work is all my own and that any work by others has been acknowledged

Signed: Helen Clare  Date: 3/2/06
Abstract

'Made in Cambodia', found on the label of a t-shirt I own. Bought from H&M for just £3.99, but are there implications to this ridiculously cheap price? We rarely see how we influence the lives of unseen others, that we are connected to on a daily basis through the commodity. Yet it is imperative, for our understanding of the capitalist economy. By simply following the thing, in a piece of multi-sited ethnographic research, this is what I hope to have done. Though, it is not as simple as untangling the threads of my t-shirt's journey from here, back to Cambodia, as I hope you will see.
Acknowledgements

There are many people I have to acknowledge, but I must first express my immense thanks to Dr. Ian Cook for his continued support, advice and encouragement. You gave me the confidence!

I must also thank my research participants, particularly those in Cambodia who gave up their incredibly valuable spare-time to help with my research. Ar Kun!

A huge thank-you to Louise, my travel buddy. What a summer!
And last but not least to my family and friends for giving me with their ongoing love and support.
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*Following a thing*

H&M

Cambodia

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H&M...Hennes and Mauritz...with you...UNICEF!
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The ethnographic nature of my study resulted in a large amount of qualitative data. Through the stylistically informal writing style of my dissertation, I have tried to cut the word count down to the bare minimum, though I feel that if I cut out any more, it would lose the sense of *being there*. Due to the sensitivity of many of the issues, I was unable to tape-record much of my research, which is explained in greater detail in the methodology section. For these reasons this has inevitably led to an extra 3,392 words.
301A

Name

Helen Clare

Registration No

537687
Introduction

Bilborough College. Whilst studying for my A-levels my geography teacher, Jim, taught a lesson on jeans. It was titled Lee Cooper: a Trans-National Corporation and was based on an article from The Guardian (Abrams and Astill 2001)\(^1\) which followed the journey of a pair of Lee Cooper jeans all around the world from Tunisia, to Italy, Germany, France, Northern Ireland, Pakistan, Turkey, Japan, Korea, Namibia, Benin, Australia and Hungary. This lesson about a single pair of jeans and their travels planted a seed in me.

Jim taught many more illuminating lessons from bananas to Barbie, from Kraft to Nike to Philip Morris. They opened my eyes! I remember thinking that there is so much more to this world than I had realised. I found it quite disconcerting really; knowing so much was going on, so many lives I was influencing with no control so I thought.

I used a presentation opportunity during my first year at Birmingham University to talk about bananas! To pass on some of the knowledge I had been given; tell people just a little about their geographies of production and consumption, the north-south divide, globalisation, and the options brought about by fair trade. I hope I opened a few eyes then.

From this first inspiration, my curiosity grew. I knew I wanted this dissertation to look further into production and consumption geographies. I initially wanted to focus on fair-trade and possibly explore the importance of bananas with a trip to the Windward Islands, but my tour of South-East Asia was in the making! It was to be my first proper travelling experience. The highlight would be four

\(^1\) Strangely, the same article used by Crewe (2004).
weeks in Cambodia when I would volunteer in orphanages. It made sense for my research and travels to coincide.

After my presentation on bananas, my tutor had commented… “You should talk to Ian Cook, he’s done some work on bananas; you’d enjoy his Material Cultures course”. So that’s what I did. He suggested reading Sarah Wrathmell’s dissertation; The connectivitea of Britain and Sri Lanka (2003) …Wow! Amazing! But I could never do anything like that. Could I?!

A green t-shirt came to mind. I went rooting through my wardrobe to find it. And on the label… ‘Made in Cambodia’.

![Image of H&M t-shirt](image)

Plate 1 – There it is!

How fascinating would it be if I could actually trace this back to its origins? If I could identify the person that made it and identify with them. To see how we frequently, yet indirectly, influence the lives of others. Just imagine.

Research Aims
And so I set myself the challenge of humanising my t-shirt. My own ‘geographical detective work’ (Hartwick 2000 p.1178). ‘…to trace the connections between producers and consumers and to ask how the item in
question came to us and how it came to be' (Collins 2003 p.19). This t-shirt has so many stories embedded into its threads, even more so because it cost just £3.99 from H&M. 'Fashion and quality at the best price' (H&M 2005a) as they say. Or 'suspiciously cheap' (Get Ethical 2003) to put it another way. To what extent have the people that made this t-shirt been considered in all this? How can they have been? £3.99, for a t-shirt!

This 'jargon-free' (Richardson 2002 cited in Cook & Crang Forthcoming) style will hopefully appeal to a wider audience, giving more people an insight into what is behind the label. I do not wish to provide a 'rhetoric of moral outrage and blanket disapproval' (Jackson 1999 cited in Castree 2001 p.96), but rather to provide an interesting, eye-opening account of how buying something as simple as a t-shirt, an 'everyday act' (Hartwick 2000 p.1190), has so much power. Similarly to Ian Cook and Sarah Wrathmell, to *defetishise* the *commodity* and untangle the stories behind it.

Plate 2 - me and my t-shirt!
Literature Review

Imagine it was possible to identify, count and learn something about all of those people....What would all these people have to say? About how their lives are affected by what we do in our own. Via those transactions. And how would we respond? But few of us ever get the chance. These connections aren’t routinely made. And that’s essential. For the everyday exploitations of modern capitalism to be hidden from view.

Cook et al 2002 p.1-2

Following a thing...

This research is hugely inspired by the work of Ian Cook (2004) and Sarah Wrathmell (2003) in which they both followed a thing (Marcus 1995 p.91). My thing is a t-shirt. A commodity. No longer simply the ‘economic cell form’ of capitalism (Marx 1979), it is ‘more than just what it is’ (Cook, Evans, Griffiths, Morris, Wrathmell et al. 2004 p.2). My t-shirt has a ‘life’ (Watts 1999 p.309).

Originally termed by Marx (1979), commodity fetishism is the principal theoretical concept behind this research. The fetish is the value that people ascribe to a commodity, yet this is artificially imposed, masking the true identity of the object and the true story behind it (Hager Cohen 1997). My t-shirt may be seen as a ‘trivial thing’ (Marx 1979), a garment to keep me warm, to cover my body, £3.99, three hundred and ninety nine pence. But it has a story. We need to ‘lift the veil’ (Harvey 1990 p.423). As geographers we have ‘catalogued the world in various styles; the point, however is to re-connect it’ (Hartwick 2000 p.1190) and in reconnecting move the stories from ‘invisible to real and tangible
tales’ (Newberry 2005 p.3). ‘We’re living in a world of connections – and it matters which ones get made’ (Angus et al 2001 p.198).

As geographers, academics, researchers, students, and parents we are connected to people in distant places, on a daily basis, through consumption.

Hartwick 2000 p.1178

The commodity chain is one ‘analytical device’ (Hartwick 2000 p.1182) for making these connections, although it is ‘not fully able to theorize the fashion system’ (Crewe 2004 p.196). The fashion industry is often described as a buyer-driven chain. But there is a problem; this theory fails to take account of chains where there may be a number of drivers. Actor Network Theory has been used to decipher the stories behind many commodities, although often neglecting to listen to the producers voices (Hartwick 2000). Something I hope to improve on. The ‘transnational advocacy network’ (Keck and Sikkink 1999) is an increasingly popular technique for achieving the same results, yet at the ‘core of the relationship is information exchange’ (ibid p.89).

‘Frivolous, fleeting and superficially concerned with appearance’?

(Jagose 2003 p.140)

A perfect description of clothes, but it is for this reason I chose my t-shirt.

Clothing is big business. The world’s consumers spent US$1 trillion on clothes in 2000 (Yimprasert and Hveem 2005). Marx’s prediction that sewing-machines, with progressive forces, would do away with the meaningless notions of fashion has not happened; they are still the primary piece of technology of the garment industry (Fine and Leopold 1993). Fashion links nations (Entwistle 2000) although the literature often neglects to connect that on production with consumption (Fine and Leopold 1993). And this is imperative as the ‘body of
the wearer contrasts strongly with the body of the worker’ (Entwistle 2000 p.209).

*Multisitedness* (Marcus 1998)

Now something of a ‘buzzword’ (Hage 2005 p.464) within ethnographies, research carried out in just two or three sites can be termed ‘multi-sited’ (ibid). As Marcus says ‘the justification for such research seems plain – after all, we live in a world of exiles and hybrids, transnational flows, post-pluralist partialities’ (1998 p.52 cited in Faubion 2001). ‘The movement among sites (and levels of society) lends a character of activism to such an investigation’ (Marcus 1995 p.113), particularly as you immerse yourself in the culture whilst conducting research.

