



## The Aesthetics of Everyday Literacies: Home Writing Practices in a British Asian Household

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*This article explores young people's home literacy practices drawing on an ethnographic study of writing in the home of a British Asian family living in northern England. The theoretical framework comes from the New Literacy Studies, and aesthetic and literary theory. It applies an ethnographic methodology together with an engaged approach to coproduction with young people. The article explores three instances of home writing in relation to textiles, gardening, and the experience of racial harassment. [home, literacy, aesthetics, ethnography]*

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of literacy practices in the home of a family of British Asian heritage. I bring together the fields of everyday aesthetics (Hull and Nelson 2009; Saito 2007) with New Literacy Studies (Street 1984; Barton and Hamilton 1998). I argue that it is important to pay attention to the aesthetic categories that lie within young people's written and oral texts as products of aesthetic traces and sensibilities. This has implications for educators. By understanding young people's written and oral texts in relation to their aesthetic qualities, it is possible to recognize the ways in which these texts can become sites of transformation, resilience, or resistance. This paper draws on ethnographic research by scholars such as David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanic (2000); Eve Gregory, Susie Long, and Dinah Volk (2004); Glynda Hull and Kathy Schultz (2002); Rebecca Rogers (2003); Elizabeth Birr Moje and colleagues (2004); Lalitha Vasudevan (2009); and Catherine Compton-Lilly (2010). All of these authors demonstrate an engagement with the lives of the young people and adults with whom they work. In addition, they engage with ethnographic and New Literacy Studies epistemologies. I specifically look at how youth make sense of their experience of racism. The work of Hull and Mark Evans Nelson (2009) is particularly relevant for my framework, and in particular their work with youth across the globe. Ernest Morrell (2008) and Valerie Kinloch (2010) also articulate how writing can become a lever for resistance and transformation for youth who are experiencing the harshness of contemporary racist discourses.

Educators, and indeed the research community within New Literacy Studies, have generally adopted a focus on the more applied and situated elements of written and oral texts (Barton et al. 2000). The concept of aesthetics, partly because of its associations with European high aesthetics from the work of Kant, has had a muted role in this field. However, literary theory within Language Arts and English literature does draw on aesthetic theory as part of an appreciation of texts. Terry Eagleton (1990) argued for situating aesthetics within the sensuous realm. By this he was recognizing the contradictory nature of cultural meanings. He further elaborated that aesthetic categories are able to resist or move outside the political or ideological sphere. This quality of aesthetic categories to disrupt or transform everyday textual practices has been less studied within the field of New Literacy Studies. Hull and Nelson (2009) argued that the aesthetic turn among scholars of youth practices represents an engagement with collective forms of expression. This process combines "the pleasures of making meaning with the pleasures of constructing and enacting a self" (207). They place great stress on the *moral* aspect of

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aesthetics, being in this case, “a sense of what is beautiful or right” (199). It is this definition of aesthetics, together with a focus on the everyday that I engage with here.

I apply this framework to a study of home literacies, with a particular interest in one young British Asian heritage girl’s textual productions. In order to tease out these links, in this introduction I begin by situating this study, which was conducted in a British Asian home, within the field of ethnography. I then move on to discuss the literature on everyday home cultures. I continue on to the field of literacy studies, with a particular focus on theories from the New Literacy Studies. I explore work in everyday aesthetics, which I used to make sense of the study’s data. I argue that aesthetic categories need to be recognized in order to understand young people’s textual practices.

### *Ethnographic Methodologies in Literacy Studies*

Home writing practices can sometimes be “invisible” to educators (Ives 2011), yet they remain encased in a “web of significance” (Geertz 1993). Making these meanings visible involves an ethnographic methodology to create a shared space in which to explore contexts and practices (Blommaert and Van der Aa 2011). Ethnographic methods have been used to study everyday literacies—Brian Street’s study of literacy practices in Iran (1984; 1993b), for example. There is a tradition within ethnography of relying on participant observation, which generates field notes, as a form of data collection. In the case of the study under discussion, data collected by informants, in the form of written, oral, or visual evidences, supplemented this dataset and built up a composite picture of all the activities present within one setting. Ethnography in this case provided a way of seeing the co-occurrence of activities, that is, patterns of behavior or particular themes that recurred across a longitudinal dataset (Heath and Street 2008). This process allowed me to connect the observable phenomena and the wider set of practices of which these are a part. Recognition of the repeated occurrence of these phenomena was how I began to make sense of these patterned practices. Understanding writing in the home required an attention to closely observed detail, providing a “thick description” of the context of the literacy event (Geertz 1993). Listening carefully to the participants’ voices as they contextualized their stories was a form of “ethnographic monitoring” and active listening, described by Dell Hymes (1996), and outlined by Jan Blommaert and Jef Van der Aa (2011). Connecting up fragments of data with fields, and recognizing context and how it shaped the momentary event under observation, was an important part of this process (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Hymes 1996). The use of ethnography involved engaging with shared interpretations and understandings. Elizabeth Campbell and Luke Lassiter (2010) described this process as “reciprocal analysis” (377). Ethnography, as an engaged and situated mode of inquiry, lends itself to collaboration in both the mode of data collection and in analytic schemas (Lassiter 2005). I continued to check interpretations with the research participants, and their insights on their own textual practices helped shape the analytic framework.

