WHOSE IS THIS STREET?

Visual ethnography and self-reflection in exploring the relationship between ethnicity, consumption and place

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What do you think about Plumstead High Street?"

A Jamaican DJ living in Plumstead and working in East London: "There is nothing to in Plumstead High Street. I am surprised you have something to research here".

An English man, the guard from the local Belmarsh prison: "Plumstead High Street is like home. I lived here all my life, just round the corner. Once it was beautiful like a Sunday morning.

His daughter: "Once it was my street, but now it belongs to others and it is not safe to be out, I don't feel it is my street".

An Indian owner of the grocery bazaar: "Plumstead is only for the unemployed. Look at the High Street, it's 11.00am and there are so many people here, what are they doing here, why do they not work?"

An English local who works in the city: I love Plumstead, the High Street is multicultural and busy, I moved to here just because of that.

An elderly English lady drinking beer in the local pub: "It is alright, I think, it is ……….I don't know, hmmm, you know?….. I don't care… ".

The aim of this paper is to combine different kinds of writing in the process of self-reflective analysis on the applied method, namely film making, and the results of this method in ethnographic research on the relationship between consumption, belonging and place observed from a subjective point of view. Academic writing on visual methods such as videoing and film making has its long established tradition in anthropology and ethnography. Writing from a personal perspective of a researcher and even including fieldnotes in final reports, however disputable in academic circles, does not make an innovative approach to ethnography either (Thompson 2002). Yet it is very rarely discussed how a projection of the video affects those who watch it and how a perspective of 'seeing' the field on the screen, rather than being in the field produces new research results (Taylor 1994; Devereaux 1995, MacDougall2006). It been emphasized by Sara Pink that the most effective video-based research contains a range of perceptions of the researcher acquired from reading, writing, and watching the results, and that researcher has to be 'in' and 'out' of her research to achieve a "plurisensory theoretical perspective" (Pink 2004:38). Although Pink does not apply a creative style in her works, her multidimensional approach, embracing different sensory effects from video and conceptual effects from textual sources does encourage further crossing of academic thresholds traditionally separating intellectual, rationally-orientated writing from

personal, creatively-oriented form, more typical of fiction and arts in general. In this paper a self reflexive method of writing was applied, combining theory, poetry, interviews, and fieldnotes, in order to expand the field of understanding of the relationship between ethnicity, consumption and place when represented on a video tape and watched by the researcher. However, it is not *just* the representation which is at stake here on a TV screen: there is also a whole gamut of perceptions and *a priori* empirical experiences of the researcher brought to the analysis. How to articulate them in writing at the same time becomes a task for any ethnographer working with the camera. In visual research watching the tapes and writing *on* them merges into the undividable activity of the intellectual and the somatic kind, while the representation on a TV screen becomes a performance *per se* which can be manipulated and repeated at wish. Nevertheless, a connection between the situated body of the researcher and a film which has been recorded and next edited is mostly unspoken and rarely becomes an object of analysis outside of the film world. It is mainly the ethical side of editing which is discussed and the academic responsibility for the artistic representation which naturally must also secure personal comfort to the participants of the film. However, creative manipulation such as writing on the film, which fluctuates and changes in relation to the visual and its political and aesthetic normativity applied by the director, should also undergo critical scrutiny. Being a director, an interviewer, an editor and a writer enforces new responsibilities which are indivisible and need a continuous self-reflection on being "in" and "out" of research. From the awareness of this 'double' engagement and the somatic attachment to the TV screen stems from a different methodological approach which allows the researcher for the embodied creative articulation of academic findings, and also enables a more intimate connection with the object of research, in this case consumers in one street in a south-eastern suburb of London. A critical question will be posed: how is the study of consumption itself affected by discourses of ethnicity as manifested in the visual language of the researcher? As recalled by Thompson reading James Clifford (1986), this question "is premised on the insight that a given piece of research reveals as much about a research community as it does about the phenomenon being investigated" (2002:142). If a research community is a whole base employed for making a film about consumption, belonging, and place, the object of investigation in writing is self-interpretation of the visual method by the researcher who is a character in the film and a critic of it. Therefore in this paper, notes from fieldwork, and self-reflective thoughts (signified in italics) complete academic writing and finally the film itself. Different fonts, diacritic signs, and disrupted layout on the pages below serve as symbolic warnings for the reader that the perspective of seeing the object of study changes from metatextual to personal, and more scientifically objective. These additional signals for being posited 'in' or out' of research are also applied in the film: my own voice over is applied and my own poems about the place next to classical English poetry and field related quotations from academic sources. Without the paper, however, the film is devoid of self-interpretation of the affect which the whole process (the research phenomenon and research community) had on myself as that one who was the "tool" for film production and the interpretation of what it represents. Reading the paper through the labyrinth of different discourses scattered on the page is to imitate the editing process: words, like images, emerge before the eyes of the receiver who has to make sense of them. The continuity of the argument, like the frame of the shot, supports a certain logic

and direction of interpretation, but the final understanding of the reading, like the emotional impact of the film, depends on the individual reception.

In traditionalist positivist approach to socio-cultural research, interpretation of ethnographic findings needs to be anchored in the objectivist paradigm of study that constitutes the disciplinary foundation of knowledge in a certain area (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). In consumer research, positivistic conventions imposed methodological and conceptual limits on the interpretation of the socio-cultural relationships in which the consumer is immersed, but also led to the restrictions on theoretical questions about the position of the researcher and her world in the process of collecting and analyzing data. Under the empirically based, critical-reflexive model of research the aim to establish patterns of consumer behavior in relation to an underlying disciplinary background is less constricted and enables interpretation across different paradigmatic traditions, and theorizations of consumption outside the boundaries of the dominant narrative conventions (Belk 1991; Thompson, Stern and Arnould 1998). If traditional ethnography excludes a biography of the researcher from interpretation and protects the object of study from potential distortions influenced by the researcher's personal involvement in the fieldwork, so promoting an ideal absence of any personal and subjective narrative which could disturb the natural condition of the researched environment, in the interpretive postmodern model the autobiography of the researcher is conceived as part of the research process and as much affected by as adding to the qualitative findings (Richardson 1995; Clair 2003; Markham 2005).

The narratives told about consumption in local places do weave fragments of stories from public circulation, local myths, and private memories. They often appear ungrounded and unconvincing, even to the informants themselves. When filtered through the additional lens of the researcher's biography and that of the camera person's, the questions of "who gets to tell whose story" becomes a critical one. In the approach discussed here, it is accepted that an interview does not belong to the academic environment or any one else's in particular; it is not, as in the Aristotelian traditional aesthetics, a symbolic representation of the world over which one can keep control or manipulate. The interview transforms information obtained from an interview into a lived experience. (Denzin 2001) A video – as a material artifact - joins a constant process of mediation, "a dialogic conversation" (Denzin 2001) and, like a work of art, constitutes a public space that is constitutive of social change. As Norman K. Denzin notes, an interview is part of the moral project in which society connects and as such it cannot be separated from the context which brings it about. By belonging to a moral, rather than a political project, an interview alongside other forms of symbolic representation, becomes part of the dialogic conversation that connects us all to a larger community in which our language, our stories, and space in which we live are our own responsibilities (Denzin 2001:23-24).

My own approach to the local community in this part of Greater London has evolved from the stage of fear and hostility to fascination with the difference of this multicultural environment which I had never known before. My first reaction after moving into the area was far from 'political correctness', in fact, it was a long cry over the fate which swept me to the suburb of South Eastern London from Poland. I did not want to live here and I did not want to accept that this was to be my home for some time.

I tried to persuade myself that it was only temporary and I would take the first opportunity to move out.

"Who would like to live in Plumstead" – asked one of my informants a year later. My friend invited for dinner exclaimed with surprise: "Plumstead in not even on the map of Greater London, how are we supposed to get there, are there any trains running behind the Thames Barrier at all? – he unfortunately never found the place.

