

Current Sociology

<http://csi.sagepub.com>

Poor Chic: The Rational Consumption of Poverty

Karen Bettez Halnon

Current Sociology 2002; 50; 501

DOI: 10.1177/0011392102050004002

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://csi.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/50/4/501>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[International Sociological Association](#)

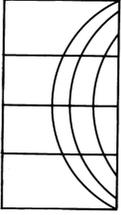
Additional services and information for *Current Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://csi.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://csi.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>



Karen Bettez Halnon

Poor Chic: The Rational Consumption of Poverty

Introduction

Poor Chic refers to an array of fads and fashions in popular culture that make recreational or stylish – and often expensive – ‘fun’ of poverty, or of traditional symbols of working class and underclass statuses. Earlier historical examples of Poor Chic are 1920s Harlem ‘white slumming parties’, 1960s Levi blue jeans, Parisian costume balls where the rich adorned themselves in expensive rags, and Marie Antoinette’s 15-cottage ornamented *Hameau* farm. Poor Chic can be compared with practices such as playing Indian, black face minstrelsy, and drag that involve privileged members of society impersonating down the social ladder of stratification. However, what is distinctive about Poor Chic today is that ‘lower class’ masquerade is now center stage in the historical theatre of downward impersonation, and is a phenomenon that takes place in the contexts of the increasing and extreme polarization of classes (Bauman, 2000, 2001); consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998; Lee, 2000; Ritzer, 1996); class-stratified consumer cultures (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 2000; Gottdiener, 2000); a zeitgeist of fluid, mutable, or unbounded self-stylization with a subject (Dunn, 2000; Giddens, 1991) and without (Gergen, 1991; Baudrillard, 1996); travel and vacationing as standard staples of social life and measures of social worth (Bauman, 2000; Urry, 1990); and more generally, in a society organized, in large part, on a highly rational fast-food model, McDonald’s being a prototype (Ritzer, 1996; Ritzer, 1998).

Below I begin by demonstrating the pervasiveness of Poor Chic in popular culture in the United States and internationally, emphasizing multiple poverty symbols across numerous fads and fashions, and by explaining how poverty symbols, while stereotypical, are representative of lower class status and have referents in the material realities of poverty. Poor Chic is further explained as an objectification of poverty that obscures itself through the fragmentation of a ‘class script’ over multiple fads and fashions.

Current Sociology, July 2002, Vol. 50(4): 501–516 SAGE Publications
(London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)
[0011–3921(200207)50:4;501–516;026817]

Next, drawing on Thorstein Veblen's work, I explain how 'conspicuous consumption' (or wasteful spending) and work abstention are no longer regarded as reliable indicators of upper class status in contemporary society, and how some theorists claim that 'lifestyle' consumption has displaced consumption as a means of displaying class status. Challenging the reductionism of 'lifestyle' theorists, I explain and extend Zygmunt Bauman's distinction between postmodern 'tourists and vagabonds', arguing that consuming the 'vagabond', or what Bauman describes as the fearful 'alter ego' of the tourist, is not only a method of addressing fears of descending into vagabondage, but also a new means of class-distinguishing wasteful consumption. Using George Ritzer's conceptualization of McTourism as guide, I delineate how Poor Chic protects against sliding into poverty through the rational (controlled, efficient, predictable, and calculable) consumption of it.

Poor Chic

Poor Chic pervades contemporary popular culture. It is found in Rachel Ashwell's Shabby Chic house furnishing style based on refurbishing flea market purchases (Ashwell with Costin, 1996), in *Better Homes and Gardens Flea Market Decorating* (Ingham, 2000), and in Melbourne's trendy 'op shop' 'trash-and-treasure jumble sale(s)' and its Salvation Army store shopping up by \$10 million in just the last year (Heinrich, 2002). Vintage clothes by west London 'secondhand stylist' Jeff Ihenacho are popular with his celebrity customers such as Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell, Bette Midler, and Winona Ryder (Gunn, 2002).

Since the mid-1990s Poor Chic is featured in high fashion, such as Calvin Klein's, 1996–1997 'heroin chic' advertising campaign where supermodels posed as emaciated, strung-out junkies and House of Dior's 2000 lines of 'hobo chic' and 'asylum attire' (de Quetteville, 2000; Dowd, 2000). London and Paris 2002 fashion trends 'Gangsta' and 'Rough Stuff'; Christian Dior's 2001 \$35 'laddered' (i.e. torn-up) hosiery (Murphy, 2001); Yves Saint Laurent's Rive Gauche 2001 collection of 'gipsy meets peasant luxe look' (Alexander, 2001); Xuly Bet's 'street-person chic' and the designer clothes of Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons ('who does a poor-girl look that only a rich one could afford') (Donnally, 1993) serve as additional examples.