### *Studies of Everyday Culture*

The home and its meanings, practices, and the ways in which people inhabit and occupy the home is a salient field in contemporary anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, human geography, architecture, and urban and region planning, among other disciplines (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Miller 2001; Pink 2004, 2012). Scholars in the field of material cultural studies and narrative, such as Daniel Miller (2008) and Rachel Hurdley (2006), have contributed an understanding of “home” as narrated and filled with objects. Hurdley (2006) argued that the making of “home” involves the production of identities

through the medium of material objects and aesthetic schemas. Studies looking at objects and practices within homes included Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton's study (1981) in which 80 households in Chicago were examined in relation to the meanings they ascribed to everyday objects, providing a rich and complex dataset.

Seeing cultural "stuff" using a wide lens is the contribution of anthropology (Miller 2010; Ingold 2011). Anthropologists such as Tim Ingold have widened recognition of forms within everyday cultural settings. Ingold (2007) described how script was connected to other flowing connective lines such as embroidery, knitting, walking trails, and other traces. By viewing everyday writing as connected to other forms that involve traces and lines, the analytic lens was widened (Pahl 2012). Embroidery, for example, became relevant as a cursive and flowing form with characteristics close to writing. When I brought this lens to home literacy practices, embroidery became part of the dataset and analytic frame.

### *Literacy Studies Approaches*

This study involved a recognition and interpretation of literacy practices as they naturalistically occurred within homes. Literacy can be understood as a social practice, drawing on conceptual frameworks from Shirley Brice Heath (1983), Street (1984, 1993b), James Paul Gee (1996), and Barton and Hamilton (1998). These theorists, loosely known as coming from a New Literacy Studies perspective, enabled an understanding of literacy to be linked to particular domains of practice, such as home, school or community. These domains were connected to cultural resources, often referred to as "funds of knowledge" from outside schooling (Moll et al. 1992; Gonzalez et al. 2005). Early studies of literacy and language practices in the home included the seminal study by Heath (1983), which examined literacy practices within three communities in the rural Carolinas in the United States. This ethnographic study not only examined the language and literacy practices of these communities but also linked these practices to ways of decorating the home, the arrangement of space, the construction of parenting, and a myriad other practices. Such detailed ethnography provided a situated understanding of home literacy practices.

The study of literacy and language in the home was often conceptualized and framed by researchers interested in the dissonance between home and school literacy practices, following Heath's insight that different communities have different "ways with words" (Heath 1983). Gregory focused specifically on the home literacy practices of Bangladeshi children in London and found that they mixed and blended "school" literacy practices across both sites (Gregory 2008). The conceptualization of "schooled" literacy practices came from the work of Street (1984, 1993b, 2000), who identified that there were different literacy practices associated with different domains of life (Scribner and Cole 1981; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Barton et al. 2000). Language and literacy practices that occur naturalistically in home settings have also been studied by Deborah Hicks (2002), and Charmian Kenner in the case of multilingual homes (2004). These studies were important for recognizing the way in which language and literacy practices arise quite naturally in home settings. Homes hold "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al. 1992; Gonzalez et al. 2005) that can be drawn upon by educators to create new kinds of spaces and discursive understandings (Moje et al. 2004).

Detailed accounts of home writing practices have been provided through ethnographic work in particular communities, for example, Kenner's study of bilingual children's writing practices (Kenner 2004) and my own study of children's writing practices in three London homes (Pahl 2002). These studies shared an awareness that the concept of "writing" needed to be extended in some way to reflect the visual as well as oral and gestural nature of home writing. In my work (Pahl 1999) I drew on Gunther Kress (1997)

to describe children's home written productions as "multimodal." By this I meant that they incorporated more than one "mode" and the written was embedded within a wider landscape of communicative practices. Children drew on multiple modes when they naturalistically wrote and composed in the home. Children's home composing has also been observed by Anne Haas Dyson (2003) as being a collage-like production of meaning that spans oral talk, drawing, and writing. Rosie Flewitt (2008) defined this activity in young children as "multimodal literacies." Writing was seen as a component of a wider multimodal activity that can be considered together as one unit of analysis when studying home literacy practices.

Literacy researchers identified the different ways in which literacy was situated within "schooled" contexts (Street and Street 1991) and then in "out of school" contexts, such as home and community contexts (Gregory et al. 2004; Pahl 2004). The concept of writing was frequently closely connected to school in many research contexts; however, Hull and Schultz (2002) argued that home and school needed to be understood as connected and related. School writing might involve the learning of letters and the acquisition of a set of closely connected concepts including alphabet, sounds, letters, and words that were represented cursively or in computer typescript as a multimodal representation called "writing" (Kress 1997). While previous researchers (e.g., Kenner 2004) have considered the way in which writing is constructed in the home, the aesthetic nature of these productions was less considered. Kress (1997) did describe the context of the productions of the children in his study but did not consider the aesthetic qualities of their work. I argue here that aesthetic categories can inform an analytic understanding of home writing practices. Below I describe this field in more detail.

