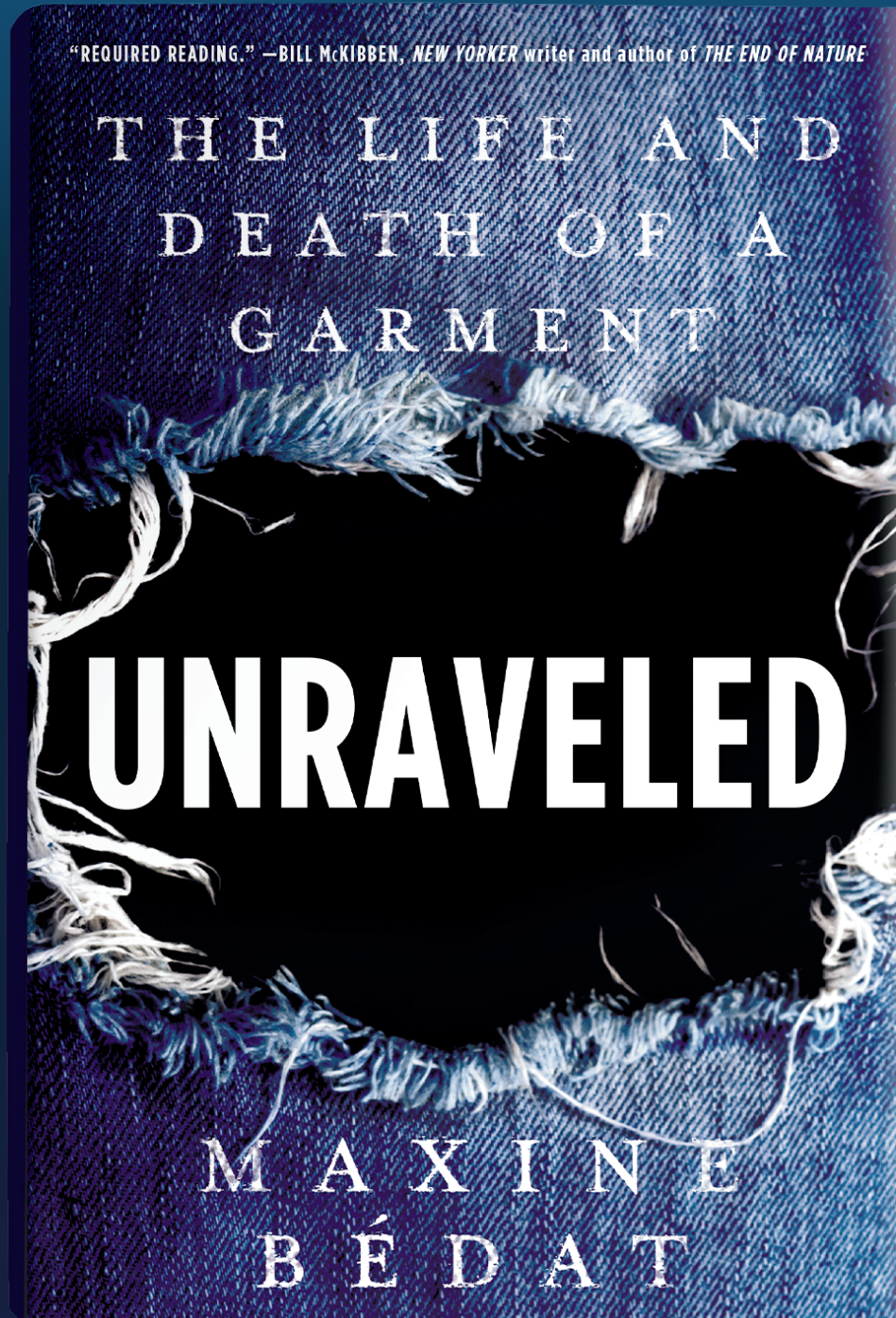


EXCERPT



Introduction

Billed as “the Marketplace of the World,” New York’s Jacob Javits Center stood before me like a glass fortress. As a novice in the fashion world, I was intimidated by the prospect of entering the building for the 2013 MRKET menswear trade show, where buyers from across the country were descending to find the goods that would land on their shelves. I grew up in Minnesota, home of the Mall of America, the largest mall in the United States, so I thought I could handle retail on a scale as grand as this. But that morning I felt humbled by what seemed to be the aggregate of all the malls in the world, complete with the familiar convention center aroma of antifreeze and undertones of coffee and pizza grease.