**Oh No!**

During my research, ‘The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy’ (Rivoli 2005) was published! Sounds similar? In many ways it is. It also traces a t-shirt, but follows it through China’s economy, a major player in the garment industry, but with significant differences to Cambodia which I will explore later. Rivoli’s book is written from an economist’s perspective, which will provide a useful foundation for my research. Mine, however, will be stylistically informal, often resembling a journal. I deny this ‘definitive text’ (Cook & Crang forthcoming p.1) to lose its ‘life energy’ (Blumenthal 1999 p.377). I hope to develop a voice that is mine, rather than the ‘anonymous, homogenised academic voice that is part of many academic writers’ (Cook 2001).
Is my approach ‘intellectually empty’? (Rivoli 2005 p.ix)

This story ‘cannot only reveal a life but illuminate the bigger world that formed the life’ (ibid). All descriptions use concepts, structured by theoretical assumptions, therefore description is in itself theoretical (Hammersley 1995). It will also be post-disciplinary, encompassing many concepts, not merely following ideas ‘as far as the border of their discipline’ (Sayer 1999 p.5). It will read between the lines, between the threads, into the lives of the people that have played a part in the life of this t-shirt.
'Real commitment or...merely public relations exercises'? (Hale 2000 p.349)
Growing media exposure and pressure from NGO's has pushed corporations to reconsider the way they do business. They now often employ Codes of Conduct to overcome the 'contradiction between pronouncement and practice' (Hale 2000 p.349), the most comprehensive ones based on the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) template (ILO 2006a). Ensuring ethical labour standards are enforced globally is a 'mammoth task' (Rayner 2002 p.12), partly because of the differences in culture and legislation between countries (Adams 2002).

H&M or Hennes and Mauritz was established in Sweden in 1947. It now operates in 22 countries, with around 1193 stores worldwide (H&M 2005b). They are well and truly part of the 'discount' sector, offering some of the cheapest, fashionable clothing. This sector grew by 17% in 1999, whilst the clothing market as a whole only grew by 0.8% (Crewe 2004).

H&M's Code of Conduct (figure 3) 'requires all suppliers to comply with the legislation of the country in question'.

<table>
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<th>Cambodian Garment Industry Law</th>
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<td>* US$45 per month, with an additional $5 per month for turning up every day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* 48 hour week, based on 6 8-hour days, with no more than 2 hours overtime each day.</td>
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<td>* Overtime rates of 150% for regular overtime, and 200% on Sundays.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* 18 days annual leave a year, 25 public holidays and 7 days special leave for family reasons.</td>
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<td>* 90 days unpaid maternity leave</td>
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<td>* Unpaid sick leave, although the Ministry of Commerce recommends a paid leave system.</td>
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<td>* Compensation and payment for work-related accidents and injuries.</td>
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(Source: ILO 2006a)
FACTS FROM H&M
CODE OF CONDUCT

H&M does not own any factories of its own. Instead H&M buys all its clothes from suppliers, primarily in Asia and Europe. To clarify H&M's attitude to social responsibility to its suppliers, its staff and other interested parties H&M has drawn up a Code of Conduct. The Code of Conduct is an agreement that all H&M suppliers must sign and abide by. Among other things, the Code of Conduct contains the requirements that H&M sets of good working conditions in its suppliers’ factories. The suppliers are also responsible for their subcontractors abiding by H&M’s Code of Conduct.

H&M's Code of Conduct was adopted in 1997 and is used in all countries in which H&M has suppliers. The Code of Conduct requires all suppliers to comply with the legislation of the country in question in every area of their business. In addition, H&M sets requirements and has restrictions that may be stricter than the national laws. H&M’s Code of Conduct consists of eight sections:


If suppliers do not meet all the requirements at the outset they must undertake to carry out the improvements demanded by H&M. However, there are certain basic requirements that must be met in order for H&M to approve a supplier in the first place. These basic requirements include paying at least the minimum wage, not employing child labour, allowing trade unions and providing safe buildings and premises. In the cooperation agreement the supplier also agrees to H&M carrying out regular factory audits, both announced and unannounced. H&M also audits their subcontractors’ factories.

Monitoring and enforcement
To ensure that promised improvements really are implemented and that there are no infringements of the Code of Conduct, H&M has around 30 Code of Conduct auditors who repeatedly audit our suppliers. The auditors work at one of H&M’s production offices. Each year the Code of Conduct auditors carry out around 2,000 audits of suppliers’ premises. At each check the auditor goes through a list of over 100 different points. Interviews are carried out with the company management and in certain cases also with employees, all the factory areas are audited and documentation such as payrolls and time cards are checked. Once an audit has been carried out a report is compiled for the supplier specifying any comments and improvements needed. The report is also sent to the head office in Sweden for filing. Together with the supplier, the auditor sets a date by which the improvements have been implemented.

Suppliers are given the opportunity to attend workshops organised by H&M in order to create a deeper understanding of the Code of Conduct and to inspire them to develop their own business further. Since the Code of Conduct was introduced a number of concrete improvements have been made. In particular, considerable progress has been made towards a better working environment, improved fire safety and clearer documentation in suppliers’ businesses. Pay, overtime remuneration and acceptable working hours are other areas that have been improved radically for the factory workers. H&M endeavours to establish long-term relationship with all its suppliers – relationships built on cooperation and trust.

Figure 3 - H&M Code of Conduct
'H&M does not own any factories of its own', reducing their accountability in many ways. The garment industry has seen a growing shift towards international subcontracting, increasing the nature of flexibility, competition and insecurity, creating downward pressure on working conditions (Hale 2000). The mechanics of subcontracting are the only way to understand how 'supposedly law abiding' companies could resort to 'nineteenth century levels of exploitation' (Klein 2001 p.212).

H&M's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Report (H&M 2004) examines the seven areas and their monitoring process in more depth. They appear to deserve recognition for their devotion to ethical practices. Yet their website states, 'We are proud of what we have accomplished so far. However, we have so far developed few indicators to verify our achievements' (H&M 2005c). Strange. One of their values; 'We believe in people' (H&M. 2005a). What?! Instead of aliens?! Even stranger.

The real question that needs to be considered is whether Codes of Conduct are appropriate instruments for addressing labour standards. Is it feasible that a generic code can apply to employees worldwide? If so, how could this ever be achieved? We cannot be sure whether workers or companies' reputations will gain most from this exercise (Hale 2000 p.354).

In a recent Ethical Consumer report (Rayner 2002) H&M received the bottom rating for oppressive regimes and workers rights and the middle rating for their Code of Conduct (ibid). Their factory practices have previously received criticism. Workers as young as sixteen were recently found working until 11pm every night, for illegal wages in Bangkok (Lotta Film 2003), and suppliers were found working over fifty hours per week in dangerous factory environments in India (Rayner 2002). H&M's work with the NGO, Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) and their CSR Report (H&M 2004) does suggest they are trying to
improve their working practices through developing a successful monitoring process (Get Ethical 2003).

‘Voluntary work is nothing new’ (H&M 2005d)
H&M has two joint projects with UNICEF based in Cambodia, both being ‘priority’. A Girls’ Education Project and a project to prevent the spread of HIV among young people in Cambodia (ibid). An area I hope to investigate in this research.
My T-shirt’s Birthplace

Cambodia has a population of over thirteen million, with at least half the population under eighteen (ILO 2006b). It covers 181,035 sq km (Ray 2002) and is divided into twenty Provinces (figure 4).

![Map of Cambodia](image)

Figure 4 - Map of Cambodia

Cambodia suffered many decades of bloody civil war when an estimated three million people died between 1975 and 1979 (Sim 2004). As a result Cambodia’s economy was severely traumatised. For many years rubber was the primary export until supplies dwindled (ibid). In recent years, however, Cambodia’s garment industry has grown from nothing in 1994, to now accounting for 97% of exports (Hveem and Yimprasert 2005).
**Most Favoured Nation (MFN)**

This growth was largely owing to Cambodia being awarded MFN trading status in 1999 by the US, allowing an increase of quota exports each year in return for proof of an increase in working conditions. Exports to the US rose from US$0.06 million in 1995 to US$953.3 million in 2002 (Grumiau 2004). ILO was responsible for the monitoring process (ILO 2006c).

**The Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA)**

Cambodia’s garment industry also benefited from the MFA. Originally set up by developed countries in 1974 as a *temporary* agreement controlling quotas of textiles and clothing globally. These quotas were a disadvantage for many countries but meant that the industry spread, to Cambodia! (Garwood 2005). China or Indonesia, for example, might have been able to produce and export garments cheaper than Cambodia but the tariffs prevented them from increasing their exports (ibid). Industrialised countries agreed to phase out the MFA quotas between 1995 and 2005 through the *Agreement on Textiles and Clothing* (ATC) (DFID 2005). However, western governments found ways of delaying this, with 80% of tariffs still intact by the end of 2004, meaning that 2005 would come as a shock to many economies (Garwood 2005).

