



Illuminations, Class Identities and the Contested Landscapes of Christmas

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, illuminating the outside of a house with multi-coloured lights has become a popular British Christmas practice, typically adopted within working-class neighbourhoods and thus producing a particular geography of illumination. This article explores how such displays have become a site for class conflict mobilized around contesting ideas about space, time, community, aesthetics and festivity, highlighting how the symbolic economy of class conflict moves across popular culture. We focus upon two contrasting class-making practices evoking conflicting cultural values. First, we examine the themes prevalent in negative media representations of Christmas lights, notably the expression of disgust which foregrounds the working-class stereotype, the 'chav'. Second, we analyse the motivations of displayers, exploring how the illuminations are imbued with idealistic notions about conviviality and generosity.

KEY WORDS

chav / Christmas / class / conviviality / disgust / distinction / generosity / idealism / illumination / taste

Introduction

The globalization of Christmas as a dynamic, 'syncretic modern form' (Miller, 1995: 4) allows for enormous local variations. In the last two decades, illuminating the outside of a house with multi-coloured lights has

become a popular British Christmas practice. Whereas in the US these illuminations typically cover large middle-class dwellings, in Britain they have been largely adopted within working-class neighbourhoods, producing a particular geography of Christmas illumination. While modest, chic white and blue lighting illuminates middle-class housing areas, more colourful extravaganzas pervade working-class residential districts. Such displays contain various elements: festive inscriptions or traditional Christmas iconography, including holly, Christmas trees, Father Christmas, stars, sleighs, snowmen, bells and parcels; depictions of toy trains, ladders, helicopters, aeroplanes, hot air balloons and teddy bears; large inflatables; and flashing lights and pulsing rope lines. Usually installed from late November or early December, displays remain installed until mid January and have transformed the British urban nightscape, causing much controversy, reflected in the derogatory term, 'chav bling'.

In this article we investigate how and why such displays have become a focus for two contrasting forms of class expression. First we identify the prevalent negative tropes in mediated discourses, most prominently on internet chat forums, which implicitly construct displayers as lowly working-class 'others', typically encapsulated in the figure of the 'chav'. Second, we utilize empirical research to explore the motivations of 22 displayers in Manchester and Sheffield over Christmas 2006, and the ways in which they conceive their practices as productive of 'community'. We investigate how these divergent productions proffer contesting ideas about space, community, aesthetics and festivity and highlight how they are mobilized through different realms that rarely intersect, namely through media networks and local, social networks. Accordingly, we argue that while both these practices express different contemporary processes of class formation, they operate within distinct circuits that provoke questions about social connectedness and the power to mobilize identity within different spatial contexts.

We align ourselves with recent accounts that place class back onto the sociological agenda after a period in which there has been 'a strange death of class in media and political representation' (Milner, 1999: 1), along with a parallel dearth in mainstream academic discourse. Where scholarly discussion about class has occurred, it has been bedevilled by abstract, widely varying definitions (see Savage, 2000). Yet, while Bromley argues that class has become a 'ghost in the machine of contemporary British politics, the great "unspoken"' (2000: 51), he suggests that it remains alive in British cinema. Skeggs likewise refers to the 'massive proliferation of popular cultural output devoted to the expression of class interests' (2004: 5). Indeed, the symbolic economy of class expression and conflict continues to pervade popular culture, a realm within which selves and others are represented in 'a system of inscription, exchange, perspective and value-laden attribution' (p. 9). Accordingly, in the first part of our analysis, we investigate how negative depictions of Christmas light displayers circulate through websites and newspaper discussions, producing an imaginary rough working-class subject or 'chav' and also an implicitly classed self to this lowly 'other'. However, we also contend that class formation and expression remains

a grounded process, performed and embedded in local space, and thus we analyse the cultural contexts and class understandings which inform the initiation and maintenance of festive illumination, consequently avoiding the tendency to present those impugned in media representations as passive victims.

Disgusted Responses to Illumination

The Christmas light displays across Britain have excited much media comment. While many welcome their addition onto the festive landscape, we focus on the significant percentage of exceedingly negative¹ media responses found in websites and national and local newspapers, and feature an exemplary selection from this commentary to draw out the dominant discursive tropes through which the displays and their creators are characterized and criticized. The websites, found through engine searches featuring terms related to Christmas illumination, were of two types: comments from viewers and readers to news features about light displays in national and local media; and the website *chavscum*,² which annually featured a selection of photographs of displays sent in by respondents along with their critical commentary. Immediately noticeable is a class-oriented discourse that stereotypes displayers as ‘chavs’.