My business partner and I were getting ready to launch our new ecommerce site for clothing and select homewares, Zady. We wanted to present about fifty pieces—shirts, pants, and accessories for women and men—curated from brands that aligned with our philosophy and aesthetic. The goal was to unearth beautiful, artisanal products, so that day in September I was on a mission to find possible goods and brands for the site.

Approaching the enormous main atrium, I felt a chill set in, literal and metaphorical. The other buyers I could see were out for the kill, silently

judging and scanning the racks of clothing and signage that stretched as far as the eye could see. Not quite knowing where to start, I walked the length of the space, stopping anytime a collection caught my eye. I approached the first sales representative with what I thought was a simple question: “Can you tell me where your collection is made?” He responded with a blank stare followed by a shrug of the shoulders, then averted his eyes. I couldn’t believe it. Why wasn’t he answering me? Didn’t he know where his own goods were manufactured?

I continued down the aisle until another collection caught my eye. I asked the same question of the woman at the booth. “Asia,” she responded shortly, seemingly upset. What was with these people? Asia has forty-eight countries and 4.7 billion inhabitants, so while ever so slightly more specific than the first man’s grunt, this information was not terribly helpful. I walked on. It didn’t get better: Clothes, it turned out, were being made “abroad,” in “the Orient,” or to be super precise, “China.” What the hell? How did the people responsible for selling clothing to the entire US market not know something as basic as where that clothing was made? (Also, the 1960s called and wants its offensive language back.) Even saying something was “designed in New York,” I soon realized, was often code for “made in China.” After a long day trudging through Javits with zero business cards and not optimistic for Zady’s future, I left frustrated, confused, and skeptical.

Having recently graduated from law school, I was not afraid of research, and quickly applied those skills to find companies that knew who made their clothes. In September 2013, we launched the business with diverse partners, including Imogene + Willie, a company cutting and sewing denim in Tennessee, and Clare Vivier, whose colorful bags were produced in Los Angeles. We interviewed the designers and those responsible for production to tell the story behind every piece we carried, an attempt to give the customer the novel experience of knowing who made their things, down to the individual. We embedded a map on our site to show where the products came from, educating customers more deeply than the brand reps at Javits.

We had thought it would be enough to explain where each article was made—as in, what the label inside the garment would say. But we soon realized that wasn't enough. Our cashmere sweater was “Made in Italy,” in that it was where the yarn was knit into a sweater. But the yarn was not spun in Italy and the goats whose wool fiber became yarn roamed the steppes of Mongolia (the cold weather of the steppes helps produce soft fibers). Some of the brands knew where they purchased their yarn or finished textiles, but that didn't mean they knew where those companies, in turn, had purchased the leather or cotton, wool or polyester fibers.

We tried to find a company—one single company—that we could promote through Zady that was addressing these issues of transparency and knowledge, who knew the story of their clothes. But we could not. Not a single company knew the full life story of their garments: from the farm or oil rig that created the fibers, to the factories and people responsible for spinning, weaving, dyeing, cutting, and sewing.

As we dug deeper, we also realized that the tags ignored something else: the environmental impact. Apparel production was increasing precipitously, doubling in the fifteen years between 2000 and 2015; 100 to 150 billion new pieces of clothing produced annually, according to a range of reports. We soon realized that the earlier stages of the production cycle—raw material and fabric production—had the highest environmental footprint, but also garnered the least attention. Fashion companies were just beginning to market products as “sustainable,” but it was clear that that word was all but meaningless.