Poor Chic is found in a variety of other forms. It is found in the mainstreaming of tattooing as 'body art' since the 1980s (Camphausen, 1997; Hewitt, 1997; Sanders, 1989) and in Rich Urban Biking, or when white-collar professionals take 'wild' weekend excursions on their loaded BMW, Harley, and Indian motorcycles (Harrington, 1993; McCabe, 1996). It is found in Emo style, ally to punk music heavy with emotion. The poverty props for this act include wearing gas station jackets, short undersized pants, 'thin, too

small polyester button-ups', 'too small cardigans and v-neck sweaters', and 'anorexic thinness' aided by veganism (<http://www.pcweb.net/fourfa/fashion.htm>). Poor Chic is also found in the enormous popularity of WWF (World Wrestling Federation) over the past four years, and in the fact that wrestling now constitutes the single most popular spectator sport among American youth today (PBS, 2001). It is also found amidst 13 million body builders working out in 5000 health clubs in the United States since the early 1980s (Reed, 1981). The wide popularity of Kenneth Cole, Steve Madden, and House of Prada designer bowling shoes that range between \$94 and \$330 (Biuo, 2001; Wilkins, 2000) and pink flamingos (see, for example, <http://collector-connection.site.yahoo.net/flamingos.html>) serve as more specific examples.

We find Poor Chic in numerous slum and underclass fads and fashions, such as Rio's 'shantytown chic' funk balls and on the catwalks of São Paulo where 'leggy models parade favela fashions, including skintight "Gang Jeans" selling for \$200 a pop. Local companies even offer popular favela tours.' Catching on beyond Brazil, 'In Paris, a nightclub called Favela Chic celebrates the rhythms and cuisine of Brazil's slums' (Faiola, 2001). A continent away, wealthy white 'gutter punks', amidst real homelessness (and real 'gutter punks'), beg for money, sleep in parks, and otherwise 'act poor' at the fringes of New Orleans' Bourbon Street area (Field notes, 20 October 2000). A few years earlier, white middle class suburban girls in California were choosing identities as 'cholita' or Mexican 'gangsta girl' (Bernstein, 1995). Today in the United States millions of white suburban teens adopt Hip-Hop culture, which originates in the black urban underclass, by wearing expensive designer baggy pants, hoodies, Fubu jackets, gold chain jewelry, and Timberland boots.

We find Poor Chic perhaps most extremely but certainly not exhaustively in the shocking, angry, alienated, and delinquent styles of heavily tattooed, white musicians such as Kid Rock (whose inaugural tour was promoted as 'White Trash on Dope' and whose 'trailer' origins and pimping aspirations are proudly declared in the song 'Cowboy' on the *Devil Without a Cause* CD). Similar thematic content is found in the music of Eminem, Limp Bizkit, Insane Clown Posse (ICP), GWAR (thrash-metal Virginia Commonwealth University students doing a marketing experiment), and Rage Against the Machine (with dread-locked, rap-core Harvard University graduate, guitarist Tom Morello).

Poor Chic was conceptualized by collecting and analyzing multiple symbols traditionally associated with working class and underclass life – or those in our common 'stock of knowledge' (Schutz and Luckmann, 1989) that represent lower class status – among numerous fads and fashions since the 1980s. Poor Chic symbols include (so far): mental illness, homelessness, starvation, drug addiction, bowling, pink plastic flamingos, trailer park and 'white trash' status, tattooing, pumping iron, pimping, motorcycling,

wrestling, polyester clothes, belt-less prisoner baggy pants, work boots, gas station jackets, thrift store and flea market purchases, secondhand clothes, slum and gang lifestyle, and more abstractly yet importantly, a 'code of the street' (Anderson, 1999) turned 'code of consumption' marked by anger, alienation, and delinquency.

While these class symbols (that some times intersect with race and ethnicity) are obviously stereotypical, many of them are rooted in material realities. For example, sociologists have long recognized and documented strong correlations between poverty and homelessness, starvation, drug addiction, ghettoization, juvenile delinquency, anger, and alienation. These are material realities experienced by the poor (often as symptoms of poverty or as protests against it) in daily life regardless of whether they are transformed into saleable commodities. And that these symbols are stereotypes or even possible as stereotypes is because they are distortions of *realities* that lurk behind them. To convey the point as plainly as possible, just because one 'acts poor' or does a poor imitation does not erase real poverty or poor people; but it does have the effect of obscuring those realities. In other words, just because a white suburban teenager acts like a Mexican 'gangsta girl' or cholita by eating at Taco Bell, wearing dark purple lipstick, and affecting a Spanish accent does not mean that real delinquent Chicanas are nowhere to be found. One bewildered father-to-cholita recognized the less exotic reality behind his daughter's safely distanced impersonation when he teased: 'Hey, cholita . . . Get a suntan. We'll put you in a barrio and see how much you like it' (Bernstein, 1995: 87). This is not to make the claim, however, that all 'images' generated by the fashion industry, media corporations, and other producers of popular culture have a 'truth' behind them. For example, the 'Mook' (prototype Howard Stern) and the 'Midriff' (prototype Britney Spears) are artistic creations based less in representations of truth than in what Baudrillard (1983) would call 'simulation' (there is nothing behind the media-generated image but the image itself). As explained in the documentary *The Merchants of Cool* (PBS, 2001), when teens subsequently mimic Mooks and Midriffs, the images do not represent them. They represent images that have no referents outside the media-machine.