Despite that geographical obstacle, I still wanted to know everything about the area: I wanted to possess it in my inquiry, to tame it within the frame of an academic book, to disarm it with the weapon of video equipment, to consume its values and culture. That search was inflamed by my initial failure to settle down in this place. I ask myself a question which I had not thought of before: Was this research my revenge on the community and place for not being mine?

In conflict with objective and impersonal ethnography, George Devereux argues that what happens within the researcher must be revealed, if the object of study is to be understood (Devereux 1995). From this perspective, self-reflective ethnography is a moral commitment to the community under research, while writing it aims at understanding and changing the relationship between (my)self and society for the better. However, the truth about the self may be as inaccessible as the truth about consumption, belonging, and place. What matters here is the relational critical platform on which some potential, experienced and desired truths meet in their symbolic and empirical forms. By being articulated in a visual form of a film played in the living room or a local school, they enter the process of self-interpretation and cultural mediation (Deavere Smith 1993.

Re-writing experiences from the field in a performative manner allows me to see myself critically in the context researched and to re-inhabit the space of language which I use to articulate the relationship between my own self and the culture of the Other. Embodying theory helps me to reinvent my own position of an inhabitant of this culture and conceptualize the relationship of consumption, ethnicity and place in moral and political context. Crossing the boundaries between genres, juxtaposing theory with fiction, switching the narrative voices opens the space for interpretation.

I enter the terrain of the interview being equipped with the script, the project's description, pens, consent forms, business cards, and camera. I am assisted by Pete, a film maker who knows the job from a technical side. The interview was already agreed by the owner of the business and me, so we don't need to go through the consent forms now. Everything is double-checked. Everything is ready.

This is a picture of a professional person,
This is a researcher who knows what she is doing.
Who knows her aims.
Her tone is confident
And her expectations are big
She feels power.
"You have to remember about shooting the whole scene,
I don't want people only, just talking heads,
I want to film their space, and how they relate to others
during the interview.
And also close-ups of whatever they drink or eat, or buy,

and me when I do the interview”
 “yeah, yeah”.

Moving in with a camera, lights, microphone, and two bags of cables to the local High Street does not go without notice. People look at us with curiosity. Some of them ask directly: are you from the telly? Are you the BBC? What are they doing here? Is it a real camera? In the time when Pete settles the equipment, we already have a few of gapers intrigued by the symbols of the film industry targeted at them. The information posters about filming on the site decorate the walls, so all customers can be warned and read what the project is about when they pass by, but they very rarely do. Life of customers in the High Street flows through the thick polluted air at its normal pace, but we are already in the picture and the customers cannot deny our presence. People change before the camera, I change with the camera. We start acting in the proximity of a black zoom. The local youths in the High Street, like all children brought up in the *Big Brother* world, make every effort to be included in the scene. A customer in a local pub wants to dance for us, hoping that in that way he would aid to become a star on a silver screen. Our explanations that we are a university team - not the talent hunters - did not stop him. Acting, as a form of presenting a certain self- must be taken for granted in any interview, but particularly in one which is videoed. In fact, we all act something all the time. No, it is not the best word to describe it: presenting one self at a certain time in a certain situation is better. And, yes, if the reader thinks now about Foucault (1982) and his concept of the aesthetic making of the self, I think about him too. Goffman (1984) was right to a certain extent too, although he missed the influence of class, age, or race on our performance.

I act out a professional researcher in front of my informants and my assistant and now I am a professional researcher. While writing my account, I perform a fictional version of my research - and now I am a performer.

I cannot really tell which of those roles is more legitimate than the other. They represent different selves of mine in different situations. In this text I want to involve those fragmented selves which constitute ethnicity in the High Street. My Polishness is an unavoidable bias and a stimulus for de-familiarisation and reorientation of my own values and ideology that influence my work.

Where is the Other?

I realized that in the local people's consciousness the marketplace which I am studying is divided according to the ethnic origin of the owners of businesses and, following from this, the grouping of their customers. The multicultural environment of the High Street combines the native-born English inhabitants, and immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Africa, China, Vietnam, Egypt and the latest wave of newcomers from Eastern Europe, mainly Poles and Slovaks. There are other nationalities which dwell in this area or come to shop in the High Street, but they were not mentioned by my informants.   What interests me is the manner in which ethnic groups articulate themselves and how their representation is interpreted by others. I want

to locate myself between those cultures on the map of Plumstead: as a citizen, consumer, and neighbour.

Through my motto question asked in those places: *whose is this street*? I try to understand how people relate to this particular space and to others.

> Vicky, a shampooist at a hair dresser: "when you go up the street it is African shops and places there, when you go down, it is more white, more down the road, you have all Asians".

In the High Street the local businesses are positioned according to the ethnic belonging of their owners. This is followed by the perception of the inhabitants as to what types of entrepreneurial activities are performed in this marketplace. Yet Vicky's vision of the local marketplaces is a product of her own consciousness: her attitudes, experiences, and knowledge have been affected by this concrete space which she encloses like a cartographer in the gesture of mapping of the local territory into three ethnic ghettos. It does not need to correspond with a 'real' map of the place. What is a map? Is it more accurate evidence than Vicky's observation? In my interpretation of the ethnic-spatial-business organization of the High Street, I rely on my informants' stories. However each ethnic group in the High Street presents a different version of the local terrain. Which one should they be trusted? In a fictional tale, *Rigor in Science* by Jorge Luis Borges a map becomes more important than its referent but it is still taken for reality even by its inhabitants. Nevertheless, by pushing the boundaries of the map beyond its limits, Borges puts ontological validity of representation into question, whereas Viki gives me the pointers to the ethnic-divided map of the street in full faith. Eventually, either Borges' map or what Viki's sees as a fact cannot serve as the evidence of reality. I can only listen carefully and observe this place, read the local press, talk to local authorities, eat in the local restaurants, buy in the local shops, trying to understand the links between them. What is the trajectory of their connections and how they adapt the place? I am still at awe how differently this street is seen by each person asked.

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However, the narrative is not innocent: "Representations of places have material consequences in so far as fantasies, desires, fears and longings are expresses in actual behavior (Harvey 1993:22)
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In the stories of my local interviewees, the English ethnic group is presented as the minority disappointed and bitter about the past nostalgically defined as "lost paradise" that has been conquered by the foreign element. Their own mental map of Plumstead reflects that view: they feel threatened by the influx of immigrants and do not feel affiliated with Plumstead as home any more. As a consequence they do not visit any local shops which belong to other ethnicities and they look for opportunities of moving out from the area. This view is adapted by other ethnicities too. An Egyptian customer coming to Plumstead for her "own" stuff, imported from Asia, whispers to the camera: "I like the multicultural atmosphere of the High Street: it is good for me because I am not English". On the other hand, well rooted Asian inhabitants of the street feel endangered too - but by other foreigners, especially of African origin, "who have been taking over the

place leaving no space for the old immigration". To what extent the old anthropological paradigm of the conflict between the locals and the outsiders defined by Ellias & Scotson (1995) has been provoked by the narrative used by themselves and about themselves? There is also a narrative of the media and other public discourses which participate in creating the gap between them. To what extent are those discourses responsible for the material landscape of the divided marketplaces in Plumstead? There are "black" hairdressers and "white" hairdressers in the High Street, Indian groceries and "neutral" supermarkets. (I will come back to this ethnic mapping in more detail later). Race-related narratives attached to those sites do incite the effect of separation, although customers very often shop across all of them despite the racial markers.