**Cambodia’s Accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO)**

In advance of these changes, Cambodia joined the WTO, only the second less-developed country to do so through the full working party negotiation process (WTO 2004). But this has serious implications. WTO rules are predominantly written by developed countries for their own interests, insisting that they cannot protect and assist their vulnerable traders. Yet no country in the world has ever successfully developed economically without offering this protection. All rich
countries still use these tools. Trade between rich countries is also now close to tariff-free, whilst imports from poor countries face tariff barriers because of the heavy reliance of poor countries on textiles and clothing exports. Gresser estimates that US tariffs exceeding 15% are virtually never applied to their imports from Germany, Norway and Japan, but are applied to almost half of the primary imports from Bangladesh, Mongolia, and Cambodia (Rivoli 2005). ‘Inequality is now beyond a scandal’ (Drewry et al 2002 p.2) and in order for this to improve many suggest that the poorest need to be given extra help.

**Why did Cambodia join the WTO then?**

Well it’s a bit like a bad job is better than no job at all (Drewry et al 2002). There is also lots of pressure from other international organisations and developed countries to do so and WTO membership sends a positive message to international traders. They also tend to feel that they would be in a worse position if they tried to negotiate trade agreements without the WTO (ibid).

**A Turbulent Time...**

So Cambodia’s market share is determined by competitiveness rather than quotas which had given it the chance to compete in the first place (DFID 2005). Even before the change hit, its garment industry had felt the 2001 International slowdown, with many factories working irregularly meaning that many faced unemployment (Garwood 2005). It is possible that most of the investment that entered Cambodia so quickly because of the garment industry is going to flow out just as rapidly. Although there is hope. The US and EU reinforced some categories of China’s quotas in 2005 (Economist 2005) of which 40% of Cambodia’s production fit into these categories (ILO 2006d).
Methodology

'Like most ethnographers, I am fascinated by the different, the exotic, by the ways in which living with and studying an alien people could stretch my sense of what it means to be human'

Moerman 1988 p.3

Ethnography, my primary research method, is a 'written representation of a culture' (van Maanen 1988 p.1). It is 'sticky' (van Maanen 1988 p.3). Seen as controversial by many. Yet 'in many respects ethnography is the most basic form of social research' (Hammersley 1995), enabling me 'to understand parts of the world as they are experienced and understood in the everyday lives of people who actually 'live them out' (Cook and Crang 1995 p.4).

How am I going to do this?!

Cook and Crang stress the importance of 'casting the net' (1995 p.13) at an early stage, of contacting people, places and organisations that may be able to help. Initially, I didn't have any contacts, unlike Wrathmell (2003), so it was particularly important to start early. I contacted countless NGOs with an interest in the garment industry, although e-mail proved slightly unreliable to say the least! This was particularly so with those in Cambodia; I only organised one meeting before leaving England. And a random link through SPEAK, the campaigning group in England that had put me in contact with Dan, who had carried out research into the Cambodian garment industry (Radice 2005). I found a spider-diagram (figure 5) useful in the preliminary stages to easily see my progression and contacts I had made.
**Participant Observation** is the most popular means of ethnographic research. It involves the researcher deliberately moving between participating and observing a community. Cook describes it as a three-stage process, in which you first gain access, then live or work among the people, and lastly make sense of your findings (1997). Whilst in Cambodia I most frequently took on the role of observer as participant (Junker 1960 cited in Cloke et al 2004). The complexities of the garment industry often meant that I had to undertake research from more of an outsider’s point-of-view.

**In-depth interviews** were used when I met with NGO employees. They were useful due to the multi-sited nature of this research (Marcus 1998) and also as time was limited. Semi-structured interviews with planned themes were employed, but left open to deviation. A conversational approach encouraged a non-threatening environment, giving participants the chance to open up, as Webb and Webb state (1932 cited in Cloke et al 2004) interviewing can be seen as a ‘conversation with a purpose’.

**Focus Groups**

I had planned to interview the garment workers I met, but they turned rather more into focus groups. Being a foreigner in Cambodia meant that I attracted lots of attention! This meant that my role changed to that of group moderator to an extent. Using focus groups as a research method was also useful due to time limitations (Burgess 1996).

I had planned to tape both the interviews and focus groups held, but in reality this could not always happen. Due to the sensitivity of the issues being discussed, producing a tape-recorder may have presented a ‘psychological barrier’ (Cloke et al 2004 p.152). It could have also acted as another means of furthering the divide between the ‘white westerner’ and the Cambodian. This decision was also taken with advice from the NGOs I was working closely with.
My research diary was therefore crucial, enabling me not just to record academic readings, but also my thoughts and feelings whilst in ‘the field’ (Wittel 2000). ‘Field-noting’ or ‘scratch notes’ (Burgess 2003), ethnography’s principal form of ‘data’ (Cloke et al 2004) were continuously used to provide triggers. It was essential to debrief as soon as I left ‘the field’ to aid with the ‘ongoing sense-making process’ (Cloke et al 2004 p.197).

Photographs
Visual images are an ‘integral part’ by which we communicate (Cloke et al 2004). You know the saying... ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’. Consequently photographs will play a key part in my research, enhancing the story and the reader’s sense of involvement.

Ethics
Ethical considerations must be made when undertaking research, even more so when studying ‘the other’ (Hoggart et al 2002 cited in Cloke et al 2004). I ensured all participants gave their informed consent and also gave opportunities for things said privately not to be included. As a result some of the research I undertook could not be included in this dissertation. At many points during my research I was particularly worried of highlighting harmful working conditions which could potentially have a negative impact on the ‘socially responsible’ reputation of Cambodia’s garment industry. Since the US and EU reimposed many quotas on Chinese exports this has reduced, although is still a concern.

Secondary Research
Both academic literature and that produced by NGOs was useful to gain a fuller understanding of the garment industry and the economic stuff, but also in instances to support my research.
Research abroad posed many considerations; interpreters, visas, vaccinations, insurance, and equipment needed, such as my digital camera and tape recorder. In a country such as Cambodia, which is so different to England there were many cultural practices I needed to remember largely because of Buddhism, for example I had to take off my shoes before entering someone’s home, that my shoulders and legs needed to be covered, to never ‘lose face’ or touch anyone’s head as it is considered holy, and remembering to use both hands when passing items, as the left hand is used for bathroom ablutions! Could I ever remember all these?!

**Methodological Limitations**

Bearing in mind my worries before going to Cambodia, things went relatively smoothly! NGO employees often had reasonable English, so I could converse easily, and they could translate when talking to Cambodians. Most of the time these interpreters were male and I was talking to females, which could have caused limitations in terms of what they told me. It may have proved more successful if I had been fluent in Khmer!

As with being in any foreign country, I needed to be aware of my safety. Visiting and interviewing people alone, was not always a good idea. So when possible, Louise, my travelling companion accompanied me. Although this may have led to participants feeling intimidated, at times I felt it was necessary. I was aware that being young, white and female could have negative implications. Although it may actually have worked in my favour at times, some doors opening more readily than others! (Golde 1970 et al cited in van Maanen 1988).

Whilst Rivoli managed to travel across three continents with the travels of her t-shirt (2005), I will be unable to carry out my research to this extent. I was only able to visit places in the UK and Cambodia, although this did not stop me from considering others.
My research method was often random, confused, jumbled up. Largely because I had committed to working at the orphanage from eight till five, Monday to Friday. Although it was possible for me to ask for some time off, I felt rude and as though I was letting them down if I did. Volunteering was after all my primary reason for being there, but then this was my dissertation, vital for my degree. A dilemma! Many offices opened at nine and shut at five, so this was not helpful! I managed to squeeze in visits to places after lunch. (The time that I would normally rest as it was extremely hot, and looking after thirty children was tiring work!) This proved difficult though as many offices closed for a break. But I did my best, often arranging to meet people outside of office hours. Although my volunteering put very heavy time restraints on my research it provided me with a great deal more knowledge of Cambodian life, and acted as a means of comparison. As ethnography ‘carries quite serious intellectual and moral responsibilities’ (van Maanen 1988 p.1); I believe that what could potentially be seen as a limitation actually strengthened my research.

Reflection!
My journey wasn't easy. I didn't simply trace the journey of my t-shirt, like a piece of thread, back from the shop I bought it in, to the factory it was made in. In fact I never really made it. I felt close at times, but I question, as I bet you will, whether I was anywhere near where my t-shirt had been at all. It has, if you like, turned into the tale of the hidden t-shirt. But bear with me. That is all part of this story. As I hope you will see.²

² You may expect to see Section A references here. To prevent an interruption, they are at the end.
301B

Name: Helen Clare

Registration No: 537687
Analysis
"The Big Shop"

I return to the H&M store in Birmingham that I bought my t-shirt from a year ago. The Bullring, a flashy new development, where the store looks at home...

Plate 3 – H&M, the Bullring, Birmingham

Once you enter you are surrounded by a sea of clothes; piles and piles of them everywhere...

