

**THE PRACTICE OF THE NORMATIVE:  
the Making of Mothers, Children and Homes in north London**

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266 TO 269 ARE MISSING  
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BOOK**

## **Thesis Abstract**

The thesis comprises ethnography of alternative provisioning in a range of households on a street in North London. It considers the alternative (non-formal retail) means by which goods are acquired and exchanged. The areas of inquiry include gift-giving, mail order catalogues, network sales schemes, second-hand goods, nearly new 'jumble' sales and self-provisioning. Challenging polarised models of the household and the market, the gift and the commodity, the thesis reveals how alternative modes of consumption are used to generate and contest value in everyday practice.

In particular, the study focuses on the activities of women and the ways in which social networks are constituted around specific types of acquisition and material culture. These activities include the swapping of second hand baby goods, the provisioning of children's parties and gifts, the decorating of the home and the use of commercial network sales schemes revolving around fashion, cosmetics and housewares. Aesthetic practice and modes of acquisition are considered in the context of immediate social relations and domestic settings.

As well as providing empirical data regarding a range of consumption practices in contemporary Britain, the thesis goes on to argue that it is within these forms of provisioning that the practice of normativity is most evident. While a major theoretical pretext of anthropological enquiry is the question of how culture operates cohesively in the context of modernity, what arises from this ethnography is the extent to which goods and the values made around them, through exchange, are used in the making of the normative. This thesis examines the role of everyday alternative provisioning in constituting and contesting moral and social pressures to determine a basis of conformity and having made these conditions, facilitate the relationships that depend upon them.

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**Introduction**  
**The Practice of the Normative:**  
**the Making of Mothers, Children and Homes in North London**

This thesis began as an inquiry into the ‘alternative’ or ‘informal’ means by which goods are acquired and the household is provisioned in contemporary Britain. In contrast to the numerous studies which emphasise the formal retail site and the activity of shopping, this ethnography of an ‘ordinary’ street in north London set out to account for the less tangible activities involved in the provisioning of the household. Initial inquiry into these less visible activities, such as gift exchange, passing on of second-hand goods, home-made goods, party plan sales schemes, revealed their notable relation to women’s domestic work as carers (Devault 1991; Cheal 1986; Werbner 1988). Certainly, numerous comparative cross-cultural ethnographies reveal the ostensibly feminised nature of such activities, from the practice of generating home decoration schemes in accordance with a shared notion of ‘neighbourliness’ in Norway (Gullestad 1986), to the attendance of intra-household ‘kitty parties’ in northern India<sup>1</sup> (Sharma 1986). In her study of the newly urbanised area of Shimla in north India, Sharma describes how the informal provisioning activities of women, and concerns over apparently incidental issues such as aesthetic style, are crucial in maintaining and extending social relations;

It was women who took the leading role in maintaining and extending the network of gift exchange relationship in which the household participated, seeing to it that gifts of cloth, sweets, and cash were presented in the correct amount or quality on appropriate ceremonial occasions (1986:150).

The ‘work’ of women in relation to provisioning and the generation of value through exchange is dealt with in the recent work of sociologist Zelizer (1994; 2001). Zelizer (2001), in her study of economic transaction and intimate ties, considers the traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Kitty parties are regular social gatherings, taking place in the newly urbanised area of Shimla, where a group of women each contribute to a common pool of money. Each month money is drawn, in turn, and used for entertainment in the home of a particular ‘housewife’; ‘The kitty party nicely symbolizes the juxtaposition of thought and style as considerations for the urban housewife’. (Sharma 1986: 84)

divide made by sociologists and economists between money, the market and intimate relations. Even economic sociology which acknowledges the social nature of market activity (White 1988), she observes, continues to focus on so-called 'true' market examples relegating other forms of economic activity (such as households, informal economy and consumption) to a non-market world. Contrary to the numerous dichotomous approaches to the market sphere/ non-market sphere, and the world of intimacy and the world of money, Zelizer advocates an understanding of the intersection of intimate social ties and institutions such as money, bureaucracies, markets and specialised associations. In her 'differentiated ties' approach she argues that 'in all sorts of social settings people differentiate strongly among different kinds of interpersonal relations, marking them with distinct names, symbols, practices, and media of exchange' (Zelizer 2001: 3). In turn these 'differentiated ties' generate distinctive circuits which incorporate particular forms of knowledge, information, obligations, rights, symbols and media of exchange which form in all arenas of social life (schools, households, armies, businesses, etc.). These circuits are not fixed entities but rather 'exchange media' that might be reshaped by participants in recognition of distinctions amongst different forms of social relations. The market, then, like money (Zelizer 1994) cannot be understood simply as an inevitably homogenising force undermining the value and meaning of intimate relations (Kuttner 1997; Rifkin 2000). The empirical evidence presented in this thesis testifies to the constant blurring of notions of the market, social relations and intimate ties through the practices and meanings of modes of provisioning and the seeking of value through everyday cultural practice and material culture.

### **The Creation of Value and the Search for the Normative**

Activities of provisioning exist within a social context in which they are expressive of, and constitutive of, the development and reproduction of relationships. What this thesis will demonstrate, through ethnography, is that this understanding needs to be taken even further; that it is not just anthropological and sociological theorists that translate economic activity such as alternative provisioning into the study of relationships, but the people being studied themselves. They are equally clear that provisioning is an expression of such relationships (Miller 1998b; Devault 1991; Gullestad 1992) and their own concerns are quite explicitly more with the relationships themselves than with the provisioning; which is frequently regarded as merely a means towards that further end.

What will emerge in the ethnography is a sense in which the wider contexts of the study of the provisioning of the home is actually the condition of modernity under which individuals and households are striving to establish their own terms under which they interact. This point fits into a broader debate within the social sciences (considered in the conclusion) regarding the construction of the normative within culture (Bauman 1991; Beck 1992; Bourdieu 1979, Giddens 1979; Douglas 1973; Durkheim 1952). The point about non-formal retail provisioning, as opposed to formal provisioning, is that areas such as pricing, location and value are not as fixed as they are in shopping but have to be invented as part of the activity itself. We have to decide where to hold the jumble sale, for example, and what constitutes a fair price for each occasion (see Smith 1989; Stewart 1992). This brings with it a strong sense of uncertainty and anxiety about whether one is going about the procedure the right way and how it will be read by others. So what begins as a consideration of provisioning becomes as much an ethnography of those anxieties and the strategies by which those involved seek to allay their own fears and the fears of others (Goffman 1990 [1959]).<sup>2</sup> This ethnographic study, then, from its preliminary consideration of provisioning evolved into a thesis whose central concern is normativity itself. It considers the moral and social pressures involved in determining a basis for conformity and the role of provisioning in creating these conditions and thus facilitating the relationships that depend upon them.

Normativity, in the context of this thesis, is understood as the fluid process of pursuing consensus rather than the mere striving for adherence to a set of established norms. In this sense, it takes into consideration both the externally understood measures of the normative (institutions, ideologies, etc.) and the more intimately and internalised workings (personal histories, social relations, etc.) through which the normative is formed as part of a dynamic and contested process. This is not to suggest, then, the constant striving towards normativity precludes conflict and change in favour of a levelled-down conformity. On the contrary, this process, as revealed in cultural practice, involves rifts as much as coherence and is an on-going and shifting process.

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike Goffman's use of symbolic interactionism and 'role play', this thesis emphasises how pressures arise autonomously rather than from a particular agent, in understanding the normative.

The study of that practice can be observed in people's attempt to live this normativity through the processes of becoming a mother, the setting up of homes, the gifting of children and the provisioning of the household. Acknowledging that a pivotal concern of social science is the normative, this thesis turns from the abstract to the concretised form of the practice by teasing out the ways in which everyday interactions between people and people, and people and things, generate the state. It explores the importance of material culture and related practices in creating the normative in the modern world. While most literature around the normative centres on its power and the efforts of people to resist it, this ethnographic study of households and provisioning on a north London street, regards how people try to create it in the first place as the social environment within which they can live.

The huge concern that parents have for the appropriate behaviour of both themselves as parents and their children, combined with the issues of materialising this relationship in the act of provisioning itself (and the possible disruption of this process by the growing agency of the children themselves), make this the ideal material from which to construct the more general path from the issue of provisioning to that of normativity and thus culture more generally. As evident in the work of James (1979; 1993), relationships of consumption with children can be seen to bring out several paradoxical issues and, as in the case of sweets, can be quite eloquent about the otherwise unexpressed, in this case the children's own perception of their relationship to the adult world.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Thesis Structure**

The first section of the thesis considers the activities of mothers and children living on and adjacent to the street and their relation to specific modes of alternative provisioning. Chapter one traces the process of 'becoming' a mother from the initial furnishing of nurseries and the accumulation of goods through 'baby showers', to the rounds of children's birthday parties attended and arranged. The provisioning and materiality of

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular James (1993) regarding the construction of 'normal' and different childhoods in the context of the medicalisation of children which relates to the practice of normativity as a heightened aspect of parenting and childhood. To quote James 'some parents located the individuality or particularity of their own children's childhood through comparison with a stereotype of 'normal' childhood; others did so in contrast' (1993:23). Similarly, James sets out to understand the 'finer lines of social discrimination used by children themselves to sort out those who belong and those who do not' (1993:43).

motherhood forms a crucial aspect of constituting mother and infant. Choices of goods and the arrangement of birthday parties are not simply a reflection of 'lifestyle' but are detailed articulations of aesthetics and value that have real implications. The trajectories formed by these choices and relations, as well as striving towards a normative culture of mothering, generate specific forms of sociality and have broader implications in terms of ideologies around mothering. This might be formalised in organisations such as the NCT [National Childbirth Trust] which advocates specific approaches towards child-rearing as well as providing a formal support network. But more often it is through the everyday practices of alternative provisioning (the gifting of other mothers' children, preparing for a birthday party, attending school fayres, the lending of baby equipment, etc.) that access to resources and modes of mothering are generated.

In chapter two, the example of the nearly new sale and the alternative provisioning of babies and children's clothes acts, in part, as a further ethnographic case study supporting the observations of the opening chapter. It highlights the ways in which values are made and negotiated through the exchanges and appropriations of particular forms of goods. Through the inter-household trafficking of second hand babies clothing, relations are made and unmade between women, ideas around mothering are swapped as a drive for a normativity is sought. This chapter challenges assumptions regarding the isolatory nature of women's work as mothers, and instead considers how such practices create alternative spaces of sociality through the borrowing of market relations.

In chapter three the 'coming of age' of children in and around Jay Road is understood in relation to the material culture of childhood and the adult/child gift relation. While there is little visibility of children playing on Jay Road itself the main arena of intra-household child relations has arguably become that of contemporary material culture. The *Argos* catalogue, for example, has become a staple of homes in the study. Children have become familiarised with the toys and games contained in its pages and swap this information in the play-ground as well as regularly using it to inform adults of appropriate gifts for themselves. Although the parents of households on the street may never interact with each other, through this world of material culture and its transactions parents anxiously negotiate the 'appropriateness' of gifts in relation to those of other children; thus searching for some sense of the normative. Unlike chapters one and two, this chapter shows how the growing agency of the child (and their increasing

embarrassment over adult tastes) becomes a key aspect of household moral economy and the striving for the normative amongst and between children and parents.

The second section of the thesis focuses on three discrete aspects of alternative provisioning and the ways in which these modes, as opposed to formal provisioning, present uncertainty or flexibility and therefore demand a far more pronounced and proactive engagement in creating value.

Chapter four follows the home decoration, real and actual, of three households living in Sparrow Court on Jay Road. Using similar standardised spaces dictated by the state, each household responds in entirely different ways to the aesthetic ordering of their home. While much historical literature considering home decoration assumes that working class households follow a non-expressive and formulaic approach to their home making, this ethnographic insight challenges such assumptions while exploring the process through which the home is 'set up'. The home, the chapter argues, is best understood as a process in which other imagined homes are used to mediate and measure real decorating schemes. In this sense, the home actually becomes objectified as 'the other' which the homeowners live up to or measure themselves against. The house becomes a goal in and of itself through the embodiment of the imaginings and actions of its inhabitants, and as such imposes its own agency.

Chapter Five shows how relatively new forms of acquisition, such as a pre-shopping catalogue and a local classified paper, generate their own cultural norms and structural constraints used in various ways by different informants. While formal retail outlets belong to more rigid cultural histories regarding their use and meaning (particularly in terms of social class connotation) the ethnographic example of this chapter shows how such definitions are played out in relation to cultural capital with relatively new and alternative forms of acquisition.

The final chapter focuses on the anxiety of fashion and the ways in which women (particularly those returning to work after child-rearing) search for new sources of reassurance and 'inspiration' in their clothing choices. While ideas around the appropriate fashion choices might previously have been generated through relations with friends and the currency of magazines etc. with the suspension of such activities

during child-rearing the usual means of grounding choice are lost. Instead, commercial organisations such as image consultancy ‘Colour-Me-Beautiful’ provide a social situation in which friends are gathered together and paying women are offered an ‘objective’ guide to fashion colour and cut. Organisations such as this (and also Mary Kay Cosmetics company) are prominent on Jay Road and this chapter completes the evidence of the thesis in showing how commercial, market oriented institutions are incorporated into the practice of normativity.

The concluding section of the thesis focuses on the specific findings of the ethnography and the broader implications of its contribution to the field of social anthropology and material culture studies. It suggests how the findings of this ethnography lead to broader questions regarding the practice of normativity in everyday life as seen in the material culture and exchanges and social relations of provisioning.

## **Chapter One**

### **Methodology on ‘the street’**

The thesis is based on an ethnography investigating a range of modes of provisioning used in seventy-six households on a particular street (and several minor adjacent roads) in north London during the period 1994-1997. The preliminary stages of the research (contacting households and conducting general pilot interviews with approximately 130 households along one street in north London) were shared with Daniel Miller whose study formed part of a broader ESRC project regarding shopping and identity. The ESRC project (Miller, Jackson, Thrift, et al. 1998) involved the quantitative and qualitative study of two north London shopping centres, namely Brent Cross and Wood Green Shopping City, and was principally geographical in its concerns and methodologies. Miller’s research (Miller 1998b, 2000) concerned the provisioning of households through supermarket and formal retail shopping which acted as an ethnographic adjunct to the quantitative and focus-group based research (Holbrook and Jackson 1996a; 1996b).

The initial stage of the research involved the leafleting of households on a specific street in north London with a one page description of the intended research and details of the researchers, namely myself and Daniel Miller, and their credentials (which could be verified at local police stations). The leaflets outlined particular times that door-to-door research calls would be made and informed householders that researchers, one male and one female, would carry identification from University College, London. Preliminary contacts were established in this way and through a process of ‘snowballing’ eventually came to include a number of informants living on adjacent streets to the original fieldsite.

The benefit of conducting the preliminary stages of the research as a co-ethnography was two-fold. Firstly, it increased the capacity to accumulate preliminary profiles of the households and generate data in the areas of formal and non-shopping provisioning essential in creating a rounded picture of the households’ range of practices. This proved vital, at later stages of the ethnography, in providing cross-comparative detail. Secondly, the gender and age differences of the two ethnographers allowed the development of different types and ‘depths’ of relationships with specific inhabitants on

the street which improved the overall qualitative strength of our data. Although a large amount of ethnographic notes and interview transcripts were initially shared, as the ethnography for this thesis continued for a period of two years following the completion of the ESRC project, the majority of informants and data used in this thesis pertain exclusively to my own study. However, the original premise of the research, namely the study of the ‘alternative’ provisioning of the household was conceived as a corollary to Miller’s study regarding formal retailing. This basic division of areas was initially useful, as it identified a range of practices which fell outside ‘shopping’ as an activity most usually covered (or assumed) in contemporary and historical consumption studies (for example, Bowlby 1985; Pasi and Falk 1997; Porter Benson 1986; Williams 1982; Fine and Leopold 1993; Reekie 1993). In practical terms, specifying a particular area of study outside retail shopping was invaluable in enabling the identification of otherwise invisible practices and reassuring informants that their otherwise unremarkable activities (many of which fell outside conventionally acknowledged areas of domestic labour and economic activity) were entirely relevant to the ethnography. The term ‘alternative’ was not maintained as a major theoretical approach to consumption and household provisioning in the thesis but as a loose term it did help to highlight otherwise peripheralised activities.

### **The ‘Street’ as a Fieldsite**

The fieldsite, a street referred to throughout as ‘Jay Road’, was selected due to its non-specific social class and ethnic identity in terms of geographical location and housing types so as to prevent, as much as possible, pre-determined social parameters circumscribing the findings of the ethnography. Instead, social classifications were ‘allowed’ to emerge from the practices themselves. In relation to the broader remit of the ESRC project the street also fell (according to questionnaire research) within a postcode bracket (Miller, Jackson, Thrift, et al. 1998: 65-66) which showed a statistically higher probability of residents visiting either the Brent Cross and Wood Green shopping malls. As both malls tend to attract a high proportion of local clientele from the widely differing London boroughs in which they are situated<sup>1</sup>, there were only a limited number of areas which both shopping centres could draw on for potential

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<sup>1</sup> Brent Cross is most aptly described as a suburban area while Wood Green is more appropriately described as inner city. The boroughs in which they are situated, namely Barnet and Haringey, both differ in social class make up (see Miller, Jackson, Thrift, et al. 1998: 57-58).

customers and Jay Road fell into this category. In practice, however, inhabitants of Jay Road could access Wood Green shopping mall more easily, by public and private transport, and in this respect Brent Cross was more often frequented on shopping trips designated as 'special' or exceptional from everyday shopping (for example at Christmas time and to find specific purchases such as household white goods or lingerie). Although there was a much stronger local affiliation with the 'Shopping City', due to its comparative convenience, there was an equally strong antipathy expressed by many Jay Road residents towards this shopping area due to it being perceived as overly urban and crime-ridden (Miller, Jackson, Thrift, et al. 1998:123-127). Whilst some residents of Jay Road had never visited Brent Cross shopping mall it was identified by others, along with the West End, as a regularly visited shopping destination. These practices did not, however, fit into neatly articulated reflections of social class but they do bear out the initial statistical analysis offered by the ESRC project regarding the 'dual' affiliation or non-fixed identity of the postcode in this particular area. This is further born out by findings (chapter 5) of this thesis which describe how residents of Jay Road, referred to by informants as an 'in-between' or 'no' place, engendered and negotiated a sense of 'location' through their practices of provisioning rather than through a strong sense of identification with a particular geographically defined place or locality.

The ethnography was instigated as a study of the alternative means (i.e. non-formal shopping) by which goods are acquired in the provisioning of the household including broad categories such as gift exchange, second hand goods, party plan sales schemes, jumble sales, classified and catalogue consumption. Rather than consider discrete spaces, sites or practices of provisioning most commonly privileged in consumption studies (see for example, Chaney 1990; Crewe and Gregson 1997; Falk and Campbell 1997; Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe 2000; Kowinski 1985; Lancaster 1995; Lowe and Crewe 1996; Mort 1996) the study set out to position the domestic as the significant locus of such practices. This raised a series of methodological problems; in particular how to conduct participant observation of largely invisible and diffuse practices (as well as site based events) and how to generate data regarding a range of 'ordinary' practices across a broad range of potentially inter-related or localised households. A London street, with all of its diversity, provided a bounded setting for this inquiry. Data acquired

pertained to a range of household types including single person, family and shared households (see table below).

Tenure and composition of main households in the ethnography

	Nuclear	Parent-Child	Two adult	Single
Council	7	10	3	15
Other	19	3	1	9

As discussed later in this chapter, the ethnographic findings (in terms of volume of data generated) were necessarily biased in favour of households most able or willing to allow researchers into their everyday lives. Every attempt has been made to balance this bias towards the ‘social’ though it is recognised as a hazard of home-based ethnography located in the domestic.

The ESRC project and the preliminary co-ethnography with a researcher (Miller) considering conventional ‘shopping’ as a means of acquiring goods (including supermarkets, corner and high street shops and departments stores) provided the ideal context in which to frame my study of ‘non-formal’ shopping (as an extension of previous historical work in this area; see Clarke 1999). While the requirements of the ESRC project contributed to the choice of location for the field site the selection of the specific street, referred to as Jay Road, arose from discussions around methodological concerns between myself and Miller. In short, as the findings of the ESRC project were published after the completion of my ethnography the tangential relationship with the project was ostensibly pragmatic, rather than intellectual.<sup>2</sup>

The street used for the ethnography was selected as a fieldsite in part due to its geographical relation to the shopping centres mentioned above (both malls are accessible by public and private transport from the street) and due to its wide cross-section of housing types. Despite the variety of housing, though, the street is most aptly described as ‘nondescript’ and, as previously mentioned, informants themselves frequently referred to the area as a ‘no man’s land’ which lacked a coherent identity or

<sup>2</sup> Findings from my own research have been published in the form of related articles during the course of the ethnography, prior to the completion of this thesis (see Clarke 1997; Clarke 2000).

rather, lent itself to multiple and often contradictory identities as encapsulated by the following quotation from a Jay Road resident;

It is quite difficult, I mean you can say Wood Green, it is not really Wood Green. You can say ... it is not really Latchbrook. I tend to say near Robintown because I can't really think of, I can't, it is too far from Wood Green to say Wood Green. Sometimes I say that sometimes I say Latchbrook. I mean it really varies. Sometimes I say even Ibis Pond, I mean that is interesting, in some ways, who you're talking to. Sometimes, there is an element [of that], but also sometimes it is not so much because you want to say it is one or another place, it is also where you think they know.

As well as being ambiguously situated in terms of the local cultural geography, the street has a notably mixed range of housing types. One side of Jay Road is dominated by council housing in the form of low-rise flats, constructed in the 1960s, which are maintained to a high standard and set amidst green lawns. Sparrow Court and Lark Estate are both conventional low rise council estates. The other side of the street consists of two-bedroom maisonettes (valued slightly below the average price for a terraced house in the area and thus popular with young families) and a range of average priced terrace housing. The street also incorporates a series of semi-detached 1930s and 1950s houses with above average room sizes for the street. Although comparatively large in terms of the accommodation offered, they are less expensive than the Victorian terraced three-bedroom houses on the streets adjacent to Jay Road which are considered more desirable as ideal middle-class family homes. The gentrification of these two leafier streets off Jay Road is partly due to the stylistic attractiveness of the housing stock and their family size. In contrast, Jay Road 'proper' has a mixed, and in parts, badly maintained housing stock. In the course of the ethnography the borough council was considering a scheme, backed by residents, to introduce speed bumps to make the area safer for pedestrians and children. The street, then, is located approximately a mile away from a busy inner city area but simultaneously borders areas of north London suburbs. It does not have direct access to underground tube travel or overland train stations. It is, however, manifestly urban, and while not having direct access to the tube system, many inhabitants in and around Jay Road work in the West End of London as well as in local areas.

At one end of the street is a telephone kiosk and a parade of shops which includes two late-opening grocery stores, a post office, a hairdressing salon, a betting shop, a public house, an electrical repair/carpet shop, a hardware store and a fish and chip shop. Residents remarked on the swift turnover of tenants setting up business here and how they most often failed to survive. In the course of the ethnography a health food shop and a nearly new children's-wear boutique, set up only a year before, ceased trading. Established residents who had lived in the area for five years or more commonly remarked upon the fact that 'proper' shops, such as a green grocer's, a butcher's and a baker's, had previously inhabited the sites of the present stores (for expanded discussion of use of local shops in the area see Miller 2000).

In terms of social and economic distinction, the area in which the street is located is considered neither particularly poor nor particularly wealthy. The diversity of the housing stock (which broadly represents the range available in urban areas throughout London) allowed study of households of generally average income across a reasonable spread of working and middle class groups. This ethnography, however, does not purport to specifically represent the 'average' householder as, between the definitions of 'not too poor' and 'not particularly well-off', there were enormous variations in informants' circumstances. Rather it was an attempt to include a broad range of circumstance. While a sixty year old janitor struggling to support himself and his frail elderly mother on a minimum wage lives on one side of Jay Road, a professional working mother of three children attending private schools lives on the other; they inhabit the same street, but as this thesis shows, occupy entirely different social and provisioning worlds.

Although the choice of a 'nondescript' or 'average' street was intended to avoid a prior assumption of class as a key mode of analysis, in effect social class did emerge as the key means by which informants defined themselves. As discussed in chapter 5, despite (or because of) the lack of strong class identity offered by the street itself (positioned equidistant from a strongly working-class and a renowned middle-class area referred to here as Ibis Pond), modes of provisioning emerged as a means of negotiating such identities.

Jay Road, then, does not stand as a coherent place within itself (in terms of engendering 'community' through the interrelation of social spaces and social relations) but is rather generated through the variety of practices and identities of those inhabiting this location. Although there were strong logistical reasons for choosing a single street as a fieldsite (as mentioned previously in relation to ESRC 'Shopping and Identity Project') the diversity of this street could be argued to have constituted a type of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1998). Indeed an ethnography based on the study of a urban street in England offered little semblance of a community in which to become involved; rather it was defined by the guarded privacy of individual households. Although the lack of visible social networks or communities prominent on the street presented a logistical problem, there is in actual fact no reason to assume that inhabitants in a transient urban population rely on their locality or formal/informal group association in their construction of social networks (for problems regarding presuppositions around the concept of the field site see Clifford (1997) and Gupta and Ferguson (1997)).

The 'multi-sited imaginary', advocated by Marcus (1998:5) in response to an 'understanding of cultures as increasingly in circulation, making all locales and sites of sustained fieldwork partial perspectives on what anthropology... promised to study', and his challenge to traditional site-based understanding of ethnographic inquiry, is useful when considering the problem posed by researching in a location such as Jay Road. Although the use of 'the street' as an ethnographic site might be seen to constitute a naturalised category of traditional anthropological enquiry, there was no implicit or explicit prior assumption that this might offer a discrete unit of study of peoples or practices.

Despite academic work highlighting the centrality of the street to the history of British cultural life (Young and Wilmott 1962; McKibbin 1998) the ideology of the street as a proper unit of sociality was not apparent in this ethnography. Significantly, for the findings of the thesis, it was through the ethnography of provisioning rather than the activities of the street and its 'life', and the understanding of material cultures and persons (and particularly their relation to the construction of the normative) that a number of co-existing localised 'cultures' and otherwise invisible networks of relations and cosmologies emerged. Provisioning was not understood in the sense of Wallman's (1984) classic functionalist account of eight south London households, in which

households like organisms, respond with enormous variations in strategy according to the range of the resources and the relation to local social networks. Rather provisioning (the acquisition and consumption of goods and related knowledges and practices) as viewed in this ethnography is seen as a multi-sited practice involving a diversity of resources and the imaginations, memories, biographies, 'other' voices, life course associations, power and social relations of informants.

A useful example, for challenging the fixity of site bound ethnography, is Marcus' (1989) study of wealth and Texan dynasties in the United States in which he adopts a methodology which, unlike traditional anthropology, does not premise the family or dynasty as the proper object of study but rather considers the less tangible and diffuse practices and meanings around money. Drawing on ethnographic comparison with Kaluli people of the Great Papuan Plateau of New Guinea, whose parallel universe of unseen doppelgangers (intangible in terms of conventional ethnographic research) forms a crucial but invisible part of their cultural order, Marcus argues that the invisible parallel world of wealth is a vital object of study in itself for the understanding of Texan dynasties. As 'a disseminated subject diffused across many contexts', wealth can not be reduced to the ethnographic solidity of stock market evaluations, descendants entitlements, or the practices or discourses of experts and institutions. Just as the Kaluli's unseen world is an intimate part of what it is to be Kaluli 'here and now', in the context of Texan dynasties, wealth (as a conglomeration of histories, relations, people and practices) and persons are mutually constitutive although as a category 'wealth', unlike family and kinship, is less likely to fall into the naturalised categories of anthropological research. Marcus concludes by arguing that 'modern' cultures, despite Western metaphysical assumption, need to be understood as much as 'non-modern' cultures in terms of their 'invisible' cosmological underpinnings. Subjects cannot merely be bound as fixed entities for in contemporary ethnography groups as apparently mundane as the 'the credit-card carrying middle-class are potential ethnographic subjects who must be studied as disseminations, as always and partially here and there' (1989:121).

It is clear from the earlier informant's quote regarding the ambiguity of the street's 'true' location that even in terms of the relatively localised world of north London a subject might in the same instant identify themselves with Ibis Pond (a notably middle

class) and Wood Green (a urban, more working class area). In this sense, the traditional boundaries suggested by a single site based ethnography do not automatically infer 'coherence'. But it is in regarding the practices of provisioning in a specific site, such as a street, however, that a conceptual base through which to explore what Marcus describes as the 'process of dispersed identity' is allowed (1998:63).

In terms of ethnicity, this particular area is typical of north London in being highly cosmopolitan. Over twenty different languages are purportedly spoken in the local primary school and the seventy-six households included in the study had occupants from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds; South Asian, Jewish, West African, Southern Irish, West Indian and Cypriot. Approximately half of the households had English born inhabitants and could loosely be described as Christian. Similarly, in terms of life-course the street's householders cover a wide range of stages and include single women sharing rented accommodation, retirees, young families, elderly bachelors, students, young single fathers and middle aged single mothers. Although the street is identified as the site of the study, as considered in the empirical evidence and analysis of the thesis, it is the practice of provisioning which more often defines the sense of place and identity as lived by the inhabitants themselves. As Marcus asserts 'the identity of anyone or any group is produced simultaneously in many different locales of activity by many different agents for many different purposes' (1998:62).

Arguably it is through the cultural practice of the normative encountered through activities of provisioning (as described in the following chapters) wherein this dispersal of identities becomes apparent. This may be revealed, for example, in the case of new 'mothers' in the process of taking on a new identity in relation to social groups and associated ideologies. This may be negotiated through formal means (such as affiliation with a national parenting group) or through the swapping of second-hand baby wear with other mothers which temporally changes the relation to 'the street' as a concept. Similarly, this process may become apparent in the decorating of the home, where a variety of localised understandings of larger ideological structures such as the 'State' are apparent in the provisioning of the household. In this sense 'the street' (in as much as it exists at all) is made-up of the various, intermittent and occasionally intersecting, practices and imaginations of its inhabitants. However, despite these dispersed identities and the ethnographic understanding of subjects as 'disseminations', the inhabitants of

Jay Road, as will become evident in the empirical data of the thesis, construct their practices in relation to a sense of the 'local'. Even if this is not bound to the notion of a 'street' in geographical terms in the specificity of their practices and the construction of value around them (be it choosing the 'appropriate' children's Christmas present or bargaining over second-hand clothes) informants 'belong' to Jay Road as a street made up of the diverse subjectivities of its inhabitants. In this respect, and the ways in which this research follows a number of households over a three-year period in terms of their trajectories and changes in household activities, this study might be defined most aptly, in accordance with Marcus (1992), as a modernist ethnography using an interpretative approach of 'thick description' Geertz (1973).

None of the informants in the study received payment for their involvement. Rather, an ethical approach of informal reciprocity was developed in which food, in keeping with the specific households tastes, or domestic help or companionship would be offered by the ethnographer in the course of their research. In the case, for example, of day-time research (particularly with mothers of small children) lunch was so frequently offered that a notable dent would have made in the household budget had the researcher not reciprocated consistently with food goods. Similarly, when invited to events such as Tupperware or book parties participant observation involved the buying of items to support the hostess of the event.

During the period of research a wide range of data were acquired relating to specific social and age groups which, due to the chosen theoretical direction and word limitations of the thesis, have been sidelined in preference of highlighting other more dominant groups and practices. My research was conducted during weekdays, evenings and weekends and included the households of single men, students, shared tenants, lone elderly people, housebound individuals, gay couples and teenagers all from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds. However, the informants eventually selected for inclusion in this study were chosen to most efficiently represent the cultural practice of normativity and the range and specificity of modes of provisioning in this process. In particular, mothers of young children arose as a prominent group due (as discussed at length in chapter 1) to the cultural geography of the fieldsite and the comparative coherence of their activities, which came about through their relation to a particular life course stage, and made them more availing as consistent subjects of study. This is not to suggest that 'mothers' were simply more convenient in relation to the intent of

ethnographic study, but rather to reiterate that the prominence of this ‘group’ is due to the immense relevance of the practice of normativity and the role of material culture and provisioning in this process, in the formation of mothering in contemporary society; an understanding which arose entirely through the ethnographic inquiry and then was subsequently pursued as a thesis.

The specific ‘voices’ of informants heard throughout the thesis, in the form of examples and interview excerpts, are selected to best illustrate a range of practices and provide as much as possible a rounded picture of the approaches of specific individuals or households in the study. The research could not purport to be wholly representative of a range of practices or social groups but the selection of voices does attempt to offer the reader an insight into the range of data acquired in the course of the ethnography as well as efficiently illustrate specific analytical and theoretical points. By the very nature of ethnographic inquiry, there is a bias in the study towards certain groups that for pragmatic and social reasons became more availing than others. As a female researcher the depth of relations generated with women in the thirties and forties, at a life stage which demanded more reflection on living situations and, in the case of mothers of younger children, their social relations, undoubtedly led to an increased amount of data generated around this identifiable group and its practices. Despite being childless and single myself, over the course of the ethnography I was most easily incorporated into this social network; firstly, because at this point in their life stage the women were engaged with a coherent social network (of multiple layers) but secondly, due to the ease with which I was recommended and introduced within the group as a friend and participant observer. Although the study remained all-inclusive throughout its duration (in terms of variety of informants) due to the otherwise broad and all-encompassing subject of study it was ultimately necessary to focus on the findings of particular households and individuals.

Names of individuals, families, sites and geographical areas have been disguised (with the exception of Wood Green and Brent Cross) to protect the anonymity of the street’s inhabitants as much as possible. Informants were advised prior to the research that data arising from the ethnography would be used academically and possibly published for an academic audience. In the case of my own research, individuals were invited to create their own pseudonyms, if desired, but most declined this offer. As has been advocated

as good practice by a number of researchers, particularly those concerned with a feminist agenda of addressing the power relations of ethnographic inquiry (see for example, Bell, Caplan and Karim 1993; Skeggs 1994; Wolf 1996) I initially planned to 'allow' informants to see and amend field notes to allow dialogue over interpretation. However, following my pilot study I rejected this approach as being overly contrived to the point of preventing the establishment of any kind of qualitative relationship with informants who were more likely to see the process as an arduous task than an empowering exchange. Although formal tools of ethnography were used (interviews, participant observation, etc.) these 'tools' were coupled with more informal approaches dependent on the formation of a friendship or companionship which, bounded by the remit of the research, simultaneously allowed for a qualitatively enhanced ethnography and the maintenance of self-reflexivity on my part. As Skeggs asserts in the introduction to her ethnography of class, gender and 'respectability' in contemporary Britain it was important to treat the informants not as mere 'ciphers from which subject positions can be read-off' but rather as subjects 'active in producing the meaning of the positions they (refuse to, reluctantly or willingly inhabit' (Skeggs 1994:2).

As much as possible this ethnography has sought to generate a balance between how informants choose to represent their own activities and how these activities might be interpreted and placed, by the ethnographer, in a broader context of practice. Beyond the initial stages of the research (which relied on more formal means of inquiry) relationships with informants varied enormously and this multi-dimensional approach, challenging a methodology of detachment (Friedrichs and Lüdtkke 1975; Agar 1980) in favour of a more interpretative quest (Clifford 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986), added immeasurably to the quality of the research. The diversity of social and ethnic backgrounds and life circumstances of informants demanded sensitivity and adaptability in considering how the research for this project, and any time offered by specific informants, might be usefully incorporated into their lives. In the case of a housebound, terminally ill tenant this might involve help in completing and posting a housing welfare form or fetching provisions from the local corner shop. In the case of a single mother re-training in higher education, reciprocity took on the form of proof reading essays for submission for a degree. In most cases the merging of companion and researcher (as comparable example see Gullestad (1984)) meant that reciprocity was manifest in my role as sympathetic listener or 'witness'. In a small

number of cases this raised serious ethical dilemmas, as the intervention of the ethnographer showing genuine interest in the lives of individuals provoked a heightened sense of self-reflexivity, or performativity, in informants. In using informants' descriptions of their own encounters and activities I have not attempted to censor the more 'problematic' interventions (for example passionate confessions of animosity towards offspring or boastful accounts of fraud) anymore than I censored descriptions of 'acceptable' practices, such as arranging a children's extravagant birthday party. Although the interactive process of ethnography may have prompted these particular expressions of practice, to omit such material would imbue the ethnography with a moral agenda in keeping with what Gullestad has described as 'culturally biased' research which 'takes middle-class values for granted' (1984:12).

As James states each ethnographer 'brings to his or her study a set of 'foreshadowed problems', hypotheses-in-the-making and hunches to be followed and reflected upon' (1993:67) and in collating, describing, interpreting and writing the ethnographer's principal role is one of representation, most frequently of Others denied political or social power. This act, therefore, demands a level of self-reflexivity, and the acknowledgement of the 'situatedness of the knower' (Hawkesworth 1989). This is a long held tenet of feminist anthropological practice as described by Bell et al. (1993:2); 'the issue of gender arises because we (ethnographers) do fieldwork by establishing relationships, and by learning to see, think and be in another culture and we do this as persons of a particular age, sexual orientation, belief, educational background, ethnic identity and class'. As a single, childless woman in her late-twenties/early thirties of non-South-East origin residing outside London during the period of the research, I had the advantage of being at once familiar but distanced enough for my presence to be unproblematic in terms of belonging to any particular local group or 'type'. By definition of being an academic researcher I was categorised as middle class, though this became less significant in the field as being a woman and having diminished status (in comparison to my co-ethnographer) as a student. The perceived power relation between male Professor and female student (all informants knew the project had begun as a co-ethnography) was noted frequently by informants (formally and informally) and arguably helped me to establish empathetic relationships as my research was considered as mandatory work I was forced to complete in order to receive a qualification. Similarly, although I inhabited a middle class position as an academic researcher (or

‘knower’), as a student working part-time to support my research, in economic terms I inhabited an ambiguous or peripheral position that counterpoised the power relation generated by my affiliation with academia.

Unlike researchers working in non-home or culturally alien environments (Wolf 1996), where social mores (particularly around gender) demand adaptation of the truth regarding personal circumstances or status, I was open about my life situation and swapped ‘real’ gossip, opinions and experiences as part of the ethnography. Although I was never compelled to lie about my personal circumstances for the advantage of the research<sup>3</sup>, my self-representation varied according to the different informants I encountered. Working with a single African father in his early twenties, for example, interactions and conversations might evoke heterosexual banter revolving around club dance music and fashion while with a married mother in her thirties interaction might involve intimately shared details regarding advice on pain-relief during child birth, relationships and discussions of proposed household decorations.

Generally, after formal preliminary interviews, interactions followed the lead of the informants and, while there may be some advantages of conducting ‘home’ anthropology (see discussion below), the status of belonging (and therefore potentially sharing core values with informants) also consistently raised ethical issues. As this thesis goes on to describe, the cultural process of generating normativity depends on a constant ‘to-ing’ and ‘fro-ing’ of ideas and practice as individuals search for the ‘appropriate’. In the everyday interactions which make up an ethnography researcher and informant are engaged in the same process of establishing a common or mutually accepted base from which to understand and pursue various relationships. The inherent problems in this process become apparent in circumstances where informants express, for example, overtly racist or sexist views. Short of limiting an ethnography to acceptable areas of inquiry in keeping with a cultural bias towards liberal middle-class values (Gullestad 1984) the ethnographer is obliged to include, if not openly concur, with informants’ opinions. Avoidance of concurring with certain values and opinions proffered by informants in the course of fieldwork the ethnographer clearly tapers the

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<sup>3</sup> Wolf (1996:ix), for example, describes how she was compelled to lie about her marital status and personal circumstances (creating tales of a fictional fiancé and elaborate wedding) when researching Javanese culture for fear of jeopardising her research through ‘loss of face’.

nature of certain relationships. In terms of my own research, it was essential to maintain a level of self-reflexivity which prevented a bias towards the individuals and groups most easily incorporated into an ethnography. Ethnography, by the nature of its emphasis on participant observation and social relations, prioritises sociality and the ease with which a relationship can be built with the ethnographer dictates the 'depth' of the research in certain areas. In this respect I sought to organise the research so as to pay equal attention to groups and individuals less easily incorporated into ethnographic inquiry whether due to their broader social exclusion (through being housebound, socially inactive, economically disadvantaged, etc.) or the lack of ease with which an ethnographic relation might be generated. In a research context (described below) so strongly defined by a culture of privacy, this endeavour proved particularly difficult to fulfil. Whilst every intention may be made to maintain a level of broad inclusion, ethnography is dependent on the willingness of its informants and this by default generates a certain bias in empirical data collected. As previously mentioned, the prominence of young mothers and their activities in this thesis is due, in part, to their high visibility in this particular fieldsite, and the fact that the mothering stage of the life course in Western contemporary culture demands new (and often public) configurations of social relations. In this respect, the research is partly biased towards this particular social group as being most accessible for ethnographic inquiry and relevant to the object of study proposed in the initial research outline.

Despite using multiple self-representations, one of the principal ethical concerns of the fieldwork, due to the emphasis placed on privacy by informants, was the protection of household information. In order to gain trust and respect from the informants in the neighbourhood, it was essential not to be seen to be divulging information gleaned from other informants. Although sharing in local gossip became an essential element of the research, this had to be carefully set apart from information gained in the privileged position as ethnographer. Balancing the loyalties between various households and individuals was a tentative process and, while acknowledging the subjectivity of the ethnography, I usefully adopted the role of objective researcher in maintaining balanced discretion.

### **Anthropology at Home: defamiliarising the familiar<sup>4</sup>**

The ethical, practical and intellectual problems associated with anthropology conducted 'at home' in the ethnographer's country of origin or up-bringing have been well documented as the rise in 'home-based' studies has increased several-fold over the last two decades (Jackson 1987; Loizos 1992; Okely 1996). The 'familiarity' of the ethnographer herself makes traditional research methods, such as participant observation, (as highlighted earlier in this chapter) problematised in the home context as identities, such as social class, strongly pre-define relations between researcher and informants. In her study of French bourgeois culture, for example, le Wita (1994) encounters a social group so bound by the unspoken subtleties of its modes of exclusion and inclusion that her non-bourgeois identity as a Frenchwoman (belied by her provisional spoken accent or the simplest of hand-gestures) prevents her, because of her familiarity, from integration into her subjects' worlds on even the most basic level. It is only after being offered honorary status through a recommendation of an established academic bourgeois friend that Le Wita is able to encounter French bourgeois culture more closely (although she is forced to limit her ethnographic inquiry to pre-arranged visits and meetings ostensibly outside the domestic sphere). Le Wita's work and the problems encountered in her methodology reveal the very processes by which bourgeois social power is maintained through the 'naturalised' social networks and cultural practices.

Skeggs' (1997) research into the life course of a group of white working class women, published under the title *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, poses a similar but inverse problem to that of Le Wita, regarding the predefined class position of the researcher in her 'home' context. As a researcher Skeggs occupies a privileged middle class position which raises an ethically uncomfortable situation when she defines women as working class who, by their own definitions, are unequivocally middle class and would wish to be represented as such. This immediately imposes a power relation between the interpreted and the interpreter which seems to undermine the most basic of feminist anthropological endeavours, namely to address the weighted power relation between ethnographer and subject.

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<sup>4</sup> Allison James describes the process of conducting research in one's own culture as one which 'defamiliarises the familiar' (James 1993:13) as a lack of fit between what 'one thought one knew and what one gets to know' gradually emerges.

However, Skeggs' study, made over a three-year long period, takes a longitudinal approach in which she follows the trajectories of women from their enrolment in college to their entry into the labour market, education and family. It sets out to understand 'the lived experience of how women inhabit different social positions and cultural representations'. Consequently, she emphasises the importance of listening to the 'conversations' of the women themselves to radically inform theory around issues of how 'women live and produce themselves through social and cultural networks' (Skeggs 1997:2) whilst acknowledging that broader ideological structures (such as the class definitions she herself imposes) as being essential in accounting for women's lives. As a sociologist using participant observation, Skeggs considers the methodology of her work to belong to a tradition of British cultural studies which seeks to politicise everyday practice through detailed empirical study. Although the object of Skeggs' study is to follow the trajectories of women's lives rather than focus on specific activities, her methodology (which seeks to examine the ordinary as opposed to the extraordinary or exceptional and examine ideology in the context of everyday cultural practice) provides a useful model for comparison with the endeavours of this thesis. In view of the fact that so much of the ethnography was conducted in the context of the 'everyday', my status as a 'home' anthropologist seemed to offer more advantages than disadvantages, though I was careful throughout to maintain a systematic approach to my research reflecting on any innate bias I might have as a 'native' (see Skeggs (1995) re: ethics and feminism in native culture).

As the major types of provisioning which emerged on the street in the course of the ethnography were predominantly associated with women and their sociality, the advantages of my being similar in age and gender (in relation to mothers on the street) coupled with my 'outsider' status as a single, childless woman gave me enough familiarity to be incorporated and enough difference to be understood as safely outside a regime of comparison with my informants. Although I worked with a broad cross-section of households (including those made-up of elderly, single, divorced and multiple occupancy) this thesis focuses predominantly on family households (working and middle class), and the activities of women due to their pronounced involvement with non-formal provisioning.

A useful comparable example of an ethnography carried out in the anthropologist's native culture, is Gullestad's study of working class Norwegian housewives (1984), titled *Kitchen Table Society*, in which she highlights the problems of researching the 'everyday' in a familiar context. Like Gullestad's Norwegian housewives, my informants did not belong to a particular ethnic, deviant or marginalised population. On the contrary, other than being representative of the diversity of urban neighbourhoods in general the chosen street in north London was 'ordinary'. It was not representative of any specific class or ethnic group. This was essential to an inquiry based on the everyday, as opposed to the exceptional, provisioning of the household.<sup>5</sup> However, the very 'ordinariness' of the project, as anthropologists have pointed out in studies of women's work in the home (Hoodfar 1997; Devault 1991), led to informants' initial confusion over the 'point' of the research. Many of the non-formal practices used in the provisioning of the home such as gift giving, hand-me-downs and 'found' goods, were such an integral and diffuse part of provisioning and social relations as to pass largely unacknowledged in their own right. Whereas informants could immediately identify and elaborate on their formal shopping activities (Miller, 1998), with the exception of mail order catalogues, few identified the extent of their non-formal provisioning in response to the initial questionnaire and interviews. In this respect, participant observation over a sustained period of time proved invaluable. Although this ethnography does not constitute a holistic study, neither is it sociological in the sense that it did not set out to look at activities which automatically pre-figure social structures (see James, Hockey and Dawson (1997) for discussion of specificity of ethnography's contribution to contemporary social science). In methodological terms, as there was quite often no particular 'event' or visible activity on which attention was focused, like in Gullestad's study, chats around the kitchen table and general domestic activities of the day evolved as a pivotal element of the research.

The bulk of the research was conducted through participant observation which included informal interviews (some of which were recorded as samples and incorporated into the writing up of the thesis). While several days in a row might be spent with one

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<sup>5</sup> Marianne Gullestad (1992: 39) points out the problem of the notion of 'everyday life' in an anthropological context 'tied as it is to a specific stage of Western secularised modernity'. Her studies of working class urban Norwegian homes, then, are framed in this historically and culturally specific understanding of the phrase as politically powerful symbol in contemporary life.

household, another day might involve activities with a range of households on the street. As well as participating in the daily chores and visits of a particular informant, my research involved attendance of a wide range of provisioning events from nearly new sales to Tupperware parties. One advantage to the extended nature of the research (which was carried out intermittently over a three year period covering 18 months full-time in total) is that shifts in provisioning, due to changes in informants' and household's economic and social circumstances, were made apparent.

This ethnography did not set out to consider children as a distinct category within the practices of household provisioning<sup>6</sup>. However, in the course of participant observation, and informal interviews and discussions, children emerged as a key part of the study as a range of child related activities were incorporated into the mainstay of the research; walking children to and from local schools, attending school fairs and jumble sales, impromptu childcare and babysitting, informal play sessions, attendance (with mothers) of child related activities such as gymnastics and dance, library visits, park visits and walks all formed part of my interaction with children. The data extrapolated from the broader participant observation was supplemented by specific research in the form of small discussion groups, regarding children's gifting practices, conducted at the local state primary school.

Increasingly, over the last decade, academics have questioned methodologies and approaches within the social sciences which have previously allowed only the 'muted voices' of children to emerge within research (Christensen and James 2000). Children have most often been constructed as 'proto –adults' considered largely in terms of socialisation and the context of their care-givers. While children have been construed as peripheral objects of study, childhood has been considered as a static entity within social theory; 'sociological accounts locate childhood in some timeless zone standing as it were to the side of the mainstream (that is adult) history and culture' (James and Prout 1990: 220).

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<sup>6</sup> The specificity of childhood provisioning and the specific provisioning practices of children's is certainly an area worthy of indepth academic study. However, this would require a different set of methodologies (foregrounding children's interpretations and experiences of provisioning) than the remit of this thesis allowed.

Chapter 3 in particular draws on general data concerning the activities of four to eleven year olds on the 'street' and focuses on the specific gifting practices of ten to eleven year olds observed in homes and discussed in small (four children) groups. In my role as ethnographer my relationship with households depended on a daily integration into household activities. Consequently much of the research involved establishing relationships with the children of a household as I became increasingly incorporated into routines of housework and childcare. Depending on the age of the children concerned I was incorporated either as a friend of the mother's or a rather exotic interloper detached from the normal household relations. In some households (particularly with younger children) my presence was gradually accepted to the point of my being an unobtrusive 'helping hand'; making snacks for toddlers or hanging out the washing. In households with older children, my presence attracted more attention and I often developed relationships with children apart from the normal routines of the household and the relationships established with adult members of the household. In this capacity younger members of households were clearly aware that the stranger in their midst who, although afforded the status of family friend, held some external relation to the household that made me not fully belong to the 'adults' (in this respect children often implemented me strategically in their relations with parents and adults). In methodological terms then, although I was clearly part of adult power structure though I held separate currency in relation to children's worlds which allowed their activities to become a significant part of the research (see James 1993:23-27 for issues regarding shifts in identity in relation to research with children). This thesis does not, however, purport to provide participant observation of children which would require an entirely different methodology (see James and Prout (1997) for discussion regarding ethics and research approaches to childhood).

### **A Material Culture Approach: Biographies of 'Things' and the Agency of Objects**

As previously mentioned, preliminary interviews (shared with Miller) provided the initial basis for forming relationships with households and for ascertaining the range of provisioning practices on Jay Road. As a supplement to the opening interviews we used a method developed in connection with Appadurai's (1986) influential work regarding 'the social life of things', as a means of incorporating non-verbal 'prompts' into the early research. As well as providing basic information regarding the types of households and their practices for the study, the interviews and object biographies created the basis

of relationships built up, in my ethnography, over a three year period which, from their tentative beginnings, culminated in consistent in depth discussions and sustained participant observation.

All householders in the study were asked to relay the biographies (Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998) of specific mundane objects in given rooms; a set of weighing scales in the kitchen, a cushion in the living room, an ornament on the mantel piece, etc. (see, in particular, chapter 4 for empirical evidence acquired through the application of this technique). This enabled an often detailed insight into how goods were acquired, how they were maintained and had shifted meaning or positioning in the household since their acquisition, in a way which far exceeded that elicited through verbal questioning alone. This was especially useful in revealing the importance of alternative modes of acquisition, since in many cases we might never have guessed about the source of objects which came neither from shopping nor established forms of alternative provisioning, but combinations such as inheritance together with swapping between relatives. This technique was therefore a testament to the inseparability of social relations and networks, resources and household trajectories and the materiality of people's lives.

By way of cross-cultural and methodological comparison, Hoskins (1998), referring to her ethnography of the Kodi living in the Western tip of the Indonesian island of Sumba, recounts how her attempts to compile individual life narratives were consistently frustrated by the reluctance of the Kodi people to reveal their personal life stories. While prominent men might refer to a list of accomplishments in terms of offices held and ceremonies performed, when posed the question "Tell me about your life" women generally did so through offering little more than a list of their children. When she began to study the exchange of ritually significant domestic objects, however, Hoskins discovered that the Kodi were quite willing to convey subjective reactions and personal experience; 'what I discovered quite to my surprise was that I could not collect the histories of objects and the life stories of persons separately' (1998:2).

The conflation of 'people and things', and the willingness of Kodi individuals to give personalised narratives bound into the contexts of material culture, is accounted for by Hoskins understanding of the Kodi people's differing notion of self and personhood in

comparison to contemporary Indonesians touched by modernity. In tracing the paths and histories of objects such as a betel bag, a drum and a spindle, intimate and intricate narratives unfolded in notably gendered ways with tales relating, for example, to familial hierarchy, success and virility and unrequited love.

Although Hoskins unwittingly stumbles across a methodology in which the biography of objects comes to illuminate the biography of persons (and, in this particular case, the lived meanings of gender) this conflation of persons and things is no less relevant to the life narratives of north Londoners than it is to a Kodinese culture at odds with Western understandings of personhood. In keeping with a range of feminist works which advocate alternative methodologies in the construction of personal narratives and life course studies (Hockey and James 1993; Personal Narrative Group 1989; Sizoo 1997; Skeggs 1997), this methodology opens up ways in which individuals can verbalise and visualise life stories and trajectories. This is not, however, to suggest that objects merely act as passive aide memoires but, rather, that they act as agents in themselves.

In Miller's key theoretical work addressing material culture in mass consumer societies (1987) he considers the role of materiality in the constituting of the self. In so doing he advocates the Hegelian notion of objectification, which he describes as 'a dual process by means of which a subject externalises itself in a creative act of differentiation, and in turn reappropriates this externalisation' (1987:28). The subject is involved in a constant process of self-creation, such that a dialectic, dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship exists between object and subject. This approach, which challenges a structuralist understanding of material culture as a mere reflection of meaning, argues for the agency of 'things' and the inseparability of practice and materiality as described by Shanks and Tilley (1992:132):

Material culture as a social objectification is charged with meaning and structures in relation to social strategies. People symbolically construct and organize their activities in a pre-constituted social field and simultaneously effect an ordering of the representation of those activities in language and in material objects as a symbolic scheme or modality for action in

the world; activities can neither be understood nor explained apart from these. (Shanks and Tilley 1992:132)

In chapter three of his book *Signs of Recognition* Keane (1997) (who also examines the material culture on the Indonesian island of Sumba, with regard to the contemporary Ankalang) argues that objects are not merely the passive vehicle of communicative or semiotic intention, since their very materiality may act to create unintentional consequences to which agents have to respond. Ankalang objects have a plurality of attributes which may or may not be significant for a specific occasion. They may be related back to their origin in trade, or in labour, or they may imply permanence or impermanence. Other potential attributes may include their value as cash, their past history of transaction and many other historical and material facets of their existence as objects. The object itself does not prioritise the relevance of its various attributes. One of the effects of formalisation in exchange, therefore, is to mark out and limit those attributes which should be pertinent to that particular exchange.

Keane rejects the idea that this simply manifests the desire to unambiguously reflect the intentions and agency of any one individual. Instead, he argues that formal exchange focuses upon the event itself, whose consequences transcend the intentions of individual participants, and may end up expressing conflict and revealing aspects of both the relationships and the objects involved that participants themselves would not have chosen to bring to light. The very durability and facticity of material culture means that objects may transcend the desire to control them; as, for example, when an object is torn or dropped and people read major consequences into those events, or the receiver of a gift highlights an attribute of the object which was not particularly that which the giver had intended to draw attention to.

This thesis was formulated and researched in keeping with this recent tradition of material culture studies and therefore brings objects, styles and the materiality of everyday practice to the fore. The ‘object biography’ methodology adopted in this ethnography was ideally suited to the broader concerns of the thesis as an intervention in material culture studies. The thesis set out to look at the ‘alternative’ means by which households and individuals acquire goods in order to take into consideration the role of exchange beyond the commodity transactions of retail shopping and emphasise other

realms of exchange operating around goods. It does not, as emphasised by Carrier (1995) and Appadurai (1986), recognise an a priori distinction between commodities and gifts as advocated by the Maussian perspective<sup>7</sup>, but rather, challenges simplistic and dichotomous understandings of gift-commodity relations and use as against exchange value. Instead, it attributes the making of value to wider processes of socialisation and normativity that both provide the conditions for and are constituted by exchange. Following Keane's emphasis on the facticity of material culture and the specificity of its modes of exchange in marking out the attributes of objects and subjects, the study includes detailed accounts and 'thick description' of objects as much as subjects. In so doing it aims to provide an account of cultural practice in which the agency of objects and subjects are granted equal attention in the understanding of contemporary social worlds.