A related introductory point is that Poor Chic is often obscured as a specifically *class* impersonation because of its objectifying character. Objectification, as feminist scholars (Bartky, 1990; Dworkin, 1989) have explained, entails reducing a complex and multi-faceted human being to a single part or function. In pornography, the prototype of objectification, subjects are cut up, split up, or fragmented. Feminists have argued that pornography not only reductively objectifies the individuals depicted (e.g., the narrowly depicted woman in the centerfold) but also objectifies women as a gender *class*. Poor Chic is like pornographic media and individualizing claims about it ('It is only a self-deciding women in the centerfold') in that it fragments or divides

up the large script of 'lower class' symbols across numerous fads and fashions and because it is often defended with individualizing (and reifying) claims to the ring of 'it's just a style' or 'it's just a form of self-stylization'. However, inductively reconstituting lower class status by cataloguing multiple poverty symbols otherwise dispersed among numerous Poor Chic fads and fashions (as I have done), aims to show that it is not simply a characteristic of poverty or non-referential 'lifestyle' involved, but a class script (even while obviously incomplete). This theoretical explanation is like sermonizing to the choir to some critics of Poor Chic, such as a *Washington Post* writer who explained with equal generality (and much more concreteness) about class status, while using Poor Chic clothes as a single example:

The height of chic is to look downtrodden, poor, disadvantaged . . . The rich – or those willing to hike up their credit card debt – are distinguishing themselves with clothes that stand out because they are so off-kilter, so mockingly lower-class. (Givhan, 1996)

Vacationing in Vagabondage

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* Thorstein Veblen (1925, c1899) explained how the upper class displayed its greater social worth through the acquisition of property. At the time of Veblen's writing, the American upper class, lacking an aristocracy, also distinguished itself from the lower classes through work abstention and 'conspicuous consumption', or wasteful spending. In the postmodern period where consumption has displaced production as the prominent feature of capitalism, where 'conspicuous consumption' pervades in its practice throughout the social classes, and where the upper classes are integrated into the occupational structure (even Bill Gates, who is worth \$43 billion or so, goes to work), it is becoming increasingly difficult to use work abstention and conspicuous consumption as a means of distinguishing upper class status (Gottdiener, 2000).

These changes, and other features of postmodern living, have led some scholars to question whether 'lifestyle' consumption, an individualistic, self-expressive, and self-stylizing consumption, has displaced consumption as a means of constructing conventional social statuses. Featherstone (2000: 93) clearly poses the pertinent questions:

Are consumer goods used as cultural signs in a free-association manner by individuals to produce an expressive effect within a social field in which the old coordinates are rapidly disappearing, or can taste still be adequately 'read', socially recognized and mapped onto class structure? Does taste still 'classify the classifier'?

Featherstone (2000: 93), who attempts 'to develop a perspective which goes beyond the view that lifestyle and consumption are totally manipulated

products of mass society, and the opposite position which seeks to preserve the field of lifestyles and consumption', proposes that:

. . . the 'no rules by choice' view (celebrated by some as a significant movement towards the break-up of old hierarchies of fashion, style and taste in favour of an egalitarian and tolerant acceptance of differences, and the acknowledgement of the right of individuals to enjoy whatever popular pleasures they desire without encountering prudery or moral censure) does not signify anything as dramatic as the implosion of the social space but should be regarded as merely *a new move within it*. (Italics added)

Featherstone (2000: 100–1) explains the continued significance of class status through his discussion of the 'new petit bourgeoisie' who serve as 'cultural intermediaries', intellectuals who apply serious analysis in new areas of expertise such as popular culture and in doing so cater for and promote 'a general interest in style itself' (e.g. the unavoidable contradictions of the paper you are reading). Featherstone (2000: 100) is scathingly, yet implicitly, self-reflexive: 'In effect the new ethic espoused by the vanguard of the new bourgeoisie (the producers of consumer commodities) and the new petite bourgeoisie may well be in the process of creating the *perfect consumer*.'

In this paper I wish to show, in the spirit of Bourdieu's (1984) work, how socioeconomic status is distinguished through distinct consumption processes of dominant members of society to reproduce inequality. To do so is to challenge the reductionism of 'lifestyle' theorists who propose the 'waning of class', along with other conventional social statuses. For example, Dunn (2000: 116), who provides a 'weaker' version of the postmodern subject/object of consumption than that of Jean Baudrillard, Mark Poster, or Frederick Jameson, still proposes that 'socially delineated statuses' have been replaced by 'a loose aggregate of personality traits' gleaned through 'lifestyle consumption'. He says at greater length:

(T)he collective identities of class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, along with conventionalized institutional social roles, are weakened or replaced by more 'individualized' and fluid 'lifestyle' identities constructed in relation both to consumer goods and media images. . . . To the extent this occurs, the moorings of the self in socially delineated statuses, roles, and relationships are weakened, and processes of self-definition come to depend increasingly on an appropriation of the attributes of commodities. An integrated social conception of the self is thereby replaced by a loose aggregate of personality traits assembled through the consumption of goods and images. (Dunn, 2000: 116)

I do not challenge this 'weaker' version of the postmodern subject overall, but aim to show how in *Poor Chic* (at least) class status is distinguished through work abstention (i.e. travel and vacationing) and conspicuous (wasteful) consumption, although with somewhat different applications of those traditional class-distinguishing activities.