So we ventured to do it ourselves. We made a wool sweater (named .01 The Sweater), with the intention of being transparent and sustainable with every facet of how it would be made. The wool came from a ranch in Oregon, was washed in South Carolina, dyed and spun into yarn in Pennsylvania, and knit into a sweater in California. We launched the sweater alongside a very simple explanation of the social and environmental impacts that all clothing has. The response was overwhelming—not just from customers who were delighted to connect to their clothes, but from other companies, companies much, much larger than ours. Thank

you, they said, for putting together the information on the impacts of clothing; it was really helpful for me and my team.

I should not have been shocked, but I was. It wasn't just that customers were ignorant of the impact of the fashion industry. So was the industry, which had blinded itself to its own inner workings—and consequently, its own catastrophic consequences.



I got into fashion as an outsider, and still see myself as one. My path into the world of clothing began not in fashion school, but in law school and through work at the United Nations.

One summer, I was dispatched to Arusha, Tanzania, working at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. I spent my weekends doing my fair share of wandering, and in Arusha on a weekend any wandering will lead you to a market. These gatherings of makers, growers, and entrepreneurs were vibrant, joyful, and irresistible to my twenty-something self. At first, I used these shopping trips to find souvenirs to bring back home.

The more time I spent there, though, the more I realized I was getting more than just gifts I thought my relatives and friends would find pretty. I started to form relationships with the people who were making some of the things that I was buying—the woman who'd made my cool, yet classic floral shorts, the man who wove the baskets I hung on my walls. Visiting those markets, where the fabrics, colors, and patterns were rich with cultural significance, I also came to value the beauty of hand-crafted work. Beyond the odd trip to the farmers' market, I really had never had meaningful interactions with the people and places behind what I consumed.

The conversations and discoveries I had at that market would return to me in the months and years after. I started to connect the dots between the Sustainable Development Goals the UN folks were so focused

on and the things we purchased. That is to say, environmental degradation and poverty, for example, were both tied to how our things are made and paid for and how we use them. How global trade relationships are structured are a major determinant of whether people have the opportunity to make things and earn a living to begin with. At the same time, the craftspeople I met showed exceptional creative talent and an entrepreneurial drive—they had what it took to make livelihoods that were sustainable for their families, communities, and the planet. What if I could make a business out of working with people like that—artisans whose talents customers would be pleased to know about and support with their purchase power? Eventually, that impulse led me to cofound Zady—which then led me to the Javits Center, confronted with the realities of the fashion industry.

As Zady evolved, I kept digging deeper. If I was really most interested in advancing “sustainability,” was the best vehicle to do that a company whose business model, when it came down to it, was to sell more things? And since citizens and the industry itself had proven to not know its own impact, could I play a more helpful role by bringing that information to light? Eventually, I decided to stop selling clothing and focus all my attention instead on explaining the fashion industry’s real impact. I connected with experts who understood every aspect of fashion’s impact on our world—agronomists, climate scientists, historians, fashion executives, factory executives, and material scientists; labor experts, organizers, and laborers; political scientists, toxicologists, psychologists, marketers, and economists—to launch a research and action think tank—a step above your average think tank, where ideation stops at the whiteboard. The New Standard Institute (NSI) is an effort to use information, data, and stories not for private profit, but for the public good.

My goal at New Standard Institute is to provide rigorous research and data (and highlight when more is needed) about the fashion industry, which is not, unsurprisingly, known for transparency. As we will cover in the pages ahead, the processes and practices behind how our clothes

get made have flown under the radar. As a result, the information that has been captured thus far has been piecemeal and often inaccurate.

Data is one way to tell a story, and a pretty convincing one at that, but most of what we all do has little to do with data. (If we all acted on data alone, we'd be in a very different world right now.) The stories that get us to act are ones that spark something in our spirits, that put up a mirror to our own experience that reminds us of others who have the same values, fears, triumphs, and dreams as ours. What you are about to read is that kind of story.



