

# **Valuing precarious commodities: An ethnography of trade in three charity shops in the Cape Metropolitan area**

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### **Declaration**

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### **Abstract**

In this study I investigate how the value of factory manufactured second-hand objects is determined within three charity shops in the Cape Metropolitan area. I argue that the value of the second-hand object sold in the charity shop cannot be determined solely from the quantifiable abstract labour of its ‘initial production’, or the perceived depreciation thereof. Nor can it be ascribed to the meanings produced in exchange. Instead I propose the histories of use and biographies of the objects in conjunction with the expectations of charity that emerge within the charity shop render them ‘precarious commodities’. The value of the precarious charity shop commodity is informed by the socio-spatial conditions inside and outside the charity shops that, I suggest, propagate racial nostalgias from which notions of ‘expensive respectability’ and the middle class emerge as valuing. Within these conditions the charity shop acts as a point of production, in which staff labour to reconstitute value and transform donated objects into resalable commodities. These labours include the purging, sorting and distribution of objects in the ‘back-space’ of each shop and the commodity aesthetics of the ‘front-spaces’. This labour is not limited to sellers; buyers also negotiate the dynamics of value within the ‘front-space’ of the charity shop, drawing upon similar notions of racialized respectability as they seek out ‘quality’ shopping experiences and engage in ‘treasure hunting’ and ‘aspirational shopping’.

### **Opsomming**

In hierdie studie het ek ondersoek hoe waarde bepaal word binne drie liefdadigheid winkels in die Kaapse Metropool. Ek argumenteer dat die waarde van die tweedeHande liefdadigheid voorwerpe wat verkoop word in die liefdadigheid's winkel kan nie uitsluitlik bepaal word van die kwantifiseerbare abstrakte arbeid van die voorwerp se 'aanvanklike produksie', of die vermeende waardevermindering daarvan bepaal nie. Dit kan ook nie toegeskryf word aan die betekenis wat in ruil geproduseer is nie, omdat die voorwerpe wat op die spel is reeds onderhewig aan gebruik en die spesifieke verwagtinge van liefdadigheid wat na vore kom in die liefdadigheid's winkel. Verder illustreer ek dat waarde bepaal word deur die sosio-ruimtelike omstandighede binne en buite die winkels. Hierdie toestande, stel ek voor, propageer rasse nostalgie waaruit 'n bepaalde rasse tipe, 'n 'duur ordentlikheid' na vore kom as waardering. Ek argumenteer dat liefdadigheid winkels tree op as punte van produksie en transformeer geskenkte voorwerpe in haglike-kommoditeite deur arbeid wat nastreef om gebruik-waarde, die vervaardiging van die kommoditeit estetika en verkoop van die voorwerp te versterk. Hierdie arbeid is nie beperk tot verkopers nie, ek wys dat kopers maak gebruik van soortgelyke rasgedrewe opvattinge van kwaliteit terwyl hulle die dinamika van waarde binne die liefdadigheid winkel onderhandel.

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## *Chapter 1*

### **Introduction**

I watched as Angeline tore open the black dustbin bag and emptied its contents onto the wooden sorting table in the back-space of The Flagship Shop. Out tumbled men's and women's clothing, T-shirts, trousers and dresses, of varying degrees of wear. The bag was but one amongst an avalanche of donations that had been streaming in over the festive season. It is easier to sort if the donation is either all rubbish or all quality, said Angeline; if it is a mixture, it is more work. Deftly she examined each item, quickly appraising its condition, seeming to read each donation in order to decide whether to categorise it as upmarket, ordinary, jumble sale quality or 'rubbish'. As I worked alongside Angeline in the days and weeks that followed, transforming donations into something worth reselling, I began to view the labours of sorting as more than simply an aesthetic judgement of pre-existing value.

I conducted the fieldwork for this project in three charity shops in the Helderberg run by the same charity, which I have referred to throughout this thesis as Helping Hands Charity. Two of the Helping Hands Charity shops, Tannie Hermien's Shop and The Flagship Shop, are located in the retail heart of Somerset West. The third, The Strand Shop is, as its name suggests, located in the centre of the Strand business district. Over the course of the time I spent in each of the three shops questions of value determination became increasingly salient and perplexing. What I aim to show here is that what are traditionally thought of as spaces of value consumption are, indeed, also spaces of value production. Accordingly this thesis differs from authors such as Posel (2010:161) for whom "the acquisition and use (including the display) of durable and nondurable goods, along with the cultural, political and psychological antecedents and effects thereof" is decidedly the realm of consumption. This is a continuation of my interest in examining 'alternative' spaces of second-hand exchange begun during my Honours' research project when I investigated a Cape Town flea market. The flea market emerged as a space in which particular fantasies of authentic consumption

were produced and sold to customers desirous of re-personalised exchange (Watt & Dubbeld, s.a.). In the same way, this study is concerned with mediations of the exchange process, where the labour of exchange makes the charity shop a point of production.

By means of an ethnographic exploration, this thesis seeks to understand how the value of the second-hand charity shop commodity is determined. I will argue that the value of the second-hand object sold in the charity shop cannot be determined solely from the quantifiable abstract labour of its first production, or the perceived depreciation thereof. Nor can value be ascribed to the meanings produced in exchange. For both of these measures become mediated by the labours in selling, and the social conditions of space. Value in the charity shop is therefore a tenuous measure, and the commodity within the space is a precarious one that sellers and buyers work to stabilise.

### **1.1 Theorizing the research question**

Smith (2000: 36-7) suggests that the true price of all worldly wealth is labour, of which money is only the nominal price. Commodities “contain the value of certain quantity of labour which we exchange for what is supposed at the time to contain equal quantity” (Smith, 2000: 33- 4). Hence, for Smith, wealth is determined by the quantity of others’ labour a person is able to purchase. Smith views the privileging of value-in-exchange as a natural expression of human progression rather than the product of a regime of political economy.

Working from Smith’s framework, Marx (1978:303-319) argues that under the conditions of capitalist society, the commodity has two dimensions of the value form. Its use-value stems from its ability to satisfy human wants and needs and is “Whether they spring from the stomach or fancy makes no difference” (Marx, 1978:303). Use-value is a qualitative thing, particular to the nature of any given commodity. Indeed use-value is not only the stuff of commodities; any object may be in possession of a use-value with no claim to being a commodity. An object only becomes a commodity when it is of no use to its

producer and of use to a potential consumer. This is in line with Smith's (2000: 31) "value-in-use" which he poses is proportional to the needs to the individual, and is prey to sentiment. Both consider this value-in-use to be superfluous to the measurement of value-in-exchange.

The second form of value is exchange-value, which Marx (1978: 302-19) posits is in fact the only form of value within capitalist society. This, at first, appears as a "purely relative" (Marx, 1978:304) projection of use-value, seemingly dependent upon and changeable according to the particular physical characteristics of the object. However, if exchange is to occur, two qualitatively dissimilar objects must be likened to one another quantitatively, thus there exists a third thing, common to both, which can be quantitatively measured. And what is common to every commodity is the human labour power expended in its making.

It is human labour that gives the object its life as a commodity, the useful object that exists of its own accord is not a commodity. Therefore, it is labour that transmutes the natural world into the world of commodities. Of course, human labour of production is not uniform: the work of the weaver and the work of the tailor are inescapably qualitatively different. From this difference the question arises: how is different labour to be compared? Here Marx (1978:305) calls attention to the flattening of the commodity's use-value in the determination of its exchange-value:

But even the product of labour itself has undergone a change in our Hand. If we make abstraction from its use-value, we make abstraction at the same time from the material elements and shapes that make the product a use-value [...] its existence as a material thing is put out of sight [...] along with the useful qualities of the products themselves, we put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them, and the concrete form of that labour; there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract.

Exchange-value is thus the phenomenological expression of human labour time in the abstract. It enables commodities to be bought and sold, and thus it enables value. This value

hides both the particular nature of any given commodities — its use-value — and the particular circumstances of working that crafted that commodity. Thus value in capitalism has a historically specific function, creating the means of universal exchange and levelling specific labours and attachments. Despite this critical revision to Smith's understanding of value as transhistorical, what Marx shares with Smith is an understanding of the value of commodities as determined by the labour of its production.

The problem that arises is that the objects for sale in the charity shop are not the freshly turned out end point of a labour of production. Each has been (at least once) through a circuit of production, distribution, exchange and consumption, as such they seemingly have “biographies” prior to their arrival within the charity shop. Introducing the seminal work “The Social Life of Things”, its editor Appadurai (1986:3) writes that

Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, construed broadly. This argument [...] justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives.

Of Simmel's conception of the emergence of value and its function, Appadurai (1986:4) writes that economic objects

Exist in the space between pure desire and the person who desires them, which is a distance that can be overcome. This distance is overcome in and through economic exchange, in which the value of objects is determined reciprocally.

One object must be sacrificed for the desired object, and, in such a way, they are given a value. He proceeds to argue that within social situations “desire and demand, reciprocal sacrifice and power interact to create economic value” (Appadurai, 1986:4). His conception of value points to its instability, which appears relevant to understanding the determination of value of second-hand objects. However, while the life or biography of things is relevant, it is not the unmediated process that Appadurai suggests. There exists labour in the exchange itself; and value-in-exchange does not exist independently of these labours. The desire that

Appadurai (1986:3-4) describes as 'pure', does not manifest spontaneously; in itself desire is relative to value, not only vice versa. Accordingly, the biography of the object is not as transparent nor is its relationship with value unmediated. Value becomes a mystery, and part of that mystery is working out the life of a thing, but this alone is insufficient to understanding the determination of value within the charity shop.

The labour price of the second-hand object has been paid in full and yet value here is not simply a case of gradual depreciation as the object moves down a series of descending links in the value chain until it is rendered obsolete and becomes disposable. The new car that depreciates the moment it is driven out of the showroom is one such example of this logic: mileage and age are used to work out its value according to an established norm. But what of the lovingly restored vintage sports car worth a great deal more today than when it was first produced? There exists an entire labour of selling second-hand objects that renders such calculations of depreciation impossible.

In place of calculations of depreciation, use-value (or the biography of the thing) takes centre stage. For the use of previously owned objects is an issue of contestation, particularly when objects bear signs of their previous owners' use. As such use usually becomes measured against the objects, by both buyers and sellers, with well-worn objects valued less than slightly worn ones. Yet, such a process of reading value of objects off their usefulness is shaped in the first instance by sellers and then by a range of social conditions. I suggest that the commodity in the charity shop never totally regains its commodity status: it is ever a 'precarious commodity'. This precariousness is the product of the life it has had after its initial production; as well as the expectations that are allotted to it from its position of sale within the charity shop. Sellers see the purchasing of buyers as donations to their cause, whilst buyers expect to be the recipients of charitable goodwill; which renders it akin to a gift or token rather than a commodity.

Aware of the precedence of use-value and its perception as determining exchange-value, sellers within the Helping Hands Charity shops perform a number of labours aimed at producing value in these objects anew. Ultimately use-value appears to be very important in the value of objects, however, that use-value is neither determined by a simple calculation, nor is it unmediated — this use-value has to be produced. This thesis investigates the process of determining the exchange-value of these second-hand objects. Through this, it offers a critique of people who assume that the biography of the thing, its use-value, is the sole determinant of exchange-value. It is about reconstituting exchange-value, and, as such, the charity shops become points of production. Therefore these labours of staff in the shop, and at times customers, produce value in the precarious commodity anew. It is important to note, however, that the labours of the charity shop themselves are never directly reflected in the value of the commodity in the way that the first labour of production, in the form of homogenous abstract human labour time, constitutes value.

The labours of charity shops draw upon pre-existing social conditions in manufacturing commodity aesthetics that will be read as valuable. This can mean, at times, the imaginations of use can increase the value of the object, as is shown in Chapter 5's discussion of how customers imagine histories for the precarious commodities at stake, which raise the value of the commodity. The types of histories they imagine are specific to the space of the Helderberg, and South Africa. Thus, the particular social conditions that surround the charity shop influence both the type of labour exerted within the shops and the understandings of what constitutes value in general.

## **1.2 Positioning race in space in post-apartheid Helderberg**

If value is a mystery to be unlocked here, the issue of social spatial conditions, of post-apartheid Helderberg in particular, is salient. One of the major articulations of apartheid was spatial; at every level, spaces were constructed by its racist ideals and laws producing “what

could be described as typical geographies of (racial) classification and socio-spatial control” (Teppo & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2009: 351).

The town of Somerset West, established in 1817, is situated in the Helderberg Basin cradled by the Hottentots-Holland mountain range. It begets its name to one Lord Charles Henry Somerset, English governor of the Cape Colony. In 1967, the Group Areas Act declared the entirety of Somerset West Municipal area ‘white’ and, in 1976, “all squatters living in the Somerset West Municipal area were re-settled at Macassar” (Heap, 1993: 194). Anthropologist Fiona Ross (2005a) describes Somerset West as “a town that was declared a ‘white’ residential area and is now part of the Cape Town Unicity”. According to Frith’s (s.a.) interpretation of 2011 census community profile data, more than half of the dwellers in Somerset West identify as white, a quarter as coloured and 13 percent as black. Against this image of Somerset West as a predominantly white residential area, I examine the centre of Somerset West’s retail space. Lily, a twenty-six year-old white woman living in Somerset West, told me that when she walks to work along Wide Road in Somerset West, she experiences some discomfort as the object of unwanted attention. This attention, she supposed, had less to do with her individual charms, so much as it was the product of being the only white person walking there. “Only black people walk in Wide Road,” she said, “not really even coloured people”. What this suggests is a predominantly ‘white’ Somerset West residential area is absent from the retail space in the heart of town, at least on foot. Chapter 2 examines how perceptions such as Lily’s are evidence of the unique social conditions of the space inside and outside the shops.

Neighbouring Somerset West is the seaside town of Strand; they are joined by The Mall and a number of walled housing developments, boasting secure living and identical houses. The Group Areas Act legislation in the Helderberg, then called Hottentots Holland, in 1966 declared “a large area on either side of the Strand/Gordon’s bay road [...] coloured” (Heap,

1993: 195). The formerly racially mixed community of Strand was scattered and divided, coloured residents were exiled to the periphery, and ‘white’ space was instated. Frith (s.a.) broke down the Strand population according to 2011 census population groups’ classification as 51 percent identified as coloured residents, 34 percent as white residents and 12 percent as black residents. Noting that this includes the periphery space to which coloured residents of Strand were forcibly relocated, there remain a more equal number of white and coloured residents, whose history of proximal living, I suggest, influences the racial dynamics of the area. Residents suggested that the relationship between white people and coloured people is more intimate than their relationship with black people; and less separate than the segregated racial mixing of Somerset West.

Today Somerset West and Strand fall under the administration of the Cape Town Metropolitan and the N2 highway feeds traffic between these towns, suburbs and the centre of Cape Town, and are no longer racially classified residential areas. Yet the impact of apartheid’s socio-spatial control remains as, in the post-apartheid landscape, the geographical conditions of apartheid continue to shape spaces (Teppo & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2009: 352). Both in Somerset West and Strand there are few black residents dwelling in the towns, although they are said to work and shop in the spaces they are transported in from elsewhere. Analysing how “race is staged in space” in Cape Town’s formerly ‘whites-only’ Victoria and Albert Waterfront mall, Teppo and Houssay-Holzschuch (2009: 352)

[...] uncovered the paradox of a privately owned space devoted to consumerism also functioning as a place where racially and socially diverse people exert their ‘right to the city’ – a privilege that is historically far from self-evident for the residents of Cape Town.

Like the Victoria and Albert Waterfront within, the customers of the Helping Hands Charity shops are kaleidoscopic in their racial and social diversity. This is evident when observing the customers, and is a deeply held conviction by the majority of inhabitants of the spaces (although they differ on which group of people there are more of in the shops). The Shops

present a space in which those who live on the outskirts or outside of the towns themselves take part in the happenings of the town centre. But while the Helping Hands Charity shops are purported to be welcoming to all sorts of people; the reclamation of the town centres by those previously barred from participating in the retail spaces it offers is perceived to pose a threat to value. For when the Helping Hands Charity shops are compared to “The Mall”, other charity shops and inexpensive retailers in the area; an association between who the imagined ideal or target customer of the shop is and the value of commodities within it become apparent.

A racial type that is perceived to be ‘better’ than others emerges here. At first I was tempted to follow Teppo and Houssay-Holzschuch (2009: 366) and simply read the emerging type as one subscribing to “white aesthetics and behaviour” as considered superior and pervasive. However, this uniform whiteness does not work entirely as a frame in the Helderberg because it fails to reflect the complex integrations of the space, the differing levels of esteem for certain types of whiteness and the stereotypes and anxieties expressed between racial groups against ‘others’. It is an idea of a racial value that speaks of a history of racial interaction in the Helderberg and the complex effects that reverberates from it.

The relationship between consumption and race in South Africa is according to Posel (2010:161) one that receives less academic attention than it warrants. Posel (2010:160) proposes that the legacy of racial segregation in South Africa shaped who had the “power to consume” along lines of race; which influences the development and conceptualization of “freedom” and is intimately entwined with notions of class.

In attempting to understand how the value of second-hand objects within the charity shop is determined, this thesis examines the way in which race and value work together within the Helping Hands Charity shops in a way that speaks to a certain conception of racial ‘respectability’. In segregation era South Africa (1910-1948) Posel (2010:166-7) writes that

those classified as “native” could legally attempt to be classified as “non-native” on the grounds that they displayed characteristics of the European in manner, education, dress and so forth. Thus race here is self-evidently understood as the reading of social differences:

The fact that race was officially construed as a judgement of ‘respectability’ along with the social and material dimensions of status created circuits of power that produced, and constrained, modes of aspiration and identification. Race is always a relational construct, with (versions of) whiteness and (versions of) blackness defined oppositionally, invoking each other.

Thus ‘consuming’ the correct commodities, in the correct ways and arenas allows for a performance of a particular racial identity that was thought by the regime in power to be far more valuable than what was constructed as its opposite. Once apartheid had been formalised there was an effort to create a less permeable legal definition of race, complex systems of racial classification were prescribed. This was aimed at concretizing the hierarchical nature of race and the superiority of whiteness, while eliminating any occasions where one could “pass for white”. But like the system before it the racial classification of the apartheid regime relied upon the conception of “whiteness” as a judgement of “civilized manners” that would be “read off a person’s body, lifestyle, community and social standing” (Posel, 2010: 168). Being classified as ‘black’, or ‘non-white’, automatically barred someone from participating in a multitude of opportunities deemed the domain of whites only, including freedoms occasions to acquire material goods and “social sophistication” (Posel, 2010: 167). She gives the example of the limits placed on black owned business in terms of the products they were permitted to sell; “luxury” items were banned in favour of basic food stuffs and “necessities”; transgressions of such restrictions were disciplined.

This idea of racial “respectability”, born in the belly of racial classification and white supremacist South African politics, allows certain people comfortable access to spaces and others not, framing projections onto the value of objects in these spaces. “Respectability” as it is used within this thesis, also borrows from Ross’ (2005:639) understanding of

*ordentlikheid*; although it is somewhat transmuted in use. She suggests that although such ‘respectability’ is “considered an essential attribute of humanness” (Ross, 2005:639) it must be enacted correctly through behaviour and spatial conditions or it decomposes. I follow her understanding, but in line with the historicity of the term charted by Posel (2010) propose that the conditions of this ‘respectability’, such as cleanliness, neatness and privacy, are associated in the Helderberg with a particular racial type.

The respectable racial type presented here as valuing, is born of a particular conception of ‘superior’ white behaviours and aesthetics, but is not limited to ‘whiteness’. Further, it exists at intersections of race and class and is one that seems to imply a performance of an expensive whiteness.

It speaks to ideas of moneyed prestige, brand names, newness, quality and easy *flânerie*. It opposes reminders of the body, dirt, poverty and rudeness. Its presence remains only ever alluded to by buyers and sellers in verbal encounters, although its spectre is perceptible in labours of the sellers that aim to ensure value and the assessments of the buyers who wish to obtain value. The embodying or performance of this racial type is not without the risk of censure from others who view such performance as stepping outside of predetermined racial behaviour, as is illustrated in Chapter 4. Thus the problem of defining this racial type exactly remains, as it lingers ever in one’s peripheral vision, constantly evading pinning down.

What is evident, as Posel (2010: 173) suggests, is the closeness of race and the access to certain types of commodities and types of what she defines as “regimes of consumption” and because of this there is validity in her supposition “there are strong and dense historical reasons why the performance of racial identity in the present could be so closely connected to practices of acquisition”.

### 1.3 Fieldwork

To understand the space of the Helping Hands Charity shops and how determining value within this space was linked to ideas of value in the space around it, I became an ethnographer. For as Miller (1998:12-13) writes,

Ethnography tends to lead to a much deeper involvement in people's lives than just what they say about themselves. Ethnography used in material culture also tends to emphasise careful observations of what people actually do with things. As such we are constantly faced with the everyday discrepancies between what people say matters and what they actually give their attention to.

To gain access to my research site, I embodied the dual role of researcher and volunteer, spending time in each of the three Helping Hands Charity shops. Between April 2012 and January 2013, I volunteered intermittently first at The Flagship Shop, then in The Strand Shop and, finally, in Tannie Hermien's Shop. I would visit between two and four times a week, sometimes for the full day and sometimes for the morning or afternoon shift.

My duties in each of the charity shops were divided between the back-space and front-space. The front-space is where the buying and selling happens; it is the retailing space of each shop and is open to customers. In the front-space of the Helping Hands Charity shops, my duties included, but were not limited to, assisting customers with requests, working behind the counter and packing stock into the shop. The back-space of the Helping Hands Charity shops is behind the front-space, and admittance is reserved for staff only. In the front-space of the shops I became acquainted with customers and the moment of exchange, and the labour of artful presentation. The work of the back-spaces of the Helping Hands Charity shops is, for the most part, invisible to the customers. Although the back-space in each of the shops is different, it is characterised by some form of 'office', 'kitchen' and storage area for excess stock. Working in the back-spaces, assisting the paid staff in sorting and classifying donations, determining to which shop and at what price, formed an important part of

investigating spatial and temporal circulation of goods as well as the process of evaluation and categorisation.

In addition to my role as a volunteer, I also inhabited the role of customer, buying from each of the shops, and, as donor, selecting belongings of my own to give to Helping Hands Charity. In this way, I hoped to experience first-hand the perspectives of each. Critically, through being a volunteer in the front of the shop, I was able to both participate in and observe the conversations that occur between staff, customers and donors. Such conversations provided insight into charity shop specific purchasing practices such as bargaining and knowledge negotiations - all of which are centred on the specific commodities customers seek to purchase at the time. Ethnography allowed me to become intimately acquainted with both the background workings of the shops that take place outside of the public gaze and the public space of the shop. It enabled me to build rapport with staff, customers and donors, each of whom performs an integral role in sustaining the particular nature of trade at the charity shop. In this manner, the dynamics of the research sites, the interpersonal interactions and person object encounters were observed using the methods of Max Miller (1988:57), which include: “listening, watching and hanging around”.

During periods of observation and interaction when it was “inappropriate to be seen taking notes” (Bryman, 2008:420), for example, when assisting customers on the shop floor, I made mental notes to record the relevant information. During periods of greater flexibility in my activity, such as during quiet times in the shop front or while unpacking donations in the back-space, I utilised what Bryman (2008:420) describes as “jotted notes” in a note book or, less conspicuously, on my cellular phone. These mental and jotted notes were compiled and written out with thick descriptions into detailed, full field notes (Bryman, 2008:420).

After some weeks of observation and informal conversations to become acquainted with the dynamics of my field site, I began to conduct unstructured interviews with key role

players. I did this in each of the shops, so that I could familiarise myself with the inhabitants and so that they could become accustomed to my presence within the shop spaces. By beginning with observation alone, participants were more at ease with my now familiar presence and I with theirs, which allowed for greater rapport between us. Furthermore, having some knowledge of the space of the shop and the activity within it, meant I was better equipped to guide the interview around topics that related to the issues at hand.

The participants were primarily selected according to their role and activity with the research site: some were obvious choices such as the staff, others were people I had developed personal connections to and others still were introduced to me by staff, by virtue of the regularity or length of their relationship with the shops. A theoretical sample was selected, which as Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Bryman 2008:415) propose that

[T]he process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges.

Following this, every attempt was made to conduct interviews with as wide range of people as possible, in order to represent different demographics, opinions and experiences. Thus data emerging from preliminary interviews determined who best to be interviewed next, even if only in casual conversation. Furthermore, as such sampling is not limited to people, it may determine other periphery sites or events that are worth investigating. These individual cases were used as examples to illustrate a wider phenomenon. Similar observational techniques and in-depth interviews were utilised successfully by Gregson and Crewe (2003:209-214) in their study of charity and retro shops.

One of the limits of accessing the space primarily as a volunteer working in the shops was that I appeared as an insider of a certain group, the staff. This was not entirely inaccurate, for I spent a considerable amount of time with the staff on each of my visits. The consequence of this, however, was that, in a sense, it limited my access to the group

‘customers’ before whom I had to distance myself from the staff as an independent researcher. This was necessary so that the customers did not feel their interview answers might compromise their relationship with the staff and thus curtail any special treatment they might receive.

The interviews ranged between 15 and 60 minutes, although most were around 45 minutes long. Interviews were conducted in whatever setting the participant felt most comfortable. If participants did not have a preference, I would suggest a local coffee shop within walking distance of the charity shop, and offer to pay for their beverage as some form of thanks for their time. On several occasions, this offer was refused on account of my age and student status, and the interviewee would instead pay for us both, despite my protestations. On two occasions, one staff member and one customer preferred to be interviewed in the back-space of one of the shops. And, on one occasion, a customer wished to be interviewed on the shop floor, talking as she perused the merchandise.

Verbal consent forms were read to participants so as to inform them of the nature of the research and their rights. The participants were provided with both my and my supervisor’s contact details, should they have any questions or concerns at a later date. When participants acquiesced, interviews were digitally recorded. These interviews were transcribed.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with the mentioned theoretical sampling, this study adopted what Bryman describes as an “iterative or recursive approach” (2008: 541), in which data collection and theory generation occur simultaneously, and repeatedly refer back to each other. For example, the topic list for each of the interviews I conducted was subject to adjustment as themes arose from other interviews and observations. The data gathered from my field notes

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<sup>1</sup>In the excerpts from interviews an ellipse in between square brackets [...] has been used to denote omitted words. Where words appear between square brackets they are my own interlocutions and indicate excerpts that have been edited for clarity of meaning.

and the transcriptions of interviews as integrated to form one body of information from which overarching themes were lifted. These themes were selected and determined by their frequency and their pertinence to other themes and research problem. People, some businesses and streets were given pseudonyms to obscure their identities and locations.

### **Primary informants**

If estimations of value are important, then who is estimating also becomes important. Here I undertake to give a sense of who my primary informants were. I formally interviewed six members of staff, four current volunteers and seven customers. I will discuss the informants grouped by the area and Helping Hands Charity shop with which they are most associated.

Tannie Emma, who manages The Flagship Shop, is a white middle-aged woman. I worked briefly under Mary, a black Zimbabwean woman, who was the manager of The Flagship Shop when I first arrived. Angeline, who is the assistant manager of The Flagship Shop, is a black Zimbabwean woman in her thirties; her role differs from that of the other second members of staff as she, rather than being a salesperson, works primarily in the back-space of The Flagship Shop, processing donations. On average, there are a minimum of two volunteers each week day at The Flagship Shop. Of these, I interviewed one man and three women: John, Cara, Fiona and Shelagh. All of them are white, retired or semi-retired, primarily English-speaking, and live in the Somerset West area. Shelagh and Fiona both began volunteering for Helping Hands at the time when The Flagship Shop was being set up. Tannie Hermien is the female, white, manager of the other side street shop. Tannie Mari, a middle-aged coloured woman, is employed as a self-described 'sales lady' in Tannie Hermien's shop and is the longest serving Helping Hands Charity shop staff member.

As The Flagship Shop and Tannie Hermien's Shop are in close proximity, many customers move between them. The customers I interviewed in Somerset West are: Ilze, Joe and Mrs Van Rooyen. Ilze is a middle-aged, white Afrikaans-speaking woman, who works

near Side Street and pops into Tannie Hermien's Shop and The Flagship Shop daily. Joe, a white male, is an avid second-hand shopper, who regularly visits the Helping Hands Charity shops. Mrs Van Rooyen is a middle-aged coloured woman, who particularly loves to visit Tannie Hermien's Shop to chat to the staff.

In Strand, Jeannine is the shop manager; she is white and middle-aged. Her sales assistant, Elmarie, is a white woman in her thirties. The customers I interviewed formally from The Strand Shop are Tannie Ronel, Yolandi, Tannie Jakomien and Millicent. Millicent is white and English-speaking, and lives within walking distance of The Strand Shop. Yolandi is a coloured woman in her twenties, who works at a local business and meets up with her fellow-workers and friends in The Strand Shop regularly. Tannie Ronel and Tannie Jakomien are both coloured Afrikaans-speaking women of middle-age. Tannie Jakomien grew up in Strand and Tannie Ronel moved to Strand five years ago.

#### **1.4 Chapter outlines**

Chapter 2, *The shops and their surroundings: Imagining urban "quality" in the shadow of The Mall*, introduces the reader to the social conditions inside and outside the shops. It investigates how the geographical position of each of these shops is not neutral space. Rather it is deeply entrenched within a narrative of race, class and otherness in space which has given rise to racial nostalgias for an 'unthreatened', 'personal' retail space that inform conceptions of quality. In this way Chapter 2 sets the stage upon which the analysis of value that spans Chapters 3, 4 and 5 can play out.

Chapters 3 and 4 investigate the Helping Hands Charity shop as a point of production, in which staff labour to produce value anew in the precarious commodity, first in the back-space of the shops and then in the front-space. Chapter 3, *Chaîne opératoire: Producing value anew in the 'back-space' of the Helping Hands Charity shops*, examines the labour of the back-space of the Helping Hands Charity shops as donations are sorted, distributed and

priced. It illustrates how the act of judging value is in itself is a work of imagination that assigns use-value to each object. Therefore, while in the charity shop use-value is salient when understanding the value of second-hand commodities, ultimately exchange-value is the sole expression of value under the conditions of capitalism. In Chapter 4, *Precarious commodity aesthetics: Display and techniques of sale in the 'front-space' of the Helping Hands Charity shops*, I argue that the commodity aesthetics, used in the front-space of the shop to give the precarious commodity sensuous appeal, draw upon a racialised notion of 'respectability' that in turn produces atmospheres that both encourage and police *flânerie*.

Chapter 5, *Purchasing the otherwise unattainable: Buyers' negotiations of value and the nature of the charity shop*, shows how the space of the charity shop is imbued by expectations of charity that contribute to the instability of the precarious commodity's value, and limit the modes of buying it allows. In this space customers use aesthetic expertise that relies upon a discourse of nostalgia and upward mobility to produce value anew in the cast of commodities.

## *Chapter 2*

### **The shops and their surroundings: Imagining urban “quality” in the shadow of The Mall**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The determination of value and how it is produced anew is intimately entwined with imaginaries of the town centres in which the three Helping Hands Charity shops are geographically and socially positioned. In Somerset West are The Flagship Shop and Tannie Hermien’s Shop and in the neighbouring town of Strand is The Strand Shop. The central concern of this chapter is the influence of the urban social conditions around the Helping Hands Charity shops upon the perceptions of quality, and thus value, within them.

An investigation of the space around the shops examines how post-apartheid urban dynamics reveal a discourse of race and quality in the space around the shops, which informs how value is produced anew within them. Furthermore, the triumvirate of race, space and quality influence the hierarchy of the three Helping Hands shops as each one attempts to forge an independent identity based on their imagined customer and the quality of the product they sell. I propose that both Strand and Somerset West are the subject of various nostalgias for their inhabitants who consistently situate a ‘better’ shopping experience in a past of unfettered quality exchange, family run businesses and personal relationships. These nostalgias are blind to the mediating role of commodities in both an imagined past and projected present, and the yoking conditions of capitalism that define them. And that these nostalgias speak to the generation of a particular racial type as value making.