One of the ways to display social worth in the role of consumer in

consumer society is by traveling in a world of increasing and extreme polarization between wealth and poverty. Bauman (2000: 18) tells us that in 1996 'the total wealth of the top 358 "global billionaires" equaled the combined incomes of the 2.3 billion poorest people (45 percent of the world's population)', and in 1991 'the top fifth of the world population enjoyed 84.7 percent of the world's gross product', while the bottom fifth made do with 1.4 percent. Bauman explains further that in this polarized world where we are expected to be always on the move, travelers are stratified 'high up' and 'low down'. The 'high up' people, judged to excel in their willingness and ability to move, are globetrotting 'tourists'. Contrasted with tourists are 'vagabonds'. Their experience is 'localization', space restriction, and a slow, shallow, and morally unworthy use of time. In a travel society, 'The vagabond is a flawed consumer':

Vagabonds are not really able to afford the kind of sophisticated choice in which consumers are expected to excel. Their limited resources severely limit their potential for consumption. This fault makes their position in society precarious. They breach the norm and sap the order. (Bauman, 2000: 24)

Bauman's account of the psychological relation between tourist and vagabond is intriguing and provokes elaboration. He says:

(I)n a society of travelers, in the traveling society, tourism and vagrancy are two sides of the same coin. The vagabond, let me repeat, is the alter ego of the tourist. The line that divides them is tenuous and not always clearly drawn. One can easily step over it without noticing. There is an abominable likeness. (Bauman, 2000: 24)

The dilemma for the tourist is to 'exorcise' the 'nightmarish' fear of that 'demon', the ever-present possibility of declining into 'vagabondage'. 'In forcing the vagabond off the street, confining him to a far-away and "no-go" ghetto, demanding his exile or incarceration, the tourist desperately seeks the deportation of his own fears.' The utopia of the tourist is 'a world without vagabonds' where 'the tourist need never wake up a vagabond' (Bauman, 2000: 25).

In a less than utopian world, tourists and those who aspire to tourist status have found a new kind of tourism in a travel society that helps sooth the fear of downward flight into vagabondage. Convenient that vagabonds are localized, fixed; that way you know who and where they are. That is especially necessary when they themselves might become the tourist site. The tourist defends against its alter ego after Bauman's work: in a society unlikely to be rid of vagabonds, and in a society always inventing more and more wasteful things to consume, why not take a vacation in poverty? Why not baptize that social waste with the fluidity of the tourist? Why not control the vagabond by consuming him?

The Rational Consumption of Poverty

Control

Vacationing in poverty, like other forms of McTourism in consumer society, is carried out rationally. Control is most important in that efficiency, predictability, and calculability are integral to this 'scientific' process. Yet control is far from objective (an alleged feature of rational science) in its application to Poor Chic. In Poor Chic, control involves becoming what elicits fear, what haunts, but in its opposite: poverty becomes wealth, despair becomes fun, localization is transformed into travel. The tourist controls by obscuring the reality of vagabondage, in 'self-stylizing' word and in deed. The Poor Chic tourist is fluid and mobile, on a temporary, affordable, comfortable, and recreational voyage, venturing always, like other vacationers, toward the safe haven of home.

By becoming the tourist-as-vagabond, one can take charge, dominate the alter ego by displaying discretionary power to occupy and vacate poverty. Tourist masquerading as vagabond, Poor Chic, controls the possibility of becoming one by dehumanizing it, by reducing it to a commodity. Envelop it, consume it, before it consumes you. The 'It' status of fearfully real persons is especially important for the highly ontologically uncertain. 'It' quells the fear of being swallowed up (Laing, 1969: 47). And Karl Marx (quoted in Gottdiener, 2000), in a different context but not inconsistent way, said: 'the commodity form possesses the peculiar capacity of concealing its own essence and origin from the human beings who live with and by it.' The commodity fetishizes: it conceals its essence, and replaces it with desires purchased for a price. The tourist (conveniently in this case) is estranged from what really lies behind the commodity: the haunting humanity of the poor and the fearful reality of poverty.

Efficiency

Accustomed to efficiency in their everyday lives, many people tend to have little tolerance for inefficient vacations. They want the most vacation for the money . . . and to see and do as much as possible in the time allotted. (Ritzer, 1998: 38)

Imitators of the poor pose, for example, as junkie, delinquent, (hungry) gas station attendant, slum-dweller, homeless person, or patron of flea markets. These stereotypical roles serve as time- and work-saving devices. Instant identities, with minimal and pre-packaged ingredients, replace the otherwise costly process of mastering a role from scratch. For example, a *Boston Globe* reporter (Hayes, 1996) says that the children and adults he interviewed about temporary tattoos 'agreed that their biggest selling point is their temporary nature . . . It's kind of harmless fun. You get a chance to be that motorcycle guy without having to undergo laser surgery.' A *Houston Post* writer