Tyler (2008) argues that in media-saturated cultures in which social classifications are extensively imagined and represented, the figure of the ‘chav’ has become over-determined in disproportionate and emotive ways that reveal underlying anxieties within middle-class and ‘respectable’ working-class fractions. An iterative mediated process produces powerful social and cultural effects through which the ‘chav’ becomes ‘real’, for repetitive negative representations are subsequently mobilized and assigned to actual bodies and spaces outside media space. Tyler underlines how, on particular websites, the articulation of terminologies and attitudes are progressively intensified, generating and consolidating this ‘reality’. These assumptions become further entrenched through their association with popular British media forms and an intensified celebrity culture, including comedy characters Vicki Pollard from *Little Britain* and Wayne and Waynetta Slob from the *Harry Enfield Show*, pop stars Lady Sovereign and Mike Skinner, and uber-chavs Wayne Rooney and Jade Goody.

As Lawler (2005), Skeggs (2005) and Tyler (2008) have emphasized, depictions of the ‘chav’ are suffused with a sense of disgust. Tyler shows how emotions generated by these expressions of disgust reinforce an ‘other’-oriented form of middle-class identity, which relies on shared affect. Skeggs underlines how the articulation of disgust emerges out of ‘a crisis in middle-class authority and security’ (2005: 968) and attempts to reinforce forms of distinction that authorize particular values and subjectivities, as the following website contribution makes explicit:

I am so glad I have money and am not forced to live in local authority housing. This image just makes me realise how lucky I am to be an educated, cultured member of the middle classes. (From website www.chavscum.co.uk)³

As Lawler contends, forms of middle-class disgust emerge out of relational assumptions. However, the terms 'chav' or 'charver' are also mobilized as part of a reconfigured articulation of the enduring distinction between 'respectable' and 'rough' working classes. In his rich discussion of working-class masculinity in north-east England, Nayak (2006) highlights how groups of young working-class men are distinguished by their cultural tastes, self-presentation and participation in new corporate leisure spaces. Typically, these more 'respectable' youths distinguish themselves from 'chavs', whom they characterize as predisposed towards violence, criminality, indolence and welfare dependency, and by their rough speech and bodily comportment. Accordingly, these assignments render class visible 'through a mobile economy of signs, discursively mapped onto the cartography of the post-industrial city and the working and non-working bodies that lie therein' (Nayak, 2006: 827). In the largely anonymous extracts from websites that we select, the class of contributors is unidentifiable. Nevertheless, there are distinctions of tone between those who use derogatory, condemnatory and abusive speech and others who adopt a more distanced, refined moral tone that perhaps hint at class identities.

In these extracts, there are prevalent assumptions that beauty is transcendent and self-evident, and 'good taste' can only be identified by those with the capacity to discern it, whereas those unable to accord with such judgements are aesthetically and morally deficient. Visceral responses of disgust which (over)react against the violation of taste underscore the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' and produce abject bodies with their excess flesh, bad odour, vile habits, hideous clothing, sexual depravities and gluttonous tendencies. In addition, assumptions about social backwardness are apt to extend into assertions that the lowly working class are 'excessively white – offensively and embarrassingly white' (Haylett, 2001: 355) and further, unlike the 'cosmopolitan' middle class, are 'emblematically racist' (p. 356) and parochial.

To bring out the class-making specificities of these negative discursive portrayals of Christmas light displays, we highlight the implicit articulation of distinctive expressions of identity that mobilize geographical and consumer-oriented values.

The Imagined Geographies of the 'Chav'

Popular media expressions of disgust produce a luridly imagined space populated by chavs and other bete-noires, including youths serving anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), gangs, drug users, hoodie clad ne'er-do-wells, teenage single mothers, asylum seekers, those dependent on welfare, and the work-shy. This imagined geography is apparent in one reader's response to a feature⁴ on a particular local Christmas lights display:

Sooo Chav-like. Funniest thing is that the majority of these houses with big light displays outside are on council estates where the majority are on benefits. A sense of

wasting money (my taxes no doubt) and wasting electric (not very environmentally friendly). People need a reality check and instead of wasting my money maybe find a job and some taste. (*Manchester Evening News* website)

This imaginary is further exemplified by the following website contribution where ‘negative place images of social housing estates have congealed around immovable stigmatised reputations’ (Watt, 2006: 780), and can be translated into local contexts:

This little council house beauty can be found in its natural habitat of Cardiff’s North Way. Astonishingly it makes up 25% of Cardiff’s electrical consumption and is sponsored very graciously by the benefits agency. (chavscum website)

These ‘sink’ council estates are supplemented by ‘bog-standard’ secondary schools, brothels, betting shops, pubs and mean streets, imagined geographies that chime with earlier and contemporaneous spatial depictions of spaces inhabited by the ‘non-respectable’ working class (Haylett, 2001). Representations of particular low class locations include ‘crap towns’ (Jordison and Kieran, 2006) such as Croydon, Hull and Luton, a link between place and disgust apparent below:

I nearly crashed the car when I saw this blinged up scummy chav house on an estate near me in Middlesbrough – known locally as ‘middles-b-ROUGH’. I bet they are spending all of their benefit on leccy tokens! scum! Best bit is it’s probably all nicked. (chavscum website)