When I set out to write *Unraveled*, I wanted to trace the life and death of a single pair of jeans—a garment that is ubiquitous in our culture, beloved for function and style alike—from farm to landfill. This is an extension of the journey I began at Zady, trying to tell the basic origin story of a garment. But there were obstacles, as I had already discovered with Zady. Companies do not have a clear understanding of their own supply chains, and many manufacturers are not exactly willing to throw their doors open for scrutiny. These roadblocks show just how far the industry has to go before it achieves anything close to true transparency. So while this story does not follow one single pair of jeans in a literal way, it does follow where an average pair might go, alongside many other kinds of garments (everything goes with jeans, right?).

In the story that follows we will visit cotton farms in Texas, which was and still is a significant source of global cotton production, meeting farmers navigating the trade-offs between the health of their land, their bank accounts, and themselves. In China we will see how those raw fibers are spun into yarn, dyed, and woven into denim. And in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh we will meet the women responsible for cutting and sewing fabric into a final garment. Back in America, we will go inside an Amazon warehouse to see how our jeans are shipped and make their way to our closets. Finally we travel to Ghana, where quite a bit of our

clothing lands after we've had our way with it, becoming our jeans' final resting place.

The story of a pair of jeans is the story of modern fashion and capitalism, another reason why they make a particularly fitting hero for our journey. Today, 1.25 billion (yes, that's billion with a "b") pairs of jeans are sold globally every year, and the average American woman has seven pairs in her closet. They are evidently a big player in the fashion world, which is itself a major player in the global economy. The jeans we wear today have become an ironic symbol of democracy that even American presidents have played into (until the suit-donning forty-fifth, that is). They are billed as all-American, but the truth of their creation takes us far outside the US borders, and deeper inside where we'd ever think to look. The story of our pair of jeans will take us around the world and back, reflecting the sprawl of our supply chains and the degree of cultural fusion that has allowed fashion to become the radically opaque and exploitative force it is today.

I could give you all this in numbers and charts, and there will be a few of those in the pages ahead, but more important this book introduces you to the people who are involved in making your clothes. What their stories reveal is that understanding the systems of creation and distribution of clothing, of how they are marketed and the impact that marketing has on us, helps us understand our broader world and our role in it.

Until very recently, this \$2.5 trillion industry has been relegated to the "style" section, connoting that it's superficial, girly, fun, unimportant. Yet it's an enormous industry. It is responsible for the incredible net worth of a few people at the very top of the list of the wealthiest people on the planet. It employs millions of the most vulnerable people globally—a majority of them women—and engages some of the lowest-paid labor domestically, as well. And it has a significantly destructive impact on our environment, contributing, according to one report, at least the same level of greenhouse gases as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom combined. The roots of how we dress are also the roots of slavery and

colonialism—systems of oppression that we will see are far from fully dismantled, and behind the conflicts over racial equality that are raging today. Our deeply unequal economic system is also the fruit of those systems. Seen together, the story of our clothes also helps us understand why our societies have become so divided. In the words of historian Sven Beckert, “Too often we prefer to erase the realities of slavery, expropriation, and colonialism from the history of capitalism, craving a nobler, cleaner capitalism. We tend to recall industrial capitalism as male-dominated, whereas women’s labor largely created the empire of cotton.” Part of my intention in writing this book is to put fashion and the clothing industry in its rightful place as not just part of, but at the foundation of, industry and society as we know it.

I have come to believe that the reason this industry has not been taken seriously in the world of policy and business is because it has been relegated to the domain of social “minorities”—namely, women and people of color (and often both). Since the earliest days of industrialization, clothing has largely been made by people belonging to both these two groups, and marketed mostly to women; we’ll meet some of their progeny—the people whose hands make our garments today—in the pages that follow. Even in environmental circles, fashion is very often dismissed. I can’t tell you the number of times I have spoken with significant environmental donors about the impact of the fashion industry during my work for NSI, to which they would respond, *Oh, you should talk to my wife about that, she loves fashion.* (That would of course be meaningful if the wives of major environmental donors held the purse strings, but from my experience, they do not.)

