

FROM THE BUSH TO THE CLOUD:
FOLLOWING THE SOCIAL LIVES OF THE SKINS ‘DUN’ AND ‘DEE’

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ABSTRACT

Tracing the flows and transitions of some commodities can be incredibly difficult. Like their living counterparts, crocodile skins are unpredictable and multiple, submerging in and out of view. They are disobedient, ‘Other’ objects in the sense used by Ihde (1990), as they regularly work against the classifications and transformation activities of human agents. Like Law and Singleton’s (2004) ‘fire objects’ they are both present and absent as their ‘crocodileness’, their status as animal subjects, moves in and out of focus in different cultural contexts.

When faced with such devious objects an ethnographer cannot, like Appadurai, view objects as mere conduits of human meaning and intentionality but instead must make use of multiple methods to capture the voices, actions and effects of these objects as they move through processes of commoditisation. Combining online research, practitioner narratives, object interviews and photography, my research and telling of Dun and Dee’s story aims to explore how the crocodile skins’ physical, relational and symbolic properties as animals/objects/commodities have the capacity to affect the emotions, interpretations and creative efforts of cosplayers and others.

Keywords: cosplay, commodities, social lives, body multiple, fire objects

INTRODUCTION

This article recounts the social lives of ‘Dun’ and ‘Dee’. Dun and Dee were, and are, many things: freshwater crocodiles, hides, leather items, costume objects and a television character known as ‘Rumple’. Connecting hunters in rural Queensland to fan consumers on Facebook, major Italian fashion brands to Australian and international conservation policy, sewing machines with rifle bullets, these crocodile skins brought together diverse fields, technologies and

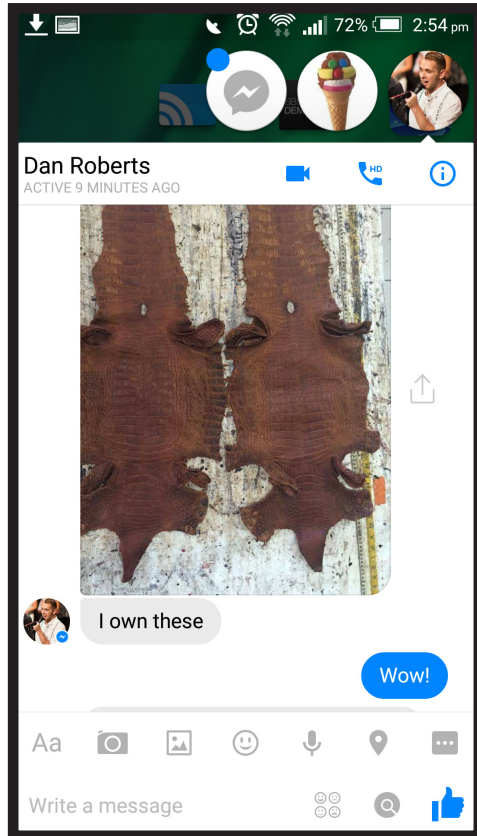


Figure 1. Introducing 'Dun' and 'Dee'

individuals as they underwent processes of commoditisation. However, the social lives of mutable, multiple commodities like crocodile skins can be very difficult to follow. Exploring the uses and effects of these two crocodile skins and their interactions with a third subject, cosplayer Dan, this story of Dun and Dee demonstrates how treacherous, slippery and unstable nonhumans can be positioned as ethnographic subjects through the use of a mixed methods approach including object interviews and the analysis of metaconsumption practices.

Led by the advocates of the material culture (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987) and posthuman (Latour 2005; Mol and Law 2004) approaches, anthropologists are increasingly recognising the importance of including objects (material or

digital things, tools and technologies) within the scope of ethnographic studies. In particular, commodities have been the subject of considerable ethnographic attention as ‘following the things’ (creating and recording the social biographies of commodities) can provide an entry point for exploring the ways that globalised commodities are valued, interpreted and transformed in exchange and consumption (Appadurai 1986, 5; 1997).

However, as this account of the story of Dun and Dee will demonstrate, following the flows and transitions of some objects can be difficult. During their journey from the bush in rural Queensland to a digitised image on Facebook, the skins take on many different roles and forms. As ‘fire objects’ (Law and Singleton 2004) their ‘crocodileness’ flickers in and out of focus. These physical and symbolic transformations are not entirely under the control of human actors. In some contexts the skins can be considered objects to be valued, transformed and exchanged by humans; in other contexts the skins are animal subjects with the power to evoke emotions and resist transformation. The skins can be considered ‘Other’ objects in the sense used by Ihde (1990, 98) as they regularly work against the classification and transformation activities of human agents. Methodological approaches that only consider objects as mere conduits of human meaning and intentionality fail to capture these flickers between object/subject status. To fully understand the roles and cultural significance of devious objects like crocodile skins, ethnographers must make use of multiple methods to capture the voices, actions and effects of these objects as they move through processes of commoditisation. To tell Dun and Dee’s story I have drawn on multiple methods including online research, practitioner narratives, object interviews and photography. Woven together, these different approaches capture the ways that the crocodile skins’ physical, relational and symbolic properties as animals/objects/commodities have the capacity to affect the emotions, interpretations and creative efforts of cosplayers and others.