Plate 4 – clothes!
I consider my t-shirt's life here. It will have been touched by many hands. Someone will have unpacked it. Hung it on the rails. Others may have considered buying it. Then I came along, exchanged £3.99 for it, and now I am the owner! The end of my t-shirt’s journey. For now at least.

I find two shop assistants, let’s call them Jim and Sarah, at the changing room entrance, tending to unwanted clothes, unlike my t-shirt! Using Hartwick’s recommendation that as consumers we should ‘learn to deconstruct the disconnected images that bombard them by reconnecting with material realities’ (2000 p.1183) I approach them, feeling slightly nervous (and a tad random to say the least!).

Me - “Do you ever think about where these clothes come from?”
Jim - “No…”
Sarah - “Umm…no…no I don’t”
Jim - “They’re made in poor countries aren’t they!”

They both stuttered, looking slightly baffled. It seems to be something they have not considered before. Until prompted. Jim is right to an extent, clothes very often are made in poor countries, for many intricate, knotted, tangled … ‘complicated’ reasons, you may say. These workers at H&M must spend many hours each week handling these clothes, made all over the world, in Cyprus, Turkey, China, Bangladesh…Cambodia, and they often never give a second thought to where they have come from. But then again, I wonder, how many of us do?

Back at H&M another member of staff, let’s say Ralf, has come to join us.

Ralf - “What’s this about? (pause) What are you asking?”
Me - “Do you ever think about where these clothes come from?”
Ralf - “Yeah I do. They’re often made by people that get paid about £2
a week. It’s terrible. Poverty’s a big issue at the moment.”

I explain my research; my quest. Jim looks slightly perplexed, whilst Ralf seems interested...I feel hopeful.

I arrange to come back at lunchtime to speak to the manager. I return to find Jim in the same place. A look of what may be dread appears on his face! He uses the internal phone to call someone. He explains, “there is a student here, following a t-shirt back to...where is it again?” Cambodia! I silently scream! “You speak to her” he says.

It’s Julia, the manager! I speak to her over the phone from the changing rooms. I never do actually get to meet her. A ‘Brummie’ accent explains my t-shirt’s likely journey....

“It’s produced in the country, so Cambodia, for example, but H&M doesn’t own any of the factories, they’re sort of, contracted out. All produce is then sent to Hamburg where it’s divided into the country it’s going to be sent to. It arrives in England, in Wembley, at the Distribution Centre and is then divided up into which store it will go to depending on the stores turnover.”

Julia’s not sure anyone else can help me further with my research, even anyone in this country.

When I come off the phone Jim and Ralf are interested in what she had said. I relay the information. Jim remarks “that’s cool isn’t it”. ‘Cool’... ‘cool’?! Do you think their eyes opened? Maybe they blinked?
My t-shirt has already touched many hands…Hamburg, Wembley, Birmingham and then mine.

And so from here, I prepare to leave for Cambodia, the ‘poor’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘unstable’, ‘dangerous’, ‘corrupt’ country. What was I letting myself in for?! I’ll be fine (I told myself reassuringly).
Just seen an elephant walking down the street!
(Phnom Penh has its very own elephant that goes for a daily walk!)

So I arrived in Phnom Penh, having had an adventurous four weeks including an unfortunate encounter with an angry dog in Vietnam, a missed flight from Kuala Lumpur to Hanoi and some seriously weird side-effects to malaria tablets! But it was time once again, to get on the tail of my shirt's journey.

I went to visit Chey Vatana, the Assistant Manager of a government funded training centre. It was more difficult than I could have ever imagined finding somewhere in Phnom Penh with its completely illogical road numbering system!

...Eventually I find Street 67, just off Phsar Thmeiy (Central Market), between Streets 63 and 81.
Cambodia Garment Training Centre (CGTC)

CGTC has a small façade, part of a terrace that doesn't really stand out, sandwiched between two very ordinary looking offices. I let myself in. It is cold, well freezing actually! Why can't my guesthouse have air conditioning like this? A guard approaches me and I try to explain I'm here to see Chey Vatana. After some pronunciation difficulties, he understands and disappears. I add my shoes to the heap by the door. The guard reappears accompanied by Chey.

![Figure 7 - The man himself, Chey](image)

He introduces himself and tells me it's fine to wear my shoes. One rule for Cambodians, another for foreigners. A recurring theme, usually with prices! I follow Chey along the corridor to his office, which is even colder! He tells me how excited he was to receive an e-mail from England and asks how I am finding Cambodia. I say how much I like it, and that the people seem lovely... "you must be careful", he tells me. If I have any problems I must contact him.
Chey stresses the importance of the garment industry for Cambodia, to me. It employs 260,000 workers with 212 factories. Since the quotas finished, most of Cambodia's produce goes to the EU. Whilst the US now favours China over other South-East Asian countries, he tells me. Unfortunately Cambodia can't make the fabric as it doesn't grow cotton, it mostly comes from China, Malaysia, Hong Kong or Singapore. "The big shop" contracts to the factory directly, or its head office and then they distribute.

CGTC offers four types of training:-

1. *Supervisor Training Course* — for people who have a job in a garment factory already, but this assists foreign leaders teaching all-round factory management skills.

2. *Quality Control Training Course* — an understanding of quality management and how to solve problems.

3. *Maintenance Course* — Comprehensive understanding for the maintenance of factories. Although there is no instructor as yet!

4. *Sewing Operator Beginner Course* — two week course for "the people who know anything — no skills, no knowledge of government and textiles".

Garment workers are paid US$45 per month. Extras include over-time and holiday pay. Pay is like commission; the more they work, the more they get paid...

A huge majority of the workers travel from the provinces to Phnom Penh to find work. Chey mentions problems that are arising as Cambodians living in provinces along the Thai border will go to Thailand to seek work, rather than travelling to Phnom Penh, so they are losing potential workers. Chey hopes that CGTC can expand to more places throughout Cambodia, as well as expanding the services that they offer. His optimism is endearing. He wants to find out about my travels. He tells me that he wants to travel everywhere! He's only
visited Bangkok. Even this is a rarity among Cambodians I later realise. The living standards and salaries in Cambodia are too low and he would really like to work elsewhere.

Chey teaches the Sewing Operator Beginner Course, the one for people who “know anything”. Feeling confident, I ask… “would it be possible for me to visit when the training is taking place?” …. “of course, you can do everything”…

Chey was ready to enrol me on the whole course! Unfortunately I did not have time to do that, due to the thirty under four year olds that needed my attention! But I did return for an afternoon.
Do I "know anything"?

I had been looking forward to returning to CGTC! Although I did question whether it was worthwhile. Every spare minute I had and could be spent on t-shirt business, had to be constructive!

...This time, Chey can not be here as he was attending a meeting. Neav, the Administrative Director is in his place. He comes out to the reception, "How do you do?" he says! Chey had told him I’d be coming. He asks what I would like to do this afternoon. I explain that it would be great to see the training, maybe take some photographs, and possibly talk to a couple of the trainees if they don’t mind. "Yes, yes...no problem at all....anything that you want." Wow! That was easy! We enter the room where there are 31 people, 2 of which are male, all sitting behind their sewing machines vehemently concentrating. None of them look up or acknowledge me or Neav. They continue sewing. The atmosphere feels slightly cold, tense maybe. Similar to a factory I wonder?

Plate 5 - the trainees!
Neav walks me to the front of the room, where I stand in front of the trainees with a microphone. It makes me feel peculiarly important, giving me some sort of superiority that I don’t feel I deserve. Neav talks to the trainees. I say talk although it is more like shouting. He seems a friendly chirpy guy, but his manner is slightly abrupt and there is something that makes me feel slightly uneasy in his company. Maybe this is just compared to the people I know at the orphanage. Although I’m not sure. It’s just not quite right. Neav hands the microphone to me, and asks if there’s anything I would like to say. I say that I am a student from England studying the garment industry of Cambodia, but moreover trying to trace the journey of this t-shirt, with a ‘Made in Cambodia’ label, which I hold up. I ask if I could talk to some of them, but only if they want to. I didn’t want them to feel pressurised into it. This was a daunting experience for me, never mind them.

Neav shouts at them to continue whilst he explains more about the training to me. Everyone in Cambodia must undertake training before they can work in any garment factory, he tells me. GMAC are essential in order for the running of CGTC as they fund and control the project. CGTC charge just US$5 per person for the course, but this “obviously doesn’t cover costs”. They “accept everyone, people with no education, no options, it provides them with hope”. CGTC and GMAC know of all the factories in Cambodia and which ones need workers. “99% of them will get jobs”.