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<sup>7</sup> Marcel Mauss' seminal work *The Gift* (1954) considers the gift as a total social phenomenon in which persons and objects are bound through temporal circulation. The concept of the gift is one of a 'prestation' of embedded things and persons which stand in opposition to the social disembodiedness associated with the commoditisation and monetisation of modern societies. The terms inalienable and alienable refer to two oppositional modes of exchange characterised by Mauss as representing 'primitive' and pre-modern societies and industrialised Western societies. While the 'gift', as a 'currency' of non-Western societies denotes social binding, the 'commodity' denotes the exchange of alienable objects between independent transactors typical of the capitalist mode of production.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Becoming a Mother in North London: Maternity and Materiality**

From the onset of pregnancy, the conceptualisation of motherhood is bound up with facets of provisioning and consumption choices that mark imagined trajectories. Increasingly, the act of birth itself is presented by advice-literature and public health bodies as a significant choice a mother makes for herself and her baby (Longhurst 1999; Sharpe 1999). The type of birth desired (if not carried out) and the choice of God parents or mentors, are all part of a mapping out of resources, aesthetic and practical selections made in the course of constructing mothering.

The birth of a baby most often signals a significant change in the make-up of the home in terms of its social relations and physicality. This most frequently manifests itself in the re-arrangement or re-decoration of the home, as an explicit expression of a pending shift in the composition of the household. Rooms that may previously have acted as kitchen extensions become play-areas; home offices are transformed into nurseries as the prospect of a new child takes on a spatial and aesthetic dimension prior to its actual physical presence. A baby seat might be added to a household's car or a new car purchased (as advertisers are well aware) on the premise of its increased safety or enhanced space (Taylor 1992). The relation between a new birth, household life-cycle and consumption is made apparent in the proliferation of advertising, specifically aimed at this event (Larson 1992; Seiter 1993). As a whole arena of new activities, roles and behaviours presents itself to the mother-to-be, products, their exchange and acquisition, become one of the key means through which types of mothering are constructed and negotiated. This transitory process varies widely according to the resources available to the parent/s but it forms the beginning of a sustained relationship between activities of provisioning, their objects and values, and the construction of 'mothering' and 'the child'. Although there are superstitions attached to the acquisition of goods (borrowed, given or purchased) too early on in pregnancy, the process of 'becoming a mother' involves a simultaneity of materiality and conceptualisation.

Anthropology as an analysis of kinship recognises the mutual constitution of mother and infant (Strathern 1993; Miller 1997; Zelizer 1994). This chapter illustrates how this dyadic relationship actually resembles a more triangulated structure in which the

mother/infant relation is mediated by the practice of materiality. And, in the case of this particular ethnographic evidence, we see how this process leads to the creation of a normative culture of mothering generated amongst women themselves.

In her research concerning foetal loss, Layne maintains that it is through the accumulation of goods and gifts pertaining to a new child, most often initiated prior to birth, that a baby and mother is socially constructed. The rituals of baby showers (parties for a mother-to-be in which she is gifted by female friends or colleagues), the receipt of presents from relatives and family shopping trips organised around the baby-to-be, are processes which lend the foetus personhood at an early stage of development (Layne 2000).

Feminist scholarship has tended to avoid analysis of cultural dimensions of the foetus in Western society as a counter response to the contentious Pro-Life (anti-abortion) stance of locating personhood at the point of conception. However, the increasing visual presence of the foetus in medical procedures and popular culture (due to the wide spread use of forms of imaging such as the sonogram) signals, it has been argued, a widespread shift in attitudes towards a baby's social presence (Kaplan 1994; Taylor 1997). In Layne's research, based on informants belonging to pregnancy loss support groups in north America, consumer goods emerge as the principle means by which women 'make' (often far in advance of the anticipated birth) their babies and themselves as mothers;

Through the buying, giving, and preserving of things, women and their social networks actively construct their babies-to-be and would-have-been babies, real babies and themselves as 'real mothers', worthy of the social recognition this role entails (Layne 2000:321).

Using homologies of children's goods (fluffy animals, miniature forms, brightly coloured rainbow-decorated items, pastel clothes) women bring the foetus to life as a social being and these specific and sensual forms of material culture become the treasured objects of many women who lose their babies. Booties or cot blankets become mementoes stored carefully in cupboards; foot-prints of a still-born baby might be made into a special framed picture commemorating the 'realness' of the child. In the process of grieving their loss, mothers consistently draw on the sadness of unfulfilled

provisioning as expressed by one mother; 'If you were here I'd buy you a red velvet dress... I'd give you dolls and dishes and all the play-house toys I loved as a child' (Layne, 260:1999). In the life of a 'real baby' these objects would be part of an ongoing consumption process but, with the loss of the child, they are transformed into objects of memory and devotion. Layne's argument, by focusing on the specificity of material culture in the context of mothering, opens up what she describes as an alternative feminist perspective; 'one that focuses on the iterative process by which individuals and their social networks materially and socially produce (or opt not to produce) a new member of the community' (Layne 1999: 252).

Layne's work considers the *discourse* of material culture (her evidence is drawn from verbalised accounts and the writings of pregnancy loss support group newsletters) rather than ethnographic context of the persons and objects. It is a point of rupture, the loss of a child, which highlights the significance of 'baby things' and their provisioning. Material culture in this context, while socially constructing motherhood, also defines the end of lived relationship and the beginning of a transcendent relationship.

Through their archaeological interpretation of an abandoned British council flat, Buchli and Lucas, like Layne, consider the relation of material culture in the construction of the 'intertwined dyad of mother and child' at a moment of rupture and loss. Analysing the contents of a council flat, abandoned by a twenty-five year old mother after the breakdown of the relation with her drug-addicted partner, Buchli and Lucas consider the ways in which the home has been appropriated by the mother (despite the conflicts with her partner) and used almost solely in terms of the 'child' and 'childhood'. The authors surmise (through examination of documents and analysis of the number of items left half-packed and unpacked) that the mother left hurriedly (despite lack of council arrears) taking with her the children aged four and six years old. Child-associated artefacts and clothing predominate throughout the flat; their quality indicative of expenditure connoting a considerable 'sacrifice of resources' (Miller 1998b). Occupied since the birth of her first child, the mother has decorated the bedroom with Flintstone cartoon character wallpaper (depicting the archetypal nuclear family). The sheer number and positioning of children's artefacts is indicative of the 'ubiquity of child space' increasingly prevalent, beyond the exclusivity of children's rooms, in many contemporary British homes. The mother had created a 'distinct realm or transcendent

futurity through the constitution of her children, their objects and spaces' made evident through the jarring abruptness with which the scheme was abandoned (Buchli and Lucas 2000:137). As the mother vacated her home through her own volition, she has lost her entitlement to social housing, forfeiting as it is seen, a 'fit home' for her children. In the course of fleeing an unsatisfactory relationship with the father of her children, the mother of the abandoned home has left behind personal belongings (amongst them a 'baby' book and related artefacts documenting her infants' development). The mother is now forced to 're-think' herself and her children outside the structures with which she was so 'intimately subject to earlier' (Buchli and Lucas 2000:138).

At the end of the twentieth century, Buchli and Lucas assert, 'the way in which we constitute our offspring' has become one of the most significant means of structuring social life; 'contested, articulated, commodified and disciplined' definitions of 'child' and 'childhood' have become heavily determined with children having distinct identities from birth (or as early as in the womb) (Buchli and Lucas 2000: 132). As illustrated in their archaeological 'excavation' of a living space within the 'mutually constitutive circumstances of the 'child' and 'mother'' there exists a 'highly conflicted and ambivalent role' in which 'women's identities and futures [are] mediated through children' (2000:132).

The following ethnographic accounts regarding the provisioning of infants and infant-related spaces on Jay Road, reveal the mutually constitutive process in which 'mother' and 'the child' are made through the collation of objects, processes of acquisition and their ensuing relation in a local context.

### **Making Babies: Nurseries & Baby Showers**

Brendan and Katrina, both in their early thirties, have been married for four years and own a three-bedroom, 1930s semi-detached house on Jay Road. Brendan works in the information technology industry and Katrina as a personnel administrator. Since the conception and birth (eighteen months ago) of their daughter and first child, Serena, they have transformed the largest of their bedrooms into a fully-equipped nursery. Wallpapered in bright striped colours and carpeted in deep pink the nursery contains a large cot with *broderie-anglaise* drapes, toys, nappy-changing table and a cheerfully coloured pink chest of drawers. While many of the stencils along the nursery wall were

applied by hand the contents of the room were acquired brand new prior to the baby's birth from a large local shop, called *Lilliput*, which specialises in nursery furnishings. The décor incorporates stylised pictures of animals and Teddy Bears and around the bay window a cloud-effect paint technique is used to depict fluffy clouds on a sky blue background. The couple are extremely proud of this room as their favourite in the house (despite the fact that Brendan skilfully re-tiled and re-fitted both the kitchen and family bathroom) and describe it as being their 'ideal' baby room. The couple did not meet the extensive costs of this refurbishment alone, for the room is scattered with gifts from grandparents and aunts as described by Brendan;

Even before Serena was born we had wardrobes full of baby stuff. I'm not saying we didn't go out and get things ourselves that we liked but most of it, like the cot, has come as gifts even if we might not be too sure about some of it! Katrina's tried to make things fit in but some of it just isn't what we would choose, but it's Serena's.

Unlike the majority of informants on the street Brendan and Katrina have several sets of relatives living within a twenty-five mile radius with whom they maintain strong ties. Most weekends are spent paying visits to them with Serena. Since their daughter's birth Brendan has re-gained his teenage interest in Christianity and recently took Serena to the local church. Although Katrina is not actively Christian (she describes herself as a Humanist) she bowed to family pressure, more than a year after Serena's birth, to hold an elaborate christening with a celebration in the couple's newly decorated home.

Katrina and Brendan are exceptional in relation to other informants on the street, firstly because their home is comparatively spacious and secondly, because they acquire a large proportion of their furniture and appliances brand new as gifts or in specifically organised shopping trips (rather than in an *ad hoc* fashion over a several month period). Since their marriage they have self-consciously set out to transform their home and consider the re-landscaping of their garden as the only outstanding objective before the house is complete and they contemplate their second child.

Brendan and Katrina are perhaps exceptional as regards the extent of their explicitly 'planned' approach to the physical transformation of their household in relation to the

bearing of children, and their almost exclusive use of brand new full-price goods. Also, they are one of the few couples who actively approach the furnishing of their baby's room as a joint project (although Katrina acts as 'supervisor' exercising full veto on decisions of décor, etc.). The couple's relatives are extremely active in the direct provisioning of their household, acknowledging the presence of the unborn child with their chosen gifts of clothing and equipment. Despite some misgivings regarding the extent of their relatives involvement, the parents-to-be happily reciprocated on behalf of their unborn child by signing their Christmas greetings cards with a '?' as a gesture from the, as yet unborn and unnamed, child. Otherwise the couple are thoroughly typical in their enthusiastic accumulation of baby related goods (initiated prior to the birth of their child).

Gemma lives with her husband Anthony in a two-bedroom Victorian terrace house on one of the less expensive streets adjacent to Jay Road. In the latter stages of her pregnancy Gemma gave up work as a part-time salesperson, in a natural health food store, to spend more time at home preparing for the forthcoming birth of her son. The couple depend on the single income generated by the husband's position as a visiting lecturer in a London art school and so are fully aware that a new child will drastically change their fairly relaxed attitude towards household budgeting. In this particular case, the extensive re-decoration and refurbishment carried out by Gemma, in the construction of a customised nursery, relies solely on home-made and customised goods rather than brand new models of furniture and equipment. Unlike Brendan and Katrina, Gemma and her husband did not originally own their home together. Formally Anthony's bachelor home, the house has been gradually transformed into a family home through the joint purchase of second-hand furniture and collected artefacts. But for Gemma the creation of a themed nursery, both prior to and several months after the birth of her son, is not a shared project with her husband. Rather, it is the major focus of her time spent at home alone and an extension of her relationship with her new son;

I've got all the furniture in his room, Charlie's room at the moment  
I'm going to paint, I'm going to stencil on little cowboy motifs and  
stuff make it look all 'Westerny' so I've got a constant running list  
of what I'm going to do it's just having the time. I've ... taken a very  
long time to do it. And it's not like nursery rhyme, it's like cowboys

and stuff, it's a bit more grown up than a typical nursery, which drives me mad.

Although Gemma insists the nursery is incomplete, (she intends, for example, to make three-dimensional cacti from vivid green felted fabric) upon entering Charlie's room one is stunned by the minute attention paid to detail, from the embroidered cowboy hats on the bed linen to the tasselled 'poncho' lampshade. Provisioning for Charlie's room is an integral part of Gemma's present mind set; 'All the time I lay awake I think of doing things and making things, maybe it's just my creative outlet at the moment?' she comments. Gemma, like the majority of non-working mothers on the street, spends a large proportion of her time alone with her child in the home, but in Gemma's case her enthusiasm for home-crafts and design generates a type of motivation and sociality that carries beyond the domestic sphere. She visits local furniture auctions and charity shops, for example, with her six month old baby, looking for cheap items to renovate and paint. As Gemma left her country of origin (the United States) twelve years prior to her marriage in England, she does not have direct contact with any extended family and her new role of mother is largely self-taught. Although she has had contact with local mother organisations such as the NCT she remains on the periphery of this network and disassociates herself from what she views as typically British middle class mothers' concerns. She is less purist, for example, in her critique of consumerism gleefully telling of how she combined her trip home to America to see relatives with a massive shopping spree in which she managed to fit Charlie out with a wardrobe of branded clothing which would have cost at least twice the price in Britain. Unlike the core of middle class mother's on Jay Road, previously sociable women who self-sacrificially deny themselves a social life with the birth of their new child (Miller 1997), Gemma makes concerted efforts, within weeks of her child's birth, to visit pubs with friends and generally regain her social self. In this sense Gemma's nursery project melds the knowledges and skills of a previous identity with those of new mother, to create a newly valorised role expressed in her concerted effort to use an atypical nursery motif indicative of her, and her son's, individuality.

Like Gemma, Katherine relies almost exclusively on second hand and home-made goods to furnish her new son's nursery. As a single parent living on income support, supplemented sporadically by her estranged boyfriend's maintenance payments and a small amount of savings, Katherine rarely buys household items from formal retail outlets.

In her early forties, the birth of a baby has drastically changed Katherine's life and has become the absolute focus of all of her decision making and daily routines. Despite living on income support Katherine is the own-occupier of a three bedroom Victorian house (purchased several years ago when she had a full-time administrative job) on one of the leafy streets adjacent to Jay Road. The house is furnished with items from previous households, therefore much of the furniture is of late 1970s and early 1980s styling and she describes these items as belonging 'to her previous life'.

Although Katherine regularly asserts her indifference towards home-styling and fashion, two rooms in the house have been completely transformed since the pregnancy and birth of her son, Rory. The double bedroom adjacent to her own has been made into a pastel coloured nursery designed, painted and stencilled solely by Katherine. The woodwork has been stripped to its natural state and an old fitted wardrobe painted in deep purple and gold has been designated as Rory's special toy cupboard. In the centre of the room stands a contemporary cot above which a hand-made mobile of colourful shapes dangles. A 1920s wardrobe (acquired from a neighbour by exchanging a pile of un-used plywood in her loft) is filled with second-hand and hand-me down clothes awaiting Rory to grow into them. On the stripped pine chest of drawers a collection of toys from Katherine's own childhood is mixed with furry animals from local nearly new children's shops. In the hallway a wooden peg-plaque with 'Rory' carved in wooden letters is attached in a prominent position to the wall.

Downstairs the main reception area has been extended, with the addition of an out-door wooden deck accessed through large French windows, into an all-season playroom. It is decorated with bright alphabet pictures and filled with toys ranging from a full-size toddler slide to a miniature cooker. On first entering the room it is reminiscent of an up-market, fully equipped, professional kindergarten. The entire contents of the playroom (with the exception of a reduced price *Ikea* shelving unit) have been obtained through the free advertising section of the Lonsdale Mother's Monthly Newsletter, or from local nearly new sales specialising in children's ware. Despite this enormous reception room and the entire house being given over to the activities of an energetic two-year old it is kept in a near perfect state of tidiness which Katherine maintains by spending £15 a week of her income on the cleaning services of the next-door-but-one neighbour's au pair.

Although Katherine would describe her values as being broadly middle class (particularly in terms of attitudes towards education) she is proud of her northern, working class origins and, even after living for more than twenty years in London, disassociates herself from what she views as the competitive, materialist values of the south. As Rory has grown up Katherine has deliberately acquired toys she considers to be non-sexist and educational. She openly tries to counter gender stereotypes by encouraging Rory to play with baby dolls and prams. In this respect she does not consider her overtly child-centric home, with its nursery, playroom and extensive toy collection, as 'materialistic' but rather as educational. Katherine views the 'alternative' ways in which she acquires goods as subverting the market and constructing an added value around the specific forms. Recently, for example, Katherine found an old pay-phone in her loft that had been installed in her house when she used to take in lodgers to supplement her income prior to Rory's birth. She advertised this, for fifty pounds, along with other more child related items in the Lonsdale Mother's Newsletter nearly new section;

This woman she rang up. She works for a mother and toddler thing and their pay phone had broken and they needed a pay phone and so I said 'look it's for a charity just make me an offer -I don't want the £50'. So she paid £30 and gave me a little apron for Rory - like for cooking - she said 'you've done me a favour' and I thought she'd done me a favour - and a swimming bag for his kit and a little box for his sport shoes - things they hadn't sold [at nearly new sales] so it's really good. It's like bartering.

Separated from her extended family in the far north of England, estranged from her child's father and unattached to a specific peer group, Katherine is the sole decision maker in the up-bringing of her baby. Consequently, the projection of the ideal through her child, is relatively unmediated. Katherine's moralities around consumption, as with the majority of middle class mothers in this study, are legitimated around understandings of education. In Katherine's case, however, 'middle class' is being constructed as the 'other', to be opposed through the correct appropriation of certain goods and cultural forms, in the form of her values and strategizing. It is in the material manifestation of the home and its child-related contents that the contradictions and conflicts in this endeavour become evident.

On Jay Road itself, numerous young families occupy one and two bedroom maisonettes that provide room for an 'eat-in' kitchen and a front reception area. Typically these informants turn their front living rooms into play areas while maintaining the 'eat-in' kitchens as the centre of the household's activities in an attempt to create a social 'family' space. Mary, a thirty-six year old mother of a four year old daughter and two year old son, was forced to consider the re-organisation of her domestic space with the pending birth of a third child. Mary considers her third child to be a defiant resistance of the typical English model of the two-child family. Due to the restricted size of the maisonette the new baby will share the back bedroom (converted from a breakfast room adjoining the kitchen) with his two older siblings. Mary and her family live on the income generated by her husband's work as a teacher at a local progressive primary school and, despite their desperate need for more space, cannot afford to move to a larger flat or house within the neighbourhood. Instead they create a space, for a cot, in the back bedroom by moving the two older children into bunk beds.

Following the birth of Harry, Mary used *John Lewis* department store gift vouchers (given by friends from the NCT who clubbed together to offer a 'baby' gift) to buy several metres of blue patchwork patterned fabric to make matching duvet covers for the children's bedroom. In order to save on the cost of fabric Mary backed the cover with cheaper material from *Ikea* furnishing store in a co-ordinating colour and cut an old double duvet in half to make two single size duvets. Several months later she returned to *John Lewis* to buy similar blue gingham material to make drawstring bags for school that could hang on wooden pegs in the bedroom when not in use.

Unlike the previously mentioned informants, Mary and her husband Jake have a limited opportunity to create a designated space for their children. Mary's choice of blue gingham as the over all colour and theme of the children's bedroom is born from a canny understanding of child development and a need to make, as much as is possible, a gender-neutral space;

When I chose the blue gingham pattern I had to think ahead so as to not get one with flowers or similar so as in a couple of years time Alex [the older male child] wouldn't object!

Despite the endless frustration of bringing up a family in a cramped maisonette Mary prides herself on the ingenuity of her home-sewing and design sensibility carried out ‘on a shoestring’. Although the family depend predominantly on second-hand goods and hand-me-downs the couple visit formal retail outlets, such as *Gap* and *John Lewis*, to gauge the price and styles of child related goods. While recently searching for scraps to make Barbie clothes for her daughter Maria, for example, Mary spotted an *Ikea* plaid duvet ‘of half the quality and twice the price’ of her home-made version. Similarly, the couple recently saw an embroidered light blue baby quilt in the *Gap* high street clothing and accessory store priced at £180; ‘I enjoyed pointing it out and telling Jake [husband] that it was almost identical to the one I made for Harry’.

On the other side of Jay Road, on the Sparrow Court council estate, Lola Santos anticipates, at the age of forty-one, her third child. She and her husband had originally intended to confine their family to the two girls they have brought up in London since leaving Chile over twenty years ago. Lola knew how happy a baby boy would make her husband and so when she became pregnant, the family, including the two girls, became very excited (despite as yet remaining uncertain as to sex). Since then they have been making arrangements, tentatively, for the new arrival.

Taking the bus alone to the Brent Cross shopping centre Lola recently bought herself a pattern for a maternity dress, and fabric for curtains in the new baby’s room from the *John Lewis* department store. Renowned as a high quality outlet, and embraced by the middle class mothers of the area as an ‘institution’ in terms of its rigorous sales policy and service, even as a one off event this marks an entry into a new realm of provisioning.<sup>1</sup> The choosing and buying of nursery curtains from *John Lewis* marks a transition from allegiance strictly to the local ethnic area from which Lola came, to a new allegiance in an area dominated by normative middle class motherhood as engendered in the values of *John Lewis* (renowned as a rational, sensible retail outlet offering value for money and high quality merchandise) (Glenn, et. al. 1994; Everingham 1994). While Lola uses the ‘bargain’ fabric shop to supply the material for her own maternity dress, the ‘specialness’

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<sup>1</sup> See Miller (1998a) ‘John Lewis and the cheapjack: a study of class and identity’ for a comprehensive discussion of the significance of the John Lewis store in relation to middle class identity in north London.

of the new baby's curtains is marked by the significance of purchasing in a completely new arena.

The 'specialness' of the new baby is compounded by the secrecy with which the pregnancy, in its early stages, has been treated and the uncertainty as to whether the child will be male as desired by friends, family and social pressure to 'complete' the Santos' family. Relatives in Chile, who have not seen the couple for fifteen years, are expecting a visit within the next year but to date have been kept 'in the dark' about the new baby. This, Lola explains, is because they would worry too much due to her age and the fact that her own sister in Chile has recently suffered a miscarriage .

Unlike the descriptions of pre-birth announcements, conspicuous consumption and baby showers in North America (Layne 1999, 2000) there is much superstition attached to the premature acquisition of baby related items in South American culture. Indeed, the personal and cultural reluctance to disclose the pregnancy 'too soon' has made it quite difficult for Lola to arrange some of the provisioning associated with the birth as she plans to borrow most of the necessary and expensive baby items. Although the pregnancy was not explicitly planned, Lola had deliberately kept aside the cot used for her daughters but anticipates borrowing a pram from one friend and a baby bath from another. Another friend, whom she describes as spending 'lots and lots' of money on her own children, will, Lola anticipates be handing down large amounts of expensive clothes in very good condition for the new baby. A bench upstairs will be converted and used as a changing area and the only items really necessary to buy brand new, Lola surmises, will be 'Baby-Gros' as she passed on all her previous baby clothes to friends and relatives.

Although other informants preparing for birth receive one-off baby-related gifts individually from friends and relatives, in the course of the ethnography Lola's baby 'shower' party constituted the most public and ritualised pre-birth gifting event in the vicinity of the street. Lola's own party belonged to a series of other parties, and to have turned down the offer of a celebration would have meant explicitly extracting the family from the Chilean community as a whole. During the course of the ethnography Lola attended over half a dozen such events. Although the items chosen for the expectant mother differ according to her particular needs or request, the format of the celebration is well rehearsed and considered as an inevitable part of the pregnancy; 'The baby

shower is usually around seven months because at the beginning you are not sure if something is going to be wrong and at the end it's too close to the birth. So seven months is just the age you need to buy things if you are pregnant – so it's the best time to do it.'

As well as dancing, chatting and eating, the main focus of the event is the point at which the pregnant woman is seated on a chair in the centre of the room surrounded by gifts. After games, many of which refer to the impending motherhood, the mother-to-be publicly unwraps the baby shower gifts. Lola makes flattering comments to the donors regarding suitability of gifts as she discards the wrapping paper. Although there are many smaller gifts offered by individual families, the shared gift, negotiated through word of mouth (and initiated by Maria), is considered as the opening gift of the party. This gift is consensual within the immediate social group and considered as a thoughtful, practical gesture to show an understanding of the mother-to-be's needs. As illustrated by Lola's description of the most recent baby shower;

We took a baby alarm, you know, a baby listener. And we all gave her a carry-cot and some clothes – we asked her what she needed because, you know, there's no point in giving her something and somebody else already has – and she said, at first, she said she wanted one of those things to carry baby things in but someone gave it to her so she said [she wanted instead a] 'baby listener'.

Unlike North American culture, in north London 'baby showers', formal events organised specifically for the purposes of publicly gifting a mother-to-be, are confined to social groups with non-British ethnic ties (see Werbner 1988). Tara, a young mother of West African origins, lives in a smaller block of council flats on Jay Road with her husband and baby. A year into the child's life, Tara is only recently considering shopping specifically for her daughter as she has accumulated a vast array of baby-related items as gifts from family members and predominantly West African women friends;

To be honest, I didn't buy many things. You know when you're having a baby they have... what are they called? Baby showers! And people just keep giving

me presents, so I didn't have a lot to shop for her. Maybe I'm going to start now, yeah, because all along I've been using things I've been given.

In the case of Katrina, Lola and Tara, the role of material culture in 'materially and socially produc[ing] ... a new member of the community' (Layne 1999:252) is most overtly (and instrumentally) enacted through their connections with extended kin and ethnic community respectively. Katrina herself expresses concern that her relatives are 'buying' her baby with the enormous amounts of gifts they bestow upon her (which elicit reciprocity in the form of access to relations with the child). More importantly such gifts usurp Katrina's role as an autonomous mother (making choices over everything from correct nappies to appropriate play groups) anticipated in the good parenting ideologies of middle class mothers' groups such as the NCT. Similarly, Lola and Tara still have connections with the ritualised social traditions of their north London ethnic communities with whom, despite their geographic dislocation, they still identify. In this case, extended kin and friends offer a powerful alternative to the community of 'mothering' (discussed in the second half of this chapter) prevalent in their locality.

In her study of the Iñupiat, Bodenhorn (1988) considers the not dissimilar means by which kin and communities stake their claim on children of the Iñupiat in the North Slope of Alaska. In Iñupiat society, a child does not automatically 'belong' to the biological parents who bore it. Rather children circulate amongst households and are regularly adopted on a permanent basis into households unrelated by blood kinship; in this way adoption acts as a ritual form of sharing children (Bodenhorn 1988:12). As well as literally sharing children between their households, the Iñupiat invest in a child through the process of naming. Baby-naming is not carried out by parents, but by those deemed most socially salient in passing on the name of a deceased member of the community. Consequently name-givers may include grandparents, extended family and others; 'people who feel close to a recently deceased relative are likely – if they also feel close to the new parents – to name the new infant' (Bodenhorn 1988:11). The chosen name of the child is not intended to confer personhood but rather to create a continuity between the dead and the newborn through social rather than biological dependency. The child is expected to take up the characteristics and social relations previously associated with the deceased from whom the child's name was derived. In

this way, personhood is not understood as a new identity, but as vehicle for previous identities.

Just as nurseries, in the above ethnographic accounts of Jay Road, constitute safe and idealised spaces for newborns to be received into the world so too do names in the Iñupiat culture. Iñupiat names, like nurseries, are constructed through the social relations and exchanges of a given household. If a name is chosen well (i.e. the deceased was well-loved) the welfare of the newborn is protected in the world. It is through the appropriate naming of a child that a congenial atmosphere is created for the animating spirit that enters the body of the infant at birth. The spirit may choose to leave, or remain, depending in part on the appropriateness of the chosen name (Bodenhorn 1988:10). While in the Iñupiat context it is the 'name-soul' which lends personhood through the adoption of the child as a 'vehicle' of continuity, in the north London context baby showers and shopping trips for new cots constitute the mother and child as social beings according to the variations in their class and ethnicity.

Whereas the babies of Katrina, Lola and Tara are 'adopted' and identified (if not literally 'named') by their respective communities of kin and friends (through the ritualised gifting of mother and child) Mary, an established mother active within the local north London mothering community (an NCT and Lonsdale Mothers Group member), perhaps most explicitly typifies the dominant mothering community around Jay Road. The giving of gift vouchers from *John Lewis* department store (a staple retail institution of the British middle class) by other mothers in the area (and her canny use of them in provisioning her infants across gender lines) reveal the extent to which Mary and her children are established within the values of local middle class mothering community.

In the cases of Gemma and Katherine, women who in educational terms and cultural values most easily constitute the typical profile of a middle class mother in this locality (both briefly belonged to the NCT and Lonsdale Mothers groups) the desires manifest in their provisioning to create an 'alternative' form of mothering ultimately led them away from the locality. Both Gemma and Katherine, despite attempts to 'fit in' and embrace the community of mothering in their locality (dominated in terms of mothering by the NCT) left Jay Road, in the course of the ethnography, to begin new lives in areas

they considered would offer better opportunities for their children and for themselves as mothers. Gemma and her family returned to the United States to take up residence in a small Southern town with a 'community spirit', cheaper housing, improved child facilities and flexible job opportunities for Gemma. Katherine moved to the north of England to escape 'the competitiveness of middle class mothers in north London' and re-establish what she considered to be 'supportive' relations of mothers and kin in her place of origin.

The following section considers firstly the prominent mode of mothering in relation to the geography of Jay Road and then secondly, how the prominence of this form of middle class mothering is manifest through the provisioning of infant's and children's birthday parties. Like the provisioning of nurseries such activities fall, as highlighted by numerous sociological and anthropological studies of women as mothers (Devault 1991; Hoodfar 1997; Sharma 1986; Werbner 1988; Gullestad 1986) outside the formal definition of 'work' yet they constitute (as we have seen above) vital facets of the social construction of the mother and 'the child'.

### **Children and Social Collateral: Trajectories of Mothering on Jay Road**

The following ethnographic descriptions focus on predominantly middle class families with young families living on Jay Road, as by the nature of their social group they are easier, in anthropological terms, to deal with as a coherent group working towards shared values. They are also considerably easier than other groups (for example, the elderly, single mothers, immigrants, etc.) to generalise in terms of the construction of normative culture. The visible prominence in the area is also due, in part, to the 'meaning' of the housing stock in this area of north London; 'Values, markets and meaning inter-relate to create both immigrant ghettos and exclusive suburbs. What a house or neighbourhood *is* is, first and foremost, what it *means*. Even with a single city, the 'natural' concept of housing varies both synchronically, over time, and diachronically for different local populations' (Werbner 1990:15). In this sense, Jay Road has taken on a particular meaning within the lifecycle of middle class families in north London. The houses and flats in Jay road, and directly adjacent to the street, are close enough to Ibis Pond to benefit from its amenities and reputation as a 'village-like' middle class enclave but due to their closeness to less desirable urban areas the property remains comparatively cheaper to buy and rent. For the middle class families with very

young families living in the small Edwardian maisonettes on the street the area is mostly considered as a temporary 'stepping stone' in a trajectory aimed towards a bigger house or 'better' area before the children grow up. For the inhabitants of the larger Victorian houses on streets adjacent to Jay Road the prohibitive prices of larger Ibis Pond family houses (where they may have initially aimed to live in the long term) has created a sense of semi-permanency usually associated with access to appropriate secondary schools.

Indeed, for middle class inhabitants with children the geographic understanding of the area is largely cast in relation to schooling and the choices (or perceived lack of choices) available to them. There is an established hierarchy of primary and secondary schools in the area, independent and state, judged according to their reputation. The secondary school hierarchy begins with the high school in Ibis Pond as the most prestigious, Robin Park as the second most sought after and finally Lapwing Lane as the acceptable but 'last resort' for many parents due to its 'mixed ability' intake (its catchment area includes working class urban areas). Primary schools are considered by some parents as being slightly less problematic, as both main state primary schools in the area have reputations as innovative and well-run institutions. Eaglesdale (situated nearer Ibis Pond) is considered less liberal, more academically orientated and geographically convenient by some parents on the street, whereas Blackbird Hill has an established reputation for innovative teaching and a successfully integrated multi-cultural cohort. For Catholic parents the most sought after local state primary school, situated fifteen minutes by foot from Jay Road, is St Mary's Girls' School. Parents are aware that their choice of primary school may affect their chances of later getting their children into the secondary school of their choice. They may also plan to move to a street within the catchment area of the chosen secondary school as the child nears the age of secondary school entry (David, Edwards, Hughes and Ribbens 1993.)

The most prominent organised forms of sociality on Jay Road revolve around two mothers' organisations, namely the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) and the Lonsdale Mother's group, which provide mothers of new born and young children with access to, in accordance with geographical location, social networks and information. The prominence of these groups can be explained in part by the nature of the housing stock and the cultural geography of the area. The greenness, and close vicinity to parks and associated amenities, is identified by residents as an attractive feature of the area, especially in terms of bringing

up small children. The safety and intimacy of Ibis Pond, attracts first time mothers to the area and is often contrasted with the harsh urbanism of Wood Green. In the following excerpt taken from a conversation with Sally, who moved to Jay Road several months prior to the birth of her son, the harsh urbanism of Wood Green, was encapsulated by a portentous shopping trip for the baby-to-be;

The first time we went to Wood Green [high street] was the week before he was born, and I went with my mother-in-law to look for a cot. We were walking under the car park area and got hit by a flying bottle. We got cut, so I've not had good associations with Wood Green, not my sort of place.

Despite the promise of Jay Road and its environs as a antidote to the harsh urbanism of London, the sociality and quality of life imagined by some of the incoming inhabitants frequently fails to live up to expectations. The Ibis Pond 'natives', seemed less friendly than anticipated and, for some, exhibited a positively 'haughty' attitude towards outsiders, even mothers struggling with their infants;

They're - well, I sort of describe them as - oh dear, this is going to sound awful - um, upper-middle class Left but with a certain sort of arrogance as well. ..They're the sort of people that barge out of shop doorways when you're trying to get in and they don't even sort of acknowledge that you've held the door for them. Or, the other day I was trying to get into the doctor's surgery and I'd got Sophie [daughter] in the buggy and the doctor's surgery's got two sets of doors, almost directly behind each other, and it's really difficult to get the buggy in while holding one door and trying to open the other. And two people came out and they didn't hold the door. They could see me waiting to go in. ...And they were....sort of archetypal Ibis Pondians.... Sort of quite arrogant sort of people. But they look terribly smug. They look like they sort of think that, you know, everything that they do is very politically correct and right and everything but they kind of ride roughshod over people too. They're

not the sort of people I really like. But then again, I do like Ibis Pond in general.

While many of the mothers in Jay Road may previously have worked and socialised in the West End of London or happily lived in more urban areas, with the onset of motherhood an ideal sense of place and sociality is sought. While 'community' may not ultimately be found, idealised geographical spaces such as Ibis Pond might be sought through modes of provisioning and associated social networks, as described above in the context of the construction of nurseries and provisioning for infants.

In the course of the ethnography, the most frequent activity undertaken between domestic tasks, by mothers of young children, was to 'get some fresh air'. Although the nature of their work as mothers meant most women spent the majority of their time indoors, it was considered important for infants and toddlers to be taken outside at some point in the day. Despite the 'village-like' reputation of Ibis Pond, like most urban areas in Britain, there are few provisions or spaces made easily accessible for adults with children. Dianne, like numerous mothers on Jay Road, staggers her peripheral grocery shopping so as to have a focus, such as buying fruit, for a walk into Ibis Pond. Once there, however, there are few places to relax or enjoy adult social interaction when accompanied by her young daughter, Pippa;

When Pippa was smaller and I didn't know so many people and we didn't have so many activities, I used to think, oh, "let's go up to Ibis Pond" because it was one way of getting some fresh air and exercise, and it was somewhere to aim for rather than aimlessly walking. Actually, there aren't really very many places to go in Ibis Pond. I mean there is that new place above Hippo Antiques but it's a bit difficult to get up there because it's the stairs and you've got to leave the buggy somewhere. And there's the new Cafe Austin - I haven't tried that yet. But it's not easy now to sit and have a coffee, because she wants to run around. Actually that's what I miss - really what I really long to do - is sit and have a chat with a friend without being interrupted. You never feel like you finish a conversation.

This isolation Dianne encountered as an individual was overcome when she joined the Londsdales Mother's Group and in this context, as explained by another mother Judy, in exceptional circumstance commercial spaces provided ideal settings for large groups of women and children;

We can't use one another's homes because it's too many children. So what we do is we meet down at Sunnydale, at the garden centre [café], which is like our centre, oh yes we use it as a community resource actually very much, and they are very welcoming there. They're so nice to women with children, because obviously kids are a nuisance and they can... we can sit down have a cup of coffee get them an ice cream and the kids can go round the garden centre, we do tell them not to touch things and not to run but obviously they're children so they don't always obey those but they're very tolerant there. So it is partly their attitude that means that we go there and then we go to the playground.

In their ethnographic study of the social contacts of women with pre-school children in South East England, Bell and Ribbens (1994) challenge the simple conflation of the terms 'isolated' and 'housewife' which typify sociological descriptions of mothers in industrial societies. While it is crucial to consider the change in women's domestic lives in the context of their work as childrears, they argue that the pre-occupation with the isolation of domesticity undermines the "importance of [the] apparently insignificant or invisible networks" of women's lives (Bell and Ribbens 1994:227). The ambiguity of women's roles as mothers poses (as either source of oppression or source of power) within feminist discourse is well documented (Devault 1991; Segal 1985; Segalen 1986; Stacey 1986) as is its ambiguity within the context divisions of 'formal' and 'domestic' economic activity (Ferber and Nelson 1993; Gershuny 1983; Morris, 1990; Pahl 1984). For this reason, Bell and Ribbens suggest, social research has largely ignored, or at best under-estimated, the significance of women's social contacts as mothers.

Isolation, then, is not the automatic result of motherhood in an urban setting. A larger scale British study, involving 400 women living in an outer London Borough, revealed that 56% had socialised the previous day with a home visit to a friend or relative and only 3% (a third of whom had lived in the area for less than a year) felt they had 'no-

one to talk to' (Tivers 1985). The extent to which such relations offer emotional fulfilment to women raises further questions, and as has been pointed out by Allan, women's friendships have largely been assumed in social science as an extension of their roles as mother or wife rather than as a serious object of study within themselves (Allan 1996).

Women's ability to establish social networks undisputedly relies upon access to broader resources which differ enormously according to locality, ethnicity and social class (Tiver 1985; Wallman 1984; Werbner 1988). Furthermore, the pursuit of sociality or 'community' should not automatically be considered as beneficial or sought after by women in preference to a perceived 'isolation' as women have frequently sought to affirm or undermine certain social class and ethnic identities through actively distancing themselves from specific forms of female sociality (Cornwell 1985; McCannell 1988; Richards 1990; Sharma 1986). As is made evident in the case study of children's birthday parties later in this chapter, there is much ambiguity (even amongst middle class mothers who have enthusiastically joined groups such as the NCT) around aspects of sociality offered in the context of 'mothering'.

Women's sociality as mothers in and around Jay Road is based (as in Bell and Ribben's study) around a number of formal groupings, such as toddler and mothers groups, the NCT, playgroups and the local mother's group as exemplified by the following extract from a discussion with Julie (mother of a son, 6, and daughter 3);

I very rarely go to shopping without seeing one or two people... [Are you in the NCT?] Yes, that's how I got to know most of the mothers that I bump into ... there are 10 of us in the group and there's usually 6 or 7 every Friday and we go to play groups and we tend to meet 2 or 3 of us ... god we sound really boring, but we do all those stereotype things. I mean we actually say 'God, I never thought I'd sit here and discuss nappies', but you know, someone will say 'did you try those new ultra things, *Commitments*?' and you find you're actually talking about nappies, and we try to change the subject quickly but were all still quite keen to know how the others found them. There seems to have been

quite a lot of conversation recently about [children's] shoes, where's the best place? Who fits them the best?

Julie, like many of the middle class mothers on Jay Road, is conscious of the negative connotations associated with mothers' sociality and self-mockingly recalls the 'superficial' nature of some of her interactions with other mothers. Yet, as she is keen to point out, the group's chats about shopping and children's shoe fittings, for example, while seemingly indicative of a conservative, non-feminist model of motherhood, are actually an enjoyable and valued part of everyday interaction.

The formally organised groupings of the NCT most commonly evolve into more informal groupings between women, according to the circumstances of their childcare (full-time working mothers, for example, quickly lose the range of initial contacts they maintained during maternity leave). Similarly, much sociality revolves around loose social networks and tentative encounters. Meetings at the school gates, passing comments or the exchange of pleasantries, make a basic form of sociality for part-time employed or non-working mothers and it is here that children are directly identified with specific women and their households. As a typical example Jessie, the mother of a five year old daughter Siân, asks another mother, with four week old twins, at the school gates where she purchased her 'fantastic ultra-modern' McClaren push-chair. The brief conversation then expands to a discussion of coping with the work of looking after twins and an older daughter. In this short encounter Jessie, while unfamiliar with the woman's name, establishes her as a future acquaintance by association with her daughter (a similar age to Siân). But she also establishes the vague parameters of the other woman's mothering as relayed in this excerpt from a conversation recorded after this particular 'school-run'; 'Didn't she have tiny little twins? Just weeks old. She said things weren't too bad looking after them as her boyfriend did lots of stuff but imagine that? 'Boyfriend' sounds so weird to me – so unstable when you have twins. I would just feel insecure in that situation. It would have to be 'husband''. This is not to suggest that Jessie is making a crude moral judgement of another mother, but rather that she uses what she gleans about this woman's model of mothering to re-assess or substantiate her own in a constant process of comparison around her parental values.

The chain of potential contact between mothers can begin as early as pregnancy, through attendance of the ante-natal clinic or even through a random comment regarding a piece of baby equipment whilst out shopping, as recalled by one mother, Frances;

I remember when I was pregnant, I was looking for a buggy and I saw a girl pushing one that I liked and I went up to her and I said, "Where did you get your buggy?" That's right. We exchanged telephone numbers in the bakery. And we do see each other occasionally. We saw each other quite a lot when Lily was smaller and her [the other mother's] child was born. But her child's nearly a year older than Lily and we just found it really difficult because they just didn't get on because her child was that much further advanced than Lily.

The sociality generated by the two mothers described in the ethnographic account above, is solely reliant upon their identities as mothers. The mis-match in the age and developmental stage of their children, however, quickly becomes reason to abandon the friendship as recounted by Frances; 'I think we were thrown together. We didn't really have all that much in common. I mean we got on very well when we saw each other, but we didn't feel very easy about seeing each other. And, as I say, she got involved in other groups and I got involved in mine'.

Although some of these friendships maybe merely fleeting, they are vital in forming the basis of further relations or bridging between stages of women's lives in which they are extremely isolated. Women who, for some reason, fall out of the 'loop' may find themselves almost entirely socially isolated as expressed by Teresa, living in a two-bedroomed maisonette on Jay Road, who prior to becoming a mother, had an extremely active social life;

Q: Do you have any friends who pop in for coffee?

A: Not really.... I don't have any people to do that [with] I've not made friends that well for that. I was actually thinking about that. I'm determined to do it with my daughter because the reason I didn't really do it with my son I couldn't get into a.. his Birthday's June so I couldn't

get into any playgroups they wouldn't take him until he was 3. And he would go to Blackbird Hill [primary] when he was 3 and then I got offered a job, a friend of mine runs a nursery down in Fulham, she offered me the job so I took Joe down there with me.

Teresa's son, through chance date of his birthday, fell outside the prescribed date for play school registration and so she has become completely detached from local mothers around Jay Road. This has been further compounded by the need to take her son with her to employment outside the local area. Teresa recognises this has had such an impact on her ability to build friendships that she consciously vows to rectify this situation with the schooling of her daughter.

Other women, keen to use the NCT and similar groups as a means of establishing or expanding friendships, were sorely disappointed with the allocation of their group. Branches of the NCT are organised according to strict geographic groupings which frequently clash with the socially constructed or desired groupings established by mothers themselves;

Q: Do you ever arrange to have coffee or tea with somebody?

Clara: No. I don't know anybody because, when I joined the NCT I thought I would be in Ibis Pond area. But they've actually put me in Flockston. They count me as Flockston. So all my NCT connections are from here to the other side of the park, you know, not Ibis Pond. Which peeved me a bit at first because I thought "well I want to get to know people between here and Ibis Pond". But I mean, it doesn't matter now.

Women's sociality as mothers frequently revolves around ways of countering domestic isolation. But it also has enormous implications for the social welfare of the household and its children. In terms of child-rearing, there exists a form of backwards pressure asserted on the parent, in which the university attended by off-spring is determined by secondary school, the secondary by the primary, the primary by the nursery, and the nursery by contacts, information accrued in shopping trips or meetings with groups such as the NCT. Many people may be unaware of this narrative, in which choices made

early on effect those later. However, this narrative, whether consciously or otherwise, is wholly incorporated into middle class strategizing around education and has broader ideological implications regarding class specific notions of ‘good parenting’. The choosing of an appropriate neighbourhood in accordance with school ‘league table’ statistics, prior to pregnancy, is perhaps the greatest testament to middle class strategizing (David, West and Ribbens 1994).

Knowledge about schooling, and similar educative or creative resources such as music classes and ballet lessons, is also a defining feature of contemporary middle class parenting (Le Wita 1994 ) and a prominent issue amongst parents on Jay Road. In Jay Road the class differentiation of schools is particularly polarised due to the area being equidistant from an overtly white, middle class, cosmopolitan area and an urban ethnically mixed working class area. But, as the following ethnographic detail reveals, middle class dispositions in and around Jay Road are not *a priori* reflections of economic and cultural privilege. Rather many inhabitants on the street are less stable in their class positions. This may transpire in the use of oppositional geographical locations such as Ibis Pound and Wood Green. In this sense Miller (1998a), discussing this locality of north London, describes a process of ‘shopping for class’ as people ‘try on’ different class positions; ‘The problem of job insecurity combined with better possibilities of class switching is not somehow less ‘authentic’ or more superficial than a consistent identification with a particular cluster of values. Many people inhabit not one or other site, but encompass the relationship itself and the field of difference.’ (Miller 1998a: 157-58). Class then is understood as a social practice, rather than a static identity.

Although the mobility of inhabitants on Jay Road is a testament to the notion of non-static class identities, there remains a traditional class hierarchy made most visible in access to local schooling. Tina, and her husband Ray, live on one of the sought after ‘family’ streets adjacent to Jay Road with their three children. Tina’s social life is unusual in comparison to other mothers in Jay Road as she is both a native of the locality (coming from a working-class area near Wood Green) and an active member of the predominantly middle class non-local group of the National Childbirth Trust. She is supported by her extended family (her mother frequently baby-sits for the family) as well as the networks generated through the NCT. It is through her association with the

more transient group of middle class mothers that Tina has 'wised up' (as she refers to it) to the importance of schooling. Despite recent attempts her son, unlike all the other children in her NCT-based social group, has been turned down from the 'preferred' secondary school and Tina is left in a quandary as to where to place him;

A Well we would have been quite happy with Robin Park, but that's not to be, I believe now, because of the over subscription basically. So, I think he's capable of exam entry schools which really go very much against the grain but the alternative is, in terms of secondary school, is well, I feel unacceptable really, totally unacceptable.

Q Hoping for exam?

A Yes we're heading for that anyway.

Q Not many schools?

A Well there's a lot of grant maintained [schools] that don't have exam entry, but there's St Helen's and Christchurch in Southgate, we'll try for those two. I wouldn't try for King's [prestigious private school with high fees] or anything like that because I think socially he would be completely devastated really, it's a different league .....he's a very poverty stricken boy so St. Helen's and Christchurch are just about possible.

Tina's knowledge regarding local schooling is predominantly acquired through her relations with women in the NCT. Though her own parents simply enrolled Tina in the school within her catchment area with little anxiety regarding the standard of her education, a generation on and Tina is desperately unhappy at the prospect of allowing her son to enrol in the 'last resort' school of Lapwing Lane. For, she is all too aware of the consequences of this choice within the larger trajectory of his education especially as she believes that her complacency in allowing him to attend Blackbird Hill primary, as opposed to Eaglesdale, has thwarted his chances at secondary level. By giving in and allowing her son to attend a different, and less reputed school than Tina's peers'

offspring, Tina herself will jeopardise the social relations she has generated since her early attendance of NCT meetings and further compound the disadvantage she feels her children have.

The knowledge women generate through their social contacts as mothers has specific instrumental value, in passing on for example, details regarding appropriate schools or resources (Werbner 1988; Gullestad 1992; Sharma 1986). Whereas Bell and Ribbens consider places and spaces of mothering 'allow' women to meet 'women of like mind, like children and the same social class' (Bell and Ribbens 1994: 248) ethnographic detail reveals how women, in their exchanges of relations and material culture, do not merely reflect pre-existing modes of mothering and class disposition but rather generate and contest it. In the culture of the children's birthday parties mothers circulate their offspring, gifts and creativity in the generation of a child based sociality which exists in a constant tension between normative and competitive and expressive relations.

Although children's parties exist across a spectrum of class and ethnic groups, in the following ethnographic examples it is clear that certain types of mothering (in this case middle class nuclear family based mothering) exist at the expense of others. Mothers living, for example, on Sparrow council estate are not only precluded from the children's 'party circuit' through lack of economic resources but through their social exclusion they remain on the side-lines of the pre-dominant mode of mothering in the locality. While there may be other forms of sociality for mothers on Jay Road (for example strong ethnic networks as in the case of Lola and Tara), these remain at the periphery of the burgeoning ideologies of middle class mothering, which assure power and advantage in trajectories of education and other child-related resources.

### **Potlatch and Lucky Bags: the Culture of Children's Birthday Parties**

The most prominent means of sociality experienced by mothers and their children, is the 'birthday party'. Toddlers' and children's birthday parties are a regular occurrence in the vicinity of Jay Road with some mothers preparing their children for the attendance of well over a dozen events a year. Birthday parties are generally held in the child's home, a local community centre (or park in the summer) or a commercial venue such as McDonald's or 'Paint Your Own Pottery' shop.

Despite the increasing prevalence of commercial party and children's leisure services and venues (McKendrick, Bradford and Fielder 2000) many of the mothers in this study spent a considerable amount of time organising their own home-based children's parties as well as arranging for their offspring's attendance of other children's events. Some mothers noted that if they were 'unfortunate' enough to have their child's birthday fall in August they might have attended over twenty parties since the previous September. For some, the sheer pressure on financial and time resources led them to feel increasingly ambivalent about, as one informant described it, 'the snowball' effect of arranging and attending party after party and buying a seemingly endless round of birthday presents.

The escalating expense and public display associated with children's birthday parties is most easily analogous to that of the anthropological 'potlatch' famously described by (Mauss 1954) as a *prestation totale* whereby the exchange involved the total social personalities of the exchangers' (Davis 1992:7). The 'potlatch', a highly symbolic event of conspicuous consumption, in which those that have received goods and gifts strive to give more in order to preserve and increase their social power and standing, was understood by Mauss as the anti-thesis of rational exchange which typified industrialised societies. Certainly, there can be no 'rational' explanation for the expenditure (in terms of time and money) incurred by households in the organising and funding of children's parties, the expense of which most often contrasted sharply with the budgetary constraints of householders on the street.

Jenny, a mother of three children living in a street adjacent to Jay Road, observed that the 'party circuit' seemed to have expanded in size, and its events in lavishness since she had been a child brought up in the same area. While her own children expected she and her husband to provide birthday parties at local venues (such as the Quasar paint-gun play centre) at enormous cost, Jenny wondered whether this signalled a shift in her class mobility or a general boom due to increased materialism in connection with children's demands. Although she had previously organised a series of large house parties and more expensive activity events in local leisure centres she described attempting to 'opt out' of an escalating party scene;

It's just a different world to the one I was brought up in. I think they just make life so difficult for people these days- all this – we never had birthday parties when I was younger we had family birthday parties –we had a few cousins come over and that was it – and it was much easier and it was much less harassment for my mother. I think it's a bit of keeping up with the Joneses [now] if the friends have a particularly extravagant outing they want to do it – 'can we go bowling?' Or 'can we all go to the cinema'. Jake had about ten [guests]– if you're taking them all you have to pay for everyone but this time for Jake we went over the park for a game of football and then just brought them back [home]for burger and chips – that was all right.

In contrast, Camilla Knowles, mother of four children ranging from several months to six years, spends a considerable amount of time thinking up themes for her children's parties. Unlike Jenny her children are still young enough for her be enthusiastic in devising imaginative accessories and food. In the summer her five-year-old daughter, Caitlin, had a 'gypsy' party and Camilla made a cake in the shape of a Romany caravan surrounded by fresh flowers. She made 'lucky-bags' (party gifts bags) from muslin filled, with 'lucky charm' sweets and novelties that she had collected on numerous shopping trips, for the fifteen guest-children to take away (along with a slice of birthday cake) at the end of the party.

Camilla, is well known amongst the middle class mothers in and around Jay Road as she attends many NCT meetings and events and is dubbed 'super-mum' due to her unflappable ability to deal with four excitable young children and run a 'homely' house. Her home, a terraced Victorian house on one of the less expensive streets adjacent to Jay Road, is given over entirely to the children who are allowed to play unhindered in all areas of the house. Camilla is a fulltime mother and the family live on the husband Jeremy's income as a trainee barrister. During a typical visit to the house Camilla attempts to bake a cake while daughter Caitlin decides to spin dry her wet Barbie doll in the washing machine, and the baby cries to be fed while the other two toddlers run dangerously fast around the paddling pool in the garden. The 'romantic' chaos of the Knowles' home was often evoked by other informants, familiar with Camilla and her style of tolerant, patient and creative mothering, as an idyllic scene of homeliness. Her birthday parties were

conjured up my mothers as an example of how creative one might be given the time to dedicate to such events.

Another member of the NCT, Harriet Smith's childcare approaches and household organisation differs greatly from the liberal chaos of the Knowles' home. Harriet, who has one three year old child, keeps an immaculate home with pristine décor and toys fastidiously stored away in a large under-stair toy cupboard. Parties are a particular source of anxiety for Harriet, as she desperately wants to encourage her daughter, Sara, to develop social skills despite being comparatively shy herself. A recent incident in which Sara refused to share her toys with a child of a visiting mother from a local playgroup led Harriet to feel embarrassed, ashamed and annoyed by her daughter's behaviour which had 'shown her up'. Although Harriet and her husband Bob live in a larger than average Victorian house in a road adjacent to Jay Road the family depends on Bob's fluctuating wage as an electrician and so the couple try to budget conscientiously. Except for the local NCT gatherings Harriet is socially isolated and has only recently started attending children's birthday teas which has entailed the acquisition a new set of outfits for Sara; 'We've had a lot of birthday teas lately so I've noticed a lot of the girls wear dresses to that but usually it's leggings and jumpers, dungarees things like that but I put her in a dress for the parties.' Belonging to the NCT, then, is clearly not just a matter of completing a registration form and attending local meetings; it is a tentative process in which some women (such as Camilla) have greater success than others.