The lack of attention has allowed the industry to operate with very little regulation and not as significant coverage in the media, all the while its (mostly male) executives make enormous sums of money on the backs of (mostly) women’s work and women’s purchasing. I write this book as someone who both is deeply troubled by the industry and the society that has been created in the effort to sell us more of it and appreciates the power and pleasure of clothing. The knowledge of how our clothing

is made, marketed, sold, worn, and discarded is a powerful lens through which to better see the truths of our world and its history, however beautiful or ugly they may be. Seeing clearly is the first step to dismantling the urgent injustices this book describes and bringing about not only a more just society, but a pleasurable and thriving one.



Denim has a global history, intertwined with the rise of modern capitalism. That story begins in India, where cotton has been grown and worn as clothes since around 6000 BC. In the seventeenth century, on the shores of what is now Mumbai, impoverished workers in the port city of Dongri donned garments made of a thick, coarse, cotton fabric called “dungri.” Cotton in any form was completely foreign to Europeans and Americans, and when they saw it they went bananas. Think your high-waisted jeans and cheap cashmere sweater are uncomfortable? Try living your life in a rotating wardrobe of animal skins, wool, and linen, which is pretty much all Westerners knew until the 1800s. It was not a comfortable, or particularly colorful (those materials don’t hold dyes so well) time.

Awestruck by cotton’s unprecedented softness, lightness, and durability—*the touch! the feel!*—Europeans at first couldn’t decide if it was an animal or a plant (they called it a “vegetable lamb”). But what they did know was how valuable this white fluff was. Intoxicating an entire continent, “white gold,” as it would come to be known, led to colonialism, the expansion of slavery, the rise of Europe, and the creation of the capitalist system and institutions from which we still operate today. Lusting for clothes that smelled less and gave them fewer rashes, all of the major European powers—the Dutch, Danish, French, and British—got in on the lucrative cotton trade, which was still rooted in India, by each forming their own East India Company. In order to ensure a steady stream of the stuff that would become the fabric of our lives, the Europeans began spinning a network of trade routes that crisscrossed not just India but Africa, Europe, and eventually the Americas.

This required enormous amounts of capital and the institutions surrounding that capital—banks, contracts, lawyers, corporations, and government institutions that could ensure contracts would be enforced. In the years before the United States declared independence, cotton textiles accounted for three quarters of the East India Company's exports. This giant of a commodity would fundamentally change how people interacted at every level of society. Without cotton cloth, we would have no global economy, no staggering social inequality between the Global North and South, no work for women outside the home, and no industrialization, which was all powered by slavery on expropriated and overtaxed land.

Indeed, during the preindustrial period, cotton may have been a major innovation in terms of comfort and washability but remained wildly labor intensive. First there's the labor of picking, performed in America mostly by African people who were enslaved and brought to the southern states. But the work doesn't stop there. Cotton fibers also need to be removed from tightly wound and prickly seed pods (called bolls) in order to be transformed into jeans, or anything like them. By hand, it could take one person ten hours to separate one pound of fiber from the seeds. But then, or as we were taught, along came Eli Whitney, who thought he could make the process more efficient. He patented the cotton gin in 1793, a machine that mechanically separated the seeds from the boll, allowing someone to process about fifty pounds of cotton a day. While it was Eli Whitney that is given credit for inventing this process, historians now believe that the initial ideas came from uncredited African people who were enslaved, who, not being allowed citizenship, were not legally allowed to hold patent rights. With the creation of this production system, the Industrial Revolution commenced, and the world as we (rather, they) knew it had changed forever.