During the training, they first have to master sewing in a straight line. They then move onto right angles, the more difficult maze-like right angles, and finally, the most difficult, curves (plate 6).
Plate 6 – Training materials

As we are walking around the room looking at photographs on the wall of the other training courses, I point out a Norway Save the Children calendar (plate 7). Neav explains they are key funders of CGTC, “we are very grateful to them”. I tell Neav that I volunteer for a Save the Children project working with unaccompanied refugee children back in Birmingham. “I thank you, as a Cambodian” he simply says. Maybe it’s not just this t-shirt that could link the lives of me and the people of Cambodia.
Strangely in an industry where 90% are women (Grumiaux 2004) I ended up speaking to quite a few men along my journey! Um (plate 8) was one of the trainees on this course. He was twenty-two years old and used to live in Svay Rieng Province, on the Vietnamese border, which is about 120km away from Phnom Penh. In fact, I probably went through Svay Rieng when I was travelling from Vietnam to Cambodia. Before moving to Phnom Penh he used to stay at home all the time, but decided to follow in his brothers footsteps and move to Phnom Penh to find work in the garment industry. He is enjoying the course! Um didn’t have any thoughts on my research. Neav explains to me that when he asks this he first has to explain that I am from the other side of the world, they
cannot comprehend this; the majority of these people have had no education he says.

Pech (plate 9) was from Takeo province near the Vietnam border, and was just living with her family before moving to Phnom Penh. She appeared to be very scared of talking to me, as she sat hunched over her sewing machine. This was not helped by Neav's abrupt manner. Pech had heard about the course from a previous student. After the course she believes that her life will be better in Phnom Penh. Neav again explains that I'm from England. Does she find my research strange? No, "maybe you just want to find out more about how Cambodian people work".
At the end of speaking to her, I was quite moved. I felt that there was so much she wanted to say, but didn't have the confidence and couldn't as we were speaking through Neav. I asked Neav how to say good luck in Khmer - "Sum nang laore". "Sum nang laore" I say to Pech. He shouted to the whole class, "See! You have to be independent and just go out there and get what you want. Helen has come all the way from England and asks how to say good luck in Khmer! She shows initiative!" Not quite the quiet message of thanks and good luck that I wanted to give her.
After today, I felt kind of dejected with my research. I didn’t seem to be getting anywhere. None of this related to my t-shirt. I felt so far from its journey.

Friday 22nd July
Bit of a depressing day. Don't feel needed at orphanage. Loads of dissertation stuff that I need to do – Aargh! No more to say.

Figure 8 – Diary Entry

On reflection, I think I had things out of perspective. The person that actually produced my t-shirt will have undergone training, similar to this. And although at the time I didn't realise it, other things linked me to Cambodia and it's people. I also couldn’t understand why the people I spoke to didn’t find it weird that I had brought this t-shirt, originally made in Cambodia back to Cambodia, returning to its birthplace! Instead they appeared to take it all in their stride. Like it was normal. What was I imagining would happen? If only I could properly understand what was going on, the warp and weft of the garment industry, maybe I would then understand. At this point I think I was quite naïve or maybe just an idealist.
Their usual non-email-replying selves!

Today I went in search of the Cambodia Labour Organisation (CLO). I once again spent ages trying to find the office! It was late in the afternoon, and the daily torrential downpour, due to monsoon season had hit Phnom Penh again...

I eventually find their office set back from the street, with a large courtyard in front, absolutely teeming with parked motos. The building is considerably larger than that of CGTC and is equally dark and slightly eerie. I approach the front desk where there are two men and a lady chatting. I never knew in situations like this whether they would understand English. Luckily they did! I explain my random link to CLO through SPEAK. They remembered Dan! A tall Cambodian man directs me to the office. His name, Tola. His English was brilliant with a tinge of Irish to it, because of his teacher! We spend a long time chatting. He tells me more about the garment industry of Cambodia, and I tell him about my research. He offers to help me in any way that he can. And not just with my research; if I have any problems in Cambodia I only have to call him. A very friendly guy. Just what Chey had said to me. Slightly odd. Probably a mixture of being a female foreigner, but also the corruption of Cambodia, which although I encountered, I did not seem to be as worried about as the Cambodians!

I explain my research so far to Tola. He knows of Chey and has met him a couple of times but he comments that CGTC cannot provide sufficient training places for the vast number of workers in the industry. He’s also never heard of them providing training before?! He comments that most of the factories do belong to GMAC although there are some that don’t, such as homeworkers and small factories producing solely for Cambodia.
CLO aim to provide communication between the workers and management through monitoring. They interview workers of a particular factory about the working conditions, hours they work, pay and so on, write a report on their findings, feedback to management and give them one month to make any necessary changes. If after this time the changes have not been made then campaigns happen, often gaining the support of other NGOs such as CCC, Labour behind the Label and the Thai Labour Campaign. CLO are increasingly trying to work in conjunction with the government; their dream being to ‘obtain social justice, and thereby enjoy a peaceful and prosperous Cambodia’ (CLO 2005).

CLO help to organise workers into Unions (figure 9) and develop workers’ knowledge and capacity as union leaders. They also aim to educate workers, particularly women and children about the law, as “it is for them the most”.

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<th>Structure of Unions</th>
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<td>Confederation</td>
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<td>Union</td>
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Types of unions...

**Management and Government.** These are both not good, as they only have their best interests at heart. They don’t benefit the workers. Government and management want to eliminate worker unions and create their ‘yellow unions’.  

**Workers.** These can educate and train the workers. These are good because workers fully understand their rules. Workers’ unions can often fight against each other. Management and government are happy to see this as it means there is not one strong voice.

Figure 9 – Structure of Unions
I then explain to Tola that my t-shirt is from H&M, a shop in England, and that I would like to get as close to someone that produced it as possible. He says he has heard of them, but that’s as far as it goes. He’s not sure where they produce... “on National Road #4” (only the major industrial garment-producing area in Phnom Penh!) He says he will try to find out. And that he can organise for me to meet with some garment workers! Wow!! I am excited. Tola will try for them to be ones that produce for H&M.

Tola went on to tell me about some of the problems garment workers face, including forced overtime, wages and problems with management, who are largely Chinese but can often be Korean, Singaporean and American. They have “very strong behaviour”, often hitting workers.

The beginning probationary wage for garment workers is US$40 per month, which lasts for three months. Not the legal minimum, US$45 per month, Chey told me of. If their performance is good then their pay will increase to US$45 per month. Wages are a great area of concern for CLO.

There are also problems with the perception of Khmer women working in the garment industry. Tola explained how the majority of these women leave home in the provinces and move to the city. One serious problem is the money needed for this move. Their families often borrow money to fund this move, which has a high interest rate attached to it. Once in Phnom Penh “the unofficial sewing training is too expensive and can last for one, two or three days. They go to factories, look for job announcements, take the test, and if they fail, they have no money and nowhere to live. They go to prostitution, trafficking or work as a beer girl” (wearing provocative clothes to advertise beer).

Back home, their family’s agricultural land has been sold in order to pay for them to move to the city. They can’t go back to the province with no money and
nothing to show, so they have to stay and try to make things work in Phnom Penh. They have to find money to send home to their families, as well as money for living. These women are seen as ‘bad’ and ‘loose’ as society believes that young girls should not live away from their families. Young men would never dream of marrying them although the women are proud of their independence (USAID 2003).

Companies such as H&M have a Code of Conduct, but they are just to look good and protect themselves. “As soon as a big order comes in the Code of Conduct goes out the window”. The factory is supposed to follow this, but do they?!

Tola comments that there could so easily be a fair answer to all these problems. I agree. The workers often don’t know who the buyer is or who they are producing for. Identifying the buyer is very important, mainly so that it can help with the issues that are there. This encouraged me immensely. Although I’m not quite the “buyer” in terms of “the big shop”, I am a consumer, and a “buyer” in one sense. I was now even more excited about identifying the workers.

So Tola and I organised to meet up the following Sunday on his day off, once I had returned from my weekend in Siem Reap, visiting Angkor Wat.

I left feeling elated at the prospect of meeting the garment workers. I thought that I had made it. I thought Tola could know everything; that he could easily organise for me to visit garment workers that produced for H&M. I should have listened when Chey and Tola had told me it was “complicated”. I should have also taken the hint when Tola told me about his fears of being arrested, as factory management are often unhappy with CLO’s work.
I've made it! Well nearly. Not quite...

It's early afternoon as we hurtle down National Road #4, the rain pouring down, a particularly wet day, one of the wettest I experienced in Cambodia, absurd considering it was monsoon season. All three of us, Louise, Tola and I, squashed onto the moto, in ponchos – the Cambodian equivalent of those at Alton Towers, although they cost just 1000 riel, 15 pence. Tola pointed out factories along the main road, huge white warehouse-type buildings, usually with the name of the factory emblazoned across the side, in Khmer, Chinese or English. He also pointed out people carrying huge bundles of clothing on the back of their motos. He explained that factories have thrown them away and people root through the bins, to make them into doormats and sell on. I am still desperate to find out if the people we are going to visit produce for H&M... Tola doesn't think so... feeling quite disappointed; we turn into the road shown below...