I am not sure anymore if I ever would be able to find the "truth". I decide to leave it to my motto question and accept whatever happens next. But when the question is asked, the response is already predetermined, and it enters a political chain of comments to follow. The questions I ask and the research itself is part of historico-political scape with its own 'flows' (Appadurai 1996) which interrelate on a personal, national and global level. From my political position, I am a foreigner who was enabled to do this research in the aftermath of the EU's expansion. From a personal side, I am a displaced individual who tries to find home, as much as I am a woman, a mother, and a citizen, all with different agendas. From a theoretical perspective, I am a receiver and a producer of the "flows" in this one place. Referring to John Urry, I argue that my research is both cause and effect of the determinants of preference structures external to the locality and those internal to the locality at a certain moment in time. (Urry 2003:63)

My attempts to break through the 'determinants of preference structures' in the present conjuncture remind me of the Don Quixote's struggle. I delude myself with the possibility of the sufficient language which could explain the phenomenon of this place and my role within it. To move beyond an academic and socio-historical framework of my own ethnography is as difficult as positing my own nationality among the local ethnic groups. Can I remove the signification of my Polishness and find the acceptance of the locals? The anxiety I feel about my national identity is a personal problem that I bring to this research, but it is also responsibility of others who have to face me and respond in this particular situation.

A group of white English customers are drinking their early afternoon beer in the "the proper English pub with food and a telly". They hardly talk to each other. A glaze of boredom sheds the heads of their golden lagers. The wall behind them brightens the scenery up: an army of colorful ceramic pots and mugs line up neatly on the built-in shelves. A curvy shape of some original sculpture in the middle of the quaint collection - but I cannot see well since the light is too dim and we forget to turn the extra light on what spoilt a lot - adds the edge to the picture. Modern paintings of local artists surpassing the borders of the locality call for attention from behind the clients' backs. A repeat of *We get Knocked Down,* by Tub Thumpers, on the hi-tech jukebox saturates the air with the fading memory of the local pride.

> I ask two English customers sitting in the corner reading *the Sun:*
> - May ask you some questions about Plumstead and the High Street?
> - 1st man: Why, why do you want to know about Plumstead? and what do you want to know?

-I am doing an academic research for the University of East London and I want to ask you about what you do in the High Street, where you do your shopping, how you feel here.

-2nd man: We don't want to be in the camera, but we could tell you a lot about this place. We lived here all our lives. But it changed lately

-1st man: I can be filmed, I don't mind. Plumstead was famous many years ago.

-Me: Oh yes, that's true. Would you like to tell me about this place, what you do here, how often do you come to here?

1st man: I come almost every day for a pint, a chat, and a paper. It is a good pub, everyone knows each other. But why do you really want to know about such things?

What can I really say? That I am looking for home and their acceptance? I am a professional researcher and I have an agenda to follow. I cannot afford to be distracted. I have to keep this interview under control, otherwise it will change into a shared confession and no one ever will publish it.

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"If we are willing to study others, we ought to be equally willing to place ourselves, our lives, our families, under the same critical scrutiny". (Goodall 2000:110)

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Me: I am interested what people do here and how they feel. Do you feel here at home?

2nd man: I don't. It's all due to foreigners. How would you feel? How can you feel when everything is taken over? Plumstead is not ours anymore.

1st: I do feel at home, but here in this pub. It is our pub. Would you like a drink? I need a refill.

Me: no, thank you, maybe later.

2nd man: There is no community anymore. They don't mix. They have their own habits, you know. It's a different culture. And us? We are not important anymore. No one is interested. Look what Blair did, only immigrants can get it. The Polish and others have it. We are nothing. Polish people are coming and they take over our jobs and there is nothing left.

1st man: I know it sounds racist…………but we were invaded by foreigners. I know you are foreign too, but it is too many of them, too many of them.

He smiles and tries to be nice and engaged, asked me for a drink after all. Yet I feel in his hands, completely in his power. I have to stick to my questions about shopping……I have to remember my agenda.

Me: Is there anything good about this immigration?

2nd man: No, but we can't even say it, it is not allowed.

Me: Why is it not allowed?

2nd man: you know why…………you cannot say anything to anybody. You can't say Merry Christmas – it's offensive…..

1st man: Where are you from?

Me: Where do you do your shopping?

1st man: in Morrison's, Sainsbury's, Marks & Spencer, Burton's

2nd: Sainsbury's and also Somerfield's, the supermarket up the road.

Me: Do you ever do any shopping in the local shops, those small shops in the High Street.

2nd man: They are all Asian shops.

1st man: Sari doesn't normally suit an English person. What's the point of walking there……I am not saying no way…..but I don't want a stupid shirt for £6 that looks like an old man shirt. I don't want a sari and I don't want a turban. Where are you from?

He did it again. Why can't he just stop? What right does he have to do it?

1st man: It is not a difficult question, is it?

I try to smile but my face turns into a pickled gherkin instead.

Me: No, it's not. I came down from Glasgow.

1st man: but you are not Scottish with your………….

Me: accent? No, of course not, how could I? I have many nationalities.

1st man: how many?

He will never stop. Why do I have to go through this?..... If it is obvious I am foreign, isn't it enough? What should I say?

Me: three. I have three nationalities.

Which is an obvious lie to avoid a definite answer.

1st man: Yes, which ones?

Me: Russian, Slovak, and Czech.

1st man: Russia is a big place…which part are you from, Bosnia?

Me: Noooooooooo! Bosnia is not in Russia!. Let's move on…….

I have my power back. He proved not knowing the difference between the Baltics and the Balkans! I hope he sensed my desdain! I showed him in my tone, didn't I?

Me: Let's go back to the main point: Whose is this street?

1st man: Whose is it?.......It's not ours, it's not ours anymore. .

There was much more happening under the surface of this interview than I could bear, but I could not signal my apprehension, nor could I skip it and pretend it was not there. I felt trapped in this situation as a woman, as a Pole, and finally as a researcher. I could not continue that conversation and I quickly finished it up with my motto question and moved to another table. The first words I said to my next English interviewee were: I am Polish, would you like to tell me what you think about Plumstead High Street?

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In her *Body Politics*, Nancy Henly observes race, gender, and class differences in nonverbal pattern of communication which, as she states, not only reflect inequalities of power in the larger society but also contribute to maintaining it. (Henley 1977:3)

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Why do I need to disguise my nationality? I felt vulnerable and helpless and I blamed them for putting me in that position. But they didn't say anything offensive to me, just the same gems of public discourses from the conservative wing which have been in circulation since Poland entered the EU in 2004. In fact, they were kind to me and gave me their time when I interrupted their "pint and paper". And I turned my frustration against them. I really feel like a puppet who let them play out my fears. But what fears? That they might find out that I am Polish myself, the same who are coming to take over their jobs? Or that I am losing my control as a researcher to a private conversation about my origin that can distract my objective view of the situation? This going astray from the main track of my research happens each time when I interview English dwellers of the High Street. "Why did you come to the UK?"; "Where did your learn English so well"; "Do you feel homesick"; "Do you have any family here"; "Are you going to go back?". I feel perplexed and embarrassed. I don't want to answer these questions and I

don't want to go through it. I know they are trying to be nice and friendly, but I cannot understand how only being foreign can open the gate to so many personal inquiries in the first minute of our confrontation. Yet they cease being personal on the ground of power which entitles the owners of the land to interrogate those who come from the outside world on their intentions, health, and skills. I can see now, that those questions asked "off-the-side" have become important part my research, maybe even the object of research on its own right. I have never been asked about my origin with such persistence by my non-English informants. The references to my nationality pass almost unnoticed (my surname on the letter, my foreign accent), or is verified through a concise, almost technical inquiry about my origin. Does a foreigner, a refugee, know how difficult it is to answer the questions about home, past, the decision to leave? I can't help thinking about Julia Kristeva's words:

The foreigner, precisely – like a philosopher at work – does not give the same weight to "origins" as common sense does. He has fled from that origin – family, blood, soil – and even though it keeps pestering, enriching, hindering, exciting him, or giving him pain, and often all of it at once, the foreigner is its courageous and melancholy betrayer. His origin certainly haunts him, for better and for worse, but it is indeed elsewhere that he has set his hopes, that his struggles take place, that his life holds together today (1991: 29)

The English interviewees, on the other hand, were always curious about my origin and felt inclined to ask about it when hearing my accent. Being far from "home" I must suffer from homesickness or at least longingness. But what can I say if I don't suffer from homesickness and I don't feel affiliated with my country in this emotional way they want me to? Being asked where my home is I always answer: "in Plumstead" but then I face another question: "no, the real home, where is your real home?" And then I feel hopeless again.