Toddlers parties directly related to the NCT are more overtly pressured in their adherence to ideals of parenting, although these are constantly in the process of negotiation according to the exchanges made between the contributing women themselves. Penny (mother of a three-year-old daughter) recalls one incident, happily resolved by consensus, in which the addition of Smarties [multi-coloured chocolate candies] to a party caused much consternation:

We never give sweets, I mean sweets would be probably a kind of class thing but basically sweets are never on offer at an NCT meeting... In our group there is quite a good sense of tolerance for other people's, you know, there was that kind of incident a couple of weeks ago we went to the first 3rd birthday party of the little group of children and it was done

by one of the mothers who is, who probably has the same attitude as me; “they love Smarties, it's a party, [so] give them Smarties”. I was sitting next to my friend whose child has not had sweets and Caroline said, “this is the end of my beautiful pure-bred”. I said, “Yes it is, it is. You have to accept she's going to come to these birthdays. You can't, you know, you can't not [let her]”. And so we were laughing at the whole thing, and she agreed that that was the end really. And I said, “look you've given her a good start. She'll just have to learn that there are limitations”.

Although the NCT (originally titled Natural Childbirth Trust) openly promotes progressive, middle class mothering (zealously advocating breast feeding to its members, for example) such groups do not simply reflect the class similarities of their members. Rather, as revealed in the interaction above, it is through such groups and their exchanges that class is made; here, through mothering. The mother responsible for organising the first in a round of birthday parties for three-year olds, clearly broke a sacred but unwritten NCT rule regarding the exposure of infants to impurities, such as sugar (see for expanded discussion of NCT Miller 1997). The act of offering inappropriate food stuffs to infants within the group might have been deemed wholly unacceptable; thus placing the initiating mother in an uncomfortable position (exposing as she is her values of mothering). However, the exceptional nature of the context (children's birthday party), is deemed by at least one mother (who then goes on to persuade another mother) as a perfect justification for the challenging or breaking of previously established values within the group. In this way consensus is generated and negotiated amongst the women over ‘mothering’ through the provisioning of parties and the continued circulation of infants and children.

In response to the ubiquity of children's parties a particular genre of merchandising arising during the fieldwork which a number of mothers had begun to use for the first time. *Party Pieces* a catalogue dedicated to the accessorisation of children's parties, offered goods such as fancy dress outfits, decorated paper cups, party games and prizes, banners and balloons. Mothers receiving the catalogue complete a form listing the dates of their children's birthdays and receive the catalogue in the post two months prior to the date of a specific child's birthday. As well as providing ideas for themed parties the catalogue appealed to mothers such as Camilla (despite awareness of paying over the

odds for the merchandise) as an expedient way of shopping while maintaining the high standards of parties;

I've bought things from the *Party Pieces* catalogue but you can try be a little bit less extravagant really – I probably wouldn't tend to depend completely on it– I don't think they are that pricey but the whole thing always adds up in the end – you end up buying more rather than if you had just gone out and bought a few white plain paper plates – if you get the whole thing co-ordinated and masks and that sort of stuff.

The expansion of formal businesses into the previously 'home-made' arena of 'dressing-up' and 'fancy dress' costumes and accessories seemed further testament to some mothers of the commercialisation of children's worlds. As well as catalogues featuring festive wares, more recently a local woman from Ibis Pond had been organising 'children's fancy dress direct sales parties', showing a range of costumes from Dracula to Fairy Queens. Gathering together in the house of a volunteer hostess, mothers sip wine and handle a range of children's fancy and dressing-up wear and choose from a stand-up cardboard model showing prices descriptions and costume types. One mother had been invited by her daughter's playgroup leader, as there had recently been a fire at their community centre and all the dressing-up clothes had been destroyed. In general, the costumes were considered overly simple in relation to the prices charged for them. A pirate costume, for example, consisted of a black patch and a pair of shorts resembling pyjama bottoms; an ensemble several mothers considered insultingly easy to have put together themselves.

However, Sally, despite being aware that the items must have been made with a large profit margin in mind, bought a 'beautifully made satin cloak' to dress her daughter as a vampire as she admitted she would never have 'got around' to making such an article herself. Other items, fairy dresses and ballet costumes merely consisting of a piece of white net hanging on a piece of elastic, were seen as unacceptable in terms of their value for money and too embarrassing to purchase.

For some mothers the overt commodification of the catalogue seemed to undermine the entire project of the children's party and take away the creativity of inventing games,

costumes, decorations and prizes. Jane, for example, enjoys making home-made items, to create a co-ordinated theme. She used the closeness of Halloween to her daughter Rachel's birthday as a theme for her fifth birthday party, organised in conjunction with another mother, in the local church hall. As it was a fancy dress event, Jane had spent several evenings sewing a witch's outfit for her daughter from scraps of fabric from a local remnant store. She made jamboree bags filled with 'bits and bobs' from Woolworth's and had cut out paper decorations to string across the walls of the hall. Both mother's spent evenings carving out pumpkin lanterns and hand-made invitations with pop-up ghosts had been sent to around twenty children. A birthday cake in the shape of a 'scary monster' with the names of the two girls iced on top formed the centrepiece of the food. Working to a limited budget, Jane viewed the creative aspect of the party-making as crucial element of its value and she encouraged Rachel and her small brother to make invitations and decorations at the kitchen table with her.

The night before the event Rachel insisted on abandoning her proposed witch's costume insisting instead on dressing as a 'good fairy'. As well as preparing the party food of pizza, cheese sticks, jelly and fruit, Jane set about constructing a fairy costume from white netting and tinsel, to pacify her distraught daughter. Several of the mothers of Rachel's school friends helped transport the food and drinks to the church hall and organise the party games. As the children arrived with their mothers wrapped gifts and cards were placed on a table near the birthday cake to be opened later at home.

Sally, the mother of eight and ten year old sons, living (like Jenny) in a maisonette on Jay Road used to enjoy birthday parties when her children were toddlers as it was an 'excuse' to gather together with other mothers and have a glass of wine and 'a laugh'. Now she dreads the time of year around which her children's birthdays fall;

I used to enjoy spring but now, oh no! It's such a pressure, 'we want to do this', 'we want to do that', 'we want this, we want that'. Now I feel I've got to get through March and April before I get to the nice weather. They're [the sons] not too bad you just have to draw your limits with them, really, and you have to be quite well organised and know what you are going to do with them. You know like this time I quite enjoyed Alex's birthday party but

Jamie had one the week after and by the end of that I was fed up with it and I thought – ‘next year they’re definitely having a combined affair.

Due to the expense of booking external locations and paying for a child’s invited guests (usually friends from school, clubs, etc.) mothers felt an obligation to other mothers in informing them of the last minute non-attendance of a child in the hope that at least the cost of one child might be saved. Towards the end of fieldwork parties at *Monkey Business* (a ‘soft play’ venue filled with inflatable structures) were described as ‘the in thing’ by several mothers. The cost of a soft drink, snack and entrance for around ten children easily cost upwards of £100, a sum of money clearly prohibitive for many families. This sort of expense prompted some informants to question the increasing pressure they felt to hold parties within their peer groups and the origins of that pressure as expressed by Jenny;

Well – I don’t know I sound as if I’m being a bit ‘classist’ here but I wonder if it’s more of a middle class thing. That is to say, what I was used to when I was a younger – we were much more... I don’t know whether it’s access to money – having less money than we’ve got now but I can’t remember being invited to birthday parties. So either I was a very unfriendly or unliked child or we just didn’t do it. Some people seem to thrive on it as well – like my cousin’s ‘set’, they seem to go to millions of parties and she looks on it, sort of all, very generously and thinks it’s all great. And I just find giving them traumatic I’d do anything rather than give a party I just don’t like it.

Although ambivalence towards holding children’s parties is not directly related to the financial security or affluence of a given household for certain families the obligations of children’s parties presented a kind of tyranny that brutally reminded them of their economic and cultural disadvantage. Jill is a young single mother with two children (the eldest four years old) living in Sparrow Court council estate on income support. She can barely cover the costs of her monthly bills yet her ability to attend the birthday parties of her children’s classmates remains a basic requisite of sociality associated with mothering;

I’ve been to nearly six so far, but it’s dreadful because their birthday is coming and I haven’t got the money to buy them anything to have a party or anything.

Carrie has been to quite a few [classmates' parties] and one of David's friends had to go to McDonalds and it's really expensive especially when there's about twelve or fourteen children and I can't even afford to get David a birthday card, let alone a party or anything. I mean it's his birthday on Tuesday and he's gone down to their [in-laws of ex-husband] house for the week so I mean I've only just sent a card down. It's all I can afford. It's very difficult when you're on your own and you haven't got any money. And I feel quite embarrassed when they have to keep going to parties and I haven't really got a present but I sort of manage to get something like a colouring book from over the road [the corner shop] to show I appreciate going.

Another mother, Irene, also living in Sparrow Court, with a younger son, categorically declares that she can no longer afford 'kids parties';

[there is]one that day, one the next day, so I've decided not to have birthday parties any more since they're too expensive by the time you've done party bags, drinks, games, food and all that. So none this year, but what can you do?

As well as the resources required for the organisation of children's birthday parties the most prominent type of gift provisioning within family households on Jay Road is children's that related to birthdays. A number of strategies are employed to deal with the sheer volume of gifts required in the attendance of the yearly 'rounds' of parties. Jenny, for example, uses a two-tier approach to birthday gifts for her children's friends. For general school friends' parties she uses a collection of Woolworth's items, amassed throughout the year in the course of everyday household shopping trips. For closer friends' and best friends' birthday parties she uses the Early Learning Centre catalogue and specific shopping trips to make selections. She also keeps a bulk of children's birthday cards in a drawer of the living room cupboard and uses the corner shop 'in emergencies' if she runs out of appropriate cards. For members of her own family Jenny uses trips abroad, for example, to try to find items a little more special. Although family gifts can be postponed, delivered at a later date, gifts for the children's friends are a more pressing concern and onerous task;

Most of the presents I buy are for the children to take to parties – the last gift I bought was for Alisa's cousin on the ferry back from France– I owe

my other cousin's little boy a present – he was four so I've got to get him something – I've got a huge family so it costs me a fortune in presents and also the kids have acres and acres and friends which is good, you want them to have friends, but sometimes the parties and the buying gifts can be a bit much.

Similarly, Jane uses the January sales to buy children's gifts (such as reduced-price bubble bath sets in pink) ideal for her five year old daughter's party attendance. Alternatively, she makes up her own versions buying bulk bubble bath baubles and hand soaps in pastel colours wrapped in brightly coloured nylon net and tied with a ribbon. In this way Jane ensures an equality and consistency in the price and type of gift her daughter Rachel takes to each party. For best friends, such as the next-door-but-one neighbour's daughter Helena, Rachel will help choose an item from the Early Learning Catalogue with her mother. Like Jenny, Jane generally views the attendance of parties by her children as a positive aspect of their social development and a good indication of their successful socialisation. But as the number of parties attended has escalated as the children have grown older mothers respond by ascribing a rational price guideline or 'going rate' which entails judging the relevance of a particular friend and party within the child's social life;

There is a certain price for a certain friend. First of all I didn't budget but certainly I think it's got so it's snowballed really so the best friends still get more expensive presents. But the friends that I've been surprised that they've invited to their party or whatever – I might try to make a limit of £3 as it all adds up.

Anne, the mother of four children ranging from seven to eleven years sees herself as 'an old-hand' at the birthday party gift buying. Although her children are now old enough to assert their opinions and choices regarding appropriate presents Anne still uses a pragmatic 'bulk-buy' approach to children's gift purchase. During the sales she identifies the kind of coveted children's items that are still fashionable enough to be sort after but destined to be replaced by a newer fad or edition, thereby reduced in price but not fully redundant in meaning. In the course of this ethnography Power Rangers plastic action figures were popular, for example, and Anne, on one particular shopping trip,

found several items at special sale prices in the local department stores. She took the opportunity to buy them up in the hope that they would suffice for a number of parties the children would be attending later that year. By choosing such fashionable and child-centred objects Anne takes a risk that they be rendered completely undesirable by the time they are used as gifts thus placing her children in the embarrassing position of offering potentially ‘out of date’ presents. On the other hand she may manage to maximise contemporary appeal and price, thereby out-doing what she described as the ‘rip-off kids merchandisers’ into the bargain.

For Lola, the south American mother of two children recently moved to Jay Road, the choosing of birthday gifts for English children’s parties is a fraught task in which she tries to reduce risk to a minimum. Lola is relatively unfamiliar with the local shopping area and depends on mail order catalogues almost exclusively for her non-food household provisioning. Although her two daughters are well versed in the gift and party etiquette of Chilean culture English birthday parties are a new form of sociality that have arisen through the girls recently formed friendships at the local school. Lola has little idea of how English children’s parties operate and discovered, for example, through two embarrassing mistakes that an invitation is confined to the named child and does not extend to a sibling. In contrast at Chilean parties it would be unthinkable to invite one sibling and not another;

It is very strange. Anita [Lola’s eldest daughter] noticed the difference between English parties and Chilean parties and sometimes when someone invites Anita to a party and Sofia wants to go along I say “No that is English party – you don’t go”. But if it’s a Chilean party all the family go and all the men – the family, all the whole family.

Unlike many other children, Anita and Sofia play a significant role in choosing the gifts they take to their separate birthday parties as Lola relies almost exclusively on their experience and judgement. Together the mother and daughters read the *Argos* and *Index* store catalogues and the girls’ select the presents Lola visits the shop to buy them. The most recent gifts, for example, were a pink snow storm globe and a sewing craft kit bought for Anita’s closet school friend. Unlike other mothers on the street Lola, despite her low income, buys the gifts on an individual and full-price basis her provisioning

curtailed due to her lack of knowledge of the local English birthday party and gift item norms.

Although recognising the amount of effort involved in dressing, transporting and equipping children in relation to their attendance of birthday parties it is most often the children, rather than parents, who resist attending the events. On several occasions during the ethnography there had been ‘scenes’ between mothers and children when, often a short time before the commencement of a party, a child had firmly refused to leave their home. As Jenny comments in the case of smaller events, or those organised around a paid commercial venture, mothers feel a sense of obligation; ‘Sophie had been invited to one [birthday party] this weekend but she wouldn’t go – and there was no contact number and I haven’t seen that mum since so... I must apologise.’

The type and extent of thought that went into gifts also revolved around the nature of the relationship between the mothers of the donor and recipient. Stephie, a mother of two who testified to spending a inordinate amount of time choosing children’s gifts, also resorted to using a fixed price in relation to how well she felt she knew the mother ‘I just bought a jigsaw and it took all of one minute to chose - not because I didn’t care but because it was just right. I know the kid and her mother well’.

More anonymous or general types of presents (bubble bath, stickers, etc.) were often abandoned in favour of ‘thoughtful’ versions when mothers felt they knew the mother of the ‘birthday’ child more intimately. Celia, for example, used a two-tier price range directly correlating to the relationship she had with the mother of the child in question;

If I don't know the mother its less and if I know the mother and I'm good friends with her then it's more, so normally I tend to put my price range at £5, that is for or even less now that they can read I get them books, it's less than that sometimes it's about £3 something like that depending...

Gift types also correspond to the attachment mothers had to towards one another’s children. One child might receive a birthday present such as a clay molding figure set from a special toyshop in Ibis Pond, in the knowledge that this will be appreciated by the recipient mother and child. Books and jigsaws given to less familiar children and

mothers, could be considered thoughtfully appropriate and imminently practical as they could be easily exchanged at known local shops if duplicated. As well as creating a rationale behind the selection of gifts the price limit and gift typing helped prevent further escalation of performative party culture that, as previously mentioned, many informants viewed as potentially punitive. In some cases, mothers identified birthdays (more than gift giving events such as Christmas) as times when children were most likely to make direct comparisons between themselves and individuals in their peer groups with the potential for revealing inequalities of wealth.

The tentative way in which these situations are handled is illustrated by Jane a particularly popular and perceptive mother, involved in numerous social groups on Jay Road. Jane, keen to buy a special gift for Pipa the six-year-old daughter of a neighbour, asked what the little girl might like in the presence of her own daughter, Rachel. 'I'd really like a fizzy haired Barbie – but there's a problem,' said Pipa, 'it's expensive' a comment to which Jane's daughter Rachel, retorted 'That is a problem as we don't have much money!' This poignant exchange, retold by Jane as a means of illustrating her daughter's growing awareness of difference was further compounded by Pipa's mother organising for her daughter a large birthday party featuring a professional magician (previously hired by 'super-mom' Camilla Knowles).

## **Conclusion**

Women, as is made evident from their provisioning of new-borns through to their provisioning of children's birthday parties, are engaged as mothers in the articulation of a network of exchanges of goods and relations. The minutiae of material culture, its styles and its values are crucial to the social construction of mothers and children. Women's work in organising children's birthday parties and equipping infants and children with appropriate gifts has been viewed solely in terms of its role in the socialisation of children (Sirota 1998; Ribbens 1994:84). Unlike the gift relations described in chapter 3, the provisioning of birthday gifts does not involve complex mediations between child/adult. Rather choices of gifts rely on a heavily prescribed and general repertoire of material culture organised principally in accordance with gender/age appropriateness and cost allowing the easy circulation of goods and children.

The expansion of the previously kin and home based activity of the children's birthday party as a form of 'potlatch' (in which increasingly imaginative or subtle variations of a theme are used to demonstrate the mother/child's worthiness and prestige) is testament to a contemporary British culture increasingly premised on the 'child' as community. While, these parties might be understood as a crude series of escalating potlatches (in terms of the colloquial concept of competitive gifting that followed the popularisation of the term after Mauss) in actual fact the parties are far removed from this sense of direct competitive giving. Rather, they involve subtle and skilful positioning through a series of normative stages each of which has its associated strategies and potentials. What this produces is not just the transition in personal status but, as a by-product, it importantly creates the network of women and then in turn the sense of neighbourhood, i.e. it creates its own social contextualisation.

While much literature deservedly deals with the social isolation of women as mothers, as is made evident by the ethnographic descriptions above, 'mothering' operates as a key form of sociality. Contrary to Allan's depiction of British social relations (Allan 1996: 103), which describes men as having a privileged access to the friendship ties and support networks of the public sphere while women remain isolated within the domestic sphere, in Jay Road men are largely absent from the social networks which define the prominent sociality of the area. Men do not take a role in the minutely detailed exchanges women make with and around the child and this impacts significantly on their role as care-givers (Jackson 1983; Radin 1988). Isolation, then is not *a priori* condition of mothering in such areas. Isolation is more an effect of social exclusion or the inability or unwillingness to join networks rather than a condition of women as mothers *per se* which is itself a key moment for the construction of networks (Hill 1989; Coombs 1979).

In this respect, the social geography of Jay Road is bound by the reproductive status and gender of its inhabitants as exchanges such as those described above exclude childless households, men and full-time working women. Furthermore, as emphasised by Bell and Ribbens (1994:248) while social theorists have stressed the contemporary demise of the local as a significant concept (Giddens 1991) in women's networks the local takes absolute precedence as a conceptual tool through which these women use their social relations as mothers.

Children's parties are indicative of the tension mothers mediate between the normative and competitive (and expressive) elements of their relations as seen in other forms of exchange between women (Oliker 1989; Werbner 1988). There is a strong desire, as seen in the narrative of middle class parenting, to act strategically in the interest of household. Thus the 'intertwined dyad of mother and child' become implemented in strategizing which leads to overtly competitive behaviour (expressed here through the 'imaginative' construction of children's parties). This is simultaneously tempered by a pressure of the normative; to avoid embarrassments and 'wrong' behaviour (generating a cult of 'sameness'). While there is at once a desire to use goods and gifts to express relationships and their depth (honouring a particular mother or child, for example with a more 'individually' chosen gift) the notion of the 'going rate' for the price of a children's party gift is crucial to the maintenance of 'sameness'. The relationship between these strategies horizontally then in turn relates to the narrative of temporal strategies worked through school and onwards, as anticipated of the infant in the long term.

## **Chapter Three**

### **“Mother Swapping”: the Trafficking of Second-Hand Baby Goods**

This chapter considers the specificity of a form of alternative provisioning in terms of its relation to the construction of a local form of sociality around mothering. While the ‘trafficking’ in children’s nearly new items might be assumed as an extension of women’s role as carers (Devault 1991; Finch and Groves 1983; Finch and Mason 1993), this chapter considers instead such ‘work’ as a means of women creating a social space outside their roles as mothers. In keeping with what Bell and Ribbens (1994) describe as the ‘invisibility’ of women’s social networks, the inter-household practice of sorting, identifying and exchanging ‘hand-me-down’ clothes remained unidentified by households, in the preliminary interviews of the ethnography, as a form of provisioning worthy of identifying. Yet through participant observation, it emerged as the most prevalent form of alternative acquisition practised across a diverse range of households in terms of class and ethnicity. Lourdes, a South American woman, regularly exchanges her daughter’s outgrown clothes with mothers in a local Chilean social club; Doreen, a West Indian mother of two baby boys receives regular consignments of traditional Caribbean clothes from Jamaica, whilst passing on her own children’s garments to relatives in Bristol.

While certain households merely supplement formal retail acquisition with this trafficking of second hand goods, others rely on it exclusively for the provisioning of their children. Jennifer, a mother of Southern Irish origins, depends entirely on second-hand children’s clothes and toys as an everyday means of provisioning. As well as supplying her own children with clothing and toys she regularly attends nearly new sales to find items for her extended kin in Ireland, commenting ‘there are lots of things I know they can’t get easily there [in Southern Ireland], you know, so if I see something I’ll get it and put it aside for them’. The ‘trafficking’ in second-hand children’s wares, then, is used in a variety of forms and at various levels of involvement but it forms a staple, yet formally unacknowledged, form of alternative acquisition on the street in north London.

The term ‘trafficking’ is used to denote a precarious activity in which goods are dealt with, not in one-off isolated acts of exchange, but within the ongoing, convoluted,

contradictory and tentative world of 'mothering' and sociality. As the title of this chapter suggests, the provisioning of second-hand children's clothes is an integral part of the social process that might be described as 'mother swapping'; for entrenched in the transactions and material culture of the second-hand informal economy of children's wear, are the identities, knowledges and formations of women as 'mothers'. The specificity of the informal economies which operate around clothing, has been outlined by a small number of sociologists, historians and anthropologists (see for example Corrigan 1995; Ginsburg 1980; Hansen 2000; Martin 1994).

Corrigan, for example, considers the stealing and borrowing of clothing amongst family members as a specifically delineated form of economy within the domestic sphere. In particular, he considers the importance of taste as expressed through the selection and gifting of clothes by mothers for teenage daughters and what he terms the creation of 'sartorial theorecticity'. Daughters use their developing sense of 'taste' as a means of rejecting their mother's gifts of clothing, forcing instead the need for monetary equivalents through which the teenage daughters' win their independence. The clothing economy, Corrigan asserts, is an economy in which men generally 'lose out'. Like the gift economy in general it is dominated by women (Cheal 1988) and it is in each individual female's interests 'to attain her own independent control over it'. There are other economies which differ in their distribution, such as food, in which women 'lose out'; 'it may be that this is linked to traditional notions of men as substance (food) and women as appearance (clothing)' he concludes tentatively. Although Corrigan provides a convincing argument regarding the contestation of relations between mothers and their teenage daughters, as the editors of the volume state Corrigan crucially misrepresents women's provisioning of clothing as 'gift-giving'; whether these ordinary purchases are best seen by us as gifts is questionable. After all, the provision of clothes for children is part and parcel of routine maternal care?....Women's purchase of clothing for other household members is not simply an expression of power but of their domestic responsibility as careers'. (Jackson and Moores 1995:7)

Extensive studies made by Gregson and Crewe (1997;1998) of British car boot sales similarly highlights the integral relation between women and the provisioning of children's clothing; "within the confines of car boot sales it is the buying and selling of children's clothing which comprises the single most important category of goods with which women, irrespective of class, are involved" (1998:86). The comparative

invisibility of this form of acquisition amongst informants themselves can perhaps be explained, then, by what Devault describes as the ‘naturalisation’ of women’s domestic work as carers and provisioners (Devault, 1991). The day to day sorting, exchange and circulation of ‘hand-me-downs’ and ‘cast offs’ and the attendance of informal consumption spaces such as ‘nearly new sales’, belongs to the broader practice of caring in which arduous repetitive tasks and tacit skills are bound with emotional ties, intimate relations and anxieties. Activities such as straining the pips from the tomatoes of a ‘fussy-eater’, removing the labels from a child’s clothing to prevent the scratching of over-sensitive skin, ensuring a two year old toddler’s favourite dinosaur socks are washed and ready to wear, are not only functional responses to ensure the ‘smooth running’ of a household they are crucial acts of valorisation.

Through the trafficking of used children’s clothes the work of caring and the practice of valorisation is made visible. As mothers swap anecdotes about cast-off items, formerly intimate parts of the material culture of their everyday routines and social relations, they generate a unique form of sociality. This chapter begins with a specific example of the ‘hand-me-down’ process to reveal how such transactions constitute relations in and of themselves; it then goes on to explore ‘nearly new sales’ (organised by mothers specifically for the sale of used children’s wares) as unique and alternative spaces of consumption. The chapter goes on to suggest that such venues are used by women, not to perpetuate their work as mother’s, carers and provisioners (as described by Devault), but rather to invert such roles through the use of market exchange relations. ‘Mother swapping’ is taken from the domestic sphere, to inter-household relations and further valorised through the activities of the market place encapsulated in the nearly new sale. Here skills of dealership combined with cajolery, playfulness and intrigue (traditionally associated with the wily traders of street markets and the mythology of the eastern bazaar) are appropriated by women in the creation of a self-made and consensual market place (Still 1997).

### **‘Hand-Me -Downs and ‘Cast-offs’: A Moral Economy of Clothing**

It’s a beautiful, gorgeous little white fur coat; real fur with mother of pearl buttons and a sweet little hood. But Sophie can’t wear it - she loves it but she just can’t wear it. People would probably throw tomatoes at her in the street and [laughing] they’d think I was Cruella

Deville! But we still keep it in the wardrobe, it's too nice to hide away and charity shops around here probably wouldn't take it anyway.

Jane (37), discussing an item of 'hand-me-down' clothing received from relatives in the United States.

Every three months or so Jane receives a consignment of 'hand-me-down' children's clothing from relatives across the Atlantic. As a mother of four children, aged between eighteen months and six years, these parcels form an integral part of her household provisioning. The consignments of clothing arrive after a lengthy process of vetting undertaken by Cindy, Jane's American sister-in-law, the mother of two girls aged four and eight years. Most of the items are the result of seasonal 'clear-outs' and have been set aside from other piles destined for neighbours' children, thrift shops and garage sales.

Jane considers her American sister-in-law Cindy as 'a bit of a smooth operator' who, despite her comparative wealth, is a particularly resourceful woman when it comes to the provisioning of children's clothes. According to Jane she effectively operates a 'racket' in cast-offs and hand-me downs whereby she guiltlessly converts the copious and generous gifts of her children's grandparents into hard cash by selling the items (often scarcely worn before being outgrown) for a decent price at her 'nearly new' garage sales. Despite Cindy's apparent callousness in systematically selling off the grandparent's gifts as profitable commodities Jane admires her gall and understands this as a legitimate way of recouping part of the cost of these beautiful, yet scarcely worn, clothes. There are certain items, however, which even the ever-resourceful Cindy deems too special to sell for profit or pass on to non-kin. Consequently, items such as the fur coat (mentioned in the above quotation) are reserved for the English nieces and nephews. Deemed special enough to warrant the cost of overland postage and packaging, they are sent off to England.

Despite the intimacy invoked by the practice of imagining your own child's clothing worn by someone else's offspring, and of receiving and deciphering the intimate material culture of another's household, prior to these exchanges Jane and Cindy rarely had contact with each other. The families have not met up in ten years (and according to Jane do not even bother sending each other 'dutiful Christmas or birthday cards') yet

since the birth of Jane's first child they have sustained a long term transatlantic relationship through the exchange and sorting of thrice yearly consignments of hand-me-down and nearly-new clothes.

The transposition of clothing, from one cultural context to another, is explored in Hansen's (2000b) extensive study of the international second-hand clothing trade in Zambia. Hansen considers how garments previously worn within North America and Europe are transposed, through a complex global and local system of provisioning, to an African context. The increase in the trading of second-hand clothing in sub-Saharan Africa over the last two decades has resulted in the creation of 'localised' definitions of the import; in North Western Tanzania it is known as "died in Europe"; in Ghana "dead white men's clothes", in Senegal "shake and sell" and in Zambia 'salaula', meaning in Bemba "selecting from a pile in the manner of rummaging"(Hansen 2000b: 245). Intimate knowledge of a specific locality is crucial to the successful trading of second-clothing; 'Second-hand clothing exporters need local knowledge not only about the political climate, import rules, tariffs, and currency regulations but also about consumption practices in the various African countries' (Hansen 2000b: 252). As well as the clothing being incorporated into the established dress, fashions and traditions of each locality, the imported clothing may also generate a unique culture operating as an agent of social change (Martin 1994). Second-hand clothing then, is not received or understood as a monolithic form of provisioning but rather has its own densely nuanced relation to specific localities, socio-economic groups, and gendered forms of dress within the areas in which it is appropriated. A pair of jeans, for example, takes on a range of meanings depending on the age and gender of the wearer and the regional politics of the locality of sub-Saharan Africa in which it emerges as a worn garment.

Hansen's study deals with the globalised commercial trade in second-hand clothing<sup>1</sup>. However, the inter-household exchanges of second-hand clothing in north London are highly comparable in ways in which the specificity of particular items are re-appropriated in local contexts. The trafficking in second-hand goods involves a complex process in which values are generated, amongst women, around specific genres and

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<sup>1</sup> Between 40-75% of charitable clothing donations are estimated to be passed on to commercial traders for export (see Hansen 2000b:250).

articles of clothing. When the 'hand-me-down' children's clothes, plucked from their American context, first arrive in north London they begin their journey into another network of exchanges between friends and relatives. Many articles undergo a process of 'de-acquisition' through which they are passed to neighbouring households or alternative arenas of provisioning (such as charity shops, nearly new sales, re-cycling centres, etc.) while others undergo 're-acquisition' whereby motifs and labels are removed or patches added. In this process of 'de-acquisition' and 're-acquisition' articles such as a real fur coat (previously described) and an overly elaborate 'gaudy' sequinned party dress become displaced and problematised as the biographical trajectories of the commodities drastically change (Kopytoff 1986). Exported from the social relations of a suburb in Connecticut to an urban street in north London, in the processes of 'mother swapping' certain items are rendered distasteful, anomalous or impractical within their new context.

A polyester Disney night-dress with a *Beauty and the Beast* motif, for example, presents an inter-household dilemma which could either secure or undermine Jane and her daughter's valuable neighbourly relationships. The nightdress, sorted from the most recent American consignment of clothes, holds an unsurpassable appeal for Jane's six year old daughter, Sophie. In principle, Jane and her partner discourage their children's interest in Disney merchandise, which they consider as exploitative and non-educational. But Jane is fully aware of the desirability of the *Beauty and the Beast* night-dress amongst girls of Sophie's age group and for Sophie in particular as it holds a special premium, operating, as it does, outside the rules that constitute the moral economy of this household. The dilemma of the Disney nightdress is further compounded by its dubious status as a 'synthetic' garment. As a compromise, Jane offers the nightdress to her daughter, not for her own use, but as a potential gift for her friend Rachel (a seven year old girl living next-door-but one). In this way the magical but problematic article can be experienced vicariously through Sophie's relationship with her friend Rachel; it can be kept while given. It also acts as a long awaited reciprocation of Rachel (or her mother's) generosity towards Sophie who receives many of Rachel's cast-offs. Jane comments, 'I know Sophie is very conscious of the fact that Rachel's always giving her things, like summer dresses and pretty girl things, and she wants to give her something back - I did make some Barbie clothes for her to swap but

she's always getting pretty dresses from Rachel and wants to give her something she can wear'.

Unfortunately, allowing Sophie to present Rachel with a polyester Disney night-dress might be construed as insensitive or insulting to Rachel's mother; why would Jane try to pass off an item, deemed problematic within her own household, to another mother? Both mothers have frequented the local nearly-new sales and discussed at length their tastes and preferences as mothers and, in particular, their shared disinclination towards their children wearing synthetics. Over a cup of coffee later in the week Jane pre-empted the 'problem' of the contentious hand-me-down Disney night-dress by assuring Rachel's mother of her own ambiguity towards the item and explaining that if deemed unsuitable, despite its contemporary appeal, it 'can always be sent to Oxfam'[charity shop].

Sally, mother of two girls aged seven and ten years living in a maisonette on Jay Road, uses gender as the main rationale in sorting 'hand-down' clothing for friends and relatives. As her brother, who lives in a town seventy miles outside of London, is the father of two baby girls most of the girls' cast-off clothing is sent to him or saved up until a family visit. Any 'boyish' clothes that Sally receives as 'hand-me-downs' from other family members or friends are passed on to Tracey, a mother Sally made as a friend through the local NCT meetings.

If Tracey finds that she can not use any of the items Sally has earmarked for her children, rather than pass them on to another mother she passes them back to Sally for further recycling. It is Sally, as the initial donor of the second-hand clothing, who decides if the circulation of the clothes should be terminated within the social network and be taken to the charity shop, Oxfam.

The prioritisation of recipients, for example between kin and friends, can shift from year to year. Although at the beginning of the ethnography Sally donated her daughters' clothing to Tracey, towards the end of the study she began to save them for her nieces to 'grow into'. Baby clothes, particularly those given to kin, are most often seen as 'lent' rather than unequivocally handed down;

I felt like I should save them and Tilley [Tracey's daughter] has loads of clothes anyway. Another friend has a two and a half year old so I give to her. Sometimes it depends on who's around when I empty the cupboard. But I handed all my baby clothes to my brother – and I'm hoping I'll get them back.

Most mothers retain items deemed of particular value often associated with their child's development or a particular moment or event in the infant's short life, as reiterated by Layne (1999, 2000). These items, as well as holding particular sentimental value, are seen as having a 'life' within the family and are retained in recognition of the reproduction of future generations, as expressed again by Sally; 'I've also kept a special bag [of clothing] supposedly for Kylie and Natalie, if they ever have kids'.

Sally considered donating the 'special bag' of baby and children's clothes to her brother as the 'natural' recipient of her own family's items. However, although Sally normalises the passing on of children's wares to her own kin (supplanting the previously established 'hand-me-down' relationship with a close friend and mother) this is not an unproblematic gesture;

I might as well lend them [the special, saved clothes] to my brother – but I've never seen them [previously 'handed down' clothes] on them [the brother's children]. I'm a bit like a granny [imitates stern, elderly woman's voice as if reprimanding her brother] 'Where are those clothes? [laughs].

Although Sally and her brother were both brought up wearing 'hand-me-downs', Sally believes that it is Kimberly, her brother's Texan wife, who rejects her nieces wearing of the second-hand clothes of their cousins;

I daren't say anything..and his [wife]..Kimberley who, you know has quite, well she's really not like me, you know scruffy things don't bother me, her kids are in beautiful clothes and the latest designer prams. And it's all new, the toys are all new, so it's a different culture, whereas I've always had second hand clothes.

Bethany, a mother working full-time in the publishing industry, lives in a four bedroom Victorian house adjacent to Jay Road and has a five year old daughter, Abigail, and a baby son. She also retains close contact with her Jewish extended family in the area. Although she is familiar with some of the mothers in the local NCT and Lonsdale Mothers' Group (LMG) she spends most of her social time near her place of work in the West End and employs a nanny and cleaner. Bethany, despite her broad network of kin and friends, finds 'hand-me-down' practices an unpleasant but 'endured' aspect of mothering ;

I normally buy Abigail's clothes myself and we get given a lot. Bags of baby clothes, I hate them. A lot of rubbish, but you have to comb through them. I have a friend [Isabelle] who lives in South London and she is from a big family, her sister has four children and all of those things go to Isabelle and because I had a girl, and she didn't, all of the girls' clothing came to me. And now I've got a boy, my sister-in-law has a boy and I'm getting a lot of clothes given.

In contrast, Wayne and Gillian Burrows, an unemployed couple with five children living on income support in Sparrow Court, depend almost exclusively on the second hand children's items of their extended kin to clothe their family. They can rarely afford to purchase new clothes from formal retail outlets, catalogues or even the local market and so have little reason 'to browse' or window shop;

We've been round [the local market]but it seems to be mainly clothes. Not much of anything else. We come from a big family most of my brothers have children, if they're getting rid of things they'll ask if it is any good - it saves us a lot of money.

Gillian, unlike many of the middle class mothers in and around Jay Road, has never belonged to the NCT or attended any of the Lonsdale Mother's Group events or nearly new children's wares sales despite raising five children in the neighbourhood. Although the Burrows receive over seventy Christmas greeting cards each year (from friends, neighbours, kin) their intra-household relations are almost exclusively confined to

family connections and most of their social activity takes place several miles away in a different part of north London. Unlike many of the more affluent households on Jay Road, for Wayne and Gillian provisioning and childcare is notable in the extent to which it is evenly shared between husband and wife; the bulk of the 'mothering' and provisioning in the household is shared by the couple. The second-hand clothing they receive from Wayne's brothers rarely gets passed out of the household and re-circulated due the sheer usefulness of the bundles to a family with a broad age range of children. As with the majority of informants described in this chapter the couple define themselves as holding middle class values. But their relationship to second-hand provisioning is vastly different, as will emerge in the following descriptions, to that of the middle class mothers' on Jay Road.

Miriam, a mother in her mid-forties, has lived on a street adjacent to Jay Road for nearly fifteen years and has brought up all three children in the area. Although she is a trained barrister, after the birth of her third child, Rosalind, she put aside immediate plans to return to work in order to care full-time for the children. She is fully conversant with the activities of the local mother's groups and sold the unwanted garments of her first two children through the LMG newsletter. At this later stage in her mothering she prefers to personally pass on the out-grown items of her children's clothing in direct relation to the needs of her close friends. Miriam generally circumvents kin, due to mismatch in sizing, in preference of a particular friend, Jenny, who lives in the same street who also has three children, and a daughter the same age as Miriam's youngest child, Rosalind.

I [have] a niece, she's five, so in theory we should be able to pass on girls' clothes to her. Unfortunately she's incredibly tall so she's as tall as Phoebe [Miriam's middle child] but I have passed things on. There is a little girl up the road, well Alisa, children you know. I have given Jenny some and she's given me some boys stuff and I've given her some girls stuff. I have actually sold on to somebody who advertised in Lonsdale mothers' [newsletter] asking for girls clothes between four and six years. But I used to be quite, I used to hang on to an awful lot of stuff, I've become more ruthless about getting rid of things now.

Anne is the mother of three young boys and considers the swapping and 'hand-me-down' clothes cultures between households and mothers as an activity from which she is largely precluded due to the gender of her offspring;

Q . Are you involved in swapping clothes at all?

A I'm not involved in that .I think with the girls' clothes there is more, there are people who turn up [to nursery]with girls' clothes and it's tried on different kids that are there. And the kids are asked whether they want to wear them, this is the sort of 4 year olds who at the moment are in half day nursery and there's certainly been that with the girls' clothes quite a lot. I haven't seen it with the boys clothes. I think what I've heard is, other people have said boys wear clothes out [whereas] girls get pretty dresses that aren't practical but look nice so they can get passed [on].

Q Do you swap more between families?

A Yes I think so I mean we get clothes from one of Robert's cousins.

Q Do you give clothes in turn?

A No not much, well either he [eldest son] destroys them or we put them away or we give some to the school [Blackbird Hill primary].

The passages above offer glimpses into the particularity of a given households' use of second-hand children's clothing. Evidently the passing down (to younger children) and passing on (to other families) of clothing is a form of provisioning integral to everyday domestic activity. These examples, despite their specificity, are by no means exceptional. Several informants spoke of receiving bin liners full of baby clothes from female neighbours on the birth of the child; comparative strangers previously unrecognisable to them, except perhaps in passing on the street, confidently offered their second-hand goods. The arrival of a new born child prompted gestures of familiarity, manifest in the gifting of second-hand clothes, which many women had not

previously or subsequently experienced. Occasionally a blurred distinction was drawn, however, between the 'lending' and the giving of clothes; a blurring which added to the precariousness of the second-hand trafficking process in general. Relatives, close friends (or potential close friends) might hand over a consignment of baby clothes on the premise that certain earmarked items were expected to be returned to their original donor after a certain stage of a baby's development. This arrangement was often based on an unspoken understanding that mothering, whilst temporal, could never be fully relinquished as a practice. Even women who openly discussed their resistance to having any further children expressed superstition in totally relinquishing their ownership of some of their baby related wares. Obviously in some cases this was confined to articles of sentimental or familial value (hand-knitted cardigans or particularly memorable garments) but it also applied to more apparently functional wares. As a quote from Gillian (extracted from a general discussion regarding acquisitions as a new mother) illustrates;

Gillian: 'A woman called Barbara is lending me a baby bath, she's a similar age to me and has had her first and her last [baby] a year ago so she knows what it's like, you know. It's a lovely baby bath, and she gave me some clothes and a changing mat too'.

Q. 'How do you know Barbara?'

Gillian: 'I don't really know her she's actually a friend of a friend that I met at pre-natal classes and she heard I was having Joe, and like me she was in her forties when she first got pregnant, so she told my friend if I needed stuff she'd pop round with it. So she came round yesterday'.

In some extreme cases the trafficking of baby clothes, and the ambiguity of this specific form of transaction proved too contentious. Sarah, a mother of three young children, confessed to bearing a bitter grudge against her sister for not returning certain items of baby clothes she had 'lent' to her several years ago. The entire family had apparently become involved in the feud after Sarah felt hurt that the baby clothes had not been 'returned' in time for the birth of her most recent baby. Short of going over to her sister's home, she commented, and raiding her cupboards she saw little chance of ever

retrieving them. It is unclear as to whether the clothes were actually ever explicitly given or lent to Sarah's sister. Nor is it clear whether or not the ambiguous status of the material culture changed the nature of the sisterly relationship, or vice versa but the 'hand-me-down' clothing had become pivotal to the family discord.

The precarious, yet potentially fruitful, nature of trafficking baby clothes, with its ambiguity of lending and giving, is carried over into unique spaces of alternative provisioning known as nearly new sales; events which bring this vital domestic, inter-household form of informal economy into the very public domain of a market place. Nearly new sales of children's clothes take place in a rented church hall, every alternate month, a couple of miles away from the ethnographic site called Jay Road towards the middle class area of Ibis Pond in north London. Like other alternative arenas of consumption, such as car boot and garage sales, nearly new sales are defined by the face-to-face transactions between buyers and sellers (offering personal possessions as goods), the negotiation of a non-fixed pricing system and a heterogeneity of goods.

As Gregson and Crewe (1997) point out, in their study of car boot sales in Britain, the act of purchase is drastically over-simplified in consumption literature (tied as it is to assumptions regarding transactions in formal retail environments). Through interviews Gregson and Crewe contextualise the purchases of car boot consumers exploring the intended use of purchases as gifts, ornaments, renovated objects and potential commodities for further exchange arguing that the practices of acquisition and the meanings of goods are inseparable spheres.

Comparable approaches to alternative spaces of provisioning, such as Herrmann's study of garage sales in the United States, 'emphasize the social relations of exchange rather than the items that change hands' (Herrmann 1997:911). For Herrmann the material culture of garage sales is generalised as 'the manufactured effluvia of late 20<sup>th</sup> century American household' (1997:916). It is gift giving, in the guise of market exchanges, that transforms these fungible goods into inalienable commodities. Rather than the invisible hand of the market place, it is the seller at the garage sale who controls the price and 'the social relations of the exchange' and these vary according to the face-to-face encounter of each transaction.

Similarly, according to Gregson and Crewe the act of purchase is the means by which goods are 're-enchanted'; through ritual and performance, they are divested of their original owner's associations, and re-invented as possessions by their purchasers. Despite the similarities between garage, car boot and nearly new sales both Herrmann (1984, 1997) and Gregson and Crewe's (1997, 1998, 2000) work emphasises the significance of face-to-face transactions in creating the meaning of 'possession' for the consumer in a way that is not easily equated with the practices of the nearly new sale. They talk, for example, of ridding objects of the 'contamination' of the previous owner and, whilst valuing the 'history' of second-hand goods, seeking to re-appropriate them through renovation, etc. Although children's clothes are bought and altered, the material culture of the nearly new sales, it is perhaps better understood as 'lent' rather than 'possessed'. Nearly new sales are understood as part of an ongoing trajectory, rather than as finite, singular events.

In her re-interpretation of Melanesian exchange relations, Weiner argues that women are crucial to the maintenance of social relations through the *prevention* of exchange in certain cultural forms, thus protecting certain forms of relations. Similarly, in their consideration of cloth as a specific genre of material culture, Schneider and Weiner (1989) assert the highly symbolic nature of cloth as creating 'a binding tie between... kinship groups, or ... generations (Schneider and Weiner 1989: 3). The relation of cloth or woven artefacts to the social construction of women as mothers is further considered by Layne (2000) in her study of pregnancy loss and the 'making' of babies through the acquisition of goods (predominantly clothing and textiles). In an anthropological context, MacKenzie's (1991) study of the bilum or string bag of Papua New Guinea, provides a specific example of the means by which material forms generate and mediate gender relations. It is the caring and skill used in weaving and maintaining a bilum (a woven bag used to contain a range of goods and entities including babies, wood and spirits) which comes to define a 'good woman'; 'it is through making bilums that women consider themselves as women and socialise their daughters into culturally appropriate gender roles as women' (MacKenzie 1991:141).

Neither gifts nor commodities, used baby and children's clothes warrant a form of exchange closer to Weiner's (1992) theory of inalienable possessions (a paradox of 'keeping-while-giving' in which possessions must *not* be given, and if they are

circulated, must be returned to the donor) than Herrmann's view of 'inalienable commodities' or Gregson and Crewe's 're-enchanted commodities'. The acquisition of such goods transcends the desire of the individual and notions of possession associated with other types of 'owned goods'.

Similarly, the transactions of the nearly new sales act as modes of exchange which perpetuate the status of used baby and children's clothing as a specific form of material culture associated with women's biological and cultural reproduction and ensuing social relations. Herrmann argues that the predominance of garage sales in contemporary United States is directly linked to the demise of 'earlier face-to-face means of distributing used goods to those who could most use them (e.g. clothing exchanges or extended kinship networks)' (1997:916). Clearly, clothing exchanges thrive in the north London setting and nearly new sales have not merely arisen as a replacement for an authentic form of what Herrmann describes as 'social egalitarian' exchange. The creation of a market place in second-hand children's clothes, within an already established culture of clothing exchange, is obviously motivated neither by economic imperative or functional necessity alone. Rather, it operates as a public arena in which the 'trafficking' of the semi-devotional goods of babies and children is celebrated and the knowledges and skills of mothering practised. It is through this market place and its monetary transactions, that the significance of caring and nurturing and the potential isolation of housework is countered by the significance of friendships and women's sociality. The perpetuation of this sociality relies on the status of the material culture and its relevance, not just to babies and children themselves, but to the social dimensions of women's newly forming identities as mothers. Although this chapter seeks to illuminate the dynamic role of social relations in the construction of taste and consensus it considers the specificity of the material culture of children's and babies clothes as integral, rather than incidental, to this process.

### **The "Nearly New Sale": Constructing a Utopian Market Place?**

'To the foreign eye, a mid-Eastern bazaar, ..is a tumbling chaos: hundreds of men...., shouting in each others' faces ,whispering in each others' ears, smothering each other in cascades of gestures, grimaces, glares – the whole enveloped in a smell of donkeys, a clatter of carts, and an accumulation of material objects God himself could

not inventory, and some of which he could probably not identify... sensory confusion brought to a majestic pitch'. (Geertz 1979: 197).

The Lonsdale Mother's Group (LMG) holds a nearly new sale of children's clothes, toys and equipment in a spacious church hall at 10am each alternate month. To the outsiders eye, with the exception of the 'enveloping smell of donkeys', LMG sales are not dissimilar to Geertz' description of a Moroccan *suq*, or bazaar. They are hectic, noisy, excited events in which piles of assorted wares are tugged and tousled in the course of animated transactions between eager buyers and sellers. In contrast to the eastern bazaars, however, LMG sales are organised solely by women, for women. Under the auspices of their roles as mothers they are both the vendors and buyers.

Typically held on a weekday, the events commence with the gathering of women, equipped with babies and buggies, in a long queue winding its way around the front of the church hall. As the nearly new sales are extremely popular, they form a common topic of conversation at the ethnographic site known as Jay Road. Several weeks prior to the sales taking place women discuss potential purchases, social encounters and donations to the event. This 'build-up' begins as soon as the sale dates are listed in the bi-monthly listings section of the LMG newsletter. While the newsletter formally advertises the sales events, the crucial information, including speculation regarding the 'quality' and content of the next sale, circulate via word of mouth. Admission to the sale costs 20p with stall rental costing £4 for members and £8 for non-members. Around eighty women (and accompanying buggies and babies) are in the sale hall at any one time and there are typically around twenty-five stalls. A tea hatch to the rear of the hall serves refreshments and is the focal point for respite from the affray of the gathered crowd. It is here that mothers gather to swap details regarding purchases made or intended and where verdicts are reached regarding the comparative 'success' of the sale. Consensus forms around the gender bias of the goods on offer (is it a 'boy' sale or a 'girl' sale?) and whether prices are perceptibly lower or higher than previous events.

Amidst 'a jungle of price and a cacophony of goods' (Geertz 1979:217) women circulate around the hall stopping at each stall, leaning over one another to fondle and scrutinise an array of miniature items; hand-knitted mittens, baby booties, shiny

swimming costumes and tiny raincoats. Although LMG nearly new sales are ostensibly middle class enterprises, as reflected in the profile and addresses of the key organisational members, the sales themselves attract a mixture of members and non-members alike from the local area. It is not the LMG as an organisation which constructs the aesthetics or practices of the nearly new sale; for many women their involvement with the organisation is confined to their attendance at the sales and they have no intention of supporting any other of its activities such as bonfire nights and picnic parties. Rather the sale has become an entity in and of itself; a unique market place where talk and tactility, luck and kismet come together in a sensory world far removed from the nearby shopping malls or supermarkets.

Sites such as department stores have been identified by numerous academics as vital facets in the construction of modern femininity that encode 'a masculine heterosexual gaze' in the promotion of commodities (Porter-Benson 1985; Winship 1987). Conversely, Crewe and Gregson argue that the highly gendered but heterogeneous world of the car boot sale allows for multiple feminine identities, in which women can exercise their skills as homemakers and carers, as well as construct themselves in the context of the 'male gaze'. In the nearly new sale, liberated from the conventions of formal retail spaces, the scrutiny of shop assistants and male companions, women create a unique site of feminised sociality.

Although many women in this milieu recognise each other solely through the profile of each other's children, this distanced familiarity enables the gradual development of friendships. Discussions initiated by stall holders and purchasers regarding the history of particular garments and associated experiences allow women to introduce each other's households and family members as mutual reference points. Such conversations might concern seemingly practical issues, such as sizing, in which a whole group of women become involved; 'This label is Naf Naf supposedly age eight', says one stall holder, 'but it's French so it's much smaller than it says and wouldn't fit my daughter' comments another. However, despite the apparent functionalism of matching a garment with an absent child such exchanges are premised more on sociality than expedience. Most lengthy discussions end, not in a closed sale, but in polite farewell gesture and a move to the next desirable stall.

Discussions combine with physical demonstration at stalls, as the 'value' of the items is determined. If a garment is hardly worn, though its condition might theoretically increase its worth it also raises questions about its usefulness or desirability; why didn't the child or mother like it? Is its design inappropriate for the age group it is meant to fit? Is it made from non-washable materials and therefore difficult to maintain? In other words the testament of the stallholder proves vital to the validity of the object for sale. At one stall, a young mother Jane (carrying her baby in one arm and a hold-all over her shoulder) spots a pair of pink pyjamas decorated with gold sparkly writing and cartoons. She immediately recognises the stall as being run by a mother she had encountered previously as a vendor and with whom she associates some successful purchases. 'What age little girl are you looking for?' asks the stall holder, 'Oh, she's a big five year old' responds Jane; a typical conversation ensues in which the stallholder explains the size and age of her own children in relation to the clothing item. In this case Jane and the stallholder laugh as they describe the shift from pink to gold preferences in little girls and the stall holder warns 'wait until she gets to the black phase. It's all black now with my girl -she wouldn't be seen dead in pink'. The encounter closes with the purchase of several pink and sparkly items. At the next nearly new sale Jane identifies this mother a sympathetic vendor and a potential friend.

The typical strategy for dealing with the heterogeneity of the nearly new sale was to circulate at least half a dozen times around the stalls before identifying the key areas of interest. 'Clientalization', the term Geertz' uses in his ethnography of Moroccan bazaars to describe the loyalty built up between trade and buyer, also proved vital as an aspect of women's efficient navigation through the chaos of the goods and personalities of the sale. Katy, for example, favoured the stall of a well -groomed fashionable mother, who often had 'good clothes' with 'all the designer labels'. But as another woman pointed out, this vendor had spent so much money on her children's clothes in the first place that it was difficult for her to sell them at 'heart-breakingly' low prices, even second hand. Consensus suggested, in this case, that for such high quality goods her prices were wholly justified.

The majority of the informants mentioned in this study live on severely restrictive budgets. Yet, second hand clothes and toys are not lamented as a poor alternative to shop-bought equivalents. Economic imperative alone does not explain why a busy, low

income mother with two toddlers to supervise would spend three-quarters of an hour scouring a crowded church hall sale on the off chance of finding a pair of second-hand pink elephant motif Wellington boots for her daughter. A functionally equivalent, brand new pair could easily be purchased at the local department store for a similar price. But the bazaar like atmosphere for the nearly new sale is a unique arena of consumption bounded by friendship, ethics, expertise, solidarity and pleasure as much as thrift and prudence.

Amongst the chaos of the sale, informants frequently ‘recalled’ items on stalls that might be of relevance to other mothers as friends and acquaintances. Similarly, many attendees of the sales could not resist the temptation of purchasing goods for their absent friends or women they had become familiar with through other mother-related activities (such as picking the children up from school). Sandra, for example, spotted a collection of children’s books written in Finnish. As she remembered a certain mother (absent from the sale) had just employed a Finnish nanny, she bought the whole lot, despite her own severely limited budget. She justified the purchase on the grounds of serendipity and an imagined scenario in which the absent mother’s nanny might read bedtime stories to the children in a native language. It seems incongruous that a low income mother (with three of her own young children to support) should chose to buy such an obscure but thoughtful gift for another considerably more affluent mother (apparently too busy to attend the sale herself). Yet, in exercising such a finely honed expression of her consumptive skills and motherly imagination Sandra’s monetary limitations were superseded by a form of sociality that stands for the nearly-new sale as a whole. Purchased from a formal retail outlet as a pre-meditated gift, the Finnish storybooks would have proved utterly inappropriate. But given to another absent mother as mementoes and trophies from a missed LMG nearly new sale, they increased Sandra’s status as a mother and potential friend whilst reiterating the shared currency of the event.

Contrary to popular images of marauding women at jumble sales or housewifely bargain hunters eyeing up the best cut of meat, women at these nearly new sales adhere to particular style of decorum. Like Smith’s (1989) depiction of auctions, the actors of the nearly new sale exercise courtesies and allegiances in their trading community. Despite spending most of their time avidly concentrating on the wares set out before them, and

on the method for best traversing a chaotic and crowded church hall turned market place, filled with the sound of impatient toddlers and excited transactions, the women dress as if for a social event. In the winter many sport fashionable hats and functional but trendy coats with bright lipstick. They are dressed in a fashion that would not easily translate to the formal shopping expedition of a West End high street but which, in its studied informality, is by no means thrown together or everyday. Leggings are worn with colourful baggy jumpers and scarves; hiking boots with woolly socks depict a kind of active urban woman rather than a provincial high street shopper. The nearly new sales shoppers are dressed for action as they move from stall to stall holding babies, bags and potential purchases simultaneously.