The narrative of Dun and Dee emerged during fieldwork I was conducting among cosplay communities in Australia. Cosplay, or costume role-play, is a fan practice centred on the recreation of pre-existing character designs in the form of wearable costumes. The practice is said to have arisen from the globalised interactions between Japanese and American fan communities and their particular dress practices. It has since spread from these centres to other countries including China, Italy, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand (Lunning 2011; Okabe 2012; Peirson-Smith 2013; Rahman, Wing-sun, and Cheung 2012). Cosplay is a highly dynamic practice with its emphasis on the transformation of objects, bodies, and texts. Bodies of knowledge, aesthetics, products and practitioners move between physical locations and online sites. Even at the

local level of a particular geographic region, the city of Tokyo or the Australian city of Adelaide, the practice is difficult to place. In contrast to many other practices studied by ethnographers, such as craft and performance traditions, cosplay has no formal schools or training organisations and there are few formal clubs and associations (Okabe 2012). Australian cosplay has a large online presence but rather than being concentrated upon a central site it is fragmented with cosplay activities being conducted on social media platforms such as Facebook, convention organising sites and forums, and image sharing sites such as deviantART and Flickr. The multi-media nature of the practice with its incorporation of craft, performance and photography activities provides a further layer of complexity as these activities can take place in different online and offline locations.

Through all these different sites run many different commodity flows. Cosplayers purchase craft materials like fabric, thermoplastic and paint, and tools like sewing machines, heat guns and moulds through online and physical retail stores. They raid hard rubbish collections and second-hand goods stores for objects that can be reworked into costume parts. Cosplayers sell unwanted props, accessories or even handcrafted costumes through their friendship networks on social media. They organise commission arrangements through Facebook and sms messaging. Tracing the social lives of commodities provides the ethnographer with a means of understanding many of the disparate sites, practices and relationships associated with cosplay in Australia.

FOLLOWING THINGS: ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO STUDYING COMMODITIES IN MOTION

In 1986, at a time of renewed anthropological interest in material culture and consumption, Appadurai, in the edited collection *The Social Life of Things*, highlighted the potential of following the 'social lives' of commodities as a means of understanding the broader social and cultural contexts in which these commodities exist. Appadurai and fellow contributor Kopytoff (1986) both emphasise that commodities move in and out of commodity status over the span of their existence depending on cultural and temporal contexts. Kopytoff, in particular, argues that as objects are so enmeshed in cultural systems and the lives of their users, the 'cultural biographies' of commodities can be used to provide insights into the contexts and systems that grant and remove commodity status (1986, 66–67).

Appadurai's and Kopytoff's (1986) proposed methodological approach is attractive but fails to consider the complexity of commodity trails and the mutability

of things themselves. 'Follow' implies a neat path; 'thing' suggests a stable entity. For Appadurai (1986) objects are primarily the conduits or expressions of human interpretations, structures and practices. In the ethnographic projects of anthropologists adopting Appadurai's approach (for example, Hoskins 1998) material things are used as a lens for uncovering and understanding the experiences and interpretations of human subjects. However, as posthuman studies of commodities and other objects have highlighted, things can be active and highly unstable in ways that exert considerable effects on human subjects. Objects can exert forms of agency through their physical appearance causing human subjects to feel emotions like fear and awe (Gell 1998) or through being 'disobedient' and failing to operate in the manner intended by their user or designer (Ihde 1990, 98). Objects can be multiple, experienced in different ways or perceived as different things simultaneously (Mol and Law 2004). Objects can be present and absent, alternatively or simultaneously (Law and Singleton 2004). What happens when these unstable objects go through processes of commoditisation?

HUNTING CROCODILES: MULTIPLE, FLICKERING AND DISOBEDIENT OBJECTS

This article focuses on the social lives of some rather unusual commodities: crocodile skins. Crocodiles fulfil many roles and represent many things in Australia (Thompson 2012). In the northern regions of Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory estuarine (saltwater) and freshwater crocodile species have long been intertwined with human practices and histories, both Aboriginal and those associated with more recent settlers (Thompson 2012). On one hand, crocodiles are objects that can be controlled and used. In Queensland and the Northern Territory crocodiles are commercially farmed for meat and leather. Crocodile eggs are legally or illegally 'harvested' (gathered from wild crocodiles) for breeding purposes. Crocodile bodies have long been used as hunting trophies. Crocodiles are also written into state, territory and international policy, in documents like the Northern Territory's Parks and Wildlife Service's *Management Program for the Freshwater Crocodile (*Crocodylus johnstoni*) in the Northern Territory of Australia, 2010–2015*, and the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora* (CITES).

On the other hand, crocodiles are uncontrollable and unpredictable subjects. Ihde (1990, 98) suggests that certain things, especially animals, can operate as Others, existing in opposition to humans but possessing a disobedient subjectivity. Unlike Australia's other notorious predator, the shark, crocodiles are amphibious and can exist in many of the same places as humans. The treachery and deception implied in English phrases such as 'crocodile tears' and 'crocodile



Figure 2. No swimming

smile' echo the ways the animals use camouflage in hunting, lurking beneath the water or appearing as logs. Beaches and waterholes are designated as off limits to humans when they are occupied by crocodiles. As the Northern Territory media endlessly report, crocodiles can unexpectedly appear in designated human spaces. State and territory initiatives like the Northern Territory's *Crocwise* program are created to help human beings negotiate the liminal spaces between crocodile and human territory.