In every conversation, at the time when the discussion was shifting to foreign ethnicities and, what followed, immigration, they were always overwhelmingly nice and respectful. I did not face any direct discriminatory behavior or comment which could demean my position; to the contrary, I was always treated with friendliness and … sympathy. Yet, my frustrated self of the immigrant started seeking a second bottom in that attitude, to which I found some explanation in Mary Jackman's article on the psychology of power. Jackman writes:

But the agenda for dominant groups is to create an ideological cocoon whereby they can definite their discriminatory actions as benevolent. In this way, the beneficiaries of the inequality assuage their own sensibilities at the same time as they avoid the awkwardness of having to withhold something from the demanding grasp of subordinates. Subordinates do not demand something unless they define it as a need. Dominant groups thus mimic the traditional father-child relationship by claiming superior competence and attempting to define the needs of subordinates. They can then provide with pleasant sentimentality and with a satisfying feeling of benevolence – for the fulfillment of those needs. (Jackman 2001:385)

I try to convince myself that I am in control of this research and I am not overpowered by my informants. I use Jackman to observe my dependence from a

theoretical perspective. Do I feel subordinate to their Englishness and identify in them symptoms of superior benevolence because it emphasizes my own otherness and vulnerability? Julia Kristeva analyses that paradox in *Strangers to Ourselves* and suggests that the "foreigner concentrates upon himself and the fascination and the repulsion that otherness gives rise to" (1991:96). This romanticizing concept of the foreigner who suffers but understands more than others helps me to mythologize my own difference from the other and shift in a way beyond them. I may need, therefore, in the same way as other ethnicities in the High Street, to find my own "superior white" against whom I could crystallize my own identity and belonging. From a psychoanalytical standpoint, in this case meeting with a syntactic-political context, it may be a need to become a child, find home and be protected by a powerful parent, even that who harms us…, thus my vision of the approaches of my English informants may be completely distorted. However, I choose to observe how a psychosocial interpretation of ethnicity – none the less subjective – adds to a symbolic one. In social identity studies, individuals differentiate themselves from others by adopting and producing signals of commonality which will let them share their belonging with their own subgroup. (Jenkins 1996) Consequently, for social consumption studies, ethnic and racial groups use consumption to define and reinforce their identity. Yet if the need to confront the other to recognise the borders of one's self is a need of any individual, then we face a political problem of how the group identification process works and on what basis an individual wants to be affiliated with a certain ethnicity, race or social groups.

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As George Schöpflin specifies: If we accept that identity axiomatically creates boundaries, then it follows that identity requires alterity, others against whom we define our 'we-ness'. If we accept this as axiomatic, then the problem of multi-ethnicity is not ethnicity as such, but the means of dealing with inter-ethnic contact or conflict. (2001:115)

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People need ethnic identity to be categorized externally and accepted internally, but ethnic identity needs them too to be produced and maintained. It will never allow me to forget about my otherness. "So where is your lovely accent from?" "What brought you here?"; "How do you find our culture?"; "What is your national food?" I realize later that I do the same to my informants. But ethnic identity does not exist without those who want to belong to it (Bhaba 1994). Every ethnicity or identity needs the borders to enable socio-cultural belonging of their members. The use of the opposite pronouns "us" and "them" is a discursive consequence of this axiom.

Each time English informants showed reservation and even confusion when asked about their relationships with other nationalities in the High Street. At the same time, however, they seemed obliged to make self-critical comments about racism and multiculturalism. It was clear, that those comments worked as a catalyst neutralizing their fear of being accused of racism. But they also deepened the distance between them and the object of criticism disguising their fear in the cloak of the moral duty: "It may sound offensive but it is honest".

Conversely, I haven't noticed that kind of critical pressure from non-English informants. Instead, there were many direct complaints about other immigrants who are "taking over". A Jamaican client at the hairdresser run by an African owner admitted indifferently: "This street belongs to Asians. Plumstead is for Asians, you see them

everywhere". This was a common opinion among African users of the High Street who strongly feel their affiliation to particular ethic groups *against* others. A Punjab owner of the fabric shop expressed her concern that, although "majority of the shops are run by the Asians now, it will change in a very near future and African – Nigerians will take over". Both Africans and Asians bemoaned the flooding of new Eastern Europeans to the High Street, offering their cheap labour. Nevertheless, they never expressed any concern towards the competition from the English. From a sociological point of view this hostile attitude of one immigrant group to another is characteristic of mixed environments. As argued by Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson in *The Established and the Outsiders*, there is always the next wave of newcomers who become the target of discrimination from the 'rooted locals'. (1995)

For the English informants, the demarcation line clarifying the nature of the relationships between local ethnicities was articulated from the standpoint of the ideology of political correctness. The former involved reflexive statements like, "I know it sounds racists but we are not racist", or "we know we are a foreigner but….we have to say it", while the latter instigates a tone of suspicion and reservation, like "I know what your real goal is", "you know what I mean but I cannot say it". The moral and political entrapments of English identity brought about some self-reflexive confessions, like that of the shampoonist, Vicky, who after making comments on the separate localisation of Asian pubs and English pubs in the High Street, felt obliged to add: "Don't take me wrongly, I don't want to offend anyone, I would like to see all races together, and I have mixed children, so I am fine", or an Irish lady in an 'English' pub who asked me: "Please put it down in your notes, that I am not prejudiced and I have a Jamaican grandchild". These words, Kristeva would say, do spring from fear. By writing them down I create a document of what has to be said about tolerance to cover up that what cannot be said about the lack of it. My informants have adapted the discourse of political correctness and want me to secure the evidence of their updated political and humanist awareness, but by doing it they also demarcate the line of their own 'foreigness' in the discourse embracing the other. The embrace is a clutch: "an enclave of the other within the other" crystallizing otherness as pure ostracism (Kristeva 1991:24) The analogous warranty of the 'right' attitude, confirmed by having a mixed-race personal relationship was stated in the 'Indian' pub by Angela, an English customer who offered me her view of the street:

> When I first came to Plumstead I thought I was in another country.
> I have an Indian husband, I am not prejudiced,
> but I actually thought I was in another country.
> I don't actually agree with that. There should be more mixed race,
> but it's not.
> The country has been taken over.
> They let too many people in from all walks of life,
> and it's not right,
> under any circumstances.
> You get overtaken,
> That's how we feel when we come shopping to Plumstead.

Authenticity and Home: Whose product?

While trying to map out ethnic relationships in my informants' narrative, I can see that the English recognize as "theirs" the national chain supermarkets (Co-Op, Somerfield's, Safeway, Marks & Spencer, Tesco), the global outlets of ASDA and Morrison's, and the local all-ranging malls like Bluewater, and Lakeside. They make the effort of going for shopping to those places rather than using the local 'non-English' shops in Plumstead. Only the local branches of Co-Op and Somerfield's meet their expected standards. Whereas non-white consumers express their double affiliation with both: the white culture and all market places which the whites visit and their own indigenous culture.

> Natalie, a Nigerian customer in the African hair salon: I never go to the Asian shops. I buy Nigerian products in African shops, and other things in supermarkets: ASDA, Morrison's, or TESCO".
> Janak, an Indian customer in the Irish pub:
> "For lunch we go to Star Burger, Star Express, Gregg's, but in the evenings, and surely at weekends we eat Indian food"
> Mira, a Punjab owner of the fabric shops:
> "The white is ok. We go to McDonald's and we eat their food. No problem. But our food is Indian food, homemade food every day".