### **Trading Relations: Appropriating the Market**

The stalls and their arrangements of goods (although by no-means uniform in their styles of display) borrow extensively from formal retail marketing techniques; like colours assembled with like, backdrops formed using co-ordinating or outstanding items, montages of items assembled according to theme. Arriving up to an hour before the commencement of the event, stallholders arrange their wares and solicit advice and suggestions from on-lookers and other stallholders in the hall. One of the most common display methods revolves around the rationalised organisation of clothing into types (vest, leggings, sweat tops, pyjamas etc) and then age appropriateness.

Yet despite this attempted rationalisation of goods through indication of age range and gender suitability (using written labels or a sliding scale display) informant's comments suggest this approach as the least appealing display method. As so few of the sizes are consistent within children's clothing ranges, the banter between seller and buyer serves as an evaluation process based on women's own interpretation, advice and the willingness to receive such advice. Potential purchasers are more interested in the subjective opinions of the stallholder than objective labelling. The stories or 'biographies' of the goods do not just operate as forms of authentication but as insights into the knowledge and values of the previous owner; crucially the interaction between the women over potential exchanges creates a form of sociality and consensus making which ultimately feeds back into the inter-household informal economy of used children's clothing.

Most of the stalls are hired by mother's like Melanie, who (after being persuaded by friends and informed by women familiar with transactions from the trading side of the stall) use the opportunity to pass-on an accumulated array of redundant clothes and artefacts related to a specific stage in a child's development. In Melanie's case she had decided to clear out her two-year-old son's outgrown toys and clothes due to a pending house move; tired of being an isolated single mother in London Melanie had decided to move 'back to her roots' in Scotland. Pricing up her son's clothes the evening before the sale, then, proved an emotive experience in that it signalled the demise of her London life and the friendships formed at events such as the nearly new sales. Melanie was also clearly excited about the pending sale, however, eliciting bets from other stallholders over which items would sell first.

Although Melanie attached an adhesive price label to each of her child's items, within minutes of the sale's commencement she began desperately to remove them. Despite extensive pre-sale inquiries (ringing around friends and nearly new initiates) her prices proved untenable. A particularly fraught incident, in which a potential buyer accused Melanie of charging 'about a hundred times over the odds' for a pair of toddlers jeans, confirmed to her that there could be no fixed prices attributed to her son's clothes; instead they were adapted to suit each transaction rather than reflect the original value of a given item. The attitude of the buyer towards her son's used-clothes, and her perception of the buyer's particular circumstances and motives, caused prices to be altered. Money was not, as Herrmann (1997) describes in the case of garage sales merely 'the grease to lubricate the exchange'. On the contrary the pricing scheme proved integral to the broader construction of value around the goods in the church hall. Rather it was, as Smith (1989) describes in his study of auction, a crucial means of creating consensus of value within the social relations of the sale.

The face-to-face negotiation of price in relation to items of intimate value also caused some mothers, experienced in attendance of the nearly new events, to become disaffected. Miriam, a keen advocate of 'hand-me-down' culture in general, eventually abandoned selling her children's clothes at nearly new sales (originally termed 'swap shops') due to the attitude of certain mothers who seemed to take advantage of the generosity of other mothers' non-market prices;

I used to go to Lonsdale mothers' swap shops but I hated the attitude of the people buying the clothes. They were very sniffy about prices and things. You know, given they were rock bottom prices and you know that people are going to Frocks Away [local dress exchange shop] the next day and paying through the nose for things.

Although in the original conception of the LMG sale (when Miriam was a first time mother nearly ten years ago) none of the goods on offer were ever directly swapped using a barter system instead of cash, vicious 'haggling' and the disrespectful handling of wares could jeopardise the entire enterprise;

Some of them quite unreasonably [haggled] I think. This isn't just me, because we're witness to other people doing it and really it's quite horrendous. And also your own children's clothes are quite precious to you and when you see someone pick them up like this it's sort of "sod off"! So sometimes, after those sales, I've just thought rather than doing this I'd rather actually give them to Oxfam or something.

Similarly, Melanie's experience of the upper middle class mother challenging the price of her son's jeans caused other stallholders to rally round and reassure Melanie that the woman, an unrecognised outsider, had 'been out of order'. Nevertheless Melanie amended her sales style and repartee accordingly as she accumulated information from women's responses towards items and from in-depth conversations appertaining to specific goods (sometimes held simultaneously with up to four different women). Melanie also combined her sales banter with the news of her forthcoming move to Scotland.

For Melanie setting up a stall at the Ibis Pond mothers nearly new sales was also an opportunity for her to inform the other local mothers of her imminent departure; in between making sales she chats about her new house in Scotland and how it is situated on a safe cul-de-sac with kids playing on their bicycles, open countryside and a community atmosphere. Her only regret, she points out, is that her family size house in north London is being sold to a 'Yuppie couple' rather than a family who need it.

Although she was initially very nervous about setting up the stall, and had spent an evening pricing garments and toys only to remove the labels once the sale began, to her surprise it proved to be one of the most successful stalls in the hall. Items that she felt sure would sell (such as brand new jackets and dungarees) attracted little interest whereas others, to her surprise, sold within minutes (such as well worn games). The prices fluctuated according to the attitudes and approaches of the purchasers and although Melanie's stall was comparatively expensive the highly selective nature of the goods set out in regimented order (toys, books, tops, bottoms, coats etc.) allowed women space to peruse. Many women visited the stall three to four times before settling on a selection - consequently they frequently lost out on their coveted purchase. Melanie found one woman particularly rude - she suggested that a pair of jeans priced at £4 were over-priced by 100% even though Melanie had said that all reasonable offers would be considered. This decided her that the prices should be removed, however the child's jeans remained along with the playhouse, one of the few articles unsold.

When after half an hour a plastic toy with pop-up shapes had not been sold at Melanie's original suggested asking price of £1 she decided to sell for 20p to a non-English speaking Asian mother with a disabled son in a wheelchair. Melanie had been happy to lower the price of her son's much loved toy in exchange for seeing the pleasure it had brought to another child. Melanie enjoyed relaying information about sizes and the appeal of certain toys, and details about her own son to the other mothers and she declared the entire event a great success with £70 gained towards her son, Jeremy's, climbing frame fund. Later she confided that this was essentially a clear profit as many of the clothes had originally come from the very same nearly new sales and as 'hand-me-downs' from relatives in Scotland.

### **Consensus and a Papoose-Only Policy?**

Formal mothers' organisations are popularly recognised for their proselytising approach towards mothering. Advice meted out to women from organisations such as the Mother's Union, Women's Institute and the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) is historically located in a middle class discourse of social reform (Andrews 1997). While many mothers in the ethnographic study happily embrace the liberal endeavours of the NCT (Miller 1997) the legacy of formal mothering advice stood as an anathema to most

women involved in the nearly-new sales. As the Lonsdale Mothers Group (LMG) is tied to a socio-geographically diverse London borough and, unlike organisations such as the NCT, does not advocate a formally prescribed approach to mothering, within the street it is generally considered as a liberal, even radical, organisation.

Membership of the LMG is maintained through a monthly newsletter, the source according to numerous informants of invaluable information regarding local events, childcare resources and 'nearly new sales'. Although many women had ceased official membership of the LMG as their children had grown up they 'borrowed' newsletters and continued to attend numerous organised events. Obviously aware of their local currency LMG Newsletter features a bold type warning that the publication 'is for distribution amongst members only. It must not be displayed in public places, such as libraries or health centres.'

The opening page of a typical issue of the LMG Newsletter features a letter of complaint, written by a member, directed at a local supermarket regarding its display of 'lad magazines' (such as 'Loaded' and 'FHM') which although not defined as pornographic invariably feature naked women on their front covers and are displayed at eye level of children waiting at the check outs. Printed as a blueprint to encourage other members to follow suit the letter threatens the withdrawal of custom if action is not taken by the supermarket. Although the Newsletter uses a quaint, homely sampler pattern image and mock embroidered lettering indicative of more conservative notions of mothering, the organisation clearly has a more 'cosmopolitan' and alternative agenda reflective of a north London population.

As well as advertising Fun Days and Bonfire Night parties for local families, and featuring articles of interest (such as 'Reflexology during Pregnancy') the LMG holds craft workshops (such as 'Gilding for Christmas') and an enthusiastically attended monthly nearly new sale. Even in the newsletter two thirds of the space is given over to private classified advertisements, through which members sell second hand goods, request childcare shares and initiated schemes such as baby-sitter circles and allotment shares.

While there are a number of commercial advertisements (such as advertisers pay £20 per month for an insert) offering highly specific services including 'Children's' Murals' and

‘Children’s homeopathy’ the newsletter offers itself as a rarefied local guide to alternative acquisition. Even plumbing and heating services are delineated as ‘alternative’, sanctioned by the Ibis Pond Mothers ‘Good Tradespersons Guide’ and backing up their credentials with statements such as ‘Plenty of references from Ibis Pond Mothers’ and ‘work undertaken by civilised non-smoking workmen’. Commercial advertisers use phrases such as ‘friendly’, ‘non rip off prices’, ‘design to all budgets’, ‘good references’ and ‘reliable, trouble free service’, in a members only publication aimed extensibly at delineating an alternative means of household acquisition. The newsletter and its affiliated monthly nearly new sales form part of a vital informal economy tuned to the lifecycles of the household and the activities of women as provisioners of the household; crucially it is run by them and for them.

As the details so far might suggest the LMG newsletter and nearly new sales serve a predominately middle class audience; a ‘fact’ exemplified by adverts for live-in nannies, the predominance of recognisably ‘desirable’ post-codes and the standard of living indicated through the nearly new goods offered for sale. This supposition is apparently born out by the evidence of the informants on the street. While there are a dozen regular attendees of LMG events on the predominately owner occupied side of the street (and more expensive housing on the streets branching off), in the council housing opposite (rented and owner occupied) not one informant mentioned knowledge of or attendance of LMG events in the course of the ethnography.

While many women involved in LMG activities see themselves peripheral to mainstream mothers’ groups (and in some cases, seek to disassociate themselves completely from what one informant described as the ‘perfect mother syndrome’) women within comparable class groups who sought to completely disassociate themselves from the activities of such groups were considered with suspicion. On the way to a nearly new sale one particular morning, Margaritta, the middle class mother of two small children attending a private kindergarten, was keen to point out another local mother who would certainly not be attending the event. She was described as having seven children, all attending private schools, and a full-time nanny and a very handsome husband. While she was envied her apparently affluent lifestyle as a full-time mother, Margaritta openly criticised the woman’s ‘inward looking’ attitude; she never bothered talking to other mothers at the play group and maintained a her own ‘self-contained

world'. Although (as described below) many women harboured their own individual reservations about mother-related sociality and activities, belonging to such groups, if only in a peripheral context, was generally considered as an empowering part of the process of 'becoming a mother'. One woman, for example, described the LMG in terms of a rite of passage into knowing- motherhood, 'the place where you come when you've outgrown the NCT, know what you're doing and have moved on from baby-talk'.

While figures such as the overly self-reliant mother caused consternation (and mild envy) amongst mothers such as Margaritta, other women considered the 'forced' sociality associated with middle class mothering as being overly tyrannical. Anne, a mother living on Jay Road, was particularly critical of over-competitive mothers and what she described as a 'materialistic' southern English mentality in general. She chose to illustrate this using the story of a local bring and buy sale to highlight the anti-social behaviour of most middle-class mothers. Notably this particular informant contrasted the horror of the 'bring n' buy' incident with her positive experience of the LMG sales. The bring and buy sale organised in support of a *Blue Peter* charity appeal was held in a mother's house situated towards the leafy and more affluent area of Ibis Pond. Anne parked her baby son safely in the corner of a room only to return minutes later to find him smothered by a fur coat; 'I just happened to turn round and see his legs sticking out from under a heap of fur, I couldn't believe it. She'd just dumped the thing on top of him and trotted off to look at the stalls. I asked her what she thought she was doing, and she said it wasn't her fault she didn't see him there! That's fairly typical of *them* [middle class London mothers].'

As a single mother in her forties, Anne had originally joined the NCT in an attempt to thwart the isolation of motherhood, but found herself marginalised by her single mother status and the fact that her frank and informal attitude seemed to cause offence; ' Oh..I remember trying to talk about relationships, you know, and that sort of thing, anything really except about babies and my gossip went down [at an NCT meeting] like a lead balloon. So me and some other mothers I'd seen at the nearly new [LMG sale] got together off our own backs and we have barbecues and things, you know it's really nice and we talk about everything'.

Friendships struck up on the periphery of groups such as the NCT and Lonsdale Mothers' in certain cases, then, might be orchestrated in direct opposition even to these localised representations of mothering while they are simultaneously used as the basis of new forms of relationships. Tessa and Abi, for example, are mothers of two year old boys. Both women purport to being made to feel uncomfortable in the NCT and LMG because they are 'older mothers'. Although they met at an LMG sale their friendship has extended from the 'hand-me-down' culture of children's wear to the 'hand-me-down' culture of women's fashion clothing. Tessa and Abi have notably diverse backgrounds. Tessa (who now lives on Jay Road) originates from a small working class town outside Manchester and Abi from a Jewish academic family in Ibis Pond. Although the women met at a newly new sale they have totally divergent attitudes towards provisioning for themselves and their children which they explain through the adage 'opposites attract'. Abi shops at expensive West End department stores such as Harvey Nichols and Fenwicks for herself and her son (Abraham) while Tessa relies solely on second-hand clothes for provisioning herself and her child (Benjamin). Tessa subscribes to *Green Peace* and *Friends of the Earth* magazines while Abi reads fashion spreads and buys *Hello!* gossip magazine every week; 'I love it', comments Abi, 'I should be reading Winnicott but instead I'm reading *Hello!* magazine!'.

Despite their differences, circumscribed by their provisioning, Abi frequently takes Tessa on shopping 'missions'. On such occasions Abi buys Tessa's son an equivalent item to that which she is purchasing for her own son Abraham; these 'gifts' from the shopping trip are not confined to small gestures such as ice-creams and sweets but include boots, books and toys. Abi has also recently passed on some of her own nearly new fashion clothes to Tessa who comments that for the first time she will have a choice of clothes to wear for a wedding she will be attending in Spring. The material generosity Abi shows towards Tessa is off-set by in the fact that it is Tessa's home and her son's toys which, with the exception Abi's shopping trips, form the focus of their sociality. Despite Abi's generosity, Tessa increasingly feels 'used' as she is consistently expected to offer the hospitality of her house and the friendship of her son. The break down of this friendship culminated in Tessa giving a friend from the LMG a second hand fur coat, that Abi had previously handed down to her, to sell at the nearly new sale. Now considered anathema to Tessa's life, the 'huge' fur coat is placed side-by-side with babies and children's wares for sale to another mother. Defiantly risking the possibility

of Abi seeing her 'gift' sold in the public and incongruous context of the LMG sale, Tessa defends her actions; 'I just thought 'look there's no way I'm ever going to wear it'. It's just so over the top – but I thought, well, you know I can... and Helen [a friend] was saying 'oh yeah. Go on sell it! I shouldn't think she'd [Abi] walk in but knowing my luck...I'll say 'I was just trying to get some money for it for you Abi [laughs].''

Despite its affiliation with a particular form of mother's group, the sale and its surrounding range of social relations is far from prescriptive in its relation to women's identities and practices as mothers. And as the above example illustrates, this space is used as much to contest, as cohere, women's roles as mothers as they strive to carve out friendships in often limited social circumstances (O'Connor 1992). At the sales, consensus is made and unmade, through negotiation over the appropriateness of goods on offer to the types of aesthetics used in their display; in this process types of social relations are generated.

## **Conclusion**

Apart from the occasional flare up over mis-pricing, nearly new sales are defined more by co-operation than the competition associated with popular notions of jumble sale bargain hunters. Baby buggies, however, and their impatient occupants have become an increasingly controversial issue at these events which has prompted discussion over a proposed 'Papoose Only Policy'.

Although the hall is relatively spacious, when filled with around twenty-five stalls, eighty women and thirty abandoned buggies freedom of movement to view the stalls becomes restricted. For despite the apparent child-centred nature of the events women use various strategies to relieve themselves of the buggies and their children and so render themselves 'hands free' to scout around and circulate. One informant who regularly attends sales initially used to take her buggy to the far side of the hall and leave her sleeping toddler by the women at the tea stand, checking him at regular intervals. This ploy, however, required the child to be sleeping, a rare and luxurious treat. It also proved contentious since word of a number of regrettable 'incidents' involving unsupervised toddlers at the nearly new sales had been getting round. Several

informants independently and unprompted retold the story of a two year old found outside on the street unattended having wandered off from her mother engrossed in the sale in the church hall. Although no one would name the mother of the child, this indicated, by consensus, that things were getting out of control and that the interests of children were no longer forming the focus of such gatherings. At another weekend sale a leading and admired Ibis Pond organiser (described by one informant as a 'big chief mother') condemned the use of buggies in the hall outright and the neglect of the children parked in them; she had reached the point of proposing a total ban on buggies and planned an announcement to appear in the next newsletter. This signalled a move towards a 'papoose only' policy in the future that would ensure women would not abandon their children in favour of chatting and bargain hunting. Obviously there were inherent contradictions in this debate - a mother's group proposing to ban mothers with buggies would effectively preclude those women with children larger than 'papoose' carrying age or those without daytime childcare. Essentially though the moral debate centred on whether or not children's needs were being neglected at such events, 'I think they're really awful places for children, really boring' said one informant. Another however regaled at how much her little girl enjoyed playing with other toddlers in cardboard boxes amongst the stalls.

The 'papoose only policy' contention reveals the nearly new sale as moral rather than merely economically motivated community. It also reveals the tension between women's roles as carers and provisioners and their desire for increased sociality. In transient urban populations, such as the street in north London, where women caring for children have limited access (due to restrictions of time and finances) to places of sociality such as work, social clubs and other non-domestic activities (Allen, 1996) 'community' is effectively built around children. The nearly new sales, the public spectacle of 'trafficking' in children's clothes as an alternative form of provisioning, brings the chaotic aesthetics of the bazaar to an urban north London setting. Through these events, their prices, transactions, exchanges and social relations, consensus around mothering is created. Like Smith's challenge to economic models of auctions, (as expressions of rational economic man in the purest form) the transactions of nearly new sales 'are not exclusively or even primarily exchange processes. They are rather processes for managing the ambiguity and uncertainty of value by establishing social meanings and consensus.' (Smith 1989:163). Pricing at such events, unlike Herrmann's

description of garage sales, is far from arbitrary. Rather it is the means of measuring shared knowledge and of amending and negotiating the social construction of value.

For some informants nearly new sales represent part of a broader move towards ethical forms of consumption, in which goods are recycled and the alienation of conventional retail outlets countered. Aside from this self-conscious and class based understanding of second-hand consumption, nearly new sales operate implicitly as alternative modes of consumption which operate outside adult sartorial codes and related understandings of 'second-hand' clothing (McRobbie, 1989). The provisioning of nearly new children's clothing in the context of these local north London mothers is also far removed from a simple instrumental, economic imperative. Many of the mothers in this study openly embrace second-hand provisioning, but like Jane (who worries that her children may look 'too second-hand') they carefully ascribe to a specific aesthetic within the realm of this mode of acquisition. The dressing of children in noticeably incorrect sizing and clashing mixed colours ('orange and black coat worn with pink leggings' as described by one mother wary of creating the 'wrong' aesthetic) undermines the class specific form of knowledge associated with this local cultural practice. The second-hand items, despite generating their own aesthetic, sustain an on-going relationship with the aesthetic regime of first-hand children's ware retail market evident, for example, in the adherence to gender differentiation in clothing.<sup>2</sup>

Through the nearly new sales, with their 'mother swapping' transactions and entrepreneurial flourishes, women valorise, transform and contest their knowledge as mothers. The domestic work of women is taken through dealing, trafficking, talk and banter, into the public realm of the market and back in to the intra-household relations of the 'hand-me-down' clothing economy. Like the gypsy horse –traders of Hungary (Stewart 1992) who continue to sell horses at a loss in order to maintain their cultural

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<sup>2</sup> The common discussion around assessment of the nearly new sale as either a 'boy' or a 'girl' sale reveals how conventional modes of aesthetic discourse around children's clothing is perpetuated, rather than challenged, within an 'alternative' market environment. Mothers in the social group described above adhered to a gender and fashion consciousness around clothing their children whether buying first hand and second hand clothing as described in an excerpt from a regular attendee of NCT groups and nearly new sales; 'I am [conscious], I sought of, if some of them [NCT mothers' children] look more trendy than she might do that day, I probably come away thinking, 'now have I neglected her wardrobe?' I won't actually rush out and get her something, but next time she needs something, maybe I should change it slightly so she's a bit trendy or she looks a bit more like a girl, because she didn't have hair for ages and she looked a bit like a boy, so I sort of buy some girly things'.

advantage over the economically superior peasants with whom they trade, mothers turned traders 'traffic' their goods on the periphery of an otherwise hostile market (filled with over-priced Disney merchandise and Telly-Tubby jigsaw puzzles). The material culture of babies and children, its aesthetics, maintenance and acquisition constitutes the expertise of women's work and social relations as much as horses (as opposed to other forms of cattle) are linked to the cultural status of Hungarian gypsies. Although these entities are traded they are never, for the gypsies at the horse-fair or mothers at the nearly new sale, reduced to alienable commodities. For they are the means, through the market, by which a degree of control is exerted over the outside world. To borrow the concluding remark from Stewart's description of gypsy horse-fairs and apply it to mothers in north London, 'could it be that the true bearers of the capitalist spirit, ever willing to act on an entrepreneurial hunch, are those excluded from the capitalist system in almost every other respect?' (Stewart 1992:111).

## **Chapter Four**

### **Coming of Age in North London: Gifting and the Practice of Normativity**

From an early age children engage in the practices and sociality of gift giving, through attendance of birthday parties and ritualised events such as Christmas. In contrast to their involvement in everyday provisioning, such as supermarket food shopping, where the parent might elicit a response from even the youngest infant over the selection of a favourite cereal or yoghurt (Miller 1998b; McNeal 1987), children's practices of gift-giving ultimately extend beyond the immediate child-parent relation. By the age of nine to ten years old (see Jones and Cunningham 1999 re. middle childhood), despite their limited access to monetary resources and retail outlets, many children participate in a range of gift-relations requiring discernment over the value of various forms of material culture. Children's activity in the arena of contemporary consumption is generally considered as an facet of socialisation (Bourdieu 1979) or a symptom of the ever expanding impact of the market on otherwise 'authentic' childhood practices (Kline 1993; Postman 1985).

It is assumed that forms of provisioning (ranging from a trip to the bakery to attendance of a birthday party) are used in an explicitly instrumental way to 'teach' children values or manners. Beyond the commonly held model of socialisation, this chapter, however, considers the agency of children and objects in the construction of their social relations and moral worlds. Through a dialectical relationship with the universal and particular nature of commodities and gifts children generate a dynamic relationship with adults and peers around the value of 'things'. Stylistic minutiae of toys, clothing and artefacts are scrutinised by children and (beyond the birthday party relations initially mediated by their mothers) they begin to make evaluations regarding appropriate or desired objects and relations. Children's gifts and gifting practices are not merely devices of socialisation and extensions of a household's moral economy. Rather they become the crucial means by which households participate in a broader public culture of 'the child'. Although they incorporate adult discourses (for example, the concept of 'being spoilt') children themselves, through their own investment and intricate exchanges in goods and values, generate their own moral economies external (but integral) to the household. Socialisation is most often seen as the learning of norms, but it is also experienced as the growing autonomy and agency of the child. Children simultaneously develop their

relationships with peers and adults, and, as this chapter reveals, incorporate material culture into this process. As James argues, socialisation is not simply an apprenticeship to adulthood but rather a variable and context-specific process;

sociality is thus actively learned rather than simply passively acquired ... and the meanings which children learn to attribute to particular kinds of behaviour may be both various and subject to flux and change... there is a thin and shifting boundary between social and antisocial acts which children must learn to negotiate as, gradually and tentatively, they begin to participate more fully in the cultural world of childhood' (James 1993:139).

As pre-adolescent children gain greater autonomy, they invert the established child/parent relation (whereby the child poses a risk of social liability; Ruddick 1982; Ribbens 1994) and begin to suffer the embarrassment of their affiliations with adults in the form of inappropriate gifts (such as out-of-fashion toys and hand-made jumpers). In this way, children and parents engage in a tentative and dynamic process of morality making, mediated by the normative as constructed through strategies of child/parent gift giving. Commodities, mass produced and easily accessible offer the ideal form around which the normative is constructed. Items, such as highly expressive or home-made artefacts, which have maximum value in the non-market sphere of the household, hold minimal currency in the public realm of the children's playground as they defy the requisite normativity<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, readily available shopping catalogues, such as *Argos*, which feature a vast array of toys and general wares, become a vital medium (bridging household and playground) through which children accumulate and circulate child-specific knowledge around goods.

As discussed in the opening chapters, mothers use the circulation of gifts, toddlers and young children in generating or undermining specific intra-household relations and effectively making community around the cult of the child. Layne, similarly argues that it is the notion of the gift, in contemporary consumer culture, which comes to constitute

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'playground' is used to describe a cultural space (rather than a literal place) in which children meet and exchange with other children. The chapter goes on to describe how children themselves are used culturally as a 'public space' allowing both private (household) affiliation and a broader transcendent relation to 'society.'

the actual humanity of an infant and so ‘make’ mothers (Layne: 2000). This chapter expands these ideas by focusing on the ways in which pre-adolescent children construct a notion of morality with adults through the mutual recognition of knowing when to be normative and when to allow, or use, discrepancy. As well as constructing morality in the context of adult/child relations, children’s gifting practices operate outside of the domestic sphere. Their exchange of knowledges and skills amongst the social periphery of peer groups feeds back into the household as a vital external culture constituting a shared and public space of objects and children.

The chapter begins by offering an outline of children’s cultural geography in and around Jay Road, which highlights the ostensibly domestic nature of children’s (aged eight to eleven) existence and the contradictions inherent in their care-givers’ desire to protect and liberate them. Although children have a limited visual presence on the ‘street’ in cultural terms they, in effect, constitute the largest public space through, as this chapter examines, the shared culture of children’s gifting. The constant tension, in policing children’s play, between care-giving as protecting children and care-giving as nurturing the development of a child’s individual expression is extended into the culture of gift-giving between parents and children within the confines of the domestic sphere. In order to understand the significance of children’s relation with material culture, particularly in relation to adult gifts, it is useful to consider the demise or limitations of ‘public’ or street space available to children in this area. Whereas the visible playing and mixing with other children on the street might establish intra-household relations and inter-parental contact, the lacking of this space puts greater emphasis on children’s gift-culture as a ‘public’ site in which the normative is generated.

### **The Geography of Children’s Play on Jay Road**

The majority of children aged between five and eleven living on Jay Road attend the local primary school approximately one mile away, referred to locally as ‘Blackbird Hill’. This site was chosen as part of the ethnographic study, after consultation with the head teacher and local parents, as being most representative of the range of Jay Road’s inhabitants. Children from the council estates, the maisonettes and the larger Victorian family homes on streets adjacent to Jay Road attend the school although an eagerly sought after (but over-subscribed) primary school nearer to Ibis Pond, named Eaglesdale, is often the favoured primary for more traditionally educationally-aspirant

middle class parents. Blackbird Hill (despite funding problems typical of inner city schools) has a positive reputation for attracting dedicated teachers and maintaining a successful academic record. It has an exceptionally broad range of ethnic and social class groups (in contrast to Eaglesdale) within its cohort and so promotes a liberal, multi-faith educational policy. The school suffers from many of the problems normally associated with contemporary inner city education (large class sizes and deteriorating school buildings) but the head teacher commands much respect, with the majority of parents on Jay Road, for improving the school in the face of adversity.

Although Blackbird Hill School is situated approximately a mile away, in relation to the cultural geography of Jay Road, it acts as the key public space of the street. Its strong identity as a thriving urban, multi-ethnic school, feeds back into the identity of the street. For (particularly middle class residents) the school is spoken of in direct terms as forging a sense of community in the neighbourhood and for being forward thinking and inclusive in its approach. As the most prevalent shared space amongst inhabitants of the street (conceptually if not physically) it places children at the helm of public life on Jay Road. For it is their interaction at school and in the playground which generate a public culture and form of sociality feeding directly back into the households of Jay Road.

With the exception of older teenagers occasionally gathering towards the less residential end of Jay Road (near the telephone boxes and fish and chip shop), there is little external visual presence of children as a group on the street. This observation corroborates what academics over the last decades have described as ‘a progressive retreat from the ‘street’ by urban children’ (Matthews, Limb and Taylor 2000: 63). Although this assumption regarding the demise of children’s presence in public urban space has been questioned by other recent academic literature (Skelton 2000; Skelton and Valentine 1998), on Jay Road evidence supports the general contention that contemporary childhood worlds are shifting to the domestic sphere.

With little play in the actual street, it is the two prominent areas of council housing on Jay Road which attract non-domestic play. On the larger council estate, known as the Lark Estate, children run, skateboard and ‘hang-out’ as the architecture of the development provides a substantial amount of covered, interior space in the form of lengthy corridors. The use of this interior space for play causes much concern for

inhabitants, particularly the elderly, who regularly complain of the noise and nuisance directly outside the doors of their flats. Similarly, on the Lark Estate parents complain that they can not let their children play directly outside their own homes as they fear the influence of the other ‘wrong types’ of children frequenting the area.

In contrast, in the summer months, the communal gardens and external spaces of the Sparrow Court council estate become lively, and slightly more acceptable, areas of children’s activity. Here resident children of mixed ages play together publicly in an area easily watched over by parents and neighbours. The high visibility of the children and their play in an otherwise quiet and orderly environment adds to the potential for the behaviour to be viewed as a ‘polluting presence’ in an ordinarily adult space; ‘discrepant and undesirable’ (Matthews, Limb and Taylor, 2000: 63). Certainly, in contrast to the interior privacy of life in Sparrow Court (as discussed in chapter four, where adult occupants rarely enter each other’s homes) the estate suddenly takes on a public presence. This is openly welcomed by some of the tenants, such as Maria a resident and parent herself who feels relieved that children have at least some opportunity to play outside; ‘Oh, it’s lovely to see them [children] out there. I mean it’s not everyday they can [play outside]... but it just feels like at least you live *somewhere!*’

Other parents, wary of the lack of control they can assert over their children whilst playing in public limit, or entirely disallow, their children’s participation in outdoor play in the immediate area. Unlike the socialising that children take part in at school (outside their neighbours’ and parents’ gaze), in the locality there is a pronounced fear of children *being seen* ‘getting in with the wrong crowd’ and that this might reflect unfavourably on parents or the household as a whole. In a sense, the notion of ‘the neighbours’ (acting as a form of interiorised ‘super-ego’ controlling behaviour) compels otherwise liberal or relaxed parents to intervene, as a parental obligation, in their child’s ‘playing-out’ activities. Children become easily identifiable with particular households and gossip circulates regarding sightings of misbehaviour or ‘high spirits’. Sharon, for example, has been approached by several well-meaning neighbours expressing either concern or bemusement over the antics of her ten year old son who had purportedly been spotted jumping across the estate’s garage roofs. She comments that as long as he’s active (‘not sitting in a bus stop smoking’) she is confident that his (possibly exaggerated) antics are harmless. Sharon is unusual in her confident response to such

gossip; other mothers quickly respond by curtailing their children's play in response to neighbours' comments. Lola, for example, heard from another mother whilst walking her daughters to school that the 'Irish girls' next door were rather 'rough' in their play. Lola (living on the ground floor) quickly responded by confining her daughters' activities to the small back garden.

Kelly, a single mother of two children living on the upper level of Sparrow Court, originally allowed her son, eight year old son Raymond, to happily play with the children in their 'row' (of flats). But since moving him from the local State primary school to a private school Kelly has felt her son has been stigmatised and deliberately 'left out'. According to one of Kelly's closest neighbours, who is aware of Raymond's isolation, this is entirely his mother's fault; 'I think it's cruel really. I mean he's a lovely boy and she just shouldn't have taken him out [of the local school] for his own sake, it's bound to happen'. Kelly, unlike many other middle class families in the area, can not afford to provide extra-curricula activities for her son or pay for excursions, entertainment or sports during the long summer holidays. Consequently, his isolation is further compounded as 'playing-out' has become less and less of an option as Raymond has neither the opportunity to extend relations with children from his new school or re-develop friendships with local children.

On the other side of Jay Road stands a row of approximately fifty, two-bedroom, upper and lower storey maisonettes that typically share a small back garden each. There is a high proportion of young families living in this type of housing due to its occupying a transitional space between 'flat' and 'house'. Here, younger children are actively encouraged to 'play-out' with friends in their gardens. Nostalgia for a period when children could happily create their 'own Kingdoms' in the parklands or gardens prompted many families to encourage socialising in the safety of a back garden by inviting neighbours' children around for outdoor dress-up parties or equivalent games. One mother, Jane, described having the most ideal summer since the birth of her children as her two eldest children, girls aged six and eight, spent weeks 'running in pink tutus and dress up clothes through the gap in the fence to and from each other's gardens'. In keeping with what Jones (2000) describes as the 'pure space' adults construct around depictions of a country upbringing, Jane equates these simple childhood pleasures and this level of freedom and with her own country childhood in

Southern Ireland. The ‘naturalness’, and the safe intra-household relations generated through ‘kids playing with the neighbours kids’, was placed in opposition to the contrived and highly expensive childcare activities otherwise provided in the area. Despite the idealism of the summer scene, Jane’s children were playing, not just with neighbours, but the children of established friends under a relaxed but constant surveillance by both sets of mothers.

In the larger middle class homes of the adjacent streets to Jay Road, children regularly cross from one side of the street to the other unattended, to visit one another’s homes, to play computer games. Parents are fully aware of the informal economy of swapping, which the children operate around used computer games and accessories, and encourage what is generally considered to be a safe and sociable activity indicative of the road’s ‘community spirit’. In keeping with the popular discourse around computers and children (Miller and Slater 2000; Valentine 2000) several mothers expressed concern that their children were jeopardising educational pursuits or avoiding more ‘active outside games’ in preference of computer games. However, as in keeping with a general view of parenting in Britain (Ribbens 1994: 83) they preferred their children being safely inside and expressed contentment that their children could socialise at home or in a (known) neighbour’s home. Despite the comparatively low traffic volume of this street the children do not play along the pavements or in the public areas even in the summer. They use their rear gardens, or if supervised by older children, visit the nearby park. Children are frequently invited around for tea from neighbouring houses and as the children get older (eight years and above) to ‘sleep-overs’. Many parents described the street as a ‘sought after location’ due to its reputation as a ‘family street’, with an orientation towards bringing up children and a commitment to ‘community’. Though like Sparrow Court, it is the children, rather than the adults, who frequent each other’s homes and open the household out to a public realm.

Across the range of housing and social groups on Jay Road, the same dilemma exists as the street is suspended between contradictory expectations of contemporary care-giving. On the one hand there is the desire to allow children ‘freedom of expression’, associated with contemporary notions of child development, in the context of a safe collective, community life. On the other hand there is the social obligation to limit risk and protect children from potentially hazardous social and physical situations as well as the cultural

imperative to maintain privacy. This as, Holloway and Valentine contend, is not merely a practical dilemma but a historical shift with significant ideological ramifications; ‘childhood... has been increasingly domesticated over the course of the past two centuries. This process is not simply a material one, in the sense that children are spending increasing amounts of time in the home, but is also ideological, in that there is a sense in which this is where children should spend their time’ (2000:15). As this chapter goes on to explore, the contradictions of parenting are extended to the domestic provisioning of children’s gifts and the increased emphasis on their role as the key ‘space’ in which children construct their personhood.

### **Christmas and the Gift: The Struggle for the Normative**

In the course of the ethnography the range of presents given by parents and principal adult friends/relatives to pre-adolescent children included computers, computer games and accessories, bicycles, scooters, watches, training shoes, gift vouchers, trips abroad and to commercial play areas, roller blades, soft toys, Barbie dolls, football strips, craft/art kits, videos, clothing, books, fashionable toys and character figures. The most prominent modes of provisioning for children’s gifts included a local *Toys R’ Us* super store, Blinky’s ‘old-fashioned’ toy shop in Ibis Pond (renowned for its wooden and educational toys), *Argos* catalogue shop, mail order catalogues, the Disney store, local nearly new children’s ware sales, local and John Lewis department stores.

For some parents (irrespective of income) providing their child with the most recent computer game was deemed an imperative of respectable parenting and caring. For others faddish games and expensive technology were avoided as part of a conscious effort to resist what one parent described as the ‘escalating gift wars’ indicative of an increasing media and consumer literate generation of children. More frequently, the gifting of children was positioned (through the choice of goods or an adherence to a notionally appropriate budget) between the extremes of providing a gamut of extravagant treats and a limited range of instructive or educational presents. In keeping with popular discourse regarding the commercialisation of childhood, many informants complained about the pressure they felt to provide an increasing array of goods for their children (Kline 1993; Seiter 1993). But the most distraught parents were those whose children expressed minimal interest in toys or other child related goods; this being interpreted by parents as indicative of a broader social exclusion.

Helen and Jim Williams live in a two-bedroom flat on Sparrow Court council estate. Both have been unemployed for three years and so rely on income support and credit. They have four children ranging from four to ten years of age. The most recent Christmas celebration caused great concern for the couple as their children showed little interest in writing lists for Santa Claus. Although such lists often contain fantastical requests, they are used by parents to gain some idea of a child's desired repertoire of gifts<sup>2</sup>; traditionally floated up the chimney over an open fire, more recent variations involve car-givers encouraging children to post their Christmas lists to a fictional address in Lapland or leave them pinned to the mantel-piece or similar domestic focal point. Similarly, visits to 'Santa Claus' Grotto' in department stores is a pre-Christmas custom in which children are expected to articulate their material desires in exchange for good behaviour. This is followed up after Christmas by an adult (relative or friend of the family) typically asking of a child 'what did Santa get you?' intended to elicit a response in which the child lists their favourite gifts and toys received.

For the majority of households on the street Christmas gifting was considered as an exclusively child-focused event, with adult gifting channelled into familial projects such as 'the home' as illustrated by the following quote taken from a discussion with a married couple on Jay Road ; 'We didn't buy anything for each other [this Christmas] – it sounds terrible but you get to the stage where – if you buy anything you buy it for the house or towards some visible project that we might be doing. It's meaningless now – except for the kids.' Christmas acts as both a universal event (made salient by its replication in households across the nation) and an event of particularity (families inventing their own traditions from the use of family recipes to the inter-generational collection of decorations) (Kuper 1993). It is the emphasis on the domestic sphere, non-economic relations (goodwill, generosity, charity, etc.) and the celebration of gendered labour of care which sets Christmas as a time apart, Kuper argues, from the transactions of everyday social and economic life. Children, as the members of the household in Western industrialised countries deemed outside the sphere of market relations, act as the greatest recipients of Christmas gifts. And it is not just the opening of gifts (particularly for

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<sup>2</sup> Asking children to write 'pretend' Christmas wish lists for Santa Claus is also a research technique used by market researchers in ascertaining the currency of specific toys, see Kline, *Out of the Garden* (1993:187).

children) which defines contemporary Christmas but the rituals and adult work of Christmas shopping itself which generates meaning around the season (Miller 1993; Carrier 1993).

It is unsurprising then, that even though Helen and Jim live on a limited income (they rely mainly on credit to buy their children's presents) shopping for their children's material desires remains paramount. Despite financial restrictions they are keen to see their children enjoy the anticipation involved in day-dreaming about, and then excitably opening, their presents in a manner which constitutes a 'normal' Christmas.

The family frequently shop together in local budget supermarkets, but for their non-food provisioning they rely almost exclusively on two high street catalogue retail outlets, namely *Argos* and *Index* as described by Jim; 'normally we go into *Argos* because it is not ....only if you can get the stuff it is a lot cheaper than virtually anywhere else, but we've also got an *Index* catalogue shop further down so if you can't get it in *Argos* you can normally pop down to *Index*'. By limiting their provisioning to catalogues and catalogue shops, they are able to browse goods at home and make decisions that reduce the cost of 'shopping around'. This process pro-actively involves the children of the household. However, the Williams have only visited a shopping mall once together as a family, under the pretext of Christmas shopping, and the cost of the bus fares alone undermined any value or enjoyment of the trip; 'We don't get much further afield [than Wood Green]. We went down to Brent Cross as my sister-in-law thought that was the place, you couldn't beat it. We went down there and it cost more to get there than I spent there it was ridiculous, I don't see what they go on about.'

The Williams feel equally ambivalent about bulk retail outlets such as *Toys R Us*; stores which, due to their specialised goods and high turn-over of goods, are generally considered to offer competitive pricing. The supposed advantage of price is outweighed, according to Jim, by display techniques that hinder efficient selection and encourage impulse buying;

everything ... seems to get moved around every so often, you can't actually get in there and go to the section you think you know and find what you want. It's either not there or nobody knows where it has been moved to and it's a pain at times and they're also, the price differences

between them [*Toy R Us* and *Argos*] can range from 99pence up to about a fiver.

The Williams' children, then, are confined to their experience of general wares catalogues and limited local shopping experience for inspiration to make their Christmas lists. The children are particularly apathetic towards Christmas this year, which their parents fear maybe a response to the family's poverty in comparative terms of their children's peer groups. In response to their children's obvious apathy in identifying potential gifts, the parents desperately resorted to purchasing, what they admitted to being, a fairly arbitrary range of toys from *Argos*, *Toys R Us* and *Poundstretchers* [budget shop] in an attempt to cover all facets of their children's perceived needs and desires;

[we got] 2 little sets of police things, helicopter, 4 *Power Rangers* [plastic figures] from *Toys r Us*. It didn't matter because they ended up with stocking fillers which were; a tangerine; a car; some small toys so when they get up in the morning they know they can have them. We got the police sets from *Poundstretchers*. We got John a Haunted Castle and something to do with art. Then the youngest all he wanted was a digital watch and he gave us no idea of what he wanted, that was as far as his mind would go. She's so small [four year old daughter] so we got her a doll, some hair bands and a toy telephone.

Helen and Jim, despite their limited resources, have negotiated their way through shops stacked with expensive toys, which (to the adult eye at least) are frequently indistinguishable from one another, as they skilfully manoeuvre their way to providing an array of articles which best suit their children's 'needs'. Their chosen collection of toys was supplemented with gifts of 'educational' value such as Roald Dahl books, game puzzles and an art and craft kit, in an attempt, according to the couple, to improve the concentration span of their children and 'make them do things'. Helen and Jim, although compelled to buy a collection of normative gifts in keeping with the age and gender range of their children, off-set this with more 'educational' articles in an attempt to stymie any negative affects of what they perceive as their children's passive consumption. Their gifts successfully cover a maximum range of possibilities as regards their children's use.

How do children at this particular time of year, asks Lévis-Strauss [1952] (1993), have a right to receive gifts and why are their parents or care-givers so keen to obligingly satisfy them? Furthermore, how did children acquire such exclusive rights? Although numerous accounts of Christmas highlight the significance of the festival as a newly child-focused event, Lévis-Strauss argues that few adequately explain the inversion of child/adult relations as indicated in the emphasis on children's gifting. The evolution of Christmas, in the post-war period, as a child focused festival and the myth of Santa Claus is, according to Lévis-Strauss, part of a thoroughly modern initiation rite defined by transactions between the generations. Children are systematically excluded from adulthood through the secrecy surrounding Santa Claus, to the point where age may actually said to be defined according to belief in his existence. Through cross-cultural and historical analysis he asserts that children occupy a significant bargaining position as regards their relation to the dead. The shift from a traditional fear of the dead (in the form of spirits and ghosts) to a broader dread of death (as degeneration and deprivation) has led to an improved relation to 'death' in which sacrifice merely amounts to the offering of symbols, in the form of toys and presents. The 'otherness' of children, as social beings not entirely incorporated into the group, makes them entirely appropriate as symbols of the 'supreme dualism: that of the dead and the living'. Through children's gift giving, symbolised in the form of Father Christmas as a deity, sacrifice is made 'to the sweetness of life, which consists first and foremost of not dying'. Furthermore, states Lévis-Strauss, 'the belief that we help to perpetuate in our children that their toys come from 'out there' gives us an alibi for our own secret desire to offer them to those 'out there' under the pretext of giving them to the children' (Lévis-Strauss [1952] 1993:50).

Children's gifts, then, might be seen as a form of sacrifice during a seasonal period historically defined by its inversion of power relations. Indeed, Lévis-Strauss' account of the inversion of power relations between adults and children, the role of children as social beings as yet not entirely incorporated into the social group and his depiction of Santa Claus as a deity, are in keeping with contemporary child-centred Christmas rituals. However, the intensity with which parents and care-givers negotiate the pressure of the market (with its saturation advertising campaigns and over-priced, ever-changing toys) and the manifold desires of their children, in an attempt to gift appropriately, is not adequately explained by Lévis-Strauss' account. The Christmas gifting of children is less about

sacrifice and more about the culmination of an extended relation in which parent and child constantly struggle around establishing the normative. Outside the social group as they may be, children maintain a closer affiliation with a temporal world of goods offered in the form of children's toys and products designed with minute attention to details exclusively honed to the sensibilities of the child. And it is not just the giving of gifts to children which is important, rather it is the specificity of the material culture offered (and frequently refused or endured by children as recipients) which lends significance to Christmas and its rituals in terms of its child-centredness.

Christmas is a key event in which the striving for the normative is focused around the household, its relations and objects. Jim and Helen strategize and accrue an appropriate range of gifts to secure a normal Christmas. Although a family trip to a local mall for Christmas shopping is thwarted by the sheer expense of the exercise, the Williams manage (in spite of their children's apathy) to constitute the normative in the form of their skilful selection of gifts; for, in the face of economic disadvantage (signalled, according to the parents, in the disinterest shown by their children towards new toys) it is even more important that Helen and Jim anticipate a 'proper' Christmas. The creation of the family as 'ordinary', and in particular the role of the mother in maintaining this normality is described by Ribbens (1994) as such; 'An important resource towards the establishment of clear family-based authority is thus for the woman to accomplish her own production of 'an ordinary family', which is accepted as such not only by its members but also by those around her and the world at large' (Ribbens 1994:75).

In the household next-door-but-one to the Williams', Mary, a single mother of four children announces that her Christmas was 'perfect'. Mary also relies on the credit, in the form of schemes provided by mainstream catalogues such as *Kays* and *Littlewoods*, to purchase her children's gifts. But unlike the Williams', she is happily contented with the balanced requests of her children which she considers neither too demanding or worryingly disinterested. The gifts requested by her children are in perfect keeping with perceived normative behaviour of children (in terms of gender and age grouping) and so reflect back to Mary the success of her household; 'At Christmas I asked what they want; a Barbie doll, that's all the three girls and the boy wanted a computer game. 'Don't you want nothing else' [I asked]. 'No just that' [responded the kids]. They're not demanding at all'.

While Mary finds her children's traditionally gender oriented selection of gifts entirely unproblematic, Linda, a middle class mother active in the NCT [National Childbirth Trust], strategises ways of preventing her six year old son from succumbing to the lure of stereotypical toys in the future;

Linda: we went to a friend of my husband's who he goes to football with and they invited us over to their house and they've got this boy who's eight. And he was there with his friend and he had a gun, and he had a boxing set with, you know, boxing gloves and that's particularly two things that I wouldn't encourage at all.

Q: How do you feel you'll deal with this as he gets older?

Linda: I'll have to cross that bridge when we come to it. But I think the more that you keep going on about it, that you don't want it, the more they'll pick up on it. I wouldn't buy it for him.

Whereas for Mary the predictable gift behaviour of her children is considered exemplary, for Linda such behaviour is considered as a challenge to good parenting, to be pre-empted with a rehearsed strategy. In practice, as in discourse, the most prominent critics of mainstream contemporary toy forms (particularly those which make the most blatant references to gender or ethnic stereotypes) could loosely be described as educated, middle class parents. But even in the cases where normativity is problematised, the child's development or autonomy (or as Miller argues, the mother's, (Miller 1997)) is eventually accepted along with the growing collection of Barbie dolls or action toys. Self-consciously middle class parents who have striven from the birth of their children to control their consumption (protecting them from sugar, additives and the perceived effects of malevolent commercialism) are, in practice, equally keen to see their children exhibiting 'normal' acquisitive behaviour. Gillian, a primary school teacher and prior member of the NCT, happily resigns herself to her children's acquisitive nature and her complicity as a mother in this;

I've got an *Argos* catalogue, which my children take to bed they love it so much. They read it. I've got two, in fact, so there's one each without quarrelling. They sort of study it at great length and then they make lists of things they hope they might get for their birthday or Christmas or they work out how many weeks it will take them to save up to get x y or z that they desperately have to have at the moment.

In many circumstances households are unable or unwilling even in a ritualised event such as Christmas to achieve normativity through gifting. Jodie is a single, middle class mother of twenty-six years of age who has recently embarked on a relationship with a new partner. The newly forged significance of a romantic relationship with Jack, a DJ and journalist has forced Jodie into what she describes as an 'identity crisis' in which she has become openly ambivalent about her role as a mother. This ambivalence is most visibly expressed in her changed attitude towards buying Christmas gifts for her child. Jodie desperately seeks to re-gain her youthful independence and enjoy her burgeoning romantic relationship. However, as Christmas nears the emphasis falls on Jodie to be a competent and loving parent exercised through the appropriate choice of gifts for her six year old daughter, Amy. In response to this role Jodie has taken on a vehemently anti-Christmas stance;

I hate Christmas. I absolutely loathe it. I'm a real old scrooge. I just hate the whole consumer mess of it. I resent having to go out and spending loads of money and that it's expected, my family expect it and we're Jewish so I kind of get very "why are we all buying each other presents". It's so stupid.

Despite her out-spoken antipathy towards Christmas and the meaninglessness of gift exchange Jodie makes numerous shopping trips to pick out special presents for her new boyfriend (selecting CDs featuring 'their tune'; videos of films they have watched together on dates at the cinema). Wandering through the stalls of a local car boot sale near Ibis Pond, she enthusiastically picks up item after item considering whether or not it would suit Jack's taste. In the case of items of vintage clothing, she wonders if he would find her attractive in a certain lace blouse or 1930s bias-cut skirt.

In contrast to her enjoyment of shopping for Jack (for their first Christmas together) she has become markedly nonchalant in her approach to buying gifts for her daughter. An attitude indicative of her broader antipathy towards motherhood;

I'll just go to the shops and get her a few things, her birthday is in December as well so she I'll just get her one thing for Christmas. It will just be a one present thing and she'll get a few things for her Birthday. It won't be a big deal, I'm not going to spend loads of money.

Jodie's rejection of Christmas and its associated gift-giving as a child-focused event is a direct inversion of the norm in which adult gift relations are frequently relegated to a purely instrumental role in the context of family relations. Jodie shows no desire to mediate with her daughter over the taste, value or desirability of potential presents; rather she wilfully enforces the privilege of her adult power in an attempt to relinquish her role as care-giver.

As a Jewish couple Rachel and Mark, also express an ambiguity towards the role of Christmas in their own household. They have, however, arrived at the conclusion that it is beneficial to create a hybrid Christian and Jewish festival for the sake of their daughter;

It's rather complicated – we gave her [eight year old daughter Isobel] our gifts on Hanukkah but people who are non-Jewish like Jean, our nanny, and other people, other people who aren't Jewish, they gave them [the children] gifts at Christmas. Usually you can merge the two [Hanukkah and Christmas] and it works quite well. We don't have decorations or a Christmas tree. You can't pretend it's not happening and our non-Jewish friends buy Christmas presents so we tend to buy them for ... our children get them too and the kids love it they get two for the price of one'.

In the hybridised model created by Rachel and Mark the children are only active as recipients of gifts. They are not expected to reciprocate, through the prompting and teaching of adults;

I really think it's for the kids anyway so she [Isobel] didn't [give any gifts] and she doesn't get a lot of spending money and she's very generous anyway and we didn't think – I mean I didn't prompt her to get anything for [her father] Mark, and Mark didn't prompt her to get anything for me.

Sara Smith lives on an adjacent street to Jay Road with her husband, Roger, a senior academic at a major university. She is the mother of six year old Megan and eight year old George and works part-time as an assistant to a medical researcher. Since their marriage nine years ago the couple's relationship has revolved around a constant battle of wills regarding basic household management. Roger complains that Sara has an ill conceived sense of priorities, exemplified by her household budgeting, and constantly makes comparisons with his own mother's superior housewifery. Sara fluctuates from fondly accepting her husband's criticisms as an endearing eccentric quirkiness, to trying desperately to assert and defend her own values:

When I first met him [husband] he had a bottle of red wine that he had been given about four years before by his ex-girlfriend's parents as a Christmas present. He'd never drunk it. I wanted to just open it there and then drink it, but it then became a bit of symbol of, you know, the fact that he had this and it wasn't subject to my great voracious appetite so we actually opened it a couple of weeks ago with another friend and it was a great moment; this wine was actually opened so... Roger is happier if I keep the overall bill down that's his treat, when I don't treat myself or him or Megan or George.

In principle Sara agrees, like similar middle class mothers in her social group, with her husband's 'anti-consumption' stance. But unlike other households which might apply a version of ethical consumption through a concerted effort to re-cycle or cut down on superfluous children's Christmas gifts, the Smith household is governed by a kind of fundamentalist frugality which Jessica constantly strives to negotiate particularly in the

context of her own relationship with her children. She tries, for example, to destroy supermarket shopping receipts before her husband returns home from work. She hides her children's fruit yoghurts towards the back of the refrigerator and thinks up ways of defending any purchase her husband might (in an impromptu spot check) query as overly extravagant. Due to the restrictive regime her husband applies to the household provisioning, Jessica craves the normativity so many other households find overwhelmingly oppressive. In contrast to the taste of her peer group, she regularly fantasises about a taking family Christmas shopping trips to malls and spending hours in shops such as *Toys R Us*.

For Darius, a ten year old boy living in a single parent family in Sparrow Court, family trips to Brent Cross and Wood Green shopping centres around Christmas are a relished experience. Since his estranged father's return to England from Jamaica, he has gained a new layer of family relations most visible in the form of gifts at Christmas and birthdays. On the most recent Christmas trip to West End his father (with his new girlfriend) bought Darius a brand new computer. On two other separate trips with his ex-step-father and his mother's new boyfriend he received Adidas training shoes, shin pads and socks. The complex shifts in Darius' male kin and their relationship to him have been negotiated and established through shopping trips for and the giving of gifts. Within the context of his immediate familial relations and household, with his mother and her new partner, the maintenance of these complex relations would be untenable. But operating outside the household, the adult gift relations (the objects of which are influenced directly by Darius' peer group relations) generate a peripheral, satellite normativity which complements, rather than undermines, the main complex and shifting household relations.

While the previous ethnographic excerpts reveal the significance of Christmas as a key aspect of the broader mediation of the normative within children's gift giving, the extent to which it provokes a sense of obligation even within the poorest parents regarding selection of appropriate offerings, becomes evident. As with Jodie, this task may prove so onerous and prescriptive that it is spurned in favour of more satisfying gift-relations with adults. Jessica, due to her husband's extreme regime, feels denied the opportunity to explore the normative through gift relations with her children. Or, as in the case of Mark

and Rachel, despite their religious and ethnic antipathy towards Christmas they feel socially obliged to allow their daughter inclusion in the dominant cultural practice.