I begin this chapter by charting three pivotal moments in the history of each shop: the establishment of The Strand Shop, the relocation of Tannie Hermien’s Shop from Queen Street to Side Street, the founding of The Flagship Shop as a retail outlet and the subsequent move close to Tannie Hermien’s Shop. Thereafter, I step into the interior of The Flagship

Shop and then Tannie Hermien's Shop, in Somerset West; here I examine the two shops' proclaimed target markets and how the customers they attract are thought to be influenced by their geographic and social positioning within the town. Moving into Strand, my attention falls upon The Strand Shop; here again the racial politics surrounding the shop inform the politics of quality and space within the shop. Trade within Somerset West and Strand is thought to be carried out beneath the shadow of The Mall, an expansive shopping centre constructed in the early nineties between Strand and Somerset West. The figure of The Mall has come to represent an agent of change transforming the urban landscape, by changing the people who are thought to move within it.

In this way, I hope to provide the reader with an in depth sense of social conditions and spatial politics inside and outside the Helping Hands Charity shops, upon which the examination of the determination of value is built in the chapters that follow.

## **2.2 The makings of the shops and the circuits of objects**

This section charts several key changes in the history of the three Helping Hands Charity shops. In doing so, I aim to illuminate the trajectory the three shops form, along which donated goods are transposed, and how The Flagship Shop acts as the heart in this circuit determining the course of the flow.

I was told it took one to three days to set up the second Helping Hands Charity shop in Strand, around six years ago. Tannie Hermien was hired to be the manager of The Strand Shop, she recruited a Helping Hands Charity volunteer, convinced her to become permanent staff, and together they set to work. Tannie Hermien energetically narrated the labour of putting out stock they had sourced from the existing Somerset West shop, mostly clothing, and the thrill of that illustrious first day of business in which the profitability of the shop was realized as they were inundated with customers. After simultaneously managing both the

Somerset West shop and Strand shop for a time, Tannie Hermien became the permanent manager of the Somerset West Shop, which I refer to as Tannie Hermien's Shop herewith.

At its inception Tannie Hermien's Shop was established in Queen Street close to the taxi rank. But after several years the rent of the premises was greatly increased and the shop was forced to relocate to Side Street, where there were thought to be fewer feet. There were misgivings about moving further from the taxi rank, as it was thought a desirable position for a business selling inexpensive used clothing and household items, as Tannie Hermien animatedly articulated,

Now we are further away and we thought when you get out of the taxi you are gonna shop at [the low cost grocery store] and come all this way all your packages? And who would come first here? You don't know how much your clothes [are] gonna cost! You don't come in here and spend R200 and say 'oh now I must buy my groceries'. (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

She paints the shop's customer as walking between the least expensive grocery store and the taxi rank, spreading a limited budget between comestibles and clothes. Despite the quiet nature of Side Street, customers were said to have returned, bringing others with them. Thus the shop has become more "famous" (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013) over time, as Tannie Mari said, which can perhaps account for its staff asserting that it is busier than it has ever been.

Originally Tannie Hermien's Shop and The Strand Shop shared a 'depot' with another local charity. This space acted as a place where people could leave donations and they would be stored until the shops needed more stock. But sharing a space between two independent charities proved less than ideal, thus it was decided that Helping Hands Charity needed its own space "where everything could come to first then be sorted, because of course they were getting a lot of stuff in they couldn't use" (Shelagh, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2012). The Flagship Shop would therefore serve as a central location at which donations could be accumulated and then redistributed amongst the Helping Hands Charity shops, and its monthly jumble sale in a nearby lower income town.

A series of events involving a silver candelabrum<sup>1</sup> deemed “too good” (Fiona, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2012) to be sold in the two existing Helping Hands Charity shops and not good enough for a “fancy” auction, signalled<sup>2</sup> the need for a third sort of Helping Hands Charity shop: one in which objects like the candelabrum could be sold. This would be incorporated into The Flagship Shop. A venue was found at Blue Circle, a shopping centre of sorts in an industrial area off the N2 highway. Every donation that had languished at the former sorting area was indiscriminately dumped into this new space. Once The Flagship Shop’s set up was complete, the shop space was divided into the retail part in front from which customers were able to purchase goods and The Flagship Shop part at the back for the unpacking and sorting of donations. Those things that meet The Flagship Shop’s criteria would move from the back-space into the front to be sold and that which did not was sent to the other two Helping Hands Charity shops.

From its inception, The Flagship Shop was presented as different to the existing two Helping Hands Charity shops; it would sell the best of the bric-a-brac<sup>3</sup>, specialize in vintage clothing only and cultivate an image of upmarket quality. In the words of Lisa, one of the first volunteers “The Flagship Shop was meant to be for finer quality things [...] and a step up from the normal as a thrift shop” (2<sup>nd</sup> May 2012)<sup>4</sup>. Her fellow volunteer Shelagh described the shop as more “exclusive” (20<sup>th</sup> July 2012); echoed by Angeline’s understanding that The Flagship Shop was “opened so it would be different from the other shops so it was deliberately [...] an Upmarket shop” (4<sup>th</sup> December 2012). These attempts to verbalize the

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<sup>1</sup> This candelabrum has languished upon a shelf in Tannie Hermien’s Shop; much admired by those who encountered it but too costly for most to afford. In any case, I was told, people who came into the shop were looking for clothes and bric-a-brac not silver candelabras.

<sup>2</sup> The project of establishing the retail depot was the ‘brain child’ of the fundraising co-ordinator of the Charity at the time.

<sup>3</sup> A note on the use of the phrase bric-a-brac and its variations: when I refer to bric-a-brac in the text I formulate the phrase as such, when citing excerpts from interviews I follow the form the speaker has used. These variations include: ‘bric ‘n brac’ and ‘bric and brac’.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa positions the “thrift shop” as those shops that only carry second-hand clothing, explaining that in terms of clothing The Flagship Shop is only for “some special, special gowns and special unique outfits” (2<sup>nd</sup> May 2012)

character and intention of The Flagship Shop clearly express a shared metaphor of upward mobility. The term ‘up market’ seems to be the one whose use is common in describing The Flagship Shop and simultaneously captures the boundary drawing between this space and ordinary charity trade and the value judgment made in this distinction.

Shortly after beginning my fieldwork at The Flagship Shop in Blue Circle I learnt that in a few weeks we would be moving The Flagship Shop to a new venue close to Tannie Hermien’s Shop in Side Street. Moving was a laborious process that took place over several weeks. The “authentic” “valuable” vintage clothes were separated from the mass of trousers, shirts and T-shirts, and set aside and saved for the new shop<sup>5</sup>. Clearance sales of the unwanted stock were held, the back-space was sorted and packed and the office was disassembled. Gradually the premise in Side Street was filled with boxes of books, bric-a-brac and electrical appliances. While the shop was being unpacked the large street side display windows were covered up with newspaper to hide the chaotic interior of the shop from prying eyes, sparking the curiosity of many a passer-by.

Behind this newspaper shield there was much careful deliberation, management sought to re-emphasise the upmarket nature of The Flagship Shop so as to distinguish it from its new nearby neighbour Tannie Hermien’s Shop<sup>6</sup>, which was described as having a low income target market, they sought to encourage luxurious browsing and lingering. Of the new shop space Cara said,

I think probably Helping Hands Charity are giving, are giving an impression that we have a better quality of stuff than we had at Blue Circle, and maybe that could

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<sup>5</sup> Later, once Tannie Emma had been instated as manageress I learnt that the status of The Flagship Shop was thought to have slipped as ordinary objects began to infiltrate the shop floor formerly reserved for special objects. Shelagh musing on the reasons for moving and what The Flagship Shop used to be, suggested that after Jane left and Mary became manager the shop took “a nosedive”, as, slowly baskets of underwear and cheap goods were said to have been re-introduced, perhaps, one volunteer mused, so as to serve the daily visits of women working in the nearby businesses. Fiona thought “when they moved it here [Side Street] they tried to get rid of that again. (20<sup>th</sup> July 2012).

<sup>6</sup> For example its position meant The Flagship Shop could no longer house any clothes that were not ‘special’ as it would be in competition with the nearby branch of the same shop.

be due to the fact that we're not selling clothes and shoes and handbags anymore, that that's gone somewhere else. This is more a specialized shop for Helping Hands Charity. (13<sup>th</sup> July 2012)

As a result the re-location brought about a new vigour to re-define The Flagship Shop as an upmarket space of quality. After it moved The Flagship Shop was subjected to a process of 'rebranding' including being given its own name. This is critical to understanding the deliberate reshaping of the shop as an attempt to engage with a particular market; naming it aligns it with boutique-like shops of The Mall. Having a name rather than going by the self-same moniker 'Helping Hands Charity shop' of Tannie Hermien's and The Strand Shop distances The Flagship Shop from the 'charity' which has two implications for the precarious commodities within it: on the one hand it is an attempt to relegate the used-nature of the goods to the background and on the other hand it allows The Flagship Shop to put business before expectations of charity and thus is reminiscent of Horne's (2000:116-9) theory of charity shops trading up.<sup>7</sup> Once the newspaper in the windows had been torn down and the glass doors opened, The Flagship Shop was opened to the public. When one elderly female customer exclaimed upon entering the shop that "it doesn't look like Helping Hands Charity, it looks like a special shop [...] it looks posh", it became clear that this rebirth was, at least in part, having its desired effect.

In this location The Flagship Shop continues to have a large back-space in which the majority of all donations are stockpiled and sorted, and it is from there that they are distributed between Helping Hands Charity's retail endeavours. The process of how it is determined what thing shall be sent to which shop is the subject of Chapter 3.

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Horne (2000:116-9) theorises three phases in the life cycle of a charity shop. First, is the entry phase in which is characterized by low prices, minimal running costs and poor status. Second, is the so called trading-up phase in which the shop appearance, its merchandise and its status are bettered. Horne (2000:116-9) proposes that what follows this is the mature phase in which the shop itself becomes top heavy and susceptible to management problems and conflict arises between the shop's status as service provider to the public and fundraiser for a charitable organization.

### **2.3 People and things in the Somerset West Helping Hands Charity shops**

In the parking lot, off Side Street, the smell of fried fish, over-used oil and the acerbic tang of vinegar hangs heavy in the air, occasionally coloured by the permeating scent of urine. On the corner of the fish and chips shop, bordering the parking lot and Side Street, live a group of street dwelling men. They shelter under an awning jutting over the sidewalk. From time to time one of them serves as self-elected parking attendant; ushering people in and out of the parking spaces for small change. On the pavement of Side Street the airborne aroma becomes punctuated by the acrid scent of chemicals. The shops are situated above the ground level of the street; passers-by must tilt their face upwards to look into the windows. A sign reading 'Helping Hands Charity' protrudes from the wall ahead: we have arrived at Tannie Hermien's Shop. The entrance to Tannie Hermien's Shop, is succeeded by a few upward leading steps, enrobed in scuffed greige linoleum.

Walking further, a second newer sign is visible; its fresh white background embellished with curvilinear script announces The Flagship Shop. The long large window is clear of mannequins and permits a leisurely, if somewhat dim, view of the shop's spacious interior. There is a flat inter leading space behind the door, followed by a few stairs. For a time a neon orange workman's overalls decorated upon these steps to alert customers to their presence and prevent injury, these attracted a consistent amount of interest from young black and coloured men passing them. There is a much smaller window on the other side of the door, covered by adhesive film bearing the shop's branding.

This section illustrates the perceived influence of space and race on the people and objects that inhabit the two Helping Hands Charity shops in Side Street, Somerset West. It explores the sometimes tenuous, sometimes symbiotic relationship that binds these two shops by virtue of their geographical proximity. As well as how each shop attempts to stabilize its identity and secure its trade in the face of neighbourly business.

## **The Flagship Shop**

The Flagship Shop is the only of the Helping Hands Charity shops that utilizes volunteers as sales assistants in the front-space, usually there are two volunteers per shift and they stand behind the tall wooden counter or move between the tables of bric-a-brac. Manager Tannie Emma and her assistant manager Angeline work mostly in the back-space, although they move between the two when volunteers are scarce or donations must be brought through.

The rectangular floor of The Flagship Shop's front-space is covered in dark wall to wall carpet, the sort common in large offices. Part of the window is partially obscured by a dark wood shelf on which hats and hand bags have been laid. The door that follows is cordoned off from the street by a security gate, the volunteers inside wear plastic buzzers, when pressed the gate springs open. The Flagship Shop is the largest, most considered, most contested and most expensive of the three Helping Hands Charity shops; to borrow the words of customers it is something "special", something "smart". This is reflected in its merchandise and layout.

A tall bookshelf runs the length of the far wall, packed with paper backs and hardcover books. Propped top of it are amateur paintings of flowers, children and landscapes that spill over onto the adjacent wall, which is almost completely covered in a plethora of small and medium sized framed pictures, of every sort imaginable. On smaller shelves coffee table tomes are piled, vinyl records are stacked together and one is devoted entirely to CD's and audio tapes. Around these shelves low leather poufs have been strategically positioned, so that tired readers may settle with a book, or sit down to better scan the lowest shelves.

A single rack of clothes is visible against the furthest wall, laden with sparkling evening wear, winter coats and dress suits; there are no basic T-shirts or jeans in the front-space of The Flagship Shop. In the street-facing window a slated back shelf boasts a carefully

curated collection of handbags and a few pairs of women's shoes. There is a single fitting room, for attire to be tested.

The Flagship Shop is wary of second-hand clothes, as Shelagh said "we don't really carry many clothes but it's really just the best- it's supposed to be- the best clothing that they now carry" (20<sup>th</sup> July 2012). The inclusion of clothing that is thought 'ordinary' (as opposed to vintage) second-handness than the best is tantamount to a slippage in the tone of the shop as a place of high quality. This distinction is an important indicator of how The Flagship Shop's target market differs from that of The Strand Shop and Tannie Hermien's Shop. Second-hand clothes have a particular association with poor people. It was a perception that I first encountered during my research of a Cape Town Flea market where the sale of second hand clothing was prohibited; the official reason being that the inclusion of such clothing would "flood" the market destroying its character as a bric-a-brac market. However, a second implied reason became apparent: that the inclusion of second-hand clothes might attract a flooding of a different kind; that of people perceived to be "undesirable", that is to say people who are black and poor (Watt, 2010: 58). This anxiety appears to be true of The Flagship Shop as well, apparent in its stringent moratorium of second-hand clothes.

On the shop floor tables are carefully laid out with what has been deemed the 'best' of the donated second-hand smalls: kitchenware and appliances, such as a dehydrator and magimix; crockery and silver-plated cutlery, moulded glass vases and knickknacks. The wall behind the counter is used to hang what are considered valuable pieces of vintage clothing. For some weeks a creamy white curtain of wedding dresses in satin and lace hung resplendent; later gradations of fawn to jet black leather jackets and skirts was displayed. Beside the counter a glass shelf and glass topped display unit hold a selection of costume jewellery, cufflinks, plastic and leather watches and small treasures; all within an easy glance of whomever is seated on the recycled bar stool working the till. To the side of this a wooden

cupboard is home to folded linen and a collection of souvenir china beer mugs. A space on the opposite side of the counter is reserved for miscellaneous electronics and a gift card rack.

### **Tannie Hermien's Shop**

Near to The Flagship Shop is what is here referred to as Tannie Hermien's Shop, although officially it has no individual. This, the smaller of the two Side Street shops, is animated by the personalities of its two staff members. Every day customers are met by the familiar faces of its manager Tannie Hermien and sales assistant Tannie Mari behind the counter at the top of the stairs. If The Flagship Shop is framed as different from the charity shop norm then Tannie Hermien's Shop is constructed as what a charity shop should be: it has none of the fancy trimmings of The Flagship Shop, but, as shall be illustrated in chapter 4, it is also positioned as 'better' in appearance, atmosphere and quality of stock compared to other charity shops in the surrounds.

There is no spare chair behind the high counter, nor is there enough space behind it for a second person. There is a chair placed under the first rack of men's shirts that faces outwards into the shop, padded with an odd concoction of quasi-orthopaedic cushions, above it is an A4 typed sign, "Chair only for staff". This serves as Tannie Mari's seat when she is not working sorting and hanging in the staff room; from this position she observes the customers as they pick through the underwear, rumple the linen cupboard and fit shoes. It is from here that she pages through *Die Son* newspaper or *Huisgenoot* magazine when the afternoon gets quiet, and from here that she greets the plethora of customers that know her well, mostly other middle aged coloured women.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Unsure of where to position myself within the small area upon my arrival, I decided to fit myself at the entrance to the 'behind the counter area', between each of the staff members. This 'in between space' situated me as not quite customer, not quite staff. More so than in either of the other shops where I had been quite distinctively 'staff' I felt in the way here.

The interior of the shop is arranged so that those behind the counter may have the best vantage point to survey customers in the shop. On the wall behind the counter are signs that read “no refunds on either cash or goods by order of management”, “no laybys/no keeping of stock for either collection or payment” and “shop is protected by surveillance cameras”, which is accompanied by a fearsome looking toy hyena growling outwards. The clock on the wall is complemented by “clock not for sale”.

The space of the shop is cordoned in to sections by thin plywood walls. There are two cubicles labelled ‘fitting rooms’. Side by side, they share a plywood wall; drawing the blue curtain creates privacy, although it stops a good few centimetres from the ground. Inside the change room a sign warns against theft in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. Next to these fitting rooms is the back-space, consisting of a miniscule store area that leads to a staff room that doubles as a kitchenette, so small there is barely enough room to sit.

Almost the entire front-space is devoted to second-hand clothes; rails are nailed to the walls and cover most of the floor. The left over space is filled with bric-a-brac, magazines and odd bits of linen. The type of second-hand smalls being sold in Tannie Hermien’s Shop are the objects considered too ordinary and unremarkable. In the sense of the stock it carried Tannie Hermien’s sister shop is The Strand Shop, as whatever is not fit for sale in The Flagship Shop is shared between them.

### **Who shops where? Sharing customers and drawing boundaries**

The Flagship Shop and Tannie Hermien’s Shop are situated in close proximity to one another. As I have described, each is presented very differently and they sell different things; yet they occupy almost the self-same geographical location in Somerset West. This section examines how being situated in Side Street has impacted upon the customer base of each shop in comparison to their prior location, their relative position to the taxi rank (and parking lot) and their proximity to each other. In doing so it raises issues of who the target market of

each shop is and the imagined threat that sharing customers presents to their hierarchical identities.

The situation of The Flagship Shop in Side Street was described by its current manager as being “a little out of the way of our target market” (Tannie Emma, 27<sup>th</sup> November 2012), when questioned as to who this target market is, she described someone who, while not hugely affluent, has extra spending money. In its current position people have to “find” the shop because it is “out of the way” she said. This proclaimed out-of-the-way-ness of Tannie Hermien’s Shop and The Flagship Shop becomes integral to understanding the flow of feet in Somerset West and the town’s mapping in the minds of those who traverse its streets. As Tannie Emma explains,

A lot of those [people with money] you’ll find shop in The Mall. But you’ve got your other people that, the passing traffic, and you’ve got your more affluent black that has now found the shop as well, and although they may not be able to pay the two or three thousand rand for the Hugo Boss or whatever it may be, suit, they can find one of quality for a good price. (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

She stations The Mall as places where moneyed people go to satisfy their consumer needs and The Flagship Shop as a more accessible alternative where those aspire to luxury goods (some of whom she supposes to be ‘black’) are able to buy cost effective quality alternatives. The way Tannie Emma positions the ‘black’ consumer seeking out luxury goods, harkens to Posel’s (2010:157-160) assertions that the “conspicuous consumption” of luxury goods in post-apartheid South Africa by those previously classified as black is tied to a narrative that views “acquisition” as an expression of freedom “to become rich”. Race and power to consume in South Africa, Posel (2010:160) argues, have historically been co-constituting, the one shaping the other.

This line of argument thus revisits the connectedness of race and class, here locating it in the subjective experiences of class, in the life of the imagination and what Arjun Appadurai (2004) has called ‘the capacity to aspire’, as much on the part of the poor and marginalized as any others. (Posel, 2010: 160)

What begins to emerge here is the imagined upper-class demise of the centre of Somerset West and its replacement by working-class customers desirous of upward mobility that has grown in its place and the new flow of walkers and taxi users.

Tannie Hermien told me that the other businesses in Side Street are not conducive to the type of relaxed browsing that would encourage visitors to explore the surrounding shops. Instead they present purely utilitarian visits, in which the visitor speedily enters and exits the locale. It is the “call” of her shop and The Flagship Shop redirect the flow of feet from Wide Road into Side Street:

Here’s nothing there that can call the people; it’s we that call the people. You know people come to the [...] offices but not really, they come and sort out the thing and go home. To the [other business] people just come and drop off and take their things. The fish and chips is dying, there’s no business for them cause they too expensive, everybody goes to the fish and chips down at [the low cost grocery store] [...] so we are the people that are calling them now. That’s why they say “if you close down” if we down like now the 12 days we were closed they say “it was dead in this street”. There is nobody there. (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Tellingly, Tannie Hermien emphasised the practicality of buying one’s inexpensive fish and chips close to where they buy their groceries without walking any further than needed. Her imagined customer is thus one who moves on foot.

Side Street is out of the way for the imagined target market of both The Flagship Shop and Tannie Hermien’s Shop, although for different reasons. Both Tannie Hermien’s Shop and The Flagship Shop purported to have changes in the demographics of their customers because it changed the proximity of each to the taxi rank. Thus the reliance of many of those frequenting town upon public transport between work and their homes means that the taxi rank occupies an important spatial and influential positioning in the minds of the participants.

The location of The Flagship Shop in the midst of Somerset West foot traffic has meant an influx of a ‘type’ of customer that was not common when The Flagship Shop was located in Blue Circle. To paraphrase one staff member’s description: whereas at Blue Circle people

would have to get into their cars and drive to The Flagship Shop, in Side Street those passing by may simply step inside. In describing the positioning of the Blue Circle shop and the resulting customers Lisa defined them as “destination shoppers” (2<sup>nd</sup> May 2012) who would make a special journey to the Charity shop. These “destination shoppers” have been replaced and supplemented by ‘walk-ins’ and ‘passers-by’ that tread the streets of Somerset West:

There [are] more walk by people here [Side Street] than down there [Blue Circle]. There you had to actually come specifically to The Flagship Shop. And there are a few factories around there obviously where the people came but not many so it was mainly people who had to come specifically there. Here of course there’s loads of walk by trade so there’s many, many more people coming in. (Shelagh, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2012)

In conversation Tannie Hermien was direct in her appraisal of the impact of The Flagship Shop’s location within Somerset West on its customers, explaining that when The Flagship Shop was in the Blue Circle “black customers” did not go there because there were no regular taxis. Fiona too felt that The Flagship Shop had more black customers since its move, and mused that this had changed the behaviour of white customers:

I think sometimes [...] —again I’m not being racist at all— because the client base has changed a little bit, you know white people aren’t staying as long as they used to. I’m not saying that’s necessarily a good thing or a bad thing. (9<sup>th</sup> July 2012)

While in its previous location the majority of The Flagship Shop’s clientele were thought to be those able to afford their own transport. Now that it is in Side Street it seemingly attracts a less affluent, less ‘white’ clientele, walking around Somerset West CBD and dependent upon public transport; despite its upmarket aspirations. Modes of transport here becomes a way to speak about racial space and shopping; taxi users and walking implies ‘blackness’ while owning private means of transport predominantly implies ‘whiteness’.

The taxi rank is considered an important provider of a steady flow of feet around the town and supplying shops with their customers, emphasized Tannie Hermien:

We call that [near Queen Street] the CBD because [it is] where the taxis are that is where the business is, because everybody is just in the way in the shop in the taxi, because lots of the people don't have cars here. (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Shelagh, further expands upon this line of argument using modes of transport to illustrate the shift in race and class of the Somerset West CBD's customer,

I think the immediate area, 'cause this is the shopping area, the taxi rank is here, this is where they have to get off in the morning this is where they have to get on in the evening to get home. So their shopping area is here. So I mean the shops round here must cater for that clientele. Whereas the clientele it used to cater for in my parents time have now moved to shop at The Mall, to shop at Water Stone. They're not shopping at the centre of town anymore. (20<sup>th</sup> July 2012)

Despite their different understandings of the proximity of the taxi rank to Side Street, both Shelagh and Tannie Hermien infer being too far from the taxi rank is potentially detrimental to business. Those who consider the CBD a desirable retail space today are presented as 'black' in contrast to an imagined past customer that now shops at The Mall. In the time of Shelagh's parents Somerset West would have been accessible only to those branded 'white' by the apartheid government. Somerset West CBD's customer is painted as shuttled in and out of town via taxi, moving between shopping and work in the centre of town and their homes on the periphery. The businesses in the area, Shelagh suggests, must accommodate these new clientele.

As I hovered next to the counter Tannie Hermien said that this shop has the same customers as The Flagship Shop next door, specifically the same white customers. Its move from Queen Street to Side Street was seen to change who the shop's customer was, Tannie Hermien explains

In the beginning when we opened here most of the people were black people, when we were still in Queen Street most of the people were black people and coloured people. There was one or two white people, I don't know if they were ashamed to go into there, I don't know[...] But now suddenly from the beginning of, say, two years back the white people start coming in; when the economy start going down then they start coming. And now most of our customers are white people you can see while you are here, every second person is white people. There is a lot of men coming in not really to shop they come to browse to see around, to go tell their wives what is in here. And lot of women, in the afternoons

only women. Because they are coming from work the chars they're coming in.  
(9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Tannie Hermien produces an image of a steadily whitening clientele caused by a disintegration of stigma associated with the purchase of second-hand goods and the repercussions of economic downturn, to the point where she suggests half the shop's clientele is white. The other she suggests is made up of passers-by.

Seemingly contradictorily Tannie Hermien's Shop is thought to have become more "white" since moving from Queen Street where it was nearer a taxi rank In Blue Circle, The Flagship Shop was out of the way for taxi users, whereas in its new position it is much easier to reach for those on foot and using public transport and so it experiences more black and coloured customers. While the question of who the shops' customers are is not only vaguely defined, but also wrought with contradictions; what seems to emerge here is that particular spaces in Somerset West are thought to be "whiter" and other spaces, such as the taxi rank are "black" and "coloured" spaces. The positioning of the shops in relation to these spaces influences the "colour" of their clientele.

A few metres from Side Street is a free parking lot. It is this parking lot that allows for ease of access to the shops for those utilizing their own transport, for as it has been said white customers are not walking in Wide Road or lingering in side Street. Of this amenity Tannie Hermien said: "The best thing for us is the parking space at the back, because the parking is there so they know they just have to walk around here" (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013); knowing that they are able to park close to the shops, without charge, encourages customers using their own cars. They are never required to traverse the streets of the CBD as the parking lot serves as an exit and entry point. Indeed, even the lure of The Mall to those who drive their own cars is greatly heightened by the vast expanse of grey tarmac parking that encircles it, promising time saving ease of access.

While the participants were quick to elaborate upon the changing racial demographics of their customers they also spoke of the shops as a space for everybody and anybody. Describing the shop's customer base today, Tannie Mari stressed the variety of person that enters her shop, "At the moment everybody, at the moment really all walks of life comes to the shop" (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). This opinion was reflected by Mrs Van Rooyen: "oh there [are] people from all walks of life, you know. Lot of people from the rural community comes in but also the small people shop here" (3<sup>rd</sup> January 2013). Such emphasis upon the multiculturalism, and multiracialism within Tannie Hermien's Shop was in some ways shared by The Flagship Shop in its new position, as Fiona said "But um it has changed definitely, not necessarily in a bad way 'cause I think we're making more money. But it covers all aspects now, you get everybody in" (9<sup>th</sup> July 2012).

This idea of every type of person traipsing through the two shops was rendered with one limitation: both The Flagship Shop and Tannie Hermien's Shop insisted that the very poor person was not their customer. Tannie Mari said that whilst the very poor did come into the shop those "people who really has got nothing" (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013) would go elsewhere, describing her shop's customer she said:

I think you can't say for sure [unclear though], I see yesterday a few professionals I think it is more middle class and upper the really poorer will walk down to the Charity A shop, because you know they can buy things there or the car boot sales. I wouldn't say it is really, really poor people. From middle class upwards that buy from us. (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

The same is true of The Flagship Shop; according to Tannie Emma "you don't actually get the people, um, that I'd say is down and out, in the shop. They may come in and the look and then they walk out" (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012). This very poor person must shop in other charity shops, as I suggest in Chapter 4, ones with lower quality, cheaper, goods.

From this analysis it would appear that the boundaries between who the customers of The Flagship Shop are and who the customers of Tannie Hermien's Shop are blurred by their

shared location in Side Street. The physical proximity of the two shops compels the policing of perceived deviations from the particular mandate of each. In the immediate aftermath of The Flagship Shop moving next door the staff in Tannie Hermien's Shop was unhappy; they did not have anything to sell. This they feel was because, not only was The Flagship Shop selling the 'special' things, they were selling ordinary things too<sup>9</sup>. Tannie Hermien and Tannie Mari both spoke of the problematic situation created by this perceived overstepping of boundaries; as Tannie Hermien elucidated:

Because at that time Tannie Emma took some of the stuff that we are selling here and put it on her floor [...] We start complaining, basically the new stuff also and the new shoes and she asked the same what we should ask, do you understand? [...] So the things must be a higher price and so now. Then our customers start saying, 'why would I shop here? I can go there for a new thing' [...] Then we complained. And they [management] said 'stop immediately, you're not allowed to do that. You are the shop that is selling the vintage; you must be known as the shop that sells the vintage and the evening wear, and the nicest stuff and the crystal and the jewellery and nice books'. And then she stopped and her earnings [are] up and my earnings [are] up. (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

This conflict arises from a perceived blurring of the lines between the two shops — their mutual existence depends upon the clear definition of each as different from the other, most viscerally manifested in the goods they carry. In discussing the quality of the stock sold from Tannie Hermien's Shop, Tannie Mari spoke of how in the past she would have been able to make "a very good thing price" now they only have "a good thing price and a bad thing price" because the "very good" (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013) things go to The Flagship Shop next door.<sup>10</sup> In a sense Tannie Hermien's Shop is required to 'trade down' as a foil to The Flagship

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<sup>9</sup> This account is quite at odds with The Flagship Shop's ambitions during its setting up stages, in which the emphasis was upon only retailing in the 'better' stock. It speaks to the constant 'slipping' of The Flagship Shop back into ordinary charity shopness and the anxiety that surrounds such slippage.

<sup>10</sup> Tannie Hermien and Tannie Mari downplayed the tensions between the shops by their common goal as fundraisers for Helping Hands Charity, and thus Tannie Hermien and Tannie Mari insist that instead of animosity between the two shops they act harmoniously, focusing upon the greater good. This is apparent in the redirection of customers out of Tannie Hermien's Shop into The Flagship Shop on the recommendation of staff who will send customer to The Flagship Shop if they are looking for something not in their shop. This, Tannie Mari suggested sharing of customer is important because it fosters a 'good relationship' with their neighbouring colleagues which is 'crucial' (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). The common thread of this neighbourly sharing of customers is that in remaining within the closed definitions of what type of charity shop each is supposed to be, the trade in Tannie Hermien's Shop is not threatened by the larger more impressive Flagship Shop.

Shop's aspirations to 'trade up'. Although it was suggested that Tannie Hermien's Shop was also desirous of bettering itself; for Angeline, The Flagship Shop's nearness to Tannie Hermien's Shop was making the latter overly selective about the stock they are sent, whereas before they would have sold anything.

#### 2.4 The Strand Shop, inside and out

The Strand is a home [*tuiste*] to me, because I grew up here. I will go to my town of birth to visit, I will go to Durban and Joburg on a tour, and to Mpumalanga, but when I return home again, Strand is homely for me. The sea is nearby. You look around in the evening and see Simon's town's lights, you see Gordon's bay, you see the cars coming over from Grabouw passing through Strand on their way to Cape Town.<sup>11</sup> (Tannie Jakomien, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012)

The first time I visited the Helping Hands Charity shop in Strand I was driven there from the Side Street shops, round the cramped traffic circles of Somerset West Wide Road, past the security villages of indistinguishable houses, through the tip of leafy suburbs, into Long Road: lined with mechanical repair shops, semi-industrial visages and taxi's pulled over the yellow line. The driven distance between The Strand Shop and the Side Street Shops is relatively short and both are influenced by the dynamic of the greater Helderberg. Yet, crucially, they remain separate towns and as such exist within differing microcosms of exchange and racial dynamics.