These and similar statements expressed in the interviews contribute to my general observation: the non-white ethnicities in the High Street imitate the white consumer culture in their choices of marketplaces and manners of consumption. For my Asian and African informants a 'dual consumer' affiliation is the expression of their double belonging to the English society. Africans and Asians interviewed by myself are in most cases British citizens, first or second generation born in the UK. A degree of assimilation, however, is different among them, and some, like Jim, whose parents came to the UK from Jamaica, do not feel related to their original ethnic group: "I was brought up in a white community and I don't interact with the local people. I have my friends elsewhere". But the majority opt for cultivating the indigenous lifestyle, and even Jim eats from time to time a jerk chicken which "comes from a jar", and he tries to excuse his choice beyond ethnic affiliation: "I eat it simply because I like it". To what extent they adopt "whiteness" in their lifestyle depends on many factors: class, gender, status, religious formation, age even situational factor of time and space. Expressing 'white consumer behavior', as much as 'ethnic consumer behavior' can be an aesthetic choice, as Celia Lury claims (1997), but in the first place it is situated in a complex social and political situation.

My male Indian informants drinking in the pub present themselves in a relaxed manner which I identify as English-local. They consume the pub in the manner I am jealous of: sitting there and playing cards, waving to other customers, joining the pool game between pints of beer, moving around as if they knew the rules by heart, as if they were inherent part of this community. They also confirm their double affiliation verbally: "We go for our boys' nights out to the English pubs" and during the day we go for lunch to Gregg's or we buy at Safeway's or Co-Op, but in the evenings or at the weekend we eat Indian meals and only homemade food. Their Indian shopping is done in the Plumstead High Street, "which is famous for its great supply across South East London". At the end of the conversation, however, they admit that it is their wives who do

shopping, not themselves" and I feel a bit deceived after twenty minutes of talking about their favourite marketplaces. They do not seem to be engaged in this interview. I feel a bit excluded from the picture and they do not hide they would like to get rid of me and go back to their game. Is it another pose they have to perform? I spent more than an hour talking to them but they try to put across their own issues in this conversation, rather than answer my questions. Using the opportunity of this situation, based on the power of the microphone, they pass a "very important message for Ken Livingstone and people alike" whom they imagine as responsible for my presence at their table: "They should do something about this area"; "We should have more banks here" and "more car park space". I would like to be able to realize their claims with the immediate effect, but my academic research is as far from the centre of power as this situation is far from natural. Being Indian, my informants express their strong belonging to this street and conscious care about the social problems of the area of which they speak using pronouns: "ours" as opposite to "theirs" who stand for anonymous powers making decisions. They admit they feel at home in Plumstead, but at the same time they state ceremonially that their "real home" is in India which they try to evoke in local shopping and domestic rituals. Are they the "mimic men", whom Homi Bhabha defined as metonymically white, "but not quite white", citizens who want to belong but they know they will never be equal? The desire to imitate the behavior of the whites takes a form of "mimicry" which aims at melting into the environment but only to stand against it and to feel the difference even more excruciatingly.

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Bhabha writes: The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object. […] But they are also, as I have shown, the figures of a doubling, the part-objects if a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as 'inappropriate' colonial subjects. (1994: 87)
****

In the post-colonial hegemony, the other is accepted only to be subordinated and re-created as the white who is different: "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994:89). In the (post)colonial representation, the other has all rights to be different, hence never acquires a full presence. Their "partial representation" is recognized by Bhabha as "the metonymy of presence" provoking a strategic confusion that all identity effects in the play of power may be illusive, because they hide no essence. (1994:87). In the (post)colonial representation, the other has to be granted an ambiguous status of being authentic on the one hand, and being integrated on the other.

Non-white ethnicities adapt the "English" marketplaces as suitable for them, but they also strongly differentiate themselves through the connection with their indigenous consumption cultures: "white" is ok, we eat in McDonalds", admits the owner of the fabric shop. Although it is not specified what she means by "white", a link to McDonald's points at the global chains where all nationalities meet. Through the process of globalization spreading from Western economic resources, the meaning of the big chain shops and their local branches is interpreted as "white and Anglo-Saxon", hence the symbolic affiliation with that ethnic group among those who use global products and services. (Bird at al. 1993)

The English consumers occupy this street within the frame of "the white cultural imagination" (Gormley 2005), reinforced by the discourse of globalization absorbing the difference between ethnicities on 'white' terms. They differentiate the marketplace and its offers - like all other consumer groups – in an ordinary way which reinstates their ontological orientation in the world. They go to the supermarket where they can find "normal" products, like Sheila, an English customer interviewed at the Irish pub:

> "I only buy in supermarkets, never in the local shops. I buy normal stuff there: pizzas, ravioli, fish and chips, quiche".

In this sentence, both the globally distributed products and the typically English products have become devoid of their ethnic meaning and changed into "ethnically neutral commonly recognized signifiers, detached from its roots. When put together they stand for what is acceptable by and suitable for white consumer culture. They also demonstrate the expansion of a global consumer culture that influences customers' choices and their mental and material mapping of the marketplace. The global and the English products are signified in the same nominative group (as "normal" and "suitable"). The English consumers separate those products from the local non-English offers of the High Street ("there is nothing for us there, only spices"). When "caught" doing shopping in the Indian grocery, the English customers tell me about their passion for curry, or they admit that they had just run out of something as basic and "universal", as cucumber, milk, or bread. In the Indian shops, customers from non-Asian ethnic cultures did not know any other products except those which exist in their own cuisines, like the Egyptian lady who goes to the Indian stores for "her things". I can see in my daily shopping routes that English consumers rarely try anything 'not-theirs' either, except chili which is needed for what I call, 'an ethnically different' meal, which has become an inherent part of Western culture. Chili powder and soya sauce are available in all the local shops, across all ethnicities. No one asks about the origins of such products, unless it is needed for some academic research. They belong to the group of the must-be essentials which consumers do not distinguish as foreign anymore.

> From a semiotic perspective, it is not the product, but its meaning that participates in the lives of different ethnic groups and contributes to their consumer identity. But from a socio-cultural point of view, things have lives as much as lives have things. Celia Lury writes;

> Racially coded objects – that is, objects that have public or conventional racial associations, such as Malcolm X T-shirt or cap – move across different sites, bringing meaning with them, but also acquiring new meanings in the process of their use, and in this way acquire their own life, or cultural biography. (Lury 1997:173)

In Britain, Favorite Dish Is Chicken Tikka Masala

By INDRANEEL SUR
The Hartford Courant
May 02, 2001

Goodbye, fish and chips?

Britain's most popular national dish is now chicken tikka masala, an entrée of oven-roasted chicken in a creamy tomato sauce widely served in Indian restaurants, the British foreign secretary proclaimed in a speech in April. Critics immediately blasted the speech, which celebrated multiculturalism in Britain, as a blatant attempt by the secretary, Robin Cook, to curry favor for his Labour Party with immigrant voters in upcoming national elections. But his remarks also provided official recognition of an extraordinary shift in Western eating habits. Once limited to notoriously basic dishes of beef, mutton and fish, the British are now major consumers of Indian food. The Times of India recently counted 8,500 Indian restaurants in Britain. "While in America you almost have a Chinese restaurant on every corner, in England it's an Indian restaurant," says John Jago-Ford, owner of the British Shoppe in Madison, which sells tea and British food, including curry mixes. Underlying the trend was the massive wave of South Asian immigration to the United Kingdom after World War II. But Indian food has wide appeal there. British retailer Marks & Spencer has long sold prepackaged chicken tikka masala sandwiches. On April 11, McDonald's in Britain kicked off a two-month campaign that puts "a host of Indian-inspired products" on the menu, such as lamb rogan josh and vegetable samosas. Even Queen Elizabeth reportedly has a favorite place for munching curry - the upscale Veeraswamy Restaurant on London's Regents Street. http://www.cuisinecuisine.com/Link-HartfordCourant.htmp

A foreign product, in confrontation with the "receiving culture" (Kymlicka 2001), just like a foreign word or an immigrant herself, acquires new shadows of meaning, and, while still signified as 'original' or 'authentic', it undergoes what Lévi-Strauss called recontextualisation. (1979) But it can also happen that a foreign product or an immigrant herself dominates the receiving culture and becomes a significant and influential element in its own right. Those two directions, considered opposite in social identity studies, are, in Homi K.Bhabha's interpretation, two sides of the same coin.(1994) Both conceal the desire of the white cultural imagination to ensure the difference from the non-white. Many non-white ethnic food stuffs and products of everyday use have acquired a status of commonality within the British culture within the last decade. Black people, Asian people and white people alike favour curry, Tandori, kurma, pizza, or Chinese. These products have been conquered, swallowed by the discourse of the white identity and reissued as "ethnic" on the market. The meaning of authenticity attributed to such products, just like that granted to immigrants, becomes a symbolic currency changing its value depending on who needs it and for what purpose. By being recontextualised within the hegemonic discourse of the dominant culture, ethnic products, enclosed within the required borders of their difference, cease being different. The label of authenticity and ethnicity stipulated under the umbrella of multiculturalism is – as Bhabha reminds us - the device of essentialising difference by the (post)colonial hegemony. Yet the "ethnic" dishes taste different from what I know from home and I feel like crossing the border between the West and the East which meet on the shelves of Plumstead stores.