Such critiques are infused by assumptions that other, ‘proper’ space-making practices produce a respectable landscape. Frequently, such assertions infer that unrespectable practices unfairly impose bad taste upon neighbours and should be confined to the private realm inside the house:

Tacky? They are environmental vandalism on the grossest scale. If people want garish decorations, put them where others don’t have to see them. (BBC News website)

I love Christmas and enjoy setting up the tree and decorations with my family but find decorations of this type tacky and offensive. It is perfectly acceptable to decorate the interior of your house to whatever level you choose but to go to these extremes on the exterior has nothing to do with celebrating Christmas but is simply a case of one upmanship with the tacky neighbours. (BBC News website)

Moreover, concerns about spatial propriety are informed by anxieties that such practices are potentially contagious, might infiltrate their own neighbourhoods, breaching spatial boundaries. They are also inflected by the contemporary espousal that the middle class are now marginalized subjects (McCarthy et al., 1997):

Stanhope is a nice picturesque village in Weardale, Co. Durham. Nowhere is safe from being ruined by the filthy charver scum however. The picture doesn’t do it justice as the reindeers & santas are all animated. Please God burn it down. (chavscum website)

The potential for grotesque, unruly and excessive forms of house and garden decoration to infringe upon the aesthetic convention of 'respectable' space are further matched by temporal norms. Notions about how nocturnal urban space should be appropriately regulated and about the correct time span during which exterior lighting should be displayed are expressed. Commentators aver that Christmas is expanding beyond its proper limits and festive light displays, the complaints go, are erected too soon and last too long:

Is November the first not a little early? I reckon that planning permission should be sought for this type of decoration and the display period should be much shorter. They can be an eyesore to neighbours and how many will really say what they think?... but First November? (*Manchester Evening News* website)

The summoning up of lurid working-class places of otherness in these critiques implicitly construct an 'other' to those who are making the commentary. This is thus a class-making practice that constructs a 'respectable', orderly and tasteful geography in contrast to these vilified landscapes.

Design and Consumer Identities

Moran (2006) asserts that the 'chav' phenomenon surfaced as part of the 1980s turn towards neo-liberal thinking and 'enterprise culture'. A form of consumer profiling emerged in the advertising and marketing industries, 'lifestyle research', that was pervaded with assumptions about the declining importance of class. Instead, society was conceived of as comprising discrete groups distinguished by their tastes and lifestyle choices, rather than level of income or occupation. Such typologies seeped into media commentary to influence popular discourses and everyday chat, in which 'yuppies', 'toffs', 'boffins' and 'chavs' loom large. Yet these stereotypical characters re-introduce class, re-orienting it around lifestyle, the performance of self and consumption. Thus, lower class groups are typified by their crass, excessive and showy consumption, evident in clothing styles, ornaments and musical tastes. Accordingly, negative responses to Christmas displays exemplify the belief that 'chav culture is a symptom of a more general debasement of taste' (Moran, 2006: 269), as the following distinction-oriented statements assert:

Christmas decorations have been becoming tackier year on year. It doesn't stop at lights any more. Now we are subjected to inflatable Homer Simpson Santas and other totally inane rubbish. (BBC News website)

Someone should pull the plug on 'Christmas Houses' – tasteless, tacky and an embarrassment to the neighbours... Life must be so dull for these people spending 3 weeks attaching tat to your house. Could be worse I guess, at least they aren't at the end of my street. (*Manchester Evening News* website)

This denigration of style and taste is embedded in the increasing centrality of lifestyle to certain middle-class and would-be middle-class groups, where

consumption-oriented self-making is accompanied by impulses to mark out others as deficient consumers, as is made explicit in the assumed cosmopolitan attitude of the following extract:

Yes! Jump on a plane with a budget airline and fly to Germany to see a Christmas market. Tasteful, hand-crafted decorations on display and for sale. Outdoor decorations need not be tasteless. Why do so many Brits go over the top? (BBC News website)

Such assertions maintain the authoritative discrimination through which particular class fractions feel able to identify 'inappropriate' excess and vulgarity. This authority is further informed by an increasingly influential group of cultural intermediaries and lifestyle media experts (Bell and Hollows, 2005) who critically comment on lifestyles, provide tasteful 'makeovers' of homes, bodies, clothing and gardens, judge competencies in home-making, cooking and design and offer remedial cures for deficiencies, all the time reinforcing particular cultural values that masquerade as 'common-sense'.

Taylor maintains that the transformations wrought by these gurus of design impose particular middle-class 'solutions' on the homes and gardens of those who are alleged to possess 'less developed' tastes (2005: 113). Such redesign is frequently *themed* so as to provide an aesthetically coherent, overarching concept into which everything must fit and from which 'excessive' fixtures, colours and ornaments must be banished (Holliday, 2005). Accordingly, expressive working-class decorative practices clash with typically 'understated' middle-class designs, which epitomise good taste by 'not being too brash or obvious about material wealth' (Bridge, 2007: 40). Light displays are thus regarded as 'excessive' (Skeggs, 2005: 974), disrupting carefully themed, understated markings of distinction. The articulation of such judgements via media reveals how class relations are apt to 'seep into the very public production and performance of supposedly private subjective construction' (pp. 974–5).