To illustrate this microcosm, I discuss the location of the Helping Hands Charity shop in Strand, uncannily it is considered both homely and unsafe, in which 'multiracialism' and 'multiculturalism' are thought both the norm and a threat. Accordingly, this section discusses the dynamics of who is welcome and unwelcome in the Strand area and how this is reflected within the Helping Hands Charity shop; and mirrored in assumptions about the quality of the

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<sup>11</sup> *Die Strand is vir my 'n tuiste, omdat ek hier groot geword het. Ek sal na my geboorte dorp gaan om te gaan kuier, ek sal Durban en Joburg op 'n toer, en Mpumalanga toe; maar wanneer ek terug kom huis toe, die Strand is 'n tuiste vir my. Die see is hier naby, jy kyk rondom jou, dan sien jy vir Simonstad in die aand sy liggies[...]jy sien vir Gordons baai, jy sien die karre kom oor Grabouw en jy sien die Strand is hier in die omgewing is, gaan uit Kaap toe en kom terug* (Tannie Jakomien, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012)

shop. While Strand was spoken of as the most community centred shop it was also at times implied that its stock was the worst selection (although this could perhaps be because of its diminutive size).

Long-time Strand resident and historian, Rhoda (2008) described the area around where The Strand Helping Hands Charity shop is today as having once been a bustling community of homes and small businesses run by coloured proprietors known personally to all who shop there. This idyllic setting was violently disrupted by the apartheid government's implementation of racial segregation; tracing his family history in the area, Rhoda wrote that

The Rhodas, like many Muslim and Christian families classified 'coloured', lived in the Strand for generations [...] until they were forced out by the Group Areas Act.[...] The Group Areas Act led to the total destruction of this neighbourhood in the mid-1960s and the community was scattered in the new 'coloured' residential areas of Rusthof. The rows of houses made way for businesses, parking lots, open squares and highrise buildings. Today in 2008, the three mosques established by our forebears [...] stand proudly, in defiance of the inhumane system of apartheid.

The landscape of Rhoda's childhood was violently disrupted, replaced by impersonal urbanity, from which his family was exiled. Rhoda's imaginary of Strand past and present presents a type of nostalgia for a retail space in which shopping entailed gregarious visits between friends and shopkeepers who well-known figures in the community, of which only relics remain.

Today the Helping Hands Charity shop in Strand is situated near a medium sized parking lot. The lot is the territory of a quietly grinning car guard, slender leather whip over his shoulder, and sometime home of an assortment of street dwelling men and women. Facing onto this vista is the building housing The Strand Shop, bifurcated by a dim arcade.

The entrance to the shop is in the mouth of the arcade; barred by a buzzer-operated metal security gate. The shop space is small and, when peopled, cramped. There is a low counter next to the door with a wooden 'gate' that can be shut to seal the space behind it from

customers. A short stool and a quasi-office chair provide enough space for two people to sit. Opposite the entrance to the shop is a single fitting room. Like Tannie Hermien's Shop, The Strand Shop is devoted primarily to the sale of second-hand clothing, supplemented by a small amount of bric-a-brac, paperback novels and magazines. At the end of the front-space is the back-space, of the 'office' and miniscule sink and kettle 'kitchen'. Reminiscent of The Flagship Shop this staff-only area leads to a narrow enclosed alley like passage that connects the shops in the arcade and is used to store clothes that have not yet been unpacked.

On my first day in The Strand Shop Jeannine said she believes the Somerset West Helping Hands Charity shops to be "destination shopping" whereas people come to The Strand Shop en route to do their shopping at the surrounding shops. I was told that the proximity to the taxi rank did not influence trade hugely other than causing a 4 O'clock rush when many domestic workers finish work. When I formally interviewed Jeannine she once again stressed the ability of the surrounding shops to pull customers into the area, although she previously belied the influence of the taxi rank, here she emphasized it:

The shop is near the taxi rank which means a lot of people who've now finished work and are on their way home will pop in. Um so that brings us quite a lot of business....we're on route to a few places, so we're quite heavy on passing trade, which I think is a little different than the Somerset West shop. (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

Elmarie cited the usefulness of being close to the taxi rank bringing feet into the shop, and making shopping easy, allowing customers to "buy a duvet set, pillow cases and a [...] curtain, put it in a black bag, carry it to the taxi rank, go and drop them off at home" (16<sup>th</sup> October 2013). Describing the "vibrant" centre of Strand, popular reader-written online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, writes that "the large black and coloured communities just outside Strand also flock to the CBD on a daily basis" (Strand, Western Cape, 2013). While the accuracy of the source is debatable, the quote presents a perception that many black and coloured customers live on the periphery of Strand and its surrounding communities.

Desirous of shopping in the CBD they must move en masse (or so ‘flock’ implies) in and out of the city centre.

The arcade has been the scene of a number of bag snatchings, I was told mostly ‘they’ target old ladies, but you can never be too careful: walk fast and hold your handbag tightly. As an interloper in this space I felt that the depictions of Strand were divided between a sense of easy going homeliness and a threat of crime particularly from foreigners or other outsiders. Interestingly Tannie Ronel contrasts ‘safe’ Strand with what she feels is unsafe Somerset West, “All what I can tell you is this area is a very quiet area, and I feel safe here [...] in Somerset self I don’t feel safe there” (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012). Millicent, who lives a block or so away from The Strand Shop, described the many “homeless” residents, before speaking of the “laid back” atmosphere of the space and the number of “retired people” who also live in Strand (3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012). In a way Millicent’s juxtaposition of elderly folk and street dwelling folk is testament to the seeming ambiguities of Strand. She spoke of the irritation local residents had begun to feel towards these street-people, but otherwise posed them as living harmoniously within this space.

This duality was also expressed when inhabitants spoke of the racial dynamics in Strand, as the space was welcoming to the white and coloured people who were said to have traditionally lived in close proximity to there, but less trustful of and welcoming to black people and foreigners from other African countries. When speaking about racial tensions participants were eager to distance themselves from any racist attitudes, but were comfortable discussing the racial prejudices of others.

Of the area around The Strand Shop, the centre of town, Tannie Ronel said: “they call it *tarentaal*, and whatever, but I don’t know” (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012), comparatively referring to “the coloured area”. *Tarentaal* is the Afrikaans name for guinea fowl, a local bird celebrated for its painterly black and white speckled feathers, thus as metaphor it alludes to an

intermingling of different races. When I asked Elmarie, who has lived in Strand for most of her life, what sort of racial dynamics exist, she weaved the following analogy:

You see the Strand was more whites and coloureds, like the community together. I see the Strand a lot like a farm. A farm situation, you know? the whites was, like older whites[...]and the coloured people used to work in their houses doing the laundry, clean for them, whatever so they come very close- it's like they're family; and now all of these Nigerians- the coloureds don't like the Nigerians and the Somalis and the blacks. And strange enough if you see, if you see new blacks coming into the Strand four five together, then the coloured people will tell you 'watch them, watch it' and within a day you hear 'First National [Bank] was robbed' or 'this was robbed' or 'that was robbed. So they lift them out, they said 'those are bad, bad men'. (16<sup>th</sup> October 2012)

The historical relationship that she illustrates between coloured people and black people is one of intimacy but also of hierarchy. The coloured worker is allowed into their white master's home but the power imbalance between employer and employee remains. Within this 'familial' scenario black people and foreigners are cast as the harbingers of crime. Elmarie's words speak to the various racisms and xenophobia propagated in Strand.

One morning sitting in the back-space of the shop, Elmarie and Jeannine related an incident that had occurred the previous week whilst I was away. A black "well to do" family, that the staff described as "beautifully spoken" and "*ordentlik*", were perusing the shop. So enraptured was Elmarie by the family's infant that she asked to take the baby with her to the cigarette and snack-shack on the corner. As she made her way through the parking lot, a group of local coloured street-dwellers remarked, "*Elmarie wat maak jy met 'n Kaffir [sic] pop?* [What are you doing with a Kaffir [sic] doll]?" The street-people were surprised to see Elmarie, a white woman with a black baby. What particularly fascinated the staff was the idea that the street-people considered themselves 'superior' to the black family by virtue of their colouredness. The discussion turned to race relations in Strand: the coloured people in the Strand dislike the black people, particularly the Zimbabweans. In turn the Zimbabweans were said to not like the South African black people but prefer the company of white people.

This analysis of the racism and racial divisions in Strand led to the recalling of another anecdote: a few young Zimbabweans presumed to be students in the shop were talking amongst themselves in “perfect” English “as only Zimbabweans can” said Jeannine; when a black South African woman motioned to them muttering “white people!”<sup>12</sup>. What becomes apparent here is that certain characteristics of behaviour are associated with performances of race; in this instance speaking English in a certain way is equated with ‘whiteness’. These perceived performances can be met with both approval and with disdain<sup>13</sup>.

Not all are adverse to the increasing ‘multiculturalism’ of the Strand; Tannie Jakomien explains how to turn feelings of invasion and discomfort caused by the influx of foreigners, into appreciation for increasingly international make-up of her community.

What I notice happening now, that was never here before, is there are now different people in the surroundings and that makes you sometimes feel uneasy and out of place [*ontuis*], but if you do not have those negative thoughts [...] and you have an attitude to get along with other people [...] It is nice to me that I can also get along with Japanese people and get along as well with black people and white people.<sup>14</sup> (16<sup>th</sup> October 2012)

She recognized the feelings of animosity that exist in her community towards these groups of people as well as the manner in which they disrupt the homeliness of the area. And yet she poses that she has overcome these initial misgivings through friendliness, natural charisma and love for others.

Many participants felt that the racial tensions and xenophobic attitudes in the centre of Strand did not enter the Strand Helping Hands Charity shop in its midst. Elmarie attributed

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<sup>12</sup> The woman was chastised by her companion, whom Jeannine later thanked.

<sup>13</sup> Such prejudices are not limited to one group and are entwined with ideas of xenophobia; as evidenced on one occasion when Elmarie was very aggravated by Congolese Pastor Edward, a man who relishes the opportunity to find a bargain, even better if in the process he raises the hackles of Helping Hands Charity staff. Later she recalled a particular homeless woman in the area’s admonishment of the local Congolese population: “at home you eat pap and here you eat KFC and your hair turns straight! *Voetsek! Voetsek! Voetsek!* [Bugger off! Bugger off! Bugger off!]”.

<sup>14</sup> *Wat nou vir my plaasvind, wat nooit hier was nie is die, hiers nou verskillende mense in die omgewing en en dit laat jou partykeer ongemaklik en ontuis voel maar as jy nie daai negatiewe gedagtes het nie [...] en jy het daai gesindhede om met ander mense oor die weg te kom [...] en dit is vir my lekker dat ek met Japanese mense ook oor die weg kan kom sowel as swart mense en blanke mense kom ek oor die algemeen oor die weg.* (16<sup>th</sup> October 2012)

this apparent lack of racial tension to the shop's position in the community as a respected server of all. Jeannine was more circumspect, saying "we don't know" (16<sup>th</sup> October 2012). But she highlighted the "multiculturalism" inside the shops, saying that her customers "are probably an enormous cross section of every faith, culture and language"<sup>15</sup>. The shops customer is thought to include everyone; trying to describe the economic power of the shop's consumer Elmarie remarked that there are "the poorest one with two cents" (Elmarie, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012) amongst their customers. And Jeannine said

I'd say a vast majority of the Strand is middle to low income; having said that, you certainly get your upper echelon income levels as well. Um but I'd say the vast majority is middle to lower. (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

As was the case when discussing race, there is a commitment to presenting the shops as spaces for all. What seems different in The Strand Shop compared to its Somerset West counter parts is that they believe that the very poor person, described by Elmarie, is not a customer.

Shopping it would seem is posed as a unifying act, which unites those frequenting the centre of town, or so Yolandi proposed: it is "*glad nie racial nie, almal pas in. Dit is wat ek jou gesê, as ek daar aan kom van die winkles [...] almal interact* [not at all racial, every one fits in, it is like I told you, when I come to the shops everyone interacts.]" (17<sup>th</sup> November 2013). She places this non-racialism in the context of interaction through exchange. The idea of the area around the Helping Hands Charity shop as an "appropriate" place is articulated by Yolandi, who emphasized that this space is close to everyone, close to the shops and 'neutral' (17<sup>th</sup> November 2012). I read the word appropriate in this context as referring to the ease of access and geniality the space offers to all.

Officially everyone is welcome, yet whether they in fact feel comfortable mingling with

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<sup>15</sup> Jeannine enjoys greeting people in their mother tongue (customers were said to appreciate this) and claimed to have spoken eight different languages in one day (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012).

other races is less certain, as has been shown. Elmarie expressed this candidly when she described how the presence of “too many” black or coloured people inside the Helping Hands Charity shop discouraged elderly whites from entering as they would feel “unsafe” and not feel “welcome”, preferring the shops empty. This seems to link the fears of safety in Strand to a fear of racial integration which seems to account for the strange contrast between Strand being shown as a homely place and an unwelcoming place. Indeed, Jeannine’s appointment as manager seemed to have been met with enthusiasm; Tannie Emma was glad that it was going to be “a white face” managing the shop because if all the old people in the area were to see a black person managing a second-hand shop they would assume that the merchandise was poor quality; and would not bother to go in; hinting at the equation of race and quality.

The deployment of racial stereotypes was later differently reinforced by Yolandi who supposed the prices in The Strand Shop had increased as more white people begun to frequent this shop. This increase in price had driven away the street-people who used to shop there as they could no longer afford to buy anything; even she herself was no longer able to purchase as often as she used to and would like to (17<sup>th</sup> November 2012). Millicent too found that after the change in management the prices in the shop had peaked, but claimed the general consensus is that they have dropped and are once more affordable to those ‘on a limited budget’ (Millicent, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012). These two ideas share a common base that places whiteness in line with expensiveness and quality as well as pointing out that this type of idea is exclusionary. Racial stereotypes abound, and while there may be intermingling of races there may not be interaction between races of the sort that changes the way other people think about race. Otherness of any sort is still considered to bring with it the threat of exclusion and change. And change here is viewed with suspicion as it is considered to depart from a more inclusionary, homely past.

## **2.5 The shadow of The Mall: Material transformations and racial nostalgias**

This section endeavours to observe the imagined impact of The Mall upon the retail centre of Somerset West and, to a lesser extent, Strand. I propose that the alleged demise of this area as a quality shopping destination coincides with the racial integration of the space, and thus it presents nostalgia for what was thought to be a time in which shopping in the CBD was an un-alienating personal experience connected to the histories of the early days of trade. In this way the perception of the quality of the retail experience it offers is intimately connected to the perception of who its imagined customer has become.

From observing her own customers, Ilze felt that the space that The Mall left behind has been forced to become its own microcosm cut off from the broader Helderberg Basin, catering to those who are confined to its parameters by work, “a sort of self-sustaining business community” (Ilze, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2013). This was echoed in my own observation that oftentimes customers in the Helping Hands Charity shops in Strand and Somerset West were employees of local businesses in their lunch breaks or between shifts on their way home. Indeed, when The Flagship Shop and later Tannie Hermien’s Shop would close to customers for an hour over lunch time I, usually accompanied by Angeline as my guide, would go for walks.

From Wide Road, we would occasionally walk uphill towards the R44, but most often I would venture downwards. The streets were grey and littered but the sidewalks are broad and on days when the weather permitted walking, they were populated by black and coloured men and women, sporadically interspersed by the odd ‘white’ face, becoming busier and busier towards the large low price grocery store. Not far from Side Street is a, recently refurbished, inexpensive clothing chain store that usually has a short queue stretching from the till. Further on another clothing store sells garments from popular chain stores at a cut price; most of the garments’ labels mutilated to disguise their origin. Many of the older

buildings are peeling and pollution stained, but remain standing, mingled between concrete slabs and face brick shop fronts.

Against my own walking experience of the space I examine the thoughts of my white participants who said the centre of Somerset West was no longer the lively place it had been before The Mall was constructed on its periphery. It was, I am told, a beautiful, leafy popular shopping destination feeding the Helderberg Basin with all the consumables it desired. According to historian of the area Heap (1993:130-2) many of the early businesses in Somerset West were family run enterprises, begun by previous generations and staunchly continuing to trade as reputable long standing local institutions. One such business was TS Martin's pharmacy, established in 1900, it housed

the traditional large apothecary's jars filled with coloured water-red, blue, green and amber- and over the counter could be seen on a high shelf rows of white china containers labelled in gold Latin, and myriads of small wooden drawers holding heaven knew what mysteries. (Heap, 1993:131)

For many years Martin's, as it was locally known, continued to be run by the sons and grandsons of the eponymous TS Martin; until eventually unable to compete with larger, company owned pharmacy chains it was sold. The building that had housed Martin's since 1952 is today the site of a so called 'Chinese shop', retailing in inexpensive miscellaneous goods imported from the East.

The physical retail geography of Somerset West in its historical centre has undoubtedly changed since the residence of the first TS Martin, but this is not unexpected of the gradual shifting of time. What is interesting is that while historical buildings are easily located, some people feel the central retail district of Somerset West has 'died' in social and retail terms. This death is attributed to the founding of The Mall between Strand and Somerset West. Writing on the cusp of democracy, in 1993, Waring described the not yet concretized mall's target market as "reflected in the high order tenant mix, with the emphasis

on fashion, entertainment and food outlets, including the largest Pick 'n Pay in the Western Cape" (1994:41). The Mall's ideal inhabitants are constructed as those with money to spare seeking out a place offering itself as a village on its own in which shopping, eating and socializing can be carried out under artificial atmospherics.

Waring suggested The Mall's impact would most greatly be experienced by the surrounding "speciality" stores and small community shopping centres. Local community convenience stores trading basic goods on street corners would, she wrote, be immune because of their accessibility and lengthy business hours. Waring (1994:70) echoes critics of regional shopping centres suggesting that not only are such centres inaccessible to those who do not own cars, they "lead to the closure of smaller shops which were previously accessible to this group". The Mall's original plan was accompanied by the suggestion that consumer response would determine its second phase of expansion (Waring, 1994:42).

If the feelings of white inhabitants towards Somerset West's CBD twenty years since the establishment of, the now expanded, Mall are to be believed, much of what Waring (1994:42) predicted has come into being. The imagined distinction between what Somerset West Centre was and looked like before The Mall and how it is now, lends itself to the stuff of white nostalgia. Shelagh, whose parents had lived in Somerset West and who returned there to spend her retirement, typified this sense of loss in change:

The centre part of Somerset West is falling apart; it's becoming quite a relic 'cause of the clientele that's shopping here, it's not a shopping centre anymore. You know as soon as they build a mall the town centre suffers doesn't it? People don't shop here anymore. (20<sup>th</sup> July 2012)

This nostalgia is encapsulated within the laden word "relic" that embodies a sense of bygone grandeur of which now only the empty shell remains. Shelagh blames this apparent decline firmly on the creation of The Mall, whose destructive impact upon the local shopping centre she framed as inevitable. Other white, relatively affluent, participants in the later years of

middle age, when asked to describe Somerset West, often spoke of an abandoned Central Business District (CBD), from which shoppers have migrated to The Mall. The seeming demise of what was once viewed as a hub of activity was presented by these discussants as regrettable, but written on the geography of Wide Road. As John said, the centre of Somerset West town is no longer in Wide Road: it is The Mall, “and you only have to walk down the Wide Road to see that, to see the shops that have closed; that are empty” (27<sup>th</sup> July 2012).

It is not without irony that those who commiserate the supposed death of the Somerset West CBD are among the very shoppers who favour shopping at The Mall. They reason that it offers a better quality retailing experience: for example Fiona no longer frequents the centre of town because of its status as a place for low quality goods:

Well the centre- again I don't do much in the centre of town I must admit- but I see the centre of town nowadays as more down market, I don't mean it in a bad way but its more your people who don't have their own transport so they come here because its walking distance from all these apartments, so you'll have the older people, I presume, that living in all these apartments and complexes and things, and um, your people that come in on the taxi. (9<sup>th</sup> July 2012)

What appears to lie below the surface of these complaints is that Somerset West CBD has changed from being frequented by white customers to being walked by mostly black and coloured customers, the sadness at the ‘death’ of the CBD seems to be a sort of racial nostalgia. The CBD is no longer for those who can afford to get to The Mall privately, it is a space for the marginalized elderly and those forced to use taxis. This shift in who inhabits the centre of town has been understood in as a shift in what inhabits it: a quality shopping experience is seen to have been replaced by a low quality experience. Though gone are the family run businesses, replaced by so-called Chinese shops, charity shops and anonymous low-end chain stores.

Walking in the Somerset West and Strand centres is an open air activity, in which one encounters the city, the wind, the street-dwellers and the traffic. Walking inside The Mall is

an altogether different activity. The distances are altogether shorter than those of the streets, the enclosed passages that substitute streets are clean, the temperature controlled and any loitering is designed to take place inside the shops themselves or in the coffee shops and restaurants that spill into the passages. The walker in The Mall will not be buffeted in the wind, nor will they be asked for money. And for those who imagine Strand and Somerset West to be 'dead' The Mall offers a better 'quality' shopping experience as a seemingly lively 'town' experience without any of the perceived drawbacks of the actual towns. The organization of the space around The Mall echoes that of the inside space: the flat tarmac of parking lot is patterned with a limited number of already designated walking routes that do not encourage desertion. Rather, the multiple entrances and exits each posted by a large department store attempt to eliminate the distance between one's parked car and purchasing destination.

Angeline said of the area surrounding The Flagship Shop: "a lot of street-people and a lot of thieves as well in the Somerset area; but it is a very busy area" (4<sup>th</sup> December 2012). Unlike those who consider the centre of Somerset West syphoned of life by The Mall, Angeline describes it as populated by what would appear to be undesirable types of people but is nonetheless an active, peopled space. A customer entered Tannie Hermien's Shop and announced to us all that the menswear shop around the corner had been victim to an armed robbery. My co-workers and customers meandering about the shop said this was by no means the first occurrence of its sort in the area; indeed, this particular menswear shop had been targeted four times. A discussion ensued of the safety of the area and the particular susceptibility caused by the negligence of the menswear shop's inattentive staff. A customer suggested that Tannie Hermien shut the metal security gate to bar the entrance of the shop; her response was "how will I know who the criminals are?" The security gate remained unlocked.

For the most part people were unwilling to characterize the area as a place of crime. Perhaps this is because the crime rates were not perceived to be above the norm or because to do so would be at odds with the nature of the deliberately welcoming atmosphere attempted to be made in the shops. Trading in an area that is talked about as having a high incidence of crime exposes the vulnerability of businesses and walkers in the town centre are — particularly compared to the enclosed secure trading and walking experience offered by the Mall. The presence of crime suggests to the staff at the charity shop is perceived as denoting the existence of ‘unsavoury’ criminal people in the area.

This speaks to earlier discussion of the quality of the patrons in the shop influencing the perceived quality of the shop itself. Thus here, once again, we see a fear that the centre of this town is in threat of being devalued in relation to safe retail spaces. And so a firm stance is taken by those who by choice or force of circumstance have made its streets part of their habitus; in the face of these sometimes inhospitable conditions they forge a sense of community and business, one that is perhaps based upon the old maxim that money is money.

Therefore, rather than having become a relic of its former self, Somerset West, and indeed Strand, has become a space for those with less financial means to shop, and for marginalized people such as the elderly, for the local workers, those using taxi’s and those on foot. Perhaps these are who Shelagh meant when she spoke of “clienteles” who shop in the centre and in doing so cause it to no longer be a “shopping centre” (20<sup>th</sup> July 2012). The type of person shopping in this space is considered different to the customer of The Mall, although no such dichotomy in fact exists.

### **The New Mall**

The position that The Mall holds in the mental landscape of those who do shop in Somerset West is evidenced by the habit among certain customers to refer to The Flagship Shop as ‘The Mall’ or some variation thereof. In calling The Flagship Shop ‘The Mall’ people

simultaneously position it as an accessible equivalent to The Mall and highlight its appearance as more expensive and exclusive than the other Helping Hands Charity shops.

In describing the appeal of the charity shop as being dependent on the elusive bargain, Joe was critical of The Flagship Shop explaining that the customers call it The Mall:

Yes because see the problem is now with that big shop was a flagship there, yes The Flagship Shop they call it: The Mall [...] because they feel a lot of things are overpriced and you know they go then next door and find it much cheaper. (7<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

In this context referring to The Flagship Shop as ‘The Mall’ is pejorative. In being ‘expensive’ it does not embody what is expected of a charity shop and, like The Mall itself, it becomes unattainable. When John and I were working on the shop floor of The Flagship Shop hanging and pricing paintings around the shop, he overheard a customer saying of the shop “this is an expensive mall” (17<sup>th</sup> August 2012).

Nonetheless, referring to The Flagship Shop as ‘The Mall’ also speaks to the imaginary of quality of its stock; to equate The Flagship Shop with The Mall is to equate it with prestige, value and desire. It speaks of the success of The Flagship Shop’s project of distancing itself from the problems that arise from being a charity shop; while Tannie Hermien’s Shop and The Strand Shop remain close to their status of charity shops. Speaking of her shopping habits in Side Street Mrs Van Rooyen said “and now I shop here [Tannie Hermien’s], but I go in occasionally because they [The Flagship Shop] have the better things, if I want a special present for somebody then I go next door” (3<sup>rd</sup> January 2013). It is telling that Mrs Van Rooyen, calls Tannie Hermien’s Shop “People’s Choice” because people choose to shop there. This name has very different implications to The Flagship Shop’s moniker. “People’s Choice” speaks of accessibility to all; it is the opposite of exclusive and thus it cannot be high quality or value. In the same way that Choice clothing makes the surplus clothing from chain stores available to the general

public at greatly reduced costs (although with the labels cut out so that the brands are not devalued by association).

## **2.6 Coda: Imagining quality people and things**

The establishment of The Mall and the dissolution of apartheid seem in the minds of white participants to have become somewhat blended. The Mall is credited with having radically altered the face of Somerset West; of sapping its lifeblood into its own corridors. But while the building of The Mall undoubtedly impacted upon the retail landscape, to describe it as having ‘killed’ the centre of Somerset West seems at odds with the many businesses that flourish along its streets and the feet that shop there. The apparent explosion of “blackness” and low-quality trade in the heart of Somerset West is seen to have curtailed white wandering and shopping in the streets. Instead of pointing towards the changing face of South African urban occupation and shopping the onus of this change is attributed directly to The Mall.

This fear of racial mixing is integrated with narratives of crime in the areas. Thus the proximity of the parking lot to the Helping Hands Charity shops becomes a pivotal point of entry and exit because it limits the need to walk around Strand and Somerset West. In light of this thinking The Mall becomes held as a better quality, safer alternative to shopping in the CBDs.

However, this is not limited to white residents only, foreigners, black people and coloured people all experience varying levels of anxiety and prejudices compelled as they are to share shopping spaces. Indeed Rhoda presents a very similar narrative when describing pre-segregation Strand and the type of space of homely business it presented. And the inhabitants of Strand express their anxiety over the influx of foreigners, and to an extent black people (these categories appear to be often overlapped by those who consider them

‘others’) into their area and how they think these interlopers bring criminal activity into their homely space.

Thus these nostalgias seem to indicate a longing for personalized trade, walking freely, for a prior condition of space that cannot be, whether this is envisioned as before The Mall was built, before Somerset West was desegregated or before Strand was segregated and open to outsiders or a multitude of other conditions. This nostalgia speaks to the type of spaces they wish to shop in, and in turn influences what becomes valuable.

What emerges in this space from out of this shadow of racial nostalgia is a narrative of what constitutes quality, and how it is more than simply read of the surface of objects. There is something about the way in which race and value work together here that speaks to a certain conception of racial ‘respectability’ that allows certain people access to spaces and others not and frames projections onto the value of these objects. These ideas structure the hierarchical relationship that orders every aspect of the three Helping Hands Charity shops, from the stock they carry, to their imagined consumer and location. Just as The Flagship Shop indicates its target market and quality through its exclusion of ordinary used clothing, The Strand Shop and Tannie Hermien’s Shop’s inclusion of it is indicative of the character of the shop as for the ‘everyman’.

How race and space and their perceived impact upon quality influences value determination of second-hand things in the Helping Hands Charity shops remains a salient theme throughout the following chapters. It informs the labours of producing value anew in both the front-space and back-space of the Helping Hands Charity shops; and the buying practises of customers frequenting the shops.

### *Chapter 3*

## ***Chaîne opératoire: Producing value anew in the ‘back-space’ of the Helping Hands Charity shops***

### **3.1 Introduction**

Therefore, first: the valid exchange-values of a given commodity express something equal; secondly, exchange-value, generally is the only mode of expression, the phenomenal form of something contained in it, yet distinguishable from it. (Marx, 1978: 304)

In this chapter I explore how the staff labour to realise value anew in donated objects; so that they may once more be transformed from cast out objects into saleable. This labour happens in the back-space of the Helping Hands Charity shops in which admittance is reserved for staff and volunteers only. Here staff must grapple with re-invigorating objects that bear very particular marks of use that will be sold in a particular retail space.

It is in the pawnshop, Stallybrass<sup>1</sup> (1998) suggests, that the double life of the commodity and its contradiction becomes particularly evident; as it is there that the object is transformed from a receptacle of personal attachment and memory – use-value – into an exchange-value by stripping it of any sentimental value and history. It is a transition that makes visible “the opposition between the particularity of a thing and the abstract exchange-value of a commodity” (Stallybrass, 1998:196). In this moment, he asks why certain things become valued more than others, and how the object’s identity as commodity is made visible and invisible. Therefore, the pawnshop offers a domain for the making of exchange-value in a manner that is somewhat different to the homogenised labour time that is the basis of exchange-value in a new time. The object that is made into a commodity once again in the charity shop, like that of the pawnshop, is the object of prior history — the origin of its production is unknown and the labour time extended in its production is incalculable. No

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<sup>1</sup>Stallybrass (1998:184-207) engages with the idea in Marx’s “Capital” of objects gaining exchange-value, and the trajectory towards a world in which everything is commodified.

amount of stripping away can make it new again, this is known by seller and buyer, and thus its value (which we know to be exchange-value) is open to speculation.

Through an investigation of these practices I show that staff, unsure about the past and use of the donated objects, attempt to judge value from the object's exterior, based on its use-value, independent of the amount of labour expended in its making. This judgement is in itself a work of imagination that ascribes a use and history to each object. These judgements are part of a two stage process; the first stage encompasses the labour of the back-space, primarily creating classifications of value. The second stage manifests in the front-space of the shops and is concerned with commodity aesthetics.

This chapter charts the manner in which the back-space of each shop becomes a point of production of object biography and use. Beginning at the moment of donation it examines the anxieties donors experience classifying personal history and things in divesting. Similarly staff grapple with the difficulties of divesting as they try to understand how signs of use are used in the classification of commodities and construct 'rubbish' as a category of 'used up' goods no amount of productive labour is thought to revive. This is apparent in the labour of unpacking and the effort of purging donated objects of any signs of use from thought to compromise use-value. Thereafter, the labour of judgement is continued as donations are sorted, selectively distributed between the shops and priced in each. All the while seeming evaluations of value are productions thereof.

### **3.2 Donations**

With the exception of the 'Give'<sup>2</sup> products, every item for sale in the Helping Hands Charity shops has been donated. In my considered opinion 90 percent<sup>3</sup> have been worn, cooked in,

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Give' products are a range of comestibles that are bought by Helping Hands Charity at a low cost from retailers, re-branded with the 'Give' stickers and sold at the counters of The Strand Shop and The Flagship Shop. Comparatively they constitute an incrementally small proportion of the stock for sale. 'Give' is a pseudonym.

<sup>3</sup> On a few occasions I witnessed donations of unused/ unsold merchandise from business owners.

eaten out of, read or treasured by someone else; and all have been cast out. The Flagship Shop is the official donation drop off point; its large back-space exists for the purpose of sorting and storing these donations. It is here that they are transformed into stock, and selectively distributed between the three Helping Hands Charity shops for re-sale.

Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe (2007:187) write that the circulation of second-hand goods is characterised by a physical divestment that “entails the separation of people from their things”. Divestment is more than the habitual knowledge of how to do away with surplus goods: it entails “relationships between artefacts, conduits and meanings” (Gregson *et al.*, 2007:188). With the exception of those few who stop to browse, donors permanently seem in a hurry. Some donors bring full plastic packets to drop and go; others haul goods in crates, or re-usable shopping bags and wait for their containers to be returned while the donations are hastily emptied. Out of age, infirmity or the sheer magnitude of their donations some donors require assistance carting loads of objects squeezed into their cars; Angeline and I would quickly oblige. Yet Angeline said she was often ignored by white donors who rushed to “talk to a white person” (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012). In contrast, donors were often concerned that I was overexerting myself carrying heavy donations; no such courtesy was extended to Angeline who often shouldered the heavier loads. Not all donations are brought to The Flagship Shop, sometimes the ground staff collect large donations from the donor’s house. All donations, in whatever state they arrive, are routinely dumped into the back-space of The Flagship Shop.

Much of the time donations are the by-product of ‘clearing out’ during which donors evaluate their possessions and eliminate those that are no longer of use-value to them; they have become superfluous to the lives of their owners.<sup>4</sup> The impetuses for such acts of clearing

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<sup>4</sup>Recounting Italo Calvino’s allegorical tale ‘Invisible cities’ Paterson (2006:230) describes a section of society so enflamed with desire for newness that every day they are forced to expel heaps of unwanted goods; “from an

out are many. The reasons I encountered most often were clearing out for clearing out's sake or to make room for further purchases, clearing out because of relocation to a smaller living space and clearing out a deceased loved one's belongings. An elderly white woman entered The Flagship Shop asking if we could help her carry a donation from her car to the shop. The woman mentioned that she had been to Gants Centre but we had moved and it was a pity because there she could have parked directly outside the shop. She explains that she lives in a small flat and things accumulate quickly so she tries to clear out once a year or so. The type of clearing out she demonstrates is that of habitual clearing out for its own sake; for the accumulation of objects must be followed by divestment, or her living space will be overtaken.

At times such divestment of unwanted objects is transmuted into a charitable act in the form of a donation, I was told. This is exemplified by an occurrence whilst I was working at The Strand Shop. An elderly white English speaking woman brought in a few cooking items, among which was a slow cooker that, she professed, was simply too large for her to use now that she is alone. In conversation with Elmarie it emerged that the woman's husband had benefited from the work of Helping Hands Charity; and that making this donation was her "small way of saying thank you" (Field notes, 9<sup>th</sup> November 2012).

These two examples ostensibly reflect Gregson *et al's* (2007:197) finding that divestment practices are the result of people "continually attempting to work out what to do with things drawing on specific meaning frameworks and their conjectures with the practicalities of certain objects' materialities as they do so."<sup>5</sup> The donations are presented as

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outsider's perspective it might seem that the true passion is not just novelty but also 'the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing themselves of a recurrent impurity'" (Calvino, 1997:114; as cited in Paterson, 2006: 230). Thus Paterson (2006:230) concludes that the prevalent state of excess in consumption, especially for better, newer goods is mirrored in by a wilfully turned blind eye to the eviction of the old.

<sup>5</sup>A member of one of the families they studied is described as so committed to the role of recycling in divestment that he brings "abandoned items back to his home from Glastonbury, does the divestment work on them... and then places them in a charity shop where he knows their value will be rekindled" (Gregson *et al.*,

consisting of objects no longer of value to the donor because of the changing circumstance of their lives (in the first instance downsizing and in the second, the loss of a partner). By specifically selecting Helping Hands Charity as the conduit through which to divest (because of their past interaction with the charity) they successfully rid themselves of unwanted goods in a way that resolves dealing with the materiality of the objects and at the same time gives them a sense of doing good in their community.

Donation acts as an alternative to wasteful throwing away and as such a necessary evacuation of objects is, for some, transformed into a charitable act. Writing about the circulation of second-hand clothing in Zambia from Western donation to much exchanged local merchandise, Hansen (2000: 99-119) suggests that the magnitude of clothing donated by Europe and North America is perhaps indicative of “the uneasy relationship of poverty to wealth”. Reviewing Hansen’s work, Hopkins (2005:93) asks, in getting rid of their unwanted clothing are Western customers able to get rid of their unwanted guilt? Thus, donation allows for a mitigation of guilt: donors are not wasteful, they do not throw things away, instead they give ‘useful’, ‘potentially valuable objects’ to ‘needy’ institutions to help ‘needy people’.

### **Valuable to them but not to us: Examining the value of ‘rubbish’ donations and who defines value**

If value derives from the action invested in something, relative to the actions that go into doing other things, then discard would seem the prototypical objectification of *negative value*, things that are not worth (or ‘waste’) our time and creative capacities . (Reno, 2009:30)

Clearing out necessitates getting rid of rubbish. If we are to believe Gregson *et al.* (2007: 188) things “have physical lives; they age, decay and deteriorate, can be used-up, break down

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2007:194). The subject in question actively seeks out paths of divestment that will lead to the production of value anew in the objects, preventing them from becoming “rubbish” (Gregson *et al.*, 2007: 193-4). In so doing they propose he demonstrates that “he cares about attenuating the social lives of things” (Gregson *et al.*, 2007:194).

or fail to work appropriately” and that what they define as “consumption” is an ever-changing embodied practice entrenched in social life it follows that,

Treasured objects [...] can only endure as condensed symbols of social history because of the reverence and care that have gone into preserving them; while things left to decay, like industrial ruins or abandoned homes, gradually lose the material traces of their former significance as they foster new arrangements of life and non-life (Reno, 2009:30).

Things that have lost their significance and been allowed to become ‘rubbish’ or ‘waste’ have been released from the sentimental and physical attachment that breathed value into them and must be divested.

Many a time, donors appeared to view Helping Hands Charity shops as an alternative to throwing something away. They offloaded broken electrical appliances, bits of plastic, a single earring, a jacket with a broken zipper or out dated garden implements; things that are “of no immediate use” (Reno, 2009:29); a fact that has not gone unnoticed by customers.

Angeline admitted The Flagship Shop sometimes receives ‘dirty’, ‘filthy’ donations that cannot be used or sold and will be disposed of; but she stressed the importance of politely accepting even un-saleable donations, because donors believe what they are giving has value. “Whatever is rubbish to you, to other people it’s something that is valuable” (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012) she said. What she meant by value she did not elucidate, yet I infer she makes a distinction between use-value or sentimental-value imagined by the donor and an actual use-value that would make the objects appealing to other people.

Tannie Emma proposes that the prevalence of ‘rubbish’ being donated is due to a lack of understanding of what a charity shop is supposed to be and how it functions, a misunderstanding exclusive to ‘locals’ who she said will

Just empty their garage of all their bits and pieces; to them it’s valuable you know ‘this can still be used’; but not having a ‘junk shop’ as such you can’t keep everything. So it’s not always of value to us to sell it and we can’t sell broken electrical appliances, although that is of a value to somebody else because they can use the parts. It’s not feasible that we can sell everything in the shop. So

we've had to sort of target what merchandise we're going to sell. So, that's when we sort, we have a look and see, what is it that we can really sell in the shop and send it out to the shop. Things that we can't then get passed on or taken through to ah like the scrap yard where we can get money for it. So we still getting money, but like the clothes and that we pass on that we donate to like other charities that are able to use it. (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

Like Angeline she distinguishes between objects being of use-value to the donors, versus objects being of exchange-value to the shop for re-sale. Some of these 'rubbish' donations are in line with Gregson, Crang, Ahamed, Akhter and Ferdous' (2010:848) description of things of "rubbish value", that are broken apart and whose parts and materials undergo "re-valuation". To accept 'rubbish' objects would undermine The Flagship Shop's project of trading up as it would lower it to the level of the "junk shop", which it has sought to distance itself from.

A middle-aged white woman made a small donation to Tannie Hermien's Shop and upon buying some odds and ends she exclaimed "I know it's rubbish, we bring our rubbish here and take more rubbish back" (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). She shows the use of Helping Hands Charity shops as a way to dispose of things she no longer has use for and defines as 'rubbish' and finds sufficient value in other people's cast off 'rubbish' to purchase it.

The notion of 'rubbish' worthy only of being disposed of as conventional waste, or being of 'rubbish value', is contrasted with customers' perceptions of 'rubbish' as appealing. Speaking of her predilection for buying, Fiona explains how after every volunteer shift she would come home with something: "I pick up a lot of rubbishy stuff, 'cause stuff that most people would just chuck out, I buy it 'cause I like it" (9<sup>th</sup> July 2012). Clearly, what Fiona takes as 'rubbish' worth salvaging has not been defined as 'rubbish' by the staff or it would not have survived the sorting process. Furthermore, she concedes that, while to others her purchases would be deemed worthless, they present an aesthetic value to her. Candling and Guin (2009:13), editors of *The Object Reader*, dedicate a section of its theorizing to what they term "leftovers": objects that are no longer functional and have "outlived use" or bear

the status ‘discarded’. They argue that these leftovers are not to be dismissed, as they are still of value to collectors or able to be socially valued.

### **Difficulties of divesting**

I succeed the discussion of clearing out, with what I describe as ‘holding on’: when the donor remains invested in the life of that which they donate. This is important because it speaks to the commodity fetish and the salience of exchange-value as ultimately the only expression of value (Marx, 1978:304). These donations are of no use-value to the donors, but have some other sort of value that makes donating them difficult. Although this at first appears as some form of sentimental attachment, it is the product of exchange-value, whereby the commodity as “social hieroglyphic” (Marx, 1978:322) stands in for relationships between people. Here the fantastical characteristics of the commodity are seen to be of its own making, rather than the product of the human labour that shaped it.

Clearing out requires relinquishing ownership and sending personal items into the unknown, to be bought and used by the unknowable. Often I listened as donors ardently described the wonders inside the brown cardboard boxes, dustbin bags and plastic shopping packets they brought with them. These descriptions would culminate in the hope that the donated goods would fetch a “good price” – implying that they would be priced appropriately and that their value would not go unnoticed. During a workshop for volunteers we were told in the past there had been complaints from donors who felt that their donations were under-priced and thus not sufficiently valued.

On several occasions donors professed their attachment to that which they were on the verge of donating; carefully detailing the genesis of the personal belonging. They appeared to feel the parting painful, but necessary; balancing precariously on the brink of indecision. This behaviour is anticipated within the shop, and signage warns customers to be sure of their

donations as they cannot be reclaimed. A middle-aged white woman came into The Flagship Shop one afternoon whilst I was working in the front-space. While clearing through her recently deceased mother's belongings, the donor had discovered many of the toys she loved as a child which her mother had saved and stored in the interim years. She was leaving these toys "with a tear in my eye", insistent that they be "looked after". While she valued the toys as embodying of her mother's role as the protector and retainer of her childhood, they were no longer useful enough to warrant keeping. This made her donation uneasy and she sought to assuage her mixed feelings by obtaining assurance from me that the toys would be sold to someone who would care for them as she had.

This 'holding on' and emotional intensity was especially present when family would donate the belongings of a deceased loved one, as Jeannine put it: "The donors that come in to drop stuff, generally or not might have lost somebody, so there's a lot of sensitivity and emotion that might be required" (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012). A white woman in her thirties brought in a donation and as I facilitated the transaction she tearfully told me her mother and father had both passed away and now that their house had been sold she was clearing through thirty years' worth of belongings. In volunteering this information unprompted the woman appeared to want staff to know the biography of the donation and thus its value.<sup>6</sup>

Grief is not the only obstacle to be overcome in divesting through donation; issues of ownership and contagion of identity, or what I frame as a certain disembodiment, also materialises. Upon hearing of my volunteering at Helping Hands Charity, an elderly white female acquaintance of mine told me that when her husband passed away she donated all his clothes to Helping Hands Charity in Johannesburg, 'except the underwear', which it seems she anonymously dropped somewhere. I found it intriguing that she had been eager to donate

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<sup>6</sup>For her the process of sorting and donating was an emotional one. Although sadness and difficulty letting go is not always the case: Jeannine told me that daughters donating their deceased mother's clothing had found the process to be one of joyful remembrance.

this separation between giving away clothes and underwear, the former openly and the latter covertly.

I remained intrigued by this desire for anonymity when it came to giving away the more intimate vestiges of the self. I received some insight into the matter when I later observed someone buy a dress that I myself had donated to The Flagship Shop. When I saw it hanging amongst the other dresses a few weeks later in Strand I found myself strangely affected. I wanted to claim it as my own; feeling a sense of disembodied indignity seeing it hanging for sale, where once it hung in my closet. I watched as other women stretched the elastic smocking; discussing its merits. It was as though they were commenting on me personally. I was ashamed of the less than pristine condition it was in when I donated it, and that I had taken no special care to wash or mend it. I was working behind the counter when a woman decided to buy it. I rung up her purchase, folded the pink dress, slipped it inside a plastic shopping bag and never mentioned that it was mine.

Writing of the movements of meaning in “consumption”, McCracken (1986: 80) notes that divestment rituals are not only the stuff of those who are consuming commodities (mostly those that have been owned before) but are also practised by those divesting themselves of goods;

The consumer will attempt to erase the meaning that has been invested in the good by association. In moments of candour, individuals suggest that they feel "a little strange about someone else wearing my old coat." In moments of still greater candour, they will confess that they fear the dispossession of personal meaning.

Reflecting now upon this experience, I see that not unlike other donors, I viewed the Helping Hands Charity shops as a way to divest myself of ill-fated purchases, buoyed by the assumption that someone who I would never know, someone ‘needy’ and anonymous would be their next owner. And thus despite my accrued knowledge of the inner workings of the shops I fell prey to the image of the shops as a chute down which to shove unwanted goods of

potential value. In short, it is an impersonal divestment, which limits the need for contact between the giver and the buyer. Helping Hands Charity becomes an intermediary between these two (now faceless) figures impersonalising the process through the cleansing ritual of capitalism. This invisibility is twofold, just as the buyers are unknown to the donors; the donors themselves are unknown to the customers except through the donations they leave behind.

### **3.3 Labour in the back-space of the shops: Producing value anew and negotiating retail identity**

In the back-space of the three Helping Hands Charity shops the labour of producing value anew in pre-owned objects begins.

Now we must pass under the staff-only sign and pass through the flimsy curtain that flutteringly allows customers a tantalising glimpse of the Aladdin's Cave beyond it and enter the back-space of The Flagship Shop.<sup>7</sup> Here the diligent process of unpacking, sorting, divesting and packing away carefully coaxes value to the surface of donated objects once more. Through this labour, The Flagship Shop's staff are able to further the project of trading up as well as maintain the status of the other two shops as more 'typical' charity shops. Similarly, in undertaking a second-sorting of the stock they receive from The Flagship Shop, rejecting and accepting certain objects, Tannie Hermien's Shop and The Strand Shop assert their own conceptions of what 'type' of charity shop they are, and who their imagined customer is. In this way, despite their reliance upon an unreliable source of stock, each of the shops mimics the stock buying practices of conventional retailers.

The back-space of The Flagship Shop almost mirrors the front-space in size; the greater part dedicated to sorting and storage. Three doors lead off this central sorting and storage area. One doorway leads to the many-cubicked bathroom where heavy plastic trunks

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<sup>7</sup> Officially only staff and volunteers, i.e. those working at The Flagship Shop are permitted to enter this space; although this is not always adhered to.

filled with out of season stock are stacked on top of one another like containers in a shipyard. A second doorway connects the sorting area to ‘the office’ – a small room with a glass window into the retail space (covered in iridescent cellophane to shield it from those looking back), a plywood desk, a computer, a padlocked cupboard and a radio. A third doorway culminates in a narrow passageway to the back door which opens onto the cement alley that runs behind the building connecting the businesses in Side Street. Off this passageway is a miniscule ‘kitchen’, and a stairwell, upon which black-bags of garments going to the jumble sale are stacked.

Every bit of wall space in the central sorting room is dedicated to storing categories of stock. Fixed to one wall are clothing racks (identical to those of The Strand Shop and Tannie Hermien’s) upon which to hang suits, shirts, skirts and dresses; another wall is lined with flat shelves for folded clothes: jerseys, trousers, shorts, sportswear and the like; a shelf against the wall dividing the front-space from the back-space is laden with glasses, ornaments, tins, bottles and a second bric-a-brac shelf is dedicated to lower quality stock. To the one side of the curtained entrance to the back-space, between the parallel rails of vintage clothing and the hanging ordinary clothing, is the area designated to storing incoming donations; although in times of plenty these donations spill out over the brown carpet across the back-space floor.

Donations are unpredictable: in their magnitude, contents and timing. It is a situation that Tannie Emma describes as being always either feast or famine:

Okay, [feast is] when you suddenly get a lot of stuff and you’re overwhelmed with stuff. Not; not wanting to be too discriminatory as far as, um, what it is, just because you want space [...] and when you have the famine and you sit there and you’re quite bored and that’s quite difficult as well. You know being concerned about ‘is there stuff coming in? When are we going to get stuff?’ And then the next thing you’re totally flooded (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012).

Thus the volume of donations determines the pace and manner of work in the back-space of the shops. Tannie Emma shows how in tune with the fluctuations of donations the speed of

labour fluctuates: in times of ‘feast’ work is performed quickly to free up space, and in times of ‘famine’ boredom descends, work stagnates and the space is empty. Furthermore, she suggests such a state of ‘famine’ manifests a level of anxiety and helplessness, as staff are without agency in the procurement of stock. When the workers’ judgments are decisive is once the donations have arrived, although as previously noted the level of donations might influence the level of attention the workers are able to give to the labour of transforming donations into stock and producing value anew. Therefore, just as the arrival of donations is unpredictable, so too are the outlay of new stock on the shop floor.

Unpacking and sorting<sup>8</sup> can be monotonous work. In times of ‘famine’, Angeline would sit on the high stool and lean her elbows on the sorting table; I would find a space on the carpet to sit, leaning against bags of clothes to be sent next door and we would talk, often joined by the manager and a volunteer or two. Conversation often began around the state of the shop and moved to the state of South Africa at large. When the number of donations threatened to overwhelm us, a different monotony descended: a seemingly endless rotation of opening, folding and hanging up. When the back-space is finally clear and neat and donations have been packed away and sent out, the cycle of labour begins again.

What follows is a detailed account of the particular labour of the back-space of the Helping Hands Charity shops, focusing on The Flagship Shop. Beginning with the unpacking of donations, it charts the course of these activities in the order in which they most often occur in the life of each object. Whilst I have elected to separate these tasks into individual activities, in actual fact they are not so distinct and can be performed concurrently. The aim of this labour is to shift the status of the object from personal belonging to commodity;

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<sup>8</sup>The manager, assistant manager and volunteers perform different parts of the task of ‘making’ The Flagship Shop, although these roles are by no means mutually exclusive and have the tendency to bleed into one another. I have outlined them as such: the everyday front-space activity of selling is performed by volunteers, whilst Tannie Emma focuses on pricing and researching ‘valuable’ items and bringing them to the front and Angeline (sometimes assisted by a volunteer) begins the Sisyphean task of diminishing the mountain of donations.

however the object's history as used, and its divorce from its original production, lends itself to the stuff of precarious commodity.

### **Unpacking and purging**

Goods are not simply put on the shelves as is, if possible they are improved  
(Field notes, 14th May 2012).

The labour of the back-space begins with unpacking donations. This section examines this unpacking and the purging of signs of use that follow it. Here purging acts as a form of divestment, enacted from the vantage of the staff upon the donations.

I was party to a great deal of unpacking during my fieldwork, but for the purpose of illustration I draw specifically upon my field notes of the morning of 10<sup>th</sup> August 2012 because as the account they offered bears the typical characteristics of the labour of unpacking. Nonetheless, the varied nature of donations makes for a varied experience of unpacking, and so the objects presented here are by no means representative of all donations.

On the morning of that Friday,

Cara worked the front and I moved between assisting her in the front of the shop and helping Angeline unpack in the back of the shop. We unpacked about six black bags that had been donated [...] The bags were filled with torn T-shirts, multiple... shirts identical in all but colour, a selection of large swimming trunks - one still had the tags on, a bag entirely filled with socks, a tuxedo with a memorial programme from a woman's funeral still tucked into the pocket, many ties — some silk — and a box of miscellaneous items, including a few old fashioned vogue sewing patterns already cut. The clothes were all 3XL or 6XL, and many were outworn and fit only for the jumble sale. I felt a heightened level of sensitivity and, in honesty, disgust upon handling the large pairs of Jockey underwear, they were too visceral, too much a reminder of the intimacies of this large man's life that Angeline and I had unpacked in a matter of half an hour. I was surprised at my own reaction as I have handled numerous pairs of second-hand underwear from lacy black widows to shiny boxers.

In the back of the shop there was a cardboard shoe box - I'm not sure where it was from - filled with an array of small valuable and valueless treasures. A real pearl tie pin, random buttons, beads in plastic pill bottles, tiny wrist watches too small for modern day arms, once trendy travelling clocks, a broken pair of glasses, a 70<sup>th</sup> birthday pin, a preserved starfish, two compacts: one broken, one whole, a '*prefek*' [Prefect] pin, broken chain necklaces and a piece of cotton wool. All of this was intertwined and tangled, speckled with dust and dirt and age.

Although much of its contents were broken and without value there was something very exciting about unpacking it, something intimate and almost like searching for treasure [...]

We unpacked several pairs of good quality men's shoes, Pierre Cardin and Dakotas amongst them, which were deemed in good enough condition to be saleable in The Flagship Shop. The rest were thrown into the large orange dustbin that serves to house shoes that have passed the 'bend test'. These shoes will supply the Strand and Tannie Hermien's with footwear. (10 August 2012)

The description begins with the unpacking on one large man's life, a mixture of 'valuable' items such as the tuxedo, and 'valueless' items such as the worn out T-shirts. These various objects reflect the mundane leftovers from everyday life, made no longer useful in death. Black plastic bags are typically the vessels in which refuse is transported to the dump and are symbolic of the disposability of the objects to the donor.<sup>9</sup>

Remnants of the man's personal life remain on the surface of these goods, the funeral leaflet and the imprint of his body upon the torn T-shirts. Sometimes these visceral reminders of the body are unpleasant; Angeline and I opened packages from which the fetid smell of damp and mould erupted. Such objects deemed irreversibly tainted by ownership are considered unsalvageable and no amount of purging will renew them. They are quickly thrown into the dustbins in the alleyway. Thus, unpacking is the most physical aspect of the labour, in many senses. By the time sorting proper occurs the truly repugnant goods have been divested. It is recognised that the public will not receive such objects as commodities because the sins of their prior use are too apparent and the bodily influence of the object's previous owners is contestably a negative one.<sup>10</sup>

While unpacking the shoe box, I allowed myself to wonder about the woman (I assumed) who had kept these small, 'rubbish' goods, collecting them in the shoe box instead

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<sup>9</sup>After emptying, these black bags will not be returned to the donors; they will be shoved into a smaller plastic packet and stored in the back-space of The Flagship Shop. Later they will be filled by poor quality goods bound for the jumble sale.

<sup>10</sup>Dead people's things in particular are contagious: stray hairs tangled in combs, wash resistant make-up smudges and sweat stains on garments all attest to the close relationship these objects had with the body of the deceased. It is this closeness, this bodily intimacy that deters the squeamish from purchasing clothes from Helping Hands Charity.

of throwing them out. Where had they been bought? Were they of any value? To me the itch of possibility seeps out of certain donations, chiefly those marred by dust and time. I was not alone in my anticipation, upon coming across a large cardboard box sealed with slick brown tape amongst the pile of donations, John, who usually is committed to working behind the counter asked if he could be the one to open it and examine the contents. Such a feeling is not universal, Angeline did not express it; rather those who seek it out find it.

When grouped together in a donation, objects such as the contents of the shoebox seemed to paint a clear picture of their former owner. This unpacking is the place of greater perceived intimacy than the shop floor because when priced and set among a selection of other donated goods the donation becomes far removed from its previous owner. This is important to understanding how the objects are reshaped so that they may be resold; it is also critical to note that no matter how far removed from their first owner, the objects are forever pre-used in the eyes of the customer and this in part prevents them from being more than precarious commodities.

The shoes that were unpacked present donations close enough to newness that they need little back room labour; upon unpacking they are easily and quickly sorted. This exemplifies the symbiosis of unpacking and sorting, whilst I have separated out here, they regularly occur simultaneously: as an item is unpacked it is sorted. Furthermore, this description hints at the key points staff use to determine value when deciding what will be sent where: quality, condition and brand. Each donation contains goods that will be sent to The Flagship Shop, the smaller shops, the jumble sale, as well as that which will be classified as ‘rubbish’ and discarded.

In discussing waste as a product of newness rather than exclusively of ‘used up’ commodities, Reno suggests: “most things must be separated from a disposable husk at some point in their ‘careers’ as social objects for their values to be inscribed and realized”

(2009:30). Shadowing this idea (and perhaps stretching it), I propose that unpacking entails the peeling away of a different sort of ‘husk’: that of the containers in which they arrived and coming into physical contact with the objects within. Like first-hand goods the majority of these outer packagings are disposable (in this case the black dustbin bags and old shoe box) and removing them signifies the beginning of the labour of producing value anew intended to distance the objects from their origin. This is aimed at opening them once again to value realisation and inscription by new customers; that people might be able to once again identify themselves within exchange-value.

This purging is continued with the removal of signs of use, thereby scrubbing away the marks of the previous owner. As donations are unpacked and sorted in the back-space of the shop, like Marx’s coat (Stallybrass, 1998), their past (unless it is worthy of emphasis) is attempted to be wiped away so as to bring forth their exchange-value once more. In understanding this commitment to removing signs of prior ownership that might hinder exchange, I turn to the body of theory that proposes a type of divestment that occurs after the second-hand item has been purchased. It is a divestment of the previous owner (whether physically or ephemerally) from the object. Lupton (1998:142-9) writes that it is this corporeal memory of second-hand clothing that deters certain customers from buying such clothing, and their role in performing and producing identity makes them charged with emotion and biography and thus “singularized”. This personal meaning, Lupton (1998: 144) suggests, reduces their value as commodity lessening their ability to attract other customers. Erasing the marks of use from the donated objects prior to sale, makes for a more appealing, less contagious second-hand commodity. It tries to endow the object with an appearance closer to newness, and emphasises exchange-value. In some instances it precludes any divestment on the part of the customer, opening the commodity up so that the new owner may immediately identify with its exchange-value.

This purging takes extra time and effort, therefore it is a labour mostly reserved for objects that will be sent to The Flagship Shop. Therefore purging does not always precede sorting; sometimes it occurs after the decision has been made as to where the object will be sent to be sold. During the hours I spent in the back-space of The Flagship Shop, I spent a great deal of time polishing silverware,

Among the silver I polished was a very tarnished twelve piece set of silver knives and forks that became very shiny with a bit of Brasso, two silver cups, a set of interesting tea spoons and a silver jug [...] It is such a symbolic act of re-enlivening an object that has been relegated to a pile of unused goods deemed no longer worth of keeping, something so invaluable that it is to be donated. But through the magic workings of the back room it is truly given its second debut and once again becomes something to be admired, valued and priced accordingly. (Field notes, 20th of April 2012)

Vases, cups and other items of glassware and crockery that were dusty, dirty or stained would be washed in soapy water in the kitchenette. A small buzzing electrical contraption (also a donation) was used to remove the bobbles and pulls on jerseys and other woolly items such as scarves. On a few occasions, Angeline and I sewed closed the smaller holes in real wool jerseys. Tannie Emma would take some of the 'better' garments that were soiled home to wash,<sup>11</sup> carefully trampling them with her feet in a bucket until even the most stubborn stains gave in. Once unpacking and purging are complete, the object is ready to undergo an evaluation through sorting.

### **3.4 Sorting: Judging space, value and authenticity**

Sorting determines what gets sold where: it is a judgement made by staff about the perceived value of the object and about the value producing ability of the different shops. It is thought that value is contained within the object and can be read from its surface. Thus producing value anew entails an attempt to return the objects surface to its original state so that its value may be apparent to customers. Against this perception I propose that the space of sale

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<sup>11</sup>A while after I ended my fieldwork I returned to The Flagship Shop to visit the staff and volunteers. I was gleefully informed that one of the changes in the shop since my departure had been the acquisition of a washing machine.

influences the value of the object because it is a precarious commodity, and its value is thus unstable.

In the centre of the back-space of The Flagship Shop is a large wooden trestle table on which donations are unpacked and appraised before being packed away to await redistribution. Categorisation of goods occurs on two levels: by the type of objects they are, for example, as clothing or bric-a-brac and by the retail environment in which they will be sold. Staff premise the recognition of value on the assumption that exchange-value is the relative product of use-value, determined by the physical characteristics of the object itself.

When deciding which object is to be sold where, the staff sorting donations are required to judge the value of the object by reading its surface. In order to examine the criteria used I draw upon the subsequent extract detailing The Flagship Shop's sorting process, in the words of Tannie Emma:

“So um the goods come in and um be it clothes or bric ‘n brac, we go through... and check to see if it's not broken and so, if it is broken or if it's stained it gets put to the one side. The stuff that is of a good quality gets sorted again as to what, what of that, can be sold in the um [The Flagship Shop]. And then the rest gets packed away and as the stores order, so we send it out. And the similar thing with the bric and brac and that, so we go through it and we have a look and if there are electrical items and that we have that tested before we put it out, so that we know it's at least in working order.”

KW “And you said you keep the things that are sort of, of quality for [The Flagship Shop]. What sort of parameters do you use?”

“Some of the top names, in clothing, and um , if we get like newish shoes- when I say ‘newish’ sometimes it may be brand-new, but the others that have perhaps been worn once or twice, and you can see the sole is still new. Ah we'll sell those, those are the top brand ones and we know that we can get probably double to more than what the shops can. Because of the type of customer that comes in; you see although there are some of the customers that we share between the two other shops, a lot of them still have a bit of a snobbish value. And that's why they are prepared to pay that little bit extra, because we don't have such a big range and then they can find it easily. And also because it doesn't to them seem like they're buying in a second-hand shop.”

KW “[...] what goes to the other shops is?

“It's still quality stuff. You know, like your Woolworths and your Truworths and that. It's still quality stuff and that gets sent to the shops as requested. And you

can't always meet their requests because it depends on what we've got in." (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

Immediately sorting is a means of quality control, rooting out objects that will reflect negatively upon the shops or that have been used-up. Thus as Angeline explains, only things that people can use are sold, so anything broken or torn is not kept (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012). Shoes held sole upwards are bent toe to heel in a grotesque arabesque, to see if their rubber soles crack and split. Electrical goods are dutifully plugged into wall sockets to test their working order. It was felt that selling broken goods; be it shoes or appliances, would tarnish Helping Hands Charity's reputation as purveyors of quality goods.

Volunteer Shelagh sorts and prices the books donated to The Flagship Shop; she throws half of them away, because "generally old books are old tatty and smelly cause they come out of someone's attic or somebody's cellar where they've been stored until mom died or great aunt died and they dump them at Helping Hands Charity" (20<sup>th</sup> July 2012). For Shelagh, the importance of sorting and examining the quality of objects is born of donors' careless donations of 'rubbish', and there is the possibility that a valuable 'old book' lies in the pile of ordinary books. The books that must be thrown away are too much the product of their former home and owner, and too distant from newness for value to be produced in them anew. The books that are thrown away are sent for pulping, so that Helping Hands Charity can claim the weight price of their paper, they are seen as having 'rubbish value', worth only dismembered as they continue downwards on the back end of the value chain.

Newness and branding are upheld as criteria of value during sorting. Tannie Emma tellingly singles them out as markers of quality and of the parameters used to determine what is appropriate for sale in The Flagship Shop. Indeed, Angeline described the difference between the two smaller shops' and The Flagship Shop's products: "the other two shops only do sell ordinary clothes and more ordinary bric-a-brac, us we sell like the brand names from

clothes to the bric-a-brac” (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012). Interesting much of what is sold in The Flagship Shop is in fact not branded, or new, it is simply the ‘better’ bric-a-brac.<sup>12</sup>

Not all brands are considered equal markers of value. There are ‘top names’ and then there are brands such as Woolworths and Truworths which in the two smaller, less upmarket shops are regarded special. This can be understood in terms of the accessibility of brands such as Truworths and Woolworths; for upper middle class patrons these shops are not luxury goods, their branding is of everyday quality. However, for lower middle class and working class patrons Truworths and Woolworths are less attainable, being comparatively more expensive than other chain shops selling similar combinations of lifestyle goods.