(Roberts, 1992) reports similarly: 'Like artificial sweeteners and near beer, temporary tattoos give you the thrill of the real thing, but without the morning-after guilt and regrets.' 'America's yuppie outlaws', or Rich Urban Bikers, can also 'climb aboard their growling Harleys on weekends and slip quietly back behind their neat desks on Monday mornings' (Cobb, 1999: 3). An Internet description (<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/cruz07.03.96/bikers-9627.html>) commented further about such efficiently superficial and temporary identities:

... for some new riders it has now become a ready-made, weekend identity. Expensive black-leather jackets hang in closets alongside Giorgio Armani suits. And RUBies – rich urban bikers – own \$20,000 motorcycles that share garages with high-priced BMW and Mercedes-Benz automobiles. They've become *The Wild One* for the brunch bunch.

Poor Chic is not only efficient because it minimizes work and time investments, but also because of other more sociologically evident benefits of employing stereotypes. Stereotypes are vehicles through which socially devalued identities are made 'open' or de-privatized. And the extent to which an identity is open and accessible is a sociological gauge of its devaluation (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, to use stereotypes as recreational domains is to exploit inequality, (and, quite literally, to make fun of it).

Goffman's (1959: 59–60) discussion of the differential social costs of 'upward' and 'downward' impersonation points to the further social efficiency of Poor Chic:

... while it is felt to be an inexcusable crime against communication to impersonate someone like a doctor or a priest, we are often less concerned when someone impersonates a member of a disesteemed, non-crucial, profane status, such as that of a hobo or unskilled worker.

However, in Poor Chic there is no 'heroic' discovery that a low status individual actually has a high one, as in Goffman's account. The social costs of impersonation, measured in the application of negative social sanctions, are at a minimum when there is an explicit downward impersonation from the very beginning. Poor Chic is distinctively the superficial pretense of poverty.

Poor Chic is also efficient (quick, non-committal, fluid) because of the very faddishness of the phenomenon. For example, Harold (1999) observed of Heroin Chic: 'As fashion trends inevitably do, heroin chic passed from the cultural spotlight almost as quickly as it had arrived.' The trend began in September 1996 with an advertising campaign for cK Be cologne and was over directly after leading heroin chic photographer Davide Sorrenti's lethal heroin overdose in February 1997. As one magazine article read: 'Out with wasted looking models in scuzzy settings and in with full-figured beauties gleaming with health' (Kaplan, 1998). Once the impersonation revealed the harsh reality behind it, fashion moved in another direction. While Calvin

Klein may have 'kicked the habit' of heroin chic, the fashion world has since offered a number of trendy equivalents such as House of Dior's self-starved models donning 'homeless chic' and 'asylum attire':

They came down the runway raggedy and baggy, some swathed in newspapers, with torn linings and inside-out labels, accessorized with empty little green J&B whiskey bottles, tin cups dangling from the derriere, bottle caps, plastic clothespins and safety pins. Some posed as lunatic ballerinas in frayed tulle, others in straitjackets and white madhouse makeup. (Dowd, 2000)

Predictability

... the McDonaldization thesis leads to a view that people often travel to other locales in order to experience much of what they experience in their day-to-day lives ... many [tourists] want few, if any, surprises. (Ritzer, 1998: 137-8)

The mother of flea market 'art', Rachel Ashwell, instructs that one must learn to discern potential 'treasures amidst the trash' (Ashwell with Costin, 1996). And while Ashwell says that she is 'attracted' to 'the quirky appeal of chips, stains, cracks, dents, and irregularities that assert character and reveal the charm of history', and that she 'gravitate(s) toward the crumbling, the disheveled, the tattered, and the battered', to 'do' Shabby Chic is to adopt 'a style that is appreciative of the beauty of process and *evolution*'.

What is distinctive about Shabby Chic is how it is actually not-so-shabby chic. Shabby chic does not involve the simple purchase of and decoration with flea market items. It involves cleaning, polishing, staining, repainting, and covering up (most aptly, Ashwell says her style was first inspired by the use of slipcovers). Refurbishment requires a lot more cash than the pocket full of it Ashwell recommends for the initial purchase of items. It also requires a strategic or thematic style, marked by functionality, individuality, integration, and a particular pallet of pale colors. While Ashwell is clear on the latter point, her examples (in her books and on her show) are just as clear in the further requirement of placing flea market items in clean, well-kept, and well-structured homes. Her examples range from small one-bedroom condominiums for young professional bachelors to Paul Mitchell's pricey estate. Pieces of trash-transformed-into-treasure are used to decorate not the subsidized apartments of welfare recipients or the dingy trailers of the poor, but the homes of wealthier classes. And the poor who rely more heavily on flea market purchases for essential items do not have equal access to additional disposable income to transform items from shabby to Shabby Chic. What is necessary for the economically disenfranchised is a leisurely and discretionary choice for the economically privileged. Finally, while Shabby Chic is democratized in that everyone (who can afford cable) has access to the Style channel and can learn to do Shabby Chic, a hierarchy of Shabby Chic styles is inevitable when materials used in the process of refurbishment

will be purchased, depending upon one's income, from a range of class-stratified businesses such as Target to Bloomingdale's.

