

MOSS GREEN CASHMERE SWEATER

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MY FINE-KNIT MOSS GREEN cashmere sweater has developed three holes large enough to reveal either the shirt or the skin where the left underarm seams meet.

Why the left and not the right? I have no idea. As a professor, it was my right arm that continually stretched up to write on the whiteboard. No moths have infiltrated my closet. Maybe the fact that my left arm stayed closer to

my body led to additional friction. Or maybe it's the way the garment worker pulled the material while sewing, causing additional strain on the fibers. Or maybe I'm just lucky.

My earlier repair attempt to stitch the fabric back to the seams with olive green thread failed utterly. If anything, the holes became larger than they once were.

I've decided to use the invisible mending technique of Swiss darning



but to make it visible by using black yarn instead of green and an acrylic-alpaca blend instead of cashmere. The black is what I already have in my stash. Having left academia to become a full-time writer and editor, let's just say that it behooves me to be frugal.

STEP 1: UNWEAVE

Because the holes are irregular shapes but need to be square for Swiss darning, I must unpick some of the knit to reveal orderly loops. The knit is so fine that I need to take off my bifocals and squint at the material held about six inches from my eyes. There is something disconcerting in making the holes larger before mending them, deliberately destroying the fabric. It feels like an imposition on the sweater.

More than a quarter century ago, I taught Alison Lurie's 1981 essay "Clothing as a Sign System" in my advanced composition classes. Lurie compares clothing to language, with each item or accessory equivalent to a word—fashion as speech act. While there is a lot that is problematic regarding her argument that taste is "innate" and anachronistic regarding gender, her overall point that

we "read" each other by our clothing still holds weight. Unless we are visually impaired, we often see another before we hear them talk. In class, I used Lurie's text to open a dialogue about how history, culture, context, convention, hierarchy, rebellion, and belonging all impact, and are implicated in, the signs we use on a daily basis, whether those are the things we put on our bodies or the words we write and speak.

Each semester, on the day that we discussed this reading, I wore the same outfit: the cashmere sweater, black dress pants that were slightly too long, black socks, black boots, and dangling earrings engraved with the Chinese character for luck. I invited students to interpret what my clothes were saying.

The clothes looked professional, they said first. My more formal clothing compared to their t-shirts, sweats, and pajama bottoms distinguished me as the authority in the room, the professor. The clothes marked my place in a hierarchy attached to the context of a classroom. (The fact that it never occurred to them to consider me outside that context and collection of fashion signs was abundantly apparent with their shock at seeing me in the grocery store wearing

jeans and a sweatshirt.) The pants and boots also nodded toward the chilly weather during late fall and early spring in upstate New York. The earrings possibly expressed an interest in world cultures, perhaps resulted from some travel, or were worn as lucky talismans, connecting them to common traditions and superstitions of clothing as magical items.

Then we came to the sweater. They noted I probably chose the moss green color because it emphasized my green eyes—and they were right. The bateau neckline reinforced the feel of elegance. They didn't have too much else to say until I showed them the labels: Exclusively for You: Lord & Taylor and 100% Cashmere, Made in Hong Kong. Most of them were unfamiliar with the massive luxury emporium, except for the few who came from New York City and had passed by the flagship store on Fifth Avenue. There was a lot they didn't know about cashmere: that it comes from goats instead of sheep; that hand combing the goats results in finer down and can take up to two weeks; that Mongolia, Nepal, and Kashmir have produced cashmere textiles for thousands of years. What

they did know: cashmere is expensive, and for most of my students at our technical college, prohibitively so. They immediately accorded me high socio-economic status. But the truth was, I couldn't afford this sweater on my salary either. Even today, on Lord & Taylor's website, a woman's cashmere sweater costs over \$100 and up to just under \$12,000—on sale from \$14,330. I had been lucky enough to find mine in a thrift store for one dollar.

Clothes, just like words, can lie.

In the same way that ill-fitting hand-me-downs can signal a tight budget, so too can patches or mending. In fact, before the advent of cheap fast fashion, mending was often necessary, especially for those who had little or no money.



STEP 2: STABILIZING THREADS

I sew loose stitches between the top and bottom loops surrounding one of the holes to function as the structure for the new yarn. I use bright-blue J & P Coats super sheen boilfast mercerized thread, originally costing thirty-five cents, taken from my mother's long-ago sewing basket. I create jagged V-shaped mountains made of lagoon waters. These mountains will eventually disappear, just as real ones do, but more quickly.

It is exactly because clothes can lie that sumptuary laws—determining who can have what depending upon rank or social class—have existed for millennia. While these laws regulated access to all kinds of luxury items, including food, furniture, and jewelry, one of their main targets was clothing. Ruling classes understood what Lurie suggests: clothing marks—or mismarks—status. Someone of low status could be mistaken for a higher status based upon what they wore and might be accorded more power than they “deserved.”