This identification of excess in Christmas décor chimes with the excessive bodies of lowly working-class people who eat *too much*, or in women depicted as excessively vulgar or sexual, wearing inappropriate clothing. The purchasing of certain clothing styles or jewellery ('bling') or the hiring of limousines for nights out is identified as an excessive squandering of money. Even expressions of mourning through the erection and maintenance of roadside shrines can be typified as excessively emotional (Potts, forthcoming). These identifications often extend into demanding legislative regulation of 'excessive' noise, design and celebrations, even during the Christmas festive season long associated with excessive consumption, expenditure and behaviour. For even Christmas can be championed as an occasion for the sophisticated display of 'tasteful' décor.

Accordingly, Christmas light displays are commonly regarded as an immodest spectacle, excessive aesthetically, a waste of money by poor, inept consumers, and above all, a waste of electricity, an outrage against energy conservation and ecological thinking:

Have these people no concern for the environment. What a waste of resources. They aren't exactly thinking of the long term future for the kids are they? (*Manchester Evening News* website)

A small display of light is alright – it's the completely over the top displays which use far too much electricity should be banned! We should not throw away important resources on frivolous displays, they should all be turned off after 10pm. (BBC News website)

Clearly, the symbolic economy is increasingly an important arena for class-making endeavours. The characteristics of excess attributed to Christmas light displays contrast with the class-oriented values of their critics, who imply that they, conversely, carry out responsible, modest, skilful and tasteful modes of consumption. And whilst selective cultural forms and practices originating in working-class culture can be appropriated and rehabilitated as 'kitsch', and re-valued through their potential to express the detached and knowing irony of the consumer, Christmas lights appear to be deemed to be excessive and irredeemable, an expression of a (classed) essence rather than witty and cool. Such critiques do not thus represent a 'relaxation of aesthetic judgement and social distinction' (Potts, 2007: 4) but testify to the power of some to appropriate and redefine cultural meanings only where they see fit.

The Motivations and Cultural Values of Christmas Light Displayers

In order to explore the production of the Christmas light displays and the motivations and understandings of their creators, we interviewed 22 householders in Manchester and Sheffield. After driving round large areas of both cities it became evident that the specific geography of Christmas light display was characterized by its prevalence in housing estates that were originally council owned as well as other areas of low cost private accommodation. Thus, a high proportion of interviews took place in Wythenshawe, often termed the UK's largest council estate, and low cost private housing in Stretford, the areas with the highest concentrations of displays. In areas of middle-class housing, such displays were virtually non-existent. Displayers were recruited by posting letters through their door to forewarn them of our interest and later contacting them in person, after which an overwhelming majority consented to be interviewed. It became apparent that a majority of interviewees were not working for various reasons (retired, long term sick or unemployed) and tended to be middle aged or older. We were concerned with displayers' situated understandings to reveal specific cultural values and dispositions. Accordingly, questions focused upon the following themes: motivation for the initiation of the displays, responses of neighbours, decisions about the style and content of displays, the development of displays and plans for future decoration, practical issues of cost and acquisition and opinions about critical responses to the displays.

Despite the often virulent criticisms, displayers tended to respond with blithe indifference or incomprehension to the tone and content of remarks, although many were unaware of the jibes:

I can't imagine anybody complaining to be quite honest. (David, 60–70, Sheffield, retired builder)

If you were using their electricity or if you were infringing on their space something like that then I could understand it, but if it's your own property and you're paying the electricity bills I can't understand it. (Linda, 60–70, David's wife)

More overt responses to critics were not typified by any kind of loathing or overt defensiveness. Instead, displayers tended to identify a Scrooge-like miserliness, and a lack of (Christmas) spirit or communal sentiment:

They're just grumpy, grumpy people. (Deborah, 30–39, Sheffield, housewife)

(They are) miserable and childish. They complain because they can't be bothered doing it. Idleness. They can't be bothered doing it so why should anyone else do it. Well I think a lot of it is to do with that they won't spend the money on it: tight. (John, 60–70, Manchester, retired)

We have had no complaints. No way. I mean how could it possibly be offensive? You will always get one or two people what might complain 'cos they have nothing better to do, and they are miserable people. I mean what about the young kids? Them young kids love it ... It's about Christmas ... I bet they don't even have decorations up in their house. I mean what do they do at Christmas? (Billie, 40–49, Manchester, off work with ill-health)

Despite this lack of defensiveness, there is an insistence upon the right to display, in the face of those who would regulate their activities, a sense that they would battle to uphold their cultural rights:

I will never, ever take mine off this wall. I will put them up every single year. If it upsets people then I'm sorry but they don't need to come and have a look ... I'm sorry but tough, this is our way, our way of living. (Mary, 40–49, Manchester, unemployed)