### *Aesthetics*

The field of aesthetics is broad. It includes more abstract concepts of aesthetics, for example Kant's concept of universal "beauty" linked to concepts associated with morality (Crawford 2001). It also extends to Raymond Williams' concept of culture as "ordinary" and residing in the everyday "ethnographic imagination" (Williams 1961; Willis 2000). Within home settings, the deployment of aesthetic judgment has been linked to social class and ethnicity. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) applied a deterministic class focused schema to understand the everyday choices different classes use to decide on home furnishing. Since Bourdieu's study, a more dialogic and engaged understanding of everyday aesthetics has emerged that has focused more on people's interpretation of cultural "stuff" and the relational way those interpretations arise (Armstrong 2000; Kester 2004). Yuriko Saito (2007) linked everyday aesthetics to the lived fabric of everyday life and the diverse practices that lay within that lived experience.

My understanding of this term was informed by the work of Saito (2007) in articulating the "ordinary and mundane" nature of our aesthetic life (4). Researchers such as Willis (2000) explored the interaction between lived experience and cultural forms. In post-colonial contexts, the concept of aesthetics has been reframed to challenge Western ideals of beauty (Mignolo 2010). Eagleton (1990) provides an account of aesthetics that stressed the importance of sensuous and bodily engagement, a definition that spills outside political ideologies. To make sense of aesthetics as connected to everyday practice I drew on John Dewey's concept of art as connected to lived experience (1934). Eliot Eisner likewise saw the potentialities of art for exploring new experiences and possibilities (2002). A sensuous and material engagement with the world can be located within the everyday, in everyday practices, texts, and discourses. Everyday cultural experience is itself aesthetic, located within the "sensuous materialism of the human use of objects, artefacts and concrete forms" (Willis 2000:23). Aesthetic categories are embodied in human relation-

ships to the world. Hull and Nelson (2009) brought together new literacy studies, arts practice, and aesthetics as a way of understanding young people's meaning making practices. The crafting of aesthetic objects could be seen within their framework as part of the process of making sense of the world. This related to Willis' concept of symbolic creativity. By making the link from an imaginative engagement with the world to aesthetics, but locating this concept in everyday contexts, the concept of aesthetics is reborn in an engaged way that was connected to lived experience (Pahl 2014).

The research participants were British Asian, with grandparents and a father who came over to the UK from Pakistan. The aesthetics of everyday material and cultural practices as realized in homes by people within communities who migrate across diasporas have been explored within a number of contexts. For example, Ozlem Savas (2010) considered the ways in which Turkish families in Vienna make material choices from particular aesthetic schemas in their new places of dwelling. The significance of particular choices and decisions are marked in relation to the cultural significance of "home"—both "there" and in the new space. Divya Tolia-Kelly described the remembered and imagined spaces of "home" in relation to gardening and everyday practices (Tolia-Kelly 2004). Everyday aesthetics can be understood to be associated with the "living out" of the everyday habitus of the home and expressed through an assemblage of multimodal meaning making. It is situated in the material complexity of the everyday, located within a diverse array of practices and discourses (Saito 2007).

Aesthetics, therefore, is not a process of judging according to "universal" values, but rests on the concept of the "everyday" and the sensory (de Certeau 1984; Eagleton 1990; Moran 2005; Saito 2007). The engagement with the everyday and the dialogic can also be informed by theory from arts practice, for example, within the work of Jacques Ranciere (2006), who understood arts practice to be situated and politically contingent. From arts practice I then link this to relational aesthetics (Kester 2004). By seeing aesthetics as relational, it is possible to recognize the situated and context dependent nature of home writing practices. Everyday aesthetics can be located with historically relevant practices, such as, for example, a focus on gold jewelry within certain groups as a marker of intergenerational value (Pahl 2012). Everyday aesthetic practices in the home can be seen as part of the process of "making" culture as a verb and is produced through everyday actions (Street 1993a; Saito 2007). Aesthetic categories within the everyday can therefore be understood as many and various, and derived from all sorts of timescales, places, and intergenerational influences beyond the home.

### *Context for the Study*

The family I describe here included the mother, Anita; the father, Abdul; and three daughters, Lucy, Tanya, and Saima, who were 13, 9, and 3 at time of writing (all names are pseudonyms, some chosen by participants). The father was born in Pakistan and moved to the UK as a young person, the mother was born on the same street where she now lived. The family originally lived in a terraced house in a nearby street and, during the ethnographic fieldwork, moved into a new detached house on the street where most of their family lived. The father of the household worked in a local factory. He moved to the UK permanently when he got married. The family lived in a central area of the town, which was home to a settled community of families, many of whom had migrated from the Kashmiri regions of Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially men came on their own and later their wives and children came over and the area was slowly home to many such families. The family in this study now lived on a street surrounded by relatives. While their heritage language was Urdu (mostly written) and a variety of Punjabi (mostly spoken), the language the younger generation spoke was English, which is the language used by the

informants in the study. Aspirations for education in the family were high, and there was a culture of “getting on.” A previous project, in which I had worked with an artist, Zahir Rafiq, to create a community exhibition called “Ferham Families”<sup>1</sup> emphasized the pride the families in the area had in their heritage and in their achievements. The family provided contextual information about their heritage. For example, Anita’s sister wrote to me in an email about the family’s tradition of embroidery,