Buying foreign food stuffs in the High Street makes me feel local but also cosmopolitan. I order Indian food in a local take away and I feel one of them. For Pete this is a question of taste, not politics. When asked what he would like to eat during our lunch break on the location he replies indifferently: "whatever, I like Indian and everything else". For me it is an existential experience, which floats me to the desired area of belonging. jalfrazi, boryani, madras, bhuna, vindaloo, dupiaza, dansak, bhajee, and shisha: I swallow, and through recognizing the difference I recognize my own otherness. I swallow, and I tame what I don't understand. Now I know the Indian is not my culture but I see the Polish culture as different from me too. The decision of which

meanings belong 'my' culture and which travel to a culture of the Other is not entirely mine. But I can produce the feeling of belonging by practicing: I burn popodams frying them for ten minutes, and I still cannot make rice, but I am not giving up, one day I will get it right.

Can I create a home on a new land by decision?
By a well planned strategy of knowing the Other
Analyzing their choices
Swallowing their food
How can I
Make these people embrace my difference?
Make the street unfold its litters under my feet
And pour the story of its people to my afternoon tea?
As Savage et al. say, today you choose where you want to belong
But they don't tell me how to make the place know about me.

The market does it

Since joining the EU, Poles have come here in their hundreds of thousands. Critics say they deprive Britons of jobs and houses. Economists say they are adding £300million to the economy and keeping interest rates down. Starting today, in this major investigative series, *The Mail* sets out to discover the truth ... The shelves of the Polskie Delikatesy are crammed with jars of red cabbage, pickled cucumbers, smoky kabanos sausages, dark Polski chleb (bread) and racy, indecipherable magazines. I ask a question and the assistant, a young woman with long black hair, looks at me blankly, shrugs and shakes her head. I turn to two other customers, a pair of stocky men in work clothes, but they are equally puzzled. So, unable to make myself understood, I retreat. I feel like a foreigner, but this is not Warsaw, Kracow or Gdansk. I am in Southampton, an English city where one in ten of the 220,000 population is now believed to be Polish. Home Office figures show that 205,000 Poles have come here to work since May 2004, when Poland and other former Soviet bloc countries were allowed to join the EU. Once in London, the immigrants gravitate towards existing Polish communities in the suburbs - at the end of Tube lines, where housing is cheap to rent. It is here, in boroughs such as Ealing, Barnet, Walthamstow and Finsbury Park that the increased numbers are most visible. In the West London suburb of Hanwell, the corner shops now sell Polish bread and at St Joseph's Catholic School, one in six of the pupils is Polish. In response to the influx, the council has employed two Polish classroom assistants to help new pupils settle in, but their assimilation of the language and education system is extraordinary.

The New Britons, By FIONA BARTON, *Daily Mail* 10:28am 18th May 2006 (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=386567&in_page_id=1770

In my empirical observation of the shops' supply, I identified products from different countries on the shelves of Asian and African shops. In reaction to the latest influx of the new immigrants from Eastern Europe, they have also introduced Polish products. In every Asian shop and news agent there are adverts, sales offers and original products' names displayed in Polish language. There are no other Eastern European food stuffs or languages included yet. When asked why it is so, the Asian shop owner

explained to me that "it is the majority of the clients which decide. There are more Polish now in Plumstead, so we do Polish".

I interviewed the groups of Slovak and Polish informants in the High Street. The former group feel discriminated as consumers, since they cannot find any original Slovak products in the High Street, whereas Polish food is overflowing the shelves in all the Asian stores. They showed me with the pride of the hunters a chocolate bar with the Slovak name which they found in the West End: "That's what reminds us of home". I recalled the times when my parents had to send me parcels every week to fulfill my nostalgic hunger of Polishness in all kinds of everyday products. I hated English bread, and potatoes and everything that was different. Like my Slovak informants, I felt sentenced to the supermarkets where we can buy familiar products called by foreigners "normal stuff", but only in reference to that which is not characteristically English (since English food "does not taste like food", as my Eastern European informants explain), neither belongs to any specific ethnic group. In the same manner, my Polish informants express their - typical for the newcomers - distrust for any unknown products which they even don't want to try (at least within the period of adaptation to the new culture) they feel much more appreciated than Slovaks, having so much choice of their indigenous products in the Asian shops, which they even started calling 'Polish shops'. In the course of my interviews I realised that Indian news agents in the High Street are called by Polish immigrants "Polish shops" and this name works now as a signifier in my mental map of the High Street and indicates a concrete location in my conversations with other Polish people. Now, I go to the Indian shops only to ignore their original ethnic products and mark the place with my feel of dominance springing from my skinny wallet: I buy herring and smoked goat cheese, mushroom in vinegar, carp in jelly, and pickled sour kraut. An Indian shop owner with a coiled purple turban stares at me with the same perplexed smile on his face. He cannot believe we really eat it, but always asks humbly: "Anything else? If you need anything I don't have at the moment, please write down the name in Polish and I will get it for you". They never fail; they create for me a sample of home in the London suburb. Their shop is my shop now.

The distinction between "ours" and "theirs" in the narrative of the informants contributes to the ethnically-orientated signification of the marketplace. Consumers create their symbolic affiliation in the space of the ethnic narrative, but this narrative is also physically imprinted on the façade of the local shops and mentally engraved in the minds of their users.

Whose street is this?

Lamont shows that opting for an identity lies in an imaginary mapping, which aims at acquiring a symbolic affiliation with a certain community operating at the level of widely-shared cultural structure beyond the level of interpersonal contacts or ties. (Lamont 2000) In empirical reality this figurative sharing may lead to alteration of a physical landscape where ethnic relationships are played out. English users of the High Street affiliate themselves with the 'white' marketplaces, even though many of them also specialize today in ethnic products. Whereas non-white users do both: they emphasise the importance of their ethnic shops and at the same time they assimilate "the white" as theirs. The ethnic shops, most of the times, also offer both: global and indigenous supply.

However, the stigmatisation of the 'local' shops with 'ethnicity' (black hair dresser/ white hairdresser) separates customer groups and eventually leaves a mark on the physical landscape of the market place: "black shops on the top of the street, white in the middle, and Asian at the bottom".

> Mira, a Punjab owner of the fabric store reflects on this divide: "Say, for example, a Nigerian shop was opened here with their own food which they eat. We are actually reluctant to even go there and try it, and I don't know why really. Even other nations think that, they don't want to mix either"

> Amir, a male Indian informant in the Irish pub: "I have tried Chinese, but I have never tried African or Eastern European".

> Natalie, a female Nigerian client at the hair salon: "I don't go to Asian shops, but I was at the party once and there was such food there, I really like their food: all those samosas and spring rolls. I go to African shops, to buy African products, they have them in the High Street. I buy yam there, and vegetables for Nigerian soups".