For these reasons crocodiles are highly unstable commodities with multiple social lives. Like the diseases and human bodies described by Mol and Law (2004), crocodile bodies are multiple – object and subject, eaten and eater, controlled yet uncontrollable. As I will demonstrate throughout this article crocodile products like skins and teeth are 'fire objects' (Law and Singleton 2004), things characterised by their flickering between presence and absence, as their crocodile nature flickers in and out of perception. In the networks that form around them crocodiles and crocodile products can also act as 'boundary objects', facilitating connections and interactions between different cultural groups (Star and Griesemer 1989).

As unstable commodities crocodile skins cannot be easily followed. The use of techniques such as interviews and participant-observation alone may not sufficiently capture the ways that objects, material or digital, can structure or affect human subjects (Woodward 2015). The skins, their digital extensions,

their stories and performances must be hunted through a mixed methods approach. These methods may be drawn from the many different techniques proposed by material culture, posthuman and archaeology approaches. Adams and Thompson (2011, 2016) recommend paying explicit attention to the voices of objects in what they describe as ‘object interviews’, a series of observations and interrogations that require the ethnographer to ask: what roles does this object occupy and how does it associate with humans and other non-humans?

Recording humans’ talk about objects may be a fruitful additional approach, as it helps to explore the networks of participants that form and dissolve around an object. Shankar (2006), in her exploration of Desi consumption practices, argues that storytelling about commodities, verbal and visual (photographic and video), expands the meanings, relationships and activities around particular objects. Similarly, Message and Frederick (2011) have emphasised that objects are constantly mediated in some form, and that these mediations shape the ways that objects are used and understood. Exploring the ways that objects are performed, mediated and discussed by human actors can provide considerable insights into the roles, uses and meanings attached to objects.

In following the social lives of Dun and Dee I used a range of methods, blending formal ethnographic techniques with cosplayers’ own metaconsumption practices of storytelling, documenting and archiving. I conducted a formal, in-depth object interview with Dun, Dee and Dan, the human cosplayer who purchased, crafted and performed the crocodile skins as a costume. I recorded Dan’s Facebook and sms messages about Dun and Dee, his attempts to buy crocodile skins as craft materials and his attempts to shape the skins into a costume. I also observed online and offline performance events where Dan attempted to incorporate the skins into an embodied performance of the television character Rumpelstiltskin.

INTERVIEWING DUN, DEE AND DAN: ‘BUTT-HOLES’ AND OBJECT ALTERITY

Like many others studying the social lives of commodities and other material culture objects, I conducted semi-structured ethnographic interviews with participants about the ways that they used, represented and discussed particular objects. Interviewing cosplayers often involved listening to stories about photographic images on their Facebook pages, costume pieces that were sitting on their sewing machines or items stored in their wardrobes. In the tradition of research conducted by Miller (2001), Shankar (2006) and Woodward (2007), I conducted one of my interviews with cosplayer Dan in his own home, in the presence of his fiancée, Laura.

At the time of the interview Dan owned a pair of crocodile skins which he had turned into a collar or stole. The collar formed part of his first handmade character costume. For his first solo construction effort Dan had chosen a difficult project. He decided to recreate one of the costumes worn by actor Robert Carlyle as Rumpelstiltskin, one of the chief antagonists of ABC's fantasy drama, *Once Upon a Time* (2011–). In the interview Dan described his reasons for his choice of character:

D: I liked him because he's manipulative, like me [laughs].

C: So that's a feature you think, about yourself?

D: Yes... I thought it would be a challenge to do but I also find the character a fun character to cosplay. I like to do ones that have personalities that reflect me.

C: So what sort of character is Rumpelstiltskin?

D: He's a kind of evil magician type person and he... his whole costume is created out of various animal skins. I think it's because he's an evil magician person and reflects his personality. His nickname on the show is 'The Crocodile' and there are a lot of crocodile elements in his costume. (Author's interview 2015)

When I arrived at Dan's home the crocodile skin collar was spread out on the dining table along with other, excess pieces that Dan had cut off the skins. Other components of his costume, including a handmade, full length coat of artificial snake skin, were assembled next to the table.

Throughout my fieldwork I found that one of the most fruitful aspects of object-centred interviews was the physical (or digital) presence of the object under discussion. This was certainly the case in our interview about Dun and Dee. For most of the interview the collar sat on the table in front of us. I picked up the collar and asked him to interpret its features. As Dan began his interpretation of the collar, highlighting shapes, patterns and textures, the crocodile Others, Dun and Dee, flickered into view:

C: These skins are taken from... Do you know which part of the animal? We can see they're definitely tails.

D: I think these are the undersides because there are buttoholes [laughs].



Figure 3. Legs and all

C: We can kind of see bits and pieces, like the legs...

D: You've got a leg there. I think I chopped off a few bits of leg because I didn't want them poking me in the neck when I made it. But that [holding piece]... that's a leg. When it was actually joined up... I'm pretty sure that this one was joined here so it was a bit wider.

C: A bit wider in the belly? So they are two crocodile underbellies?

D: Yeah, there are two separate crocodiles to make this one. I think this one [holding skin] went like that... so there was a leg there and a leg here and there was one there that I chopped. There were two crocodile undersides as opposed to the top and the back of one crocodile. They're two crocodiles, roughly the same size and width.