Sorting out entails an authentication processes aimed to ascertain which objects are ‘properly’ valuable. An array of tests of varying success and validity are enacted to determine authenticity and value of objects. Some are embodied: ‘pearls’ are lightly brushed against teeth to test their authenticity, the sound of glass objects when tapped with a fingernail is listened to carefully to ascertain whether they are crystal or not. Other authenticity tests are knowledge based: in this process certain objects are set aside in the office. These are objects that are believed to be of out of the ordinary value, they are the precious metals, the branded, the collectable – a white Wedgwood vase, a silver flute, and small china figurines. Thus, whilst impersonal newness, if often criteria of value for ‘ordinary’ objects, for objects offering up a pedigree history that values rather than devalues them, their past is an asset. What is critical here is that the history of the object must be widely known enough to be accessed; it is not enough that a vase was owned by someone famous if no one knows about it. This is why branding is an especially simple way of determining history. Most brands have descriptions of the histories of the objects they have produced, and often have a following of

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<sup>12</sup>The Flagship Shop is resolute in its rejection of ordinary used clothing and yet it accepts the ordinary bric-a-brac such as plain glass tumblers and patterned mugs. It is worthwhile here to recall the tale of the candlestick that, being too good for the shops and not good enough for auction initiated the creation of The Flagship Shop.

collectors committed to mythologising the trajectories of these objects. In such a manner an object with a knowable history, be it made by a known brand or from a distinct era is differentiated from objects that are simply old.

In describing sorting as a pragmatic process devoid of sentimentality, Tannie Emma neglects the role personal taste plays in examining value. I never quite got the knack of sorting, of how much stretch was too much, how much smell was permissible, what was suitable for the jumble sale and what was appropriate for the shops and what was fit for nothing except the rubbish bin. Inevitably, I would have to ask Angeline where the garment I had unpacked should go. Angeline sorted with the steady skill of one whose Hand and eyes are accustomed to their work, unfolding, smelling, quickly and decisively appraising and then categorising. It seems that the criteria for determining what goes to which shop is not as clear cut as one might assume at first glance. It is influenced by personal taste and perception, thus in attempting to objectively define the boundaries to follow when sorting, I failed.

By way of sorting and subsequent categorisation, individuated donations are transmuted into a body of stock. I draw once again upon Reno's (2009:38) investigation of rubbish, in understanding this process:

Whereas the individuation of bits of rubbish through scavenging explores their individual possibilities, assigning different objects to general categories [...] reduces heterogeneity and individuality: 'divesting ... objective contents of any exemplary or unique character' (O'Brien, 2007: 121).

Just as it is the objective of the managers and owners of the rubbish dump to categorise the plethora of 'rubbish' items they encounter, once the outward characteristics of each unpacked object has been examined and evaluated, they are consigned to one of a number of categories in an attempt to reinvigorate the used objects as commodity once more. It is the work of the customer, like the scavenger, to re-explore the individual possibilities of each object that

reaches the front of the shop. Their sensuous character is replaced by emphasis upon their exchange-value.

The avenues in which the goods can be sold are defined by the staff in terms of the quality or value of stock they are mandated and able to sell. Some objects are deemed too valuable to be sold in the shops; the price at which they would sell it is said would not reflect their value because the client of the Helping Hands Charity shops is not the type of person who can or wants to afford these objects. Thus it is felt that the true value of the object will not be recognised and appreciated and thus it cannot be priced high enough to reflect its value. Goods deemed truly valuable are sold through auction or occasionally private sale. This seems to point to the idea that objects have an intrinsic value that must be uncovered, yet here I propose that the value of precarious commodities is tenuous and in order for it to be produced anew the space of its production is critical.

Set aside in the office these ‘valuable’ objects wait in limbo: they are researched on the internet, they are asked about at antique shops, others advise; some remained in the office for the entirety of my tenure in The Flagship Shop.

Many times I heard that people will only pay up to a certain amount because it is a charity shop and because of this some of the perceived valuable objects were sold on auctions.<sup>13</sup> Tannie Emma supposed they would fetch a higher price on auction because the “market” (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012) it attracts is different to that of the charity shop. Tannie Emma further alluded to the role that space plays in producing value anew in the object; people are prepared to pay more for an object in The Flagship Shop than they would in one of the two smaller shops because of the shopping experience The Flagship Shop offers. In doing

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<sup>13</sup>At a reputable auction, with its authoritative auctioneer and the breathless bidders, the precarious commodity’s value is heightened and its price is pushed up by its ability to entice. Yet in The Flagship Shop the aura of the object is diminished rather than heightened, even if it is a recognisable brand the space is bound with the expectations and implications of the charity shop, and neither is conducive to producing high value or price.

so she inadvertently highlights the mutability of the value of the precarious commodity, dependent as it is upon buyers' "snobbish value" for its realisation. Although simultaneously she appears to view value as pre-determined and inherent when suggesting that the 'true' value of the object would not be recognised in a less upmarket space, thus to send such objects to Strand or next door would be to do the objects a disservice.

The rest of the objects, once sorted, are sent to the three Helping Hands Charity shops or the jumble sale. The Flagship Shop is distinguished as the most upmarket of the three Helping Hands Charity shops, thus, it receives the 'better' bric-a-brac, branded goods, almost new goods and 'vintage' clothes. Tannie Hermien's Shop and The Strand Shop are the avenues through which to sell 'ordinary' bric-a-brac, and a great majority of the clothes. Objects deemed of insufficient quality to be sold in the smaller shops but too good to be thrown away are packed into black plastic bags for the jumble sale,<sup>14</sup> run by the volunteer manager. Things of 'rubbish value' find themselves relegated to pulp or price in weight. 'Rubbish' things deemed without value are thrown away.

Once goods have been sorted, clothes destined for The Flagship Shop's front-space are hung on rails devoted to 'vintage', other clothes bent for Tannie Hermien's and The Strand Shop are divided by type and hung up or folded away. Bric-a-brac is placed on the shelves, valuable goods in the office, ordinary shoes in the orange bin, and books on the book shelf or packed into crates. In the manner of many conventional retailers, the Helping Hands

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<sup>14</sup>The jumble sale is held once a month on a Saturday in the nearby town. Trestle tables are set up and the contents of the black bags are strewn on top of them. Everything is priced at one Rand, so customers (who I am told come from far and wide) take a black bag and fill it up. When they reach the one end of the tables where the makeshift till is, the Helping Hands Charity worker simply counts out all the customer's items and asks for the equivalent number in money.

Charity shops are committed to seasonal rotation of stock, based around autumn/winter and spring/summer<sup>15</sup>.

### **Distribution and the second-sorting in Tannie Hermien's and The Strand Shop**

Moving from the back-space of The Flagship Shop into the back-space of Tannie Hermien's and The Strand Shop is where a second-sorting<sup>16</sup> takes place. Objects destined for these two shops are stored at The Flagship Shop until the smaller shops request stock. Then Angeline extricates items from the shelves of The Flagship Shop that comply with what is requested as closely as possible, adding some extras. If the goods are going next door, Tannie Mari or Angeline ask one of the local street men to help carry the crates of stock. If the request has been made by The Strand Shop then one of the grounds team will use the *bakkie*. When the stock arrives at Tannie Hermien's or The Strand Shop they perform a second-sorting. This is necessary as Jeannine explains stock from The Flagship Shop is "pre-sorted" in terms of quality but not in terms of price (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012).

In The Strand Shop Jeannine steams creased clothes and hangs like goods on rails in the back-space of her shop, so that they are almost sorted according to price. She then 'grades' the stock focussing on the outward appearance of the stock and the degree to which it bears the marks of its life journey, deciding what is appropriate for re-sale,

Purely in terms of what condition it is in. I'm talking about stains or breakages; I mean obviously something like a missing button is not the same as a hole or a huge big stain that's not going to come out. It's just gotta be as attractive as possible and as shop ready - you know the person should be able to wear it. (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

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<sup>15</sup> In winter and autumn months, new donations of light clothes are packed into large black plastic crates where they will hibernate until summer. When the seasons change, the heavy black plastic crate boxes are hauled out, the summer clothes are packed out and winter goods that have not been sold are packed away in their place.

<sup>16</sup> Every now and again Tannie Hermien and The Strand Shop receive small donations from customers or walk-in donors. The official policy runs along the lines that if donations are dropped off anywhere but The Flagship Shop they are to be kept until they can be taken there, for 'security reasons' and to track donations of valuable goods. This guideline is not always strictly adhered to, particularly in The Strand Shop which is some distance from The Flagship Shop. Medium and smaller donations are sometimes sorted and unpacked in the shop in which they were donated, and sorted and placed on the shop floor.

Anything that does not meet these criteria is re-circulated through more ‘appropriate’ conduits of purging in which the discarded object need only be of use-value not exchange-value; she donates some to a local pastor for his community and some is rubbished.

The second-sorting affords staff the opportunity to define and protect the identity of their shops, outside the reach of The Flagship Shop, by deciding what is and is not worthy of being sold. As Tannie Mari elucidated: things that are not “up to standard” are sent to the jumble sale that “is even less than us” (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). In doing this she re-routes objects The Flagship Shop judged suitable for Tannie Hermien’s Shop through an even lower-end space. Rejecting such things is a subtle way of contesting the down trading Tannie Hermien’s shop is required to do in the face of the trading-up of The Flagship Shop. Similar mechanisms are in place in The Strand shop. On one occasion the staff of The Strand Shop were greatly offended when infamous fisherman, Uncle Piet – came into the shop, complaining about the merchandise saying “you get all the junk” (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012). This incident speaks of the subjugation of the shops to The Flagship Shop, from whom they receive their stock and its ability to determine the perceptions of the two smaller shops through their choice of stock to send them (though the availability of certain types of stock is of course dependent upon donations).

### **3.5 Pricing: Examining exchange-value**

For something to be "priceless" it must be worth more than any possible financial value. "Valueless" has the same semantic form as "priceless": both mean, literally, to be without price, to be without value. But whereas the "priceless" is raised above economic valuation, the "valueless" sinks below it. (Stallybrass, 2000)

In the sorting and distribution processes the value of the object is continually examined by staff, but it is only in the moment of pricing that they attempt to reflect their evaluations in a quantifying price. While they start by examining the object’s material qualities or use-value, it is ultimately conventional methods of establishing exchange-value that they wish to

replicate. These, however, prove difficult because the second-hand object is separated from the labour of its original production. This section maps this moment of pricing.

The responsibility of pricing falls to the shop Manager; the assistant manager or sales assistant acts as a consultant, sounding-board and questioner. Although the three managers draw upon marginally different barometers of value when pricing, I have extracted the overlapping strategies that emerge in each: the perceived markers of value on the exterior of the object, the price of the same type of object (new or used) in other retail spaces; and the price customers are thought willing or able to pay.

The first strategy is based on ‘knowing your product’, thus pricing begins with an examination of the particular charms of the object in order to determine any special marks of value. The markers that are thought to constitute value are similar to the criteria used by The Flagship Shop in sorting: signs of use, newness and branding.

The most obvious marker of value that is particular to the pricing of second-hand objects is evidence of use. The ‘wear and tear’ of its former owner automatically devalues the object, both in terms of use-value and exchange-value. Newness or being ‘brand-new’ is held as the ideal, and the exchange-value of new objects, in keeping with Marx, is the equivalent of homogenised human labour time. There is no such concrete formula for determining the price of second-hand goods; though Jeannine alluded to attempts to do this when describing how she determines the prices for broad categories of clothes using their manufacturing cost,

Having had a manufacturing background, I can more or less work on what it has cost, so if the garment is really good quality and in good ‘condish’, what it would cost to make and the cost factor that’s [the] kind of factor that I work with. (Jeannine, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2013)

Crucially she mentions that the garment’s condition impacts upon the viability of such an approach. And once the various merits and demerits of the object have been established, the positing of the object in other retail realms is investigated, particularly if an object is thought

potentially valuable but the staff are unfamiliar with it. Second-hand things cannot be priced too closely to what the same item would cost new and I often heard customers complain when they felt this was the case. Instead, first-hand prices are used as a measure against which to make a judgement of what they can ask in the charity shop:

For general items we walk around different shops and have a look sort of what prices they sell for. So if I look at it and um for new it sells for about 5/600 rand then I know that I can push the price up a bit to probably about R80. Depending on, you know, if it's well-worn or the condition of it. So that would determine then. (Tannie Emma, 27<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

Pertinently on the occasions when new objects replete with tags are donated, no matter how mint their condition they cannot be priced as new,

Sometimes we do get brand-new things but we can't sell it like if it's a R200 jacket from Truworths we can't sell it for R200 at The Flagship Shop we'll make it maybe half price since it is brand-new. (Angeline, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

Comparison to the world of first-hand shopping is also present when pricing branded objects, and is employed as a second strategy. The status of the brand in conventional retailing is considered as not all brands are equally desirable. There is a distinction between 'ordinary' brands, the most oft used example of which is Mr Price, and 'better' brands that is to say more expensive brands such as Truworths. Because customers are familiar with the retailing of brands first-hand they are prepared to pay more for 'better' brands and accordingly expect lower prices for ordinary brands, as Jeannine and Tannie Hermien explain.

Researching what second-hand things cost on the internet is an exercise popular in The Flagship Shop. This extra research is usually reserved for objects that are suspected to be very valuable. They favour sites that give details about the product, and that have a clear formula for working out their price, rather than online auction sites such as Bid or Buy. Importantly, like the prices of new things, these prices are not identically replicated in the shops.

This research can sometimes backfire when items are misidentified as similar or identical to those for sale online, and are priced high accordingly; thus the pricing of objects thought to be valuable continues to be an area of contention. A volunteer was asking “knowledgeable” customers what they think the un-priced goods should be. There seems to be a general sort of feeling that there is a misjudgement of value and imitation. Not valuable goods that resemble valuable goods that the manager has seen on the internet are being priced as though they are the latter. I was witness to a conversation between Joe and a volunteer that epitomised such feelings. Picking up a set of spoons, Joe decried their cost, “they are nothing special!” In fact, he claimed they were not even genuine silver but were nickel. His implication was that the manager pricing the goods was unable to distinguish between true value and imitation, as they had misidentified the sensuous characteristics of the object. Such knowledge, we shall see, is perceived to be critical to the acquisition of bargains within the charity shop. This reveals the necessity of knowledge and perhaps even expertise when it comes to pricing ‘collectable’ or ‘valuable’ second-hand things.

Such knowledge is not, however, limited to rare collectables. Knowledge of any specialised sought can be incremental in finding bargains from the perspective of customers; and making money from the perspective of the sellers. In The Flagship Shop, a regular black male customer employed in the area chatted to me while I worked behind the counter and said that one can always find “interesting things” in our shop. Picking up a computer modem with 8 portals priced at R100 he told me that he had purchased a very similar one with 16 portals for R40 from “the other lady”. He asked her whether she knew what it was and she did not. Now that the modem was priced higher he ascertains that now “we know what it is”. This occurrence highlights constant mutability of pricing within the Helping Hands Charity shops. Getting a particular object for a ‘bargain’ one day is no guarantee it will be apparently under-priced the next. Furthermore, it paints a picture of a consumer who is aware of the

advantages of knowledge and is very much sensitive to shifts in pricing. Which leads us to the third element of constructing prices within the Helping Hands Charity shops: knowing who the consumer is and how much they are prepared to pay.

When creating prices I was told that it is important in the shops to “know your customer”. Reflecting on the freedom Helping Hands Charity gives their managers in allowing them to price their own goods, Jeannine emphasised that knowing your customer and understanding their needs and abilities is a critical aspect of pricing within the charity shop as it allows staff

The opportunity to react to the local climate because as I say: you get to know your regulars, you know what they can cope with; and they’re quite vociferous about what works for them. Try and price up R5 and they’ll let you know. Oh yes! They know ‘this is too expensive’. (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

Tannie Hermien expressed the importance of being sensitive to the market and not over pricing common place items, because of the number of second-hand shops in the area (9th January 2013).

People will only pay so much because they know that the shop received the goods for free, and this links to ideas of charity. Joe told me that because the shops get everything for free pricing things “too high” was “greedy” and it seemed against “murphy’s law”, expressing some sort of idea that if you give you will receive (7<sup>th</sup> September 2012). Elmarie, who prices the bric-a-brac, worked along the lines of what she believed the customers could afford to pay at “a good price that will help them” (16<sup>th</sup> October 2012) in order to avoid stock stagnating. Thus, the idea of the shop as a means to be charitable to the community is combined with the idea of ‘any money is good money’. It is interesting that Elmarie highlights the notion that the merchandise was obtained for free and adopts an approach reminiscent of conventional retailing as when pricing using a formula of covering the cost of purchase to make a profit. In

Helping Hands Charity shops there is no outlay of money to buy stock and so the focus of pricing is to move stock as quickly as possible.

Half way through my fieldwork in The Strand Shop their pricing system for clothing changed. Instead of pricing each item individually according to its characteristics and what it would retail first hand, standard prices for each category of clothing such as shirts or dresses were established. These prices were written on posters hung strategically on the walls of the shop, in place of individual price tags. Customers had been swapping the labels of prices so that expensive garments' prices were replaced by cheaper garments' prices in the changing room, said Jeanine, a type of "cheating far more prevalent than outright theft" (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012). She hoped that this new system would curb these duplicities, and as there is no longer a price difference between branded and ordinary clothes. She said "know if you get a Polo or a fancy label in that price range well then lucky for you" (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012). These prices were adjusted after a few weeks – some items of clothing became more expensive and some became less. And, in what appeared as an act of frustration, a plain T-shirt was hung on the wall, supplemented with a sign "if it does not look like this it is not a basic T-shirt". Hence while the new pricing system had done away with one form of 'cheating' it had clearly introduced contestations over the classification of garments, as customers attempted to pass off more expensive items as the cheaper "basic T-shirt".

This shift in pricing strategy came after I had interviewed Jeannine for the first time, and I struggled to reconcile these blanket prices with the meticulous pricing formulations she had formerly used. This shift is important as it speaks to the difficulties involved in estimating the value of second-hand goods. Furthermore, although Jeannine adopted this new pricing strategy for security purposes, the fact that she was able to create blanket prices for vast categories of goods, irrespective of their use-value, is indicative of how unstable value is here.

In conjunction, the emphasis upon which other spaces of exchange are pricing similar goods is evidence of how little the specificities of the individual objects ultimately matter in the process of pricing. All the attempts at concretising or formulating fixed pricing strategies illustrate the difficulty of using such formulations to determine the value of the broad miscellany of pre-owned goods the shops encounter. Even though they know that in their shops they cannot ask a price that reflects this value, they try to work out what that value is by looking at what other people are selling things for, and as the following statement of Angeline's reveals, they try to negotiate to find the most accurate price.

Normally it's the manager who makes the prices but we do help each other because it's not always that she is correct with pricing the things sometimes she over marks or under prices so we help each other if it's over priced we just tell her why don't you reduce it to this amount because it costs this much because normally when she does pricing we also look at the value of the thing in the shop, in the shop they are brand-new then that's how she marks from there, it's not like we do half price but we just look at the value of the thing. (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

Where something is being sold is more important than what is being sold. For example, a brand-new item will always retail for less in the charity shop than its identical counterpart in a first-hand shop. Furthermore, it places the charity shop in conversation with various spaces of retail, as the shops attempt to turn a profit within the glass pricing ceiling of the charity shop.

What emerges from this examination of pricing is that while, as Marx says, value is never derived finally from use-value, in the case of second-hand goods use-value appears to play a very important, if mediated, role. In attempting to quantify use-value to create a price for the objects at hand, it appears it is separated from exchange-value. In order to understand how the precariousness of the second-hand object's use-value is overcome and customers are to desire the precarious commodity, commodity aesthetics become important, and this forms the second stage of the productive labour of judging value.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how, through judging value, the labours of the back-space attempt to transform donated objects into saleable commodities; yet the history of use compromises the commodity that is produced, rendering it precarious rather than fully fledged. The labour of purging that the staff enacts upon the objects appears to be focused on restoring use-value because it focuses a great deal of attention on the sensuous characteristics of the objects to determine its value. The criteria used when sorting and pricing aim to evaluate use-value, but the creation of classifications of value based on use, are in fact labours of production that serve to produce value anew. Although it is true that use-value becomes more salient and less relegated to the periphery in understanding the value of second-hand commodities, what emerges in these appraisals of the object's concrete characteristics is that ultimately the only form of perceiving value is exchange-value. This is particularly evident when the objects are priced; which is critical if they are to be sold. Value as such in capitalist society is exchange-value. That is, there is ultimately only exchange-value in capitalist society, and use-value as something independent increasingly disappears.

Thus commences the labour of judging value in the front-space of the shops because, in a seemingly contradictory manner, to produce desire in the consumer the sensuousness of the object must be made appealing to the consumer. Value is produced by the careful manipulation of commodity aesthetics to produce value in space, which is the subject of the subsequent chapter.

## *Chapter 4*

### **Precarious commodity aesthetics: Display and techniques of sale in the ‘front-space’ of the Helping Hands Charity shops**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Once it is priced, the precarious commodity is transferred from the back-space of the Helping Hands Charity shops to the front-space. Here it must be made appealing to customers aware of the precariousness of its status as commodity. This chapter presents the labour of producing value anew in the object in the front-space of the shops, under the watchful gaze of the consumer. I draw upon my research at a flea market in Cape Town when examining the importance of appearances and space in the propagation of value and desire:

What sets the market site apart from its formal counterparts and makes it a desirable space to visit, is to a large extent the manner in which the space is arranged. Marx writes that “the need which consumption feels for the object is created by the perception of it” (1973: 92). The perception of objects at the market is created by the world external to it, that is to say mass consumption and formal retailing as well as by the structuring of its internal world [...] Despite the informality and seeming haphazardness of the market, arrangement influences selling although there is little uniformity on the market when it comes to display, as each trader has their own particular habits when it comes to arranging their stock on their stall (Watt, 2010:30).

Attention to the arrangement of space and objects is paid in the open air of the flea market with the intention of piquing consumer interest, a practice it has in common with the sale of most commodities, regardless of whether they are new or second-hand. This artful presentation of the commodity is the stuff of commodity aesthetics, a term coined by Haug (1986: 7):

It designates a complex which springs from the commodity form of the products and which is functionally determined by exchange-value — a complex of material phenomena and of the sensual subject-object relations conditioned by these phenomena. The analysis of these relations reveals the subjective element in the political economy of capitalism in so far as subjectivity is at once a result and a prerequisite of its functioning.

The focus in this chapter will be on the cultivation of the sensuous appeal of the commodity, its beauty, which is produced “in the service of the realisation of exchange-value” (Haug, 1986:8), and the manipulation of the physicality of the commodity which produces a desire in the consumer to buy it. Haug presents the consumer as one whose needs must be appealed to if they are to be manipulated by commodity aesthetics. Following Haug (1986:67), the commodity aesthetics I investigate here are produced with the aim of realising profit through the generation of exchange-value by shaping every aspect of the sale: the behaviour of the staff, the smells and sounds of the space of sale, the presentation of the commodities within it and the exterior appearance of the building.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, the process of transforming the second-hand object into a commodity once again – re-enlivening it to gain a value of exchange – is precarious, insofar as value to all concerned appears to be a matter of estimates about past “use”. This past use is never unmediated and involves a special kind of labour that is indispensable to the possibility of its valuation, but at the same time will never be reflected in the value directly (in the way that labour power in its homogeneous form is reflected in the new commodity). In this chapter, the aesthetics of the commodity, in the front-spaces of the stores, is especially important, and in particular labours that enable these commodity aesthetics.

This chapter begins by painting the interior of each shop drawing on a discourse of what Ross (2005) describes as *ordentlikheid* here referred to as ‘respectability’ the making of ‘respectability’ in space. It examines how each shop uses display to produce value anew in the precarious commodity by giving it a heightened appearance of use and respectable biography. The second part of this section focuses on techniques of selling and customer care as producing atmospheres that encourage *flânerie*. The production of such atmosphere, although it manifests differently in The Flagship Shop and the two smaller shops, relies upon

notions of race and class that privilege certain characteristics as valuing – although the exactitudes of this aesthetic remain only alluded to. Therefore, while the charity shop for the most part encourages a kind of *flânerie*, thought absent from conventional retailers in some respects it polices boundaries in a very similar way.

#### **4.2 Arranging the space, arranging the commodities**

Taken from the back-space and placed in the front retail space of the shop, the newly priced commodity is contextualised by a myriad of objects around it as it becomes part of a display. Commodities begin to glitter on the shop floor in the same way that works of art in a white walled gallery, or artefacts in a dark museum, are given meaning and value through the aesthetics of their exhibition: the brightness of the lighter under which they are illuminated, the space between each of the objects and the narrative between them.

To contextualise the importance placed upon issues of attention to space, in particular cleanliness and neatness, I draw upon the work of Ross (2005:639) on *ordentlikheid*. Describing residents of a coloured community dwelling in the Helderberg region, she writes that,

For the most part, residents described *ordentlikheid* as a disposition inculcated by environment: although considered an essential attribute of humanness, *ordentlikheid* is thought to be eroded by environmental factors. It is manifest in external appearances: respondents described an *ordentlike* person as being 'skoon en netjies' (clean and neat), and 'decent' places as being visibly cared for and well maintained.

'Respectability' becomes an important issue when buying second-hand goods, which are traditionally a marker of poverty. Because they are other people's cast-off belongings, the objects for sale in the Helping Hands Charity shops can have been cast into disrepute by their former homes and the marks of use upon them, and thus producing *ordentlikheid* through the shop space becomes significant. Here I read 'respectability' and value as closely linked: value is respectable, valuelessness is not. Respectable people are valued, disrespectable people are

not. The environment of the shops plays an important role in producing ‘respectability’ and thereby value. This, as Ross suggests, can be achieved through cleanliness, neatness and attention to preserving a “decent” space.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Flagship Shop**

There have been a few changes to the shop front since my last visit [...] a clothing rail that had been in the back of the sorting area is moved to the front public area. More pictures have been hung on the walls. Wedding dresses and furs have been hung high up on the wall behind the counter<sup>2</sup> [...] There was a ‘teddy bear picnic’ display seated around the dining room table. (Field notes, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012)

When The Flagship Shop moved into its premises in Side Street the transported stock was unpacked and purposefully displayed. Mary, the manager at the time, instructed my unpacking: she wanted to make The Flagship Shop different to “other second-hand shops”; arranging to illustrate both the usefulness of the merchandise and, critically, its “potential”. Books were painstakingly divided into genre and then subdivided alphabetically. Faux leather poufs were placed in front of this bookshelf so that the reader could relax. A dining table was set as though for dinner; adorned with flowers, candles in candle holders, multiple knives and forks for every course and serving platters, in a manner reminiscent of some of the larger décor chain stores. A medium sized clothing rack was set up, and the various items of carefully selected vintage clothing hung upon it. Cara dismissed my suggestion that the move had brought with it an increased attention to the detail of display, instead she said “because it’s [the shop space] bigger, its better laid out; um, the goods are more prominently displayed *because* of the space” (13<sup>th</sup> July 2012). It must be noted that the front-space of The Flagship

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<sup>1</sup>What becomes clear is that attention to spatial arrangement of objects, particularly in terms of ease of perusal, and cleanliness and neatness is not considered the norm of charity shops. Being light and clean and neat and spacious set the Helping Hands Charity shops aside from their less business savvy competitors and places them closer to more conventional retail realms. In this way, in their attention to display of objects and space, Helping Hands Charity shops reveal once more their fear of cotangent through ‘dirt’ and the ‘unclean’ as well as their continued project of trading up; albeit a project more subtly expressed in Tannie Hermien’s and The Strand Shop.

<sup>2</sup> When the doors of The Flagship Shop re-opened after lunch one afternoon, a male customer asked me why the furs and wedding dresses were hung high up on the wall behind the counter. I responded that it was to better display them, to which he replied: “it’s because they’re expensive”.

Shop in Side Street is larger than that its previous incarnation at Blue Circle, so I suggest the manner of arrangement gives the front-space a feeling of spaciousness that appeals to those entering it. Cara agreed that the prominent displays encouraged sales, as the windows were ‘eye-catching’ (13<sup>th</sup> July 2012). In contrast to this, Ilze said that while she was not attracted by the shop windows, “The Flagship Shop’s shop displays are beautifully done. And the fact that they vary it all the time makes it interesting” (7<sup>th</sup> January 2012).

After Mary left and Tannie Emma became manager, The Flagship Shop continued to display things in ways that instruct use, imitate homeliness and echo the world of first-hand retail. The Flagship Shop is presented, literally and figuratively, as different to other charity shops, even Tannie Hermien’s. Indeed, Tannie Emma, said that it is “presentation” and a commitment to having “clean” merchandise and “cheerful” arrangement that people could “identify” (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012) that sets The Flagship Shop apart from Tannie Hermien’s and The Strand Shop. Whilst the ethos behind display seems to have remained the same after the change in management, there were a number of bureaucratic and aesthetic rearrangements within the shop. Tannie Emma explains her motivation for some of the changes thus:

“Umm, just to display it differently, ah to make it a little bit more appealing. Not good to look like a shop, as such. That it had a bit of warmth in it, I was very pleased today, with the gentleman that, who’s a regular customer, came when he donated stuff and ah he just said that ah you know he really likes the shop, because it’s so appealing.”

KW: “And you said you wanted to make it not too much like a shop could you expand on that?”

“To explain things, people can see how you would actually display it in your home. Not always just very ridged with everything on the tables and that you, each thing just the glasses and that. That you can decorate a table and show them how to decorate, because a lot of people don’t always have that insight or when they see something they don’t put it together with something else”. (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

Angeline expressed very similar views in a separate interview, explaining whether Tannie Hermien’s Shop and The Flagship Shop have the same customers, and if so whether they would actually buy at both shops or simply visit both. She said that The Flagship Shop’s “set

up” was “admired”, and it gives people “a picture of how they can put it in their homes” (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012). In carefully arranging the objects in ways that instruct their use-value, staff continue the labour of erasing any stigma of uselessness that might have attached itself to these objects when they were cast out. Through arrangement of space, customers are expected to immediately recognise the purpose of each of the objects.<sup>3</sup> There are areas in The Flagship Shop in which stock is simply set out like by like<sup>4</sup> and such groupings serve to emphasise the practicality of seemingly unusual objects.

The displays act as simulacrum of the home. The squashy beige lounge suite is set up in a convivial semi-circle on the shop floor; complete with wooden side tables for resting drinks, magazine rack and an uncannily leafy imitation pot plant. It is a vibrant buzzing emulation of the real, made of commodities that hum and whirr with usefulness and the spectre of human ownership and human touch; only their stickered on exchange-value gives them away. This apparent homeliness does not come without a warning to those who wish to exploit its hospitality: hanging on the front of the counter in The Flagship Shop is a green toy frog with two very large bulgy eyes, and above it on the counter top is a sticker upon which the letters “I-C-U” have been written, to remind customers that staff are keeping an eye on them, similar to the toy hyena in Tannie Hermien’s Shop.

In The Flagship Shop, display instructs the onlooker on how to use the objects being sold to create their own homes. Angeline suggested that the combination of home and

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<sup>3</sup> One such example is a display of wool, thread, half completed needle work and knitting needles, set up on the card table. Grouping these items together creates a narrative of craft; alone these items are simply cast out remnants.

<sup>4</sup> When a collection is donated the items are displayed together: a collection of decorative owl statuettes made of shells and china are grouped clustered on a shelf; so is a cluster of wood and china ornamental clogs. Alternatively, pop-up collections are created when similar objects are donated over time by different people. For example on one of my visits the wooden trunk on the far side of the shop and the space above it had been turned into a clown themed display. There were clown masks, clown toys and pictures of clowns hanging on the wall. This entire display was bought by a woman for her daughter’s third birthday party. By grouping objects that fail to display the prerequisite use-value upon immediate glance, knick-knacks and odds and ends are given value in collections.

instruction is admired. “Admiration” alludes to the upmarket nature of the shop, and it hints at a desire for emulation, the ‘set up’ that is admired is one that has come to be considered valuable. The type of home presented as the ideal by The Flagship Shop, is middle class, luxurious enough to have a dining room table and spacious enough to have a complete lounge suite. In doing so they recreate normative ideas of how a respectable home should look.