The newly industrialized gin process only increased the already insatiable demand for cotton. Cotton *picking* had not yet been industrialized, however, so in order to get more cotton there needed to be more people in the fields. As a consequence, the institution of slavery expanded. Cotton yields in the United States went from 1.5 million pounds in 1790

to 2.275 billion pounds by the eve of the Civil War in 1860. Southern agricultural regions thrived off this industry. Southern port cities like New Orleans and Charleston would not be the major cities they are today without the ships full of white gold they sent to Europe.

Cotton wouldn't have been such a successful coup for its owners, financiers, and customers without slavery. In 1850, 3.2 million people who were enslaved worked the fields of fifteen slave states, 1.8 million in cotton fields specifically, and their lives are woven into our national and social fabric. The South was not alone in its support of slavery. While outlawed in the North, slavery was financed by Northern (and British) merchants, bankers, and investors, and their cooperation in order to satisfy conditions of supply and demand is the root of modern-day capitalism.

Things did not have to be this way. Consider how all of the other major cotton-growing countries of the time (and today), such as India, did not turn cotton into white gold using the depraved means the United States did. American cotton plantations also established the first forms of formal workplace management, with unsettling consequences for modern workers. Slaveholders kept detailed track of workers' output, rendering humans into cotton-picking machines and valuing them based on performance—a theme that you will see is now embedded throughout the production and distribution of our clothing today.

Going back to our process, we find even more exploited work and commodification taking place after the gin. Once cleaned, those fibers needed to be transported to the cotton-hungry people of Europe, as well as spun into yarn and woven into fabric before we could make them into jeans, or dungarees, or whatever else you want to call your pants. This, too, was arduous labor, which in preindustrial times had been done by women in the home, who sat at spinning wheels turning wool into yarn for their families' needs. Post-cotton gin, though, the demand for spinners and weavers increased to meet higher demand for textiles, creating yet another stream of labor capital.

Cotton drove modern industrialization and inequality in this way. The higher those with access to cotton rose on the socioeconomic ladder,

the lower those who didn't fell. The former was now in a position to derive labor from workers in a system that relied on inequality—there was always a taker and a giver, a winner and a loser, despite constitutional claims (and balanced books) to the contrary. Thanks to cotton, humans became commodities the world over; Indian cloth was used as currency with African traders in exchange for people who were enslaved, who in turn were used to expand production in the American South and make more cotton (and cloth) to sell somewhere else.

To maximize the potential of the gin, plantation owners needed more quality cotton-growing land, which they found farther south and out west. The only thing standing in their way was, well, people—this time, the indigenous people of the Americas. The government ensured that it would stay in the cotton race by forcibly displacing people from their land in a trail of death and destruction. In fact, the Louisiana Purchase, which created many of these cotton-growing states from Native lands, was structured by none other than Thomas Baring of Britain, one of the world's leading cotton merchants.

As we will see in the chapters that follow, similar trade flows are still intact today. Legal slavery has been abolished, but the exploitation of labor and land still continues. One of the promises of capitalism—which, as we know, fashion helped create—is shared prosperity. Yet according to the Edelman Trust Barometer in January 2020, 56 percent of respondents found that the economy in its current form was not working for them. By 2020, when I completed the majority of the work on this book, a tsunami of conflict, upheaval, and loss had made the notion of “shared prosperity” seem utterly fantastical. The pandemic and its related societal and economic quakes exposed the fragile seams of our global fabric woven from exploitation and deception. And it laid bare how manufactured our desire and need for more is, and how quickly our craze for clothing can shift once the stakes get higher. At one point, jeans may have represented an ideal of democracy and equality, but the jeans our society is wearing have become frayed to the point of distaste. If we want to reclaim true democratic values, we need to reexamine how our po-

litical and economic systems are woven into the clothes we buy, wear, and discard.

We are living in extremely challenging times—culturally, economically, environmentally. In this moment of crisis, it has never been more important to understand how the actions we take can impact the world—for worse or for better—and what we can do to turn our clothing, ourselves, and our institutions into a force for good. In the last chapter of this book, I offer more specifics on how clothing can be a gateway to reclaiming our citizenship, but before we get there we need to meet a few people. So let's go.

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