C: They don't look that big, do they? They're only about a metre or so long.

D: They'd probably still take a nice chunk out of you if you went swimming.

C: They're not saltwater [crocodiles]?

D: They're just freshies [freshwater crocodiles], these ones. One of the reasons they selected these particular crocodiles was because they were close to the colour that I was looking for anyway. Because if you... to dye hide or skin you have to strip it first because it's got natural oils. You have to strip it first and then you have to dye it and doing that distresses the leather and that could cause issues and it wouldn't last as long.

C: So this is the natural colour of the crocodile?

D: Well, it's been tanned. The natural colour is more like this [points to lighter patch] where the tan is starting to wear off. That's more of its original colour. (Author's interview 2015)

Goodwin (1994) has described this kind of in-depth attention to visual and physical properties of an object as 'highlighting' – a means by which particular features are interpreted and used to guide the construction of meanings or narratives. In this section of the interview we both attempted to read the crocodiles in the collar. In our discussion of the collar we discursively reversed the different transformations that had been worked on the crocodile skins – the stripping, the dyeing, the sewing, the cutting and even the deaths of the animals – to imagine living, active animals.

As fire objects (Law and Singleton 2004) characterised by presences and absences, the crocodile skins began to re-emerge as crocodiles as our attention was drawn to particular visual and textural features. In the interview Dan drew attention to the 'buttholes' in the collar. While Dan was obviously amused by the scatological humour provided by this visual feature, the said 'buttholes' provided a visual reminder of the object's animal origins and the regimes of value used to classify leathers for fashion use. Dan pointed out that neither the crocodile skins used in Carlyle's costume nor the skins used by the first cosplayer had evident buttholes. He interpreted this difference as evidence that Dun and Dee were rejects from the crocodile farming international fashion commodity chain, their butthole features too animalistic and dirty for the tastes of the fashion consumer. The buttholes here are further evidence of Dun and Dee's status as fire objects; interpreters like Dan may interpret the holes

simultaneously or alternatively as the cloaca of two animals or as flaws in a craft or fashion material.

For Dan's fiancée Laura, however, the collar's status as crocodile Other was ever present. She said that even after Dan had sewn the skins into the shape of the collar she still found the object 'creepy' (Author's interview 2015). She refused to touch the collar and visibly flinched when Dan poked the object in her direction.

CROCODILE WRESTLING PART I: DISOBEDIENT CRAFT MATERIALS BITE BACK

Gell (1998), Latour (2005) and Woodward (2015) have all argued for greater ethnographic attention to the ways that non-humans, including commodities, act upon humans and non-humans. It was in the close-observation of the collar and the discursive interpretation of its visual and tactile properties that its affective and active capacities were most evident. Dan pointed out the rows of stitching, pieces of canvas and masking tape that he had used to join the skins together into a collar. He described the challenges of working with the physical properties of the skins – their thickness, gnarliness and slipperiness. 'I'd never worked with leather or hide before. I'd worked a bit with vinyl and sort of assumed it would be similar. It's definitely not' (Author's interview 2015).

As studies of other craft practices have demonstrated (see for example Mall 2007; Nakamura 2007), the performance of craft techniques, rather than being a mere mechanised repetition of learnt movements, can in fact require and inspire creativity on the part of the technician. Mall (2007) has further argued that this comes about in part due to the properties of the materials being used. As 'disobedient objects' (Ihde 1990, 98) leather, plastic, cloth and crocodile skins will not always do as they are told. For cosplayers, the task of shaping the assembled materials into the required form can sometimes be a struggle requiring negotiation and innovative approaches.

Narrating the underside of the skins, Dan told his own story of crocodile wrestling. He had tried to join parts of the hides by forcing them through his mother's 1970s sewing machine. This was only successful in places where the skins were thin enough to pass the needle through. In many places the skins were too thick, gnarly or slippery and would block or even break the machine needles. In the face of resistance Dan was forced to improvise and fashioned the collar shape using a number of joining techniques including hand sewing the skins to calico patches and simple strips of gaffer tape.

Dan's understanding of crocodile skins as a particularly unique and difficult craft material was also informed by reading the blog of the American 'Rumple' cosplayer. According to Dan, the American cosplayer described her trepidation in the lead up to working with the crocodile skins. She was afraid of cutting the skins incorrectly due to their physical properties and damaging or wasting six hundred dollars' worth of materials. The moment when she actually worked with the skins was signposted as an event on her blog entitled 'Cutting day!' – a moment of particular significance in the creation of the costume (Author's interview 2015). Despite her concerns the cosplayer was able to cut the skins to her satisfaction using a laser cutting machine. Dan used kitchen scissors to cut Dun and Dee. The rows of stitching and sticking on the underside of the collar, Dan's narrative of construction and his metaconsumption of the American cosplayer's experience of apprehension around 'cutting day' intersect to create an image of crocodile skins as distinctive materials with the capacity to frustrate, resist and even frighten potential consumers.

CROCODILE WRESTLING PART 2: DUN AND DEE ACTING UP IN PERFORMANCE CONTEXTS

Several months before the interview I first encountered Dun and Dee 'in the flesh' when Dan wore his Rumpelstiltskin costume to AVCon, Adelaide's Anime and Videogame Convention. Throughout my fieldwork I regularly attended cosplay performance events including popular culture events, parties, photo shoots and competitions. At these events I was able to observe craft objects transformed into costumes as they were worn on cosplayer bodies. Many objects are incorporated as extensions or aspects of human bodies through processes of embodiment (Ihde 1990). Bodies are the means by which disparate material objects are connected and enlivened during performance (Mitchell 2009, 385). In the case of Dan and other cosplayers, the performing cosplayer body is a mediated body.