When it comes to distinguishing motivations for mounting the light displays, certain imperatives do inform the arrangements, and the most important is that displays should be colourful, bright and 'cheerful'. One interviewee asserted that there should be a variety of colourful lights but also advanced the ideal that they should be vibrant and full of movement, an increasingly prominent feature of the displays:

You've got to have different colours, it's no good without a mixture of different colours. We've got a lot flashing. They flash a lot some of them. All different colours changing all the time. It's good. I like the bells, always ringing, flashing and moving. (Albert 60–70, Sheffield, retired bus driver)

The exuberance and density of many light displays, their dramatic illumination of the nightscape, accord with displayers' desire to imprint their festive presence. It is

difficult to think of another strategy by which people of limited means could make such an impression on everyday space: the glaring colours, flashing and moving lights transform mundane housing estates into carnivalesque spectacles. The creation of these festivals of illumination is informed by common sense aesthetic assumptions about which particular colours are appropriate:

We prefer the colours to the white, and we certainly don't like the blue. Blue is a cold colour. I mean blue is not a Christmas colour is it? Reds and greens are Christmas colours. Reds, greens and golds. Yes we only go for the Christmas colours instead of the plain white or the blue. Well, it's more of a colourful display that way. (John, 60–70, Manchester, retired)

This understanding that Christmas colours are red and green implicitly critiques the fashionable tendency to adopt particular 'cold' colours for festive domestic and civic lighting, such as the minimalistic white spotlights used in domestic settings, and the cobalt blue lights that illuminate trendy bars and restaurants. One lamented that the modish white and blue lighting of the Christmas light displays around a central Manchester thoroughfare resonated with a lack of festive spirit, in glaring contrast to his and others' displays.

The thing I will say to you is if you look around at Christmas now ... let's just say for instance ... Deansgate. And when you see people putting *these* types of decorations up, like the ones we have outside, well it puts Deansgate to shame! (Billie, 40–49, Manchester, off work with ill-health)

Yet though strong norms govern colour choices, ideas about light assembly otherwise rarely include notions of 'good taste' or discrete and artful arrangement, in contrast to the design-oriented ideas which characterize middle-class house and garden design. This lack of importance attached to sophisticated design was made explicit by most interviewees in describing how they compose their displays:

Well it's all higgeldy piggeldy. There is no style about it – they go up the same way every year. (Nell, 50–59, Manchester, housewife)

I just throw it up ... it is that there, that goes there and that will do. It depends what I pick up ... I just fling it up: 'Will it fit there? Well, fine.' I have never thought about it. No I have never actually thought about it. It is organised chaos. That's the key. (Debbie, 20–29, Manchester, housewife)

Elements from popular culture are often incorporated into displays, notably large inflatables featuring media characters such as Homer Simpson. Criticism of these features echoes concerns about the baleful influence of 'mass' or popular culture on moral, collective, intellectual and aesthetic standards throughout the 20th century. Miller (1995) highlights how Christmas has long been a complex bricolage of numerous symbols, a blend of 'traditional' and 'popular', ancient and modern, sacred and secular and 'Christian and pagan' elements, producing displays that are inevitably profuse in matter, use and meaning. A proliferating range of popular cultural forms allows celebrants to adopt and adapt a range of icons and symbols. Such popular, often nostalgic symbols of Christmas

might evoke notions of kitsch, and may indeed be ironically consumed as such by middle-class onlookers. Yet while the self-awareness expressed by kitsch enthusiasts is absent, such elements are regarded as humorous, as is exemplified by two interviewees' response to an act of vandalism on their display:

Three years ago someone stabbed Mr Frostie (the inflatable snowman). The wife put the notice up like *Crimestoppers*: 'For the arrest and prosecution of those who stabbed Frostie ...' People were coming to the door for about three or four days and saying, 'What's happened to your snowman?' and we'd say, 'Oh someone's stabbed him' and they'd say 'Oh Dear, Oh Dear'. (Joseph, 60–70, Sheffield, off work with ill health)

There was people stopping me in the street asking how he was doing. One lady asked if he was in intensive care! (Christine, 60–70, Joseph's wife)

Instead, the incorporation of comical elements of popular culture is about the production of homeliness, a communicative quality that 'has a positive role in the formation of sociality and is by no means relegated to being the other to good taste' (Miller, 2006: 246). Here the extended joke about Frostie forms the basis for playful, humorous neighbourly interaction and festive communality, what Miller identifies as the capacity to 'create a sense of warmth, empathy and comfort through (an) appeal to humour' (p. 247).

Although concerns about 'good taste' and design are unimportant to displayers, other objectives are far more significant in influencing the decision to display. While tastemakers might favour certain colours, shapes and proportions (see Londos, 2006), displayers privilege conviviality, neighbourliness and festive pleasure.