Plate 10 - the road leading to the compound
...and shortly arrive at the compound...

Plate 11 – view into compound

We drive through the gate on Tola’s moto and dismount outside one of the doors. Tola greets the lady like a long lost friend. We take off our flip-flops, and leave them outside in the courtyard. I now have very muddy feet! Tola introduces Louise and I to Sarom, the owner of the room, a younger teenage girl (her niece), and another young woman, Sreymom. We greet them with the sompiah, pressing our hands together in a prayer like position and bow, saying “chim-rip-sur” – hello in Khmer. Each of the rooms in this compound, of which there are about eight around the courtyard are not more than six by four metres, with three camping-style beds in. My first impressions are how small and dark the room is.
There are no windows, just the door, of which each seems to remain open. The tiled floor stood out the most though. Although I had come to know this was standard, through life at the guesthouse and orphanage, it just seemed to highlight the sense of unhomeliness of the room. The walls were covered in pictures of Asian men and women from magazines, famous soap actors and actresses I later find out.

We all sit cross-legged on the floor and conversation immediately turns to the weather. Some things are uniform across cultures! Tola translates to me that Sarom is very happy as they have not had much rain this year and today's is much needed in the provinces for farming. Sarom had just arrived back in Phnom Penh today after spending a couple of days in the provinces at home with her family and daughter.

Plate 12 – Sreymom, me, Sarom’s niece and Sarom

Sarom was extremely pleased to see Tola. There had been “developments” with her job since he had last seen her. She had been sacked just five days earlier.
Tola translated her story... Originally she had worked at the CCI factory as a worker assistant which had shut as there was not enough work. A common theme since the quotas finished, he tells me. It had since reopened, although she didn't get her job back, as many of her friends had. Coincidentally she was the Union President. She managed to find work at a different factory. She worked there for six months until five days previously. Management told her they had no work, but Sarom had heard that management knew about her being the President at CCI and being the key spokesperson and demonstrator, therefore having "too much knowledge". They are never going to let her find work again. She pleaded with Tola, "please help me".

Sreymom spoke a little English, but was too shy to practice, so Tola translated ... Sreymom had worked at GI factory since 2002. Management had eliminated trade unions, by firing the president and so on; "Sacking workers who are union activists is not uncommon in Cambodia" (Grumiau 2004 p.3). Workers have no option but to join the management union. They have no choice and no voice.

Plate 13 - me and Sreymom
Sreymom recently had time off for sickness and when she returned to work she had to start over as a seasonal worker, receiving the probationary illegal rate of US$40 per month, which she is still earning now, over one year later.

At this point, a man enters the room... Sethung. Tola explains to him what I am doing, he is very intrigued! He tells me a little about himself, that he works for the PG factory and is the vice president of the IFTU – International Free Trade Union at his factory. Similarly to Sarom and Sreymom, he had moved from the provinces to find work in Phnom Penh. Sethung was very opinionated, and keen to get his views across to me, as well as question anything I may know about the garment industry!

Plate 14 - me and Sethung

Tola asks if I have the t-shirt with me. Yes I do. “Show them”, he says. I take it out of my bag. Everyone wanted to have a look at it. They passed it round. Tola
says that they may not know who they are producing for a lot of the time. I
see...my eyes are opening! They don’t recognise the H&M label though.

Sethung leaves the room and comes back with his daughter who must not have
been more than two. She had been running around in the courtyard and was
quite interested by these two white girls with funny coloured yellow hair! He
also had a shirt. He pointed to the label...‘Puritan’. “Do I know it? Is it sold in
England?” He asked me. I didn’t think so, although I admitted I wasn’t the
greatest expert on men’s fashion!

When I returned to England I found links between Puritan and Walmart
(Walmart 2006). The world’s largest retailer (Adams 2002). Knowing that Asda
was the British equivalent, I rang their helpline and enquired about ‘Puritan’. I
was simply told, “We don’t stock everything that Walmart do”. A potential link
to me...although I’m afraid to admit it, I’m somewhat of an Asda clothes fan!
This has kind of turned into the hunt for clothes that Sethung might have
produced! Each time I go to Asda, I keep my eyes peeled for ‘Puritan’ clothing,
and if I found any, I would buy it, rather than boycott them. I would support
Sethung. And Cambodia.

Sethung tells me they are told to hurry up as the customer requires the product.
“Is this true?” he asks. Tola says that it is just bad management, and that the
factories need the profit. They need to produce a huge quantity of products in a
very short time; otherwise they will lose out on profit and the contract. Sethung
asks me if customers in England are forcing the prices of the products to fall. I
tried to explain that it’s not the same as in Cambodia, we don’t barter, but that we
are forcing prices to fall by demanding cheaper products.

Until recently all garment workers had to work seven days a week. They
demonstrated and are now allowed Sundays off. I ask how they spend this time.
“Just rest or stay at home watching television, and sometimes visit family”. I didn’t realise how indebted I should be to these people for giving up their only free day to talk to me.

I ask what their typical day consists of. Sethung works from 7.00am-11.00am and then 12.30pm-4.30pm. Information about overtime is given at 3pm, never in advance. Sreymom comments that if they reject overtime once or twice they are dismissed. Overtime is usually 4.30pm-6.30pm but it can often be until 7am the next morning and sometimes even until 3pm the next day! Outrageous. Louise and I are so shocked. The look we give each other says exactly what we were thinking. Tola is also surprised; he hasn’t heard of this before. Sethung explains that they are not given a finish time, but told to “just keep working”. They are allowed toilet breaks and are given a small rice package to keep them going through the night. That’s generous!

I ask about the factory environment. They tell me that it’s stuffy, noisy and smelly (‘saoi’ in Khmer, a word I learnt from the orphanage, they are impressed!) The factories flood frequently and many worry about electric shocks. There was recently an accident with water coming through a light-switch. There was an explosion, but no-one was seriously injured. Four years ago someone was badly injured though, in this case management paid for their treatment. There are frequently electric shocks, Sreymom has had two and Sethung one. Sethung explains how he used to faint sometimes, but has adjusted now. He said it as though it was normal...we faint occasionally, oh but its ok we’ve adjusted! What?! He tells me that people in the button department “often make holes in their thumbs”...?! A friend of his, whilst cutting prominent pieces, fell asleep and cut into an important piece. He was dismissed. Sethung works in the ironing department, and often burns himself. This is one of my most vivid memories of the whole of this research process; whilst Sethung
explained this, he was smiling....smiling?! I wasn’t. I wanted to cry. But he just seemed to accept it.

If that wasn’t enough, Sethung is only employed on a two month contract. He has to be very careful; if he complains or does not work hard enough his contract will not be renewed. Sethung and his wife, who also works in a garment factory, have no stability. They can’t plan for the future. They can’t send their daughter to school. They simply cannot afford it.

They all left education in order to pursue jobs in the garment sector. Sreymom left when she was sixteen. Sarom when she was eighteen after only three years of education and Sethung at twenty-two when he was in eleventh grade. Sethung earns US$60 per month, US$30 of which goes on the room, electricity and water. Sreymom and Sarom both say how there is no money left once their expenses have been paid. Sarom’s children are with her mum. They go to school in the province, but it is not a good education. She doesn’t get to visit her children very often either. Sreymom can’t afford any kind of education, although she’d like to, but she wouldn’t have time anyway! ILO states that a Cambodian worker needs a salary of $80 per month in order to live in decent conditions and support a family (ILO 2003); A far way from Cambodia’s legal minimum of US$45. Employers are therefore in a powerful position when it comes to asking workers to do overtime. But there is a considerable difference between occasionally agreeing to do overtime and being forced to do it under threat of dismissal (Grumiaux 2004).

I am interested in the training they undertook, especially since I had seen what it may be like at CGTC. Sreymom paid US$10 for her informal training. She failed the first few tests before passing and getting a job. Sarom’s mother had to sell her land in order for her to move. She wasn’t so lucky and paid US$50 for hers.
Sethung asks me about the wage of garment workers in the UK. I explain that people working in the shops selling these clothes would earn about £5-6 per hour (US$9-10). He is outraged. I feel disgusted, enormous guilt and utterly ashamed. I am nearly in tears and can not say anything but “I am sorry”. The wage that Cambodian garment workers get in one day in the UK, these people, that I was talking to, get in one month. I understand that the cost of living differs, but in England most people can afford to buy a chocolate bar when they want to, can nip to the dentist in their lunch-break and plan for the future in some way. Sethung cannot.