I had my first glimpse of Dun and Dee in performance in a selfie (Figure 4.). Dan messaged me on his way to the convention venue, fifteen minutes before we were due to physically meet with the other members of our cosplaying troupe. As studies of cosplay practices in Hong Kong (Peirson-Smith 2013), Japan (Okabe 2012) and the United States (Lunning 2011) have highlighted and I have explored elsewhere (Langsford 2016), cosplay performances are highly mediated. Photographs of cosplayers in character are taken by audiences and cosplayers themselves and displayed on social media platforms during and after an event. In this picture Dan reveals how the separate costume items he assembled, and narrated through Facebook messages, have come together on

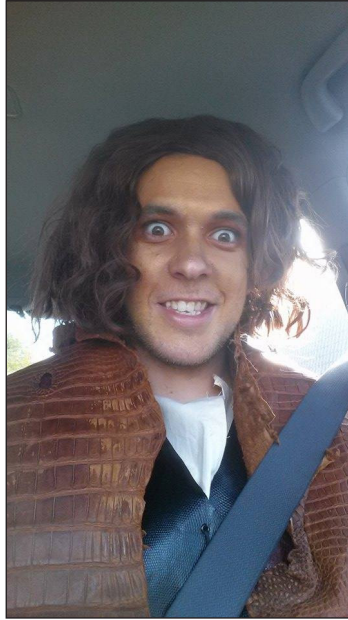


Figure 4. Car selfie

his body for the first time.

Anthropological and sociological approaches to performance have noted that actors, audiences, speech acts and objects can be transformed during performance events. Goffman (1990), Bateson (1955) and Schieffelin (1998) have all highlighted how even apparently insignificant actions, words or shifts in spatial or temporal contexts can change the framing of subjects and objects in performance. When worn around the neck on the top of the synthetic coat the object was reframed as part of a character cosplay, a costumed performance, in this case a performance of the character Rumpelstiltskin from *Once Upon a Time*.

When worn on Dan's body the costume existed as a complex assemblage. The component material parts – the styled wig, body paint, waistcoat, trousers, shirt, shoes and gaiters, and the crocodile collar – were combined with Dan's embodied performance, including signature poses (as demonstrated in Figure 5. below) and his use of the character's iconic phrases such as: 'Heh heh!', 'Hello dearies!', and 'Magic always comes at a price!' His costume was also positioned within a *Once Upon a Time* group of costumes worn by other members of our troupe who were dressed as the characters Snow White and Dark Swan.

However, within the assemblage some components work harder than others to create the performance's effect. Certain objects or elements act as icons or dominate and guide the interpretation of the whole. In interviews and casual conversations Dan used the word '*anchor*' to describe the ways that certain costumes can guide an audience's interpretation of a group cosplay or a particular object can guide the interpretation of a whole outfit. In this example Dan saw Rumpelstiltskin as the recognisable anchor costume that governed the interpretation of other costumes with arguably less iconic visual designs, including Snow White and Dark Swan. For Dan, the crocodile collar was itself the anchor of the Rumpelstiltskin cosplay:

I would still say that this crocodile stole is one of the defining pieces because he [Rumpelstiltskin] wears it quite frequently and it's something that quickly identifies the costume. (Author's interview 2015)



Figure 5. Dan as Rumpel

Although it was Dan's intention that the costume should function as a unified whole, Dun and Dee were not always amenable to playing their part. While performing the function of a collar, the skins were not actually attached to the synthetic coat in anyway. This meant that as Dan moved about the convention, raising his arms or bending down the collar would move out of alignment. Every time our group, or Dan individually, was asked to pose for a photo Dan would ask one of us to check whether the collar was sitting straight. We would know if the collar was sitting right, he told us, when the buttocks were aligned on either side of his chest.

The crocodile nature of the collar certainly attracted attention from other convention attendees. At various points throughout the event Dan was stopped by *Once Upon a Time* fans who recognised the costume and would ask him to pose for a photograph. Many of those who interacted with Dan specifically referred to the collar. Despite Dan's attempts to present the costume as a unified whole, for many other attendees the alterity and crocodiliness of the collar kept flickering into view. The presence of Dun and Dee disassembled the assemblage of the Rumpel costume.

However, Dun and Dee also provided Dan with an opportunity to explain that the collar was, in fact, made from genuine crocodile skins rather than printed synthetic fabric, and that they had cost him three hundred dollars. In these interactions Dan's performance of self shifted between Dan as Rumpelstiltskin and Dan as dedicated cosplay practitioner. In these face-to-face interactions Dan was able to emphasise his use of crocodile skins as evidence of his dedication to the cosplay value of accuracy. Interestingly, in the convention performance context Dun and Dee as crocodile skins and costume functioned simultaneously as an icon of the television character Rumpelstiltskin and reification of Dan's personal efforts as a cosplayer.

