



NEWSTATESMAN

BOOKS

Tangled up in blue

Veronica Horwell

Published 28 February 2008

[Print version](#) | [Listen](#) | [RSS](#)

Fugitive Denim: a Moving Story of People and Pants in the Borderless World of Global Trade

Rachel Louise Snyder *W W Norton, 329pp, £15.99*



The pants of Rachel Louise Snyder's subtitle are indigo-blue denim jeans, and the idea is to follow production from the Azerbaijani cotton farm to the Manhattan concept design store. That makes her book sound like a documentary of a process and far more linear than it really is, as none of the trash-laden Azerbaijani fibre ends up in the organic, socially responsible hundred-quid-plus Edun jeans on sale in NYC. Nor are Edun's fabrics designed in the research department of the Legler company in northern Italy where Snyder also hung out; nor are they bandsaw-cut and production-line-sewn in the factories of Cambodia and south China, where she did her detailed needle fieldwork.

So what we've got here, with the pants legging it between them, is scenes on location in the fibre, textile and fashion worlds. Chiefly character scenes, as Snyder is a fine reporter who, uncommonly, does her best listening when her interviewees go off-topic and talk about anything but the product. (She gives great asides.) There is the underemployed Azeri cotton tester, qualified through family tradition and an award from the Gdynia Cotton Association to determine the indifferent grades of local staple for which there is unlikely to be an international demand at any price. There are the Cambodian factory hands, not sweatshop victims despite their grim living conditions, often the sole support for parents and siblings. Their precarious income depends on politically motivated trade agreements besides fickle western demand.

Don't presume those further up the supply chain are any more secure: a technician in Italy, daughter of a man who worked in the Legler company for 40 years, and married to a senior employee there, loses her job while Snyder watches, as the firm leaches manufacturing. Even the dwellers in Edun, the pain-in-the-bootylicious-bum company that wants to make not very many pairs of expensive jeans, are aware that, with permanent investment in the firm's worldwide growers and machinists, it may easily go bust. And Edun's scenes, like the others, were recorded circa 2005-2006, long before the retail curtailment that now lies ahead of us all.

Snyder is always aware of deadlines for quota negotiations and tariff repeals, but she doesn't anywhere envisage a looming financial downturn, a change of climate in all senses, doesn't consider that the zip-lockers of Phnom Penh have depended not on the steady business of necessity, but on the extreme excesses of the past decade. Much of the cotton picked, spun, woven and seamed across these chapters must have ended up as landfill in the west within a couple of years of being plucked from the stalk.

She has a brilliant brief chapter on Verité (a US charity that audits overseas factories contracted to famous brands) teaching comity - deportment, etiquette, how not to chew gum while ballroom dancing - to Shenzhen production hands; but there is never a mention of the financial basis for the denim churn; China has in effect loaned the US the credit to pay for the purchase of zillions of pairs of pants, and much else besides, from its own unspent monies. Maybe Snyder cannot project a changed future when the twill won't circulate because her grasp of the past is shaky: anyone who can come up, in a one-par history of indigo, with the sentence "The Brits freaked out enemy armies by painting their bodies blue four hundred or so years ago" has her griefs with ethnic identity, dates and shade differences between indigo and woad (if indeed Julius Caesar meant woad when he described Pictish/Celtic tattoos: their blue ink was likely iron- or copper-based). Her stuff on the ascendancy of the fibre is flimsy, and she repeats old Hollywood-hippie tropes about why jeans became the nether-half garment of the late 20th century.

Never mind. No one else could have written anything like her fresh report on an arbitration council hearing a dispute between Khmer union leaders and Chinese management - they didn't speak the same language, and, moreover, misheard each other's decibellage; or her melancholy synopsis of the Cambodian minister of commerce and garment manufacturers' association heads expending \$350,000 in Washington to lobby for five minutes' attention from President Bush, which they didn't get, in the hope of a trade act that would ensure a decade of duty-free status and secure Phnom Penh pay packets for a few more days. It all matters. Swathes of the British empire were acquired in pursuit of yardages of handworked cotton, and much of the rest of it chasing after markets in which to sell tonnages of mechanically spewed cotton. Reading Snyder, I can see the American empire will also have its expansion and fall charted in cotton.

Post this article to

Digg | del.icio.us | newsvine | NowPublic | Shoutwire | Reddit

Post your comment

Please note: you will need to login or register before your comment is displayed on the website

Message:

Post your comment

We want to encourage people to comment on our content and to exchange views with other readers and hope this will be done on a courteous basis.

However, if you encounter posts which are offensive please let us know by emailing comments@newstatesman.co.uk and we will take swift action where necessary.

Designed by Wilson Fletcher