The textile side of our heritage comes from the women in the family. We have older relatives that do appliqué, crochet, embroidery, sewing and knitting (from the girl’s mother’s side their grandmothers sister and cousin and from their father side his two cousins who live close by). My younger sister loves craft type of activities and buys the girls a lot of resources to do sewing and fabric work especially on birthdays, Christmas and Eid. [Written text from the girls’ aunt, Email, August 2010]

The girls’ father was a skilled builder, and, in Pakistan he was proud of having built a mosque in the memory of his mother, which was elaborately tiled. The tiling he did on the mosque was suffused with gold and blue colors producing an effect of dazzling light and glitter. The family shared with me their pride in the bright and beautiful front garden that the father was keen to keep looking immaculate. I interviewed the girls’ aunt about the practice of gardening within the household:

Aunt: The vibrancy of the color is definitely seen in the courtyard. Because he [the girls’ father] worked as a builder in Pakistan, the houses, that’s where he got it from, the houses. [recorded discussion, September 5, 2011]

The girls’ aunt traced the evolving brightly colored garden that was created in the front of the house back to the courtyards of Pakistan, where the girls’ father had strong links, as a builder of houses.

### *Methods*

My methodology was ethnographic and involved collaboratively collected data including FLIP camera recordings of home writing practices, photographic images using disposable cameras, scrap books maintained by the girls, drawings, writing, and other textual practices such as recorded oral storytelling. I visited regularly, about every two weeks, to discuss the FLIP camera footage with the intention of documenting the families’ writing practices. The dataset was collected over two years (See Chart 1 for details of the dataset). I transcribed the oral recordings and video recordings, and collected writing by the girls in the study together with their oral and written documents. In addition, I wrote composite “field narratives” (Gregory and Ruby 2011) that described my encounter with the home and the writing within it. These composite texts drew on field notes collected and written up after field visits and were placed together with the writing, oral transcripts, and the video data collected from the home. Because the girls’ writing was often collected but remained undated, the field narratives were a way of contextualizing the writing within oral and written data that was produced within the home visits. Repeated visits checked for the reliability of interpretations, and particular pieces of writing were focused on and, with participants, connections were made across the dataset between different data phenomena including videos, handwritten writing, writing on the computer, drawings, orally recorded stories, and observed practice.

### *Data Analysis*

To make sense of the data, I focused on moments of recognition, recognizing when I was seeing something again, and looking for their co-occurrence through rich details of

**Chart 1.**  
**Dataset for the study**

Type of data	Quantity and nature of dataset Year 1 2009–2010	Quantity and nature of dataset Year 2 2010–2011
<b>FLIP camera videos taken by children</b>	60 FLIP videos, taken when researcher was not present	7 FLIP videos taken when the researcher was not present
<b>Photographs by children</b>	120 photographs taken by the girls (aged 8 and 12) with a disposable camera	60 photographs taken by the researcher, 10 by the children
<b>Field narratives drawing on participant observation</b>	7 field narratives based on repeated visits lasting up to one hour long, every other week.	6 field narratives based on regular visits, every other week.
<b>Field visits audio tape</b>	4 audio files to support field visit data	36 audio files recording language in the home
<b>Writing by children</b>	1 scrap book each, about 10 pages filled with writing.	1 scrap book each plus 40 A4 pages of writing and a further 12 pages of notes by Lucy aged 12.

time, space, artifacts, and interactants (Heath and Street 2008). I drew on the ethnographic practice of “making the familiar strange” (Agar 1996) to unsettle the existing “schema” employed by researchers when they interpret texts, practices, and discourses. I focused on the concept of “voice” and particularly where inequality was highlighted within voice (Hymes 1996). Field narratives were put into three columns and were coded using Wolcott’s three-column analysis of description, interpretation, and analysis (Wolcott 1994).

I coded recursively making sense and then taking meanings back to the home to discuss with the family. Often the same text was discussed over the course of several weeks by different family members. Together, we watched home-produced films and brought together the themes in the films with the themes emerging from audio transcripts. Often several visits were made to check coding. I made links between audio recordings and writing, and then to the videos which Lucy and Tanya made. The coding often led to new points of interest, which I explored with the family. For example, the themes of textiles and gardening led to questions of the girls’ aunt about these practices. From this coding, I was able to develop an understanding of the links between stories, audio transcript, and practices in the home. For example, stories about seeds were linked to the record of the gardening practices in the home. I was able to trace patterns and themes in the data and then merge these themes into composite texts that focused on particular aspects of the dataset. These could be discussed with family members on site.