The predictability characteristic of Poor Chic can be further exemplified by the 'cultural upgrading' of tattooing into 'body art', as Sanders (1989: 34–5) explains:

Galleries and museums are now exhibiting both photographic reproductions and living samples of exemplary tattoo art. Mainstream publishers are marketing expensive 'coffee-table' books containing full-color photos and learned discussions by accepted art critics that situate tattooing within the larger context of western art history . . . High culture periodicals now present articles on tattoo art . . . while academicians meet to read papers about tattooing and publish proceedings . . . that further help to identify the practice as a legitimate artistic endeavor. In short, a significant segment of tattoo production is proceeding along the traditional route by which a variety of other 'inferior' media have come to be sanctioned as art.

Similar transformations from 'low class' symbolism into artistic enterprises and transportations to the safer milieu of the upper classes can be seen at elite institutions such as Carnegie Hall, the Guggenheim Museum, the Detroit Institute of the Arts, and the American Museum of Natural History that sponsor not only 'body art' exhibits, but also those on 'the art of motor-cycling' and Hip-Hop culture. In the latter case, rather than going to the ghetto, Hip-Hop is brought into the safely predictable institutions of the wealthy classes. Further easing the superficial voyage to vagabondage or providing an avenue away from anything too far removed from upper class sensibilities, Hip-Hop exhibits, such as The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame & Museum of Cleveland's 'Rhymes and Rage: The Hip-Hop Story', include explicit warnings for patrons entering areas with 'obscenity' content, a standard staple of much rap music. The Harley-Davidson Museum is scheduled to open next year in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, marking the company's 100th anniversary.

The transformation of pumping iron into weight-lifting serves as a final example of safe and predictable class travels. Bourdieu (1991: 369) explains the traditional class symbolism in weight-lifting:

(W)eight-lifting, which is supposed to develop muscles, was for many years, especially in France, the favourite working-class sport; nor is it an accident that the Olympic authorities took so long to grant official recognition to weight-lifting, which, in the eyes of the aristocratic founders of modern sport, was symbolized by mere strength, brutality and intellectual poverty, in short the working classes.

A *Time* reporter (Reed, 1981: 94) explains how this traditional working class sport is now culturally upgraded and socially insulated as an activity of the corporate class. Describing the daily fitness ritual of an information systems manager at the Xerox Corporate Fitness Center in Stamford,

Connecticut, he describes the epitome of removal from working class pumping iron:

On his daily jog, White is surrounded by a \$61,000 mechanical sculpture garden of chrome, leather and cable; stationary bicycles, cross-country skiing simulators, rowing machines, Nautilus weight stations and racks of dumbbells positioned around the spacious, brown-carpeted gym. Down a hallway hung with modern paintings are whirlpool baths and a sun-tanning room studded with ultraviolet and infra-red lamps. Near by: offices for a physician and full-time exercise physiologist.

This says little about what might be said concerning the class upgrading of a strong, toiling, (perhaps also smoking and dirty) *working class body* to an economically *invested body*: an expensive, recreational, healthy, and sculpted artistic creation. A more detailed analysis of the 'gentrification of poverty in popular culture' is provided in Halnon (2002). There I describe a four-part process involving: (1) a social and economic investment in low-cost 'slum identities;' (2) refurbishing the form and content of identity symbols so that they no longer represent them; (3) aligning refurbished poverty symbols with central cultural and economic institutions; and (4) pricing out and pushing out the poor from the refurbished and upgraded symbols of them.

Calculability

Many people want to know in advance how much a vacation is going to cost, and they abhor cost overruns. They also want itineraries that define precisely where they will be at a given time and for how long. (Ritzer, 1998: 138)

Consumers of poverty can determine how much they want to spend on a variety of commodities. A couture Hobo Chic dress; a pair of Kenneth Cole bowling shoes or Christian Dior 'laddered' hosiery; a favela funk ball admission ticket or meal at Favela Chic; an authentic (Emo-coveted) second-hand gas station jacket with a real working class guy's name embroidered on the front; or pink flamingo jewelry, all come with explicit price tags.

For particular poverty commodities there is a range of investment choices. For example, a cheap tattoo costs anywhere from one to three dollars and can be applied in a minute and easily removed with soap and water. Henna or mehndi tattoos, 'packaged in ready-made mixes', take about two hours to apply, cost anywhere from 25 to 75 dollars per hand, and 'the color fades after a few weeks' (Parekh, 1997). A permanent tattoo will cost, depending upon style, size, and tattoo artist, anywhere from 25 to several hundred dollars. The amount of pain spent can also be calculated in advance given the widely publicized procedure and costs for removal. Removal of permanent tattoos is now less painful, leaves less scarring than previous abrasion removal methods, and several laser treatments over the course of several months will cost a few thousand dollars. Finally, 'typpies' (yuppies with tattoos) can bank

on the dramatic reduction of negative social sanctions traditionally associated with tattooing. This is due in part to so many celebrities sporting tattoos, but more generally to the 'upgrading' of tattooing to an expensive, more discreet, and qualitatively different kind of class-distinguishing 'body art'.