### **Object Lessons: the Temporal World of Children's Goods**

The discourse regarding the influence of 'normative' children's toys as a degenerate force is a tenet of mainstream and academic critiques of popular children's culture (Kline 1993; Postman 1985). Since the post-war period the 'child' has become a specific facet of the market to be addressed with an increasingly complex series of objects and games designed using a range of aesthetic genres.<sup>3</sup> A whole array of commodities from Barbie dolls through to remote control cars, roller blades and character figures (*Power Ranger*, *Mutant Ninja Turtle*, *Thunderbird*, etc.) have built up a cosmology of contemporary childhood based on 'fads' and 'crazes', fashions and gimmicks, and stereotyped gender associations (White 1994). In his extensive study of the children's toy industry, Kline compares the innocent child of the Victorian era (content to play with folk toys, found objects and home-made items) with the market manipulated child of the late twentieth century;

Children can become obsessed with wanting particular video games or toys and exceptionally persistent in their demands for them. On the other hand, they can treat very expensive or special gifts with total disrespect or disdain. If a particular article of clothing, a toy, or even a pencil is not designed with the right motifs accepted by their peers, children will refuse adamantly to use them. (Kline 1993:12)

In Kline's analysis, the contemporary child, in contrast to the innocence of pre-consumer child, is a commodity-obsessed being, manipulated by an exploitative toy industry to the point of losing all faculties in relation to the discernment of value. Certainly, according to fieldwork in north London, children have an intense and nuanced relation to the commodity world and expressed an avid interest in the accumulation and acquisition of 'things'. But as argued by numerous child-focused studies of play (Gross 1996; Brougère 1992), a child's relation to the commercial product presents a model far more complex than the vision of the 'stereotypical *tabulae rasae* of the modern commercial world'

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<sup>3</sup> In 1978, a research study of children simply referred to as 'The Child' became common currency throughout marketing and advertising industries (Sutton-Smith 1986: 177).

(Sutton-Smith, 1997:153). Rather toys are incorporated into highly sophisticated social worlds and mediated within the particularity of children's culture. Furthermore, Sutton-Smith (1986) argues that contemporary toys operate as objects symbolic of a material culture significant to adulthood and, more importantly, that they reveal a major historical shift towards the individualisation and personalisation of play. Whereas more traditional societies are more likely to produce a 'toy [that] is a simulacrum of an adult occupation (a miniature spear, a doll)' Sutton-Smith also contends that modern societies increasingly negate everyday realism in favour of a more 'virtual' and solitary culture of play (1997:155).

The linkage of children's consumption to a trajectory of 'maturity', as toys and objects are systematically 'grown out' of, is suggested in a sociological study of Chicago homeowners and the values they attach to their domestic objects by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981). In their study, children are seen to 'graduate' through a trajectory of associations and ties with particular forms of material culture; beginning with toys and progressing (as the child grows older) to musical equipment, electrical goods and bicycles; 'The young receive meaningful information from interacting with objects that are appropriate to their stage of life, as defined in this culture; these are different objects and therefore different selves, from those that their parents and grandparents develop' (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 94).

Early western understandings of toys have been consistently dominated by a rhetoric of progress and, more latterly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, associated (through Romanticism and commercialism) with the role of imagination and creativity in child-development; 'The cultural interpretation of the toy in children's imaginary life has, in this century, been a paradoxical battle between the fears of mass commercial stereotyping of children's play and the ability of the toys to expand on the emotional life of the children who get to play with them' (Sutton-Smith, 1997:152). It is in a similar context that Seiter (1993) challenges the crude liberalism of middle class academics and critics who condemn the superficiality of contemporary children's goods and culture. She argues instead that children's goods and toys are not merely superficial expressions of their parents desires and marketers profiteering, but in fact directly contribute to their children's social inclusion in generating their identity and sense of belonging in contemporary culture. Seiter contends

that normative toys and merchandise form a staple means of social inclusion across ethnic and social class groups (Seiter 1993).

The consideration of children's relations to consumer objects as an entirely contemporary phenomenon, however, is brought into question by Plumb's (1982) historical account of childhood related consumption. His detailed study reveals how children and childhood emerged, in eighteenth century England, as a distinct category mutually defined through the appropriation of new objects and cultural forms ranging from automata to wooden toy animal farms and didactic playing cards to penny children's books. With the decrease in child mortality rates, children evolved as a new form of capital investment to be realised through the nurturing and enhancement of their capacities for social accomplishment. Child-focused toys, modes of education, clothing, amusements and entertainment boomed as a new socially aspirant middle and lower middle class willingly committed themselves to the expenditures of child-rearing. According to Plumb most of the child-related amusements of the eighteenth century embraced the theme of self-improvement and self-education and, by the early nineteenth century, speciality toyshops had become a commonplace retailing form selling everything from cheap inflatable globes to jig-saw puzzles; children had 'become a trade, a field of commercial enterprise for the sharp-eyed entrepreneur' and a force of modernity and social betterment (Plumb, 1982: 310). In a culture influenced by the philosophical ideals of Locke and Rousseau, children were cast as innocents to be shepherded away from ill-deeds and cruelty through the use, for example, of vivid morality tales. These endeavours were extended to material culture as early as 1798, when an educational treatise, listing a vast array of toys and games available during the period, criticised the over-indulgence of children by their parents and chided the buying of useless toys such as 'baa-lambs' and 'squeaky pigs' (Edgeworth, 1798 cited in Plumb, 1982:311).

The increased consumption of child-related goods is not simply, then, symptomatic of a newly commercialised childhood but rather contemporary consumption and childhood are mutually constitutive (for cross-cultural comparisons see White 1994 re: construction of teenagers and market in Japan and US). 'Children' (as an historically specific cultural construct) (Ariès 1962; Jencks 1996) form a vital aspect of modernity; 'Their constitution represents the collective future of a given society, a future that in a

Western context is intimately wrapped up in Western utopian dreams and aspirations along with dystopian fears. To abandon the concept of 'child', according to Buchli and Lucas (2000: 132), is to abandon the concept of adult 'one of the last remaining categories invoking a common certainty in modern experience' In this context, children are invoked as pre-social beings unsullied by the objects and exchanges of the market. On Jay Road the currency of the 'wooden toys'<sup>4</sup> and the popularity amongst middle class parents of the Early Learning Centre children's shop, reveals how specific objects manifest and mediate the contradictions of children's relationship to modernity. Material culture, then, plays an integral, rather than peripheral or merely symbolic, role in the meanings and construction of childhood.

In households on Jay Road a variety of means, implicit and explicit, are used to instil children with a notion of 'value' around goods and giving. For children of eight years and upwards money was 'lent', given as a one off payment or added as a bonus to normal pocket money to enable the purchase of gifts for immediate family, friends and relatives. Alternatively children are encouraged to make their own gifts, either alone or with the aid of parents or sibling. Children's television programmes such as *Blue Peter*, especially prior to Christmas, feature demonstrations of 'easy-to-make' items (made from inexpensive or recycled materials) promoted as ideal as gifts. Home-craft has historically been an integral part of household provisioning (Turney 1999) and viewed as vital component of children's socialisation. In the first half of the twentieth century girls' creative activities were tied to specific forms of material culture such as the making of kitchen gloves and aprons. Boys might make models or kitchen racks in the context of school 'woodwork' classes but more typically the home based craft skills revolved around relations between mother and daughter. Contemporary versions, such as those featured on television and in children's comics and magazines are less blatantly presented as rehearsals for gendered domestic adult roles (as mentioned by Sutton-Smith in his description of miniature adult objects). However, activities such as model making for boys and

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<sup>4</sup> At nearly new sales (described in chapter 2) trolleys of primary coloured wooden blocks with wheels intended for use by toddlers learning to walk, were the most eagerly sought after second-hand toy with a broadly acknowledged value as a 'good' educational object.

jewellery and crafts for girls remain prevalent in contemporary children to children gift-giving<sup>5</sup>.

Just as with younger children, the gifting of birthday parties provides a key role in establishing (or undermining) intra-household relations, with pre-adolescent children gifting practices may be used instrumentally by parents to inculcate value and bolster existing or new kin relations. This might be implemented in a directly didactic fashion where a child is encouraged to make home-crafted gifts especially for specific members of secondary kin, as described by Alice a ten year old girl living on Jay Road;

I usually make mobiles for my baby cousins Luke and Jack – they like mobiles. I have made my mum a special stand-up toilet roll from *Blue Peter* [children's television programme] and I made her pen things out of tubes from kitchen rolls and for my dad I made a shoe holder out of wire and wood. And my mum helped me. I got the idea from an art craft magazine thing that you get weekly'.

Children are aware of the adult rhetoric of value around 'home-made' articles, in contrast to shop bought gifts, as expressed by Jamie (ten years old living in a maisonette on Jay Road);

One time my cousin and my aunt made a folder and it had like plastic sheets in it and they make me paintings and I do prefer ... I mean I like them mostly making me things because it shows that they care and it means more to me and it's more work.

However as this excerpt from a dialogue with ten year old George, from Blackbird Hill primary school, reveals it is clear that the learned theoretical value of the 'home-made gift' often exists in direct conflict with actual preference of children for commodities from *Disney* merchandise to toys featured in the *Argos* catalogue;

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<sup>5</sup> Children's gifts to other children in the study (nine to eleven year olds) comprised of goods (bought and home-made) rigidly defined by gender. These typically included amongst girls friendship bracelets, jewellery, bubble baths and soaps, ornaments and amongst boys action figures, etc.

George: 'My cousin usually makes things for me and my brothers – my brother does projects at school and this year he's given me a clay model of a roman soldier and he's given me other things he's made'.

Researcher: 'Which would you prefer a present made or bought?'

George: 'Really, I'd prefer the one that was bought but I'd like the one that was made because it shows that they [the donor] really like to give it to me'.

While George acknowledges the value of home-made gifts, but admits to preferring 'bought' items, ten-year old Rachel uses a rational approach to explain her preference for bought gifts. The quotation reveals Rachel's awareness of her mother's vulnerability in giving unsuitable or unappreciated gifts;

'It's easier when you buy something, at least you can get something you like. Because, like, if my mum made me something and I didn't like it she'd be really upset'.

Children described going to enormous lengths to 'cover up' for adults and their 'bad gifts'. This was particularly prevalent in the case of gifts received from secondary kin or distant relatives. Bridget, one of the most established tenants of Sparrow Court, is Guyanese and a grandmother of thirteen children in England and Guyana. Each Mother's Day, birthday and Christmas she receives an enormous selection of cards, chocolates, flowers and clothes. Whereas for her grand children she will try to make the effort to buy 'proper' presents, she rarely reciprocates by buying gifts for her own children. This is in part due to economic reasons (although she often gives money as a gift), but she is also aware that for the 'big ones' any gift she was able to offer would belong to a different set of aesthetic and cultural values, and therefore pose too much of a risk;

I've got 13 grandchildren and one great grandchild and they all buy their Nana presents so that's it. The big ones I stopped getting them presents, I just sometimes put money in their card. And the little ones I put myself out to buy them presents. But the big ones I just put money in an envelope and that's that and sometimes I even don't if I don't have the

money I just send them a card, because I'm not working so they don't expect it.

Frequently grand parents and relatives would circumvent the children altogether by giving money directly to the parents who would most frequently use the gift to supplement the expense of other gifts or activities such as dance or gymnastic lessons. However, the relatives who chose to navigate through the tempestuous seas which constitute the temporality of children's goods, either directly consulted parents over specific goods or toys or ran a very high risk of offering items which appalled children. In this respect, it is as if children anticipated the awfulness of 'Aunty Margo's' gift as a feature of a normal Christmas or birthday as much as they admired the 'right' presents chosen by their parents or siblings. The following quotations offer some insight into the status amongst children of such gifts;

Phoebe: 'My Aunty Margo, she sent me down this horrible body suit. It was all different types of green and I haven't wore it at all because it was really horrible and it made you feel yuk. It was ghastly. I didn't tell her I didn't like it because it might have upset her. I said I loved it and I'd love to wear it but I use it for special occasions. And I *never did!* [laughing]'

Kelsey: 'My grandma makes clothes for me but they're not very nice, like nighties and things. But they're not very nice ..I've never said to my grandma I don't like them – they're horrible brown and green and all murky dark colours'.

David: 'Sometimes my relatives buy me things I don't like – corduroy trousers and things! I just left them in my draw and I've only worn them once'.

Whereas unfitting gifts from relatives took on an almost legendary status in children's culture, the frequently inappropriate gifts of parents warranted more strategic approaches;

James: 'Sometimes like if they [the parents] bring me something and I really, really hate it – I'll just trample on it and put it in the wash – and then I say mum I hate this

you shouldn't have bought it – but she says never mind I'll clean it in the wash. And then it comes back in my draw washed again!'

Natalie: 'If my mum and dad buy me something, I 'd like, I usually wait until it's too small and then I say that's too small..'cos otherwise ...I don't know they just like you to like what they like'

In other discussions about gifts, a consistent feature of children's experience was the embarrassment of receiving 'out of fashion' or ill-judged games, clothes and toys from adults. The importance of the contemporaneous currency of commodities could not be over emphasised in the dominant children's culture around Jay Road;

Jake: 'What I'm going to say is a bit embarrassing- so promise you're not goin' tell no body –my mum got me *Power Rangers* pyjamas! [laughs hysterically]'

Q :why is that embarrassing?

Jake: 'Cos' if friends come round I says it's not mine or anything it's my mum's – I don't like them they were quite good when they first came out but I don't like them now. My mum thought I liked them so I was pretending to be pleased but my mum knew how I felt 'cos she asked me if I wanted to take it on holiday and I said "no, I'd rather take the other ones"'.

Shelley: 'I got some annoying pyjamas – I got *Care Bear* pyjamas [laughing] – from aunty. I pretended I liked them when she was there but then my mum took them back'.

Jamie: 'my aunty got me these pants- my worst present – *Thunderbird* pants [laughs]– and the other day the others were all in the wash and I had to wear them!'

The attraction to the contemporaneous, as illustrated above, explains the particular currency of the *Argos* catalogue (there are two seasonal editions each year). This highly illustrated, full-colour catalogue provides an expansive over-view of available consumer goods. Whereas for many adults (see chapters 4 and 6) the catalogue is used to rationalise the enormous variety and range of commodities available at any given time, for children the catalogue provides both an exciting glimpse into the adult world of shopping and a format for developing an intensely focused, child-specific culture around commodities. Browsing and consulting the pages of *Argos* catalogue, children and parents chart the temporality of contemporary material culture. *Postman Pat* bedspreads swiftly supersede *Telly-Tubby* bed linen, as the popularity of children's fictional television characters peaks and wanes. A Mega-drive eagerly sought after one particular year, may become entirely redundant as a sought-after children's gift a few months after its initial release. In this context catalogues such as *Argos*, in this particular locality of north London, provide a medium through which children can bring the information and culture of their interaction with other children to bear upon their parents. Catalogues were consistently referred to as a staple of the household by children and families across a diverse spectrum of social class and ethnic backgrounds as exemplified by these excerpts taken from discussions with ten and eleven year old children;

Jerome: 'I love catalogues – I like looking at computer games, bikes and some other stuff'.

Cindy: 'I look in my mum's catalogues and I always put a mark round which ones I like and I wish I was old enough to get those things and I go to my mum 'can I get that?' And she says they don't come in my size.'

Matthew: 'Get this. My mum's been looking at this catalogue yesterday and so there's two big catalogues I got – right – and I was looking at one of them and mum was looking at the same things and I was just looking in the kids section'.

Noah: 'I like the *Argos* catalogue – to see if there are any new computer games- and watches I bought one in there.'

Jamie: 'I looked in the *Argos* catalogue and there was a very nice picture of it [a remote control car] so I looked at that a lot day dreaming about it'

Radha: 'I look in *Argos* catalogue sometimes but that's only because my dad gets it- it's a bit easier than going to the actual shop because they might not have it and it's always quite busy – just to look through near Christmas. If my mum and dad can't think of anything they just ask me and I look through it'

'I got a ring, I looked with mum and dad – I like those, I like those – sovereign ring from the catalogue and a chain with a Jesus cross out of the catalogue'.

Tessa: 'My mum gets catalogues out and if she wants to buy anything for her or anybody else. And I just look with her and say "why don't you get that for a friend?" – or help her decide what she wants for herself'.

The *Argos* catalogue, in terms of its physical and cultural location, at once occupies space in the domestic (it is a staple across households on Jay Road) and the playground. It is used in the home with adults and siblings, and conceptually (if not physically) in the playground within children's peer groups. Many children in this age group were able (and proud) to remember by heart the numbers of pages featuring particular items. It might be easy to assume that a child's use of domestic forms, such as the *Argos* catalogue amongst peers, simply involves the reproduction or mimicry of a household's 'philosophy' (Wallman 1984) or parental opinion. However, children use domesticated objects and information, such as the *Argos* catalogue, in a way that frequently defies or contests adult provisioning. It can also be used as a form of collusion by directing adults in the buying of appropriate goods, so avoiding embarrassing mistakes. The power of such an object lies in its dual status as an everyday domestic artefact and as an information source with currency in the social worlds of children's non-domestic lives.

In her in-depth ethnographic study of primary school children, James' considers the ways in which children create distinct social relations at home and at school. In this context, the 'lunch box' acts as an object bringing messages directly from home into the child's social relations of the school; 'the packed lunch in its confusing of two important domains in a child's social experience, is a potentially highly charged and emotive

commodity. It represents food from the social context of the home which is eaten within the cultural context of school and in the company of other children' (James 1993:144). Due to its domesticated status, children strategize around this poignant object and its contents, hiding, for example, food substances considered normative within the home but vilified by children at school. The pressure of the normative in this context has serious ramifications for children requiring 'special' foods or diets.

In a bi-annual event held by the Parents' and Teachers' Association to raise funds for the Blackbird Hill primary school, parents formally represent their children with their contributions to the 'international food bazaar'. This event is indicative of the role the school plays as a focal point for public child-related activities associated with the 'street'. While traditional school fair attractions such as the jumble sale are no longer considered profitable, schemes such as 'food fair' have proved highly successful, raising between £200 - £250 an event, as described by PTA committee member and Jay Road mother Holly; 'because of the ethnic mix of the school we would always have very successful – what we would call – an international food thing. Everyone can bring food and then people can heat it in the microwave- wonderful things come in; Turkish food, Indian, Pakistani – everything really and that's quite well known'.

The food fair is an exceptional public occasion in which the normal child/parent power relation is inverted. Like the lunch-box, the contributions made by parents (to be carried to school by children and displayed side-by-side other parental contributions) convey information directly from the domestic sphere to the heart of the children's school relations (with peers and teachers). Parents publicly represent their children through the contributions and donations they make to the fair. Although many parents avoid this encounter altogether (by simply opting out of making any donation) others spend enormous time and effort judging the right 'gift' for their child to offer the occasion. Most typically, however, it is the child or children of a given household who mediate this decision. Casey, a mother of Greek Cypriot origin, became so nervous of making the 'wrong thing' for her daughter to take to the school fair that she offered both a traditional home-made cake (using a her grandmother's recipe) and several shop-bought alternatives. Radha, an Indian mother with two sons told how she 'was nagged' by her children into making the family's favourite potato and coriander dish when she would have preferred to donate a frozen shop-bought Victoria sponge she had left over

in the freezer from a tea party. The agency of children in overseeing the representation of their parents and families (and therefore their other domestic selves) is highly visible on such occasions as they skilfully negotiate, for example, representations of their ethnicity most suited to the social relations of the school peer groups. While, as mothers, Casey and Radha initially opt for what they consider to be the easiest, safest, neutral contribution to the food fair, their children demand 'authentic' and sophisticated regional dishes as an assertion of confidence in a multi-ethnic school.

Similarly, in an inversion of the lunch-box scenario described by James, the repertoire of objects and meanings from the *Argos* catalogue is taken home from the peer group associations of the playground and brought into the context of adult social relations. Despite the critical academic discourse around children and consumption, ethnographic evidence revealed the ways in which adults anticipated and encouraged children as the purveyors of in-depth and sophisticated knowledge around 'modern' goods, toys and technologies. In the home, adults strategised around familiar media such as catalogues, in an attempt to appropriately provision their children, particularly in the construction of 'age'.

Bob and Judy, living in a two-bedroom maisonette on Jay Road, expressed concern over their son's recent birthday gift request and used the currency of the *Argos* catalogue on an attempt to 'correct' their son's choice;

The eldest one he wanted a "*Mr Frosty*". I mean he's 10 year old and he wants a *Mr Frosty*! Because last year in the summer on the way home from shopping we'd stop at the sweet shop at the top and get what they call a *Slush Puppy*. Well, *Mr Frosty* does the self same thing.... so he wanted one of them and he couldn't think of anything else, so as we 're going through the *Argos* catalogue we saw some *Power Rangers* so we got him that as well.

The parents in this example found the request for a soft drink maker so incongruous with the normal desires of a pre-adolescent boy that they supplemented his choice with plastic figures representing 'action' characters from a popular children's television show. The choice of *Mr. Frosty* as a birthday gift challenged the parental perception of their child's

development in terms of gender and age; in so doing it crucially undermined their role as parents and the success of the household.

As discussed in the previous chapter, birthdays and birthday parties are the most prominent means by which stages of childhood and children's (and their mothers') sociality is expressed in British culture. This attention to age as an ordering principle is, according to James and Prout, a crucial facet of the social construction of children; 'each year lived through is recorded by the number of candles on the birthday cake, for it is this past upon which the child's future is deemed to rest'. (James and Prout 1990:221). Children continue, through schooling and educational and social achievement, to be judged and organised through the abstract concept of 'age'; the underpinning of social reproduction within capitalist western societies. This belief system is intrinsically tied to the notion of children as constituting 'the future', an idiom used in popular parlance and within advertising representations used by insurance companies and environmental campaigns. While children represent a 'future' ('the next generation'), they also represent a past connoted in the way in which 'childhood' is construed as a static condition as opposed to an experience bounded by temporal and spatial context. Childhood exists in relation to the future and the past but is, according to James and Prout, rarely acknowledged as having a present; '[children's culture] is a vibrant, adaptable culture responsive to the nuances of the adult world. There appears, then, to be a tension here between a mythical past and a modern present' (James and Prout 2000:228).

The temporality accorded children's objects is not merely reflective of children's chronological age but constitutive of the culturally specific construction of age described above. The provisioning of children with 'brand new' items, for example, is indicative of a notion of 'future' ascribed to a child. Jenny, a middle class single mother living in a Victorian converted flat, is particularly critical of the 'hype around Christmas' and the commercial pressure to buy an ever expanding array of new toys for children. A keen collector of old objects and furniture Jenny avoids bulk stores such as *Ikea* and *Argos* at all costs. She is vociferously opposed to consumerism and enthusiastically supportive of second-hand provisioning. She frequents the nearly new sales of babies and children's wares held every month in the local church hall to clothe her eighteen-month-old son and happily receives hand-me-down toys from neighbours and friends for her infant. Yet, despite limited income and a firm confidence in second-hand buying skills, she would

not consider even a re-conditioned bicycle as a Christmas gift for her six- year-old daughter. Instead she budgets all year to provide a brand new model; 'I just want to give her one [a bicycle] that is hers and hasn't belonged to anyone else, not that she would know the difference'. It is the value of the bicycle as a new, untouched commodity, detached from an established network of exchanges or prior histories that makes it the ideal gift object to mark 'age' and a trajectory of child development.

The idea of 'brand newness' becomes particularly significant in relation to gifts that mark a visible transition in a child's development such as learning to ride a two-wheel bicycle or 'tell the time' with a wrist-watch. In this way, objects such as bicycles and watches are often set apart from other toys and child-related items in their being conferred a special status most appropriately communicated in their state as pristine commodities. Ink pens might be given as markers of a rite of passage into 'big' [secondary] school and a geometry set signals entry to a particular class and educational stage. However, as revealed previously in the case of *Mr. Frosty* drink maker and the disapproval of the child's parents regarding this gift, there is rarely such a delineated or functional facet to goods as markers of age; it is a far more complicated process tentatively negotiated by adults with children.

The cosmology of children's goods, often faddish and ephemeral, is a vital part of 'the processes through which reputations are acquired, mediated or lost within the social world of children' (James 1993:152). Just as the telling of a playground rhyme with a skill which at once reveals consummate knowledge and innovative flair (negotiating what James describes as the constant tension in children's social relations between conformity and individuality) accrues a child higher status, so too does the adroit articulation of material culture.

The active agency of children has been historically expressed through their relationship with the ephemera of commodities visible in the act of collecting. Since the turn of the century collecting has been encouraged as a normative aspect of childhood. In North America during the early part of the twentieth century children's collections (differing slightly according to gender) included objects such as rocks, cigar bands, birds' eggs, marbles, seashells, buttons and advertising cards, buttons, stamps, paper dolls and pieces of cloth (Hall, 1907). Studies carried out in industrial cultures throughout the twentieth century have shown collecting as a consistent feature of children's culture (Belk 1995;

Newson and Newson 1968; Danet and Katerial 1989); with the period between nine and ten years of age revealing a peak in collecting activity (Mc Greevey 1990). Although the artefacts collected vary according to location and historical period, the phenomenon, according to Belk (1995), is intrinsically tied to the rise of consumer culture; moreover it is 'in the process of collecting [that] collectors rehearse and imitate the market-based economy in which we are increasingly embedded' (Belk 1995: 55).

Children themselves, as expressed in an excerpt from a discussion with Sadie (11), embraced the ideas and terminology of temporality in the form of style as popularised in girls' magazine 'make-over' features;

I like having sort of posters on my wall like *Just Seventeen* and I like changing my room about because every sort of year, I sort of throw away the old month and bring in the new month, or throw away the old year and bring in the new year because it's a bit boring if you come into the same old room so I sort of shift my bed and my table and my desk.

Similarly, Chloe, a ten year old girl living in Sparrow Court estate, collects 'nearly-new' carrier bags from designer stores which she uses to decorate her bedroom walls. Since Chloe herself has limited access to stores, such as Harvey Nichols and Liberty's [high-end London department stores], she acquires most of her items as gifts which her friends have obtained from adults within their social spheres, or directly from her own adult friends and relatives. Her 'collection' forms a tenuous link with the world of privileged adult consumption but it is mostly through the wily endeavour of her friends, who use their relations with adults to acquire shopping bags, that she builds this collection.

Eight year old Andrew, living on a street adjacent to Jay Road, has an extensive collection of samples of designer aftershave ranging from *Gucci* to *Issey Miyake* which he keeps, as prized objects, in a miniature portable model of an Egyptian sarcophagus he made for a school history project. Although the collection of these items is in keeping with traditional genres of childhood collecting, like Chloe, part of the attraction to these objects is their relation to the recognisably adult (and in this case male) world of consumption popularly depicted in advertisements. Andrew carries his box of

aftershave to and from school and boasts of being able to discern, through smell, one item from another. Unlike Chloe, Andrew relies on his mother Anne, rather than friends, to supply his collection. Anne finds it quaintly amusing and incongruous that her son should take an interest in aftershave at such a young age but nevertheless makes frequent excursions to West End shops in order to (with embarrassment) persuade assistants in cosmetic departments to hand over free samples.

Marketing theorists describe such activities as a preadolescent desire to 'fit in' (McNeal 1987) and conform to the mores of one's peers. It might seem, using the examples above, that these individuals are merely mimicking the consumptive behaviour of adults. Certainly, they are incorporating 'rules' from other adult genres of consumption but they are used in keeping with the meanings of their own social relations. In this way objects, and the gift relations children have with adults, are a means of asserting and actively forming their personhood as the following section explores.

### **'Being Spoilt': Children's Narratives of Morality**

In the course of the ethnography, interactions with children often prompted discussion (initiated by the children) regarding the notion of 'being spoilt'. Discussion around 'gifts' or 'Christmas' (or similar gifting events) prompted children (as with the above discussion regarding 'home-made' goods) to acquiesce to a familiar 'adult' morality towards consumption but this was keenly tapered by specificity of their own cultural worlds and relations as the following examples reveal.

The familiar adult concern regarding the rising costs of branded training shoes would often be alluded to in conversations and group discussions and was generally understood by the children to be 'wrong'. However, the two most admired children in the ten year age group at Blackbird Hill primary school were Jake and 'Bez', children who had purportedly given each other gifts of *Nike* trainers for Christmas. Although the trainers were considered 'cool' by some of the children, it was the sophistication and expense of the gift exchange (which had gained legendary status in the playground) which was most admired. Whether or not there was any truth to the boys' alleged gift relation, it was its expression as a testament to 'special' friendship which children apparently admired. The boys, moved to separate classes by their teachers, wore

matching bandannas to show their loyalty in the playground and their peers enthusiastically referred to their defiant relationship.

Although children referred to 'unfairness' in terms of access to goods (how 'poor children' and the homeless should be allowed better living conditions) the acquisition of goods themselves was not inherently problematic. The idea of 'being spoilt' was applied most consistently to a notion of class in which children (unprompted) succinctly located themselves as in this excerpt from ten year old Spencer and Eliza;

Spencer: I'm not that rich and I'm not that poor, I'm in the middle.

My mum's a babysitter and my dad's a musician so I'm not really that... more like I'm in the middle – I think we should appreciate what we have – like some people have too much, like Hollywood kids. They go to the shops and they are really spoilt. Like these kids with big gardens and their mum treats them like a God – this kid had a massive Jurassic park cake put on the table. I'd like to be that rich but I'd never be that spoilt.

Eliza: well my dad works for a florist and my mum's an aerobic teacher so we don't get that much money – so we can't get as much. But rich people they seem to buy the whole store, you know? And it's really sad because people – like Deena at our school haven't got any money and they can't afford a house – she's been beaten and it's really sad for her she has no presents.

'Being spoilt' was the condition of not recognising or appreciating privilege and more importantly using material privilege as a means of power over others as illustrated by the following excerpts;

Ella: 'Spoilt kids get too much at Christmas and I don't like spoiled kids because they get a present and go "yeah all right" and get a big one then they really show off to the other people'.

George: 'My aunty bought me hoops, roller skates, things from Gap; we had six bags when we'd finished shopping cos' it was my birthday and then we had three videos to watch – it was brilliant. But you get spoiled if you can have everything you want all the time – when you get it just like that – that's spoiled and that's really bad'.

Natalie: 'If you demand something and you just get it instantly that's spoiled.'

While adults openly try to implement socialisation in the provisioning, the strategies utilised by parents to encourage their children in appropriate behaviour are quickly transposed to the moral economies of children's social worlds. Denise, a ten-year-old girl of Greek Cypriot origin living on the Lark Estate has very specific ideas regarding her future savings plan;

All my Christmas money and all the money I get in my life I 'm saving up now cos I get pocket money, £3.50 a week, and my mum says "okay you save up all your money and it's somebody's birthday you can get them a present" – well I would get the present but a cheap one cos I want to save up all my money and when I'm older I'm going to take my friends to – cos like my nanna and granddad they've got a massive mansion – and when I'm older I'm going to take all my friends there and when I'm sixteen to Cyprus and show them sightseeing.

Just as adults might consider children's gifts, in the form of brand new bicycles, as significant markers in a child's life, children's fantasies frequently equated 'growing up' and independence with the acquisition of goods. Some of these fantasies (particularly those conjured by girls) were notably altruistic, others utilised descriptions of types of goods as a means of describing a preferred identity;

Amy: 'When I grow up the first thing I'm going to do is save up and buy my mum a great big giant ruby ring for her 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary – cos you know it's the ruby anniversary and when she sees it she's going to really scream'.

Jack: 'When I grow up I'm going to get my dream car - my mini and I'm going to do it up and buy alloys for it and just drive it everywhere but I'm not going to get married'.

'Being spoilt' then, as a discourse around the provisioning of children, is not a solely adult construct but rather is a dynamic concept children use in negotiating value within their own social relations. In the following description we consider how Sally, as the mother of Ryan and Daniel, mediates this concept whilst tentatively allowing her sons (in particular, the eldest Ryan) the ability to generate his own values and trajectory through consumption.

Sally Tyler, living on a leafy street adjacent to Jay Road, is contemplating allowing her ten-year-old son Ryan to travel alone in Ibis Pond to go shopping for a gift for his friend. Although concerned about his welfare, she considers Ryan's first fully independent shopping trip as a rehearsal for his transition to senior school, situated a bus journey away, in a year's time. Sally considers herself as 'anti-materialist' (the Tyler household relies on a combination of second-hand goods and first-hand discounted goods). Yet she views her sons' browsing of catalogues and his, as yet unfulfilled, desire to 'spend, spend, spend' (as she puts it) in the local shopping mall as a positive indication of his ambition and increasing independence; 'they [Ryan and his brother Daniel] like to look at all the electrical equipment, things they imagine they would like to have in the future really. I don't know where they got it from really?'

Sally is keen to point out that she and her husband have never encouraged either of their sons 'to be materialistic'. Rather, contrary to the behaviour of other families in their sons' peer groups, they have implemented strict guidelines regarding the allocation of pocket money and the ways in which it should be spent. In this context, one of the most sought after items for boys in Ryan and Daniel's age group, is the strip of the local premier football club. Football strips, merchandised copies of a team's current kit, are commonly given as Christmas and birthday gifts across Britain and are viewed as a highly prized commodities by many young boys. Due to their enormous popular appeal, and the high prices commanded for them, the merchandising of football strips has received much criticism from supporters' organisations. Many clubs, particularly premier clubs, have been criticised for exploiting loyal supporters, particularly young boys, through high pricing (£40-£50 for a child's kit; £70-£80 for adult's kit) and a rapid re-design of shirts which

ensures constant and increased sales. Households with several young children keen to show their allegiance to a football club might spend over £200 a year on copy football kits. So widespread is the phenomenon of football strip consumption that by the mid-1990's, it became the subject of scrutiny within the tabloid press and the object of consumer rights inquiries (McBain 1999).

Jay Road is in a part of north London renowned for its allegiance to two competing high profile local premier football clubs; Arsenal and Tottenham. On Jay Road, and its adjacent streets, stickers in bedroom windows declare allegiance to either of the clubs though the strongest local affiliation lies with Tottenham. In many families with young boys football loyalty is seen as a defining feature of the locality and for more established inhabitants, this is an identity passed from father to son. It is most commonly mothers, however, who oversee the acquisition of copy strips as gifts for their sons (and exceptionally their daughters) as a proud emblem of the family's unity through association with a particular team.

In the Tyler household the acquisition of expensive football strips raises contradictory issues. Sally, whose own family originates from a local working class neighbourhood, wholeheartedly supports her sons' involvement in football as players in their local boys' teams and supporters of Tottenham. But she vehemently objects to the prices commanded by the football club for what she describes as 'nothing more than bits of decorated Nylon'. Rather than give the highly sort after football strips as 'straight' gifts to her sons, Sally uses a strategy of exchange and mediation which transforms the meaning of the goods from brash 'rip-off' commodities to items imbued with the value of the household.

Sally comes to an arrangement in which she agrees to match her sons' pocket money savings to the point where they can equally share the cost of the much coveted strips;

we do a 50/50 on that one because it's so expensive but they do now realise. It takes them a long time, for 6 months hard slog, but I think it's such an outrageous price they have to pay they have to realise that they're being ripped off so... It's serious shopping but it is a serious realisation of what they're paying.

Sally also sees this strategy of deferred gratification as a way of countering what she perceives as some of the amoral conspicuous consumption practised by more affluent middle class families in the area, though she is aware that this sets Ryan (the eldest son) apart from his contemporaries;

in general, most of his friends are.. their families are much more wealthy than we are. So when the football strips come out they get the whole thing very quickly whereas ours get it but they have saved for months and months beforehand so in general it is quite difficult for the older one because his friends are generally from more wealthy backgrounds.

Ultimately, Sally believes her eldest son Ryan's desire for 'new things' (like the ever-changing football strip) is an admirable, quietly rebellious reaction to his parents' reliance on second-hand goods. It is a statement of his growing independence; 'I think it's very refreshing for him which is why I don't mind this football thing to actually get something brand new. I think that's what is, it's a really wonderful experience for him.'

Sally's gracious acceptance of her son's new found desire for material goods, and her son's complicity in the '50/50' arrangement over the provisioning of the football strip, is the result of a tentative inter-generational process in which narratives of morality are constantly negotiated.

Children's involvement with provisioning, particularly as recipients of gifts within the household, is a far from passive relation of socialisation or a mere extension of the established (adult) moral economy of the household. Just as adults strive to mediate their children's tastes in the realm of the normative, so too children work with adults in establishing that same normativity as witnessed in the intricacies of ten year old Tessa's description of shopping with her parents;

I like to go [shopping] with my mum and dad really because then they help me choose and they say if they liked me in something or what they prefer – well we both sort of like have a debate over it. Like if I like one thing and my mum likes it, and my dad doesn't like it, then

two against one. So we have to buy it, and he's, like, going off sulking. But if my dad likes it and wants to buy something and my mum wants to buy something and I want to buy something then it's all right. If you want to buy separate things then you go to separate shops because me and mum sort of have, like, the same taste. But she likes to go in the lady's shop and I like go into the child's clothes shop and my dad goes into the hairdressers and then the shop with men's suits.

## **Conclusion**

Conventional accounts of childhood socialisation, which cast children as 'adults in the making' and as 'natural, passive, incompetent and incomplete' (James and Prout 1997:x) did not match the empirical evidence of adult-child relations suggested by the evidence of this ethnography. Children, in the mediation of normativity amongst peers, family members and other adults, show an enormous degree of agency, seen here through the meanings made and negotiated around 'things'.

As the descriptions of children's Christmas gifting reveal, objects (their values and aesthetics) are not the arbitrary symbols of this negotiation between adults and children; rather these forms in their own right constitute certain forms of relations (Latour 1993). It is through the specificity of certain types of material culture that the processes and practices of normativity, the contradictions and anxieties are mediated. The struggle for the normative around such objects and transactions is the struggle to establish a relationship that is stable for both child and parent. However, that same normativity can also become the source of enormous economic and social pressure (from the buying of football strips to the anxiety of being a 'good mother').

Children bring to bear their own moral economies (formulated through goods and values circulating in the context of their own social relations) on the domestic world of adults. In the power relations of gifting between adults and children each generation is aware of projecting itself on to the other and, in this process, adults and children decide whether or not to collude with or denounce the other. For example, while many children embrace the ideal of the 'home-made', they clearly draw the line at accepting unfashionable or 'out of date' items (except through tolerance and good grace) which challenge the contemporaneity of their material cultural worlds. Children may at once

willingly respect the intentions of adults' as well as wilfully asserting themselves against them; mocking 'embarrassing' presents while also making strenuous efforts to hide their parents' shame (in the form of *Care Bear* pyjamas) at the back of a drawer. Both can choose to point out the discrepancies or respect them, and they might do either depending on the state of play of the relationship itself, because the potential to sanction either by humiliation is great.

In this way, a moral economy is established in which the motivation is to recognise the ability of the other to see 'proper' balance. In other words, since anyone can, and sometimes should, deviate from the normative this does not amount to saying the normative is the moral. Rather the moral is made evident through knowing when to subscribe and when to deviate from it. This ethnographic study of adult/child gifting relations establishes how the child sees the relationship to parents as a moral one in which rules of fairness, obligation and one's own sense of means and rights are explored through the dynamics of detail.

The process of the normative, in which appropriateness is established, especially through the selection of gifts, generates a pressure of acceptability and power relations in which individuals, parents, mothers and children are constantly judging themselves against a certain set of criteria. Clearly, the market picks up on this phenomenon and responds with an ever-increasing array of newly designed toys, but it does not simply generate it. The normativity described here is not simply a question of the desire or imperative to conform, rather that it is only by comparison that we can know who we are or should be. This process, in the case of relations between parents and children, can provoke an enormous amount of anxiety but is also used as a tentative means of allowing or developing autonomy of the parent and child.

As a comparative study, Davis & Sosenbrenner (2000) chart the massive shift in the relation of consumption and goods to the construction of childhood in contemporary urban China. Whereas previously children were not taken shopping, received new items of clothing only at Lunar new year and considered a piece of fruit as a rare treat, within a ten year time span entire department stores have been given over to the display and sale of toddlers and children's wares (Davis & Sosenbrenner 2000: 54). While there the one-child policy of the Chinese state has been used to account for the 'little emperor'

phenomenon, in which the only –child (in particular the boy child) becomes the focus of a high proportion of household expenditure and kin gifting, evidence suggests that this (as in the case of north London) is not simply a symptom of wanton materialism in which the child is ‘spoilt’ with a random selection of toys and clothing. Chinese parents, like those in north London, prevent what they perceive as the less desirable effects of consumerism by vetting overly gimmicky toys (allowing only those with explicit educational value) until after the first year old primary school (Davis and Sesenbrenner 2000:68). After this age, the authors note a striking involvement of children themselves in choosing their toys. Although increased expenditure on children is clearly tied to the urbanisation of China, the phenomenon can not be explained as a crude clamour for social status or as the imitative behaviour of a new bourgeois elite; ‘what was striking was how quickly consumer items that previously had defined the quintessential bourgeois childhood- parties, movies, new clothes, and fancy toys – had reached working class children and that class difference as experienced through consumption and family habits still remained quite fluid’ (Davis and Sesenbrenner 2000:76). Emerging differences in terms of child-related consumption do not fall neatly into a hierarchy of social-class positions.

Rather, the investment in certain goods, argue Davis and Sesenbrenner, belongs to a specific historical relation to consumer culture and the demise of a state relation to childhood which leaves the necessity for the construction of new childhoods and new forms of parenting. Birthday parties in particular (especially around the age of ten years or ‘middle’ childhood) act as new rites of passage into consumer culture. These are not just manifestations of a conspicuous culture of consumption, in which ‘little emperors’ become spoilt trophies of new found affluence, but the result of finely honed priorities in the ways and goods around children (particularly those deemed educational).

Newly market-led urban China and north London, despite the enormous differences in terms of their historical relations to consumption, are useful in their cross-cultural comparison. Like north London, the parents and caregivers of children in China elicit the agency of their charges, in the field of contemporary material culture, to carve out different modes of parenting and childhood as a integral facet of the practice of normativity, in the case of China, undertaken in circumstances of extreme change.

Children's normative gift culture in the north London context, constitutes a form of space where the contradictory expectations of contemporary care-giving, which combines the imperative to protect with the imperative to allow independent development, are enacted. As described in the beginning of the chapter, the space of play on Jay Road is highly restricted, as children's presence in urban spaces in general becomes increasingly problematised (Matthews, Limb and Taylor 2000). With the increasing domestication of children's lives, the 'space' generated by the economies and networks of children's gifts, replaces the public space of 'the street' as a key arena of risk taking and morality making crucial to the construction of children's personhood. Perhaps, as has been noted in cross-culture studies of increased parental expenditure on children in the field of contemporary toys and technologies, this makes an even greater parental imperative to provide the 'latest' in an attempt to ensure a child is well enough equipped with the appropriate currency to succeed socially (White 1994).<sup>6</sup> While the street and other public arenas might previously have served as the space in which the normative was established between children themselves and children and adults, the mediation of value (the complex negotiation of 'naff' and 'cool') now more readily takes place in the space of children's things and concomitant relations.

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<sup>6</sup> In Japan and North America, the market responds to the currency of 'the latest' amongst teenagers and children with an ever greater compartmentalisation of goods designed explicitly in relation to age group defined markets. Age definition is becoming increasingly fractured in response to the use of goods as markers of age and social currency (White 1994:16).

## Chapter Five

### Setting Up Home in North London: The Ideal and the Actual

A consistent cause for a newly marked awareness of provisioning across households in Jay Road is the practice of home decoration. This process takes on numerous forms across the range of housing types on the street. Many homes on Jay Road have remained decoratively unchanged for over fifteen years or more, while others are altered with great regularity, to match, for example, a newly acquired piece of furniture. The birth or death of a family member instigates many re-decorating schemes (as mentioned in chapter one). Similarly, 'moving in' to a home frequently warrants decorating as part of the process of cleansing the property of its previous owner's presence (Marcoux 2001). Occupants also embark on home decorating in preparation for passing on their home to a new owner, or marking particular seasonal events, such as Christmas and spring. Many households take part in sporadic bouts of home decoration directly linked to material or perceived changes in household circumstance (for example, a financial windfall or, as with some elderly residents, in preparation for death). Home decoration, though tied to key life cycles and events, is the principle means by which members of households attempt to invert, re-invent or perpetuate their material worlds. The physical act of 'decorating' requires the household to draw on (or negate) both traditional and contemporary cultural, social, aesthetic and technical knowledge to varying degrees. But crucially, it also requires a process of 'envisaging', imagining or idealising even at its most basic level.

Typically the construction of 'ideal' homes is a process in which the interior private world of the household is made in contrast to the public sphere and its market relations and externalised sociality. In Miller's (1994) ethnographic study of households in Trinidad, he describes the spatial domain of the home as 'centripetal' in contrast to the 'centrifugal' domain of the streets in a culture dominated by public activities and a sociality defined by festivals, carnival and practices such as 'liming'.<sup>1</sup>

It is at Christmas that the house becomes the focus of re-decoration schemes. The re-upholstery of furniture and the sales of paint increase markedly (Miller 1994:84) and the

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<sup>1</sup>Miller (1994) describes 'liming' as one of the most important social institutions of Trinidad which traditionally involved men 'hanging out' at street corners smoking marijuana, showing off their clothes, making comments about passing women and swapping news. More recently, liming might involve the visiting of a number of bars and more often includes women.

purchase of household goods (ornaments, dining suites, tablecloths, etc.) is made under the rubric of Christmas shopping. Spending on new items for the home far exceeds expenditure on gifts (with the exception of children) as 'it is the house..rather than the person which is the main recipient of Christmas shopping' (Miller 1994: 85). This renovation of the household interior culminates in the purchase, or at the very least, the washing or changing of curtains which is seen as the climax of preparing one's home for Christmas and the rounds of social visiting (amongst friends, relatives, colleagues and neighbours) which takes place during the season. Miller describes this process of cleaning and decorating the home as a 'centripetal aesthetic' vital to 'the key annual ritual of family reaffirmation as a moral and expressive order' (Miller 1994:100).

In her ethnographic study of Norwegian homes, Gullestad (1992) also considers the role of home decoration as a significant practice in late modernity, used in the construction of an increasingly homebound and privatised world of contemporary Northern Europe. In her study of everyday life in working class urban Norway, Gullestad asserts that the increased focus on the home and its decoration forms part of a broader trend in western secularised societies. Like Miller, Gullestad contests the simplistic understanding of the emphasis upon the domestic sphere as a symptom indicative of embourgeoisement, the breakdown of public culture and a conservative endeavour. Rather she considers the home and the increase in related expenditure as being not merely 'a defended enclave of traditional values' but rather 'a fundamentally modern construction' (Gullestad 1992:60).

In the Norwegian context, home decoration and furnishings become a 'manifestation of emotional closeness' so pivotal is the notion of the home (*hjem*) to family. In Norwegian home-making Gullestad identifies the ongoing process of home decoration (particularly for women) as a search for 'wholeness and integration' outside the restricted relations of work and public life; 'the home has become a place of intimacy, integration, and wholeness, while the neighbourhood has become a part-time society, fragmented by the temporary nature of its characteristic social relations' (Gullestad 1992:51) The shifting relations between the household and community have placed an onus on the home as a site of increasingly ritualised and expressive practices. In short, the Norwegian home and its everydayness have taken on a sacred function with the demise of public formal rituals and religion.

According to Gullestad's model, setting up home may begin with the first flush of romantic love but ultimately it is the on-going project of home improvement that fosters love and security amongst spouses and family members. Like Miller's description of the 'centripetal aesthetic' the co-ordination and composition of the Norwegian urban interior decor is essential to the ordering and unity of the home and its differentiation from the 'outside'; for 'the home is grounded and belongs to the inside' (Gullestad 1992:51).

It is clear from the comparative examples above that home decoration in the contemporary context is not merely a privatised activity, indicative of individual aesthetic expression and taste, but rather is key means of ordering and dealing with externally constituted ideologies. However, while there are parallels to be drawn between home decorating practice in Norway, Trinidad and Britain, it is difficult to apply the model of egalitarian individualism (and home decoration as an on-going and earnest pursuit), described by Gullestad, or the normative practice described by Miller, to the experiences of householders on the north London street.

Whereas Gullestad describes urban working class homes as 'havens' pieced together with meticulous care in terms of composition and co-ordination (with interior designs easily recognisable as the lavish style appreciated by visiting neighbours and friends) in the working class estates on Jay Road there is little stylistic homogeneity. On the street as a whole, despite the English propensity towards privacy, informants do not construct their homes as havens. Although some informants happily discussed recent home improvements or plans for re-decoration, many found themselves more at ease expressing their sense of alienation or disinterest with their environment as illustrated by the following excerpts extracted from discussions with separate informants;

Q. Do you have any favourite objects?

Belinda: 'I'm fond of my rug but actually I don't really have a favourite thing,— and to be honest I hate this room...I'd like to have another reception room and I don't like this room anyway because it's noisy and I suppose it's just not a very cosy room. We have everything interesting up in the attic — it's all functional and boring down here'

Q. Did you both know which three-piece suite you wanted?

Andrea: 'No we didn't actually, no. I mean I wanted a leather one but it was too expensive. So we went for one that was about 800, I think, £800 -£900 but then they couldn't get that through [the door]. So we went back to the shop and had a look again picked another one for about 1,100 then that wouldn't go through the door! So then we finished up by going to that Suite Centre in Edmonton, see this straight away – and it fits size wise - so we might as well have it! I smoke roll ups and it's easy to wipe clean from ash'.

Q. Where did the ornaments on the kitchen wall come from?

A. 'Oh, those things! Well they just sort of appeared really. We painted when we first moved in and that's it – things have pretty much stayed the same way ever since. We've never really got around to changing things.'

These comments might easily be attributed to disaffected council house dwellers living on a north London estate whose apathy towards home decoration, according to Miller (1988), expresses a broader depression and alienation *vis a vis* their relation to the state. Discussing a category of informants that had made the least effort in altering their state provided kitchen fittings, Miller observes; 'This degree of decorative work was closely associated with a set of interviews which came closest to the image of the isolated and depressed woman identified in a number of studies of housewifery and the image of this particular 'valium estate'.

Antipathy or indifference towards home decoration might be explained by the informant's desire to impress upon the ethnographer their greater, but as yet unfulfilled, ambitions for the home and importantly the notion of the ideal home as part of a future trajectory, rather than present material reality. Due to the type of housing stock on Jay Road there are also pockets of highly transitory population choosing the street due to its comparative affordability and closeness to the sort-after middle class residential area of Ibis Pond and the amenities of the more ethnically mixed and urban environment of Wood Green. This may in part explain the disaffection expressed by many informants regarding home decoration and furnishings. But it also suggests that homes in north

London are not havens, constructed through the materiality of decorative schemes and objects, in conventional or academic understanding of the word. Many informants invested more aesthetic interest in their imaginary, non-material homes.

### **Day Dreaming Ideal Homes: the Process of Envisaging**

Walking along Jay Road, in the shadows of blocks of council flats, maisonettes and Victorian terraced houses there are Devonshire fisherman's cabins, baronial mansions and rose covered country cottages that thrive in the imaginations of the street's householders. These imaginings are not merely 'dream homes', plucked from the pages of life style magazines and used as a blueprint for home decorating choices, rather they act as conceptual and value laden configurations informing or undermining everyday household decisions. While the single occupant of a spacious three-bedroom 1930s semi-detached house on Jay Road conjures up a fantasy seaside residence to explain her taste in fabrics, the occupant of a cramped one-bedroom maisonette on the other side of the street talks of the garden she would have at 'her' rambling imaginary home in Southern Ireland.

'Ideal homes' are more than escapist fantasy spaces conjured up to deal with the limitations of the materiality of 'real' homes, but rather are used as measures or as proactive forces that intermittently meld with or mock the reality of lived experience. One of the research techniques used in the ethnography was to ascertain the 'biography' and provenance of particular objects in the home (Appadurai, 1986). In this way, informants provided narratives regarding the ways in which items were obtained and came to be in the place they presently occupied. As well as tracing how people came to own these goods this approach also highlighted subsequent issues over how these goods should be consumed or understood in the longer term. Jane's description of one of her favourite objects, placed prominently in the living room of her one bedroom owner-occupied Victorian flat, reveals how material culture simultaneously embodies the ideal and the actual;

I never use that massive candelabra, hardly ever, it drips all over the floor but I loved it, I thought it was brilliant because I always fancied that one day I would live in the sort of house that had a baronial hall and I would have this massive candlestick or I would be walking through

this huge house waving this candlestick, but its never happened, its just sat there quite sadly. I did trot it out for a dinner party but, as I said, all the wax dripped on the floor.

Even informants with the economic and cultural means at their disposal to realise their 'ideal' home are confronted by the lag between the 'ideal' and 'actual'. Joanna and Ben, two professional designers living on two full-time incomes, had originally envisaged a minimalist décor for their marital home and decorated in a stark modernist style. A decade after their marriage, however, collections of china, floral upholstery and a traditional Welsh dresser haunt them as markers of how, to quote Ben, their 'taste fell apart'. Despite their earliest attempts at living out a decorative scheme deemed most representative of the couple and their peer group, the house and its objects have taken on an agency of their own;

We made a wedding list which involved setting up a home, as we needed stuff. Cutlery you know, we were very specific then – but it just shows how our taste changed – or how our taste fell apart – because we had this very specific Danish Cutlery from Arne Jacobsen and we wanted eight sets but we managed to get five [laughing] we gave up because they were too expensive. We have a table cloth that Polly got especially, it's white damask she got it from Liberty's [designer department store]- we wanted something – well at that time we did a lot of entertaining for friends – you know suppers and things, and we just wanted something crisp and clean. But we don't do much entertaining now.

These 'ideal homes' conjured up by middle class home owners are not just trivial fantasies about a perceived aesthetic style or associated social aspiration, rather they offer an idealised notion of 'quality of life' and an idealised form of sociality. Furthermore, these 'daydreams' directly inform the construction, provisioning and aspirations of the lived home, allowing the occupants to begin to actualise beyond the limitations of their particular domesticity.

The late 1990s proliferation of publications and television programmes, dealing with aspects of interior and garden design, have drawn heavily on the fantasy element of homemaking as a crucial aspect of its newly valorised status. The proliferation, from the mid-1990s onwards, of a range of home improvement media suggests a continued shift towards privatised leisure and consumption in both western Europe and the USA; in Britain, this phenomenon is epitomised by the pragmatism of television programmes offering practical re-furbishment tips to enhance the property value of owners' homes and spin-off publications (Walton 1997,1998; London 1997). The diminishing use of professional painters and decorators as a class-wide service industry has been coupled with the increased availability of an expanded range of wallpaper, paint, stencils, design sources, tools and advice (Gershuny 1985). The friction between investing in the house as inalienable environment and realisable commodity value is an increasingly prominent feature of home ownership mediated largely through the mass consumption of visual and material culture; 'newspapers, magazines, catalogs, television and even the internet are part of the global marketplace where people now shop for the latest houses, furnishings, and ideas and values regarding home and family life' (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999:27). Homes and gardens are presented as transient aesthetic entities, requiring regular 'makeovers' in keeping with the vagaries of fashion (Bhatti and Church: 2000).

The period of ethnographic study (1994-1997) on which this research is based coincided with a visible increase in the media, particularly in the form of prime time television programmes, directly addressing issues of home decoration as a leisure pursuit. In a particularly popular series, named *Changing Rooms*, couples (friends or neighbours) swap houses and, with the aid of a professional interior designer and 'handy-man', set to work re-designing and re-decorating a room nominated by the householders and envisaged by the friends. The weekly programme places design and decoration firmly within the context of social and friendship (as opposed to kinship) relations. Each couple is limited to a tight schedule of forty-eight hours in which to transform each other's rooms. At the end of this hectic period they offer back the re-decorated rooms as gifts to each other; for the re-furbished interiors meld imagination, caring, labour, and, ideally, a taste consensus generated through the friendship. As well as providing DIY tips and practical information, the excitement of the programme revolves around the risk of allowing good friends or neighbours to potentially de-stabilise their relationships

by completely mis-interpreting each other's tastes and fantasies, or worse still, blatantly implementing their own. Couples are lead blindfolded back to their own residences and filmed taking in with pleasure, shock or dismay the other couple's decorative scheme. More often than not, couples are seen accepting each other's designs with pleasure, suppressed shock or good grace. For they are making a direct exchange of each other's homes, taste knowledges and aesthetic fantasies mediated by design experts.

In contemporary Britain, the representation of home decorating as a widely accessible, playful and celebratory leisure pursuit has become commonplace but it remains implicitly tied to property ownership. In May 1998, a television viewer made an official complaint of discrimination (enthusiastically followed up by the tabloid press) against the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] charging that *Changing Rooms* had never featured a council or State-rented home in the full four years of its transmission. The production team defended themselves by arguing that, to date, no volunteers from State housing had offered their homes for interior re-decoration.