The Asians and the Africans in the High Street do not question their belonging to the High Street: "the street belongs to all". It is "our" street and a "common" street - always in one phrase. Ethic groups cannot risk losing the adapted home, even if only in words. The English informants, on the other hand, admit that they feel dominated by foreigners who took the street from them. Yet all of them feel there is some other ethnic group who has just "taken over", whose statement highlights the division between the ethic groups but also evokes the tie with the one's own group.

Although the polarization between "ours" and "theirs" is so strong in the customers' stories, the reality of practice can be quite different. I observed African customers enjoying food in Indian restaurants and doing shopping in the Asian stores. I saw myself eating in the Indian restaurants. I have come across English customers in the Asian groceries, despite their general apprehension evoked in a platitude: "there is nothing for us there". Those empirical acts proved the incoherence of the politically polarized narrative which they produced in the interviews. But why would the narrative be less legitimate for studying a consumer culture than the actions of the consumers? The power of the articulated attitudes in the interviews can be as forceful as the physical actions. Thus the power of the written research or a video has to be taken into account too.

In my interviews I identified the pragmatic and textual discordance performed by the participants who try to embrace or out-manoueuvre the other's consumer ethnic representation:

> Shakra, a Nigerian owner of the hair salon in the High Street:
> "We do all kinds of hair here, all nationalities, we do white hair and black hair. We are open for everyone".
> Catherine, an English owner of the hair salon in the High Street:
> "We don't do Afro hair here, only the white hair. There is another hair salon which does black hair, but no white people or European people go there. They don't bother us and we don't bother them"

My informants' accounts and my own choice of words representing them are both symbolic interpretations of the social relationships in which we are both involved. The two quotations were selected from the interviews filmed on the sites of two hair salons in the High Street. The way they were applied (one of many possible ways) supports my thoughts about ethnic relationships in the High Street and proves that there is a clear divide in the local customers' stories. A visual appearance of the two contextually polarized quotations on one page adds to this discordance: 'white' and 'black' are separated under different nominative labels of Catherine-English and Shakra-Nigerian.

The interviewees have their own reasons behind the articulation of belonging to the High Street and I have my own reason in choosing words for writing about it. The stories told by the people and the film made on that basis are the effect of many factors meeting on the platform of the research. In front of the camera we reinforce our own values and attitudes, we have a chance to perform what we would like to be or we negotiate our image. Many of my informants acknowledged that they would prefer stating something different from what they said to the camera, but they feel obliged to say "the truth" instead. Whose truth is it then?

I look at the video tape to analyse the deeper meaning of the social and psychological veils which stand between me and the object of my study. Observed from a perspective of my sofa on a TV screen this object looks different from the reality in which it was filmed. Being in the interview and watching a video version of it are two different sources of knowledge about my informants. Shakra presents herself and her own business:

> Shakra: People come from all over the place to my salon, they travel from far, I am open till late hours and I am cheaper than others. I do micro plates for £200, whereas they are worth £800. This is a very friendly place, people now each other and they come for a chat even if they don't do their hair. It is a popular place and it feels like home. All races and nationalities come to here. I do the white hair and the black hair. I know everyone and everyone knows me. I meet all families and their friends. They come along to have a chat. I had some troubles from the local kids, but it is fine now, Plumstead is a good place for me and I feel safe here.

Shakra speaks about herself and her business in a worldly manner of a professional. Her statements and her behavior are considerate and elegant. A presence of the camera and the recording equipment is interpreted by Shakra as a symbol of a higher class to which she adjusts with a dark suit and a glamour hair. I have never seen her in that suit again at work, although I regularly pop in for a chat to her salon when continuing my observation in the High Street. She calls herself a businesswoman and tries to sound very professional when she talks to me. Her manner of speaking is slowed down, although her voice is slightly shaking and her body language shows she is tense and rather insecure. Her language is very clear, almost educational. Is it because I am a foreigner and she knows she needs to do it to be understood? Or she does it because it helps her to overcome the stress? We have a couple of lapses in understanding each other anyway. In Shakra's statements I can sense an attempt of self-promotional campaigning for the business. She is proud of her successful enterprise and tries to use our interview

as a ticket to a wider audience. After our shooting of the façade of the shop she asks me not to show the old fading advertising banner, peeling off from the wall, and she quickly explains that it is to be replaced soon. One can feel the weight of her responsibility over this place and lots of problems behind the façade which she doesn't articulate. By emphasizing that she invites all races, she wants to trivialize, or rather normalize an issue of race. She really needs to feel part of the community, even constant robberies do not bother her, or at least she says they don't affect her attitude to Plumstead. It is a significant success for Shakra to be here and run her own business, she has hopes about this place and wants to develop in this area.

In the due course of our conversation, she tries to greet every client who comes in with warm shouts, hugs and kisses. They behave as if they had known each other for ages. A female client of African origin is having a quick lunch under the hairdryer with her eyes closed; she is swinging rhythmically to the music from her MP3 player while her big hamburger disappears in her mouth. There are other people who eat their snacks, both clients and workers. Sandwiches, mugs and cans occupy the mirror shelves. There is a baby milk bottle on the counter, sticking out like a white temple from brushes and combs. It is food for the baby sleeping in a tight, colourful sack on the back of her mum, another hairdresser at Shakra's. I say: what a lovely baby. She smiles. I ask her: would you like to be in the picture? She nods without stopping her work: her fingers move very quickly plaiting the curls on the client's head, while the baby dreams peacefully along her motions. The place is very busy but at the same time feels cozy and relaxed. People eat, talk on the phone, shout cordially at each other across the room, some sway spontaneously on the floor to the R& B music, played in time with the authentic folk sounds which I identify, very generally, as African. Shakra's place is open long hours and offers lots of sub-services, like manicure, massage, wig making, and even mobile phones. There are articles from Africa displayed in the cabinet, like jewelry, but also African videos for rent. Late in the night it can be the only place still pulsating with life in the High Street. I like peeping through the windows when I wait for a bus or on my way back from work. The door is always open and invites everyone to this colourful and boisterous salon. The place combines the atmosphere of an exotic bazaar, dining room, and a floor show.

This salon is a like a home.
Everyone knows each other.
Clients drop in just to talk
Or have a coffee
This is more than a business
It is our common life, says Shakra.
Can I have a coffee too? I ask Shakra my motto question: Whose is this street, Shakra?
This street? What do you mean? ……….I think it's everyone's. All people who come to here. Is it your street?

Yes, I work here, I am here every day, it is my street too.
This place is also my place.
I filmed it in the night and day
I interrogated it
I investigated it
I interpreted it

It's become mine.
People recognize me in the street.
They ask me friendly about my research and about the weather.
They wave when I cross the street.
They offer me a drink.
I am so happy to belong.
I've become theirs. ……

On another tape I can see Catherine, a manager of another hair salon in the High Street, coming out for some small shopping in the next door off-license store. The windows of the salon are covered with white, sterile blinds. It is a very sunny day. The place looks quiet from the outside, there are no adverts or posters on the façade, just a black-and-white banner above the window. We move inside. Catherine and her assistant Amanda, and a shampooist Vicky are waiting for us. They are all very friendly and joyous, trying to help us with all the cables and other bits and pieces we have to install. It is quite obvious that there is a great interaction between them as a team, also including the clients who interfere a lot in this interview. I feel as if in a theatre standing behind the curtains - in the back of the hairdryers. They don't need any encouragement to speak, almost ignoring my questions, almost ignoring my person. They feel self-sufficient among themselves and my presence does not change it. All women know their roles here and they seem to play them almost automatically. There are no male clients here and no other ethnicities. The whole scene looks like a well arranged agora for exchanging views and gestures, while doing hair is only an excuse to come to this place and spend some time together. Catherine does not present herself as a boss of the place. She is concentrating on her work and does not seek the camera's attention. She seems very natural and relaxed, her voice sounds contemplative when she reflects on the multiculturalism of the area and melancholic when she recalls its golden past. Her palms freeze on the scissors above her client's head when she recalls the threats from the local gangs. "They fight between themselves, all those different races, for domination in the High Street."