In order to analyze the dataset, I focused on ways in which the voices in the family could be listened to, drawing on Hymes’ concept of “ethnographic monitoring” (Blommaert and Van der Aa 2011). Part of this process involved a focus on the ephemeral and the unrecognized. “Ephemeral literacy” was the term I used to describe small pieces of writing, done by children, in the home, that were categorized by parents as “mess.” They might include drawings with writing stuffed under mattresses, hidden from view, as they were personal diaries or stories. These private writings were often hugely important to the author but invisible to the outside world (Pahl 2012). In this case, however, I also focused on the repeated stories, experiences, and salient features as I worked with the two-year dataset.

### **Data Discussion: Aesthetics as a Frame for Analysis**

In the data discussion below, I consider three aspects of everyday aesthetics that emerged within the study. The first was a consideration of how aesthetic categories

emerged within the materiality of writing. The second was consideration of the relationship between the practice of gardening as an aesthetic activity and storytelling. The third looked at a particular response to the experience of racism in the form of a story with a particular focus on the aesthetic response within this story.

#### *Aesthetic Categories within the Materiality of Writing*

In the process of coding the videos, many of the FLIP video recordings from Lucy and Tanya revealed their home literacy practices including textiles, such as sewing, craft activities, and stitching. One of the first pieces of data I collected was an image of some home embroidery with a name written on it. This was collected in the form of a FLIP video of the embroidery by Lucy (pseudonym chosen by the child), age 11 in August 2010. An aspect of the home writing practices was a focus on craft and the materiality of writing materials—often texts were decorated and embellished. I collected many examples of pieces of paper decorated with glitter, illustrating the name of the child, and using colors to create a bright image of the word “Super Star” (see Figure 1). I discussed these objects with Tanya (pseudonym chosen by child) aged 9:

Kate: Can you tell me a bit about this please?

Tanya: I did it in my big sister’s bedroom called Lucy. I used watercolors and I wrote it in my name and I have done lots of stories. And I used some glitter and I wrote some crystals [audio transcript recorded in field notes, October 4, 2010]

Here, writing was linked to Tanya’s interest in sparkle and gold using watercolors and glitter. The aesthetics of glitter could be partially linked to her enjoyment of glittery forms as demonstrated by this website, which was recorded in field notes as being regularly used by the family at the time of the data being collected, Craft 4Kids: <http://www.crafts4kids.co.uk/sequin-and-mosaic-art/c12>, but also could be linked to the category “gold,” which I found was often strongly linked to home values in British Asian homes (Pahl and Pollard 2008).

**Figure 1.**  
Glitter image.



Another aspect of home writing was that it was often hidden. Alongside this visual and material text, the author, Tanya, had also written stories (“I have done lots of stories”). These stories were often kept secret from the researcher. Lucy described making a purse decorated with stickers, including, “little signs that say, keep out top secret” (audio from film, August 4, 2010; see also Pahl 2012).

Writing assemblages in the home often were multimodal and involved aesthetic practices, such as the use of stickers. Writing using stickers is an example of vernacular literacies in the home that might be invisible to the researcher (Ives 2011). They are linked to writing through association both with the script on the stickers and through the meanings generated in the stickers. In this analysis, literacy can be understood as a series of lines and traces, following the work of Ingold (2007), which a researcher can follow and can then see as materialized in stickers, sewing, and craft, as well as writing and drawing.

Much of the girls’ texts included decorative writing, and writing was found embedded within craft objects such as bookmarks, pencil cases, and masks. These small pieces of writing could have been rendered invisible; however, their meanings were important. Bodily inscriptions also included writing. The girls told me about how they decorated their hands with henna and liked to devise particular designs for painted nails. These designs could be influenced by a number of different categories. For example, in a notebook, within a drawing describing different forms of “nail art” could also be found the small inscription “say no to racism” within an image of a fingernail (see Figure 2). The small message “say no to racism” could then be linked across the dataset to Lucy’s writing about racism, written for a very different audience and with a different aesthetic purpose.

I was therefore able to understand the different ways in which written text was inscribed into material objects giving the writing aesthetic qualities, whether through glitter added to a multimodal text, the use of stickers, or text inscribed on the body or in embroidery. These insights relied on a wider concept of literacy that included everyday aesthetics and material culture (Saito 2007).

#### *Aesthetic Categories within Gardening Practices*

The social practice of gardening inspired the production of oral and written texts. As described above, the family loved to garden. When I analyzed the stories the family members wrote and narrated, gardening was a theme threaded throughout. Lucy had described how she wrote her stories for her younger sister, Saima, to listen to at bedtime. Writing in the home was part of a production process that included Lucy’s younger sister, plus her cousin up the road, who also enjoyed reading her stories. The story below was written on lined A4 paper and placed in a pink folder in a plastic wallet a few months previously by Lucy:

##### Princess Saima and the Magic Seeds

Once upon a time in a land far away there lived a princess called Saima. She was so pretty. Everybody loved her. One summers’ day she was picking flowers for her bigger sister Queen Lucy. “Oh Thank you Saima. They are pretty just like you. But remember not to pick any more as the villagers will get angry.”

“We hate you Saima” The villagers said. Saima began crying. Lucy began crying. Everyone started crying. Minutes went by.