Whether or not there is any truth in the producer's claim of mass antipathy towards home decoration in British council estates, there remains a strong cultural assumption regarding the relationship between middle class home ownership and home decoration as an expressive practice. While the middle class home is seen as a place of fantasy making and fashionability the notion of normative working class home furnishing prevails (see Gurney 1999 re: division cultural understandings of council housing and Skeggs 1997 re: working-class women and historical significance of respectability in the construction of the home).

### **The Negation of Aspiration: The British Working Class Home Interior**

Historically, the construction of the household as an expressive form has been associated with the consolidation and formation of middle class identity, as described by de Grazia; 'the pattern of expenditure for the bourgeoisie reflected considerable individuality, especially with regards to socially strategic commodities such as home furnishings, decoration, and charity, even when the family fortunes were in decline' (de Grazia 1996:153-54). By the nineteenth century, the furnishing and decoration of the bourgeois domestic interior in Europe and the United States had taken on a new significance as a form of expressive cultural practice; 'As never before, families

invested time, money, and a burning interest in designing their domestic tableau, creating impressive landscapes and special atmospheres in room after room' (Frykman & Löfgren 1987: 126). The masculine pursuits of collecting and the feminine activities of home-crafts, indicative of bourgeois leisure, were displayed within a carefully articulated schema promoting the home as both 'showcase and shelter' and 'civilising' space. The domestic sphere became increasingly understood as a moral endeavour as expressed by the author of a typical contemporary publication titled *Artistic homes or how to furnish them with taste* (1881); 'There can be but little doubt that the surroundings of our daily life are largely instrumental, not only in affording pleasant sensations...but in actually moulding our natures and characters in many important respects' (cited in Pacey 1989). The ornamentation, decoration and conviviality associated with the middle class parlour epitomised the notion of home decoration as an expressive (if highly prescriptive) practice perpetuating bourgeois values of social aspiration, material comfort, and lineage (Ames 1992; Grier 1988; Davidoff and Hall 1987). In contrast, working and lower middle class home-making has been considered as a 'normative' and instrumental practice prompting, by the late nineteenth century, the scrutiny and intervention of State and social reformers (Lubbock 1995).

In Britain, by the first half of the twentieth century, government organisations such as the Design and Industries Association (DIA) used didactic displays, to educate the 'mass' consumer in the appropriate and 'modern' way to furnish and decorate their homes using 'tasteful' and non-imitative styles in keeping with modernist ideologies (Lubbock 1995). Social reformers, such as Elizabeth Denby, went as far as condemning specific material culture forms, such as the three piece suite and bedroom ensemble readily embraced by working class couples of the 1930s, as indicative of their uneducated and restricted lifestyles (Morley 1990: 95). Richard Hoggart, in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), identified the normativity of working class home furnishing, in particular the arrangement and use of the three-piece suite, the occasional table and the bedroom set, as a consolidating element of class identity. Assumptions regarding the utilitarianism of the 'lower-class' interior were perpetuated and formalised in government reports and inquiries (for example G.B. Board of Trade, 1937).

While the stark normativity of lower class consumption attracted the condemnation of design and social reformers, the overtly aspirational bent of celebratory events such as

the *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition (a popular annual exhibit featuring fantasy homes and the latest in modern gadgetry and home decoration styles) attracted condemnation from both sides of the political field. Sponsored by a newspaper renowned for its female dominated lower-middle class readership, the spectacle of the Ideal Home exhibition challenged the positive aspects of class consolidation identified by figures such as Hoggart while simultaneously undermining the home as a place of enduring bourgeois values. Like suburbia, the *Ideal Home* exhibition offered a vision of modernity, mass consumption and class aspiration that caused much disquiet in academic, high cultural quarters (Oliver, Davis and Bentley, 1981; Ryan, 2000).

Similarly, the British boom in home improvement during the 1980s was associated, by many academics, with the broader conservatism and materialism of Thatcherite politics (Hall and Jacques, 1983; Forrest and Murie, 1984). Homeownership, considered as a petty capitalistic venture, was aligned directly with the demise of class consciousness, a view encapsulated in Tomlinson's critique of the newly aspirant classes : 'Do it yourself, then. Build your own cultural environment. Thematize all your spare time activity. Express your familiarity with and ease in consumer culture by the choices you make in this sphere: and, also, with d-i-y [Do-It-Yourself home improvement], make some canny investment decisions' (Tomlinson 1990: 69). Sociologists and geographers identified the increasingly privatised and home-bound condition of the working class as a symptom of powerlessness and alienation in the public realm and workplace (Marshall et al 1988; Saunders 1990). In particular, such theories highlighted the aspirant privatism of the post-war British working-class as indicative of a shift 'away from a broadly based identification with work, and the issues and activities which stem from the workplace, towards greater home-centredness and self-identification with a domain of control which lies in the home and consumption' (Franklin 1989: 93).

The modern household then, defined as a site of provisioning, social relations and economic management, holds a vital historical position in relation to the modern State and class politics (de Grazia 1996:153). This chapter uses ethnographic examples to explore how the increasing emphasis on home decoration as a practice, its intersection with class, gender and ethnicity, is related to the construction of ideal and actual contemporary social worlds. It does not simplistically suggest that the external abstract forces such as 'class' and 'the State' are countered through the appropriation of

domestic environments. Rather, it considers 'home' as a process, rather than an act of individual expressivity, in which past and future trajectories (inseparable from external abstractions such as 'class') are negotiated through fantasy and action, projection and interiorisation. The householders in this study are representative of the broader section of informants, in that their home-making marks a particular stage in the lifecycle of the family (and the individual women concerned). Whether physically or mentally transforming or transposing their homes, the process in which they are engaged is socially aspirant; not merely in terms of accumulating and articulating cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979), but in terms of the ambitions and projections of ideal social relations.

In order to place the home making activities of occupants in the context of a local and class specific housing culture, the following section deals with the homes of the inhabitants of Sparrow Court council housing estate. Do the inhabitants of State housing use home decorating any less than their middle class counterparts as an activity of creativity, daydreaming and expressivity? In a strictly delineated, State-designed environment, where the interior and exterior world of the households is standardised and regulated by an external entity (the council/State) the ethnography goes on to reveal the ways in which the occupants appropriate, interpret and generate agency through their standardised spaces. In so doing, it challenges the understanding of home decoration and consumption as a merely expressive activity. Rather, the interior worlds of these households, though they may remain to all intents and purposes physically private, are used as projections of very real relations with the larger external world.

### **Sparrow Court: Behind Lace Curtained Windows**

Sparrow Court council estate was built in the mid-1960s and is situated on one side of Jay Road opposite a row of late Victorian terraced maisonettes and 1930s semi-detached houses. Although the estate is an integral part of the street there is a vivid conceptual divide between the mainly owner-occupied properties on the other side of the road and Sparrow Court. Organised in three storey blocks of approximately thirty units, access to the upper stories of the estate is made by ascending a central stairwell leading to an open balcony, running to the right and left, overlooked by the kitchen windows of each unit. This relatively narrow balcony with open railings is the only thoroughfare, and it allows little room for external storage, decoration or individual exterior customisation of flats.

Lower storey dwellings have the extended space of a small garden accessed through French windows in the living rooms situated at the rear of the properties. The development originally stood in communal grounds that were later divided up into individual gardens; a scheme that coincided with the 1980s Thatcherite 'Right to Buy' policy. The assignment of specific garden plots enabled the delineation of the flats as private rather than state owned property. Although tenants were theoretically supportive of the garden plot scheme, allowing as it did for more private space and self-determination, in practice it has proved less successful. As one long term council tenant indicated the demise of communal space had direct ramifications for the social use of the development as a whole;

Well the flats have changed because this used to be all green and then they split it into gardens so we've all got our own little bit of garden now. It's okay but the kids they play in the garden and then the ball goes in someone else's garden and then there's big arguments whereas when it was all green it was fine. But mine my youngest he's 10 so he's old enough so he goes over the park with his friends but that's only over there.

Due to the dividing up of communal green space a number of upper storey flats also have garden plots but the majority of them are left untended due to their indirect spatial relationship to the individual properties and their relative lack of privacy, as expressed by one informant; 'In the summer we went out there a couple of times but it just doesn't feel like our garden. And everyone can see you from the flats – it's not like you want to lay there and sunbathe or anything, is it?'

Few of the gardens are used as nurtured, private spaces except in their capacity as storage places and exterior cupboards for non-valuable goods such as broken bicycles and rolled up bits of old carpet. The fenced off areas form a patchwork of overgrown units that offer little in the way of a coherent or pleasing view for tenants. This general disinterest in the gardens is compounded by the fact that some inhabitants are unsure as to how long they will be living on the estate and, therefore, how much time and money they should invest. Except for the lower level of flats the gardens do not act as direct

extensions of the living room, neither do they offer a 'view' as individual vistas attached to the home as is the typical English preference (Chevalier 1998).

Sparrow Court is easily identifiable as state housing, it has uniformly green/blue PVC doors and standardised external fittings, but it is a relatively low density, well maintained and neighbourly housing arrangement with an ethnically diverse range of households, ranging from five children families to single elderly person households. Unlike Jay Road as a whole, it is not unusual for neighbours in Sparrow Court to recognise and greet each other but this is usually the limit of their intimacy with the exception of benign, elderly neighbours; 'oh Gladys next-door she'll pop in, I have to shout but she's a good neighbour, Gladys next-door, but that's about it really that I've had into the house. The other people I just say hello to in the street'. Despite this semblance of community and the comparatively small scale and green setting of the housing block, inhabitants view the estate as an ostensibly urban dwelling. While strangers wandering around the blocks might be treated with suspicion informants were extremely reticent about questioning an unfamiliar face as to their business on the estate – even though – as one inhabitant pointed out 'these flats are not as secure as they look'. Although residents often unlock their doors to callers during the day without first checking their identity they tend to keep doors locked while they are inside especially in the winter. During the summer months, when the whole atmosphere of Sparrow Court is temporarily transformed, the need for children to run in and out of their flats as they play together around the block necessitates a freeing up of security. This proves particularly problematic for upper storey flats with their gardens several flights of stairs away from their homes. For even the most relaxed and sociable tenants recounted cautionary tales regarding the security of the estate;

Once I was looking out and I saw this young black guy knocking on the doors, then when there was no answer I saw him whip out a crowbar and with just two turns he was inside a flat although they've got five-lever locks. I called the police but he'd gone while I was on the phone.

Despite rumours of such incidents the fear of appearing 'too nosy' or being seen as 'an interfering neighbour' proved more important to informant's sense of protocol than

conceptual, space in the home. It is the focus of much hope for change in terms of Sharon's own personal fulfilment, her commitment to the kids as a 'better' mother and the family's overall improvement. Here we see vividly the home as process; how its decorative schemes (implemented and failed through a light-hearted play-off of gender relations) are the interiorisations of external concepts of such as 'proper' mothering.

## Conclusion

The home improvement aspirations of the above informants clearly challenge the homogenous and normative models of working class home making. While it would be theoretically expedient to assume that the rise of the 'home' as a privatised arena of consumption, exists in inverse relation to a State of declining sociality experienced by the occupants of the housing estate, such an assumption fails to explain the extent or nature of the investment made by the households in their interior worlds. In these particular examples, there is an extraordinary disparity between the amount of attention paid to how a place should look, as if it is firmly within the public domain, as against all evidence which indicates to the contrary that they are very rarely exposed to the view of an outsider. Kelly, Lola and Sharon conjure up their 'ideals' (as manifest in a man, class aspiration, the kids, immigration or home creativity), and it is as though instead of being inspected by actual visitors they are being viewed and judged by these same ideals.

This is not to suggest that people have become more materialistic and, having abandoned sociality, merely turn to an 'interiorised' social world. Traditions of working class sociality have historically revolved around public rather than private domains. Earlier studies of working class housing, for example, reveal the importance and sanctity of the 'parlour' - a fully furnished formal room preserved for potential, but largely unrealised, visitors. So even in the poverty of the slums most of the home decoration was devoted to a room that was judged as an ideal but not usually visited or even used. Later sociological studies show that social visits were largely confined to female relatives (Young and Willmott 1957).

Rather, this chapter shows how the ideal home, as used to influence the construction of the actual home, becomes an internalised vision of what other people might think of one (see Skeggs 1997 re: respectability, gender and class). Far from being a site of crude emulation, the house itself *actually* becomes the 'others'. The house objectifies the

vision the occupants have of themselves in the eyes of others and as such it becomes an entity and process to live up to, give time to, show off to. In contrast to ‘actual’ observers, the house holds an interiorised image of the other, that can actually be worked on and then fed into the aspirations and labour of the occupants. In this respect, proliferation of home decoration and the popularisation of design has become a key contemporary component of a relationship which was never simply between an internal private sphere and an external public sphere, but a more complex process of projection and interiorisation that continues to evolve.

## Chapter Six

### Catalogues and Classifieds: Provisioning, Class and New Consumer Skills

From the array of informal provisioning used by the street's householders (including Tupperware Parties, Colour-Me-Beautiful image consultant sessions, jumble and nearly new sales, stolen and found goods, mail order catalogues, cigarette coupons, door-to-door sales, etc.) two relatively recent modes of provisioning, namely the *Loot* classified advertisement paper and the *Argos* shop catalogue, emerged as the most prominent modes of informal and commercially based provisioning on the street. Forms of acquisition (as explored in chapter two of the thesis dealing with the exchange of second hand goods), like commodities, carry with them ideological discourse. As Rutz and Orlove (1989: 6) state, 'consumption has an ideological character, in that it appeals to shared understanding and thus it allows for disagreement'. Mainstream mail order catalogues, for example, bear the stigma of restricted credit bound consumption. As a mode of purchase historically aligned, in British culture, to hire purchase and working class credit functions, the mail order catalogue is bound to culturally and socially poignant meanings. Its overtly mass, non-personalised, and visually based appeal have associated it with the alienation of modern commodity purchase (Carrier 1995). Unsurprisingly then, for informants from the street it was this specific mode of purchase which initially provoked a rehearsed, socially and morally grounded debate regarding saving, spending, quality and value.

Discussions of mail order catalogues, in particular, warranted strong reactions from informants keen to disassociate themselves from the foolhardy practice of buying 'long-distance'. They frequently aligned this hazardous form of purchase with the quality and aesthetic of the goods themselves, to quote one such example from a discussion with Jenny, an arts administrator; 'cheapy nasty girlie catalogues..with tacky underwear and leotards and things, Oh no, I'd never use them.'

Others removed themselves from the economic imperative suggested by catalogue use. Credit schemes and over-inflated prices were perceived as having direct bearing on the goods themselves as indicated in the following quote from Miriam; 'those Littlewoods things [catalogues]..I'd never have those...I think it's a social thing ...a class thing

because, I mean you can buy in instalments and I used to have a cleaner who used to get all her Christmas presents through a catalogue’.

Even informants who described themselves as regular mail order catalogue users, were careful to distinguish themselves from the lack of discernment of over-dependent catalogue users, to quote one such opinion; ‘I’ve met women who have furnished their entire homes top to bottom straight from just *one* catalogue!’

Whilst for some informants Christmas presents, intimate apparel and home furnishings demanded less distanced and more pro-active forms of acquisition than those allowed by catalogue purchase, others relied entirely on mail order credit shopping as a necessary budgeting measure. Far from taking advantage of the effortless leisure of mail order purchase, these consumers (often economically precluded from formal shopping) used catalogues as a buffer against the risk and uncertainty of the market place and prided themselves on their discerning purchasing abilities.

Evidently, all modes of acquisition and their material culture carry with them culturally and historically constituted meanings. Material culture, its acquisition and appropriation, is integral to the construction and negotiation of social worlds and identities. The myriad decisions and complexities of household provisioning, embody consumption as an arena of power, in which social relations and knowledge are constantly rehearsed, re-arranged and challenged to quote Bourdieu; ‘Nothing, perhaps, more directly depends on early learning, especially the learning which takes place without any express intention to teach, than the dispositions and knowledge that are invested in clothing, furnishing and cooking or more precisely, in the way clothes furniture and food are bought’ (Bourdieu 1979: 78). And as Carrier, in his discussion of gifts and commodities in contemporary industrial societies observes, ‘a household exists in part because its members appropriate the commodities that are circulated and consumed within it’ (Carrier 1995: 16).

In ethnographic study of Jay Road two prominent forms of acquisition, *Loot* classified newspaper and *Argos* pre-view shop catalogue, offered recent examples of modes of ‘home-shopping’ which could be observed in the process of being actively appropriated and re-defined through new consumer knowledges and skills. The prominence of these relatively recent genres (both *Loot* classified paper and *Argos* catalogue were

popularised in the 1980s) was exceptional in their use across a range of households, diverse in terms of class, gender, age and ethnic make-up. Before discussing the complex ways in which *Loot* and *Argos* are utilised by different informants, however, it is useful to consider the ‘back-drop’ of the cultural geography of Jay Road in relation to the established formal modes of acquisition in the area, and the range of understandings offered by the inhabitants regarding these resources.

### **Provisioning and the Cultural Geography of Jay Road**

The housing stock of Jay Road is diverse, and due to its ambiguous position within the shifting housing market, not straightforwardly indicative of its inhabitants’ economic or social class. An attraction of the area, particularly for middle class owner-occupiers, is the combination of its comparatively low property costs (due in part to its indirect access to public transport) but close proximity to recognisably middle class areas such as Ibis Pond. In this context, housing stock, like the numerous Edwardian maisonettes (comprising of front reception room, two small bedrooms and eat-in back kitchen with share of garden) running along both sides of Jay Road, constitutes affordable family sized accommodation chosen *in lieu* of prohibitively costly Victorian family homes (generally considered as the ‘ideal’ within this social group) in the area, (as discussed in relation to mothering in chapter one). For the low income middle class occupants these properties are often considered as transitional homes for their young families while for others, such as a single long termed unemployed ex-civil servant and an elderly widow and her daughter, they are considered as more permanent housing. They are also occupied on short-term rental contracts.

For more affluent middle class owner-occupiers the comparatively low cost of the ‘ideal’ Victorian family houses on the quieter and leafy streets adjacent to Jay Road, when judged in relation to the cost of houses situated nearer to middle class Ibis Pond, have proved favourable. Consequently, this housing stock is the nearest to being noticeably gentrified within the vicinity of the street, and it is this area which houses the largest number of recent but settled middle class residents.

In contrast, on Jay Road itself, the sizeable semi-detached 1930s and late 1940s houses, set amidst the Edwardian maisonettes, are inhabited by a mixture of long established occupants (several have lived on the street since the houses were originally built) and

more recent inhabitants. The two main areas of council housing, Lark Estate and Sparrow Court (blocks of mid-1960s flats) is still largely made up of council tenants, though an increasing number of flats have become privately owned as buyers (internal and external to the estate) take advantage of the comparatively low prices of ex-local authority property in the area.

As well as encompassing a mixed array of housing, Jay Road is equidistant from the two major (and sharply contrasting) local shopping areas of Wood Green and Ibis Pond. As such it potentially allows inhabitants dual or specific relation to the given areas. Wood Green is generally understood as a busy, urban, multicultural shopping area with large chain and high street stores. In contrast, Ibis Pond is perceived as a small scale, village-type constellation of more specialised and expensive shops and boutiques.

At the upper end of Jay Road there is a parade of shops including two newsagents, a post office, an Indian take away, a laundrette, a hairdressing salon, a hardware store, a corner shop and a small general grocery store. But the street, described by one informant, as a stretch of 'no man's land' in terms of geographical location, does not lend its inhabitants an immediate and fixed identity. Consequently, its positioning between Ibis Pond and Wood Green generates a pronounced discourse around the quality of local provisioning, that is cast in specifically class-related terms (see Miller et al., 1998a:123-134). The use of the two nearest local shopping centres are markedly different in terms of their relation to local consumers, (one attracts visitors from wider areas of north London and has 'top-end' stores, whereas the other has a comparatively local clientele and basic High Street stores) and so are not indicative of the local discourse around the provisioning (Holbrook and Jackson 1996).

The nostalgic ambience of Ibis Pond, with its personalised service and speciality shops, provokes many informants to associate it with a broader, idealised notion of shopping as an integral part of community long since eradicated by the promotion of malls, corporate brands and high street franchises. In contrast, Wood Green is depicted, even by many of its regular users, as a harsh and potentially violent area frequented by muggers and car thieves, as illustrated by the following interview excerpts;

‘I hate Wood Green. Oh it’s dirty, it’s busy, it’s dirty and the business I don’t really go there’

‘They’re rough and ready in Wood Green, very rough down to earth, well I wouldn’t say down to earth but they’re rough, some of them are rough in Wood Green.’

‘Wood Green, I really appal [sic]. I do not like Wood Green really, it’s so crowded you know it’s a place you feel you’ve got to be on the alert all the time. I feel more relaxed at Ibis Pond you know’.

‘Somebody had his boots taken off him last week down the alleyway. He went and bought some new trainers, he was thirteen years old and two thugs had ‘em off down that alleyway. ... back of Boots [on Wood Green high street].’

Contrary to the aggressive atmosphere described by informants above, many pensioners familiar with the area reminisce about Wood Green and its lively High Road prior to its most recent developments and the introduction of the ‘Shopping City’ mall. Mrs Willis, a long established resident of Jay Road, considers the pleasant social of window shopping in the past:

Yes, because you could walk down the High Road [in Wood Green] which we did, many people did in the evening, and see and have a look at the shops if you were thinking of buying a dress or a coat or something like that. And the shops were more on the pavement than they are in the Shopping City [1980s mall development] which you can’t get into at night. It was quite a sort of social thing you would walk down and chat to your friend, you know.

Mrs. Gough, an original resident of the Lark Estate, remembers the spectacle of the High Road and its ‘proper’ shops in a similarly nostalgic vane;

The shops were lit up and you could window shop, I mean people would ... walk along from Wood Green to Turnpike Lane and back again because there used to be some very nice dress shops... a very nice ladies

dress shop a big shop and there was Meakers' the gentleman's outfitters. There were a lot of nice shops, but now it is sort of building societies and those sort of places you know.

I hate Wood Green, it used to be lovely, it was next to Oxford street [in status]. It used to be all the old shops, like Lipton's and the Maypole, ...Colonial... beautiful it was. [did they all move out when they built the mall?] oh yes, it went. [Is it better now it is indoors?] No, there's too many rogues run around there for my liking, too many villains all in packs.

Descriptions of Ibis Pond also evoked in informants a nostalgic view of shopping. Julie, the single occupant of a 1930s semi-detached house recently inherited from her parents, and Shelley, a mother of two children living on the Lark Estate, frequent Wood Green for their ordinary shopping but value their occasional visits to Ibis Pond due to the 'special' atmosphere it offers in contrast to the brash commercialism of modern shopping;

Julie: They're [shops in Wood Green] too modern for me, I tend to like more old fashioned things; individual shops selling their individual produce. My favourite shop in Ibis Pond is the coffee shop, I love it. It's very old fashioned.

Shelley: I like the shops because they're unusual and they've got little [places] they've got some nice florists and not the usual shops you'd see elsewhere. I like things, I can actually have a little mingle around them. So I like ... I can't afford half the stuff in them [the shops] but I like the look of what I see. There again I think it's more of a personal [experience than] massive chain stores.

Katrina, an unemployed freelance TV producer, living with her husband and two daughters in an upper maisonette on Jay Road, is conflicted by non-consumerist principles to limit her children's exposure to stereotypical toys and her simultaneous desire to give them their 'ideal' birthday presents. To retain some semblance of value in her consumption, Katrina attempts to thwart the chain stores of Wood Green, in her pursuit of a 'Swimming Cindy'

doll requested as a gift by her youngest daughter, only to concede that the more ethical small scale shopping at Ibis Pond comes at a prohibitive cost;

I do my shopping in Ibis Pond now, I'm trying not to go to the big super shops. This thing [Swimming Cindy] I went to a toy shop in Ibis Pond, they were £16! So I ended up going to *Argos* in Wood Green where they were £9.99.

While several informants aspired to the values of Ibis Pond or found its self-conscious middle class 'lofty' attitude amusing, others actively sought to disassociate themselves from what one woman referred to as the locality's 'high prices', 'affected airs and graces' and 'smugness'.

Amongst the inhabitants of Jay Road, then, a dichotomous relation between Wood Green and Ibis Pond, in which the distinct areas are often represented as the polar opposites of urban living and shopping experience, is most often used to locate the street. But for others living on the Jay Road, the 'street' itself constituted the main area of acquisition (in particular for those housebound through illness, disability or poverty). Informants, such as Sara, an unemployed twenty-three year old living on income support in Sparrow Estate remained relatively unaware of the range of areas around them despite being resident for several years; 'sometimes I wonder where Ibis Pond is, you know? But I'd never go into Ibis Pond'. Middle-aged bachelor Ron, living with his infirm elderly mother on the Lark Estate, never visits Ibis Pond or Wood Green instead relying on local shops, female relatives and the Kwik-Save budget supermarket, near his place of work, for the household's main provisioning. Similarly, Teresa a thirty-five year old housebound woman suffering from anorexia nervosa depends entirely on the corner shop opposite her flat for provisions which a neighbour brings to her.

There is evidently a variety of co-existing experiences of Jay Road as a cultural space, and varying degrees of knowledge and access to provisioning resources which defy simply analysis of inhabitants in terms of typologies of shoppers (Lunt and Livingstone 1992). Beyond this general point however, there is a notable ambivalence amongst inhabitants regarding the identity of the street in geographical and class terms. The following excerpt from a discussion, with an informant Penny who lives in an owner-occupied house on Jay road, illustrates this point;

Q. When people ask you where do you come from, how do you describe it?

A. It is quite difficult, I mean you can say Wood Green, it is not really Wood Green, you can say , it is not really Latchbrook, I tend to say near Robintown because I can't really think of, I can't , it is too far from Wood Green to say Wood Green, sometimes I say that sometimes I say Latchbrook, I mean it really varies. Sometimes I say even Ibis Pond, I mean that is interesting, in some ways, who you're talking to. Sometimes, there is an element [of that], but also sometimes it is not so much because you want to say it is one or another place, it is also where you think they know.

The above informant describes a process in which she negotiates the most appropriate way, in accordance with whom she is dealing, to identify her place of residence with a keen awareness of the implications, particularly in class terms, of a given area's definition. The fluidity of the street's identity is further revealed in the experiences of recently arrived residents. Rachel and Della, for example, described how their perception of the locality had changed since moving to the street in ways directly related to their own social class and ethnic identities.

Della, a twenty-eight year old West Indian mother of two, lives in Betram Court the smaller block of council flats set amongst the private housing of Jay Road. While some informants spoke of the Ibis Pond's inhabitants being 'above themselves' with their 'airs and graces' Della, once a resident of Wood Green, perceives her new ability to associate with the relaxed atmosphere of Ibis Pond, through living on Jay Road, as relief from the pressures of social scrutiny and 'dressing to impress';

Ibis Pond, Ibis Pond you don't have to dress up you've got... I could go to Ibis Pond like this [gesturing to casual outfit] I mean probably I could go there naked and nobody would pay any attention to me. But down that side [Wood Green] it's more fashion, fashion is a big thing if you're not dressing in a particular way it's "oh look at how she's dressed" not that it bothers me. I don't really care. I don't feel so much pressure in Ibis Pond, when I go to Ibis Pond I don't feel too much pressure and I feel more free compared to Wood Green.

Upon her recent move to Lark Estate, Rachel, a working class mother and retail worker employed in Wood Green, gained a new perspective on an area she had previously incorporated as a unproblematic aspect of her weekly shopping routine;

I've always shopped at Ibis Pond. Even though I had Tesco's across the road from me, I shopped in Ibis Pond for maybe the last couple of years ... because I liked it up there and because they have toilets and you can get a cup of coffee, whatever else you wanted, you could do that. And I wasn't aware of it then but it's since moving here [to Jay Road] there are the same sort of people. It sounds really weird for me to be actually saying it but because I've been there, done that moved on and .... I'm more aware of it than maybe I should be... I say it doesn't bother me. I'm aware of it but it's not something like [I feel] an inferior.

The street does not lend its inhabitants an immediate and fixed identity, rather it is through layers of history, affiliations and the comings and goings of daily life that the street is understood; sometimes within the broader context of London through associations with specific ethnic groups, sometimes within the local context of extended family present in the immediate area for several generations. While for some informants the Mecca Bingo Hall in Wood Green provides the social focus, for others it is shopping and taking coffee in the plant nursery in Ibis Pond that defines the locality. Considering the cultural fluidity of Jay Road, local areas and modes of provisioning offer an insight into the negotiation of identities such as class.

In Miller 's (1998a) ethnographic study of shoppers in north London, the John Lewis department store of Brent Cross shopping centre and the 'cheapjack' or '50p' shops of Wood Green are identified as specific retail environments unique in their ideological appeal to specific class identities in the area. The John Lewis store offers the middle class consumer 'high-quality functionalism' and a '“sensible balance” between price, quality and taste' (Miller 1998a:150). The aesthetics of the store, with its precise taxonomy of goods, informed staff, clear typography, design and lay-out lends an aesthetic (born of post-war popular modernism) that substantiates shopping as a risk free and rational practice and, as such, it has become a defining aspect of the Brent

Cross shopping centre for certain social groups. In contrast, the 'cheapjack' shops of Wood Green high street sell an array of goods; particularly plastic houseware and gimmicky gift objects, with questionable provenance and a price related to saleability rather than measured 'value for money'. Situated in temporary end of lease sites the 'cheapjacks' are used to sell out-of date or 'end of line' stock offering no guarantees or sales support. It is the ambience of these apparently oppositional forms of retail, which so aptly express ideological notions of class that sets them apart from more neutral outlets such as WH Smith, Boots and Debenhams. They are not merely reflections of fixed class identities but are used by shoppers in varying ways in the process of constructing class identity, or as Miller puts it 'shopping for class'; 'The opposition between John Lewis and cheapjacks is in large measure best understood as a form of objectification by which people come to an understanding of the sets of values that they in turn label with class categories' (Miller 1998a:157).

The John Lewis department store and 'cheapjack' shops are exceptional in terms of their overtly oppositional meanings and consequent ideological relations to class. But the design, location and merchandise of formal retail outlets, the ways in which they come to be configured and understood in relation to each other through consumption, is a vital facet of localised class construction. Although retail identities are not fixed entities, in terms of their consumption, they do belong to a physical and cultural geography dependent upon formal measures of urban planning, cultures of business history and the impact of local knowledges (Crewe 2000; Miller et. al 1998; Wrigley and Lowe 1996).

*Loot* classified advertisements paper and *Argos* shop catalogue do not offer retail identities and class affiliations as obviously as that of a specific supermarket or established type of shop, such as those described by Miller (1998a, 1998b). In contrast, the modes of acquisition discussed in this chapter offer less culturally and historically fixed examples of provisioning in relation to class. Consequently it is through ethnographic analysis that the ways in which different social and ethnic groups use provisioning (in relation to the dynamic of class, style and knowledge in consumptive activity) is highlighted.

Although *Loot* deals with non-standardised, second-hand goods or objects with ‘histories’ (Appadurai 1986) and *Argos* deals with alienable, mass produced commodities, formal analysis of these two text based mediums suggests a shared aesthetic appeal to social groups precluded from expensive high street shopping. Both *Argos* and *Loot* originated as non-formal modes of acquisition, offering cut-price goods and maximum choice through non-retail direct distribution. Neither sources allow first-hand physical assessment of the goods offered for sale, or the intermediate sales advice of a third party.

*Exchange and Mart*, a well known and established classified paper acts as the significant precursor to *Loot*. *Exchange and Mart* offers new and used goods at bargain prices through the eradication of formal retail distribution expenses. Its users describe it as a hard-edged, no-nonsense form of acquisition particularly useful for buying and selling used vehicles. It appeared to offer similar, but more convenient and assessable facets of a house clearance or car auction. Like the *Argos* catalogue overheads of space, distribution and sales staff are visibly absent from *Exchange and Mart*’s classified pages. From their inception, both *Argos* and *Exchange and Mart* offered simple and accessible means of saving money on substantial household purchases and were aimed at a lower income population.

In recent years *Argos* has expanded its customer profile. Its showrooms have expanded from cheaper inner city sites to high street locations and *Argos* catalogues are now delivered, as a matter of course, to increasingly middle class areas. Similarly *Loot*, which unlike its competitors offers free advertising, has expanded rapidly from a weekly to a daily publication considerably overshadowing the established role of *Exchange and Mart*.

Whilst these methods of acquisition are motivated in part by utility and economics, this study frames such notions and consequent choices as culturally bound actions. The concomitance of commerce and sociality is played out through the everyday concepts of authenticity, newness, thrift, and excess. Household issues ranging from romantic love, gendered divisions of labour to parental anxiety become manifest in chosen patterns of consumption.

Whilst practices of consumption effectively illuminate social categories such as gender, class, ethnicity and age, exploration of the specifics of appropriation and material culture reveals the means by which these externally defined roles are understood and contested. Why is an impoverished family compelled to pay the maximum, high street price for a child's bed, available 'brand new' for half the price in a local classified paper (Caplovitz 1967)? Why would a household with soiled furniture and no bathroom be the home to fifty designer suits and a copy of *Debrett's Guide to Modern Manners*?

Ultimately this chapter reveals that provisioning is not just a question of obtaining goods, but the application of particular schemes of knowledge and style to particular genres of information about goods. Poverty and wealth, as both Douglas and Isherwood (1979) and Bourdieu (1977) have argued, is based on a complex articulation between forms of knowledge and forms of possession. In this ethnographic encounter we see the experiential detail through which this articulation becomes manifest.

### ***'Loot'***

*Loot* is a London based free-advertising paper sold daily (during the period of the ethnography) at the price of £1.30. It describes itself as 'London's Notice Board' and according to many informants successfully operates in this fashion; many browse regularly with little or no intention of buying but merely to 'get a feel about what's out there'. In this sense it acts as a virtual market place where the excitement (and frustration) of rummaging and browsing are translated into the reading of obscure four line prose;

'For Sale: Video Editor vanguard, 3 in 1 unit, AV,  
dubbing edit with picture enhancer,  
as new, £50. Gary 0181741 7297 eves or  
0171 915 5480 days Hammersmith'

Whilst *Loot* purports to offer 'Everything for everyone, everyday' (as its sales pitch reads) many readers spoke of 'frequenting' particular areas of the paper, deliberately imposing self-limitations in a sea of purchasing opportunities. Some informants referred to *Loot* in purely instrumental terms confining their use to specific circumstance such as accommodation seeking or occasional car sales. Most, however, used *Loot* regularly and less strategically.

Many male informants used the paper as a staple read browsing the section on cars even when they were not actively concerned with buying or selling a vehicle. For others, *Loot* functioned as a vital source of information for swapping in 'car conversations', and informants talked of enjoying vehicle descriptions and the sense of keeping 'in touch' through *Loot*.

While a small number of male informants read comparable classified papers such as *Exchange and Mart*, *Loot* was perceived as a more localised, community orientated publication - even though both papers shared the functional task of selling cars. Notably *Loot*, as a free to advertise publication, surpassed its commercial position and enhanced its value as a means of sale and purchase.

Acting as a form of non-corporate commercial exchange, *Loot* seemingly offers a type of democracy to otherwise marginalised shoppers, giving access to thousands of daily bargains. It is considered by many as an essential urban shopping guide blurring the productive and consumptive aspects of household provisioning. A typical statement (from Barry, a long term unemployed ex-civil servant) proffers *Loot* as the most obvious and logical mode of inquiry into any proposed purchase, 'he [a friend] was looking for a computer and I said, "surely you've checked out *Loot*", you don't know what you're doing 'til you've looked in there'.

Recent developments, including a *Loot* property sales service, inter-net link, and sister papers in the North West and Midlands, reveal the growing significance of *Loot*'s appeal to informal economic activity. Originally a weekly publication, as it now circulates each weekday it has adopted the use of corresponding colours (blue, pink, gold, red, green) to emphasise its daily currency. Some *Loot* readers, newsagents pointed out, were becoming confused by the expansion and daily colour coding of the paper and lamented its new, unwieldy size.

'Whether you are collecting antiques, selling your property or looking for romance....' (as the promotional plea reads) *Loot* offers a diverse, informal consumption space. The paper is organised into ten separate sections, related to the goods and services of everyday life, beginning with introductory instructions on how to use the publication.

Once initiated the reader can peruse sections that include household goods, homes and family, cars, jobs, personal, computers, hi-fis, holidays and health and fitness. Private advertisers can advertise anything freely and are promised publication in the next day's issue provided they meet the previous day's deadline. The free advertisement appears once and charges are made if the advertiser requires a repeat advertisement for consecutive days. An individual can place up to three free advertisements for different items in each issue of *Loot*.

Columns and columns of private advertisements are interspersed with occasional trade advertisements. It is, however, ostensibly a forum for non-commercial, individualised exchange. Whilst there remains a constant risk that divisions between commercial and private sales might blur, informants stressed the personalisation of the sale as a major criteria for choosing *Loot*; 'when you go to have a look at the thing, it's then that you can usually tell it's trade dressed up as private sale, and I mean I think that's just dishonest - if I want to use a shop I'll use a shop, but **this** is *Loot*'.

*Loot*'s identity is based on its appeal as an unregulated free to advertise non-trade market place. Consequently its prices and goods are non-standardised and for some therefore overly daunting, to quote one informant 'a lot of the time the prices are so contradictory to each other. and the British public if they are offered something that's a bargain they automatically think there's something wrong with it'. Finding a bargain then amongst an array of unseen goods, whose product specifications are described by the partial vendor rather than through the distancing of formalised advertising and marketing terms, requires considerable skill, risk and time.

For some informants it was the appeal of pre-selection which made *Loot* a viable and attractive mode of consumption. The goods for sale had already been processed and evaluated by previous owners, their knowledge and selection adding a further 'depth' to their profile. Each advertisement brought together a product *curriculum vitae* to decipher. Some informants consequently felt that the recently expanded newspaper had become unwieldy; its simple to use and localised appeal lost in its hundred odd pages and ever increasing variety and choice. Similarly advertisers felt this decreased their ability to make a quick sale (due to the competition and lengthening of consumers selection process). Consequently they were encouraged to increase (and pay) for longer

advertising space; ‘two years ago I advertised a sofa bed, there were maybe two other adverts and I sold it the same day. The other week I was looking for a sofa bed there were over twenty in there, so I gave up.’

Locality and description serve as the initial enticement but information proffered is often so minimal (for example, ‘Sofas, 2 and 3 seaters, blue floral design’) that the bulk of the selection or consumption process takes place via telephone. This transforms the advertisement into a potentially hazardous encounter where exchange and social relations merge, requiring totally different skills to those learned for formal shopping situations.

Georgie, a young single woman furnishing a newly rented home, commented that she had travelled over fifty miles tracking down sofa beds advertised in *Loot*. The first had been misrepresented as a ‘good condition’ item and turned out to be a stained and tattered specimen. The second, more suitable item, was eventually located the other side of London. She did not regret the purchase but commented that a ‘real’ *Loot* user would be able to distinguish truth from exaggeration during the initial telephone call. Georgie realised now that she had not ‘asked the right questions’ and also stressed that once the seller had spent time describing the item she felt obliged to personally view it. The experience, she felt, had undermined her social capabilities.

John, a thirty-five year old systems analyst, explained how he enjoyed shopping through *Loot* as a ‘restricted’ experience. Unlike shopping around the high street it was easier to ‘rank and weight your decisions’ and narrow down purchase possibilities effectively. The basic telephone questions John used when purchasing a second-hand amplifier from *Loot* were brand, age, condition and size. One reason John favoured this form of purchase (other than price) was his assumption that unlike shop assistants selling commodities, *Loot* vendors would have intimate knowledge of their possessions. However, he expressed profound surprise at the ignorance of many *Loot* advertisers who, it seemed, had spent hundreds of pounds on items they had little knowledge of. Some vendors, he pointed out, were completely unaware of the brand, quality or specifications of the items they were putting up for sale. Whilst this led to potential misunderstandings and inefficient purchase, the mis-match in skill and knowledge of

purchaser and vendor created the ambiguity of an unregulated market place, and the potential for bargains as well as disappointments.

The dangerous ambiguity of *Loot* led many informants to refer to the power of 'the personal touch'. Barry, for example, ascertained his mountain bicycle was a *real* bargain through chatting to the vendor about his forthcoming trip to the Himalayas and the need to sell off much loved possessions (including the bicycle) to raise funds. This situation was validated by Barry's own personal situation; unemployed and fearful of bailiffs' intervention he had been compelled recently to sell a professional synthesiser through *Loot* for half its original value. Barry, an avid and dedicated reader of *Loot*, firmly trusted it as forum for real bargains; 'relatives are always dying and people need a quick place to sell things off'. He felt that British cynicism and suspicion made offering or appreciating a real bargain a major cultural dilemma.

The 'personal touch' praised by Barry made other informants deeply nervous. Chloe felt relieved that a neighbour happened to visit when two large 'Persian dealer types' arrived at her large well-furnished house to view items of furniture she had advertised for sale in *Loot*. 'It could be dangerous' she reflected, 'people knowing your phone number' or 'maybe giving out your address'.

Similarly, Sally, a council tenant with three children, bought a piece of carpet advertised in *Loot* and felt that she had been duped by personal friendliness when making her purchase. She travelled by public transport to the home of the vendor, a young mother of a similar age, several miles away and during a friendly chat was assured the rolled up carpet was in 'good condition'. On fitting the carpet Sally found it had a visible burn mark in the centre and felt very let down by the seller. She would not consider asking for a refund, as it was too far away to travel again. More significantly she felt personally offended (and humiliated for not being more vigilant and competent).

The more confident and competent users of *Loot* did not feel embarrassed to ask personal or extensive questions about articles over the telephone to ascertain their real worth. Chloe, a middle class informant (married, mother of two living in a semi-detached, four bedroom house with an au pair) frequently uses *Loot* as a kind of 'home business' and hobby. When she's bored with a piece of furniture she 'tries' it in *Loot* to

monitor the response. Only if she receives a good enough offer will she consider a sale. Similarly she purchases items cheaply through *Loot* and re-sells them at a profit ('with no overheads') back through *Loot*.

In this sense, many informants acknowledged *Loot* as a potentially 'subversive' arena where 'things might not be what they seem'. Whilst a few informants distrusted certain types of advertisements as potentially criminal, others were unperturbed by the possibility of accidentally receiving or handling stolen goods. Chloe, for example, identified this subversive, black market potential as the lynchpin of *Loot*; 'after all' she asserted 'everyone appreciates a bargain, as long as it's not as traceable as a Cezanne painting'.

*Loot* operates simultaneously as a safe, logical derivative of the community based classifieds pages of local newspapers and an anarchic, potentially subversive and ambiguous means of laundering goods and services. The free-advertising policy opens up a 'no loss', 'free for all' clause encouraging impulsive sales. The fast, twenty-four hour publication promise and lack of payment creates an instant non-formalised, fast turn over market place where gratuitous browsing is encouraged. Previously treasured objects could, in effect, be turned into hard cash within a day. Accidental bargains from unassuming vendors co-exist alongside deliberately mis-leading cajolery. Whilst the 'personal contact' between buyer and seller might sanction and secure transactions, such self-regulating and non-formalised market relations for some offered too threatening a proposition.

Yet so socially pervasive is this 'ungoverned', communal market place called *Loot* that one critic (an educated, middle-aged male informant) viewed it as a nothing less than a front for a censorious governmental organisation; 'of course...the police operate though *Loot*.. what people advertise, it's constantly under surveillance... that's why it's free'.

The following case studies reveal *Loot* as a crucial mode of alternative acquisition for specific social groups. They highlight its use in 'expelling' and 'laundering' material culture within the negotiation of social relations and household moral economy. Within households *Loot* is used, in particular, as a mode of acquisition and dispossession during periods of upheaval and re-negotiation. Usage of *Loot* fits in to a romantic aesthetic of

informal provisioning where authentic objects have ‘histories’ and negotiation of this literary, non-visual market place requires a particular urban, cultural currency and consumptive skill (for a comparative study see Soiffer and Herrmann 1987;1997).

### **Case Study I Romancing the Artefact: Objects with Histories**

Just as *Loot* is used to ‘set up’ new homes, with the acquisition of cheaper goods, it is also used as an effective means of ‘expelling’ or ‘laundering’ items made newly inappropriate to the household due to changing circumstance.

Michael and Jennifer are a couple in their late twenties. Jennifer has a six-year-old son, Harry, from a previous marriage. Michael (her recent boyfriend) is in the process of leaving his flat and gradually moving in with Jennifer and her son. The flat is brightly painted, airy and light with informal uncluttered furniture arranged to allow optimum space. Interesting ‘old things’ and modern ethnic artefacts decorate the apartment. The bathroom decor (featuring an original salvaged sturdy Edwardian basin) is inspired by a feature from the pages of *Elle Decoration*. Plain coloured and simple it is decorated with real shells and starfish.

Jennifer has re-entered higher education to train as an arts administrator and Michael has a compatible career as a freelance arts journalist. Jennifer’s newly formed relationship with Michael (he is several years her junior) has re-introduced her to the world of sub-culture and London nightclubs. There have been several emotional scenes during this process. Jennifer resents the fact that Michael retains dual status as bachelor and partner, and can always escape from the responsibilities of the parenthood (which she bares the brunt of) by retreating to his own flat. Harry’s natural father contributes little to the household, lives abroad, and sends only the occasional post card and trinket to his son. As Harry places a miniature toy (given by his father) in his playhouse Jennifer laments, ‘I may not be a very good mummy but I’m the only one he’s got’.

Jennifer is frustrated by the dilemma of whether or not to have a second child with Michael and attributes Harry’s petulant behaviour and boredom are accountable to his status as a single child. The previous evening Jennifer, accompanied by Michael and Harry, had been baby-sitting for a nine-month-old. Harry had enjoyed helping feed the baby its bottle. The dilemma of a second child seemed all the more poignant to Jennifer

as Michael, having spent the night baby-sitting with Jennifer and her son, had returned to his flat the following morning to ‘chill out and listen to some tapes’. This provoked envy, anger and resentment ultimately directed towards Harry. Jennifer dreaded having her life ‘taken away’ again by a second child when she seemed only just to be living it again with Michael. Her burgeoning romance with Michael conflicted with the responsibility she felt towards her son.

Recently she had regained her sexual confidence, enjoying dancing and taking drugs in nightclubs she had not visited since her teenage. She knew, however, this offered only a glimpse of an unattainable identity. Barricading the kitchen door, leaving her pleading son outside, Jennifer expressed with shame the anger she sometimes felt towards her son and a pressing desire to have ‘her own space’. She felt totally compromised. She was neither a single, self-determining girl, a ‘proper’ mother, or a successful career woman.

Juxtaposed with this turmoil and emotional loneliness was the construction of a ‘dream home’. Appreciating the idealist interiors featured in the style magazine *Elle Decoration* and browsing in antique shops in Ibis Pond, a local middle class shopping district, fuelled her desire to move from her two bedroom flat to begin a new life in a three bedroom house with Michael. Car boot sales provided the ideal place for Jennifer to ponder the acquisition of interesting items for their new home. With her impatient, attention seeking son in tow this seemed to be yet another luxury denied her. At times it seemed her son was the hindrance to the satisfactory pursuit of her dream as a whole.

Jennifer’s home-making was, she commented, ‘on-hold’. Since the departure of her ex-husband she had refrained from re-decorating their home, a two bedroom Victorian flat conversion. Many of its ornaments and utensils were attained as wedding presents. Although her homemaking was self-avowedly suspended, she and Michael shared an expedition to Carlton antique market to find an old interesting battered enamel bread bin.

Both Michael and Jennifer shared an attraction to ‘design classics’, articles with known provenance and ‘special’ aesthetic status. This was embodied in Jennifer’s car, a 1969 white Mini convertible that she adores, but regrets buying from a friend. Initially she

had used *Loot* to choose her vehicle. But realising a friend desperately needed to sell her car thought it more beneficial all round to purchase from a close friend in need of the money. The friendship ended in disaster when the engine exploded a week after the purchase. With hindsight she favours the comparative safety of *Loot* as she had subsequently lost contact with her friend. Whilst on a rational level she believed her friend had not set out to deceive her, the car and its ensuing expenditure acted as a constant reminder of the mis-conceived bargain.

The attraction to special things ‘with history’ combined with high style is manifest in Michael’s Christmas gifts to Jennifer which recently included an antique perfume bottle, black and white films (*It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Casablanca*) and Muji, Japanese modernist, make-up accessories. Jennifer’s family gifts were confined to utilitarian and electrical appliances such as a JVC stereo-system. This particular Christmas was a turning point in Jennifer and Michael’s relationship as it was the first spent as a family with Harry; it included tree, trimmings and a traditional Christmas day dinner. Jennifer stressed that only shopping for Michael had been a pleasure, the acquisition of other gifts had ‘been a chore’. Her favourite gifts were those given by Michael, as, she said, he remembered her smallest likes and dislikes. Michael and Jennifer bought gifts for Harry individually and with little conference (choosing traditional games familiar to them as children such as *Lego*, *Twister*, *Operation*, *Action Man*, etc.) Unlike many married or established partners of their social group there was little debate around suitability and educational value of the toys (Miller 1997). Similarly the only joint gift they received, acknowledging their ‘coupledom’, was given by Jennifer’s sister. They did not shop together as they gave no joint presents, instead buying separately for respective families. Publicly and privately, then, Jennifer and Michael’s relationship is in a state of major negotiation. Material culture, as home, furnishings, gifts and toys forms an integral part of this negotiation. As this case study demonstrates, *Loot*, as a mode of acquisition, constitutes a vital element in the creation of this ‘romance’.

As a single mother living on limited means, just prior to her relationship with Michael, Jennifer used *Loot* to buy a computer. Lacking expertise in this area she travelled unaccompanied to south London to view a computer, which feeling obliged, she purchased and discovered wholly unsuitable and over-priced. She realised how easily the newspaper could be used to ‘flog off generally suspect gear’. The experience

seemed to re-iterate her vulnerable status as a single mother, isolated for several years from practising in, what she described as, the 'real world'. Michael, on the other hand, classed himself as a 'savvy' and practised *Loot* user. Indeed *Loot* had recently become the focus in the demise of his bachelor status, the previous week his guitar and leather jacket sold through *Loot* to a 'nice young man' from Richmond. Nowadays Jennifer and Michael frequently read *Loot* together, at the kitchen table with a cup of tea, comparing prices, considering potential bargains and 'play' arguing over fantasy purchases. Jennifer, for example, whilst having no intention of acquiring a pet regularly browses the 'Animal' section to fantasise about 'a nice little Siamese cat'.

Jennifer described her attraction to *Loot* as an appeal to her 'jumble sale mentality' and its lack of association with formal marketing. She viewed regular readers of *Loot*, who understood the coded terminology of 'excellent condition', 'reluctant sale' and 'lovely runner' like the members of football collectors' cards or train spotters clubs understood theirs, as a sub-cultural group. Although it was the ideal place to get rid of 'stolen and shoddy goods', Jennifer saw *Loot* as embodying a more positive ethic than commercial shopping for it encouraged a sense of 'recycling' as opposed to wanton consumption.

*Loot*, its variable contents and 'hands on' sales method, offers the chance to practice a particular urban aesthetic and set of skills. Whilst offering a normative medium (it is a staple means of acquiring accommodation and selling cars in London) its format allows for overt display of informal sales skills. Jennifer and Michael use *Loot* as a shared celebratory consumption activity. Whereas Jennifer's experience of *Loot*, prior to meeting Michael' was wholly negative, the skills which Michael brings to the newly developing relationship, re-invent *Loot* and its material culture as an arena of mutual fantasy making. Together they can peruse their romance for 'things with history' in an area of consumption deemed ethical in terms of its recycling, non-corporate dimensions. They have embraced the spontaneity of *Loot* to decisively expel the remnants of Michael's problematic 'unattached' status. Michael is seen to negotiate the danger of *Loot* with the same ease and daring he uses in his association with London's club life, a world he has made newly available to Jennifer. The use of *Loot* in the contestation of these shifting social identities is premised on cultural and aesthetic, rather than economic, imperative.

Jennifer and Michael incorporate new, gendered, social skills into the household through the acquisition and dis-possession of material culture. The changes and contestations of a household in flux are played out through a romancing, and expelling, of artefacts with histories.

### **Case Study II Household Hostilities and the Aesthetics of Consumption**

Melissa and Jake have been married for four years and have a six-month-old baby. Both are artists and Jake works as an art school lecturer. Their house (Victorian terrace, three bedrooms) was formally Jake's bachelor home which Melissa (inspired by features in *Elle Decoration* and her art school education) has transformed into a high style modern home. She is very house-proud and has taken painstaking attempts to capture a contemporary almost 1950s Californian atmosphere. As well as contemporary furniture Melissa has collected 'interesting' ornaments and curios; the fire place features a sculptural architectural form salvaged from the demolished local church in which the couple were married. Melissa also managed to salvage numerous rose bushes from the church garden, which now flourish and bloom around the front door.

Auctions offer an arena where Melissa can make best use of her visual skills. Before the birth of their baby the couple attended Honiton auction rooms regularly to view every month. Their most celebrated acquisition was a Charles Eames chrome chair, a 'design classic' bought at a bargain price. It was now situated in the bathroom having previously occupied the living room. Artists' easels, fire surrounds and art deco furniture proved the biggest attraction at such events. Melissa also used the same auction to get rid of Jake's unsuitable bachelor furnishings; 'in fact one of my husbands horrible old Turkish carpets he sold at the auction room because I hated it, I said I like those two but that one can go'. The main motive for auction going was the intrigue of 'old stuff, other peoples stuff, things that people don't want'.

Melissa identifies her purchases as 'visually-led' and so whilst she often browses *Loot* for attractive second hand bargains she rarely (if ever) actually initiates a purchase, 'however good it might sound'. When her younger brother shared the marital home he bought *Loot* 'religiously' to browse the vehicle section and discuss the merits of certain models with Jake. For them *Loot* became a common feature of household life. Whilst Melissa had never purchased through *Loot* she was thoroughly familiar with its format,

readership and sales method. This familiarity had led her to use *Loot* as the site of major contestation in the relationship. She used *Loot* in an orchestrated protest designed specifically to challenge the household status quo.

Melissa's most valued and significant possession was a Henry Dartworth painting purchased from a gallery in Ibis Pond. The item was exemplary of the struggles and desires of her pre-marital identity. She had scrimped and saved for six months whilst at college, working nights in a 'smelly pub' to purchase the picture which now hangs prominently in the living room of the marital home. Recently she became disturbed by the picture; she felt she was 'not appreciating it enough', that it was being 'wasted' in its present situation.

In a fit of rage, after a lengthy argument with Jake, she committed what she considered a desperate act of terrorism. She telephoned the *Loot*'s twenty four hour free-advertising hotline and within hours had offered her greatest fine art possession up for sale among gild framed oil paintings of grazing sheep in 'the rococo style'. She joked that with hindsight *Loot* was the least appropriate place to sell contemporary fine art and that she did not receive one telephone inquiry over the sale. The gesture had not been intended as a serious sale attempt but to express the depth of Melissa's feelings. Publicly she had set out to sacrifice her most precious (pre-marital) possession through the 'lowly' pages of *Loot* (with its suspect goods and used cars). The act simultaneously undermined the values and knowledge associated with Melissa and Jake's shared world, they had, after all, met at the Ibis Pond Art Club; 'I was just trying to get back at Jake for something or another make him feel bad, you know, about something horrible'.

Melissa's choice of medium for the painting's sale held particular poignancy. It was a gendered consumption space shared by Jake and her brother for perusing cars. The meaning of the protest resided in the fact there would be little real risk of selling the article through such an inappropriate media. Throwing her most prized and aesthetically superior possession, symbolically, to the wolves meant that Melissa had maligned its worth and signalled a major discontent.