DUN AND DEE ONLINE: CROCODILE SKINS AS 'BOUNDARY OBJECTS' IN THE NEGOTIATION OF REGIMES OF VALUE

As objects in performance, Dun and Dee worked to mediate Dan's relationships with other attendees at AVCon. However, some months before, as online commodities, the crocodile skins had formed a point of intersection between Dan and another, very different group of subjects – crocodile farmers and hunters. Flickering between animals, craft materials, fashion items and commodities, Dun and Dee's multiple nature led to confusions, conjecture and unexpected revelations in the context of an online economic transaction.

One of the means by which I was able to gain access into cosplayer's shopping practices was through cosplayers' ongoing narration of their activities via social media. As Dan embarked on assembling the costume I began to receive Facebook messages every few days detailing his progress:

so I contacted someone on eBay about rumple stuff and mentioned I was a cosplayer without explaining it and I think they think it's some kind of sexytime thing and have fled into the hills. This is why we can't simply order kangaroo hides without explaining that cosplay is not a sexual act. (Facebook communication, Author's fieldnotes 2015)

The message above was one of the first sent and the first story Dan told that revolved around a perceived confusion between buyer and seller. From this and subsequent messages it became clear that Dan's online shopping adventure narratives about the creation of the Rumpelstiltskin costume were primarily stories of how he attempted to negotiate multiple regimes of value. As Appadurai (1986) argues in *The Social Life of Things*, commodities are enmeshed in particular cultural systems. These systems include culturally-specific forms of knowledge about how particular commodities should be valued, used, produced and consumed. Appadurai recognises that in the exchange of commodities these different cultural understandings frequently come into conflict:

Problems involving knowledge, information, and ignorance are not restricted to the production and consumption poles of the careers of commodities, but characterize the process of circulation and exchange itself. (1986, 43)

While moments of confusion, conflict, reinterpretation and negotiation during exchange processes have long been documented by anthropologists studying the effects of colonialization and globalisation (see for example Taussig 1993), Appadurai and others may not have anticipated the potential for culture shock generated by globalised ecommerce sites which connect buyers and sellers across geographical, national and language boundaries.

In Dan's social media narratives the crocodile skins emerge as 'boundary objects' (Star and Griesemer 1989, 393), capable of bridging cultural divides. Dan's online attempts to purchase genuine crocodile leather would lead him to unfamiliar territories, the Australian crocodile farming industry and the international network of conservation protection. In Dan's story it is the physical features of the crocodile skins Dun and Dee, in particular their texture, tears and bullet holes

that connect Dan's cosplay world with these distant Other places and actors.

Dan began his shopping activities on the global e-commerce site eBay. As a US-owned multinational company eBay appears to promote and enable a thoroughly Westernised, capitalist and homogenous exchange experience. Buyers and sellers on eBay can interact entirely through the use of the site's structured options, text windows and buttons. However, less structured conversations between buyers and sellers can also occur through links to sellers' websites and email addresses. It was during email exchanges that Dan experienced moments when his cosplayer understanding of an object's potential uses, properties and value were very different from the seller's understanding.

Cosplay shopping practices are informed by a very particular set of values and kind of knowledge. A core value that underpins many cosplay activities is the concept of accuracy, that a cosplay costume should visually resemble the visual properties of original character design as closely as possible (Lunning 2011; Okabe 2012). Dan took inspiration for his costume from two main sources: the original costume design created by Eduardo Castro and a cosplay recreation created by an American cosplayer which he had found on cosplay website The Replica Prop Forum. The American cosplayer detailed the construction of her version in a series of blog posts and photographs. As Dan later explained in an interview, this American cosplayer had gone to considerable effort and expense to replicate the original costume design:

The one that I saw, she'd gone to really amazing levels of detail to the point of, she contacted the costume designer from *Once Upon a Time* to source the exact boots, the specific brand and make of boots that were worn by Robert Carlyle. It was very detailed. She's a highly skilled seamstress. (Author's interview 2015)

Dan particularly noted her decision to use real crocodile skins in the construction of the costume's coat collar:

The lady who had done it online had spent about six hundred dollars getting the most ridiculous custom skins. She ordered them in and they'd been slaughtered just for her. (Author's interview 2015)

While six hundred dollars was out of Dan's price range he was still keen for his costume to appear as accurate as possible. As the buyer, Dan was acting within cosplay understandings of an object's value: he was searching for an item that held the visual properties of crocodile skin, an item that could be crafted into

a costume object and would not be too expensive. Dan's emphasis on visual accuracy comes through in discussions of his attempts to discover an alternative fabric to crocodile skins:

D: I had looked at doing it out of kangaroo leather which had been stamped with crocodile print but I ordered a little free sample and it wasn't quite right. It would work if I needed it for the underside of this [holding stole]...

C: Sort of like a lining?

D: Yeah, a lining or detail or something where you're not really going to focus on it - but for the main thing, it looked like a piece of kangaroo leather that had been stamped. It was too smooth. It wasn't quite real.

C: Is it important for you to look real?

D: Accuracy is important but it's more that I want it to be recognised. It's not so much that I want it to be character-accurate, like it has to match the show or else. It's that I want it to be able to be recognised. (Author's interview 2015)

It was this desire for accuracy that eventually drove Dan's decision to emulate the American cosplayer and source genuine crocodile skins for his costume.