In ancient Rome, only senators and magistrates were allowed to

wear a Tyrian purple stripe on their togas, which distinguished them from other citizens and enslaved people; flouting this law could result in death. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, statutes dictated that only those at or above the status of knights or lords could wear particular fabrics or furs, including velvet, satin brocade, sable, ermine, and cloth-of-gold. Scotland had similar restrictions in the early fifteenth century, and in the eighteenth century, as part of George II's reinforcement of English colonial power and the quelling of the Jacobite movement, wearing tartans or kilts was outlawed unless one was a soldier, a veteran, or a woman. In the United States, a 1735 law outlined legal restraints regarding what enslaved people wore, limiting them to low-quality textiles such as osnaburg, linsey-woolsey, calico, hemp, and homespun. This was particularly salient for slave holders, who might otherwise mistake a white-appearing enslaved person—often a result of the sexual violence visited on enslaved women by their enslavers—for an equal.

STEP 3: DARN

I don't have a darning egg, so a tennis ball will have to do. I split the four-ply black yarn into a single-ply strand. Again, I am taking apart to put back together. I pull the yarn through intact material to anchor my mend, work a duplicate stitch in the new color over an existing stitch to the side of the hole. I pull the tapestry needle through the middle of the first loose loop of green fabric on the bottom of my square, slide it behind the first mountain of stabilizing thread, and go back into the center of the same loop where the stitch began. I move to the next loose loop and the next, continuing the process. At the end of the first row, I anchor the darn to the other side using another duplicate stitch.

I repeat the process, using the previously constructed loops in the prior row. The final row attaches to the original green loops at the top of the hole. The truth is, the loops are so tiny that I'm pretty much just guessing where they are despite the pins I have used as markers.

The yarn is too thick, too fuzzy, even in single ply. The mend looks like a small hairy spider on the even green surface—but not a cool spider. An amorphous

spider, possibly dangerous. I carefully pluck it out, blue threads flashing like fish scales against the black and green. I will try again tomorrow, next time with crochet or embroidery thread.

Clothing also becomes a site of resistance. While it may lie about one's position in the human-created social hierarchy, it can also tell the truth about essential human worth.

In Renaissance England, laws dictated that women could not wear men's clothes because they might accidentally be accorded the superior

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social status of men in a patriarchal culture. Mary Firth, otherwise known as Moll Cutpurse, became (in)famous not only for her pickpocketing and thievery, but also for wearing men’s breeches and doublets despite both arrest and public penance. She even became a celebrated, if still shady, presence in the theater district.

In her National Book Award-winning *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*, Tiya Miles reveals the extent to

which unfree people in the American South during slavery spent their few discretionary funds on clothing, cloth, and sewing supplies—64.6 percent of their spending money. Through the clothes they bought and made, separate from those provided by the plantation owners and in better fabrics, they could claim a sense of human dignity.

STEP 4: REMOVE STABILIZING THREAD

My second darning attempt with black cotton embroidery thread works much better. The loops interlock in a satisfying pattern even if they are (of course) larger than the ones in the cashmere by a magnitude. I cut and pull out the blue stabilizing thread, and suddenly there’s no sign it was once there, propping up the process—rather like the status system, whose rules are constructed but invisible.

Visibly mended clothes can communicate contradictory economic status signals. On the one hand, mending clothes instead of getting rid of them and buying new ones might

hint at a wallet’s lack. In the same way that ill-fitting hand-me-downs can signal a tight budget, so too can patches or mending. In fact, before the advent of cheap fast fashion, mending was often necessary, especially for those who had little or no money. A choice between new clothing and food is more obvious if what can be worn can be repaired.

On the other hand, visible mending, especially these days, often operates as a site and sign of privilege. Visible mending requires skill, supplies, and most expensive of all, leisure time. Some critics of the practice have called it “poverty cosplay,” a pretend version of true poverty that diminishes empathy for the real suffering impoverished people experience. Certainly, it can become a sign of wealth through its emphasis on the “bespoke,” individually crafted items for a specific person. That impression is reinforced by mending that is not just practical, but aesthetic, including multiple colors, shapes, or techniques.

Honestly, I was tempted to invisibly mend this sweater. Doing so would maintain its signification of wealth and

status; it would continue the lie. The placement of the mend—the armpit—contributes to this temptation because it is one of the areas on the body often policed into invisibility. If it will be exposed, it must be clean, and no matter what, must not smell. Women, especially, are encouraged to shave the armpit as a signal of purity and (somewhat creepy) childhood innocence.

Still, I couldn’t invisibly mend this sweater. Firstly, I don’t have the supplies or skills necessary to replicate the machine-woven knit. But also, the truth matters to me. The sweater in its new form tells the story of the status fluctuations that have marked my life: an impoverished childhood in which I depended upon free school lunches to eat; a solidly middle-class adolescence; graduate-student scarcity with crates as shelves for books, hand-me-down furniture, and student loans; a brief period in the upper middle class at the height of my academic career; and a return to a more middling place after leaving academia. The sweater reminds me: this is who I’ve been. This is who I am. This is how things change. ✨

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