Melissa and Jake share numerous other forms of informal provisioning including fishing, pick your own produce, handicrafts and painting. Their relationship revolves

around public and private interest in art and culture and its associated values. Whilst other forms of informal acquisition are shared, the presence of *Loot* in the household was reminiscent of Jake's carefree car hunting days. Melissa's own pre-marital identity, built on a series of unacknowledged sacrifices, had seemed subsumed by the pending birth of their baby. Like her highly valued picture, her pre-marital worth was going to waste, taken for granted and unappreciated. *Loot*, defined by its non-visual format, provided the ideal means of 'laundering' this dispute. Reducing her ultimate, inalienable possession to the stark world of commodification and lowbrow, used goods Melissa temporarily threatened the cultural values through which she shared her relationship with Jake.

### **Case Study III 'Cultural Capital' and the Authenticity of Subversion**

In the course of the ethnographic research in north London a further case, which took place a little further afield than Jay Road, illustrated the significance of 'authentication' and alternative acquisition. Phil and Spencer, both in their early thirties, share a two-bedroom flat, and claim income support and have been unemployed for approximately a year. Prior to this period Phil had been employed as a temporary clerk in the professional sector and Spencer had worked in hotel restaurant kitchens. Their flat has no formal bathing facilities and is sparsely furnished with items salvaged from local skips. They pay a minimal rent and so accept this as a bearable sacrifice. The living room contains an oval marble topped table with wrought iron legs, surrounded either side by a broken green velveteen sofa and a foam sofa bed with torn upholstery. There are no decorations or pictures on the wall. A table and four chairs stand in the window, and a bureau in the corner holds the communal book and C.D. collection. Music is supplied by a Walkman CD, with one speaker placed at an angle towards the ceiling. The kitchen sink has a permanent leak and a bucket has to be periodically emptied from beneath it. Spencer had just travelled to Germany and so had brought back duty-free goods including a bottle of *Bombay Sapphire* gin and several bulk boxes of *Camel* cigarettes kept on the marble coffee table for general consumption.

Despite living on limited incomes and in notably squalid surroundings, Phil and Spencer had developed an avid interest in luxury clothes and second-hand designer menswear. Their favourite shop is a gentleman's dress agency nick-named 'Fluffy Fleming's' after its camp ex-1950s couture milliner proprietor. 'Fluffy Fleming' hunts out appropriate

styles from his stock and often puts things aside for the boys (who he assumes are a gay couple) until they can afford the items. An *Yves Saint Laurent* suit worth £700 can be picked up at 'Fluffy's' for around £75 in excellent condition. Phil and Spencer usually begin their shopping trips with a strawberry milk shake in a local cafe and even when they have no money, they precede to window shop at the places where their purchases normally take place. Spencer insisted that his interest in clothes had evolved through age and the ability to 'carry a good suit off'. Under the tutelage of Phil, who keeps a copy of *Debretts* 'Manners and Modern Etiquette' and 'Small Talk at Parties' on his bookshelf, he was continuing to learn the ropes. Phil joked that even in his native home of Urmston, Manchester, he had turned the tiny bedroom of a two-up-two down terrace into a study equipped with pipe rack, leather chair and 'other affectations'. Spencer, who borrows Phil's clothes whilst he builds up his own collection, had, he commented, recently discovered 'the merits of a distinctive cologne'. Both were avid readers of P.G. Wodehouse novels.

Cheaper charity shops were used for what they described as 'practice shopping' where they learned, for example, to distinguish a French cuff or a quality cotton. Mistakes proved less disastrous when made in a cheap charity shop. Both considered the 'obvious' display of labels to be *gauche* and explained their attraction to designer wear as a concern for 'cut' and 'quality'. Spencer was proud that he could now confidently visit the menswear section of any upper end department store and 'decipher' its contents without embarrassment. Phil and Spencer despised the attitudes of shop assistants in such places and defiantly shop-lifted expensive articles using a pair of pliers to remove security tags. They once stole a small item from 'Fluffy's' shop but, as they now considered him a good friend, would never conceive of doing this again and regretted the initial act. However, they occasionally stole from charity shops which they condemned as over priced. They justified their actions by explaining the fraud and colonialism associated with many charity organisations.

Whilst they rarely purchase from *Loot* they frequently peruse the car section and have recently planned to buy a navy blue Jaguar XJ6 with a 'windfall'. Ironically this 'windfall' resulted from artful subversion of *Loot*'s potentially negative aspects. Phil and Spencer used *Loot* as an instrumental part of a recent, and successful, fraudulent household insurance claim. They placed a bogus advertisement in the music equipment

section to sell two electric guitars. They stored Phil's massive collection of designer shirts, suits and accessories and their joint collection of CDs in a neighbour's house. They then contacted the police late that night to report a burglary.

On arrival at the scene of the 'crime', the major point of contention for the police was the lack of forced entry. Spencer explained this away by testifying that two young men, seeing the advertisement in *Loot*, had visited the flat to view the guitars offered for sale. They must have gained access to the house keys when Spencer briefly left the room to make coffee for his visitors. And, the police, concluded, returned later that day to steal the guitars and other property.

After Spencer had spent four hours at the police station, trying (unsuccessfully) to identify the possible culprits, the police concluded that it was an opportunist burglary which illustrated the inherent danger of unregulated publications such as *Loot*. When visited by the insurance assessor and queried on the incongruous lifestyle the couple lived (with the strange juxtaposition of designer suits, odorous furniture and generally squalid living conditions) Phil explained that his compulsive clothes buying was the result of his intolerable living conditions. The insurance claim included photographs, swatches and some receipts for the majority of the missing suits. His remaining collection of accessories and shoes substantiated the claim. A week later a joint cheque for £15,000 arrived; two thirds of their original claim.

Phil and Spencer had already begun to spend their booty. The previous evening they spent £200 dining at a four-star hotel restaurant, Spencer boasted 'we had aperitifs, Mersault, Sauterne and port' and looked 'dapper in our designer suits'. He was currently having a dinner jacket made-to measure (and worked out the possible cost of each wearing in his lifetime as £150) and had that morning spent £160 on silk cravats. Still, he lamented his lack of visionary shopping skill and envied his flatmate's strategic shopping which he compared to the 'skill of Kasparov'; he was always at least five moves ahead in envisaging the potential of purchases. Neither has yet fully decided which Jaguar to choose from *Loot*.

Due to long-term unemployment Phil and Spencer are precluded from formulating their identities in a formal workplace. Their limited economic means logically restricts their

access to forms of non-essential consumption. They are at once excluded from a world of skilled labour and by extension, a world of playful and risk filled luxury consumption. Instead, they invert their informal economic skills of theft, fraud and alternative acquisition to its disassociated lifestyle of conservative foppery and affluence. Moneys gained are re-invested in the improvement of skills of acquisition. Unlike the 'ordinary' income of the sporadic unskilled jobs otherwise available to them, their 'booty' finances the material culture and aesthetics of their shared relationship with consumption.

Like Michael and Jennifer and Melissa and Jake, Phil and Spencer shared a propensity for things with history and a sense of authenticity. Although Phil and Spencer are economically impoverished they share a romance of 'authentic' masculine identity whose associated material culture has become the focal point of their lives. They are so advanced in the art of informal provisioning and alternative acquisition that they confidently invert the 'dangerous' and anarchic aspects of *Loot*. They parody the potential risks of *Loot* in a display of defiant and cynical disregard; and attain the ultimate bargain.

### ***'Argos'***

Whilst *Loot* demands interaction, one-to-one negotiation of social relations and skill to mediate and comprehend a chaotic array of goods, *Argos* catalogue seems the ultimate handbook for the unskilled armchair shopper. The *Argos* catalogue is a prominent form of alternative acquisition across all social groups in the 'street'. Unlike *Loot*, the *Argos* catalogue provides a standardised, rigid repertoire of brand-new, visually represented alienable commodities. The catalogue, of approximately 500 pages, features over five thousand products ranging from jewellery, three piece suites, domestic technology, sports equipment, toys, gifts etc. Named after the 'argosy' ( 'a fleet of abundantly laden merchant ships') it is distinguished from other mail order catalogues in that it deals predominantly with hardware (no clothes or consumables) and acts a portable shop window. Goods are chosen through the catalogue then ordered and purchased direct, in person, at a local show room (larger orders, such as garden sheds, can be ordered by telephone and delivered). Whilst the catalogue does not rely on offering a credit system, users pay for their items in full, a £1000 Instant Credit is made available through a Personal Account Card. Some items offer six months interest free credit. The catalogue

is published each season in full colour, Spring /Summer and Autumn/Winter. Each edition is eagerly anticipated by *Argos* users who can visit the showrooms to obtain the latest copy. The company also delivers catalogues to homes in the vicinity of the outlet.

The catalogue is designed to feature maximum products in the minimum space and locates products in a strict typology. For example, the jewellery section, beginning with diamond rings (4 pages, 132 items) progresses through 'His and Her' pendants, crucifix/St Christopher's (1 page, 27 items), Sovereign rings, Mizpah pendants, to gold loop earrings (4 pages, 123 items). In total there are over twelve hundred jewellery items offered for sale. Inset pictures feature models of mixed ethnicity sporting several of the items displayed in the catalogue. The household appliance section offers everything from hostess trolleys, deep fat fryers, to electric toothbrushes. It features forty-six vacuum cleaners ranging from £17.95 (for a hand held) to £199.99 (for a *Dyson* super model) and offers a choice of nineteen different ironing boards, all fully illustrated. More recently selected goods are also displayed in the *Argos* shop window, as the outlets have moved to more prominent, high street locations.

*Argos* seems to offer a rationalised, simple, value for money way to shop where the consumer is in total control. Products selected from the catalogue are entered onto an order form using a coded number. The form is taken to the service point and during the payment transaction goods are delivered to the collection counter for the customer. A 16-day money back guarantee offers the security of a conventional shopping outlet (if not more). Although the basic product types provide the core of the *Argos* catalogue, peripheral items such as 'Take-That' bedspreads, 'Power Ranger' collectibles, 'Barbie' watches, 'Baywatch' wall clocks and marble effect telephones create a transient and fashionable dimension to the catalogue. These items circumscribe *Argos* as a contemporary, interactive catalogue as opposed to a strictly functional or blandly convenient consumptive encounter. Whilst it provides an extensive variety of apparently mundane items the substantial toy section denotes its significant use for child related consumption. Similarly luxury and gift objects, and the suggestion of gift items (certain sections show symbols and text reading 'all items are gift boxed'), are prevalent throughout the catalogue.

What distinguishes *Argos* is its dual presence in homes where mail order catalogues are otherwise considered an inappropriate, even divisive, means of acquisition and those where traditional mail order catalogues are considered a staple and respectable form of consumption.

Whilst *Argos* draws on the established working/lower middle class market of traditional catalogue consumers, the exclusion of clothing, and the sixteen day money back guarantee allows other (predominately middle class) users to imbue its presentation and mode of purchase with the safe, respectable and educated functionalism of renowned department stores such as *John Lewis*' (see Miller 1998a). The quantitative aesthetic of *Argos*, with its multiple brands and illustrations, made some informants critical of its mass 'plasticity and cheap' image. Others felt that bulk of choice coupled with the omission of a biased or manipulative shop assistant made *Argos* a minimum risk, optimum value, consumption method. Whilst informants gave numerous examples of *Argos* products actually costing more than high street equivalents' they consciously opted for the security and self-determination offered by the pre-catalogue selection sales method. They enjoyed the *impression* of mass produced, lowest common denominator goods and offered at basic, understandable stratified prices.

*Argos* catalogue was considered a staple of contemporary living across all social groups in the ethnography (most could locate it instantly in a convenient magazine rack or, revealingly, in their child's bedroom). However, there were vital differences in the role it played in their household provisioning. A contemporary (24/8/95) *Financial Times* article reported a massive growth in *Argos* shares and the exceptional success of its new 'Wedding List' service. Whilst many consumers see *Argos* as an ideal source for gifts, some informants considered it as the *least* likely place to purchase gifts. One middle-aged woman typifying this view had recently used *Argos* to purchase a kettle and mattress cover, because, she pointed out emphatically, it was the only appliance store open on a Sunday; 'I use it very much as convenience shopping, I would never use it to buy presents or anything because I like to see what I'm buying before..seeing it in a picture isn't enough for me I need to touch and feel it'.

In stark opposition to this view, *Argos* was used by other informants as an essential guide for budgeting and identifying birthday, Christmas and anniversary gifts. Chris, a

nineteen year old Greek/English youth working in a minimally paid government training scheme, who described himself as having a ‘dangerously big family’, used *Argos* to ascertain appropriate Christmas gifts on a limited budget. On Christmas Eve, when buying his brother a *Pin-Pad* executive game, he remembered the ‘desperate scene’ as people clambered to order and collect gifts.

Others viewed *Argos* as a source of consumption, external, as opposed to integral, to their own provisioning, even if they made regular use of it. Some expressed a sense of voyeurism flicking the pages of *Argos*, as if glimpsing a shopping ‘underworld’; ‘I normally find *Argos* catalogue quite entertaining because you always think ‘gosh, this cheap’, so it’s quite good for cheap, less important birthday presents..I find it quite entertaining’, commented one middle class informant.

*Argos*, then, shares with *Loot* an appeal to self-determining acquisition. The salesperson is replaced by series of descriptive product details; the formal shopping space is reduced to a format of numbered pages. Unlike *Loot*, however, *Argos* operates as a static, secure and trustworthy form of consumption used to anchor decisions and substantiate choices. As the following case studies reveal, this medium does not automatically exclude the play and fantasy making associated with *Loot*. But they accentuate *Argos* as a vital consumptive information system which, through its normative status, opens up the sociality of consumption.

### **Case Study I Restricted Choices and Familial Ties**

Wayne and Gillian live in a small rented council flat with their four children. They are long term unemployed and rely on income support and welfare benefit to support their family. Wayne has just completed a six-month government re-training programme. More recently expenditure (for example, on gifts) has been confined to the immediate family due to severe financial constraints. Wayne and Gillian, always shop together as a couple, and use the nearest shopping centre regularly (approx. three times per week). They can see no advantage in travelling to the more upmarket and supposedly better equipped mall some miles away especially as most of their shopping involves food provisioning. They recently cancelled a milk delivery as, using four pints per day, they found it more economical to purchase bulk from the supermarket. Similarly the local shops are out of bounds except for the occasional ice cream for the children and the Post

office for benefit. Mr McGrudie's local hardware store, however, was praised the wealth of information the patron offered with goods he sold. This information and service counterbalanced the slightly higher prices he was forced charge in comparison with bulk distributorship outlets. Despite their lack of funds and inability to socialise in formal settings they are a particularly sociable couple, receiving over seventy cards at Christmas. They get on well with neighbours but friendship is generally confined to greetings and conversations. Much of their leisure activity is provided by self-provisioning - the kitchen operates as a cottage brewery and distillery for the various alcoholic drinks Wayne and Gillian have on the go. A substantial proportion of their weekly budget is given over exclusively to this pastime, the National Lottery, and smoking.

Wayne is proud of his dual role in provisioning the family and insists that he is not embarrassed to buy anything - even sanitary towels. With a large family shopping frequently proved stressful and on a recent shopping trip Wayne had been reprimanded by an 'old dear' for hitting one of the kids in a supermarket. He felt morally justified as the kid had been deliberately winding him up all day. The children were expected to do their fair share of carrying shopping home and to learn to appreciate the cost of food. Gillian stressed, though, the nightmare of shopping with kids during the summer holidays and her frustration with ill-organised shops. Places like *Toys R Us* for example, enticed and over excited children. In this context, *Argos* catalogue then was used as a controllable toyshop. Indeed the family relied almost exclusively on *Argos* for selection and purchase of the children's Christmas and birthday presents. As well as offering cheaper products than *Toys R Us* it allowed the children to indicate their choices and for their parents to respond accordingly. For them looking in *Argos* replaced the trauma of 'shopping around' with a restricted income. The variety and price range offered in the catalogue was tantamount to this selection process. It was used as a price barometer and a dependable source; 'if it's in *Argos* we normally get it from *Argos*'. Lamenting the lack of Christmas presents requested by their eldest son, Wayne and Gillian used *Argos* to identify the most sought after and popular toys (in this case *Power Ranger* plaster casts). Some of the children's presents are bought from bulk cut-price warehouses like *Poundstretcher* but Wayne and Gillian pointed out that like *Kwiksave* it was a horrible but necessary shopping experience. *Argos* on the other hand encompasses the positive experiences of 'shopping around' without the stress of outside

intervention, but with an implicit sociality intact. The only downside to *Argos* shopping was the disappointment of out of stock items.

Varied and leisurely shopping is not a viable option for Wayne and Gillian. Illustrative of this position was their exclusion from 'sale' shopping and their inability to risk waiting for the 'right bargain'. Just before Christmas, for example, the family went to buy bunk beds from *Argos*; they dare not wait until the New Year sales, as they feared the money would be subsumed by Christmas expenditures. They had already saved for a year and a half and desperately needed the bunk beds as the smallest child had outgrown her cot. In a two bedroom flat Gillian stressed 'bunk beds is the only way to get four of them in one room'. They had pre-chosen the beds through the *Argos* catalogue and collected the item flat packed for self-assembly.

Wayne and Gillian have a severely limited budget and are not able to engage in varied, leisurely or experimental shopping. For them *Argos* provides a form of self-provisioning not just of goods but of shopping knowledge. *Argos* keeps them in touch with high street tastes and prices, through the normative sociality of *Argos* catalogue they prevent deeper isolation. Provisioning for a large family requires strategic action and with *Argos* they sustain a controllable, familial sociality through consumption. The children are socialised through shared food buying trips and perusal of the *Argos* catalogue. Budgeting, Gillian pointed out, involved the use of 'nightmare shops' like *Pound Stretcher* and *Kwiksave* which precluded imaginative or fantasy shopping of any kind. Such shops, based around utility, could not provide the necessary social resource that *Argos* provided.

### **Case Study II 'Swings and Round-Abouts': sustaining sociality**

Philipa and her African-Caribbean husband Roger have three children age seven to fourteen. They are both in their late thirties and live in a three-bedroom council flat that is cosily decorated with knickknacks new and old. Old sepia photographs of the husband's family ornament the walls and the living room has a comfortable, velour three piece suite and large television. They shop mostly at bulk outlets such as *Kwiksave*, *Iceland* frozen foods and *Tesco* the supermarket, but Philipa enjoys variety and happily uses markets for clothes. Recently she treated herself to £30 of *Amway* products, purchased through direct sale from her next door neighbour, which she

justified on the pretext of ‘taking more care of herself’ at her age. ‘Besides which’, she said, it was a question of ‘swings and roundabouts’ - what she saved on the arduous task of food shopping she could spend on rewarding herself, and she coupled this with the thought of helping her neighbour through the commission she received as an *Amway* dealer.

Most of the household’s non-food provisioning was supplied through catalogues. Philipa subscribed to both *Kays* and *Littlewoods* mail order catalogues as she perceived them as offering slightly different, interchangeable styles. Both mainstream catalogues, the former offered more conservative and old fashioned clothes, and the latter, younger and more up-to-date versions. When a catalogue is first delivered, Philipa looks forward to browsing its pages as an enjoyable and excitable event. *Kays* catalogue provided T-shirts for the whole family this summer and a pair of trainers for the ‘old man’. Philipa controlled the purchase of items through catalogues but shared the browsing and decision making predominantly with the children. The previous Christmas’ provisions, she stressed, had been almost exclusively reliant on catalogues. All the presents were purchased through catalogues, which she believed, forced you to keep to a fairly strict and manageable weekly credit limit. *Choice*, *Kays* and *Littlewoods* offered her a good combination of choice, and though *Littlewoods* do not offer commission *Kays* gave a 10% in the pound cash back scheme. Accumulated ‘cash back’ was a major purchase incentive and could either be redeemed in the form of a cheque or, for a greater amount, or be redeemed against future purchases. In the past Philipa enjoyed browsing the catalogues with friends and had once collated communal orders to accrue commission. In the process she discovered that some women furnished their entire houses through the catalogue. One neighbour, for example, bought three beds, a three piece suite, display cabinets, bedroom suite, wardrobes, ‘everything in one go’ from *Freeman’s* catalogue. The commission work however developed into a negative experience as many of her friends defaulted on their payments. Eventually she found the experience of badgering close neighbours and friends for their overdue payments too embarrassing.

Philipa’s most recent large catalogue purchase was a professional sewing machine. She did not shop around for the item, as she was already reliant on the catalogue’s credit system. She had recently gained a newfound confidence, trying activities she had previously felt precluded from. She had used her sewing machine to make a costume for

a jazz and tap dancing show she recently performed with a friend at a local dance school. There had been numerous time-consuming rehearsals and the whole family came to see the final performance. But ultimately she envisaged the sewing machine as a means to making clothes for her daughter, despite acknowledging that shop bought clothes were in the long run cheaper. She could not yet justify the expense of the credit payments but saw the item as a major emotional and functional investment.

Her sewing machine projects had been on hold whilst she organised and arranged the silk flowers at her cousin's wedding. The arrangements for the wedding reception revolved around a bargain wedding dress purchased from *John Lewis*' department store at Brent Cross. Reduced from £500 to £250 due to being shop soiled, the dress was described as 'exquisite' and 'totally gorgeous', white with tiny pink sequins and glittering diamantés and a long train. This bargain, of which the bride and her relatives were extremely proud, had transformed the original decorative scheme from ivory to pink and white. This theme encompassed the brides-maid's dresses, the bride's gown, the table settings, flowers and decorations. Philipa's mother-in-law made the dresses for the younger bridesmaids and a friend made the others. Philipa commented that her cousin's wedding had taken up a lot of energy and had been the main focus of the female relatives for the last five months. As well as creating the flora displays, Philipa had made the three tiers of the cake for her sister-in-law, a more proficient cake decorator, to ice.

*Argos* formed the focal point of gifting for the cousin's Wedding List. With the main list placed with *Argos*, guests were asked to either chose from the catalogue or donate *Argos* gift vouchers. Philipa had only been able to afford £20 but felt that at least her cousin could put this towards a bigger purchase. As the cousin already had an established home with two children she had preferred the notion of vouchers; but accepted that many guests would be uncomfortable giving money (despite the fact that *Argos* catalogue unequivocally indicates product prices and allows for direct comparison).

Philipa herself relied on the catalogue for the selection of gifts at birthdays and Christmas. In particular, the children used *Argos* for writing Christmas lists to Santa Claus. Their lists would include specific product selection, catalogue code number and

exact price. Far from encouraging unbridled desire Philipa used the catalogue to illustrate to the children that Christmas presents operated within a finite budget; 'I told them Father Christmas couldn't afford any products over £9.99 this year'. The children happily chose within the designated monetary limits.

Such comments were supported by the interviews conducted with local junior school children regarding Christmas gifting. They spoke of *Argos* catalogue as the dominant source of inspiration and identification of potential gifts. As another mother from the street noted, 'they see it on TV and look it up in *Argos* book to see how much it is ..the little one she can't write properly yet so she copies it all down including the price!' For many children, who fantasised about adulthood as the freedom to go 'in any shop you wanted', the catalogue acted as their own safe, fantasy shopping space. Notably at least two thirds of all children identified themselves as *Argos* literate. Conversations amongst groups of children revealed a thorough and shared knowledge of the relevant *Argos* pages. As one parent in the ethnography commented, 'the children always use *Argos*, ..they all know what's on what pages and they all get their ideas what they'd like for Christmas out of it' (see chapter three for extended discussion of *Argos* use amongst children).

Philipa and the family practice varied informal and formal shopping. Whilst they budget with limited income, Philipa's social networks, particularly female kin, open up numerous links through which other advantageous forms of informal provisioning are pursued. A 'perk' of her work, as the principle provisioner of the family, is the occasional 'treat'. Whilst an expensive purchase of cosmetics from the next door neighbour seems irresponsible, such relations sustain other forms of advantageous informal provisioning. Philipa is frequently the beneficiary of stolen goods and neighbours often call on her husband Roger for paid repairs and home improvement chores, which supplements an unstable family income. Like Wayne and Gillian *Argos* is an invaluable means of controlling and mediating household consumption. It allows the children a productive and educative role in provisioning. *Argos* also forms the crux of normative consumption values within their given social group.

For Philipa her broad range of provisioning supports an entire infrastructure of social and economic relations. The seemingly erratic consumption of treats and luxuries slots

into a socialised web of female kin, neighbours and friends. The dual use of catalogues for acquisition and monetary provisioning, turning friendly neighbour into tiresome debt-collector proved too risky a venture as its commercial imperative overtly jeopardised this balanced array of vital relationships. Within this social group *Argos* is a respectable and normative medium for self-provisioning and gifting.

### **Case Study III A Household in Rehearsal: things without meaning**

Joanna is a young, middle class married mother ostensibly responsible for the households' provisioning. At the moment her partner is re-training as a medical student and so they are living on a limited income in a maisonette. The decor mainly consists of pastel colours, stripped pine and a number of items from *Ikea*. There are no items in the household that Joanna would describe as having 'sentimental' value or particular significance, except the ornaments and gifts given by her Canadian in-laws. The house contains predominantly new furniture and objects. Although Joanna had owned one antique, her grandmother's old chair, she had subsequently returned it to her mother, as it was scruffy and too unwieldy for the small living room.

Although Joanna purchased a high ratio of brand new household products she considered *Argos* as 'last resort' shopping. Whilst the house contained numerous objects purchased through the catalogue she disassociated herself from *Argos* as a recommendable form of shopping and described its products critically. *Argos* was considered as a basic, even degrading, form of shopping used merely to supplement practical items omitted from the couple's original wedding list. The living room magazine rack held a copy of the *Argos* catalogue, which Joanna emphasised, would only be consulted 'out of necessity, not for pleasure'. Whilst the actual reasoning behind her using *Argos* was to control the purchasing experience and avoid pressure from assistants, Joanna described the visits to the shop as too hassle ridden and stressful. She compared the uniformity, ritual and 'sheep-like behaviour' of the *Argos* users with pre-Revolutionary Soviet Union bureaucracy. She did not deem *Argos* cheaper just more instantly accessible; 'you can look at home and get yourself organised at home'. Her most recent purchase, a hair razor with alterable settings, was designed to save money on haircuts for her husband and son. Three weeks after the purchase, she was still unable to operate the complicated appliance successfully.

To Joanna, *Argos* provided basic houseware at acceptably reasonable prices. In ‘an emergency’ she once purchased a pair of gold-plated earrings, chosen from the catalogue, to match a wedding outfit. Normally dismissing *Argos* and catalogues in general, for the acquisition of personal goods, she stressed the purchase as an act of desperation. She quickly realised ‘the earrings were dreadful..horrible gold plate that tarnished quickly and were just not nice..’.

Her mother similarly uses *Argos* ‘in an emergency’ where replacement, utility items are sought at a reasonable price. Neither would ‘dream of getting real gifts from there’ but saw it as a convenience hardware store. As well as precluding *Argos* as a store for meaningful or significant gifts Joanna would not consider using *Argos* for toys for her five year old, Sammy. Many of his items though were purchased through more acceptable alternative modes of informal acquisition including the Ibis Pond Mother’s Group jumble sales and the classifieds section of their monthly newsletter, the *Early Learning* catalogue and *Red House* educational book parties.

Joanna, living on a limited budget, consciously restricts the range of goods and methods of provisioning in the household. For Joanna the present household is merely a household in rehearsal. Its objects have no overt sentimental ties and acquisition of household goods is actively neutral. It is as if the present contents are props, mock-ups to be replaced in a more stable, and affluent future. *Argos* suffices as a bridging tool whilst quality valued provisioning (directly associated with the desired social and cultural group) is confined to the provisioning of the child.

Although Joanna’s household is limited to a tight budget it is made understood, through the acquisition of material culture, that this is a temporary state.

*Argos* is viewed as an involuntary option, stress-filled and aesthetically deficient. Unlike Philipa’s household, here, *Argos* exemplifies the tawdry aspects of modern alienated consumption - receiving no service or individual attention Joanna feels like one of many passive, mass consumers choosing from a prescribed range of goods. She uses the stock of alienable commodities to prevent attachment to a transitional life stage.

## Conclusion

*Loot* and *Argos* are vehicles for the restriction and elaboration of consumptive choices. As alternative, non-formal modes of acquisition they are incorporated and manipulated into broader systems of provisioning. Both act as crucial vehicles of sociality and knowledge formation within their given locality.

*Loot* with its demand on time, skill and risk-taking appears to call on optimum 'cultural capital'. Driven by the aesthetic of authenticity rather than basic thrift, *Loot* seems best 'played' by those with the least at stake. Its literary, non-visual medium requires extensive interpretative skills and, to handle the exchange, competent social interaction. *Argos*, with its standardised, price-led, easy to use method of acquisition appears in contrast to offer a simplified option for the unskilled shopper. Here the image replaces the word as a more obvious and instantaneous response-led means of representation. Shopping through pictures, with limited social interaction seems to challenge consumption as a culturally informed practice. Like catalogues in general, critics berate *Argos* as a 'degrading' form of consumption; its users merely responding 'sheep-like' to a production line of goods. Closer examination reveals, however, that users of *Argos* were as skilled and practised in their acquisition as the wily *Loot* users. Skilled *Argos* consumers effectively inverted the outlet's commodified system using the catalogue as an effective means of self-provisioning. Far from lacking skill and competence consumers used *Argos* to control and manage the moral economy of the household, just as users of *Loot* used the medium to practice and test theirs. These choices are value-led rather than rationally and economically driven.

Just as goods, according to Douglas and Isherwood, 'are endowed with value by the agreement of fellow consumers' (1977: 75) so too, are modes of consumption.

While *Loot* offers an element of thrift and bargain hunting that seems ideally suited to economically restricted or working class consumption, in effect its risk laden and time consuming method leaves it firmly embedded in a middle class style of knowledge use. Although *Argos* offers a more expensive range of goods it provides a basic resource for social groups precluded from mainstream, leisure imbued formal shopping. For poorer households and those mostly confined to the home, such as the elderly and children, it allows home based, self-regulated and containable provisioning. As this ethnographic observation illustrates, modes of acquisition and material culture are not confined to

rigid social groups. Skills culled from a range of knowledges (educational, class, sub-cultural) are brought to bear constructively on the new opportunities opened up by these forms of contemporary acquisition.

*Loot* demands high mobility and the knowledge and resources to navigate the intricacies of London's suburbs. *Argos* on the other hand is based on a fundamental notion of immobility. With formal retail outlets a much stronger, locally and historically formed class affiliation exists. In contrast, this chapter has considered how modes of provisioning which thrive on their dislocation from a fixed geographical reference, come to be used and understood. There is no consensus amongst inhabitants over the formal location of the street and yet through these contrasting modes of alternative provisioning, the 'virtual' spaces of the *Argos* catalogue and the classified columns of *Loot* paper a local and shared culture amongst inhabitants of the street is invoked. Although these national and, in the case of *Argos*, global entities at first seem to undermine local identities it transpires that they are key cross-class and cross-ethnic cultural references (although appropriated in widely differing ways) on the street.

## Chapter Seven

### *Colour Me Beautiful: the Anxiety of Taste and the Gendered Work of Aesthetics*

Matters of aesthetics, taste and style, as most convincingly established in Bourdieu's classic work *Distinction* ([1979]1984), clearly transcend the idiosyncrasies of individual agency, instead operating as manifestations of socialisation and power relations in the form of 'cultural capital'. This chapter considers how, in contrast to Bourdieu's sociological contextualisation of aesthetic practice, even in instances where individuals might have a good knowledge of formal aesthetics, their actual aesthetic judgements are tentative and insecure unless they are based upon a social rather than an individual process of decision making. So fraught are the everyday encounters of aesthetic choice that many individuals in the absence of immediate social relations seek to allay associated risks by soliciting the advice of an external, objective agent.

The following ethnographic data initially focuses on the example of clothing and the anxiety making choices evoked in the act of aesthetic choice. By examining the interactions between mothers and daughters, women and spouses, it considers how taste is made in the context of immediate social relations. The chapter then goes on to consider how 'objective' forms, such as mail order clothing catalogues, are utilised in re-establishing relations with fashion in the particular point of a woman's life-stage where these immediate social relations prove inappropriate or unavailable. It then focuses on the direct sales enterprises active in and around Jay Road, which rely almost exclusively on women's social networks. It considers how these commercial concerns are used to negotiate particular life stages in adult women's lives and the concomitant 'problems' of taste and sociality. Direct sales enterprises such as *Colour Me Beautiful* image consultants and *Mary Kay* cosmetics and *Anne Summers* lingerie party sales schemes, directly address women's work in visually constructing the self. These detailed ethnographic data reveal how the social practice of aesthetics in contemporary culture belongs to a temporality not just of style, but in this particular case, of women's biographies and related social relations. Here we see not only the social contextualisation of aesthetics but also the ways in which it is used and negotiated in the trajectories of women's lives. In the case of *Colour Me Beautiful* and *Mary Kay* cosmetics we see women literally coming together under the auspices of aesthetic practices and, in the case of the dealer's themselves, extending their aesthetic 'work'

into the realm of the paid public sphere.

Bourdieu is properly credited with establishing the academic refutation of the idea that taste, as a form of aesthetic preference, is merely an idiosyncratic expression of individual choice. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu clearly demonstrated an overall relationship between individual taste and the workings of class in French society. The implications (which one could also arguably have drawn from marketing research) is that taste is a much more predictable and contextualised phenomenon than most people had wished to acknowledge. Nevertheless, the actual act of claiming an aesthetic preference remains throughout the work of *Distinction*, an entirely individualised activity taking no account of the gendered nature of its 'work'. That is to say Bourdieu is creating maps of social space based on the statistical manipulation of data based entirely on the statements of individual (predominantly male) preferences. Bourdieu's method, so far from challenging this trait, actually concretises this individualism by using a technique based on asking individuals to make choices in relation to questionnaires. It is clear that if aesthetic preferences were other than an individual encounter this would be impossible to discern on the basis of such a methodology, since the method itself precludes any social contextualisation for the stating of aesthetic preferences. Bourdieu's sociology fixes the individual as an aggregate within a social field. If this model of aesthetics is going to be challenged then this is most likely to come about as a result of ethnographic work where aesthetic choice is understood as a practice that can be studied directly in the contexts within which it is taking place. It is also likely to move out of the art gallery to the place where most aesthetic judgements are made by most people which is the field of shopping and decorating persons and homes (Halle 1993; Putnam and Newton 1990).

The consideration of aesthetics as a social practice shows the dissolution of the idea of women's relation to consumption as separate from labour; the work made on themselves and the construction of themselves becomes a complex part of a broader moral economy rather than merely an act of individual self-expression. Similarly, it is the home and the domestic that forms the backdrop to the discussion of the 'public' issues of appearance and taste. The anxiety surrounding performance and appearance shows how an individual's sense of self is constructed in the larger social nexus and a wider public arena, as opposed to the individual masculine model of the artificial. In the case of

dealers working for direct sales companies, utilising the social network and relations of women, discussed towards the end of the chapter, this conflation of women's aesthetic work in consumption and labour is most evident.

### **The Anxiety of Taste: Mothers, Daughters and Floral Print Dresses**

The anxiety generated by the pressure of 'knowing what to like' is evident in Sharon's desire to completely re-evaluate the contents of her wardrobe and change what she views as a consistently unsatisfactory relation to fashion. Although few women can afford to completely re-assemble their wardrobes (as encouraged by image consultancy companies discussed later in the chapter), the desire to 'chuck out' clothing was commonly referred to by women either 'emerging' from their roles as mothers, or entering a new life stage involving (or desiring) a new set of social relations. The re-formulation of a wardrobe or a cosmetic 'make-over' often marked a rite of passage (or desire for such a transformative event) into a new or uncharted stage in a woman's life. Sharon, for example, is reaching her fortieth birthday and sees this as a watershed in terms of consolidating her appearance and her wardrobe, for she is 'fed-up with getting it all wrong';

It's my fortieth next month and so I thought if I don't do it now then when? I've just coloured my hair and I'm going to loose some weight this year and chuck out all my old clothes. The girl next door sells *Mary Kay* [cosmetics] so I'm going to look after my skin and stuff with some of them things.

Sharon contrasts herself with a close friend whom, she comments 'could wear a piece of rag and look gorgeous'. But the desire to re-design herself and her wardrobe is not merely indicative of a stereotype mid-life crisis. Rather she considers herself as the victim of a succession of events in which 'fashion', and what she considers to be her inept relation to it, has badly let her down. Sharon's 'fashion disasters' (as she refers to them) culminated in a recent incident at a family party organised to celebrate her mother-in-law's seventieth birthday. The female kin of her in-laws have a reputation for dressing extremely well, in the latest classic fashions, whereas Sharon prefers to wear casual leggings in the winter and lurid 'scrunch-up' sun dresses in the summer. As the party, organised in a prestigious local venue, spanned both day and evening Sharon had

been advised to bring outfits appropriate for both day and evening wear. Desperate to 'fit in', she sought the advice of her sister-in-laws regarding her outfit and her mother-in-law in the making of a long evening skirt considered appropriate to wear at the party. She also spent several days looking for a top to perfectly match the evening skirt. As the party wore on, Sharon nervously went to change into the long skirt to pre-empt the transformation of the other guests. However, after returning from the Ladies' Room, and waiting several hours, Sharon realised that she was the only person who had bothered to change into evening dress and that, despite 'looking like a dressed up tart!', she could not insult her mother-in-law by removing the skirt she had kindly helped her to make. She therefore spent the entire evening feeling let down by her sisters in-law's fashion advice and too over-dressed and self-conscious to join in the festivities.

On another occasion Sharon set off by car with her family to attend a family Christening taking place fifteen or so miles away from her house on the other side of London. After driving for over thirty minutes, Sharon had a 'change of heart' regarding the appropriateness of the dress she had chosen to wear and persuaded the entire family to turn back to north London so that she could purchase an alternative item she had seen previously in a high street shop. Although the garments, blue cotton/Lycra summer dresses, when placed side by side were barely distinguishable from each other, for Sharon the significance of their stylistic detail warranted this drastic action. In the course of the journey she had been pondering whether or not the 'T-shirt' style neckline of her chosen outfit might be deemed 'too casual' by the family and guests at the Christening. After a long internalised debate with herself, she finally opted for the more expensive option of buying a replacement with a 'less-T-shirt' style neckline.

The examples of Sharon's anxieties may at first seem extreme and may be attributed to some deeper insecurities regarding her familial relations. However, the incidents she describes are fully indicative of a broader ambivalence expressed by almost all women around fashion and clothing choices at some point in their lives. In many ways, Sharon was perhaps the most confident informant in self-deprecatingly 'laughing off' such dilemmas and embracing her 'fashion disasters' as an integral part of her biography.

While Sharon laments her lack of stylistic maturity, Charmaine, a highly fashionable eighteen-year-old who is extremely self-conscious of her 'ideal' figure, excels in

choosing items which she considers most appropriately draw attention to her body. While relishing her youthfulness she is also aware of herself becoming older and the pending problem involved in placing herself in relation to the symbolic relationship between clothing and age. Until recently she has tended to favour clothing which might be regarded as more childlike, since she looks a good deal younger than she is. However she is no longer sure if she wants to continue within a 'girl' genre, or start wearing clothing intended more for her own age. These dynamics are played out in young women's clothing shops such as *Topshop* and *Kookai*, each of which provides a particular aesthetic of dress sense and niche in terms of these dynamics and tensions of age.

Like many younger women shoppers in north London at the time of the ethnography, Charmaine will tend to buy as fashion garments 'any item as long as its black'. She, as most such women, is aware of the processes that lie behind this lack in the exercise of choice. Black fashion wear is understood to be less individualising or expressive than some alternative choice, so that wearers are often both more secure in their sense of the approval of others, but disappointed by their failure to attempt a more ambitious projection in the world. The problem with any alternative to black is that it presents a much greater risk at the same time that it provides for greater possibilities of creative self-expression in the buyer as fashion 'artist'.

This particular shopping trip, however, is dominated by Charmaine's concern to buy a floral print garment. The implication is that after several weeks she has come to feel a potential affinity with this aesthetic concept as something she might like, and might work as a projection of her choice that is then open to approval or abuse. Clearly though, the success or otherwise of this broad concept of a floral print depends upon the particular item chosen, not just dress or skirt, but the particular print. During the course of the expedition Charmaine encounters hundreds of possible floral prints. The issue of cost is not raised, only of suitability. There is not the sense here, as sometimes occurs, that the goods on offer are all the same and there is a lack of choice, rather the concern is only that she should be able to have the confidence to select the particular item that might forge a relationship between her and this genre of garment. The presence of others, such as her mother and the researcher, serves as a constant sounding board upon which to exchange opinions, with the sense that approval might be seen as much as

evidence against as for the garment in question. Even with all this support the difficulty that was evident for her, again and again, was knowing whether she actually liked a print or not and therefore being able to determine what her taste was or could be. Material culture here becomes part of a larger array of objects that include the actuality of other persons and the fantasised image of those persons as 'internal objects'. All such objects whether material or living become forms of 'otherness' which act as reflections through which people try to determine who they are. The subject that is the self is not an isolated entity who exists outside of these relations, but remains always the product of them.

Charmaigne is an acknowledged expert on subtle matters of fashion and style, where her sense of the slightest nuance of cut and design is prodigious. She could tell the shift in the growing or diminishing acceptability of a particular colour on the dance floor to within a week. Yet despite this immense confidence in knowing about style, such knowledge does not in and of itself tell her what she 'likes', because to know what one likes is knowing who one wants to be in relation to others, not merely a knowledge about what the possible range is. One can have a fine sense of the nuances of language without knowing what one wants to say. Each array of objects provides its own constraints. Buying the first flower print is important since it may determine the relation to a whole genre.

As illustrated by the cases of Sharon and Charmaigne, aesthetic choices (even down to the detail of a neckline or a floral print) are the potential cause of great embarrassment and thus anxiety. It has been argued elsewhere that shopping by individuals is almost always an activity based on relationships rather than individualised preferences (Miller 1998b). In this context, knowing 'what to like' is framed firmly within the context of immediate social relations and internalised 'others'. The processes involved in coming to an aesthetic judgement tend to be as complex as the social relations involved in the interaction, which is objectified by that judgement. The following examples reveal the ways in which this anxiety of aesthetic choice is managed within and through the social relations of the domestic in the context of family, mother and daughter relations.

Elia (30) and her mother (women of Greek Cypriot origin living together in their family

house on Jay Road) share an uncannily similar taste in clothing. Despite their age difference they are regularly drawn to identical garments as potential purchases and preempt each other's preferences in matters of style. So profound is their understanding of one another's taste that they have generated a form of syncretism a frequent manifestation of which is the duplication of garments and gifts, as described my Elia's mother Maria;

Once I saw a top in *DH Evans* and a skirt but I thought it was too expensive so I thought 'no I'm not going to buy it'. And Christmas, when I opened the present - my daughter was living in Manchester at the time - when I opened the present in the morning, the present from my husband it was the top that I saw. He just bought me this top so I went out and bought the skirt. But my daughter was living in Manchester at the time so she didn't know that I saw this suit and liked it but she came down for that day she came down on Saturday and she went and bought it [the skirt] for me.. and another time I bought her a watch for Christmas morning and she bought me one and I bought her a *Marks & Spencer* cardigan in grey and she bought me the same one in blue! Oh yes! And she bought me a waistcoat from *Next* I bought her a small one she bought me a large one! We bought each other the same things!

In the case of Elia and her mother, both women view their conflation of taste as a positive indication of their close relationship born from consistent attention to each other's preferences or as Maria puts it 'this is how you know, when you go out together all the time, you know what the other person likes'. The numerous shopping trips that Elia and Maria have shared as mother and daughter sustain their 'joint' taste even when they are physically separated and shopping as individuals. Elia is a highly sociable young woman with many friends in the locality yet the taste relation she proudly maintains with her mother is seen to take precedence over those with her younger more 'fashionable' friends.

In Elia's case it might be easy to assume that the prominence of the mother/daughter relation in issues of aesthetics is merely indicative of their sharing the physicality and provisioning of the family home. However, the mother/daughter relation proved highly relevant, in the course of the ethnography, even for women with their own established

families and partners, as a means of measuring the appropriateness of given articles or aesthetic choices. In many cases the 'mother' might be present as a voice or an external 'other' against which choices might be judged. In Sandra's case even in situations where she is '100%' sure of her judgement she would rather forego a purchase and 'save it' for her mother's opinion;

If it's something that's caught my eye and I've felt absolutely 100% that I know that I will look nice then I don't need another opinion, .... I can always hear my mum's voice saying 'oh, it really suits you' or 'it doesn't do anything'. So usually I will wait, except my mum lives in Australia, so I have to choose my moments and wait for her to come back and then I'll take her back with me [to the shop] and try it on for her.

This somewhat idyllic sense of taste as an expressive practice within sociality, and through specific relational configurations, is perhaps more unusual. More often ethnographic research brought out the tensions within relationships and a strong sense of ambivalence rather than consensus. In observing these choices we can watch people coming together in their taste, defining their differences through taste, negotiating and refusing aspects of a potential relationship through taste. Subjects and objects are not related merely by acts of representation, as though distinctions in goods just reflect distinctions between persons, but rather they work as a process of mutual objectification (Miller 1987). Much of this becomes still clearer when the actual process by which people obtain goods is considered. In some cases one is able to watch how shopping together and the development of common taste in food and clothing played an important role in the courtship of young couples. Shopping was used both to test their compatibility, to accomplish compatibility and to mask inequalities in gender relations that became expressed as though they were based on mutual compromise.

Janet and Robert are an established married couple with children. In some areas they have clearly developed a sense of themselves as 'we'. In food, for example, most of the things purchased are because 'we' rather than 'I' like them. Here the exception proved the rule. Janet became pregnant during the course of the fieldwork, and we are able to contrast her shopping for food in that temporary state to her previous supermarket

shopping. During pregnancy she developed a taste for a range of foods that differed considerably from her usual preferences. During a particular shopping trip she apologised several times for the fact that her husband would end up completely at a loss, since the food she was buying related almost entirely to her individual desires and no longer conformed to the simple collectivity which had made food purchasing relatively unproblematic prior to this event. Pregnancy brought out the contrast with their normality, which was ordinarily taste as an expression of the couple rather than the individual.

When, however, it came to other facets of their material culture such as furnishing and clothing more problematic aspects of their relationship came to the fore. So, for example, they had decided together to replace a whole grouping of furniture with something in the new 'Shaker' style. This rationale was partly grounded on this style being a relatively plain one so that if they moved they would be able to transfer it to a new home. In the case of furnishings there was the sense that Janet tended to defer to her husband, in part through the construction of the transcending 'we' but also because of asymmetries of power in their relationship. Her own awareness of the implications of this gender asymmetry meant that for her, as for many women, an assertion of individuality in taste came to stand for a more general assertion of independence. Consider the following discussion regarding dressing for a social meeting with her husband's friends:-

Janet: Well, we don't entertain them but we do go out with them, you know, to a restaurant occasionally. And that's when I feel really, you know, that I haven't got anything to wear [laughs]. Because they're usually really well dressed. And have, you know, are much better off... I mean one of them's single so he hasn't - I mean he just hasn't got the responsibilities, he still lives at home and he's 35, he still lives at home with his mother. Irons his shirts and takes his suits to the cleaners and - And his girlfriend works for Benetton [clothing chain] and is very sort of, you know, very trendy. So I always feel really scruffy and [laughs] like I haven't worn the right thing when I see them. But they're very nice. It usually passes off.

Question: Do you think your husband would like you to be more 'dressy'?

Janet: Yeah, I think he would, yeah.

Question: But you're obviously not comfortable in those ...

Janet: No, I'm not actually. I always feel - I always make the mistake when I go out of trying to live up to that kind of thing and then I don't feel comfortable in what I'm wearing. And last week we went out with them - admittedly we didn't go to a very smart restaurant, we went to a fairly casual restaurant, and I just thought I'm going to wear what I feel comfortable in, to hell with it, you know. And that's what I did and I felt much more comfortable. I just think, you know, be yourself.

Question: You wouldn't want to be that sort of person?

Janet: Well, there is part of me that would, yeah. But I think it's - you know, I can't be and there's no point in even trying to think really.

At first glance this seems to assert that Janet is an individual with her own independent taste, coming to a point where she chooses to assert this in defiance of accepted canons of dress sense. But the ethnographic context allows for a more subtle interpretation. A longer acquaintance with Janet suggests that what is being called 'casual' here is not actually Janet's core sense of comfortable dressing with which she identifies. In other contexts she could be observed working in exactly the opposite direction, in effect asserting her relatively expensive and dressy clothing against those she interacted with who had neither the money nor the desire to dress up to the same degree. In short, of all the informants she was amongst the most commonly disdainful regarding other people's preference for what would commonly be called 'casual' clothing.

Understood within that larger context the conversation reveals that in this case she is simply unable to compete in a contest in which she would usually consider herself a major player. Instead she backs down with dignity and good grace from a competition she perceives as offering her little chance of winning. Taken from this perspective the

taste preference is not an assertion of individualism but rather a form of taste, and a definition of 'casual', that is created by the set of relationships.

### **Catalogues and *Colour Me Beautiful*: Domesticating the Chaos of Choice**

The cases described so far suggest that aesthetic preferences for material culture most commonly emerge out of the routine workings of the family and relationships where people are constantly bearing others in mind. It is often where this process is failing to operate along normative lines that the evidence is most compelling. One can see into, as it were, the fissures of normal expectations as the cracks open up for people whose relationships are not seen as satisfactory or who are without the relationships they ideally desire. In such cases individuals may feel the lack the basic condition of alterity - that is a firm sense of an 'other' in relation to which the concept of the self with a given opinion is most commonly formed. This may lead people to seek alternative sources of opinion.

Where there is no clear subject against which the sense of taste can be constructed, there is no shortage of commercial institutions that are only too willing to perform this role. Much of this relates to issues of convenience and knowledge, but there are other uses of catalogues as sources of advice that seem to suggest more subtle relationships being constructed between the persons concerned and the source of information. One of the major contentions for many women is the transition, after child-rearing, back to the work place. Clothing catalogues are often used as less risky forms of purchase and knowledge accumulation used to mediate the transition from home to workplace culture. Similarly the ethnography highlighted informant's concerted efforts to obtain a sense of 'what's going on out there' (as one informant put it). Women talked of consciously scrutinising passengers they identified as 'career women' or non-mothers, while travelling on public transport to re-acquaint themselves with the latest or most appropriate styles of dressing. Having lived in a confined world of childcare and its concomitant localised social relations (as described in chapters 1 and 2) women returning back to full or part-time work regularly sought the advice of their mothers or working female relatives regarding fashion. While the mother, through her extended taste relations with the daughter, provides a kind anchoring advice (in which garments are understood in relation the daughter's trajectory of clothing in general), women friends or acquaintances provide a type of advice more in keeping with the 'general'

styles or clothing mores of the moment.

For a couple of years now Jacqui, a mother of three young children, has been toying with the idea of returning to work as a clerical assistant. Despite securing an interview for a position at a local office, she laments that she has yet to feel fully confident about the proposition:

But if I get this job I don't know what I'd wear. For five days running I'll have to go out and buy myself a few things because I haven't really got any 'officey' type clothes left. Even *I* couldn't think I'd be wearing things that I wore 11 years ago. Oh God.. the thought of it. My Mum's away on holiday for the next week and I won't be able to bend her ear on it. I'll have my nervous breakdown.

In an attempt to prepare and inform herself, Jacqui borrowed a *Next Directory* mail order clothing catalogue (known for its high quality 'classically' designed separates) from a working, middle class mother living in an adjacent street. She finds the thought of re-investing, emotionally, aesthetically and financially in fashion as a daunting, even traumatic, prospect. Fashion knowledge formed an integral part of her relationships when she was a single sociable working woman but after motherhood that previously acquired knowledge has become redundant. While middle class mothers on and around Jay Road might be identified as 'clothes conscious' this particular consciousness revolved around an aesthetic generated through the particular locality of their social relations as mothers. While Jacqui may, therefore, be fully versed in that particular aesthetic she is fully aware that it will not transfer to a different set of relations demanded by a new workplace.

Now, as well as having to re-familiarise herself with high-street fashion styles, Jacqui has to operate with an unfamiliar concept of 'officey'; a style formulated around the ideal of fitting in, neutrality and the avoidance of offending convention as against the expression of individual taste. Despite practising with her clothing during a preliminary training course (throughout which she was prepared to admit she 'managed to sort of turn out looking respectable') Jacqui desperately seeks consensus over a suitable appearance

As Carrier (1990) has noted in his analysis of catalogues, many of such publications deliberately illustrate commodities in the form of goods that have already been integrated into the lives of potential purchasers (here represented by models). As such they provide the kind of re-assurance that such objects can be appropriated as part of people's lives.

This is clearly directed to just the kinds of concerns being expressed by Jacqui.

As discussed in the previous chapter, mail order catalogues have a strong historical link with British working class credit provision, a cultural association challenged in the early 1980s with the introduction of the *Next Directory* clothing catalogue; a limited edition publication costing £5 featuring the product range of the exceptionally successful high street fashion retail outlets of the same name. The *Next Directory* (and later catalogues, *La Redoute*, *Racing Green* and *Land's End*), while offering a credit instalment scheme, promoted fashion catalogues as a convenient but more exclusive form of mail order aimed at a middle class market. During the first years of its launch the *Next* catalogue in particular used contemporary graphics and design in order to distinguish the publication from the less 'designerly' traditional forms. Catalogues such as *Next*, *Racing Green* and *Land's End*, unlike mainstream mail order publications, also continue to consciously build on their reputation for providing wearable 'classics' as opposed to highly temporal fashion items. Staple garments include white linen blouses, generously cut swimming costumes and classic cut chinos. In this sense, such catalogues are ideally appropriated as a 'safe' aesthetic means of moving from a child-centric life stage to a more public one. Although such catalogues are generally consulted in the context of social relations (passed as they are between friends, neighbours and family) they constitute a form of distanced objectivity as regards the navigation of a daunting and temporal fashion world. They do not simply provide images of succinctly categorised dress types ('work', 'evening', 'leisure', etc.) and the safety of the tasteful 'classic', they act as an objective, shared medium through which the vagaries of fashion have to some extent been filtered and processed.

Cathy, like Jacqui, is contemplating applying for a new part-time job after six years working full-time as a parent. Although she is aware that she needs to familiarise herself with the latest 'work-wear' she is also very wary of over-investing in this proposition as she is, as yet, unsure as to the ramifications of her returning to work in general;

My friend who lives across the road has just got the *Next Directory* and she asked me if I was interested in ordering anything through that. And I've not actually had the time to look through it yet but I'm probably in a better financial position than Rachel [neighbour] but we're still, you know, when you're on one income, you know, she looks for things for herself for going out to work in the *Next Directory*. I just think that probably it's a bit too pricey for me.

Many middle class informants regularly used catalogues such as *Land's End* and *Racing Green* (both of which promote the use of natural fibres, neutral colours and styles, such as crew neck jumpers and polo shirts) but disassociate this practice entirely from 'traditional' mail order purchase (and its credit schemes). Instead they use terms indicative of the 'rational' shopping associated with department stores such as *John Lewis*, in which value for money and 'sensible' styling prevail as expressed by a Flora, a part-time working mother;

I don't use catalogues in a traditional sense but I do use *Land's End*. I buy a lot of stuff through them. I wanted to buy myself a sort of canvas brief case and a friend of mine had one and I asked him where he got it and he said '*Land's End*' and I thought he meant the end of the pinnacle – but then I realised because my husband told me it was a catalogue and I rang up. It just happens to have things I like. Like this skirt [pointing to skirt worn], for example, it's a nice length and good quality, I sound like a saleswoman don't I!? I just think it's quite convenient to buy that way but it's a bore if you have to sent it back so I tend to be quite cautious about what I buy.

Outside of this use of the catalogue, particularly as a guide to work-related apparel, many people want still more support in their search for their own taste. Jacqui, for example, has a fantasy of another voice that will help her determine what she should have or be 'I could really do with someone coming in and saying, "you need this and this and this".' It is this demand that has led to commercial institutions going well beyond the conventional representations of the mail order catalogue, to provide active

advice in the form of both personal help and a cosmology within which a person can understand themselves to be located. The most vivid example of this that emerged during the fieldwork is the company *Colour Me Beautiful* (CMB).