Sethung is also taken aback to hear how much we pay for the shirts he makes compared to the wage he gets. I ask Sethung what, if I could, he would like me to say to the people that buy the clothes he makes. He tells me that he is proud that people wear clothing that he has made, but wishes that people paying these expensive prices would think about it. If the cost of just two of the items that they’re making went directly to them each month, then he’d be very happy. What a humble answer to give? He is proud...proud...of us wearing the clothes that he makes. I’m not sure I would feel the same if I was in that position. Would you?

On the way to the compound I had asked Tola if I could buy the workers a present to say thank you for inviting me. He had explained that this wasn’t a done thing in Cambodia! Though it would be nice to buy some fruit maybe. So at this point I suggest maybe we could go to buy some. We all walk to a small stall just outside their compound, on the corner of the street. I wanted to show my gratitude, but also wanted to avoid coming across as the rich westerner, although I think that was inevitable! I was just pleased I could give something as a token of my appreciation. Sarom told me that Durian is a Cambodian delicacy...eugh, I thought! I cannot tell you how disgusting it is; ‘like eating
custard in a sewer' (Greenhouse 2006). But I did buy some (for their
ejoyment!), along with pomelo (for mine!) and logans! Costing all of US$3.
Madness!

On the way back to the compound, Sreymom’s aunt joined us. She was more
confident with her English. We have a bit of a chat. She also worked in a
garment factory until she contracted Typhoid fever. She was allowed one week
off! When she had not recovered in that time, she was forced to resign. She
started telling me of her dreams to open a tailors business...I find it crazy; surely
they would need very little money to set up, little for me, a lifetimes savings for
them. If only I could help.

Plate 15 - Eating fruit!

More people had come to join us now! Maybe it was the food?! One lady (front
right plate 15) was such a character! She asks if she can come back to England
with me and be my housekeeper. My housekeeper?! I explain that I don’t have
one and that we do the cleaning ourselves! Not coming across as the rich
westerner obviously was inevitable. I joke that she can come back to England in my suitcase though!

Tola tells me how he meets with the Government to discuss the ‘National Poverty Reduction Strategy’. The garment industry isn’t helping to reduce poverty he says. The workers’ hours are increasing, whilst their pay is decreasing. Sethung had commented earlier how the piece-rate is falling. India and China are huge competition in terms of the garment industry, as they have many more skilled workers and are faster and provide produce of a higher quality and Cambodia cannot compete. He believes that Cambodia working as an open trade area would give them no chance at all, as they would then be rivalling foreign highly skilled workers. Tola believes Cambodia should focus on its natural resources, bamboo and fruit, as exporting goods.

Tola goes on to tell me about the ‘unofficial taxes’ of the garment industry. Corruption in other words. This is a huge problem in Cambodia, and despite years of talk, an anti-corruption law remains as a draft (Economist 2005). He brings up the unions again. The ‘yellow unions’ cause trouble as they are government and management led, they only work to manage their profits, taking a little point to go on strike. Worker unions are getting stronger and stronger and they need to work to eliminate the ‘yellow’ ones.

Just then a gecko runs across the floor. I ask what it is in Khmer -‘kyncha’. A welcome distraction. It’s all getting a bit too much. I have been in Cambodia for nearly one month now. I have fallen in love with this country and its people. I feel helpless, and in a way sorry for Sarom, Sreymom and Sethung. But what gives me the right? And what can I do about it? They are grateful for their jobs, providing them with a regular salary. They fully realise that they are in a better position than they were as farmers. But I’ve had part-time jobs that pay much more, and have far better working conditions than their main job. I think my
empathy stems from the fact that these people have dreams. They want to lead better lives, which are more stable for their families. They would love to open their own businesses. Sarom and Sreymom, a tailor business and Sethung, a greengrocer. But they cannot as there’s not a cent left at the end of the month. Enough thinking for now though...

Sethung and his family are just going out to buy some food. “Will you stay?” he asks. Louise and I would absolutely love to. But Tola does not seem very keen at all. He does not want to. He doesn’t want them to spend money on us; they don’t earn enough as it is. I fully understand, and feel ashamed that I had considered it. They keep asking Tola to translate that they are very happy that we’re here and want us to come back to visit, but also want us to push the people in England to make conditions better in Cambodia. How I can do this...

We decide that it’s probably time we got back to the Guesthouse, as we had an early start in the morning at the orphanage. I promise to send some English books for Sreymom and her aunt, and copies of the photographs I had taken. Louise and I wish everyone “sum-naang-laore”, many times. We just look at each other once again.

What an afternoon. It had been unbelievable, astonishing, heart-breaking, beyond memorable, ‘eye-opening’...but I was also left feeling in a predicament. An ethical dilemma (Barnet et al 2005 p.24). Here I was in Cambodia doing voluntary work, trying to do some good, no longer just ‘caring at a distance’ (ibid), but now I was fully aware that through buying my t-shirt, an ‘everyday act’ (Hartwick 2000 p.1190), I was ‘knitted into a myriad of connections’ (Barnett et al 2002 p.25). My ‘body’ contrasting strongly with theirs (Entwistle 2000). But not just this, I had also been given this information that Sarom, Sreymom and Sethung wanted me to pass on, they wanted you to hear.
Tola's Plan!

Tola felt the same frustrations I did. He was someone that I had come to know and held the utmost respect for during my time in Cambodia. He not only wanted these people to work, but to be able to learn as well.

He wants to set up his own NGO called something along the lines of 'the Association of Informal Training'. In his words... "I plan to organise garment workers who have been fired out or laid off or redundant from the factories to get training in cooking, hospitality, history and English language. After the training, we will start up a workers' restaurant and guesthouse. We will provide all kinds of foreign food and organise labour tours. All the tourists can be guided to visit garment workers at their home bases, to get to know about the actual living of the Cambodian workers. It's the local labour tour. Tourists can be guided to visit some major resorts in Cambodia, such as Angkor Wat, Sihanoukville, but guided by worker tourist guides. All the money we earn from the service will be used to support our operation and we will share some (around three to five percent to give some scholarship for workers who need to enlarge their skills or knowledge in any short training course or university."

But once again maybe this is just me being an idealist...
It's everywhere!

By this point I knew how important the garment industry was to Cambodia and it was clearly evident. Connections were everywhere.

Sa Hong
During my time in Cambodia I used the same moto driver every day. They are the most common form of transport and the aim seemed to be to squeeze as many people on the back! It was quite treacherous really and I actually ended up falling off once! Mr. Sa Hong used to pick me up from the Guesthouse at 7.30am each morning and then again at 5pm once we had finished work at the orphanage. I grew to know him quite well.

Plate 16 - Mr. Sa Hong waiting outside the orphanage
Sa Hong used to work as a skilled machinist, until it was taken over by Chinese management. Men were too expensive. Sa Hong was forced to become a moto driver, earning around US$8 per week, compared to a higher wage and the prospect of regular work in the garment factory.

Cambodia has undergone a huge social change; the women have jobs, whilst the men do not. My Guesthouse Manageress’ son had just finished a computer science degree specialising in networking. Yet he couldn’t find a job using his skills and even if he did it would only be earning US$60-80 per month, whereas he can earn more by working for his mother.

**Phsar Tuol Tom Pong**

Or the *Russian Market*, so-called because of the prevalence of items from the Eastern Bloc in past times. A favourite amongst tourists with its ridiculously cheap clothing, footwear, silk items and souvenirs (plate 16).
I loved this place. You could buy everything! Including genuine branded clothing which caught my attention. Another potential link to my t-shirt! I asked Tola about this. "They are often from a wrong order and are in the wrong style or colour, too much of one has been produced." The sellers at the market often get less money for their goods than the factory he explained. I wonder if this is true? They are often thrown away by the factories and then people go through the factory bins for them.

Plate 18 – H&M t-shirts?!
H&M...Hennes and Mauritz...with you...UNICEF!

I still hadn’t investigated the potential link to my t-shirt’s life through UNICEF and desperately wanted to. Gaining access into the heavily guarded building was a mission in itself, but after explaining numerous times why I was there, I was eventually allowed in...

I then find myself in a similar predicament, explaining my quest to the receptionist, whilst clinging onto the actual t-shirt, pointing at the label! He makes a few phone calls. I explain to the person on the other phone that there are *supposedly* joint education and HIV/AIDS projects between H&M...Hennes and Mauritz...with you...UNICEF! I am still not getting anywhere. Eventually the receptionist tells me that someone from ‘Education’ will come to see me, if I could just wait by the seating area. I was happy to be in a comfortable, safe environment, with good air-conditioning and comfy sofas!

A tall, well turned-out Cambodian, approaches me - Chamrong. I explain to him, showing him the t-shirt. No he hadn’t heard of them either. I was really coming to the end of my tether now. I said that I had read about it on the internet and ask if he has a computer. I could show him the website. It would be just my luck that I could not find where the projects were mentioned on H&M’s website!