“I know I’ll go to the magic shop to buy some seeds” Saima said.

[Excerpt from the story written by Lucy, names changed for ethical reasons]

This story of a pretty princess who loved beautiful flowers but picked too many so she had to go to the magic shop to buy seeds combined the classic fairy tale with family



*Aesthetic Categories within Written Stories: "How to Drown a Blondie"*

A feature of home writing practices is an aesthetic sensibility, including the moral judgments that inform writing. Linking back to Hull and Nelson's concept of "imaginative vigilance" (2009:221), that is, a capacity to imagine "other" ways of being than the current tropes of story and imaginings, this story written by Lucy, described below, consisted of a story of vengeance against a blond, blue-eyed girl. Below I outline the processes and practices that were involved in the production of Lucy's stories.

While conducting the home ethnography, I documented the move the family made from one street to another. Although the distance between the two streets was not far (under half a mile), the family experienced an enormous change when they moved into their new house. The reason for this was the racism the family experienced on their previous street. This was recorded in November 2010 just before the family moved, when Anita, the girls' mother, explained to me,

I have lived here 15 years. I have served my jail sentence. I shouldn't . . . I don't leave the house, you lose your parking space if you know what I mean, it's affecting the girls, I am afraid for them to get off the bus and walk on their own they walk up this way, past the shop. [Audio transcript, November 22, 2010]

Lucy described an incident in the street involving racial harassment, which she later wrote about (undated, produced in the spring of 2011):

I remember in our old area we lived in, we got a lot of racial abuse as one, we were black and many people were white, because there was us and another Asian family. We got a lot of mick taken out of us [teasing] for everything. Sometimes we couldn't even leave our house without getting provoked. It was horrible growing up in an area like that. It was bad for our health and plus it put us off leaving our house to visit our grandmas or going town. [from "Racism" by Lucy]

Lucy's way of coping with the racism she experienced was to take comfort in language. She wrote about the everyday "sayings" that helped her get through this period,

. . . in our family we have a lot of sayings like "Violence isn't the answer". "Ignore what they say they are not educated well", to show that they are missing out on stuff. This means that if someone makes a rude remark or says something nasty, just ignore them, and they will leave, you because they will realise that they are being stupid wasting their time. These sayings have helped us and they may help you. [from "Moving House" by Lucy]

Lucy subsequently moved house, but at the same time, she started secondary school, one of the only non-white pupils at a school perceived in a racially divided neighborhood as a white school (pseudonym West Secondary). In a discussion with me, Lucy described this experience,

When I started West Secondary I realized there were hardly any Asians or black people here, only me and my cousin, we were the only black people and another girl but she was popular as she hung out with the blond girls. I wanted to be blond and white and pale. When I was young I was obsessed with vampires and I wanted to be really pale and [have] purple eyes. [Discussion, September 20, 2012]

Lucy's experience was very much bound up with a "hidden" experience of racism, in which comments were made under the radar of educators' eyes:

I didn't like it at first. When I first started at West Secondary most people were racist. The people didn't want their children to go to a mixed school. When I got into year 8 they were top set people, when I realized that I was in the top set they only said comments that I could understand and the teachers didn't understand it. But they made sly comments. [Discussion, September 20, 2012]

Lucy was particularly badly bullied by a girl who turned other girls against her. For a while this became a very upsetting part of Lucy's everyday experience in school.

In year 7 my first mate, she was quite nice to me but when I started talking to other people she got jealous, made up things about people calling me [racist terms] and she made up a load of lies. I didn't realize she was bullying my cousin at the same time as me. In year 8 she spread rumours about me. [Discussion, September 20, 2012]

In the second term at the new school, Lucy wrote "How to Drown a Blondie," a story which she introduced to me in a discussion recorded on January 31:

Lucy: And it is about this blond girl and she thinks she is really pretty and everything. Looking in the mirror and she takes the mick out of people who aren't as pretty as her and then a new girl comes to a private school because she is rich and then she is prettier and glammed as well and she invites the girl over, and pretends to be a ghost and the girl goes and they go horse riding dye their hair brown and cut your hair short like a bob and I am going to kill you. [Excerpt from beginning of an audio recording of Lucy's oral story, January 31, 2011]

The language here echoes the "everyday" language of teasing in school ("takes the mick out of") as well as describing a process of "pretend" friendship, which ends in death. This oral version of Lucy's story was extended in her written piece. This story focused on looking and seeing as critical to the experience of inequality. Lucy's oral account of her story turns on the concept of "looking" and changing her looks, or, if not, if she stays the same, she dies. Lucy was threatened in the street and then later bullied for the color of her skin at school. By articulating this experience as a story, Lucy recontextualized the experience into a different genre, that of the revenge fairy tale. This response also has aesthetic elements, which include a focus on color ("Indigo-blue eyes") and expressive terms ("fire and jealousy"). Here is the opening of her written story:

#### How to drown a Blondie!

Right let's get this straight. I am a writing a story about a selfish, evil, cold-hearted girl whose life I took away. Everything in this story is the truth. 100% I guarantee you. The girl's name was Lauren. She had beautiful hair. It was blond and shoulder length with beautiful eyes which were Indigo-blue. But if you looked closer you could see her eyes were raging with fire and jealousy if she met someone more beautiful than her. Her dad was a very rich man, a billionaire who not only loved his daughter but was scared of her as well. As she was demanding and can turn anyone around her little finger with a click (but not me) as you couldn't be sure of what she was capable of doing. I'm not even going to tell you what she did. Because it is too evil. [Excerpt from the beginning of the written text "How to Drown a Blondie," undated, 2011 by Lucy]

I began the analysis of the story by asking Lucy where she got the idea of "How to Drown a Blondie." She responded that she had drawn on a section of *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer 2008) from the *Twilight* series where Jacob retorts to the narcissistic Rosalie:

"You know how you drown a blonde, Rosalie?" I asked without stopping or turning to look at her, "Glue a mirror to the bottom of a pool." [Meyer 2008:271]

This quote draws on the genre of the "blond" jokes that circulated in British schools (sexist in tone and nature) but, using aesthetic categories of blondness and blue eyes transforms this into a written fable of revenge. Meyer's text resonates with powerful descriptions of aesthetically beautiful white girls who are also other-worldly and deadly:

My first reaction was an unthinking pleasure. The alien creature in the glass was indisputably beautiful, every bit as beautiful as Alice or Esme. She was fluid even in stillness, and her flawless face

was pale as the moon against the frame of her dark, heavy hair. Her limbs were smooth and strong, skin glistening subtly, luminous as a pearl. My second reaction was horror. [Meyer 2008:403]

The use of descriptive language here has a powerful effect on the reader, creating a visual image of the character. Likewise, Lucy is beginning to make use of visual imagery and powerful language. She uses vivid imagery such as “indigo blue” and “eyes raging with fire and jealousy” to construct her character. Lucy constructs a reversed world where the powerful are laid low and come to a terrible end. Lucy draws the reader into her version of the universe, bringing a powerful counter narrative to conventional valorizations of the blue-eyed girl as a form of “imaginative vigilance” (Hull and Nelson 2009). I understand that phrase to be about an engagement with a morality in which the use of imagination is a key factor of understanding the “other” in texts. Lucy’s narratives critique the valorization of the blond and blue-eyed girl within Western fairy tale narratives. When I was first making sense of Lucy’s texts, I turned to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* as a similarly powerful tale of reversal as well as trauma (1970). While very different in terms of context and style, the themes were powerful and linked to Lucy’s message. By making this link, I could also recognize the aesthetic work Lucy had done to lift her account of racism into fiction. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970) a vulnerable young black girl, Pecola Breedlove, under the watchful eyes of two other, more protected black girls, Claudia and Frieda, yearns for blue eyes. The story challenges the reader to imagine, through the image of the blue-eyed girl, the experience of these three girls. By identifying “blondness” with a particular set of characteristics, Lucy could transform an experience of hurt and shame into something that is vivid and alive, just as Toni Morrison did with *The Bluest Eye*. As Hull and Nelson (2009) argue, meaning making must be recognized as being ethically constituted and understood in relation to a philosophy of “engaged cosmopolitanism” that values difference and imagined better futures (p. 220). Lucy has lifted her experience of racism in the street and in her school to an aesthetic level that transcended ordinary language and experience. Writing becomes here an act of critical engagement with the world, drawing on the work of Kinloch (2010) and Morrell (2008).

## Discussion and Analysis

Home literacy practices can be invisible to educators and have an ephemeral quality (Pahl 2002), but a focus on their aesthetic qualities brings out the threads and themes sedimented within them. These sedimentations can be traced across time and space and can be explored in collaborative ways with research participants (Rowse and Pahl 2007; Lassiter 2005). Home literacy practices were differently weighted in relation to the oral and the written. Lucy’s written stories were written to read aloud. Written text is used as a vehicle to promote reading aloud and oral sharing of stories. Like the Qu’ranic literacies as described by Andrey Rosowsky (2008) and Gregory (2008), Lucy tells her story to me first, as an orally performed text, and the written version is an inscribed form of that oral story. Lucy’s home literacy practices draw on her reading (*Twilight*) and her experiences but were also shaped by her desire to share her stories. She told and retold “How to Drown a Blondie” frequently. My first encounter with the story was when she told it to me orally, and I recorded it in early January 2011. Lucy’s shaping of the story was constructed both within the writing but also in and across family contexts, echoing Gregory, Long and Volk’s work on siblings as mediators of literacy practices in the home (2004). Lucy’s texts had an intertextual quality, borrowing and transforming from pre-existing texts, but she was improvising upon these texts at the same time (Dyson 1993; Pahl 2011). In a home setting, funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al. 2005) such as textiles, gardening, as well as the experience of reading books such as *Twilight* were key themes. While many of these

themes remain hidden in school, in Lucy's home she could draw freely on her own experience and knowledge. She then brought in her own personal experience of racism and braided this into her storytelling and writing. By working with her to uncover the threads behind these texts, I could begin to unpack the ways the stories were composed from these experiences and trace the sedimentations (Rowse and Pahl 2007).