I think about my own position in front of the English defenders of local nationalism. I try not to see Catherine among them. I force myself to focus on the film. Yet when I perform watching the film now, in writing, I feel vulnerable and out of place. Which gang do I belong to? This message is not about me, so why do I feel responsible for those threats? I cannot allow myself to feel like a victim of the discourse of social panic. I would like to shout to Catherine that not every foreigner is a gangster, but Catherine does not seem to be interested, nor does she pay any attention to my person. She is emotionally engaged with her own narrative and the part she plays in front of me reflects the anxieties of the public discourse about immigration. I shift my attention back to the tape. I can see Catherine is dressed in casual jeans, feminine top, and flip-flops; she presents herself as modern woman, knowing her environment very well, feeling good as a manger, accepting the camera almost as part of her duties. She treats her clients a bit like a dignified mother-hen who loves her customers and allows them to "misbehave". This interview creates an opportunity for them to express political arguments, feelings, gossip, jokes, and mutual arguments. They share their myths making them even truer by saying them to the camera.

Catherine: "Plumstead has changed. It's extremely multicultural. And I don't mean it racist. Everybody seems to be frightened of each other, aren't they, ladies?

1st client: yeah, all good people are moving out.

Catherine: Everybody is selling their houses and move out. I am staying till I have enough money and I would like to move abroad. I think, it's society as a whole, isn't it, Amanda? There is no camaraderie anymore, like it was during the war, is there? People don't talk to each other. Nobody is ready to put their selves upfront.

Amanda, Catherine's assistant: Yes, it is not the same anymore. More and more foreign people coming. People lost trust in the pace. Plumstead was very friendly when I moved in to here. Everybody knew everybody else, and it's not like that anymore. All our shops are gone. The dress shop, and round the corner………the curtain shop, the model shop, the shoe shop.

1st client: we don't have any butcher now!

2nd client: ……..and Comax, which had been here for ages is gone. All the original shops are lost. Amanda: Our place is the only one which is left.

Catherine: It is very important for our clients to come to us every week. This is like a home for them. Their husbands died and they have nowhere to go anymore.

A mythical paradise of the face-to-face community cannot be maintained. The original users of the High Street cannot accept the change. They don't want to believe that the "truth" about the racially homogenous and untarnished locality was a product of the cultural discourse being but a symbolic construct securing their belonging to the group. (Wegner 2002) However irrelevant today, the memory of the past is the only 'truth' they want to remember, it helps them to confront their shuddered identity against the distinguishable Other who, although ambiguous and dangerous, creates the sealed unity of some desired totality. The Other helps them to find a sense in the changing environment, so unknown and threatening. Discrimination against becomes the means of survival, and the reaction to the temporal and spatial change:

Whose is this street, Catherine? "It is theirs, it is not ours".

"Yeah, it belongs to them……..but let's face it, we are getting older" adds Amanda sighing deeply.

The place looks clean and bright; it carries some sings of modishness and grace in the lustrous and ordered surroundings. You can hardly hear the noise of the street, the door is carefully locked after each client – a protective gesture after a robbery which took place in the middle of the day on Catherine's salon. At 6pm the place is closed and the shutters are pulled down. It disappears for the night from the map of the High Street.

I see Catherine's place as isolated against the Other and against change, whereas Shakra's place tries to be integrated with and open for the Other and change. For Catherine this interview is an occasion to present herself and her business also from a political perspective: the discourse she uses produces the effect of victimisation. The Others, in her words, are a problem in the area and her performance during the interview carries out a very well know media-inspired tone of fear and nostalgia: all non-white ethnic groups in the High Street contribute to Catherine's sense of isoloation and displacement. From Shakra's perspective, however, the place is seen as homely and safe, bringing prospects for the future.

Catherine's confidence presented in her professional calmness and personal detachment and Shakra's insecurity covered by her diligence and enthusiasm meet with their different attitude to the place and their life in the High Street, and subsequently to their being interviewed. By saying: this is my street, my home, my place, Shakra tries to make it happen, but the street still belongs to Catherine who rejects it.

My subjective way of seeing the interviews and evoking their contexts and interpreting them in writing does not emancipate the picture of the hair salons from the traditional oppressive discourses separating ethnic groups. In my interpretation of the interviews, I produced an image of the "white salon" being official, civilized, organized, rationalized, aloof, and controlled, and the image of the "black salon" as noisy, organic, disorganized, messy, and irrational. In this paper they emerged in the same polarized way as the informants tend to think about them, without even trying to check "the truth". The same question arises again: do I see the representation through the dominant lens of the "white imagination", or is the representation the effect of this imagination which pushed them into the frame of stereotype triggered in the eye of the camera? I cannot stop thinking that by writing what has been said in the interviews I do not negotiate, but rather reinforce the ethnic separation.

Conclusions

By writing 'black', 'white' and 'Asian', by providing certain quotations to prove my point, I fall in the grasp of the same discourse which divided my informants. I simply reinforce the paradigm already in circulation. Edward Said would see my writing as "miming" the racial imagination of the white culture. Yet being aware of this authoritative mimetic obligation imposed on my academic self and revealing its overpowering status should move my research beyond the level of imitation. Self-reflective writing enables me to recognize my own submissive position and I can open it to critical scrutiny. As one externalizes one's argument in a text, they become the object of study too (Lofland 1971). A political effect I hope for is to come from what Hirschman and Thompson's (1995) said about the power of representation, namely that representations not only reflect social relationships, but simultaneously rework them.

The symbolic fusion of materiality and representation in the narrative of the High Street supports the situationist vision of space as Henri Lefebvre saw it (Lefebvre 1991). In the "Lefebvrian matrix" thinking about place requires an equal consideration of materiality, representation, and imagination to see, as described in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, how places are constructed and experienced as material artifacts, how they are represented in discourse; and how they are used in turn as representations, as "symbolic places" in contemporary culture. (Harvey 1993:17)

In my "report" on the High Street, the stories from my informants about other ethnic groups are compared against my empirical observations. DV tapes with recordings make their own world of visual data which I "translate" into words. Quotations from interviews also have their own cognitive and ontological value whose 'truth', put in the quotation marks, is never put into question. But when placed in a paper, quite often out of the original context, they all become textualised forms of expression - a new empirical reality on its own, a proposition for interpretation. The way it is presented in writing, however, is already filtered, personalized, and confined by my

own thinking about the collected data. But, if "writing is thinking" (Becker 1986) not just the translation of thoughts, it offers a new, sometimes unexpected, perspective of seeing the inconsistencies or connections between the thoughts. My written account on ethnic relationships in the High Street reveals the political and discursive pressure to which I submit as both the author and the user of the marketplace. A critical account elicited in the first singular person in the face of the Other becomes a political gesture. In Denzin's words, auto-ethnography represents "a call to action". (Denzin 2003:249)

The narrative which I present about my informants' preferences and ethnic affiliations in indirect speech does not differ at all from the stories which they passed to me in the interviews: their private stories and my academic story are both fictions. Fictions that represent only the ethnographer's version of a reading rather than an empirical truth" (Pink 2001:17). I have created a narrative about belonging to the specific marketplaces in the High Street on the basis of what I have seen in the filmed interviews and during my participant observation. The data from those two levels of research are melted in to one argument which *acts* as an objective view of the scene.

My seeing of the informants grouped around their ethnicities in the High Street is as subjective as their own stories about consumption performed in front of the camera. The stories they told me in the interviews are the expressions of their own interpretation of who they are as the consumers and inhabitants in the High Street. They offered me a story in response to an artificial situation of ethnographic participation in which I put them. An interview gave them an opportunity to perform a 'self' of their choice, whereas watching the film and writing about it enabled myself to (re)create the sense of belonging to this place which has become home.

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Footnote:

1. Barbara Stern explains that the application of the term representation in the Aristotelian aesthetics "stems from the classical assumption that human superiority resides in the ability to devise, manipulate and understand symbols (Stern 1998:2). This attitude underpins the rationalistic scientific tradition of seeking universal and singular meaning in representation which is believed to accurately reflect reality.