While changes in the form and content of traditional poverty symbols in Poor Chic are a major exception, Ritzer (1996) tells us that calculability involves a general shift in emphasis from quality to quantity. He exemplifies this change with the ever-bigger, culinary-displeasing McDonald's hamburger and fries. Extending this process to Poor Chic, the rational consumption of poverty involves, as detailed above, a switch in emphasis *from quality*, or the reality of poverty with its constraining 'localization' and constrained consumption, *to quantification*, or to an ever-bigger collection of poverty symbols fluidly consumed by postmodern tourists as superfluous, discretionary, and disposable commodities. And to borrow a phrase, the 'Cathedrals of Consumption' (Ritzer, 1998) for Poor Chic today include the Salvation Army's Terrytown (New Orleans) Superstore that is 'looking more like a Kirshman's than a penny pincher's paradise' and the May 2001 opening of Phoenix, Arizona's largest Goodwill Store in North America, '92,000 square feet, complete with coffee shop and snack bar' (Montoya, 2001).

Conclusion

In this article Poor Chic was explained as a set of fads and fashions that make stylish or recreational 'fun' of poverty. Using examples from Shabby Chic and slum and underclass fashions to 'artistic' tattooing and Rich Urban Biking, it was argued that Poor Chic is not an instance of 'lifestyle' consumption, or consumption divorced from the display of class status. Rather, Poor Chic was explained as a rationally organized type of class vacationing. Toward *controlling* against the fear of downward mobility in the context of an increasing and extreme economically polarized consumer society, the Poor Chic tourist demonstrates social worth through wasteful or 'conspicuous' consumption, or by vacationing in poverty. Treated as a tourist site, poverty is symbolically consumed as so many safely objectified and dehumanized commodities. Travels to vagabondage were further explained as safe and *predictable* class travels through refurbishing and culturally upgrading poverty symbols (as in the cases of Shabby Chic and Body Art), and through institutional and environmental insularity (as in the cases of museum motor-cycling exhibits and corporate weight-lifting). Travels to poverty were also explained as *efficient* in that Poor Chic involves adopting superficial and temporary identities, employing time- and work-saving stereotypes, taking advantage of low social cost downward impersonation, and the very fadishness (brevity, quick-shifting) character of Poor Chic itself. Finally, Poor

Chic was explained as *calculable* in that Poor Chic consumers can choose from a range of costs and investment choices among Poor Chic commodities, and in the seemingly ever-increasing growth of Poor Chic fads and fashions. Thus, this article has shown that the *rational consumption of poverty* is a class-distinguishing activity that controls against fears of declining into vagabondage by consuming it as a short, safe, socially-distanced and sanitized experience with commodified poverty. Accounting for additional motivations and processes embedded in the superficial pretense of poverty and related safe adventures in popular culture today are subjects of works in progress.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Research Assistant, Sandra Cohen, for her collaboration collecting data, insightful discussion, and commitment to this project; to Susan McDaniel, Maureen Goutier, and editorial staff at *Current Sociology* for their encouraging and constructive suggestions for revisions; and for Pennsylvania State University Faculty Development Grants supporting this research.

References

- ALEXANDER, Hilary (2001) 'Milan: Missoni Offers Colourful Escapism', 10 March. <http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/core/Cont...%F2001%2F10%2F03%2Fefswim03.xml&site=11>. Retrieved 22 Jan. 2002.
- ANDERSON, Elijah (1999) *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: Norton.
- ASHWELL, Rachel with COSTIN, Glynis (1996) *Shabby Chic*. New York: Regan Books/HarperStyle.
- BARTKY, Sandra Lee (1990) *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- BAUDRILLARD, Jean (1996) *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict. London and New York: Verso.
- BAUDRILLARD, Jean (1998) *The Consumer Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- BAUDRILLARD, Jean (1983) *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- BAUMAN, Zygmunt (2000) 'Tourists and Vagabonds: Or, Living in Postmodern Times', in Joseph E. Davis (ed.) *Identity and Social Change*, pp. 13–26. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- BAUMAN, Zygmunt (2001) 'Globalization and the New Poor', in Peter Beilharz (ed.) *The Bauman Reader*, ch. 10, pp. 298–311. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- BERNSTEIN, Nell (1995) 'Goin' Gangsta, Choosin' Cholita: Teens Today "Claim" a Racial Identity', *Utne Reader* (March/April): 87–90.
- BIUSO, Emily (2001). 'Bowling Shoes Walking Away from Alleys', *The Cincinnati*