The study of home literacy practices drawing on New Literacy Studies has been characterized by a focus on multimodal textual productions and an appreciation of the ephemerality of the everyday (Pahl 2002). There are fewer studies that tie together this appreciation with the literature on beauty, that is, aesthetic theory. This theory can be disruptive (Eagleton 1990) and, it has been argued, is elitist in its conceptual framing (Crawford 2001). But, I would argue, it offers an important lens to look at the writing of young people, in that it combines an understanding of moral purpose with the shaping and the intuitive, sensory choices the author makes in the assemblage of a text (Hull and Nelson 2009). Understanding these practices requires drawing on multimodal theories of meaning making (Kress 1997) or, more precisely, what Willis (2000) calls "symbolic creativity." Hull and Nelson argued of young people's digital productions that

At the core of the development of this kind of capacity, we suspect, is artistic creative practice, which promotes an understanding of textual meaning-making as a fluid, context-dependent, intertextual and fundamentally design full process. [2009:219]

Home writing practices have this quality of being fluid, context dependent, and intertextual. They rely on shared family meanings and interpretations. In order to make sense of these very embedded data, I drew on the concept of "everyday aesthetics" from Dewey and Williams. Dewey's concept of art as experience invites the everyday into the field of art and aesthetics (Dewey 1934). Experience becomes the touchstone of artistic media. The multimodal, multisensory objects and stories found in the home reflect embodied experience. Embodied experience can be seen as a way of apprehending the world, as part of a wider "structure of feeling" (Williams 1961). Lived experience becomes shaped by genre, such as the fairy tale, the "essay," or the horror story. Many of these genres have their origins within "schooled" literacy practices (Street and Street 1991). Educators need to take account of these everyday discourse genres, such as the "sayings" Lucy referred to as a form of comfort in her discussion of racism, also discussed by Hoggart (1957:29) where "the aphorisms are drawn on as a kind of comfort" (Hoggart 1957:29). These everyday sayings helped Lucy navigate the racist world she inhabits. They are also linguistically encoded and help her hear the voices that make up her stories and compositions in the home.

In educational settings, the use of the formal essay, factual recount, and story as forms are prevalent, but the content tends to be mediated by school subjects and encounters. Lucy's experience with racism was translated into a written essay as well as a fairy tale or horror story, all of which were written to be read aloud. These genres were pulled upon in the writing process, but her embodied experience of racism fueled the writing. This analysis recognized the power of an everyday aesthetic in shaping meaning making, highlighting the need to remain imaginatively vigilant at all times (Hull and Nelson 2009).

Aesthetics is a contradictory and sensuous domain (Eagleton 1990). This lens relies on a more intuitive, embodied, and nonrational form of understanding of texts. Engaging with writing such as "How to Drown a Blondie" means going beyond an analysis of the meanings within the text (a girl who goes to private school who has blond hair and blue eyes comes to a bad end). Rather, it involves engagement with the emotions engendered by the text that led to comparisons with literature such as *The Bluest Eye*. Likewise, while the textile, gardening, and glitter examples lay in a more domestic frame, being linked to the materializations and upholding of domesticity, they still contained elements of

complex aesthetic categories, drawing on the father's house-building practices, using gold for the mosque, and his ability to create a bright and lovely garden in the UK. These aesthetic traces (Vasudevan 2011) are important to locate and recognize, for their embedded nature could well be passed over, but here, the significance for education is in their shaping as much as in their content.

### Significance of Study for Education

What can educators take from studies of the aesthetics of home literacies? Educators do engage with the aesthetic qualities of texts, particularly in relation to literary analysis and fine art. But as Vasudevan (2011) has argued, while traces of aesthetic modes of engagement remain within educational contexts, the aesthetic also defies political and ideological frames and seeps outside that (Eagleton 1990). Many classrooms are placed within these frames as teachers engage with an increasingly skills-focused policy discourse. What is nonrational, nonlinear, and embedded within contexts unfamiliar to a particular educator can prove elusive. Recently there has been a "turn" to a recognition of work that listens to voices across diverse epistemologies. This development can be found among those researching dialogic arts practice (Kester 2004), listening (Back 2007), and, most important, the reverse of knowing—the space of "unknowing" or the giving up on academic knowledge (Vasudevan 2011). A focus on aesthetics within the everyday can facilitate this process. Equally important is an attentiveness to the "other" in culture, a process which Hull, Stornaiuolo, and Sahni (2010) describe as a form of "engaged cosmopolitanism." This approach recognizes how moral positions can be taken up by diverse cultures and in diverse modalities. It is this understanding that Hull and Nelson (2009) bring to their definition of aesthetics as a moral as well as literary category. This complex listening is needed. Young people continue to experience racism and their practices and cultural aesthetic schemas are not always visible to educators. Educators need to listen to the subjective, the sensuous, and the "contradictoriness of the aesthetic" if they are to recognize and engage with the textual voices of their students (Eagleton 1990:8).

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1. See [www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk](http://www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk)

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