Searching eBay for crocodile skins, Dan encountered a jarring moment of difference between his values as a buyer and the Australian and international legal systems governing the import and export of animal products:

Cosplay things I have learned today – if you import a crocodile skin from Thailand you can go to jail for ten years and pay up to \$110,000. (Facebook communication, Author's fieldnotes 2015)

Dan realised that he had never practically encountered these systems before and he began online research into the legislation that defines and shapes the international exchange of crocodiles and crocodile products. In interview Dan described his hastily acquired knowledge of this regime of value:

C: Ah, so you can't import them into Australia?

D: You can't import them into Australia and you can't export them from most countries. So you need an outgoing permit and an ingoing permit and there's a cost to apply for the permit which you don't get back if it's denied.

C: Oh gosh.

D: And there's a permit... So you pay to apply and then you pay for the permit itself if it's granted and then you've got to pay the actual shipping cost of the thing. It is cheaper to get a crocodile skin from Taiwan or something but it's a lot harder to get it done because the Australian controls are really strong. And the thing... whatever it's called... the international endangered species transfer thing applies all over the world as well. Even to import something from the States you have to get an export permit from the States and an import permit from Australia and you could get one but not the other. (Author's interview 2015)

Even in his online shopping activities Dan experienced the flickering, multiple nature of crocodile skins as both commodity and animal, and as such subject to the particular system of restrictions laid out by CITES and other local legislation.

Given the practical difficulties he would face negotiating the importing system Dan decided to seek crocodile skins from an Australian seller. This decision was communicated to me in the following Facebook message: 'thankfully we appear to live in a country filled with people who like to kill things' (Facebook communication, Author's fieldnotes 2015).

As Dan began to email crocodile hunters and farmers located in rural Queensland and the Northern Territory his Facebook message narratives started to draw upon mythic figures of Australian identity – the 'rugged bushman' and the 'city slicker'. Perhaps the most internationally famous of these texts, and most relevant to this story, is the film *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) in which a white larrikin crocodile hunter from the Australian outback must navigate the urban environments of New York City (Thompson 2012). In his Facebook narratives Dan presents himself as an urban Adelaide resident interested in indoor, online, digital and craft-based fan practices – in contrast to the rural, outdoor crocodile hunters of Queensland and the Northern Territory who would respond to Dan's requests with: 'Sorry, I didn't get to your email because I was off hunting' (Author's interview 2015).

While Dan saw visual accuracy and price as his primary interests as a buyer, his first Facebook message demonstrates that he was concerned that his cosplay motivations would be interpreted by sellers as frivolous or motivated by sexual fetishism. If Dan was concerned about being perceived as a deviant or dangerous customer, drawing on horrific representations of the larrikin bushman found in Australian films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974) and *Wolf Creek* (2005), he also joked about the possible motivations and actions of sellers he found online:

I also found a scary, scary man in Wingfield and I'm not entirely convinced that if I went there and asked about cosplay he wouldn't string me up and skin me. (Facebook communication, Author's fieldnotes 2015)

Initially, Dan found that his emails to the crocodile hunters and farmers would go ignored or would be dismissed with a short response informing him that they could not supply him. However, eventually several sellers responded and they began to enter into a discussion around Dan's intentions and the uses and properties of their products:

They said, 'What are you actually making?' And I sent them a picture of Rumble and they were kind of like 'Ah, okay. That's interesting,' [laughs] as people do. (Author's interview 2015)

Through their email interactions Dan began to realise that his needs and intentions as a buyer differed markedly from the sellers' typical customers, representatives from the fashion industry. Dan's enquiries were taking place against the backdrop of the Australian crocodile farming industry. Based in Queensland and the Northern Territory, large scale crocodile farms rear crocodiles for their use as leather in the production of international fashion products, including the handbags of Hermes, Gucci and Prada (*Australian Broadcasting Corporation* October 4th 2016). The crocodile skins are exported to Italian tanneries before being distributed across the world in the form of handbags, belts and other luxury products. Dan's emails were being ignored because his intentions, uses, and requirements as a buyer fell outside of the fashion industry exchange system.

Finally, one seller from Northern Queensland, a woman, responded to Dan's enquiries and was able to position Dan's request within the framing of the fashion industry exchange system.

D: A lot of the people that I emailed were non-specific about their industry. It's possibly because of animal cruelty and they don't want you to know about their methods. I'm not sure whether this lady went, 'I'm just going to take pity on this poor guy who has no idea what's going on,' but she did explain a lot of the process.

She talked about them [the skins] being seconds but not necessarily being poor quality because they're seconds because they don't meet the first grade standard, not because they're terrible. The first grade standard is for people like Gucci to make their handbags out of, you know, where there's a really strict level of quality.

C: I suppose when you look at it [handling the skins], I know you've cut pieces of it, but you can see in certain little bits of the skin, you can see little holes and...

D: [laughs] That comes from bullet holes and when they take the skin off and it tears. These skins are ones that were prepared for somebody else's order but they weren't of an appropriate standard. (Author's interview 2015)

In his encounter with the Queensland seller, Dan's cosplayer understandings of value intersected with the seller's crocodile farmer understandings of value through the bullet holes and tears on a pair of crocodile skins.

As a crocodile farmer explains in a report for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on the local crocodile industry, bullet hole marks transform a valuable commodity into rubbish:

'Skinning a crocodile is quite a simple process. The only hard part about it is that if you nick the skin, you can drop a lot of the price straight out of it,' Adam Lever said.

