

Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture.* Allison Pugh. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 320 pp.

Reviewed by Heather A. Horst

Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture is a poignant ethnography of the pressures and complexities of raising children in contemporary consumer society. Based upon qualitative research with children and their caregivers in the racially and economically segregated areas of Oakland, California, Allison Pugh's account chronicles how families in the area navigate the lure of consumer culture, and how parents, caregivers, and children perceive their participation in consumer culture. From decisions around purchasing game boys, soccer shoes, and Halloween costumes to how much and when to give kids an allowance, enroll in baseball, or take a trip to the local zoo, Pugh examines how parents and children's choices are shaped by class and broader systems of inequality that structure American society.

Throughout her ethnography, Pugh frames her analysis of children, families, and consumer culture through the introduction of a number of key concepts. She begins with what she terms "the economy of dignity," a concept that accounts for children's desires to participate in a meaningful way in their social world. Rather than reduce children's desire for dignity to status seeking consumption, Pugh argues that the economy of dignity is a system of social meaning through which "children claim, contest and exchange among themselves the terms of their social belonging, or just what it would take to participate among their peers" (p. 6). She further suggests that while most parents throughout her study were attuned to the economy of dignity and the importance of consumer items and experiences to their children's sense of belonging, the ways parents cope with these desires often varies by class. In the case of middle class parents, Pugh illustrates how parents utilize "symbolic deprivation" to convey the values of good parenting by withholding the purchase of games and other acts of constraint in the face of economic flexibility and choice. By contrast, working class families practice "symbolic indulgence" by purchasing expensive consumer items, holding birthday parties, or taking expensive trips to Disneyland to meet their child's need to fully participate in the economy of dignity.

The second concept that structures Pugh's analysis is "pathway consumption." Pathway consumption describes the ways in which families make decisions about where to live, experiences and extracurricular activities to join, and who to socialize with based upon their caregiver's desire to shape their children's pathways through life. The focus upon pathways signals the importance of context and experiences in attaining and achieving cultural capital. One of the more interesting examples of pathway consumption emerges in Pugh's discussion of the parent's choice of schools for their children. Many low-income African-American families (and "families of color") in Pugh's study opted to send their children to the school with other children of their ethnicity where their children may feel comfortable even when a move or different job might provide alternative opportunities. This discourse of "comfort" was also common among middle class white parents. Pugh reveals that middle class African-American families choose a

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different route, enrolling their children in predominantly white schools where they would be provided with more opportunities for academic and social capital. Yet these families also make great efforts to keep their children rooted and able to navigate diverse contexts by enrolling and facilitating their children's participation in enrichment activities with other African-Americans who are less affluent. As Pugh summarizes, "pathways are a type of consumption good that reflect and shape racialized class inequity. Such inequity contributes to the way families perceive their choices; further, the contexts themselves mold inequity through the opportunities, skills and contacts they promise for the child involved" (p. 180).

Pugh's study and analysis of families and consumer culture is comprehensive and compelling. Anthropologists and specialists in material and consumer culture will, however, note subtle differences between sociological and anthropological approaches to ethnographic research. For instance, Pugh carefully details much of the subtle class gradations that emerge through parent and children's desires for particular consumer items and experiences as well as contexts such as home and school that shape children's pathways. In fact one of the real strengths of Pugh's ethnography includes her detailed descriptions of children and families as well as her attention to the specificity of place—Oakland, California—that holds a particular position within the broader socioeconomic ecology of California. Yet, her consistent attention to the juxtaposition of 'high' and 'low' end families and, at times, the over emphasis upon the terms she introduces has the effect of losing some of these potentially salient analytic distinctions. This emphasis on structure and the dichotomy between high and low is also reflected in Pugh's conclusions about the continued reproduction of the social structure and inequality in the face of children and parents' agency in the broader economy of dignity. With these differences and concerns noted, there is no doubt that scholars interested in childhood and children's culture, sociology, anthropology, family and kinship, consumer and material culture, and class will find value in Pugh's significant contribution to understanding children's relationships to consumer culture. *Longing and Belonging* should be placed alongside a handful of excellent and carefully researched ethnographies by Annette Lareau, Barrie Thorne, Arlie Hochschild and others on families and childhood.

Heather A. Horst is a sociocultural anthropologist at the Humanities Research Institute and the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub at the University of California, Irvine. She is interested in new media and technology and in material culture studies. Her work has been published in a range of journals, including Current Anthropology, Global Networks, Journal of Material Culture, and Social Anthropology. She has co-authored three books, including: (with Daniel Miller) The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication (Berg, 2006) and (with Mizuko Ito, et. al) Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Living and Learning with Digital Media (MIT Press, 2009). She is currently working on a manuscript, tentatively titled "Mediations: Home and Childhood in Silicon Valley," based upon her work on youth and new media in the region.