Proposing that people need guidance to realise the value of the objects for sale, The Flagship Shop reveals two pivotal characteristics of its use of commodity aesthetics. Firstly, they highlight the instability of the use-value of precarious commodities that have been used and cast out by other customers and demonstrate an attempt to rectify this. Secondly, they believe that emphasising this use-value by projecting a normative idea of the home will appeal to customers preconceived notions of what aesthetics represent value. In this case, it would appear to be ‘respectability’. These techniques are used in a slightly different manner in Tannie Hermien’s Shop and The Strand Shop, yet they also draw upon the aesthetics of ‘respectability’ to produce value anew in the precarious commodities on sale.

### **Tannie Hermien’s Shop**

Neatness and cleanliness are of utmost importance In Tannie Hermien’s Shop. Part of Tannie Mari’s description of her average day of work within the shop centred on straightening hung clothes and cleaning the shop to make it “perfect” in anticipation of customers (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). Customers sort through linen, piling their arms full, intensely appraising the merchandise: taking hangers out examining the clothing, sometimes slotting them back amongst the others or carelessly toss the hangers over the clothing rails. During the time I spent in this shop it was my task to straighten out the rails, re-hang the clothes and catch items slithering off their hangers, in order to preserve the tidy appearance of the shop. On my second day in the shop Tannie Mari asked me to tidy the linen cupboard, forewarning me that

‘they’<sup>5</sup> would make a mess of it again in no time at all. In Tannie Hermien’s Shop it is enough to be clean, neat and spacious; as this already sets them apart from the other local charity shops and imbues the goods within the shop with the type of ‘respectability’.

The display of goods is aimed at creating ease of perusal and order: thus like goods are displayed together. Under the clear glass of the counter is a candle, bow ties, a small leather purse, an empty Woolworths’ gift card box and a basket with cell phone chargers. Bric-a-brac is placed to the right of the counter on a wooden shelf facing the window and on a table to the one side of the entrance. They are tightly packed with glass jars, kitchen utensils, old vacuum cleaners, posters, metal trays, jugs, an old fashioned soda stream, parts of electrical kitchen accessories, frames, an ironing board with a hole burnt into the covering, wooden hangers, mugs, glasses and plates. There are two small shelves with magazines, paperbacks and puzzles. On the floor beside these are two cardboard boxes holding toys. There is a linen cupboard holding duvets, odd cushions and sheets, sets of curtains, off cuts of fabric, pillow slips and blankets; marked with a sticker ‘keep tidy’.

The rest of the shop floor is devoted to clothing, mostly women’s. Against the far wall opposite the counter hang women’s blouses, dresses, sleepwear and coats. In front is a cluster of small linear and circular rails grouped with ladies’ T-shirts, skirts, jeans, trousers, jackets and sleeveless blouses. Behind the window is “R10 SALE” sign perched on a circular clothing rail. These clothes, Tannie Hermien told me, are not ‘nice’, marked or old fashioned or have failed to sell. Men’s shirts are hung on the wall beside the counter and men’s trousers and jackets are displayed on free standing rails on the shop floor. A low imitation wood tiered display table is covered with shoes. Two plastic baskets on the floor hold bras, men’s briefs, lacy lingerie and cotton panties, stockings and miscellaneous pairs of socks. The exception to

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<sup>5</sup> This undefined ‘they’ cropped up numerous times in the course of my fieldwork at all three of the shops. My immediate understanding was that it referred to black, coloured and poor people; however this has not been explicit and may indeed refer to the general customer base.

this general ‘like with like’ rule of display is the large street facing shop window: in it pose a number of female mannequins dressed in clothing from the shop floor. The allure of these plastic women lies in their mismatched attire; the assortment of ordinary gently worn dresses, coats, blouses and skirts signals second-hand simply by the fact that no two items are alike. I walked past this window every day when I volunteered at The Flagship Shop and later Tannie Hermien’s Shop; and almost without fail the mannequins would be wearing something different each time.<sup>6</sup> When I asked Tannie Hermien whether the window display has an impact upon customers she replied:

Ja, we sold— if you look up the doll<sup>7</sup> is naked, man [laughs]! They buy from the doll you see they have nice stuff in here. Then they buy if you have nothing there [in the window]. Then they stand like this [outside the shop] they can’t really see [...] they only see the things that hang in front; but if you got a doll, you dress the doll every day in something else [...] They love the windows. They love it! (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

For Tannie Hermien, the mannequins act as a blurb for the shop’s merchandise. The window display enables customers to see the clothes for sale on humanoid bodies instead of only being able to glimpse certain items hanging on the rails.

I was witness to one instance of a customer selecting an item of clothing off a mannequin: a curvaceous black woman wanted to fit a dress adorning the slender mannequin. Staff attempted to dissuade her, warning that if the dress stretched the customer would have to pay for it. The woman was undeterred so the mannequin was undressed and the woman headed to the fitting room. She burst forth triumphantly, to show her friends how the dress fitted: she had squeezed her curves into the fabric column. The staff looked on disapprovingly; the woman purchased the dress anyway.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Though the arrangement of the mannequins themselves was not noticeably altered nor were extra ‘props’ added to their limited window-world.

<sup>7</sup> Mannequin

<sup>8</sup> There were a number of occasions in which it was said in the other side street shop that black people like to buy very tight clothes, too tight clothes it was implied.

## The Strand Shop

Walking across the tarmac from my car to the entrance of the shop in the arcade I passed the window in which a new display representing a summer beach scene had been made. The hanging torso mannequin wore a bikini top and torn silk wraparound skirt.<sup>9</sup> Thick sandy brown paper lined the shelf of the window, bikinis were artfully scattered between a collection of shells and coral.<sup>10</sup> (Field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

Upon assuming her managerial role in The Strand Shop, Jeannine set about making several adjustments to the interior of the shop. She wanted the shop to have an open feeling, to be lighter and brighter so she moved the shelves that had blocked the windows and had made the interior appear dreary from the outside. The passageways were cleared so that customers with walkers, prams or motorized vehicles can have comfortable access. This desire to create a spacious environment out of a miniscule interior is also why Jeannine unpacks the items she gets from The Flagship Shop slowly. These adjustments make the shop seem different to the other cramped charity shops of the area; it speaks to an aesthetic closer to that of conventional retailing.

Inside the shop slated blinds cover the arcade-facing side window to conceal the innards of the till from prying eyes. In an alcove shelf set into the wall above the counter are the ‘Give’ Helping Hands Charity branded products. Next to this, also against the wall a row of hooks suspend headwear, the odd beaded necklace and promotional lanyard. Two bookshelves are home to well-read paper backs;<sup>11</sup> and for those who prefer their reading to be supplemented by pictures there are two boxes full to the brim with magazines. On the metal shelf, seen through the street side window, is a collection of cast off goods, similar to that in Tannie Hermien’s Shop: Orange lampshades, numerous pairs of spectacles and spectacle cases, empty cardboard files, a green glass vase, a single china cup and other junky oddities.

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<sup>9</sup>Later in the day just before lunch a young black woman came to the door just as myself and the staff were leaving, besotted with the skirt—Elmarie said that it was broken and thus for display purposes only.

<sup>10</sup> Like the plastic plants in The Flagship Shop, the coral and shells were not for sale. They had been brought by Elmarie from her home expressly for the purpose of the summer display.

<sup>11</sup> A select group of customers come in specially to appease their literary appetites; one elderly woman has a particular penchant for purchasing erotic novels; another gentleman seeks Afrikaans novels.

Piles of sheets, old pillows, roughly folded curtains, and fabric off cuts fill a wire basket shelf.

But the main attraction is clothes, mostly women's. The women's shirts, blouses, T-shirts and tops are all carefully grouped according to their colour. The racks form little circular rainbows of blocked colour and patterned textile. The length of the shop is divided midway by a linear rail hung with 'ladies' skirts, trousers and shirts. Opposite this, the wall is covered with an ingenious arrangement of rails. Closest to the staff room is women's sleep wear, followed by dresses and coats. Here the rails double and men's shirts are hung above men's trousers, shorts, swimwear and suits. In a black bag in the storeroom is a writhing tangle of men's ties. So great is the number of ties and so little is the demand for them that when a suit is sold the buyer may select a complimentary tie. From a plastic washing basket next to the counter, underwear overflows. Against the far wall between the entrance to the staff room and the fitting room, a number of shelves are attached to the wall. This is where the shoes are, both men's and women's, and in the manner of main stream shoe stores is a mandatory stool, so that those less mobile may easily fit on shoes.

The Strand Shop has a large display window facing the parking lot; much of the attention to the arrangement of objects and the appeal of the space is centred on it. Positioned in it a decapitated female torso is resplendent in a crochet dress and Strand of plastic beads; alongside her, assembled outfits hang from thin wire hangers decorated with pale tissue paper spring blooms. The space in the corner of the window, behind a bookshelf, exhibits a picnic scene of jars of 'Give' preserves, a basket of plastic flowers on top of an embroidered cloth and a paperback bodice ripper. Beside this a display ostensibly aimed at the older gentleman consists of a tumbler of diluted rooibos tea masquerading as 'whiskey', a hardcover tome on South African law and a pair of reading spectacles.

When I interviewed Jeannine, she said that the predominance of passing trade motivated the shop's attention to display:

The shop is near the taxi rank which means that I've got to make the shop look attractive to those sorts of passers-by, not someone who's thinking of it in terms of a second-hand shop but somebody who's gonna walk past and say "okay what's this? That looks nice, what is it? Most important I try to make it at least look fresh and attractive so I'll steam iron [clothes] if they're very creased, um. And then I dress the windows, and I'll put you know, things together, I make outfits together, I'll put a whole story together. And that seems to be attracting people. (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

By assembling outfits from individual pieces of clothing Jeannine communicates the usefulness and aesthetic appeal of the objects to potential customers. The word 'fresh' implies the appearance of newness, unsullied by reminders of previous owners. Her displays labour to lessen the signs of use that the objects bear from their previous owners, and make the precariousness of the commodity recede so to change customers' expectations of second-hand. When collaged together the items of clothing present an ideal of something that alone they cannot. Together they increased the value of each.

For Tannie Ronel, this strategy works, "they make the shop that you feel to go inside, they always put something in the window, that locks you in [...] *dit maak jou nuuskierig*"<sup>12</sup> (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012). By creating narratives with the objects that illustrate their use, the window display aims to 'explain' the shop to people walking by who may lack experience of second-hand shopping. This is reminiscent of The Flagship Shop's instructive displays although The Strand Shop limits its narrative displays to the shop window because the displays on the shop floor are designed to make browsing easy and to maximise the feeling of space.

The Strand Shop embraces themes for their displays: spring time blossoms and picnic scenes are only a few of the oft changing themed tableaux I observed. The general trend

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<sup>12</sup> It makes you curious.

amongst these themes seems to be celebration, relaxation and fun. When I volunteered within The Strand Shop Jeannine gave me a blue floral dress and asked me to use it and make some sort of “fun, fresh display” in the window that perhaps had the skirt of the dress hung playful to the side.<sup>13</sup> Over the course of the day I saw people peering into the window looking at what was on display. I had been told numerous times about how people love to buy what is hanging in the window. Indeed, when the mannequin was re-dressed by Jeannine from a leather jacket and red blouse to a black wrap skirt and strappy top, the wrap skirt was promptly sold.

Display in The Strand Shop is also instructive and is used to shape buying habits and taste. For example in order to “prevent fashion crimes against humanity” Jeannine hangs some skirt suits as separate skirts and jackets amongst the hangers of clothing, so that customers will not be tempted to wear them together.

### **Other charity shops, Chinese shops and The Car Boot Sale: purveyors of low quality goods**

I expand this discussion of the use of commodity aesthetics by returning to the space outside the Helping Hands Charity shops, to examine the aesthetics of other ‘alternative’ spaces of consumption to conventional retailing. Such a comparison is important because it exemplifies why the Helping Hands Charity shops attend to spatial and object arrangement so diligently, as well as explaining/justifying their choice of aesthetic strategies.

Not only do the Helping Hands Charity shops trade in the shadow of The Mall, they trade alongside those businesses that have flourished in this shadow. In this section I explore the notion raised by Fiona, that the retail environment left behind by The Mall is one of low quality trade. I illustrate how the customers and staff envision the Helping Hands Charity

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<sup>13</sup>I foraged the hangers with the tissue-paper candy coloured pompoms attached, that had been used in the spring display and hung up the blue floral cotton dress, a black and floral cotton skirt, a purple floral sleeveless blouse and a synthetic pale blue dress with large flowers printed on it. I used pegs to link the bottom of the one dress with the side of the skirt – giving it the appearance of being lifted by the wind and did the same with the rest (over which I hung a few necklaces).

shops as being of better quality and value than the other charity shops, second-hand car boot sales and Chinese shops<sup>14</sup> because the commodity aesthetics of these spaces do not conform to the particular set of aesthetic values associated with whiteness and ‘respectability’. These aesthetics are visible in who the imagined customers of each type of shop are, and the way in which the space of the shops is arranged and the extent to which they conform to ideas of neatness and cleanliness. By reflecting on the reasons why customers prefer to shop at Helping Hands Charity stores, what they think of as important to their consumption experience and what they consider markers of value become evident.

Through the course of my walking explorations of the area surrounding Side Street, I was struck by the cornucopia of second-hand trade it offered.<sup>15</sup> Some were concealed in arcades and side streets; others were easily discovered; and all seemed in relatively close proximity. As Tannie Hermien said, “everybody is now registering a charity...everybody starts to do a charity shop, because they know that’s where the money lie[s] now” (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013). Like Somerset West there is a vigorous second-hand trade in Strand. The local charity shops include: Charity P (open Fridays and Saturdays) and the Charity R shop that sells bric-a-brac. The second-hand shops seem mostly devoted to second-hand furniture shops.

Within comfortable walking distance of Side Street is the ‘Charity A’ shop, the Charity S shop, and ‘Discount Dip’ and ‘The Den’ charity shops. Walking along Wide Road one encounters a comparatively diminutive charity shop. Inside is mostly clothing; supplemented by an accumulation of odds and ends. Every bit of space is occupied by merchandise which

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<sup>14</sup>What materialises is that rather than being abandoned, the centre of Somerset West and its neighbour Strand has become fertile ground for the types of businesses that are unwelcome and unsuited to The Mall. For although The Mall has its own China Town this is in a side building away from the main building, accessed by its own parking lot and situated towards the highway. It remains difficult to access when compared to the Chinese Shops on Wide Road. In turn, second-hand trade does not lend itself to commercial Malls characterised by giant department stores.

<sup>15</sup> Apart from charity shops there was a multitude of other second-hand trade from upmarket retailers to the car boot sale.

makes it laborious to look at what is for sale and to move between clothing racks. Even the low counter at the furthest point of the shop is almost entirely covered in small saleable objects. Ilze expressed her aversion to this shop:

It's a grimy shop; I hardly ever buy [there]. Number one: the place is too small for the stock and number two the woman there is not at all [a] welcoming person. It's too crowded. (7<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

She highlights dirt; lack of space and unfriendliness as reason enough to avoid shopping there.

On the other side of Wide Road is the Charity A shop. Rails of clothing and a jumble of goods are grouped in front of the shop. Inside the shop is a tightly crowded maze of small rooms differs to the more 'modern' Helping Hands Charity shops whose large display windows, shop fittings and counters are closer to a conventional retail set up. A chaotic room watched over by a volunteer jam-packed with an assortment of shabby goods blends into an almost indistinguishable mass. To the right an entrance room, filled with bookshelves and miscellaneous decorations, leads to another small room dominated by a counter. On top of one shelf is a collection of animal ornaments and a funeral urn inscribed with the letters RIP are arranged – none are for sale. A doorway connects to a fourth room incumbent with crockery-filled shelves and a miniscule scullery. Last is a room filled with rails of tightly packed clothes: men's shirts, leather jackets and handbags. Fiona<sup>16</sup> explains to me that on the first Saturday of every month all the things that did not sell during the week are piled outside and sold for R1 a piece.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fiona is a weekly volunteer at The Charity A shop as well as The Flagship Shop.

<sup>17</sup> I was told by Tannie Hermien and Tannie Mari that on the Saturday mornings when the car boot sale is on and Charity A has its R1 sale Side Street is quiet. Because the "whole community" goes to the R1 sale (maybe to re-sell they mused) not just "the poor people". Thus despite being viewed as a purveyor of poor value low quality goods suitable only to those who simply cannot pay the prices in the Helping Hands Charity shops, except to scratch in the R5 box, the pull of such a sale affects the Side Street shops.

Charity A is the charity shop most often compared with Helping Hands Charity shops, second to the Charity S shop. The majority of this comparison is unfavourable, centring on notions of cleanliness, quality and internal shop layout. Ilze talks about other charity shops in ways that underscore the distasteful sensorial experience they deliver. When speaking of her predilection to only shop at Helping Hands Charity shops she said of the Charity A shop:

The place itself looked dirty and musty and it doesn't smell good you know? These [Helping Hands Charity] shops, it's light and it's bright, there's enough space and you can walk around and the people are friendly. You know? But when you're so cramped— like the place with the Charity S, also. (7<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

With equal disapproval, Tannie Hermien described the careless manner in which the goods for sale were displayed; waving her hand dismissively, “all the stuff is hung like this” (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013). Tannie Hermien believed that whilst Charity A was the cheapest of the charity shops, people still preferred to come to her shop. When I asked her why she thought this was so, she explains:

You know [Charity A] they put everything on the rack, they sell it for R1, R2 and they throw a lot of stuff in the middle of the floor on heaps. So you have to go through all that stuff to get your size. Here's not it's nice all the people say 'sjoe it's nice, it's neat, the clothing is nice it's neat, it's not dirty, it's not broken'. (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Joe praised the dust-free, “clean” and “neat” Helping Hands Charity shops, stressing that “even” Tannie Hermien's Shop was thus (7<sup>th</sup> September 2012). The same is true of the charity shops in Strand. Discussing the number of charity shop around Strand and Somerset West, Joe said that they are ‘horrible’ and ‘smell like old stuff’ (7<sup>th</sup> September 2012) that is why he only shops at Helping Hands Charity. Similarly Millicent found that she always ended up comparing other shops unfavorably to Helping Hands Charity shops, because the goods are “really dirty” and “the quality is not so good” (3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012). What becomes apparent is that quality is partially inferred upon goods through spatial arrangement and the importance placed upon the bodily experience of the space. Retail spaces that lack pleasant scent, neatness, friendliness and cleanliness and ease of perusal are also those that are not

discerning when selecting the stock they put out for sale, they are space in which the commodities are poor quality. Fiona on the other hand was more generous in her assessment of the Charity A shop, bearing in mind that she herself volunteers there. I asked how she would compare working at the Charity A shop to another charity;

They're very much the same. They're just a little bit different; I mean obviously Helping Hands is much bigger they've got shops there, I mean if you've been to the Wright Street shop its tiny you know [...] it's the house, you've got two houses but we only use the one, um for the thing, and ag it's all muddled and fuddled up, but it's still nice, you know nice people. It's very full you only got about four people in the shop and you're already gasping for air, you know 'I'm giddy I can't breathe in here', cause there's too many people but it's basically the same. (9<sup>th</sup> July 2012)

The seemingly impossibly low prices at the Charity A give it the appearance of catering for those who can only afford to pay such low prices – they must be catering to the very poor. Relating with awe her purchase of two cooler bags for R10 from Charity A, Tannie Mari justified Charity A's ability to sell their merchandise 'like give away' because they have fewer overheads: no staff salaries or rent to pay (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). In so doing she alludes to a division between those charity shops that rely solely upon the service of volunteers and the more professional charity shops that are managed by paid staff, who are then responsible for the pricing, and thus have greater incentive to make money. Her shop, like the other Helping Hands Charity shops is different from these less organised charity shops, it is, she implies, closer to conventional retailing.

Every Saturday in Somerset West, on the grounds of a school there is what everyone calls The Car Boot Sale, although the informal traders sell off tables rather than out of the trunks of their cars. This sale used to be a popular weekend haunt among locals and second-hand dealers. Through listening to conversations between customers and staff as well as a volunteer who is also a trader there, I learnt more about this Saturday activity. An elderly white female customer of The Strand Shop said that she buys blankets, not for herself but for Charity A from the car boot sale. She complained that this winter there have been so few

blankets for her to buy. Tannie Mari told me that several traders who trade at the car boot sale and Milnerton, shop in the Helping Hands Charity shops. An elderly white woman, who trades in men's shoes at the car boot sale, came into The Strand Shop searching for stock as well as shopping about for a small bag in which she could fit her purse so that it could hang safely around her neck. Through these and other incidents it emerged that pick-pocketing had become wide spread in this space and this petty crime it was said had driven the whites away. It was perceived by some to have, in that much relied upon, sticky phrase "become very black" as Joe illuminated:

It's [the car boot sale] just not what it used to be, a lot of people don't go there anymore and it's becoming too black to be honest, it's more clothing and you can hardly walk and you clench to your bag [...] Even once [...] they took something from my mom's bag and he thought it was a wallet [...] and I said 'hey you bloody stole now my mom's thing out of her bag' you know? And now just getting us the whole thing talking to us then I just grab him and said I don't want to see your face anymore he ran off, you know? Because there the stealing was a big problem, they tied stuff to the table, there was a girl she sold pots you know she had a string on every pot. (7<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

In being labelled 'very black' the car boot sale is no longer a place friendly or appealing to those who are not black. The car boot sale became reframed from a family recreational space to one of crime and poor quality goods because its primary consumer is no longer thought to be the treasure-seeking white. Furthermore, by alluding to the perceived relationship between second-hand clothing and poor black and coloured customers, Joe indicates an imagined correlation between race and the type of second-hand objects for sale.

As chain stores and boutique-type shops seek refuge in the one-stop-shop confines of The Mall, a phenomenon new to Somerset West has appeared: the influx of so-called 'Chinese shops'. These Chinese shops were mentally positioned upon the landscape of the shopping centre as purveyors of low quality goods, necessary to the support of the needy but to a certain extent undesirable both to the general tone of the area and as sensorial experiences. It is perhaps worthy of note that this is the locally given name for these

enterprises and the Asian nationals who own and run them may very well not be Chinese. These ‘cash-only’ shops peddle a seemingly boundless variety of low-priced goods: ranging from folding umbrellas and mascara to instant noodles. They are viewed with a sense of suspicion and at times a poorly concealed derision by some, particularly those in businesses in the area, and are bought from by many. Speaking of the growing numbers of Chinese shops and the impact they have upon other business in the area, Tannie Mari said,

Today Somerset West isn’t the biggest or the best business...’cause as I say, as the foreigners, the Chinese and things come in, they are actually overshadowing us. Because we can’t keep up with their prices you see. (10<sup>th</sup> January 2012)

Unlike the charity shops and car boot sale, everything the Chinese shops sell is brand new, but because of its easily discernable eastern origin, the items are considered of a lesser quality compared to their more costly counter parts such as Woolworths. Nevertheless, Tannie Mari held that people would not resist the low quality goods sold within these stores as long as they were cheap, as they would always prefer price over quality. In doing so implying that those under financial duress do not have the foresight to consider the longer term implications of this choice, an assumption that she is not alone in holding and that will be contested over the following chapters. In defining The Flagship Shop as a place of quality, Angeline situates in a realm so different from the Chinese Shops that it negates comparison. When I asked her if she thought such shops affect Helping Hands Charity’ business, she said “no, no because people see quality in the [Helping Hands Charity] shops, they see quality products, very nice quality clothes so they can’t even compare us with the Chinese shops” (4<sup>th</sup> December 2012). Ilze too believed that people had begun to see through the appealing veneers of low prices, saying “people are moving away from the Chinese shops I see. They’re looking down on the quality of the Chinese shops” (7<sup>th</sup> January 2013). Angeline links the desire for cleanliness and quality in the context of second-hand versus Chinese shop thus:

KW “... I remember you once said to me that people loved to buy other people’s underwear”

“Some people do, if it’s not dirty they buy it. I think it’s because of poverty, because if you buy in the Chinese shops it’s underwear that you can maybe wear for a week then it’s torn. It’s better for them to buy something that is much more of a good quality even if someone has worn it as long as it’s clean they can buy it.” (4<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

A choice between low prices and quality becomes apparent, at Chinese shops, the car boot sale and many of the local charity shops. These spaces are cheap but they are viewed as unpleasant spaces to shop in, reserved for the very impoverished who it is implied are less discerning than customers with more money. Furthermore these better-off customers find the other charity shops, car boot sale and Chinese shops unappealing because they do not conform to the expected aesthetics of ‘respectability’: they are seen as dirty, crowded with other customers and as such selling low value commodities.

#### **4.3 A salesperson should wear a smile: The business of the charity shop**

During a workshop for Helping Hands shop staff and volunteers a facilitator suggested that those working in the shops are ambassadors of the Helping Hands Charity brand. As such, they are to carry the Helping Hands Charity brand ethos into the shops by making all kinds of people feel valued, because, it was added, everyone’s money is the same. This discussion introduced the second aspect of the workshop namely how to make things sell.

A special presentation was given by a second facilitator who suggested that it is critical for us to realise that we sell ‘trash’ to a certain kind, for example a wedding dress may have no use to someone who is already married but to someone else it may have huge potential; emphasising the need to uncover each customer’s needs. What emerged from this meeting was that the shops themselves are not charities (donated goods only mean something to Helping Hands Charity when translated into money, we were told) and we had to focus on selling. However, at the same time staff and volunteers were to behave in a manner that represented the brand of the charity as a whole. “What is the most important thing for a sales person to wear?” the facilitator asked us. “The French-maid-outfit?” Someone jokingly

suggested. “No,” she answered, “a smile”. Thus, I propose that carrying across the Helping Hands Charity brand and making things sell are not mutually exclusive as they may at first appear. For as the discussion of ‘other’ charity shops have shown it is not only appearances that infer value upon commodities — the atmosphere within the shops and the staff’s interactions with customers are also productive.

In the analysis hereafter I begin my exploration of selling value by first examining the two smaller shops, rather than The Flagship Shop as I have hitherto done. The three subsections that follow detail the interpersonal sales techniques that staff use to produce the Helping Hands Charity shops as spaces in which a pleasant shopping experience is produced – one that is more valuable than what is offered by The Mall and the perceived purveyors of low-quality goods. The two smaller shops do this by embodying the care of the Helping Hands Charity brand emphasised here, giving customers personal attention and building relationships with them that encourage them to visit regularly. The Flagship Shop is less able to easily produce this personal level of attention because of its use of volunteers and more formal approach to trading. However, rather than being problematic, I suggest that this less personal approach to selling is in line with its desired image of being a specialised second-hand shop rather than a charity shop.

#### **Tannie Hermien’s Shop: Knowing your customer’s name but not presuming to be their friend**

Upon entering Tannie Hermien’s Shop, regular customers are welcomed by name; unknown black people are *Boetie*, *Sussie* or occasionally *Mama*, and unknown older Afrikaans speaking white and coloured people are *Oom*, *Tannie*, *Mevrou* and *Meneer*. Tannie Hermien explains that people like to shop in her shop because of the way the staff treat their customers, as well as the fact that it is of better quality than its peers (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013). In fact, I propose it is the way that the staff treat their customers that makes the stock seem a bit

better. Creating a ‘feel good’, ‘welcoming’ atmosphere dependent upon the gregarious personalities of the staff is good for sales. Tannie Hermien described how the service in her shop differs from the service in conventional chain stores:

You see with us it is like a family shopping. You know them [the customers] because they are here every day, there is more people in the Woolworths— they are strangers for them, they [the staff] don’t care about the people as long as they get the salary every month, they don’t care if you buy or not, they don’t care. Okay, we also got to get a salary but it’s just the *way you are*, there is a difference between me and my co-workers and Mari and her co-workers there is a difference, between us also. It’s just the way you are. And then you can ask some of the customers [...] ‘which shop do you prefer?’ They will tell you, and you can ask them ‘why?’ and they will *not* tell you it’s because of the clothing or because of the bric-n-brac, they will tell you it’s because of the people that’s working there; the people make you feel welcome. The people are never *dikbek* [sulky] they always laughing they make you feel— Some of the ladies even come in they don’t wanna shop they just stand and say ‘it’s so nice I was so down when I come in here and now I feel better’. That’s the way we want it, because if you are here and you don’t wanna shop, later on you’ll wanna shop— We are gonna talk you into something! [Bursts into laughter] (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Tannie Hermien’s pronounces her shop a ‘welcoming’ space to buy things in: a familial space characterised by personalised interaction between customers who seek company and staff who are not driven by their own salary. Instead the staff care whether you buy something, and each member of staff, in his or her own way, makes you feel better.

Tannie Hermien and Tannie Mari have different sales techniques. Tannie Hermien introduces intimacy to the relationship which then serves as an invitation to feel comfortable in the space, whereas Tannie Mari is wary of being overly familiar. Although Tannie Mari loves people she does not assume to be their friend. Instead she uses compliments and the standard of her own taste to encourage sales.

Of the three managers, Tannie Hermien spends the most time in front of the shop. She is permanently stationed on her stool behind the counter even when pricing. She processes most of the sales transactions, ringing them up on the till, folding them and enclosing them in plastic packets. She therefore has a great deal of face time with the customers, who, as has

been discussed above, are acquainted with her. She emphasised the importance of the manager being the face of the shops because it is the manager who prices the stock and thus when customers have queries about price changes, it is the manager they want to speak to. This is interesting because it speaks to the suggestion in *The Strand Shop* that customers prefer to have a white face in front to signal quality, and at the same time it brings forth the instability of pricing and of customers' realisation of that instability. Tannie Hermien must be present to engage in sales-talk that values the objects for sale. She told me that after meeting a customer a few times in the shop she usually asks them their name and tells them hers. Everybody, she said, in particular black people, loves to be addressed by name. She added that people at chains stores like Woolworths do not know the names of their customers or care about them.

Mrs Van Rooyen and Ilze are two regular customers who spoke about the personal attention and 'special interest' they receive in Tannie Hermien's Shop. Each emphasised the personal nature of the service they receive and explains that *everybody* receives such attention. They said that this is not the norm in charity shops,

There's definitely a different atmosphere [between the local charity shops] Say for instance, sometimes you go into [another local charity shop] they never say 'good morning can I help you?' they just sort of stare at you, they are too serious. Hermien's always [...] makes your day when you come in, her [...] or Mari. And it's, it's strange, I go into the other charity shops but they don't even know my name, Hermien and Mari they know me [...]and Mari oh she's a good sales lady, she always comes out with something and say 'try this'. (Mrs Van Rooyen, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2013)

Treating everyone with the same courtesy is paramount. Regarding race in the shops, Tannie Mari stressed that she has a good relationship with all her customers, irrespective of race, although the "African person" is more sensitive to discrepancies,

They will watch me 'do I treat Kathryn and me the same' so you better, you better treat them all the same! You understand? Because they the customer! It's the same money! The same money! Her money and your money is the same money. (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

This proclamation points to money as the key to accessing the shop space and the special treatment it offers; for here money is lauded as the colour-blind leveller; but this unknowingly seems to exclude those with no money.

Tannie Mari's self-professed job description is 'sales lady', and she loves her job because she loves being with people and she does not have the responsibility of the manager's position (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). She is gifted with the ability to discern the size of any garment – a necessary skill amongst clothes with old-fashioned or European sizing or no size labels at all. She is able to quickly negate any negative consequence of the removed label. The following excerpt from her interview details her approach to selling:

I would say 'that looks nice on you' or 'did you see this? Have you seen this? This looks beautiful! I like this! Don't you like it?' you see that? I must always say 'I like it' and then — because people will think, they— it's actually —if it's good enough for me, I mustn't come smear it off on you if I don't like it. You see? I must say 'I will really buy this' you understand? [...] And it's things like that. And I think I get it right- I think I do it very well [laughs]. People come out and ask me "how do you like this?" (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Tannie Mari is careful to avoid being presumptuous, instead she uses her personal taste as a measure of merit and 'respectability'. In doing so, she does not claim to know the customer better than the customer knows themselves: she knows nurses wear navy because she herself was a nurse, she recommends clothing to customers because she herself likes it. This manner of interacting with customers flatters them. I saw Tannie Mari's sales techniques in action when a thirty-something black woman came out of the fitting rooms wearing a blue skirt she had fitted on. The woman showed everyone, proudly twirling, and she kept it on and put her original skirt in her packet. Tannie Mari suggested that she pair it with a red garment against the skirt. The customer was so convinced of this match that she tried on a number of red T-shirts to pair with the skirt.