Argh! I really wanted to scream. After finally getting into this building, it now looked like I was wasting their time. I asked that maybe I could e-mail him, if I go to an internet café to find it! By this point, I doubted whether I had actually read about it. That evening I went to our regular internet café. And found it! If only I could have done so three hours earlier! I emailed Chamrong...
Hi,

I came to see you yesterday about a joint programme with H&M, and caused a few problems!
I’ve had the chance to find it on the internet and here’s the link...
http://www.hm.com/uk/hm/social/responsibility.jsp
If you then look at the pink box, choose charity and click download, it comes up with a factsheet, the section titled ‘cooperation with UNICEF’ is what I was trying to explain to you!
It states that it is a project in which you ‘cooperate together’ so I just thought that maybe I would be able to find out some more information from you!
Please let me know if you know about the project, and equally so if you don’t!
Kind regards,
Helen Clare

Figure 10 – Email to Chamrong

A couple of days later I receive this reply...

Dear Fabrice,

Last Tuesday I met with a gentle girl from UK, she came to our office looking for help (indicated in below messaged). His morning I went to our info/coma talked with Mr. Tan Try and he informed me to contact with you as you’re the one who could provided her for more information as H&M project maintaining HIV prevention among youth in Cambodia.
With many thanks, Chamrong

Figure 11 – Email from Chamrong

So I emailed Fabrice Laurentin, and organised to visit him on the day before I was leaving Cambodia!
United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

It had been an incredibly long day. It was one of my last in Cambodia and I was determined to make the most of everything and had set my alarm for 5.30am to visit Phsar Thmei. But now I was about to go and find out about the ‘priority’ (H&M 2005d) Unicef and H&M project!

This time there aren’t any problems entering UNICEF, so in I go to meet Fabrice. If you hadn’t guessed, he was French, and very funny with it! He spoke brilliant English and had a quirky look, with dark rimmed glasses and thinning blonde hair. He asked how my travels have been, and then explained how he had similarly gone travelling to Cambodia, and had just sort of ended up staying! I can well imagine!

Fabrice goes on to explain about the project. UNICEF does not normally work with the garment industry, but the majority of workers are female and around the age of eighteen so they are included in the target group for this project. H&M give money to the National Committee for UNICEF, which is then allocated to the project. UNICEF uses an existing model for this project, which has been used to work with five local NGOs. They provide a hotline, called Inthanou – ‘Rainbow’, which is free and anonymous; currently receiving 60,000 calls per year. The communication system is provided by the BBC, “very very good work, very brilliant”. They have also run a soap-opera containing seventy episodes on Cambodian television covering a range of issues related to HIV/AIDS. They aim to educate the factory workers about issues of prevention. Many of the workers have a very low level of education and so they provide leaflets in very simple English. A corner of the factories adopting this service contains books and leaflets, which will be run by volunteers who have to sign a confidentiality memorandum.
He tells me more of the issues around HIV/AIDS in Cambodia. A huge problem is MSM — men having sex with men. Men often go out of their marriage in Cambodia. On top of this couples don’t normally use condoms. With there being a 30% plus infection from mother to child, although this can be significantly reduced if the baby receives a drug within 72 hours of birth. This is available to all Cambodians and UNICEF aim to promote access to this. (So, maybe Lucinda at the orphanage, could have had HIV and then got rid of it?!) Fabrice believes that although there is a need for medical care, there is a complete lack of psychological care.

Fabrice tells me that Cambodia has good working conditions and pay compared to other countries! What?! The things Sarom, Sreymom and Sethung told me is ‘good’? Apparently so, Cambodia’s labour conditions have been ratified 87 on freedom of association and 98 on rights to organise and bargain collectively in the ILO convention (Grumiaux 2004). I would hate to have gone anywhere else.

Fabrice can not tell me the addresses of the factories they will be working in. They have to keep it quiet and are very cautious. They cannot mention H&M in any of their publications. He told me that I wouldn’t be able to get into any factories, but that I may as well try, “give Chris Wang a call at the H&M Production Office”, he suggested.
One Last Shot

Time was running out! But I decided to give Chris Wang a call. I explained my research to him, and enquired whether it might be possible to come and see him. He told me that I needed to get permission from Head Office in Sweden first...! Would that ever happen?

When I returned to England I wanted to see whether I would ever have been able to do this. I called H&M’s London Office and briefly explained my research. I got put through to Melek, responsible for CSR. I explained my research to her, pretending that I was planning to go to Cambodia to trace my t-shirt back there, and asked whether I could visit Chris Wang at the Cambodia Production Office. “No, I doubt it. That would be very difficult” she said, “You won’t be able to meet with an H&M person. But visit the website that will help you. It will have all the information you need”....

A Glimpse!

I was extremely aware that I still hadn’t actually visited any factories. I still hadn’t been anywhere near where my t-shirt had been produced, or where Sarom, Sreymom and Sethung spent most of their lives. I was still so far away from my t-shirt’s life. I had tried so hard, yet failed, miserably. Or so I thought. I decided to give it one last shot. I asked my faithful moto driver if he could take me to a factory. I had been staying at the Royal Guesthouse on Street 154 for my whole month in Cambodia, and it was only now that I found out that there was actually a factory on this very street, just a bit further along! Madness!
Mr. Sa Hong pulled up outside a run-down, dingy looking building. He translated to the Guard outside, that I was a student from England, would it be possible for me to speak to someone there. While they spoke, I just smiled. The doors were ajar enough for me to look through into what I could see was the factory. I could hear the monotonous drone of the machines. There was one lady working behind a sewing machine, similarly to those on the training course, concentrating intensely, except for the split second when I caught her eye. For that tiny moment I felt connected. At that instant the Guard moved to immediately shut the metal grated gates. I had caught a glimpse of life in a factory. There was no way I would be allowed in Sa Hong translated, only if I had a license. I was scared and felt intimidated. Sa Hong kept apologising that I couldn’t go in. I didn’t mind. I just wanted to leave.

Behind those doors were actually 722 people, 654 of whom were female. There were also 475 sewing machines, no wonder I could hear them! And one of the many items they produce are t-shirts for export to the USA and non-EU countries (GMAC 2006). So close yet still so far away, but as close as I was going to get!
Conclusion
The End?

When I embarked on this research I was determined to trace the journey of my t-shirt from beginning to end, and to identify with the person that made it. I never imagined it would be simple, but I thought I could do it. Yet I never quite did, for many reasons including lack of time, my position being female, a student with no real authority and a foreigner in Cambodia. But perhaps the greatest barrier of all was the industry itself, being ‘complicated’. I found it unwelcoming at times, and as though there was something to hide. But this has added to both mine and my t-shirt’s story. Do you see? This has highlighted just how difficult these connections are to make. I hope it has been vivid in showing you just some of these “awkward connections” (Cook, Evans, Griffiths, Morris, Wrathmell, et al 2004).

I could look and further question where the fabric was produced? The cotton grown? Cotton. The “symbol of the inequalities of global trade” (Oxfam 2005). We can hope that these unseen others, wherever they may be, Burkina Faso, Mexico, Estonia, have more comfortable lives. Can afford to send their children to school. Have enough money to plan for the future. Maybe. Probably not.

What if tomorrow I took my t-shirt to a charity shop? My t-shirt would lead a whole new life, possibly ending up in Zambia as part of the growing second-hand clothes industry (Bloeman 2005).

So, what do I do now?! I feel I’ve been given a responsibility. To tell others what I heard. If you could have been there in that room with Sethung, Sarom and Sreymom, then you would feel the same. You would want to do something. You would feel in the same ethical dilemma (Barnet et al 2005 p.24).
Hope for Cambodia?
As one lady that had recently lost her job at a GAP producing factory told me, “China may get the orders instead of Cambodia, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re going to be the winner. It just means that you’re the survivor, as they’ll still have poor working conditions.” Don’t you find it worrying though that what I encountered in Cambodia was apparently ‘socially responsible’? I dread to think what I may have found elsewhere.

As for H&M maybe they are to be congratulated for their caring nature. But I wouldn’t know. I can just emphasise the difficulties I encountered; trying to find anyone that knew something about their ‘priority’ projects at UNICEF, that no-one in England would tell me about their factories in Cambodia and how they wouldn’t let me anywhere near their production office or factories.

Similarly to Hartwick I argue that the time once again is ‘ripe’ for radical geographers to return to an activist relation to the world (2000 p.1177). ‘Political activity must inform our daily lives...highlighting the connections between producers and consumers’ (ibid p.1178).

And this is what I hope to have done. I hope that it has opened your eyes. Or at least planted a seed in you. Similarly to the way Jim’s lesson did in me. I hope I have shown how our lives are ‘interconnected in such a way that the conditions experienced by one group of people undermines the conditions of existence of another’ (ibid p.1182). Just remember, ‘everywhere you rest your eyes, invisible stories blossom’ (Hager Cohen 1997 p.289).
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