Above all, it is the central importance of Christmas as a festival which produces the desire to create a light display, for informants emphasize that this is a time when shared doxic values of celebration, giving and friendliness should be prioritized:

Some of them have got lights but most of them don't even have the decorations up and I think that's dead miserable. IT'S CHRISTMAS! ... Christmas to me is not a religious thing it's more of a family thing. It is about when you take time off from the trials and tribulations of life and just take time off to appreciate what you have at home. (Yvette, 50–59, Manchester, housewife)

To me it says celebrate Christmas. It's a gift to share. That to me is what Christmas is about, to appreciate what we've got. There's so many people now that are letting the tradition die off. I just think we should keep it going and it's nice to keep kids interested in what Christmas is about. (Albert 60–70, Sheffield, retired bus driver)

It's dying out now Christmas. I mean Christmas is ... for kids. Kids love it ... either you are going to be sad, or you are going to try and make yourself more happier. And Christmas lights outside are going to give you that happy atmosphere and to be joyful. *That's* the message I'm giving. (Billie, 40–49, Manchester, off work with ill-health)

The overriding sentiment articulated above, and one repeated throughout most interviews, is that the initial motivation for exhibiting a light display is to produce a sense of family togetherness and enjoyment, particularly for child

family members, a commonsense notion that may be generated by a sense that in the past, such pleasures were unavailable:

(We never decorated) because I had a shite childhood (and now) ... I want to make sure the kids remember the Christmases as happy times. I suppose you could say to some degree I'm compensating for that, but I just love it – it's a family time innit? (Stuart, 30–39, Manchester, occupation unknown)

Yet while the initial impetus might be family oriented, it quickly extends into a desire to engender wider pleasure amongst friends and neighbours, particularly their children. Accordingly, it is emphasized that Christmas is a time for conviviality, communal pleasure, neighbourliness and generosity, in contradistinction to the rest of the non-festive year:

Christmas is about sharing and this is a way of sharing and doing something for the community, for people other than myself. It was just for my own kids and then for everyone else's kids around. They start to expect it now. When it gets to November they start saying, 'When are your lights going up?' I get a lot of enjoyment out of it. When I see the faces go past the window with a big smile on their face, not just the kids but adults. They come from far and wide and it's just good to see people coming down to look at 'em and just smiling when they see all the lights. It just gives you that feeling of satisfaction that you just done something for the community. As for last year I got a certificate from the Community Alliance for the area to say thanks for brightening up the community and a cheque for 50 pounds. (Trevor, 30–39, Sheffield, taxi driver)

An optimistic vision of a more communal world beyond Christmas is expressed; the potential for future neighbourly intimacy through the establishment of 'a relationship between the celebrant and the world at large' (Miller, 1995: 31). The display is thus both carnivalesque and idealistic, for, as Miller astutely asserts, the exhibition of lavishness is 'both the inversion of the home as thrift but also the embodiment of the home as the idiom for wider society' (p. 21). Yet this sense of idealism is not wholly illusory for the homely community is produced in quotidian festive interaction:

Linda across the road she always brings her niece across to see them every year without a doubt ... Doris, next door (says) 'I know it's Christmas now 'cos you've got your lights up' ... Mrs P across (the road) she very seldom opens her curtains but when we have our lights on her curtains are open. It's expected ... (Another neighbour said) 'I thought you weren't going to put them up this year and I'm missing 'em'. People do expect us to do it and they do get as much pleasure as we do. Great comments and it gees me up that people enjoy it. (David 60–70, Sheffield, retired builder)

The element of kindness in the motivation for the display is made clear by Joseph, who opines that the extra spending entailed is worth the sacrifice, implicitly refuting the notion that excessive expenditure is wasteful and reaffirming the commonsense ethic that Christmas ought to allow an economy of generosity to hold sway:

As long as you bring a bit of happiness into someone else's life, put them up, blow your electricity bill you can always pay that when it comes in! Neighbours enjoy it

and people knock on the door and congratulate us for bringing a bit of cheer to the road which is something and nothing really. It's nothing to think about really to put them up as long as it benefits other people. (Joseph, 60–70, Sheffield, off work with ill health)

This freely chosen desire to communicate neighbourliness, pleasure and festivity is apt to become a responsibility. Far from upsetting neighbours, displays become expected and, consequently, displayers bear a communal obligation to continue to set up illuminations and add new elements each year. This production of neighbourly conviviality is thus not merely generated by the displayers but becomes part of a collaborative understanding:

But it was funny this year as we were late putting them up and the neighbours were coming and saying, 'Is there anything wrong Nell? Are the lights not going up?' I said they will go up we are just busy at the minute. (Nell, 50–59, Manchester, housewife)

Our interviewees did not articulate narratives of decline that infect much commentary about housing estates (see Watt, 2006) but, instead, their neighbourhood was conceived as a site for grounding identity and reproducing social connections. This sense of communal fellowship often encompasses neighbours from a different ethnic and geographical background as recipients of the pleasures of illuminations, refuting accusations of parochialism and racism cited above:

It brings ... a lot of Asian people (from) up the road, people from East Africa, and you've got Slovaks and people from the Yemen, I think they enjoy it. It's not their Christmas but I think they enjoy it as well, especially the kids. (Joseph, 60–70, Sheffield, off work with ill health)

There was little evidence of inward-looking mentality but rather an acknowledgement that their neighbourhood was multicultural and that their lights could be enjoyed by all, irrespective of religion or ethnicity. A live and let live understanding of the ethos of festivity encouraged displayers to appreciate the attempts of others from different cultural, religious, ethnic and sexual backgrounds to produce forms of illumination, carnival and communal rituals:

Another point that I have found this year is that a neighbour, I don't know them, I think they are Indian, had lit their house up for Eid ... in October, November and we all said 'Good God lights up already?' But that's what it was. If they enjoy it, (let them) get on with it! (Nell, 50–59, Manchester, housewife)

This liberal outlook is often underpinned by nostalgic representations of yesteryear, which offer exemplary occasions of *communitas* and celebration, in contrast with the recent disappearance of collective festive occasions. However, although this disappearance fuels a sense of loss, there is an acknowledgement that new festive forms may emerge:

Now if I go back thirty years ago, to Whit week, you would have all the walks. You couldn't move in Manchester, from Piccadilly and Deansgate all the way down ... you would have the bands – marching boys brigade, scouts ... it was jam packed with bands. Hundreds of people would go there on Whit week. Well it's not there

no more it's gone. The Whit week was the biggest celebration I have ever seen in me life ... anybody my age will tell you ... The only thing that they have like that now is when the queers do their march ... in the gay town. I have never been there myself, but people say that's brilliant and people come from all over the country. And then on Wilmslow Road when the Muslims have their celebration – you can't move down there! And they are all enjoying themselves! Let them do it! That's the way I look at it. (Billie, 40–49, Manchester, off work with ill-health)

In some cases, an engagement in neighbourly participation goes beyond the responsibility of one or two key households but encompasses most of the houses in a street or close. While these closely connected households may also participate in communal events at other times of the year, such as Bonfire Night and Easter, Christmas is the most important time for such celebrations:

We always put the lights on at 6pm on the first Sunday in December, and not a second earlier or later! Everyone in the street gathers round; it's a big event ... It turns into a party. One year we had all the old people from the old folks' home come down with their zimmer frames. My wife is going to give them all a bottle of whiskey next year when they make it down ... The other neighbours do it too – so it's a street display ... You see we are a very friendly street. In the summer we have barbeques and wash the cars; every year we organise a camping trip with all the families together ... We used to have bonfires every year, but after 10 years that got boring, so we get the kids all dressed up for VE day. On the turn of the millennium in 1999, we started collecting money from every house. We got £2000 together. We bought an army tent – that cost £700!... We put it up on New Year's Eve. We all did our own street acts ... We all put our displays up together, go out together, put the lights up as a street and then on the 6th we all take them down. The week after the first Sunday when the lights go up we all have Christmas dinner, the adults only. We go out and book somewhere and have our meal. (Steve, 50–59, Manchester, factory manager)

Finally, the need to think of others at Christmas is reinforced by those who are also concerned with creating displays for charitable reasons as well as for neighbourly purposes. Several have donation boxes for particular charitable causes.

Three years ago I got throat cancer, so I decided to do it for Christies (local Cancer Hospital). I just put (out a) collection box for Christies, (but) they don't know I'm doing it for them. (Roy, 60–70, Manchester, retired due to ill-health)

Although the displayers should not be taken as 'typical' working-class subjects, they express shared class-oriented values of festive spirit, conviviality, generosity and community that are consolidated amongst friends and neighbours, within 'proximate spheres of intimacy' and inside a particular cultural, 'physical and social location' (Fernandez Kelly, 1994: 89). Within this realm, the recognition and support they receive for their festive endeavours produces a sense of worth and local form of cultural capital. Although a target for certain middle-class and would-be-middle-class critics, these critical missiles rarely penetrate this world where 'working class culture is not point zero of culture; rather, it has a different value system, one not recognised by the dominant symbolic economy' (Skeggs, 2004: 136). Accordingly, displayers are not victims of

the culturally powerful, for they 'steadfastly refuse the authority of the judgements and the value system from which it emerges' (Skeggs, 2005: 976).

The esteem visited upon displayers by neighbours evidently contributes to the acquisition of social capital, producing and referencing 'the positive outcomes of sociability, cohesiveness and connection to community' (Warr, 2005: 286). Yet, though this status is acquired through the display of commodities, such consumption practices are better understood as facilitating family and neighbourhood cohesion and intimacy (Carrier, 1995) rather than advertising 'good taste' or wealth. Such an outlook chimes with Kuper's assertion that Christmas is an occasion when a utopian vision can be proposed, a 'time out for alternative values' (1995: 172), a period in which generosity, family harmony and pleasure coexist. These seasonal values also draw upon 'traditional' working-class values of independence, skill, respectability and solidarity (Savage, 2000), romantic concepts which haunt the present with a sense of loss and nostalgia for the unrealized possibilities of 'community'.