Tannie Mari emphasised that customers are to respect the boundary between the Helping Hands Charity shop and the staff's private time after hours and outside of the

confines of the shop where the staff are no longer expected to act in their capacity as custodians of the shops. Tannie Mari said to me that she does not allow customers to call her at home to ask questions about merchandise in the shop, citing her need for privacy and space (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). Tannie Mari expects customers to avoid presumptuousness just as she does; being friendly is not to be confused with being friends.

The service in Tannie Hermien's Shop acts as a compliment to the precarious commodities for sale; customers are treated in a manner that makes both the shops and what is for sale in them, of value. This relationship and production of feel-good atmosphere is limited to within the space of the shop and customers are expected to adhere to the unwritten rules of conduct to maintain the feel of the space.

### **The Strand Shop: A personal shopping service**

The Strand Shop places similar emphasis upon making customers feel good and giving the customers personalised attention. Elmarie expressed the relationship between selling and making people feel better. Describing her job she said:

[I] sell [laughs]! See money and sell! [But] I don't think it's only about selling I think it's [about] making people feel good about themselves when they walk into the shop. So not everybody can afford to go [to] Freidman and Cohen and buy a dress. So whenever they come in there, I think it's important for them to feel that they're the most important person in the shop, even if they buy a R30 dress [...] I like to sell to people to make them feel better about themselves, not because they buy second-hand shop they and must feel bad about other people's clothing, but to make them feel like they are in Woolworths or Mr Price and buying [...] something and walked out and feel better about themselves [...] Over time they know you and you know what they want. Ja so you know: this one's a little difficult handle him this way, this one's a little this and handle him that way. You know how handle and what- it's like family! Really, you know your cousin is like this and oh don't mention that in front of your cousin or you're nephew is allergic to veggies — don't give him veggies. (16<sup>th</sup> October 2012)

Elmarie wants to eliminate any feelings of unworthiness that may be associated with buying second-hand goods. In doing so she makes the second-hand commodities valuable, lifting them up to the status of new goods. However, as Tannie Hermien pointed out, the personal relationships between customers and staff are also what make Helping Hands Charity shops

different to stores such as Woolworths or Mr Price. Thus, even though Elmarie uses them as an example of how she is aiming to make customers feel, her suggestion that the shops are like family is quite at odds with the nature of conventional retailing. Indeed, when I asked Tannie Ronel how the charity shop is different from other shops like Mr Price, she pointed towards customer service as the biggest difference between the two. She explains that in conventional retailing some staff are very inhospitable and do not offer to assist you, but in The Strand Shop the staff make you feel at ease and you want to come again. She explains that the workers' 'nice' personalities in The Strand Shop create a caring, peaceful atmosphere (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012). The shop is a space that you leave feeling better than you did when you entered. As Millicent said, "I just like the vibe and like some days when I'm feeling really down then I just go for a browse round there and I might find something and [...] it just brightens me up" (3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012).

Yolandi and I discussed the shop as a space where strangers talk to one another as they would in a familial house. The staff even introduce regular customers to one another (17<sup>th</sup> November 2012). The shop is rendered in terms more often associated with homes, than with business. Yolandi expressed this well: "*Baie mense kom en kyk net om hier [The Strand Shop] te wees, ek dink hulle het daai selfde gevoel wat ek het daai tuis gevoel* [Many people come to browse just to be here [The Strand Shop], I think they have that same feeling I have, that feeling of home]" (17<sup>th</sup> November 2012). Tannie Jakomein gave similar reasons for no longer shopping at any of the other second-hand shops in the area adding that it feels like family and like one's own shop (16<sup>th</sup> October 2012).

Getting to know their customers has its advantages, and The Strand Shop offers what Jeannine and Elmarie call 'the personal shopping service': they keep stock to one side in the back-space waiting for regular customers, whose specific tastes they know. Personalised shopping requires intimate knowledge of individual customer's taste and can thus only be

performed for regular customers whose shopping habits have already been observed in detail. Keeping merchandise aside for particular people is a gentle bending of the Helping Hands Charity shops' policies, but along with lay-bys and discounts it exists alongside the policy transgressions that occur in each of the shops.

The regular customers who are lucky enough to be the recipients of this service are very appreciative of it, claiming that the staff know who they are and what they like (Yolandi, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2012 & Millicent, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012). But according to Elmarie some customers prefer to be "the shop's friend" than the staff's friend (16<sup>th</sup> October 2012), so that they can get the best things. This shopping service is also built upon the idea that some people "appreciate" the value or quality of certain goods more than other people, on whom such precious things are wasted. On one occasion Jeannine set a blue and white Delft side plate aside for a customer who would "know" what it was.

An impromptu personalised shopping service is also offered in the form of extra attention for customers who need unique assistance. One such example is a quiet elderly black man that Elmarie has a very soft spot for. She said that at first when he came into the shop everyone thought he was drunk but now she thinks he had a stroke and that is why he walks a little awkwardly and sometimes makes a mess as he struggles to re-hang items of clothing. When he came into the shop she immediately went to him and helped him. The man had selected a shirt, but Elmarie explains that it would be far too large for him, and found him something else. When he left, purchases in hand, she explains to me that she thinks he is illiterate and thus does not select clothing by size but by colour or style.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Another example is of an elderly blind white Afrikaans woman who comes into the shop with her daughter. Her daughter describes the colour and pattern of the clothes and her mother feels the fabric between her fingers. Jeannine told me that they are regular customers, most often looking for sets and sleepwear. Today they were looking for a red and navy chemise. Theresa helped them find a red camisole, for the elderly woman to wear under a blouse.

Despite the emphasis upon interpersonal relations in the two smaller shops, the commodity still reigns supreme; for although customers may come just to feel good, they usually end up buying and then they feel even better. The relationships they have within the shops are mediated through commodities. The service, like that in Tannie Hermien's Shop, is positioned as better than that of impersonal conventional retailers — as something that sets the shop apart from its competitors and which renders a pleasant atmosphere within it.

### **The Flagship Shop: Formality and exclusion**

According to Tannie Emma people are prepared to pay more in The Flagship Shop because of the upmarket experience it offers. Critically, the experience in the atmosphere in the front of The Flagship Shop is different to that of Tannie Hermien's Shop and The Strand Shop because it does not aim, perhaps cannot aim, at producing a personal atmosphere, because its project of trading up has distanced itself from the charity shop persona. The shop's reliance upon volunteers means that it lacks the cult of personality that acts as a magnet in the other two shops. Yet this lack of overt care and joviality in combination with its 'specialised' more expensive product and "smart" displays is an effective emphasis upon who its desired customer with extra money is. Perhaps to the exclusion of others; Ilze described the reluctance of some poor people to scratch around in The Flagship Shop

I would say it's almost as though they find it intimidating the prices in the other shop. Whether it's the prices or whether it's the people I don't know. I think they find the other shop not so welcoming. (7<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

She captures the interconnectedness between the behaviour of the sellers and the prices of the stock. By being less friendly, the shop manages to seem more upmarket, and perhaps we can read this as less welcoming to customers who cannot afford to shop there and, whether intentionally or not, sets it further apart from the other two Helping Hands Charity shops.

The faces in the front of The Flagship Shop are mostly volunteers. They work half day shifts once a week. This results in a constantly revolving personality behind the counter and on the shop floor. Every volunteer I spoke to was motivated by the dual purpose of ‘giving back’ to the ‘community’ while being social and having something to do with their time (most are retired and so have a significant amount of free time). They choose to volunteer as shop assistants for Helping Hands Charity because it provided them both with a sense of ‘making some small difference’ and with something to occupy their time without becoming overly involved or emotionally distraught. Some had volunteered at different charities or in different capacities at Helping Hands Charity but had found that the interactions with vulnerable groups such as children, animals or the ill caused them distress. Therefore volunteers remain somewhat distant from the customers and the cause of Helping Hands Charity itself. What is interesting is that many of those volunteers I interviewed acknowledged the special role of the volunteer in The Flagship Shop and affirmed the idea that not just anyone could perform it, as a caring and people’s person personality is necessary, yet none of them claimed to have any sales techniques in line with this. Most seemed wary of engaging with customers browsing the shops. Shelagh told me that she disagreed with the idea of encouraging people to buy things they do not necessarily need. She said she would prefer it if they spent that money on food. John was wary of being seen as pushy if he tried to actively sell, as he himself hates being followed around in a shop. Cara felt that knowing the product was important, and that this was easy in The Flagship Shop and that she would occasionally compliment an item a customer was looking at, but limited her interjections to that.

I feel that the root of this lies in the volunteers’ motivations for volunteering and their distance from the communities of the shop. The Flagship Shop, Tannie Mari suggests, is

naturally disadvantaged because the staff (and perhaps the volunteers too) are not intimately acquainted to the customers, so they do not draw people into the shops.

The Strand Shop I also like, because I know almost every customer, because I lived in the Strand...And so there are so many people that I know. It's actually for me nice to work there and so on. ... Because you know that I sort of also draw that, draw the customers. Like Angeline and them, they are strangers. You can expect that, you can't expect them to, to talk to anybody and they don't even know them from nowhere. It's just like that. (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

The unfamiliarity is because of their distance to the customers – they do not live among them.

Angeline is Zimbabwean, and although she lives in the Helderberg she is not part of the community because of her status as foreigner. Similarly, all the volunteers are middle class, white and in the later years of middle age, and thus they reflect only a small portion of the demographics of the customers. Because I began my fieldwork within The Flagship Shop, I was unaware at first of how different its atmosphere was to that of the other two Helping Hands Charity shops. What I did notice was that volunteers did not seem to relate to the wide spectrum of customers that they encountered.

Volunteers are not committed to producing a jovial space in the same way that the staff in the two smaller shops are, indeed they leave customers alone, as they would like to be left alone when shopping. In their experience as white, relatively affluent customers, that is what constitutes an enjoyable shopping experience in the spaces of consumption. Yet this distance has the effect of rendering The Flagship Shop somewhat more serious than the smaller shops, and much less personal, reflecting its more expensive merchandise. Here it is worthwhile to recall those customers who nicknamed The Flagship Shop “The Mall”, as the moniker seems all the more accurate given the somewhat distant atmosphere of the shop and sales techniques of the volunteers. While it may seem illogical, the lack of personal care makes The Flagship Shop appealing to its target market because it seems more like a conventional shop, and thus gives the precarious commodity the appearance of stability (as has been attempted through its instructive displays).

#### 4.4 The atmospherics of *flânerie*

The warm welcoming feelings evoked by the smell [of baking bread], especially by the entrance, either enticed customers inside or made customers feel more positively disposed towards the store. This new trend in retailing, ‘atmospherics’, attends to aspects of the atmosphere like this (music, smell or appearance) in order to influence consumer behaviour. (Paterson, 2006: 149)

One afternoon, observing the quietly rummaging customers, Tannie Hermien remarked that she could tell by their body language that they were all just “scratchers” with no intention of buying anything. The notion of customers coming to visit the space itself called to mind my research on Cape Town’s Milnerton flea market where the figure of the *flâneur* can be found wandering between the market stalls,

Emerging at a time when true *flânerie* is impossible the market offers itself up as a space in which perusing and looking, trawling the arcades, can be revived in a manner that appears authentic. This leads us to the question of what is being produced to consume at the Milnerton Flea Market? If the market is to be posited as a space of modern day *flânerie* then what is being sold is peoples’ desire for authentic markets. It invents the search for treasure; drawing forth a particular set of customers disillusioned with supermarkets in search of sensory stimulation. Such desires for authentic exchange- despite their appearance- do not escape the world of commodities but are already produced by it. What happens here therefore is not really different but [...] the sale of the desire for something different. (Watt, 2010: 48-9)

I propose the atmospherics of the Helping Hands Charity shops make them amenable spaces for modern-day *flâneurs*. The Flagship Shop’s upmarket atmosphere and the two smaller shops’ personal service seem to offer some sort of privileging aesthetic and authentic experience. But this *flânerie*, I suggest, is not without boundaries – it requires that customers reproduce the aesthetics of the space through their behaviour.

Then there are those customers who come into the shops when they have no money and look around at the stock with no intention of buying. As Tannie Ronel said, “If I don’t have money then I, feel happy I saw the stuff, I don’t know why! If I saw the stuff and then I’m satisfied” (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012). These seem to be concentrated in The Flagship Shop, which

I believe is because of its higher prices and less accessible stock. Tannie Emma described the shop's relationship with the almost poor:

There are the people that I'd say that are, not down and out, but they don't really have the money but they would like, they do appreciate those few items- they will lift them up. (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

Whether these objects lift the people up or the people lift the objects up I am unsure. What The Flagship Shop lacks in warmth it makes up for in grandeur. It was suggested that its higher price range than the other two shops meant that those who did not readily purchase would still come to look at the 'smart' things. The presence of both types of browsers is encouraged because they may be able to buy something, no matter how small, once they are in the shops.

These scratchers were not the only non-buying customers: staff, particularly in the smaller shops, stressed the importance of being a "people's person" and having a "heart for other people" because some people come for the atmosphere and company alone. In the two smaller shops *flânerie* is focused on basking in the caring atmosphere of the shops and is mostly the lonely and elderly who seek out human interaction. One such example is Oom Lloyd; an elderly white man who likes to pop in to visit the staff. He does not look around the shop at all but comes straight to the counter. He said to me, "It's like a club here only *lekker* [nice] people [...] these ladies, they keep me smiling" (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013). The Strand Shop and Tannie Hermien's, position themselves as amenable social spaces, and as I discussed in section 4.2, the personal relationships that are built with customers call many visitors to the shop seeking sociality. The type of *flânerie* propagated here is one of authentic care, in opposition to the impersonal treatment people receive in retail spaces such as The Mall.

*Flânerie* captures the extent to which the strategies of selling personalised attention in the Tannie Hermien's Shop and The Strand Shop and the more austere luxury of The Flagship Shop are successful in creating commodities so appealing they are worth coming

only to look at, and spaces so enjoyable it is enough to simply spend time in them. This appeal I suggest lies also in the production of an aesthetic that seems to speak to race and class. Teppo and Houssay-Holzschuch (2009: 366), suggest that within the context of South Africa white aesthetics and behaviour are presented as the norm of what is socially acceptable is pervasive to the point of invisibility,

the ideal state of being a good White, which everyone, including people of colour tried to achieve, whether passing for White – as was once commonplace – or not. During apartheid, a Coloured person found it much easier to pass for White as soon as he or she could adjust his/her *habitus* to be respectable enough. This ‘respectability’ included being clean and neat, wearing good clothes and speaking in a manner considered ‘civilized.’

Yet white aesthetics and behaviour appears too blunt an instrument to divine the aesthetics that produce value anew here. What exactly constitutes valuing aesthetics and behaviour in the eyes of participants is only ever alluded to and would appear less specific than simply whiteness. To appeal to Helping Hands Charity shop consumer’s sensibilities, an aesthetic emerges within this space that seems to be equated with the ‘expensive’ respectable person. It is a broader notion than the one Teppo and Houssay-Holzschuch (2009:366) suggest, though it draws on similar ideas. By using these aesthetics as markers of quality, the Helping Hands Charity shops draw upon a pre-existing discourse of what the norms are of determining value. The necessity of such commodity aesthetics is particularly salient in the space of the charity shop because its goal of business is undermined by customers’ expectations of used-up goods and charity on the form of almost give-away prices. Thus it would appear that *flânerie* is not without limits and must be policed if the valuing atmosphere is to be maintained.

The maintenance of this aesthetic requires that customers produce it also – in order to be a *flâneur* in the Helping Hands Charity shops, one must behave accordingly. Usually black or coloured customers come into any of the Helping Hands Charity shops carrying packages, such as bags of groceries and they leave them silently near the counter. This phenomenon talks to an awareness of the unwritten boundaries of the shops.

Ideas of disciplining people who transgress the rules of the space in a way that does not deter their business, reminding people that they must not steal but not following them around, is important in each of the shops. As the face of the Helping Hands Charity brand, staff are required to act accordingly, treating customers roughly it was said would not only deter them from returning to the Helping Hands Charity shops, but would reflect poorly upon Helping Hands Charity itself. Thus I observed customers being chastised in a joking or gentle way.

Tannie Hermien speaks of not following people around the shop, making them feel uncomfortable, but rather of allowing them to browse freely unhindered; watching only those who give off an air of wanting to ‘fool’ the staff. This echoes the words of the volunteers. Thieves, Tannie Hermien told me, can be identified by their body language – they look down and then glance at the staff, then look down again and then back at the staff. Hermien and Mari monitor these suspected criminals not by directly staring at them but by using their peripheral vision. Tannie Mari appears to be paging through the *Huisgenoot*, but she is carefully surveying the shop floor. This appearance of watching without appearing to watch is critical, as it illustrates the balance between creating a welcoming space and policing the space to prevent shrinkage, and this is consistent throughout the shops. In The Flagship Shop the viewing pane between the office and the front-space allows the manager to watch the customers partially undetected, thus serving a similar function to Tannie Mari’s magazine.

The idea of ‘doing as you would be done by’ in the shops emerged in conversation with Elmarie as well, when she spoke about the limits of having a warm heart. She suggested that she treats customers in a way she expects them to treat her, and when people behave otherwise they receive a gentle but firm message. What is interesting about this concept which I saw in all three shops is that it was applied irrespective of who the customer was. For example, a notoriously difficult white female customer of The Flagship Shop was usually dealt with begrudgingly, while a homeless man seeking donations in Tannie Hermien’s Shop

was treated politely. “Here he is treated with respect as long as he is respectful – which he always is.” Some behaviour is not tolerated in the shops, those who have been caught stealing and those who threaten the staff. One of the street-people, Jonas, who used to receive milk for his dogs in The Strand Shop, is no longer allowed inside after an abusive incident.

Perhaps the simplest and most physical trespass upon the commodity aesthetics of the space is not unruly behaviour, or even the rare incidences of theft deemed no more prevalent than in conventional retailing. What really seeks to dislodge the precarious commodity here is the body: when a street-person or black or coloured person with a body odour too pungent for the shop space, a can of air freshener is liberally sprayed around the shop, or a stick of incense lit the moment they step outside. This happens in front of other customers already in the shop, it is not disguised. To allow body odour to linger would undo the work of presenting the space and its commodities as clean and neat. The smell of someone else’s body, particularly if this body is considered poor and black (and I only ever saw this practise occur after black or coloured people were in) is the antithesis of the type of ambiance the shops are trying to produce. It is too intimate, too visceral and too reminiscent of poverty to be permitted, so it is masked by the aroma of artificial flowers.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the manner in which manipulating the appearance of the commodity – through artful presentation – makes it appealing to customers despite its status as a precarious commodity. This desire, or ‘need’, is critical to the act of exchange – without it customers would not hand over the equivalence in money. The commodity aesthetics in each shop subscribe to slightly different techniques, yet each shop exerts considerable labour presenting the objects for sale in a manner that emphasises their sensuous qualities, is eye catching and in arranging the space of sale in a manner that allows for easy movement and access to what is for sale. In addition to this labour of arrangement and display, is the

production of atmosphere through buyer-seller interaction and customer service. For the interaction between the subject of the buyer and the subject of the seller is mediated by the objectified commodity which appears invisible but for the spectre of its exchange-value – talking about use-value or displaying use-value is in actual fact a display of exchange-value. These aesthetics produce value in the precarious commodity because they mask the instability of its production. The aesthetic produced here as birthing value anew speaks to an ideal of an expensive, respectable person. In order to preserve this aesthetic, any behaviour seen as contrary to it is policed. Thus the atmosphere that welcomes *flânerie* is maintained by boundaries that speak to a raced and classed space, although not in certain terms. Through these labours the precarious commodities for sale are given valuable biographies.

## *Chapter 5*

### **Purchasing the otherwise unattainable: Buyers' negotiations of value and the nature of the charity shop**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

“She must have been a glamour-puss” a customer remarked as I hung a selection of fur caplets and jackets onto the metal stand in The Flagship Shop. In fact these furs were the collected product of various donations and had been languishing in the back-area of the shop for some time before I put them out for sale; although of course to the front-room observer none of this was apparent.

This chapter investigates how customers engage with the unstable value of the precarious commodity in the charity shop. It shows how customers draw upon ideas of racial nostalgia and ‘expensive respectability’ to negotiate questions of use-value. Imagining a ‘quality’ past for the precarious commodity simultaneously allows them to circumnavigate any discomfort in buying used-goods and to produce value in it anew. Just as the charity aspect of the charity shop made for an atmosphere of personal care described in Chapter 4, the expectations of charity also serve to remind customers of the instability of value here, and they draw upon this as they seek out discounts in their quest for a bargain. However these negotiations are also limited and mediated by the space of the charity shop as customers who wish to resale the commodities they purchase are thought of treading upon the ethics of gifting.

These objects are the stuff of fetish, seen as able to connect customers with the past and render them upwardly mobile. For second-hand goods are as, if not more, easily fetishized than their mass produced counter parts because they are better disguised and because the realm in which they are consumed appears to be the opposite of alienating trade.

## **Imagining ‘expensive’ donors: Attempting to locate the origin of the precarious commodity**

In a related series, the Portraits-Robots (portraits made with the trash of the "sitters"). Arman explored an earlier stage in the life cycle of consumer objects. Here the containers point to the process of symbolic consumption, as objects literally become stand-ins for personality and social identity. (Hamilton, 2008: 58)

If donors have been rendered somewhat mute in the clamour of customers, staff and volunteers, it is a reflection of their fleeting presence in the space; instead it is their donations that, like the changeling fairy-tale child, are substitute for their former owners. And the back-area labour of purging, sorting and unpacking have made for relatively pristine stock to be presented to the public, combined with the attention to cleanliness and neatness in the arrangement of space produces an aura of ‘respectability’ that allows for a very particular imaginary of donor to be read. Donors are imagined as wealthy, tasteful, of ‘quality’, often European and emblematic of the normative “good white” described by Teppo and Houssay-Holzschuch (2009). Having an imaginary of donors is useful because it projects a rosy picture of the hidden origins of the objects for sale; it presents an attempt to negotiate the value of the precarious nature of the commodity. The way in which the donors are rendered is in the language of the ‘expensive respectability’ associated with an idealized ‘superior’ whiteness, which is synonymous here with quality. In describing who they think the donors are it becomes apparent who the donors are not: the donations are not from the homes of poor, ‘rubbish’, or unrespectable people.

The best donations were thought to be made by “Europeans”. These, Tannie Emma suggests, are superior to donations made by “locals” who are only slowly being educated that “junk” cannot be donated in the hope that somebody will be “grateful” for it (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012). She conceptualizes the charity shop as a discerning space rather than one in which every type of object is welcome; Europeans understand this, “locals”, she proposes, do not.

Ilze too was confident that, based on the quality of the stock for sale many of the incoming donations are made by Europeans living in the area, “cause if I look at all the imported stuff, you know there’s a lot of French and German stuff. That tells me that a lot of it comes from there” (7<sup>th</sup> January 2013). Europeans in the sense that Tannie Emma and Ilze refer to, are undoubtedly white, and wealthy enough to move seasonally between South Africa and their native homes.

Donors are also imagined as wealthy. as Joe explains to me that from the time he had his own second-hand shop until today he has been ‘hooked’ on buying from Helping Hands Charity since it receives such “nice” things since Somerset West is “an affluent society” (7<sup>th</sup> September 2012). And in a similar vein when Tannie Ronel elucidated that all donors “must be very, very expensive people cause of the quality” of donations (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012). Thus in the people making any sort of donation to Charity are in the public imagination white and wealthy, and able to rid themselves of still-usable goods through institutions rather than kinship networks.

Believing the donors to be ‘quality people’ influences the relationship between the customers and the objects they consume; it infuses them with “respectability” equating them with objects of value. As was suggested in Chapter 2, quality (or lack thereof) in the charity shops becomes associated with racial types. This influences the relevance of consumer divestment rituals, which are much discussed in the literature on second-hand consumption.<sup>1</sup>

Tannie Ronel is not bothered by buying previously owned goods:

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<sup>1</sup> Lury proposes that divestment rituals are often performed to empty the object of meaning; in the case of the person relinquishing ownership attempting to erase any traces of themselves and their biography invested in the object; and for the new owner wishing to avoid symbolic (and on occasion physical) contamination (1996:13). Roux (2010:65) suggests that anthropologists and psychologists often contribute the taboo of reusing other people’s possessions to the notion of sympathetic magic and that “because clothing intimately links with the body, negative contagion both through similarity and contact, may impede the re-appropriation of unknown people’s possessions”. Divestment rituals such of the nature Lury and Roux suggest are in a manner present to the labour of purging by the staff, a labour that assists in the production of an expensive imaginary of the donors.

Because I know it comes from good people. It comes from people of style and people of quality. That is what is important to me. The people who donate to them are not rubbish people [...] because their things are not old fashioned, understand?<sup>2</sup> (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012)

Most customers I encountered were wholly unconcerned about contamination, and performed no divestment rituals. An ordinary “throwing it in the wash” was sufficient. Only one elderly, white female customer expressed some anxiety over the origin of her purchase: “I don’t mind buying second-hand” she said “but I always wash them thoroughly —cause you never know” (9<sup>th</sup> November 2012). You never know what? I wondered, but felt it impolite to ask. Upon reflection I believe the woman meant you never know the history of the object— the conditions of its past life and owner.

While Roux (2010:65-66) suggests that consumers are most desirous of buying clothing worn by a previous owner as similar to themselves as possible, so as to make re-territorializing the object easier. I propose that any difference between the customer and the donor here is valuing rather than de-valuing; as Van Damme and Vermoesen (2009: 292) suggest: the “older imprints [of prior ownership] are sought after and left untouched, indicating a special veneer or ‘patina’ that embodies precisely the crucial meaning or value of the product for the purchaser”. In Helping Hands Charity shops this patina is one of moneyed ‘respectability’, and is viewed as value producing, thus it negates the necessity of any divestment driven by anxiety of contamination. Furthermore, this “patina” or “veneer” and its relationship to the value of the commodity at stake are critical to the discussion of customer’s own understanding of value.

## 5.2 Alternative ‘consumption’ aesthetics and expertise

You have your dealers that come in ‘cause they’re looking for a bargain. And then you have a lot of poor people. But you do, obviously, have other people in who like the second-hand shop scene. There are quite a lot of people I

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<sup>2</sup> *Want ek weet dit kom van goeie mense af. Dit kom van mense met style en mense met kwaliteit. Dis wat vir my important is. Dit is nie rubbish mense wat dit vir hulle skenk nie [...] want hulle goed is nie outyds nie, verstaan jy?* (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012)

guess who like scratching around and that like finding something that they can use in the second-hand shop, you do get those people. I would still say that our main clientele is poor people and, obviously, mainly black people. (Shelagh, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2012)

Within the Helping Hands Charity shops there are those customers who, unable to afford to purchase the first-hand goods they desire, use second-hand spaces to bring branded identity and newness within their reach. And those for whom the three shops offer the opportunity to find special treasurable objects that, identified by expert knowledge, offer an enchanting connection with the past. I propose that, despite their differences these customers are united in a quest for ‘value for money’ and quality. Not unlike the shoppers written by Van Damme and Vermoesen (2009:291)<sup>3</sup> who select objects thought to be high-value low-cost items to “capture value” in a process that links the very rich and the very poor by a shared enthusiasm for bargain hunting or “clever consumption”. What is considered “high-value” and what are thought to be “low-cost” is, as this thesis has argued, highly mutable when it comes to precarious commodities. While the imaginary of donors is important to understanding how customers begin to work out precarious commodities’ status as used-objects by envisioning a ‘quality’ past for them; customers use different aesthetic and expert ways to negotiate value further.

### **Aspirational shopping: Borrowing from the second-hand brand**

Tannie Ronel said that The Strand Shop caters for under-privileged people. She gave the example of people wanting, but being unable to buy something beautiful to wear to a special event, because they do not possess “*daai kwalitiet geld* [that quality of money].” But on venturing into the Helping Hands Charity shop they find exactly the “quality” well-fitting

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<sup>3</sup> In their historical case study of consumption at public auctions in the Flemish village of Erembodegem in the late eighteenth century Van Damme and Vermoesen (2009: 274) argue against the presumption that “second-hand consumption is often regarded as merely a survival strategy”. Drawing on their own analysis of historical records as well as the work of Gregson and Crewe (2003), Van Damme and Vermoesen (2009:291) suggest thrift is a rationale behind both the residents in Erembodegem and today’s enthusiasm for buying used-goods. The authors surmise that much of what was purchased had a high use-value, and the very rich and the very poor share an enthusiasm for bargain hunting (Van Damme and Vermoesen, 2009:291).

garments they were not previously able to afford first-hand. These clothes, she stressed, are as good as their first hand-counterparts, the only difference being they are cheap enough to buy.

The Helping Hands Charity shops, Tannie Emma proposes, allow a particular section of customers to buy objects that in other circumstances they would be able to afford — objects emblematic of a socio-economic class lifestyle they have only ever been able to admire. In purchasing these themselves they hope to become what these things represent, and in so doing they become the things themselves,

You know the programmes on TV about finding great buys and that I think that's influenced a lot of people as well to go round to charity shops and that to look for that bargain. The other people, um, may have worked in a home and seen the type of décor and aspired to that and now they see it in the second-hand shop and that is something precious because that is something that was their aspiration. That is something I noticed when I was in Strand, that a lot of the things, the old fashioned things that came in, a lot of the char ladies bought that and I just thought about that a lot and thought: well maybe that was because it was in the homes that they charred for; and this was seen to them as being, taken just a little bit up. I don't say that's what it is but that was my perception. (25<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

In analysing conceptions of value and identity making by customers who purchase branded clothing and almost new goods I draw upon the idea of 'aspirational brands' and Lury's notion of 'positional consumption' when "commodities are purchased and used as markers of social position in regard to other consumers" (as cited in Paterson, 2006: 39) I describe this as 'aspirational shopping'. Aspirational shoppers position themselves in terms of first-hand consumers of quality branded goods, more affluent than themselves (the imagined consumer whose cast off goods they themselves are now purchasing) and in positioning themselves in this way they aspire to 'better' their social position. Attempts to produce identity through the acquisition of objects are concerned with fantasy, for the practice of consumption is intimately intertwined with desire and fantasy. As Paterson (2006:23-5) writes, much of consumption is about "wanting" and what he describes as the "imaginary anticipation" of

acquiring materials that will allow for the production of grander day-dreams and fantasies, rather than being the substance of such fantasies. This is in part due to commodity aesthetics which appeal to customers' sensual appraisal of the commodity, the linkage between abstract values and certain commodities through, for example, marketing can create the conscious or unconscious perception that the commodity is able to satisfy some lack in their lives (Lupton, 1998:140-44). In this way aesthetics become about commodities and vice versa each appearing separate from the other.

Tannie Ronel was ebullient describing the wonders of The Strand Shop: “*selfs die skoene!* [even the shoes!] That one lady bought three pairs of shoes there, so beautiful, brand new shoes! *Wat meer wil jy hê?* [What more do you want?]” (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012). Brand names and newness are held as the highest markers of value, synonymous with quality. The brands you find in the Helping Hands Charity shop are Woolworths or Truworths, brands that are quality, said Yolandi; better than the type of low-end brands found at low-price chain stores such as Mr Price. In The Strand Shop customers who buy only or predominately branded goods are referred to as “label tarts”, women who profess to love “the real thing”: genuine leather, luxury branded goods and proper quality. They look for the more expensive brands than the ones Yolandi describes, for them Polo is a marker of quality. It is worthy here to remember under apartheid such aspiration for luxury was limited to those classified ‘white’ and thus with abolition of apartheid the acquisition of luxury goods is tied up with symbolism of emancipation (Posel, 2010: 170-4).

People often told me that they heard about the shops or told other people about the shops when compliments were extended by either party on the branded, expensive looking clothes they are resplendent.

“So I said, ‘did you see the jacket that he’s wearing the other Sunday morning? I buy it by that Helping Hands Charity shops’. They said no they don’t believe it, I said ‘yes!’ [...] *Want dis kwaliteit so ek’t gese, en dis baaie nekies and dis mooi*

[Because it's quality like I said, it is neat/good and it is beautiful]" (Tannie Ronel, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012)

"You know actually I saw a lady, and I always complimented her on her nice clothing and nice jerseys - cause I'm a bit of a people's person you know-I would chat to her and she said to me 'know what? I've stopped buying anything; I only buy from the Helping Hands Charity shop'." (Ilze, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Giving or receiving admiration re-enforces the power of the objects to confer value on their owner. Through compliments and admiration the aura of 'respectability' and knowledge of the Helping Hands Charity shops is spread attracting new customers; although sometimes customers are reluctant to reveal the origins of their purchases. Letting people know where you bought the admired item positions you as a skilled bargain-hunter, an often admirable quality in itself; yet at the same time revealing the second-hand origins of the item may disrupt its aura of expensiveness<sup>4</sup>.