- Enquirer*, 11 Aug. http://enquirer.com/editions/2001/08/11/loc_bowling_shoes.html. Retrieved 9 Feb. 2002.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1991) 'Sport and Social Class', in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Shudson (eds) *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ch. 12, pp. 357–73. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- CAMPHAUSEN, Rufus C. (1997) *Return of the Tribal: A Celebration of Body Adornment*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.
- COBB, Nathan (1999) 'History of the Harley: A Tale of Outlaws and Yuppies', *Chicago Tribune*, 15 June, p. 3.
- DE QUETTEVILLE, Harry (2000) 'What a Chic! Rich Rags Rile the Poor', *The Age Company*, 30 Jan. <http://www.theage.com/au/news/20000130/A535322000Jan29.html>. Retrieved 12 April 2001.
- DONNALLY, Trish (1993) 'Young Designer's Street-Person Chic / More Rags and Tatters from Paris', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 March, B3.
- DOWD, Maureen (2000) 'Homeless Chic', *Denver Post*, 24 Jan., B6.
- DUNN, Robert G. (2000) 'Identity, Commodification, and Consumer Culture', in Joseph E. Davis (ed.) *Identity and Social Change*, ch. 5, pp. 109–34. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- DWORKIN, Andrea (1989) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. New York: Plume.
- FAIOLA, Anthony (2001) 'The Fierce Beat of Shantytown Chic; In Rio, Funk Scene Thrills and Alarms', *The Washington Post*, 10 July.
- FEATHERSTONE, Mike (2000) 'Lifestyle and Consumer Culture', in Martyn J. Lee (ed.) *The Consumer Society Reader*, ch. 8, pp. 92–105. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- GERGEN, Kenneth J. (1991) *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books.
- GIDDENS, Anthony (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- GIVHAN, Robin D. (1996) 'PLUG UGLY: Meet the Plastic Flamingos of Fashion; They're All the Rage', *The Washington Post*, 9 May (seven pages). Retrieved 2 Jan. 2002 at ProQuest.
- GOFFMAN, Erving (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- GOFFMAN, Erving (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- GOTTDIENER, Mark, ed. (2000) *New Forms of Consumption: Consumers, Culture, and Commodification*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- GUNN, Molly (2002) 'Rare Vintage that is One of a Kind', 1 March, <http://www.fashion.telegraph.co.uk>. Retrieved 22 Jan. 2002.
- HALNON, Karen Bettez (2002) 'Poor Imitation: The Gentrification of Poverty in Popular Culture', unpublished manuscript.
- HAROLD, Christine (1999) 'Tracking Heroin Chic: The Abject Body Reconfigures the Rational Argument', *Argumentation & Advocacy* 36(2) (part 2), Fall: pp. 65–76.
- HARRINGTON, Maureen (1993) 'Another Breed of Bikers', *Denver Post*, 23 January, Sec E1, C2.

- HAYES, Karen (1996) 'Temporary Tattoos Hit the Market for Youth', *Boston Globe*, 3 Nov., p. 1, C1.
- HEINRICH, Karen (2002) 'A Fine Vintage', *The Age*, 16 Jan. <http://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/2002/01/16/FFXTJHYBIWC.html>. Retrieved 20 Jan. 2002.
- HEWITT, Kim (1997) *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- INGHAM, Vicki L., ed. (2000) *Flea Market Decorating. Better Homes and Gardens*. Des Moines, IA: Meredith.
- KAPLAN, Michael (1998) 'On Camera', *American Photo* 9(1): 29.
- LAING, R. D. (1969) *The Divided Self*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- LEE, Martyn J., ed. (2000) *The Consumer Society Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- MCCABE, Kathy (1996) 'Motorcycle Sales Back on the Fast Track', *Boston Globe*, 4 Aug. Sec W, p. 1, C4.
- MONTOYA, Maria (2001) 'Second-Hand Chic: Taking their Cue from Major Retailers such as Wal-Mart, Thrift Shop Operators are Rebuilding Stores and Rehabilitating their Image. But they're not Losing Sight of their Mission', *Time-Picayune*. New Orleans, LA, 10 July. Retrieved 2 Jan. 2002 at ProQuest.
- MURPHY, Candace (2001) '2001 Fashion Blunders', *Toronto Star*. <http://www.thestar.com/NASApp/cs/ContentServer?pagename=thestar/Layout/Article>. Retrieved 21 Jan. 2002.
- PAREKH, Shefall (1997) 'Temporary Tattoos', *Chicago Tribune*, 18 Nov., p. 7, C3.
- PBS (2001) *The Merchants of Cool*. Barak Goodman and Rachel Dretzin, producers. Frontline Video. Alexandria, VA: PBS. Aired 27 Feb. 2001.
- REED, J. D. (1981) 'America Shapes Up', Cover Story, *Time*, 2 Nov., pp. 94-106.
- RITZER, George (1996) *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- RITZER, George (1998) *The McDonaldization Thesis: Explorations and Extensions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- ROBERTS, Raequal (1992) 'Stuck (almost) on Tattoos', *Houston Post*, 14 July, p. 1, C2.
- SANDERS, Clinton (1989) *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- SCHUTZ, Alfred and LUCKMANN, Thomas (1989) *The Structures of the Life World*, trans. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Englehardt, Jr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- URRY, John (1990) *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Society*. London and Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- VEBLEN, Thorstein (1925) *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- WILKINS, Stacey (2000) 'Shoes to Bowl You Over', 13 Sept. One page. <http://www.cnn.com/2000/STYLE/fashion/09/13/bowling.fashion>. Retrieved 4 March 2002.