'If you're buying a handbag for \$50,000, you don't want a scratch on it – it'd be like buying a Ferrari with a flat tyre.' (*Australian Broadcasting Corporation* October 4th 2016).

In these discourses the animal nature of the skins is erased. In his quote the crocodile farmer even likens crocodile skins to another luxury product manufactured in Italy. The international fashion and crocodile farming industries have been critiqued for their objectification of the animals by organisations

such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) who have created protest campaigns and videos which depict leather and skins as the dead or suffering bodies of animal subjects.

Rubbish to the fashion industry, carcasses to PETA, bullet hole riddled crocodile skins were nonetheless valuable to Dan. The damaged crocodile underbellies would hold seconds and reject status within the fashion exchange system but their cheaper price and less finished visual properties suited Dan's cosplay purposes. Cosplayers are keen reusers of junk objects and for the crocodile farmer and the fashion brands they supply damaged skins are definitely junk.

From the beginning of his search to the arrival of the crocodile skins Dan actively constructed and performed narratives of the exchange to me, his work colleagues and a broader audience of Facebook friends. In these narratives Dan was able to perform himself as a cosplayer and outsider negotiating unfamiliar systems of exchange – the Australian legal systems governing the sale of animal products, the animal skin market for the fashion industry and the practices of crocodile farmers and hunters. Despite multiple setbacks Dan was able to portray his activities as successful, and to demonstrate his commitment as a practitioner to the cosplay value of visual accuracy.

FROM CRAFT MATERIALS TO CROCODILE OTHERS

When his purchased crocodile skins finally arrived at his workplace in a postal satchel Dan sent me a picture message (Figure 6.) and posted 'Dun and Dee have arrived' on his Facebook wall. Reflecting their special commodity status within the Australian legal system, the skins each had little ID tags attached to them indicating that they were Australian crocodiles and were registered in a database. I asked Dan how the skins came to be named Dun and Dee, after *Crocodile Dundee*. Dan replied that his colleague had named them before the skins had even arrived in the office. Dan had narrated the stories surrounding their purchase and had even shown his colleague some of the email exchanges: 'He thinks all my costumes are a bit ridiculous but he thought it was particularly hilarious when they actually arrived' (Author's interview 2015).

The humour of the situation appeared to stem from Dan's engagement with Others – crocodile farmers and hunters and the crocodiles themselves. The naming of the crocodiles, performed as a joke, marked them as Others with a potential subjectivity. As this article has demonstrated, even dead crocodiles can continue to have lives of their own.

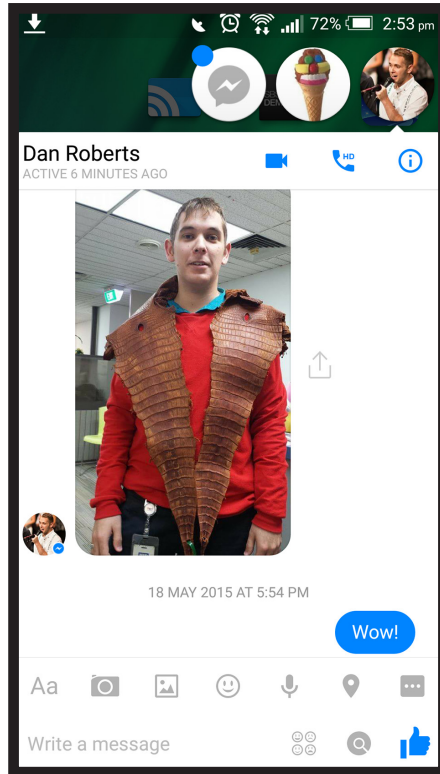


Figure 6. Dun and Dee have arrived

CONCLUSION: CROCODILE ETHNOGRAPHY

In the three decades since Appadurai invited ethnographers to ‘follow the thing’, commodities, their biographies and relationships, remain an important locus of ethnographic attention. Processes of commoditisation continue to provide a point of entry to understanding different regimes of cultural value and economic practices. However, as the anthropologists working with ideas of the posthuman remind us, things like commodities may not follow a traceable path. The life of a commodity may be multiple, messy and non-linear. Commodities may be acted upon but they may also act upon others. The messiness of the social lives of commodities like crocodile skins is evident even in the structure of this article. To tell the story of Dun and Dee I have been forced to move my narrative back and forwards in time and to make leaps from tiny scratches on a physical object to an international system of trade.

Capturing the voices of crocodile-like commodities can require considerable flexibility and innovation on the part of the ethnographer. The story of Dun and Dee, as told here, is an assemblage of textual, oral and photographic narratives. Some emerged from my deliberate use of traditional ethnographic techniques like interviews and participant-observation while others were created by participants themselves from their own, culturally-specific forms of reflexive documentation. It was only by combining various approaches including the exploration of metaconsumption narratives, examining the objects in performance, and an analysis of their physical properties that I was able to more fully understand the social lives of Dun and Dee and how these somewhat unusual objects could play such an important role in numerous exchange networks and regimes of value.

NOTES

- 1 Claire Langsford is a Visiting Fellow at the University of Adelaide. Her doctoral thesis, *Cosplay in Australia: (Re)creation and Creativity Assemblage and Negotiation in a Material and Performative Practice* explored the intersections of materiality and performance in a dynamic practice. Claire's research interests include material culture, fandom and performance, visual and digital anthropology.
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