Williams and Windebank (2002:506) take issue with what they propose is a trend of framing second-hand 'consumption' as motivated by non-economic reasons that emphasise meaning making and identity formation, they "argue that although affluent consumers might acquire second-hand goods and use alternative retail sites out of choice for non-economic reasons, this is not the case for the populations of these lower income urban neighbourhoods". The authors found that low-income Britons forced by economic circumstance to buy their clothing second-hand were eager to stop doing so, and attempted to find other, first-hand, routes of consumption. In citing what they describe as the economically excluded consumers' desire to escape such alternative retail realms out of a sense of indignity and stigma, I fear that they undermine the agency and ability of this less economically endowed consumer to create an inclusive identity through the acquisition of branded and

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<sup>4</sup> Objects are seen to have the power to infer value upon their owner. Buying, wearing and using these objects projects the appearance of being expensive without revealing the origin of the clothes and their status as pre-owned is blinded. Thus the active choice of selecting material objects to consume is also a process of self-presentation and constructing certain subjectivities and indicating membership to cultural groups for objects are all "expressions of self even when they act as disguises rather than reflections" (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981:15).

barely-worn clothing and almost new products. For as Gregson and Beale (2004: 689) write “wearing is simultaneously about the conjunctions of subjectivities and identities in the sartorial; interior modes of being with the exteriorities of appearance”. Thus in consuming second-hand clothing the consumer either purposefully or by default produces a particular subjectivity that will be read off their bodies by members of their society<sup>5</sup>.

**“I’ve found the most wonderful treasures there!”<sup>6</sup> Seeking treasure, knowledge and collecting**

Yet scavenging remains a highly meaningful practice, not because of the necessities it fulfills but because of the wide assortment of opportunities, anxieties, and enjoyments that it makes possible. (Reno, 2009: 33)

Now I turn to examine those customers seeking out things beyond the ordinary. Different from their aspirational shopping counter parts these treasure hunters find value in rare and unusual objects not readily available first-hand and thus require a specialized knowledge in order to identify them. Ilze defined ‘treasure’ as

Something that is really; I would say, almost [a] crazy bargain [...] like I bought a little binoculars for my grandson the other day for R20. In its little case and it’s just exactly what he needs, he’s four years old now and I want him to start watching birds. [...] I can never tell you what I’m looking for either. I’m never going in there to look for something. I just go to browse. (7<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

While aspirational shoppers would perhaps prefer to purchase their loot first-hand if they had the means, the treasure seeker’s pass time can only exist in second-hand spaces that

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Hansen (2000:1-20; 248) describes the sale of second-hand clothes imported from the West is an expansive industry. Indeed, the selection and wearing of this used clothing allows Zambians to embody both cultural and aesthetic values, as Hansen (2000:1-20; 248) writes that ‘salaula’ is the name given to second-hand clothing its literal meaning refers to the practise of selecting choice second hand clothes from the mountainous piles of available merchandise (2000:1). Through this practise ‘salaula’ wearing Zambians appropriate second-hand clothing by saturating it with their own symbolic meanings; and in such a way they adopt a unique approach to wearing western fashions to define the Zambian self (Hansen, 2000:1-19).

<sup>6</sup> Ilze, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2013.

specialize in no particular type of used object and therefore entertain limitless possibilities of what may be found and limited knowledge of their potential worth.<sup>7</sup>

Treasure seekers<sup>8</sup>, are in the minority it was said and are more easily associated with the affluent second-hand consumer motivated by uneconomic reasons described by Williams and Windebank (2002:506) than aspirational shoppers because the objects they consider to be treasure are only available second-hand and as treasure hunting hints of nostalgia in this treasure hunting; Joe said that occasionally he wishes that the objects he has collected could speak their histories to him and Ilze thinks about how the previous owner, now likely passed away, must have ‘treasured’ the old things and that in a way she feels she will continue to treasure them.

The figure of the treasure hunter is one that I first came upon during my research at a Cape Town flea-market. The treasure hunter of the flea market is part bargain hunter, out to find “something for nothing”, part knowledgeable collector (Watt, 2010:43-46), often embodied by the unscrupulous dealer. This treasure hunter is very much present in the Helping Hands Charity shops, diligently surveying the merchandise hoping to find something precious that has escaped the notice of the staff and other customers.

Part of what appeals to the treasure hunter is the experience of treasure hunting itself, so the moment in which the second-hand commodity is ‘found’ in the charity shop in a sea of ‘ordinary things’ serves to bolster its apparent benevolent power as an inalienable object. This is as much about the experience as the objects itself. The process of ‘finding’ the commodities is important to the enjoyment of the activity and the production of their value. Finding treasure should not be too easy, but it should also not be distasteful. The shops are

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<sup>7</sup> The sheer volume and variety of donations the Helping Hands Charity shops makes it difficult for those pricing to take the time to research it all.

<sup>8</sup> Such treasure seekers are in a way the customer that The Flagship Shop aims to attract, as their pockets are deeper than aspirational shoppers and they seek out the ‘better’ second-hand things. Though in actual fact treasure hunters frequent all three shops, as it is the two smaller shops where the greatest bargains are to be found, because their prices are in general lower.

clean and neat and are pleasant to spend time in but despite the careful attention to arrangement there is a limit to how ordered unlike items can be arranged in and so to find something one still has to look through everything. This balance between being clean and neat but not overly ordered allows for fortuitous findings. Ilze elaborated on the relationship between searching, which she described as ‘scratching’, and buying in the charity shop:

You know I sometimes think that they should for example, put the clothes in the size range you know? But then I just corrected myself the other day and said ‘though that won’t work’ because then I will go and look for something, say for my daughter, cause I never buy clothes for myself, I’ll go buy for my daughter and then I would go straight for that size. Whereas now, I would browse through the things and say “ah but there’s something for my granddaughter!” you understand? Then I said to myself “actually no, that won’t work”. I think the scratching, is part of the whole experience, you know? (7<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Not everyone can be treasure hunters, in order to discover treasure you have to have particular knowledge, and finding treasure in the charity shop is based on the premise that you must have greater instinctual knowledge about what is “valuable” than the staff. Particularly as the staff depend mostly upon use-value, and branding to determine prices they overlook things that do not have clear markers of value. Describing what he buys, Joe said that he buys a miscellany of things that others do not recognize,

It’s like there is no choice to it, I always find it exciting when I find little treasures you know what people don’t really judge as a treasure or what they haven’t got the knowledge about and, I sometimes try to teach them but I gave it up because like I would only spoil it for myself you know? (7<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

Joe described how he determines what is valuable as instinctual; as if the object talks to him, yet he went on to acknowledge that an appreciation for the workmanship of the object, he is able to recognize craftsmanship like “fine hand-carving” that other people pass over as ‘pressed’ not knowing the process of the labor. Similarly he described people not valuing the material of certain thing, giving the example of underpricing brass and silver things, not knowing that they are solid. His knowledge is supplemented by research on the internet.

Sometimes he sees something in The Flagship Shop and then researches it on the internet to see if it is valuable.

The importance of an ability to recognize the quality of objects was foregrounded by Ilze as a characteristic predominantly of those with means. Explaining the difference between the clientele in Tannie Hermien's Shop and The Flagship Shop she said that more "treasure hunters" frequent The Flagship Shop, and the more "needy" people shop at Tannie Hermien's though not exclusively. Because of this she sometimes escorts these needy people to The Flagship Shop herself:

When I see something nice I say 'no man come let me take you to the other one' 'ah but it's too expensive there!' I say 'but this is very good'; because they don't know the value of what they buy. I took a man [...] there the other day. I said 'come, come, come you gotta have a briefcase' I said 'come let me go show you'. I mean a buffalo leather brief case for forty bucks [...] I said 'buy this thing! Come I've got polish, we'll polish it for you, brand new again'. So um, I would say it's almost as though they find it intimidating the prices in the other shop. (7<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

The man described by Ilze, was to her mind unable to appreciate and recognize the "bargain" of the leather briefcase, an inability that identifies him as one of the "needy" people. How he works out the value of the precarious commodity is to her mind arrested by his lack of expertise. In contrast to the unknowledgeable "needy" person that Ilze spoke of, is the treasure hunter that Tannie Emma labels a "connoisseur" whom she positions as the opposite to "the bottom end of customers". These connoisseurs, she clarifies, are not automatically dealers; instead they are defined by their possession of intimate information about a category of things, such as books or art. She professed enjoyment in conversations with connoisseurs from whom she had learnt much helpful information (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012).

As this thesis has reasoned, precarious second-hand commodities are not so easily identified as valuable as their first-hand counter parts whose production is the main determinant of value. Reno (2009: 33) writing on repurposing rubbish suggests that

[I]t is not only that reuse relies on knowledge of the processes by which a thing is produced; in some cases it may involve ‘even more creativity than original production’ (Strasser, 1999: 10). As such, remade items serve as an embodiment of certain kinds of skill. This might be called a form of reciprocal individuation, whereby a person’s worth is foregrounded through their ability to successfully realize or identify the qualities of objects (see Bourdieu, 1984; Munn, 1986; Silverstein, 2003).

In light of this the so-called connoisseurs and treasure-seekers are held in higher esteem by the other shop inhabitants than their “needy” counter parts because they are seen to be able to recognize the markers of quality. The reciprocal individuation that Reno recognizes is not so different to the way aspirational shoppers use brands and newness to determine quality in the hope of transferring that quality onto their person. Here the lines that separate the treasure hunter and the aspirational shopper become blurry; while each seeks out different categories of objects and the markers of value they share an appreciation for the process of finding and identifying the quality object.

Gascoygne (as cited in Camic, 2010:83), theorizing the moment of discovering the found object cites, suggests that there is “an emotional experience ‘of an aesthetic nature ... as the finder discovers an unrealised significance in the object’”. The finder becomes “empowered” creator in moving this found object from its environment and situating it in a new, different one in so doing changing its reality and forming “a new boundary” around it (Camic, 2010:83). By extracting the found treasure from the Helping Hands Charity shop and exhibiting it in their home, the treasure hunter is seemingly part producer of the object’s ‘meaning’ ‘value’. Because the treasure hunter is often a collector it seems worthwhile to consider Benjamin (1935; as cited in Watt, 2010:47) on collectors, who speaks of a value different from both exchange, and use-value, as

Collector himself has a different relationship with the commodity he collects. The collector is intent of “stripping things of their commodity character by means of his possession of them” (Benjamin, 1935:84). For the collector, utopia is a world that mirrors ours in every way except that objects are “free from the bondage of being useful” (Benjamin, 1935: 84) and are treasured purely as artful expression of self to be placed in a hallowed position in the home. Yet the collectors’

attempts to extract things from the commodity world, succeeds only in replacing use-value with connoisseur's value, a form of hyper exchange that only further commodifies them (Benjamin, 1935:84).

What defines treasure for the treasure hunter is often exchange-value. In other words the object is treasure because like the gold medallion on the ocean floor, it is an item of high exchange-value discovered in an unlikely environment in which it is not appreciated for what it is. Although as I have said the treasure hunter is often collector, Joe is one such example of this overlap. He described how he has many printer's trays filled with small objects he has found, how his cupboards are cluttered with things that he 'treasures'.

### **5.3 Negotiating price and charity**

Value, for Simmel, is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by subjects. (Appadurai, 1986:3)

Signage in each of the Helping Hands Charity shops proclaims "no discounts", but the reality played out daily on the shop floor is far less cut and dried than the sign suggests. The customers of Charity are united in their quest for 'value for money' and quality for money, similar to the customers of Milnerton flea market's desire to "get something for nothing" (Watt, 2010: 43-46). Why do customers feel entitled to request a cheaper price than the one formally stickered onto their purchases? The answer is twofold, on the one hand the price of the second-hand object is always considered unfixed because of the object's history and on the other hand the shops' charitable associations exacerbate the preciousness of its status as commodity.

"[T]he source of a second-hand item is a prior consumer rather than its original producer" (Van Damme and Vermoesen, 2009:294). They are seemingly distinct from their mass produced counter parts. Even things that mimic newness, upon which a labour of purging has been enacted, are understood within a second-hand context, always ever only being almost-new. But because the precarious commodities of the charity shop are not newly produced, and because they have been used, they are never fully commodities. Thus, unlike

their conventional retailing counterparts their price is always understood by customers as a subjective judgement rather than a formula of homogenised labour time. This perception of unfixed value and by virtue unfixed price; in the mind of the customer legitimates a negotiation of price in bargaining.

Bargaining in alternative spaces of exchange, particularly second-hand ones, is by no means uncommon or unexpected. In Milnerton flea market bargaining is for the most part expected by customers and dealers and for many customers it is considered integral to the pleasure of the market, and the interaction between buyer and seller in bargaining is considered “an antidote to alienating market relations because it adds a sense of fun and excitement to a purchase” (Watt, 2010:44). What makes the Helping Hands Charity shops different to a space such as the flea market is that the seller of the former are resistant to this bargaining, on the grounds of ‘charity’, yet critically it is the same incantation of ‘charity’ that the customer use to motivate their requests for discount; Fiona described “the charity shop mentality” in which “people expect to get a bargain” as the source of continual requests for discounts (9<sup>th</sup> July 2012). This becomes particularly evident when requests for discount are made on the grounds that the object in question shows overt signs of use.<sup>9</sup>

Expectations of a bargain and a belief in the unfixed price of the precarious commodity leads customers to request discounts when they feel an item is over-priced, for what it is and where it is being sold. On the other hand, Staff, as has been shown in chapter 3, consider pricing a serious activity and go to great lengths to price things appropriately according to the perceived exchange-value of the object and its context of sale, as such they are usually affronted or resistant to requests for discount. While customers ask for discount

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<sup>9</sup> This was the case when I observed a white female customer complaining to Angeline about the price of a burner of some sort as there were some screws missing. She got a small discount on the price, and came to the counter to purchase it where I was working behind the till. She said that she simply had to tell me that our prices are too steep and that she shops at lots of Helping Hands Charity shops and ours is the most expensive. I tried to explain that the money was for a good cause but she remained unconvinced.

because it is a charity shop, this same rationale is used to refuse them. When I was working behind the counter in the various shops and customers asked for reduced prices; I found myself easily telling them that it is not the shops policy to give discount because the profits go towards the work of Helping Hands Charity itself, though I stopped short of inquiring “whose care would you like to short circuit?” as one member of upper management had suggested.

In our discussions Tannie Emma talked about a certain mentality of “entitlement” because the goods are donated and as such do not cost Helping Hands Charity anything; everyone feels it is a Charity aimed at them, she proposed. Almost identically, Tannie Hermien said that customers sometimes think their prices are too expensive because they know the shop sells donations, forgetting that they have overheads (9<sup>th</sup> January 2013). This, according to staff encourages some customers ask for discount to take a “chance” not because they are truly cannot afford the item. This, I was told on a number of occasions, was especially the habit of black men. Musing on why people ask for discount, Tannie Mari said

“It’s just taking chances, or even lots of African men they will for instance say, they will tell you ‘I haven’t got enough. I’ve only got this’ so if you say ‘No okay’ then I say ‘okay fine, I’ll put it away for you, I’ll put it away for two days at the back with me. And then you can come fetch it when you’ve got the money’ then here out comes out the R100.”

KW “So most people have the money to pay?”

“They just take a chance.” (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

In line with this think, when I worked in the front of The Flagship Shop I was instructed by the manager to only press subtotal on the till when customers handed over the money to pay as many, particular black people would leave some items behind on hearing the total price or would say they have too little money and want discount. ‘Chance-takers’ are framed as deviant trying to trick the staff into giving them a discount.

Here I recall an encounter between a ‘chance-taker’ and Elmarie. Having chosen a pair of leather sandals priced at R12 in The Strand Shop a young black man, brought the

sandals to the counter and persistently asked for a discount of R2. Elmarie was visibly perturbed by his insistence, saying that she had given discounts out yesterday and had had to pay the difference out of her own pocket and that is not authorized to give discounts. After much pleading the man promptly presented twelve rand and silently paid and left. Rather than seeing this example as supporting the view that black men are the primary ‘chance-taker’s when it comes to asking for discounted prices, I think it presents two questions: first, are some people more likely to receive discount? And second to what extent does the manner in which the discount is requested influence the outcome? I contrast it with two successful examples of seeking discount from within The Flagship Shop.

In the one case, a young black man, an acquaintance of Angeline’s, was mesmerized by the radio and speaker set, he observed it from all angles, he was away from work supposed to be going to the bank but he would tell his boss there was a queue. He wanted a R50 discount. When Tannie Emma returned Angeline asked her about it while the man hung back and she agreed to it. He paid for the speakers and left his name, saying he would collect them later. In the second case it was a small blonde girl who came to the counter of The Flagship Shop clutching a toy asking for “more lesser” on its price, it was unclear whether she had been sent by her mother to ask for this discount. Eventually the child’s mother gave her some more money and Tannie Emma, who was on the shop floor at the time, gave her a few coins from her own purse and the girl bought the toy for the slightly discounted price.

I observed numerous requests for discounts and for the most part they were denied. On those occasions when discount was given it was difficult to discern a pattern of what determined staff deciding to give discount, it certainly does not hinge upon how much money a customer has spent over time or in that individual purpose. These two cases seem to link the flexibility of the no discounts policy to the nature of person asking and the manner in which they make their request. The staff resist the majority of requests for discount not only because

the aim to raise profits for Helping Hands Charity but because they view their pricing systems as formulaic enough to best reflect the value of the object for sale and the price it can be sold for within the charity shop. This is connected to the shops' ambitions to be unlike their charity shop counter parts and closer to the professionalism though present in conventional retailing; bargaining and discounts are not the norm in conventional shops. This could also explain why staff at times feel affronted by discount seekers.

Whilst looking round The Strand Shop, an elderly coloured woman said to Jeannine "don't you give discount to old people?" Jeannine explains that because it is a charity shop they do not, to which the elderly woman said that she knew this and had been joking. Because the staff at time take offense to requests for discount phrasing requests for discount in a jokey manner or professing humour when their request is refused is common. Joking requests are in turn responded in a joking manner:

You would still talk to Hermien and say "ag no man this is a bit expensive!" and you're actually making a joke you know? Then she would in a nice way say to you "ag man if you buy something else, say I'll give you a bit of discount" whatever. Whereas you might make that kind of joke at the other Helping Hands Charity; then she just wouldn't answer you, you know? So sort of you know 'take it or leave it' type of attitude. Which I don't like but I mean that's her personality. (Ilze, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

A middle aged black man, familiar to the staff, and his male companion gathered a selection of men's clothing, as they shopped he jovially proclaimed "I buy new-second-hand", and was teased by the staff about the "*boere* clothes" he was wearing. In the end he selected a pair of leather shoes, two blazers and a t-shirt and in a jokingly serious manner requested one price for the lot, as his "Christmas present", Hermien, jokingly serious in her turn, added up the amount and gave it to him as the single price for the lot, he laughingly said "I don't want to fight mama" and paid it. In a manner I feel he illustrated a sort of jovial 'we're all in this together' tactic of asking for a discount, one that would appeal to the staff's good humour and post festive season ambience.

Using humour to ask for discount is in a way mutually beneficial, if refused it allows the asker to save face and it allows the staff to deny their requests without having causing any animosity. The joking discount relies upon a veil of good humour that relieves any tension this bargain seeking might instigate. By staying on good terms with staff the customer ensures the possibility of discounts and 'special' treatment in the future. And by not embarrassing or angering the customer the staff avoid turning any business away while not decreasing profits.

#### **5.4 Making business out of charity? Dealers and the imagined ethics of resale**

One group of customers that has remained largely unmentioned are dealers. Dealers buy stock from the Helping Hands Charity shops to resell in other avenues; some sell at the car boot sale, some online, others have their own small businesses or trade at markets. The relationship between dealers and charity shops first came to my attention at a Cape Town flea market:

Like the market itself charity shops exist on the border of formal exchange; their merchandise is donated as gifts to their cause rather than bought. Physically they occupy spaces away from trendy shopping malls, places where rent is low. The more discerning dealers scour the shelves of these shops for collectables and vintage proper, less experienced or knowledgeable dealers simply buy whatever appeals to them personally or is cheap. As stock is constantly being donated to these shops provide constantly renewing supply of merchandise for the market. Furthermore, the volunteers who sort and price the donated items often do not recognize the monetary value of certain items; making charity shops and ideal place to find valuable goods cheaply for resale. Deb sources all her stock from such shops, and has built up a network of relationships with the managers of certain charity shops in her area, who telephone her as soon as new and possibly desirable merchandise comes into the store. Such a system enables her to pick out valuable and desirable stock before it becomes available to the general public or other dealer in search of stock (Watt, 2010:41).

It is not unusual for charity shops to have long standing special arrangements with dealers, in which they keep stock aside for the dealers; indeed one charity shop in Somerset West supplies a second-hand shop in Somerset West with a multitude of goods, and the dealer in turn pays the shop a percentage of what she will sell the items for, the percentage is rumoured

to be 50% although none can be sure. Whether Helping Hands Charity should follow suit and establish this type of official, long running relationship with dealers was bandied about in the volunteer workshop to varying responses. Such arrangements can be damaging, Joe and one dealer herself said, as customers become aware that the shops keep the ‘better’ things aside for dealers they realize that there is less of a chance of finding brands or treasure on the shop floor and they are less eager to frequent the shops regularly.

The resistance to the suggestion of building formalized relationships with the dealers from the point of view of staff can be understood from the idea that no one, particularly dealers, should be getting special treatment as this causes anxiety and animosity amongst customers. Of course, as has been discussed in Chapter 4, special treatment abounds, particularly in the smaller shops, and is an important part of what makes them appealing.

The Flagship Shop has a particularly nuanced relationship with dealers, with varying accounts relating that when The Flagship Shop was first established dealers were able to enter the storage area and select what they wished to purchase and make their own prices. However, when The Flagship Shop moved to Blue Circle and began retailing it was realized that they could get more money by making their own prices, this change was said to cause some upset amongst dealers. This relationship was said to have become somewhat acrimonious under its first manager who worried about dealers buying everything, and leaving nothing for the ordinary customers.<sup>10</sup> In its project of trading up The Flagship Shop’s higher prices make it less amenable to dealers than it once was; Tannie Emma aims to price closer to the standards of second-hand shops (granting that the charity shop is never able to ask the exact same prices as per the section on pricing in Chapter 3):

I’m looking to say the same price bracket [as second-hand shops] but we’re slowly starting to push the prices up to get there. because to me it doesn’t make

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<sup>10</sup>Angeline found that dealers were particularly persistent in seeking out discounts, even in instances when good quality products were priced cheaply

sense, we are a second-hand shop, we are not a charity we are a business; that why should we supply (and this may sound terrible) but why would you/we supply somebody else their livelihood, where they get a lot of people coming and then they buy stuff from them and then sell it for twice the price or even more; when we need that money? So why can't we push that price up? Those same people are going to come to us. (27<sup>th</sup> November 2012)

In doing so she highlighted the shop's move away from providing affordable goods to low-income customers towards a more funding focused approach to trading in which the aim, is to make as much money as possible. Despite this The Flagship Shop is the most obvious source for dealers looking to retail second-hand valuables and smalls, because it has the 'best' things. While those seeking clothing and fashion accessories head to the smaller shops as well. Although, depending on their personal preference and relationship with the managers, most dealers visit each shop. Perhaps the latent animosity towards dealers is because they are making personal profit, they have the knowledge to find valuable bargains and thus make money on something that Helping Hands Charity should have recognized and made money on.

When I asked her what sort of relationship The Strand Shop has with dealers Elmarie was adamant that she has no problem with dealers, explaining that they do not get different treatment. Her response is telling, as in a sense it implies that it would be assumed that she would have a problem with dealers. Tannie Mari similarly professed no special treatment for dealers as, proposing that they are not especially different to other customers who buy a lot

It's not gonna make any difference if they are a trader we [are] still not gonna give them discount because they buy in more. There is people buying in every day. So you come up in the week then that's people's stuff is also a lot. You see. So that is not actually gonna make a difference. (10<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Unlike Elmarie, Jeannine was in favour of keeping things aside for traders. There was young white female dealer, Simone, who she was particularly fond of. Simone buys clothing and fashion accessories to trade online, when genuine leather goods or particular items would come into the shop Jeannine would keep them aside and telephone Simone. Jeannine

motivated this personal shopping service saying that dealers for whom she keeps things aside will pay more for them than the average customer, implying that dealers are able to recognize 'value' where the person off the street is not. However, Jeannine did not give this special treatment to all traders. Mrs Malan, who "buys shoes, and then she resell it for herself, for money" (Elmarie, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012), was treated in the cordial manner extolled upon most customers. Her temperament within the shop varied considerably, at times she was exuberantly friendly bringing gifts of food and at times she was brusque.

The complex relationships between the shop and dealers revealed that if some dealers get special treatment it is the same type of bending of rules that is applied to regular customers with whom the staff have developed personal connections. Thus, Simone is treated differently to Mrs Malan because she has managed to form a strong bond with the shop's manager. These connections are more important than the dealers' line of work. In some instances it decreases the somewhat negative reputation dealers have of being overly pushy in bargain seeking, and making a profit off donated goods.

Dealers are surrounded by tension because of the expectations of charity that surround the charity shop; in a vague way the idea exists that the spoils from the shop should be put toward various forms of non-market transactions, rather than market-transactions. Re-selling is seen as misusing what should be a charitable as many customers foregrounded the idea of using Helping Hands Charity as a means to afford to give to others. When describing the Strand' shops customer base Tannie Ronel distinguished herself from those who resell charity shop bargains to make money; because unlike them, she buys not only for herself but to give to others:

[A] mix, most of the time its black people. And many of them they buy stuff and they go and sell the stuff, you see? They make business out of it? See? But if I buy I buy it for some people who can't afford, I know my pastor can't afford to buy every month for the children. (23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012)

A number of customers said that they share the bargains they find with family and friends, using the shop as a way to give gifts to others. Sandra told me how she loves having masses of cheap clothes bought from Helping Hands Charity and that she likes to give away things from her closet to her friends (3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012) and Joe said that he often finds small gifts for his friends in the Helping Hands Charity shops “when I find a bargain and I have friends or something I just pass it on you know?” (7<sup>th</sup> September 2012) These end up being cheaper than conventional gifts and are more ‘attractive’.

That charity is viewed as better than resale in the shops by both staff and customers is conveniently illustrated by an occurrence I observed in The Flagship Shop. A middle aged coloured woman was buying an array of children’s things, as she shopped she told Jeannine that they were not for herself but for a family that she knew had nothing, that she herself had been so ‘blessed’ and helped by others that she wished to do the same for this family with the small means at her disposal. The story was long and elaborate and in the end Jeannine gave the woman a small discount, although the customer had not explicitly asked for one. Using Helping Hands Charity shops as a way to be charitable yourself is seen as positive even rewarded. I propose that this attitude that it is better to give away objects bought at the charity shop than to sell them is a consequence of the objects origination in the shops as gifts. In their precarious commodity status these objects are not ‘meant’ for sale, because they still have ruminants of gift-hood attached to them.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the moment of exchange within the Helping Hands Charity shops from the perspective of the customers who are its life blood. What fundamentally emerges is that the purging labour of the back-space of the shops, and attempts to transform donations into fully fledged commodities is never fully realized as long as the customers are aware that the origin of the objects for sale is other prior customers, they are forever used-goods and

thus precarious commodities. The value of second-hand things in the charity shop is unstable. This instability at first glance makes everything appear open for negotiation, but upon deeper inspection a range of ways in which negotiations of value are both shaped and limited is revealed. For within the charity shop there are conventions around what and how negotiations can happen, and there are social forces behind them that delimit uncertainties around value in specific ways.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

This thesis began with the problem of determining the exchange-value (value) of factory manufactured objects that emerge from the intimate interiors of other people's homes to be sold in spaces characterized by expectations of charity. I have argued that the commodity sold within the space of the charity shop remains ever precarious because its history of use, 'biography', and the expectations of charity that form interactions between the buyers and the sellers, are ever opaque shaped as they are by the labours of the participants in the space. Thus, the value of this precarious commodity is not able to be determined by the homogenous human labour time in the abstract that first moulded it, nor is it enough to look to its biography and ascribe its value to simple use-value alone. Instead, I have argued in this thesis that the three Helping Hands charity shops are each points of production in which the exchange-value of the precarious commodity is reconstituted, as the labours of the staff and customers serve to produce value anew.

This production of value anew is shaped by the spatial and social character of the space around and within the shops. Chapter 2 introduced the reader to each of the three Helping Hands Charity shops and the town centres of Somerset West and Strand. Examining the imagined and physical changes to the landscape of these two towns, several narratives of racial nostalgia emerge as producing a conception of racial 'expensive respectability' that both mediates peoples' access to space and frames projections onto the value of these objects. This concept drew heavily upon Ross' (2005) formulation of *Ordentlikheid* and Posel's writing on the historical relationship between race and consumption in South Africa. This imagining of the urban quality of the Helderberg Basin informs the labour of producing value anew, which is the subject of analysis in Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 4 situated the reader in the back-space of The Flagship Shop as it charted the labour of unpacking, purging, sorting and distributing objects. It illustrated how, in attempting to classify value according to use, staff produce use-value. It pointed to the salience of use-value in understanding the precarious commodity while at the same time showing the precedence of exchange-value as the only form of perceiving value. Chapter 3 followed the now priced commodity into the front-space of the Helping Hands Charity shops. It showed how staff propagate commodity aesthetics reliant upon nostalgias of unthreatened, personalized trade and ‘expensive, respectability’ to give objects the appearance of usefulness and create valuing atmospheres conducive to selling. These aesthetics produce value in the precarious commodity because they mask the instability of its production. In this way the Helping Hands Charity shops are cast as spaces of ‘quality’ personal trade, different to the other charity shops and local businesses. These atmospheres project value onto the commodities they purvey. The maintenance of these aesthetics and resulting space requires the policing of behaviour and bodies that threaten to corrupt the ‘expensive, respectability’ that has been produced a sense of personal care and unalienated trade.

Through the labours of the front and back-space the precarious commodities for sale are given valuable biographies, purged and displayed they appear to the buyer as emerging from expensive white homes. Chapter 5 examines how customers negotiate the value of the precarious commodity in the front-space of the shops. In a sense, this chapter returns to the subject matter of Chapter 1, as it illustrates how racial nostalgias of Somerset West and Strand shape the type of shopping experiences that are propagated within it: be it the aspirational shopping desirous of appearing upwardly mobile, or the treasure-hunter hoping to connect to an unattainable past. These nostalgias merge with the productive labour of judgement to produce value anew in the ever-precarious commodity. I argued that

expectations of charity within the shop both produces the instability of the precarious commodity and problematizes the balancing of business and charity in the three shops.

In this way, this thesis has hoped to have brought the reader inside the space of the shops and into contact with the precarious commodity sold within it to observe the productive capacities of the space that both renders that the commodity precarious and labours to produce value in it anew. And in so doing has hoped to shed light upon a moment that enables the consumption of second hand goods.



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### **List of interviews**

Angeline, assistant manager, interview, Somerset West, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2012.

Tannie Emma, manager, interview, Somerset West, 27<sup>th</sup> November 2012.

Lisa, volunteer, Somerset West, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2012.

Cara, volunteer, Somerset West, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

Fiona, volunteer, Somerset West, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

John, volunteer, Somerset West, 27<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

Shelagh, volunteer, Somerset West, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

Joe, customer, Somerset West, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2012.

Jeannine, manager, interview, Strand, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012.

Elmarie, sales assistant, Strand, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012.

Millicent, customer Strand, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012.

Tannie Jakomien, customer, Somerset West, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012.

Tannie Ronel, customer, Strand, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012.

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Ilze, customer Somerset West, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2013.

Mrs Van Rooyen, customer, Somerset West, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2013.

Tannie Hermien, manager, Somerset West, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2013.

Tannie Mari, sales assistant, Somerset West, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2013.