Conclusion

We have highlighted two different arenas through which Christmas illumination is utilized to make class, first through the ongoing representation of displayers as an imagined lowly, rough working class, or as 'chavs', via websites and other media; and second, through the motivations, understandings and values of those who produce such displays in working-class locales. This distinction between the mediatized and grounded performance of class might suggest that the former is the kind of cultural text analysed by a 'decorative' sociology that has replaced more structural, historical, empirical explorations of class (Rojek and Turner, 2000). However, as mediatized constructions expand their influence and filter down into everyday expressions, they are every bit as 'real' in their class-making consequences as those grounded in place, whether this is projected onto 'others' or wielded by the self. Such cultural practices do not merely descend into micro-politics, and neither are they disconnected from wider economic processes. For value-laden assertions in media criticisms of displayers reveal the ongoing constitution of certain middle-class and would-be middle-class identities around taste, consumption and lifestyle and the attendant requirement to carve out distinction through marking distance and difference. The naming of the 'chav' through differentiating the self from an other, consolidates the epistemological salience of that which it names but also 'classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu, 1986). On the other hand, the less self-conscious practices of the displayers are imbued with a set of doxic values which produce an idealized working-class identity and space. We might contrast these collective practices as economies of status-production and generosity (see Bromberg, 2009). Yet what is particularly striking is that these class-making practices are fostered and sustained within rather enclosed networks.

Negative myths about working-class displayers collectively reproduced amongst active internet participants accord with wider defamatory discourses about 'chavs' and the like, and, here, misrecognize them through the ascription of 'essential characteristics' through which they are 'positioned and fixed' (Skeggs, 2004: 4). Such iterative representations tend not to be confounded because they are rarely disabused by actual encounter with the people so vilified. The lack of any dialogic encounter between these producers of class meaning is because the two networks through which such meanings are produced do not intersect.

As far as media comment is concerned, much online interaction involves the meeting of 'like-minded' individuals, leading to a fragmented public sphere of insulated 'deliberative enclaves' where group positions and practices are reinforced rather than openly critiqued (Dahlberg, 2007). Accordingly, because users usually 'filter' information and interactions and 'self-select' what they are exposed to, the myriad of diverse online views rarely intersect, undermining the potential for understanding differently situated others. This limitation is further entrenched by the ways in which asymmetries in offline social, cultural and economic capital lead to asymmetries between voices online. Dahlberg (2007) further contends that the absence of 'general interest intermediaries' or 'deliberative domains', found in older media outlets like national newspapers and broadcasters, produces a lack of shared communicative spaces.

Yet while the mediated expressions depicted above vibrate with symbolic violence, it does not follow that the objects of their scorn are victimized. For within the social environment of working-class displayers, participation within local *horizontal* networks facilitates the attainment of status and a positive sense of social identity. Amongst displayers, this class-identity making process does not produce a working class 'for itself', but it relies upon shared values of community, family, festivity, generosity and nostalgia to produce a neighbourly space that is working class 'in itself'. However, this local status is not usually transmissible because *vertical* connections to wider networks through which individuals might 'link to a wider range of social contacts and opportunities' are largely unavailable for 'a paucity of bridging ties is likely to restrict social contacts with people in other communities' (Warr, 2005: 287) and restrict the respectful sharing of cultural values between class-oriented neighbourhoods. Because they are culturally stigmatized through associations with place, the festive values of the Christmas light displayers are misrecognized outside their immediate sphere. The myth of the 'chav' thus circulates within deliberative media enclaves and is not disrupted by the subjects it denigrates.

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Notes

- 1 BBC News website, talk forum, 30 December 2004: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/4104297.stm. The 120 responses featured supposedly 'reflected the balance of opinion' towards the question: 'Are outdoor Christmas decorations tacky or just a bit of festive fun?' Approximately one third of responses were moderately or highly critical, a third were positive and celebratory, and the remainder ambivalent. This site gives a broader indication of the responses to Christmas lights than can be covered in this article.
- 2 The chavscum website is now either defunct or dormant.
- 3 Xmas Lights Competition 2006, 12 November: Chavscum website: <http://www.chavscum.co.uk/forum//showthread.php?p=745258> The website asks for user contributions with the following appeal:

Now Bonfire Night has come and gone a Chav's mind starts to become preoccupied with the festive season. An annual competition begins to see which Chav on their sink estate can festoon their hovel with the most Christmas lights possible from the pound shop. Forget global warming and their carbon footprint, if they aren't using 5kw/hr of electricity to power their spectacle they will have failed miserably!
- 4 C. Osuh, 'Christmas comes early at house of lights', 10 October 2006: http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/comments/view.html?story_id=225128 18 out of 24 comments responding to the above article are negative about the light displays.

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