Georgina is one of a number of keen clients of *Colour Me Beautiful* encountered during the ethnography. As an image consultancy CMB specialises in using colour and style advice to enhance the confidence of women. Although CMB incorporates the terminology of the fashion industry, referring to 'seasonal palettes' and contemporary accessories, the company promotes a form of anti-fashion to its clients. It advocates instead, what it claims to be a rational calculation of appropriate individual style. CMB operates in a similar fashion to party plan direct sales systems (such as Tupperware) in which a consultant or salesperson creates a network of clients (ostensibly through word of mouth) and then promotes the company to women informally gathered as a party. This allows CMB to combine professional advice with sociality and the building of consensus amongst a woman's friends and family. Out of what may seem the chaos of fashion choices, CMB claims to offer objective advice and the skills which will ensure that 'whatever you buy is making the most of you' (CMB 1998).

Georgina is part of a nuclear family with a secure middle class income and, in general, expresses contentment about her life. Nevertheless, as in most such families, there are tensions and unresolved aspects of relationships that emerge on closer acquaintance. In this case the couple themselves can properly be termed happily married, but this contentment masks some basic incompatibilities between the partners which they have learnt to live with. This emerges out of the discussion of the objects in the home.

The husband is a professional artist with strong views on art and many other aesthetic matters. This makes it difficult for the aesthetics of the home to become the medium for expressing their relationship, which Georgina knows would and should include far more compromise and shared forms than are likely to emerge within a sphere where his opinions are so clear and strong. She would have liked romantic pictures such as Pre-Raphaelite prints, he is tending towards minimalism. As a result, there are no decorations on the wall. Unhung pictures lean against the skirting boards around the living room, evidence of the yet unresolved 'stale-mate' that defines the couple's taste. Instead, Georgina creates spaces for objects that represent the fortuitous results of

relationships such as gifts and souvenirs. By ending up with objects as tokens of relationships (with friends, relatives and neighbours) they avoid potentially acrimonious disputes about aesthetics.

By the same token Georgina's husband, whose views tend to the ascetic and austere, cannot be the basis from which she builds up her confidence to know what she likes in the field of clothing and fashion. Considering her return to work she initially relied, unsuccessfully, on mail order catalogues for fashion guidance; 'I have used a catalogue to buy clothes with little success' she comments; 'It was a black dress [I sent back] it was absolutely vile.' Instead of using her partner or an inanimate and untrustworthy catalogue Georgina has found another solution through the influence of her mother. It was her mother who first went to a CMB meeting where for a fee the company's consultant will inform a subject about the colours they 'ought' to like: using seasonal definitions as a way of distinguishing 'colourings'.

Just like Jacqui, Georgina was nervous about returning to work, in this case as a banker, expected to confidently meet clients in a competitive and commercial domain. She felt unequipped in every sense. While she found other forms of direct selling such as Tupperware parties embarrassing and patronising, she had no such feelings about CMB. The procedure used is intended to give the aura of a rationalised criterion for making aesthetic choices - a range of colour swatches are put next to the face of the customer in front of a group of other women who sanction sometimes controversial suggestions - such as yellows described as 'mustard' and 'watermelon.'

Chua (1992), in her observational study of clothes shopping in a Singapore designer store, describes how women use the experimentation of trying on different clothing and 'looks' as a form of self-display and narcissism in which the shop is incorporated as a stage. In the presence of shop assistants and overseen by their male partners, women actively work on themselves as objects in direct relation to the 'male gaze' (the male partner, Chua argues, invariably acts as the ultimate voice of veto). In contrast, the all-female context of the CMB party entirely negates the power of the 'male gaze' in preference of rationalised system which also takes into consideration the localised context of the social relations in which it takes place. The opinions of husbands and

partners are rarely alluded to, and most frequently cited in disparaging, rather than constructive terms.

CMB is promoted as a rational form of budgeting as one can adhere to prescribed colours therefore avoiding expensive fashion mistakes; 'It's actually very helpful when you're flitting around sales and things as you know what colours are going to suit you' as one 'converted' informant commented. Taste decisions are reduced to an objectively selected range of options based purely on colour and naturalised through the notion of seasons. 'You are a season and can relate to other women's seasons on this basis. What you might think as bad taste is actually legitimate taste for another woman', commented Georgina. In this way, women are offered simultaneously the individualism of a specific colour palette and the comfort of a broader, consensual sanctioning of its associated aesthetics.

CMB demands a new set of skills in deciphering a complex array of colours, as clients are given a colour chart and swatches of colour to practice their choices after the initial consultation. The colours are graded in suitability and also aligned to specific parts of the body. 'The woman who did it with us had the other girls commenting as to which one they thought was right' recounted Georgina. 'I mean I was a bit worried because the colours - which is my mother's - I'm not terribly keen on, and the winter ones were things like black which I like a lot', she continued. The account reveals subtle differences in the way an individual identifies with their given colours; 'Reds aren't pillar box reds, they've got to be bluey reds, more scarlet red, and sort of the royal blue. That electric royal blue's very good.' This agreement need not be total 'I actually disagree with some of it, because I don't actually like ice lemon another yellow that was 25%. That was sort of a real 'no no' in my colour range.' The consultant remedied this ambivalence expressed by Georgina with a reassuring statement that coalesced the individual's preference with the company's recommended choices; 'you're the only season that can wear black and that you're probably a winter anyway', concluded the consultant.

As the CMB party plan works ostensibly through word of mouth recommendation and relies on the social network of women within specific social groups, many women of thirty-five and upwards on or around Jay Road have been invited to at least one CMB

event. As consultants are usually local women (recruited themselves after attending a party) they offer not only a corporate interpretation of aesthetics but one which is mediated by the relations of the specific locality. The formal advice of the image consultant is also melded with that of significant relations such as that between mother/daughter. Even in circumstances where mother's lived hundred of miles apart from their daughter's as in the case of Chloe, who after hearing of her mother's transformation, booked her own party;

My mother was designated by *Colour Me Beautiful* as 'an autumn'. It was all the colours she had never worn before and she looked a million dollars - she chucked out most of her wardrobe and she's a real success story - she now wears mustard and watermelon!

Impressed by her own mother's transformation, and following her own CMB consultation, Georgina had a big clear out of her clothes taking everything to the *Oxfam* charity shop. She felt transformed by the confidence of finding her own colours, and began to practice the technique on her friends with a new found aesthetic perception; 'It's funny once you leave one of those things and you've worked out what your colours are and what's good on you, you start looking round your friends and you think no, that's the wrong colour for you mate!' Georgina also felt that this newly found aesthetic principle in fact supplanted her previous values; 'I used to spend a heap of money on clothes and loved clothes, very beautiful clothes, but a lot of them are completely crap. So there you are.' Cut, fabric, style, designer labels are all replaced by the primacy of colour choice which freed the consumption process up.

In this case CMB provides an ideal solution for the absence of effective and immediate social relations. Just as in the choice of living room objects Georgina comes to apply the alternative strategy of using the fortuitous detritus of events and relationships, in this case CMB provides the highly acceptable alternative of a façade of rationalism. For as against the hazards of fashion in constructing aesthetic choice, and as against the sheer level of work involved in obtaining knowledge from magazines and peers about fashion (Evans and Thornton 1989; Winship 1987), CMB provides for a certain form of stability and certainty. Once one knows one's colours this stands for longevity in a field of material culture defined by its fickleness. Within this new regime one can identify

with 'classics' without the need of designer labels and a couturier's knowledge of fashion and cut. Garments in the wardrobe can be re-appraised according to a new consensus - publicly sanctioned and ceremonially acknowledged, during the sessions held by the company in women's homes. This appeals particularly to older professional women who would normally pride themselves on their relative knowledge and experience and yet, with respect to fashion, are faced with a field of knowledge in which younger women are advantaged. Of course, not everyone who uses CMB will actually reduce themselves to its proclaimed rationalism, rather such strategies are incorporated into a range of other, often contradictory, relations with fashion and style.

### **Wardrobe Biographies: Clothing Trajectories and Mid-Life Make-Overs**

In their discussion of women's wardrobes Banim and Guy (2001) challenge simplistic accounts of the fashion 'cycle' (whereby women are duped into buying the latest garment only to find it stylistically redundant a short time later) through their analysis of women's kept, but unworn, clothing. Rather than viewing women as the victims of an endlessly changing fashion system (Barthes 1983), the authors consider the ways in which women cherish, cast off or keep certain garments in relation to the construction and deconstruction of particular selves; a means of maintaining or severing a link with former selves. The wardrobe then, is compiled of a complex series of interacting garments which, whilst being produced in accordance with a fashion system (Fine and Leopold 1993), are clearly not consumed by the majority of women in this vein.

Katie, lives on Jay Road with her husband and six year old son, and like other women in the ethnography she spoke of coming to a stage where she wanted to 're-think' or entirely transform her wardrobe in relation to a new understanding of herself or life stage. In the course of the ethnography, Katie described suffering from mild depression that she aligned with more general feelings of inadequacy regarding her failure to pursue a career. Unlike many other mothers' in the area, who keenly joined mother's groups such as the NCT, Katie had actively avoided these groups which she criticised as being 'too obsessed with motherhood and not interested enough in the women themselves'. She and her husband had met as members of the Labour Party, but since the birth of her son, Katie had gradually lost contact with her politically active friends but remained uncomfortable with what she saw as the forced sociality created around

mothering. This ambivalence manifested itself, in part, through Katie's desire to re-think her taste in and attitudes towards her clothes;

I've got to get rid of so much stuff. If I'm not wearing them why have them there crowding up everything? I've reached an age where I realise there are only seven days in the week and whereas Jim [husband] spends a quite large proportion of money on suits, he does need them for work.

The paring down of Katie's wardrobe is part of a broader move towards the paring down of the couple's household economy in an attempt to counter the debts they are trying to manage. However, despite Katie's feeling that a large part of her clothes are redundant (she rarely socialises and does not go out to work), her wardrobe is testament to a kind of cyclical dynamic in which she periodically tries to rejoin what she describes as 'the mainstream'. After bouts of clearing out her wardrobe and donating the contents to charity shops, Katie has indulged in clothes shopping which she feels forced to conceal;

I mean, I have in the past bought clothes that I didn't think I should buy, you know? When we're paying off these debts or saving up for something, and I've hidden them. I've put them in the wardrobe and haven't displayed them and showed them like you usually do – and I've made sure he [husband] couldn't see me bring them in and then I sort of appear in them three weeks later and lied about it – I've only done it a few times as I actually feel guilty about it.

The linking of compulsive or inappropriate purchases with depression, guilt and uncontrolled emotions was prevalent in discussions around the acquisition of clothing and cosmetics. Women most often located this practice in relation to internalised feelings about themselves, their own self-esteem, which they viewed as being qualitatively different from anxieties regarding external factors related to their families, work, or broader concerns as illustrated in this extract from discussion with Linda;

If you feel a bit down on yourself particularly, you'll go out and buy something to make yourself feel better. I suppose it's image, isn't it? You feel, I suppose you feel, if you feel you look good you might feel better about yourself. That's why you're down on yourself, not necessarily what's going on in life, not if I'm depressed, I'm depressed like when we were moving. I was anxious about moving. I don't think that made me go out and buy clothes, if I'm feeling particularly down on myself about something then I'm more likely to do it.

Combating internal discord through the re-arrangement of the exteriorised self was seen as both a positive and therapeutic measure or, if taken to extremes, a symptom of some greater problem. Jane, for example, 'admitted' to being a compulsive clothes shopper but took measures to counter the negative effects of this practice through confining her shopping trips to less expensive retail outlets and asking her husband to accompany her;

I'm a compulsive clothes shopper. But I will always drag James [husband] along ... I will buy cheap things that don't last very long ... because I like buying clothes and I can't keep going out and buying expensive ones! Sometimes most of the clothes that I've got that were more expensive I like very much and last longer but somehow the logic still doesn't quite sink in though you'll still get tempted by the odd bargain that probably really isn't a bargain.

While, as the ethnographic evidence suggests, many women actively incorporate their mothers into their taste decision making on a positive level, others used them, as well as other female kin and friends, as a counterpoint to their own practice. In the following excerpts two separate women describe what they view as the obsessive shopping practices of their relatives;

Anne: My mother's a shopaholic, she's bordering on being quite dangerous, she spends money like there's no tomorrow and hers is always clothes. She's always buying things for herself, she's got so many clothes I think she could wear a different outfit every day of the year and she just goes on and on and on buying.

Jenny: I think she [aunty] is one of those people that is a compulsive shopper, I don't think she can ever go to the shops and come back empty handed. I went clothes shopping with her on Saturday, she is looking for something for her daughter's wedding, she has been looking for months, and she has bought about four different outfits, and she still doesn't have one which she is happy with. And she was buying things on Saturday, just a shirt and a pair of leggings, just so she would have a few more options, the wedding is in Los Angeles so...

Women's consumption of clothing and appearance related apparel exists within the context of specific social relations as well as a broader moral discourse around value and appropriateness (in terms of age, occasion, etc.). As illustrated by the opening example of Sharon, and the spoiled attendance of her mother's seventieth birthday party, taste choices are anxiety provoking to the point where the minutiae of an outfit might have 'real' consequences. In considering, for example, the implications of Sharon's evening skirt, the 'compulsive' shopping of Jenny's aunt (in which she buys four outfits for her daughter's wedding) this suggests a strategic, rather than irrational, approach to choice. However, Jenny's aunt, unlike Sharon, has the resources and incentive to cover a range of potential configurations in terms of the styles and social relations she will encounter at her daughter's wedding in a foreign country, organised by distant in-laws to be.

Women, then, use a range of strategies to control their relationship to the infinite array of choices and the pressures and pleasures of the temporal world of fashion. Some appropriated the terms of reference used in the fashion industry itself, such as the ideal slim figure, while simultaneously using them to resist the pressures of the fashion system and the hazards of potential choices. This is illustrated in the logic Anne uses to set herself outside the hazards of aesthetic decision by inverting the pressure of 'ideal fashion figure';

My clothes sense is a very particular thing, I feel I'm at least 2 sizes above what I should be. And I refuse to buy what I call 'fat clothes' on the basis that if I want to do that, I've given in. So in a sense it's saved me a lot of money because I always go through sales things otherwise

had I been my ideal size I would have been sorely tempted, but now I just think 'oh'.

While, ironically, Anne uses the prescriptive notion of the ideal figure to avoid fully investing in contemporary fashion, Amy (26 year old mother of children aged ten and six) desperately seeks to embrace the nuances and temporality of contemporary fashions in order to cast aside her a 'motherly' aesthetic she feels she has had foisted upon her;

I feel I look less younger than I feel I want to be, because when I was married they brought me up to this old fashioned type of thing where I used to wear the old fashioned types of dresses and stuff like that and I just felt 'no' I couldn't have these no more. So now when I go out I try and get as much of the really young [stuff] to make me look young. I feel old at the moment, when you've got kids you feel twice as old.

Unlike the majority of other women on and around Jay Road, Amy seeks to reverse a general taste trajectory in which pre-motherhood is associated with experimentation in appearance and clothing and post-motherhood is associated with a 'maturing' attitude towards clothing framed in the security of 'knowing what you like'; although as illustrated in the popular use of catalogue and CMB this state of balance is seen to have come to fruition but rather remains an on-going quest.

Of course there are many women who show a complete disinterest in fashion all together, however, in the case of this specific urban fieldwork this would constitute the exception rather than the rule. But even in such cases the 'work' of avoiding taste choices and investment in such intimate matters of aesthetics is possibly more onerous than engaging (as we have seen) through a range of strategies with the hazards of this labour. The numerous strategies engaged in limiting or opting out of such investments reveals how aesthetics, as a practice, is inseparable from social relations themselves.

Carla (27, mother of six year old Tara) ideologically deplores the industry around image and fashion directed at women but has felt compelled to entertain it (particularly during what she views retrospectively as moments of depression or emotional weakness). Carla

firmly associates her interest in fashion with her youth and voices what other middle class women on the street implicitly adhere to, a liberal feminist critique of fashion;

Occasionally if feel really depressed and bored I buy women's magazines [in embarrassed squeak]. But I try and buy *Marie Claire* because its got the least kind of orgasm stuff in it which I hate, its got some interesting stuff in it, but basically I abhor magazines, I think they're vile. ...I have to admit to succumbing on various occasions, it's interesting because I used to buy a lot of women's magazines I had piles of them. I have really lost interest, I don't know, I used to be quite into fashion magazines, I don't care anymore. I don't know about you [to researcher], but as I've got older I've thought they're such a load of rubbish. These women [editors and journalists] are so unreal I mean 'get a life!' . You know, it doesn't matter what length your hemline they're all [women's magazines] managed by air heads and .... governed by men.

Throughout the preceding descriptions of women's relation to aesthetics as a practice, particularly in form of clothing and personal appearance, there exists a social compunction to invest in this practice whilst simultaneously refusing aspects of fashion which underpin its meanings. The contradictory nature of the relation between women, fashion and consumption as an aspect of modernity is a well established area (Entwhistle 2000; Peiss 1998; Radner 1995; Wilson 1985). While the 'high' art and literature of modernism is dominated by male artists, mass culture has been historically denigrated as 'feminine' (Huyssen 1986). Similarly, it has been argued that women inhabit a paradoxical and passive position operating simultaneously as both subject and object of consumer culture, in the form of glamour, sexuality and appearance; at once constructing themselves through commodities whilst being constructed by those same commodity forms (Winship 1987; Dowling 1993). In contrast to such critiques, other feminist writers have called for the acknowledgement of women's agency in relation to such cultural practices around fashion and glamour (Nava 1992; McRobbie 1991; Stacey 1994) also highlighting the ways in which certain women (in terms of class and ethnicity) occupy a less privileged position to the progressive or liberating aspects of

modernity in the form of mass consumption (Gaines 1988; Skeggs 1997; Steedman 1985).

Historically, then, the role of women in matters of taste, fashion and aesthetics is well established (de Grazia 1996; Attfield and Kirkham 1989). In a Bourdieuan sense, however, it has been argued that women have been ‘necessarily involved in drawing the distinctions of taste, but [are] not recognized as its originators, and [are] not in a position to benefit personally from any status its display might accrue’ (Lury 1997:132). Furthermore, the fact that women’s appearance and ‘attractiveness’ has real cultural and economic implications in the workplace (Adkins 1995) means that women are ‘denied the opportunity to exchange their cultural capital as economic capital on the same terms as men’ (Lury 1997:154).

While debates around women and fashion are loosely divided between those which critique its prescriptive nature and those who consider it as a form of masquerade, narcissism or a stance of modernity, neither ‘sides’ of theoretical debate match easily with empirical data of women on Jay Road in which the actual social relations of aesthetics and the anxiety of fashion are generated and resolved.

The following section of the chapter considers the ways in which women literally turn their ‘cultural capital’ and relations in the areas of fashion and appearance to the market, through their involvement with direct sales concerns aimed specifically at the sociality of women.

### **Articulating the Sociality of Aesthetics: *Mary Kay* and Network Selling**

While the first part of this chapter has explored the role of commercial concerns such as CMB and women’s individualised strategies, in relation to the anxieties surrounding women’s fashion and clothing choices, the following ethnographic data considers the intervention of another corporate structure in matters of women’s self-representation, appearance and social networks. *Mary Kay* cosmetics is a direct sales company which, in contrast to its established competitor Avon (which uses door-to-door sales techniques), uses the party plan mode of selling. The company incorporates motivational sales techniques originated in the US to distribute its products and recruit its sales team. Similarly, Tupperware and *Anne Summers* distribute plastic wares and

lingerie/sex aids respectively using the party plan system, which relies on word-of-mouth promotion and the use of female social networks.

The party plan sales technique, in which a dealer makes a product demonstration in the home of a volunteer 'hostess' (with an audience of the hostess's invited friends and neighbours) has been historically aligned to the expansion of suburban areas and middle class social groupings (Biggart 1989). Party plan businesses also rely almost exclusively on a female sales force and were developed in response to the ways in which direct sales (such as door-to-door calling) were incorporated into female networks (Biggart 1989; Clarke 1999). In the vicinity of Jay Road, invitations to commercial 'parties' are exchanged exclusively through women and relate directly to concerns such as home-making (*Tupperware*); appearance/fashion/sex (*Avon*, *Colour Me Beautiful*, *Mary Kay*, *Anne Summers*) and child-rearing (*Dorling Kindersley* book club). This particular form of direct selling is unique in addressing women simultaneously as consumers and potential sales representatives. The product demonstration, which forms the focus of the 'parties', is intended to promote merchandise as well as recruitment of potential hostesses and dealers. As party plan schemes are organised in strict relation to locality (to ensure dealer's have maximum access to a particular geographically bounded area) dealers and hostesses themselves 'belong to' the group of women attending a given party. In this sense, the party plan (even if belonging to a broader corporate base) takes on a localised context appealing specifically to particular social and ethnic groups.

In the course of the ethnography several women on Jay Road became involved as dealers, hostesses and guests in party plan enterprises which self-consciously promote themselves to women as a means of conveniently and sociably acquiring goods, as well as offering opportunities for part or full-time work. Tricia, for example, a black British woman of Jamaican origin, was introduced to the *Mary Kay* company through a female friend, Charntelle, whom she knew from her previous neighbourhood several miles away. Now living in Sparrow Court and looking after her two children as a single parent, Tricia rarely gets to see Charntelle and other girlfriends as her life is now largely confined to caring for her children in the area around Jay Road.

Like many of the women described in the previous section of the chapter, Tricia is keen to find a way back into 'the mainstream'. She also feels it is time to 'make the most of

herself' and get 'back on the market' and find a new partner. Now her children are settled into their respective schools she desperately wants to pursue her dream of being a successful career woman. It was in this context that her friend Charntelle offered Tricia a free 'make-over' if she agreed to attend a local *Mary Kay* meeting. Impressed by the company's ideologies Tricia agreed to set herself up as a *Mary Kay* agent, and has subsequently become increasingly ambitious and committed to a new regime of networking and 'glamourisation'. Tricia looks notably young for her age (she is in her early forties) and sees this a major advantage in joining a beauty-based company. As she is unable to afford paid childcare, in keeping with what has been described as the imperative of an 'ethnic economy' (Westwood and Bhacu 1988), she has turned to an entrepreneurial venture as the most appropriate form of part-time, flexible work.

*Mary Kay* products comprise a range of facial treatments (cleansers, toners, moisturisers, etc.), perfumes and make-up. The distinctive pink packaging forms part of an overall aesthetic generated through the visual and physical demonstration of the products within women's homes (and occasionally workplaces). The *Mary Kay* demonstrator, unlike over the counter retail sales service, strives to sustain an on-going relationship with her customer through follow up calls and regular contact regarding potential events and changing product ranges. The party plan sales technique requires women to use local knowledge and social networks to make sales and encourage further sales recruits. Acting as agents of the company (rather than salaried employees) women receive a small percentage of commission on sales made. But as commission-only based workers, they have to make an initial capital investment in the products, demonstration goods and associated advertising literature as well as cover costs for local sales meetings.

The *Mary Kay* company promotes a strong sense of corporate identity amongst its sales people who rely upon each other and their managers for support and financial success. Women not only receive commission on their own product sales, but on the product sales of their own recruits; therefore the securing of new members is as significant as the securing of a product sale. As well as using a strong corporate aesthetic (pink is utilised in the packaging of all products and corporate literature) the company uses the figure head of elderly corporate leader *Mary Kay* as an icon herself, objectified in the form of the ultimate *Mary Kay* sales prize (initiated by Mary Kay herself) of a pink Mercedes.

In the case of Tricia, her association with *Mary Kay* offered the possibility of entrepreneurial activity, supplemental income, flexible working hours and a social life outside the domestic sphere. Due to the local specificity of the social networks through which this form of direct selling operates, Tricia has also become acquainted with an expanded range of friends who came together as part of a broader black British entrepreneurial endeavour. In local sales meetings, for example, *Mary Kay* recruits were encouraged to attend events such as an anti-Racist gathering at a local university featuring a promotional stall for black entrepreneurship.

Outside of this specific localised culture, the concept of entrepreneurship, promoted by party plan companies, is explicitly tied to the valorisation of women's work; aesthetic, domestic and social. Their inspirational sales meetings involve complex rituals of gift giving and recognition awards in which women are encouraged to nurture their relations with other dealers as well as strive to achieve higher sales for the affiliated units. This is a vital means of generating relations amongst an otherwise disparate commission-only work force. In business terms, direct sales is notorious for the high turn-over of its salesforce, due in part to inevitable saturation of 'natural' social networks used by women to affect sales (Biggart 1989). The material culture of corporations such as *Mary Kay* embraces a conservative 'feminine aesthetic'; decorative pins and types of jewellery reminiscent of romantic fairy tales, are routinely used in 'affirmation' ceremonies within the company (pink roses, pearls, tiaras, etc.).

Similarly, women are addressed in terms of issues that form the fabric of everyday dilemmas and biographies as illustrated in the use of 'I' stories at *Mary Kay* sales meetings. Taking the form of a public 'confessional', women are asked to relate their stories, culminating in the transformative power of their joining *Mary Kay*, to the applause of their fellow sales team. These testaments revolve around descriptions of the hardship of mothering, problems of low self-esteem and diminished social lives. To quote one such typical example; 'now [after *Mary Kay*] I can have as many pairs of shoes as I want, I have a full-time au pair and I never have to stare in a shop window again without being able to buy'.

Women's relation to aesthetics is most commonly encountered in terms of the social relations and practices around their own appearances manifest in clothing and cosmetics. In conjuring up a direct relation between women's shared relation to fashion (in terms of humbling 'disasters' and desperately mis-led efforts to succeed) and a shared potential to reverse that tentative relation, the *Mary Kay* company acknowledges women's aesthetic work as part of a broader moral economy. The poignant relation between not being able to afford a new pair of shoes and not being able to afford childcare, used in the 'I' stories of *Mary Kay*'s recruitment speeches, the politics of value encountered in women's everyday provisioning.

'Success', as visualised in particular forms of gendered material culture, is a common feature of 'pep' meetings. At one particular meeting, a leading manager, named Carole, uses her own three carat heart-shaped diamond ring to vouch for the 'promise of success' with *Mary Kay*. Parading her 'bounty', Carole announces that she wears the ring as a testament to her own self-achievement and the support of other women; 'I could put braces on the children of the whole neighbourhood with the cost of this ring, but this ring is about all the women who have helped me on my way - and how I too have changed or touched the lives of all those women through beauty classes or otherwise'. She adds that her other diamond, an engagement ring, also came courtesy of *Mary Kay* as a client recommended a single man to her and two years later they married.

In the final address to the audience, Carol asked the audience to reflect on their lives, ambitions and fashion mistakes and urged women to 'confess' in a consensual atmosphere. As the price of the '*Mary Kay* Starter' kit is £75, potential recruits were asked, in particular, to consider some of their 'fashion' mistakes in relation to such a sum;

How many of you have wasted £75 on buying something that doesn't fit or you don't like? How many of you have taken home a pair of shoes only to realise they make you look like a cheap trick rather than the Princess you saw in the mirror? I bought a ridiculous skin tight shiny grey dress with a clown's collar, my children nearly wet their pants when they saw it! And all for £200. Doesn't this make the

investment in a *Mary Kay* case for £75 look like better ways of transforming your life?

Although *Mary Kay* is extreme in its utilisation of conservative, popular feminine culture (which is often parodied by even the most devoted of sales women) it overtly acknowledges, in a social context, the conflation of women's lives as consumers and provisioners. Similarly, Tupperware provides its dealers with a supportive network and encourages women to convert their social and domestic skills to sales in the public arena.

While *Mary Kay* is directed at confidence enhancing 'make-overs' and self-rewarding cosmetic treatments, Tupperware, as a company and product range, is aimed at the everyday domestic activities of provisioning home and children and is the networking sales company encountered most frequently by mothers of small children on Jay Road. Sally, mother of one year old Tim, joined the Tupperware company as a dealer after attending a neighbour's party on the street. Initially she had felt embarrassed by the idea of selling products to friends and neighbours but after attending sales 'pep' talks in her area felt supported by her local unit dubbed the 'Bumble Bees'.

The 'Bumble Bees' meet every week in an industrial park a ten-minute bus ride away from Jay Road. Here the local dealers and managers meet for sales recognition award ceremonies and prize giving, and to introduce new recruits to the broader aspects of the company. A typical meeting is attended by approximately sixty women, the only male attendees being the husband and teenage son of the area manager. Like *Mary Kay*, a complex series of hierarchically arranged awards are presented to wide public applause as women walk up to a stage and choose from an array of prizes from jewellery to luggage. Pins and words of acknowledgement are presented as the corporate anthem 'I've got the Tupper Feeling Deep in my Heart' is sung to the amusement of the gathered women. The sound of jokes and banter between women from different dealer groups fills the warehouse and the manager's son and husband are frequently used as 'jesters', appearing for example, in flamboyant insect outfits much to the delight of the assembled women.

The Tupperware gatherings use women's tacit experience of provisioning and consumption as a backdrop to discussion regarding improved home demonstrations or

potential ways of appealing to other women (in the summer, for example, explaining the merits of Tupperware for a picnic). Encouraging new recruits to invest in a 'Starter Kit' of Tupperware, dealers imparted their own experience with Tupperware (how it had provided extra money for childcare or treats, etc.) and, like *Mary Kay*, sought to enhance women's confidence with the use of personal testament.

While *Mary Kay* and Tupperware loosely draw on conservative ideas of women's social selves and domestic lives, *Anne Summers* lingerie direct sales scheme (which follows the same network principle) openly subverts the domestic tradition of the home party plan; although the lingerie parties take place in the home of a hostess, the wares and banter of the demonstrator is deliberately provocative in its open reference to sex. The selling of underwear and sex aids is not in and of itself counter to conservative ideas about women's roles and work within the home. Rather, *Anne Summers* parties encourage a female-only sociality, also based on 'confessionals' in the form of banter around certain types of revealing clothing, etc., mostly configured outside the roles of partner and mother. Alcohol is typical at such events and women are encouraged, as one dealer on Jay Road described 'to be naughty'. The trying on of erotic or skimpy underwear (even over clothing) for the comments of friends and neighbours presents women to each other outside the terms of their normally prescribed social worlds.

Party plan sales schemes utilise the social relations women commonly use in their negotiation of the fraught and contradictory world of fashion, clothing and appearance. As such, they thrive on emphasising women's shared understandings and anxieties in these areas of consumption. As well as formalising the voice of an 'other', lending women a set of social relations in which aesthetic selections may be safely made, women, in turn, can turn their experience and tacit skills (their cultural capital) to economic ends as party plan dealers.

## Conclusion

In daily life the assertion of an aesthetic judgement is not simply that of the autonomous agent but most commonly part of a social context in which the expression of aesthetics is intended to be part of relationships. These may be relationships with others who are present, others held in mind, or those more complex internalised constructions of other subjects which psychoanalysts have called 'internal objects' to whom we relate our

judgements. The aesthetic judgement, then, is itself the creature of social rather than merely individual agency. Our opinion is a partially formed set of possibilities that is only concretised as clear preference through its relationship to other such opinions during its formation. To that extent the question of aesthetics may shed light onto an existential problem of modernity - the sense of uncertainty about the location of the self. This uncertainty rests in the larger problem posed by a dialectic of objectification in which the subject is itself constituted by the cultural forms in which it recognises itself, which therefore makes the very materiality and history of the objects in question an active player in this process. There is a burgeoning literature on 'reflexive modernity' (for example Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994) but this tends to assume an individual wrestling with their own angst in the face of perceived risks. This is the problem of constructing a consistent auto-biography that can be found in some of Giddens' (1991) work on self-reflexivity. Even where there is a clear concern with mediation in such studies (for example Lash and Urry 1994:48) these mediations tend to be institutional, as in the industries of cultural and fashion production, rather than social (McRobbie 1998). It becomes very difficult to discern within that literature something approximating the ethnographic focus upon the sociality of the domestic and the particularity of gender.

The point made by the evidence of this chapter is not simply that aesthetic judgements are founded in social relations, but that the actual process of aesthetic adjudication is most commonly a social rather than an individual process. Aesthetic and social relations are both created in the same act of objectification. It is not just the relations between persons as a field of practice that is crucial to understanding aesthetic acts, but also the relations between the objects themselves. The key aesthetic unit is not often a single object any more than it is a single person. Mostly it is the 'wardrobe' or the 'room' within which are found a whole configuration of objects that together constitute a relationship to taste as a social phenomenon. As McCracken (1988: 118-129) argued in his discussion of the 'Diderot Effect' it is often the consequences of one choice for others that renders that choice most significant. So we found that Charmaigne spent much of her shopping looking for the single item with a floral print since she understood this as a point of departure into a whole new genre of clothing. A new relation to a genre or styling might have broader implications for other sites of the body, as seen in the phenomenon of the 'make-over'.

Many of the examples presented in this chapter demonstrate the anxiety that the objects, as the material evidence of one's choice, raise for the person making that choice. In some cases it is the order of the goods themselves that is used by the subject to resolve this anxiety. In the new order established by CMB a particular attribute of colour is allowed to transcend the aesthetic concern with any individual garment in favour of an array of goods based around this overarching principle. With *Mary Kay* an over-arching aesthetic of the 'feminine', under which a systematised collection of treatment products is understood, is relied upon in making sense of choice. In effect it is the order of things, here transformed into a hyper-rationalism of colour and femininity, that is used to resolve the problems constituted by the disorder of persons. Often our increasing uncertainty as to what we should like is resolved in making an individual purchase, largely a small adjustment to a much larger package of related things that is a wardrobe or the home interior. In a sense it is easier if we let the objects choose each other.

Georgina illustrates this point. At first glance the living room and clothing as two arenas of choice seem to indicate two utterly different principles in Georgina's aesthetic practice. The living room is stocked with the fortuitous results of events manifest in gifts or souvenirs, while in clothing she has turned to the facade of rationalism in colour fitting. The contrastive schemes only make sense as a pair when they are both seen as strategies for the resolution of uncertainty that arises out of Georgina's social relationships. Both save her from having to have an aesthetic preference in relation to her husband the artist. In these circumstances both the fortuitous nature of living room objects on the one hand, and the fake rationalism of CMB on the other, come to the rescue. Under the regime of CMB clothes can no longer go out of fashion and neither, by implication, can persons.

Aesthetics is rarely some naked Kantian encounter between a bounded individual and a work of art. Both subject and object are the consequences of relationships to other subjects and objects and in turn have consequences for these others. Indeed as in most ethnographic material culture studies we quickly come down to the level of observing complex forms of projection and introjection that form the mechanisms by which aesthetic preferences come to be enacted. The most significant conclusion from such studies is precisely their ability to dissolve away a dualistic conceptualisation of

subjects and objects; a concept crucial to the understanding of the everyday consumption of fashion and its social meanings. Furthermore, such studies reveal the dissolution of the divide between women's consumption and women's work as a means of understanding the inherently contradictory relation of women to fashion and the 'politics' of appearance.

## **Conclusion**

### **The Practice and Context of Normativity**

The conclusion will begin by summarising the trajectory of the thesis and then extract issues arising from the salient points before moving on to a discussion of the research findings.

The first part of the thesis has considered the ‘making’ of mothers in north London in relation to types of alternative provisioning. Goods and objects, from brand new buggies to hand-made toys, are acquired through combinations of formal and informal provisioning in the construction of social and material worlds. Ritual events such as ‘baby showers’, practised in the street in the context of ethnic social networks, formalise the complex process through which certain forms of mothering come to predominate in given social groups. The ‘baby shower’ provides a set of objects related to mother and child chosen in accordance with a collective and prescient view of mothering. Similarly, the informal giving of gifts for a new baby or baby-to-be by friends and families lends the infant personhood and ‘makes’ the child as a social being in a way that is comparable with cross-cultural example (Bodenhorn 1988).

Styles and knowledges associated with child related consumption continue as the infant starts to attend rounds of birthday parties organised almost exclusively by women. The choice of venue, food, decoration and gifts associated with such events is part of a broader sociality generated around mothering which can prove simultaneously oppressive and socially vital in its striving for the normative. Mothers strategise over the buying of gifts for their children to take to such parties, simultaneously pursuing value for money and appropriateness in the pursuit of encouraging certain social relations and discouraging others. Despite the increasing prominence of children’s birthday parties and related monetary expenditure (McKendrick, Bradford and Fielder 2000) such events should not be understood as potlatch gestures merely intended to increase the fame of a given household. Rather they tentatively generate the normative in the form of the ‘going rate’ for a child’s party gift or the acceptable food stuffs on offer at the event. Admiration and envy is won through the ‘creative’ use of resources and the re-interpretation of an already established repertoire of practices (as witnessed in the

admiration for Camilla, dubbed ‘super-mom’ by the local NCT mothers) within particular social groups. Bell and Ribbens (1994) view the ‘work’ of the birthday party as an extension of women’s role as carers, in which mothers socialise their children through formal social engagement and the indoctrination of manners. The evidence here suggests, however, that women’s sociality as mothers is not merely tied to the upbringing of their particular infants and the work of socialisation, but rather forms a integral part of the construction of a social collective.

In his work regarding the historical origins of motherhood, Gillis (1996) considers how women give birth to motherhood culturally as well as biologically and argues that the ‘naturalisation’ of the relationship between the two is a recent phenomenon;

Birth has always been marked culturally, but whereas its rites once served to create and sustain a distinction between maternity and motherhood, today they underline the identity between these concepts. When a woman gives birth in the late twentieth century, she does so not once but four times: to the child, to herself as a mother, to the man as father, and to the group that in our culture we are most likely to call family (Gillis 1996:153).

In addition to the categories delineated by Gillis this thesis has shown the significance of mothering (and then parenting) as a collectively mediated rite of passage (Thurer 1994; Davis-Floyd 1992) in which material culture, its values and exchanges, are used by women amongst themselves to generate different normativities around mothering.

Inclusion of mothers through their children, in events such as birthday parties, forms a crucial part of broader trajectories within mothering which have real implications for children. This trajectory may begin with a shared discussion over styles of baby buggies outside a nursery and culminate in children’s attendance of specific schools. A mother whose child falls outside the institutional parameters of age definition (thus ‘missing’ the next academic year for her child) falls easily outside the social loop. Similarly, full or part-time working mothers who spend large amounts of time outside of their locality fail to become incorporated into these localised social networks (though they might belong to alternative networks outside their place of residence). Importantly,

as Bell and Ribbens point out, the gendered significance of these informal networks, exchanges, aesthetics and knowledges around mothering has real implications for the potential role of male carers to become intricately involved in the process of 'mothering' (Bell and Ribbens 1984).

In this context, the second chapter considers the prevalence of a particular mode of informal provisioning (the acquisition and de-acquisition of second-hand infants' wear) as an extension of women's exclusive sociality as mothers. In contrast to Devault's study of food provisioning (1991), the ethnography reveals the ways in which a domestic practice of sorting and matching 'hand-me-down' items of children's clothing is not merely an extension of women's work as carers. Rather the exchange relations and values constructed around this specific form of material culture constitute actual relations within and of themselves (between neighbours and female kin) as well as constituting a local culture around mothering. In the spaces of nearly new sales, women exercise their knowledges around mothering in an environment close to Geertz' (1979) interpretation of the Eastern suq in terms of its chaos, bargaining and reliance on kismet.

According to the neo-classical economist's account, the nearly new sale stands as a market in the purest form whereby a system is devised for matching the individual preferences of buyers with the monetary imperatives of the sellers thus determining the selling price with minimal external constraints. In his study of auctions, Smith (1989) by contrast considers the paucity of such an economically deterministic approach to markets which excludes the process by which 'value' is generated by the actors themselves, through the very process of exchange;

The practices, places, participants, and conventions of the auction itself - what could be called its "social structure" - are seen to have no direct or casual influence on the auction process and its outcome... What is not included in the economist's perspective is the way the actual auctioning process [is used] to create/re-create both social definitions of value and the relationships among participants (Smith 1989: 162-3).

Through the process of women trading with other women, in the course of their exchanges over items ranging from pink swimming costumes to pairs of Elephant-motif Wellington boots, a consensus of value and price is generated which is based on cultural rather than economic imperative. Used Osh-Kosh dungarees and over-priced Disney merchandise is re-invented (or 're-enchanted' Crewe and Gregson 1997) in the moral economy of the nearly new sale which depends on face-to-face transactions between women as mothers and the matching of children with the material culture of other women's offspring. In this process, the normative is established and contested as appropriateness around items and ideologies of mothers are swapped and formulated.

The initial chapters show how the social construction of mothers is engineered by their positioning through a number of normative stages, each of which has its associated strategies and potentials. In the rounds of children's birthday parties the infant itself is less relevant in terms of its agency, rather there is a constant seeking of sameness and differentiation and the pursuit of individual difference with social sameness. Through these activities and practices the normative is constructed and within this process arises the emergence of class relations. What this produces is not just a transition in their personal status, but as a kind of by-product, it importantly creates the network of women and then in turn the sense of neighbourhood, i.e. it creates its own social contextualisation. Contrary to sociological accounts, which conflate motherhood with isolation, isolation here is more an effect of social exclusion or the inability to join networks rather than a condition of women as mothers *per se* which is itself rather the moment for the construction of networks. Since such sociality depends in part upon the establishment of the normative, it can be seen that the labour involved in creating such consensus and its associated trust, is important in making relationships within which individuals can feel relaxed and supported, rather than merely treating others as a comparative other inducing competition or anxiety in oneself.

The concept of normative does not, however, just imply homogeneity for all. It is also clearly the medium for the construction of differences around class, ethnicity, etc. Ultimately, the construction of normative culture within the dynamics of becoming a mother is a constant relationship between sameness and the scope for strategy and difference. But while this achieves a desired sense of individuality in balance with the growth of sociality, that same tension allows for the development of significant

differences which leads also to the reproduction of distinction itself as class. Contrary to competitive potlatch, these distinctions are not achieved through competition as such, but rather through attempts to position oneself a bit above what one might be taken as and not a bit below. At first this is done through the fluid medium of gifting strategies and material expression. But to have long lasting effects class position is institutionalised, in the form of organisations such as the NCT [The National Child Birth Trust] group which women are able to join or, as the most fundamental expression of this phenomenon in the type of school in which their children end up in.

These practices offer an insight into how ideologies around mothering are generated through practice rather than operating as simple reflections of class or ethnicity (Glenn, et. al. 1994). In numerous cases, women negotiate both traditional class and ethnic affiliations along with the strategising of white middle class mothers with varying degrees of 'success'. In chapter one, for example, Tina simultaneously maintains the extended relations of her working class family while becoming a prominent member of her local branch of the NCT thus creating a multiple set of resources around her mothering. Similarly, Lola, a mother of South American descent relinquishes aspects of her well established ethnic community in the process of moving to Jay Road and begins to encounter and embrace other forms of mothering and new manifestations of the normative. However, despite both women embracing the dominant modes of middle-class mothering in the area, it is evident when their eleven year old children apply for the most sought after schools in the locality (and fail to win places) that factors external to the local culture of their mothering prevail. Similarly, Melanie, a single mother with entirely middle-class values around mothering and education, whilst sharing the concerns of her NCT friends, finds herself prevented from broader inclusion due to her marked difference from her NCT friends' status as married and partnered mothers.

This thesis considers, through ethnographic inquiry, intricacies of practice and in so doing emphasises mothering as a cultural pursuit based around a struggle for the normative. While a substantial amount of literature deals with the relation between ideology and motherhood, its contradictions and ambivalence (Dally 1982; Thruer 1994; Parker 1996), particularly from a feminist perspective, few approaches consider how ideology works in practice; how mothering is made through practice. The above examples highlight the way certain individuals and social groups are more predisposed

than others to take advantage of ideologically configured practices. Certainly, around Jay Road, middle class ideologies around parenting and ensuing notions of the normative dominate through formalised groupings such as the NCT, Lonsdale Mothers Group, PTA, etc. associated with particular class configurations. However, beyond these formalised manifestations of mothering, the opening chapters show the very practice of normativity between and amongst mothers and the incorporation of material culture and its exchanges in that process.

Chapter three regards children and parents in the context of gift giving where an emphasis on emergent agency and the struggles over value and appropriateness is overtly apparent. In this process the child is at first simply projected as the 'other' in this relationship, as, for example, in the exchange of second hand baby clothes (in chapter two). But children themselves go on to develop their own sense of the normative in parent-child relations. This is most evident in negotiating appropriate Christmas and birthday presents for themselves in the process of 'coming of age'. While parents strive for the normative in the form of a 'successful' Christmas (using a range of strategies to acquire the best or most appropriate gifts for their children), through the social relations of their peer groups and playgrounds children generate their own moral economies which feed directly into the household in a on-going process of contestation. The intense relation children have with the ephemeral nature of contemporary consumer goods and toys (so frequently lamented by parents, academics and journalists (Kline 1993; Sutton-Smith 1997)) is incorporated into the social worlds of middle childhood. Like James' (1993) description of the adroit rhyme tellers in the playground, the cosmology of children's goods, often faddish and ephemeral, forms a vital part of 'the processes through which reputations are acquired, mediated or lost within the social world of children' (James 1993:152). Retail catalogues such as the *Argos* publication, form a household staple used by children in the imagining and exchanging of information around products and toys. As parents strive to purchase the most appropriate birthday or Christmas gift, in keeping with broader parental expectations and those of the specific child, the child's voice is most often actively sought. This is significant since many psychological theories assume the normative arises from the internalised voice of the parents within the child (Freud 1984). Whereas what is suggested here is that there is a much less remarked upon pressure in the powerful form of the child's voice concerning the norms of social life that the parent has to adapt and

conform to partly on their behalf. This 'voice' is generated from socialisation amongst children which creates norms that the parents are largely ignorant of since they are 'out of date' with trends. In this respect, although children occupy the periphery of the formal economy they are often closest to the market and (as in the case of the parents on Jay Road who are disappointed by their ten year old son's choice of a domestic-focused gift, namely the Mr. Frosty drinks maker). Many parents anticipate their children's well-versed knowledge in the 'latest' as a marker of their successful parenting.

In this process of gift giving children are far from passive. Their own development of their consciousness of society revolves around their own acute sense of normativity seen in the scale of embarrassment they feel over breaches in this (as witnessed in 'naff' or 'out of date' gifts and clothing given by adults). Indeed this anxiety is not something that diminishes with age (see Simmel 1997) as there is obviously some continuity here with the anxieties that mothers express around clothing choices discussed in the final chapter.

At the same time there is another literature on socialisation which assumes that the critical period in which one, in effect, absorbs the norms and values that make one a member of society is during childhood. This seems implicit in at least a simple reading of much of Bourdieu's work on 'habitus', where the child learns social norms through becoming aware of, and interacting with, the practical taxonomies involved in the order of things around one. It is in later life that this habitus becomes, in turn, expressed in adult agency in making the world as adults tend to create order in a manner that is homologous with the underlying structures they have absorbed through socialisation. Although, as will be suggested below, this would be to simplify Bourdieu's own interpretation of his material. What the final chapter shows is how much the same anxieties and tensions exist for adult life and never really fade away. Although social science may acknowledge this as a drive of human interaction, in the ethnographic detail of this thesis the actual practice comes to the fore.

The second half of the thesis concentrates on forms of alternative provisioning orientated largely to adult concerns similarly associated with the formation of moral and normative orders. These include the use of catalogues, home decoration and alternative selling techniques such as party plan schemes centred on fashion and appearance.

Overall it becomes evident that the degree to which the urban and suburban street is not in and of itself a community does not mean that we should treat the subjects who live there as isolated individuals. Most alternative provisioning is as much concerned with discourses about the norms of social behaviour and practices, which are extraordinarily self-conscious about their relationship to others, as they are with actually obtaining goods.

In the study of relatively recent modes of acquisition, namely *Loot* classified paper and the *Argos* high street shop catalogue, the ethnography reveals the ways in which new skills and knowledges are generated around the provisioning of the home. While the second-hand and bargain goods offered in the columns of a classified paper seem at first to offer the most to those motivated by economic imperative, in practice the first-hand full price goods of *Argos* catalogue are used by consumers least able to risk the uncertainty of an unregulated market. While *Loot* is used playfully by middle class householders in the acquisition and de-acquisition of goods, *Argos* acts as a normative repertoire of goods (a reference guide to ascertain the going price and the range of styles) in an otherwise endlessly complex world of consumption. The safety and convenience of the *Argos* catalogue is used typically by middle class householders as a staple provider of information and low-investment household goods. For working class householders and those less able to access an array of resources (such as the elderly, housebound and children) it is incorporated in the moral economy of homes and social relations with the skill and competence equated with imaginative acquisition of second-hand shopping. Both forms offer in different ways a normative form of consumption within the semi-urban environment of the street; *Loot* as a measure of second-hand value and *Argos* as a measure of first-hand price and stylistic range. It is through the complex combination of informal and formal modes of acquisition and their related values that the moral economies of households are constructed.

This finding is further highlighted in the chapter considering the home decoration schemes of householders, and the increasing contemporary emphasis on this cultural practice as an expressive form. The process of envisaging and imagining, as a means of projection beyond the limits of given domesticities, was a consistent feature of the ethnography as informants conjured up fantasy homes and worked on home decorating initiatives. The case studies of women living in Sparrow Court council estate reveal how

a normative order, created through the tension between privacy and isolation, was countered through the summoning up of the ideal 'other' (in the form, for example, of a new partner, successfully integrated children, creative mothering) used in the constitution of aesthetic projects. Through ethnographic detail home decorating schemes of Jay Road inhabitants are shown to be neither purely expressive nor strictly normative (in the sense of adhering to any evident consensus). Unlike the anxieties expressed around clothing and fashion (discussed in chapter six) the decoration and aestheticisation of homes is not made in relation to direct social relations, such as those with neighbours inhabiting similar spaces. Instead, the occupants use a melding of imagination and a projection of potential future trajectories as the context through which to measure themselves as to the appropriateness of certain choices or creative decorative schemes.

The final chapter of the thesis deals with the actual processes of aesthetic practice and, taking further Bourdieu's general point that taste is a social phenomenon, places the anxieties individuals experience over their selection of clothing and fashion in the context of their immediate social and domestic relations. In the everyday practice of clothing it uses ethnographic evidence to examine how women actually make their taste, measure the appropriateness of the choice in relation to projected 'others', internal voices and those immediately around them. Commercial concerns such as *Colour me Beautiful* and *Mary Kay* cosmetics make explicit the gendered work and anxiety of making the 'self' (Lury 1986) by offering women an 'objective' or professionalised intervention in this process and an opportunity to trade their own expertise as party plan dealers and consultants in the field.

In the introduction of the thesis the main areas covered in the literature review considered approaches to the household, alternative provisioning and the cultural dimensions of women's domestic labour. At the onset of the research these literatures seemed most pertinent and formed the basis of my methodological approach. However, the outcome of the ethnography itself has informed the distinction between the concerns of the introduction and those of the conclusion, which have turned more firmly to questions around the process of normativity. So the findings of the thesis are best represented in the discrepancy between the issues with which the investigation began and those that seem most salient at the time of its conclusion. Firstly, it is through the

study of alternative modes of provisioning that the visibility of the search for the normative becomes most apparent. Without the institutionalisation of formal retail outlets there is a greater need to formulate the game one is playing and the ground rules for social interaction being expressed through the selection of goods. For example, in shops the value of goods is expressed simply in price, but for alternative provisioning the value of goods is often a negotiated reading of the act of exchange itself (Gregson 1997, 1998, 2000). Secondly, the enormous role children play in relation to the modes of provisioning outlined in this study also leads to the making up of ground rules and anxiety over parenting and children's own concern in positioning themselves in relation to peers.

At one level the entire history of social science theory could be read as an extended treatise on the issue of normativity. Most of the founding figures, such as Durkheim and Weber, were principally concerned with the implications of the rise of modernity in relation to this issue. If one no longer had the authority of custom or religion, what force held society together and led to people agreeing to follow the norms that make up the fabric of what we call culture? In this respect, they looked to the societal role of charisma or institutional bureaucracy, the division of labour or law (Gerth and Mills 1984; Giddens 1971; Weber 1986).

Normativity could be held to be even more central to the concept of culture which lies at the heart of anthropology. This has continued to be the case for most of the major paradigms within that discipline. It was just as important an issue in Functionalist work (Augé 1982) that looked to norms as a kind of collective survival strategy attuned to achieving equilibrium as it was in Structuralist work that saw normativity in some kind of collective unconscious based within foundational structures and realised in the construction of rules and meanings (Douglas 1979; Sturrock 1986). In philosophical arguments there has also been a preoccupation with rules – how they are made and, considering the endless possibility for the transgression of rules, how are they maintained? (Taylor 1995).

Although normativity is the foundation stone of social science and anthropological theory, there is also a sense in which the question of the normative tends to be abstracted as a force emergent from other sources. In this respect, the practice of

informants normativity is held to arise from institutions such as government or, in Foucauldian approaches, some version of 'discipline'. For example, work inspired by Foucault (1988) recognises the self-construction of normativity by social actors, but tends to regard this as always the inculcation or internal generation of norms that arise from elsewhere such as the ideology of the family, or the interests of the market.

The thesis does not try to suggest that normativity is itself always something self-produced from social actors through negotiation and interaction. Clearly there are vast forces that weigh on social actors whether these are revealed in the analysis of commerce and the state, or through academic terms such as socialisation as embodied in 'habitus' or Foucauldian discipline. All these bear on informants and are central to accounting for the social parameters they live within such as class, ethnicity and gender. Indeed much of the material of this thesis suggests that in everyday life such pressures are experienced as constant anxiety and negotiation and the painful construction of trust or the sense of what is appropriate. But the ethnographic focus of the thesis creates a slight change in emphasis in revealing the degree to which the desire for, and search for, social relations especially amongst women, and especially when they are struggling as mothers, is itself an immensely important reason why people struggle with the issue of normativity. In short, much of what happens is driven by factors that lie internal to the development of social relationships within families, or amongst friends and neighbours, and is not merely a local or particular manifestation of some external pressure.

In this sense, each chapter adds an additional perspective upon, and example of what seems to be a constant struggle by the people themselves to construct normativity from practice. This may vary from the projection on to others of their likely response to 'doing up' one's kitchen, to the actual negotiation between a cadre of parents and children as to the 'going rate' in terms of the price of a birthday party gift, or how far a child should be allowed to go shopping unaccompanied. For this reason the topic has not been approached here as emanating 'top down' from the debates by theorists in any given discipline, but rather allowed to condense upwards from the material generated from the ethnography.

Although there has been some stress upon the conditions of modernity, the uncertainties created in a situation which does not look like a traditional community, or

neighbourhood and where the roots for consensus are insecure, nevertheless there may be some resonance between these findings and more traditional anthropological writing on the reproduction of culture. Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus' foregrounds the normative as a product of practice by arguing that through socialisation moralities are formed that come to constitute the normative (Bourdieu 1979). In Bourdieu's model, as discussed in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), rules may be picked up around us but they are not merely socially prescribed but open to strategising by actors themselves;

Talk of rules, a euphemized form of legalism, is never more fallacious than when applied to the most homogenous societies (or at least codified areas of differentiated societies) where most practices, including those seemingly most ritualized, can be abandoned to the orchestrated improvisation of common dispositions: the rule is never, in this case, more than a second-best intended to make good the occasional misfirings of the collective enterprise of inculcation tending to produce habitus that are capable of generating practices regulated without express regulation or an institutionalized call to order'. (Bourdieu 1977:17).

This thesis, through its study of everyday modes of provisioning, has revealed the process of the normative as a practice and the ways in which culture is 'made'. It has explored the question of how others decide for themselves in their social relations the 'appropriate', and how comfort is found in determining which of the myriad sources of advice, might pertain to them. It has found that provisioning is not merely a practice of shopping and budgeting, but also a means of creating the normative through networks and the negotiation and the construction of value around certain forms of material culture. In relation to issues of domestic labour, in particular, it has made apparent that women's networks around mothering and household provisioning are not merely domestic and isolated but at once address and create the ambivalence around anxiety and the normative. Lastly, this thesis has shown that material culture is not merely a conduit of the relations of normativity. Rather it forms part of an active process by which external forms can be used as expressive gestures, in response to which one learns both what is regarded as appropriate, for which particular group of people, and also how far one wants to be in accord, or actively deviate, from that range of norms.

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