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in Austin, Texas**

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**Ethical Consumerism and Parenting in a New Urbanist Neighborhood  
in Austin, Texas**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

For Jess, Naela, Pancho, Gogo, Iris, Chuky, and Richi.

# **Ethical Consumerism and Parenting in a New Urbanist Neighborhood in Austin, Texas**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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Abstract: This dissertation examines how people understand themselves—and, therefore, others like them—to be “good people.” Recent decades have witnessed enormous changes in the American cultural landscape, changes which have eroded, replaced, or transformed many of the institutions which Americans once more exclusively relied on (at least ideologically) to construct their moral identities. In this dissertation I argue that today where, how, and what people buy matter a great deal in how they define themselves as good people. I show, moreover, that these consumer choices contribute to new forms of social inequality. This project utilizes in-depth interviews with 31 residents of the Mueller neighborhood in Austin, Texas who are parents of young children. The first part of this dissertation illustrates how, in the case of Mueller, ethical consumerism is a product of particular social settings. I draw on Muellerites’ experiences with ethical consumerism to challenge conventional understandings of (1) what compels people to engage in ethical consumerism, and (2) the relationship between self-interest and civic behavior. Second, I explore how liberal,

progressive ideals held by residents of Austin—and residents of the Mueller neighborhood in particular—coexist with gentrification and persistent inequalities in surrounding neighborhoods. Third, I explore how middle-class parents in Mueller interpret and negotiate dominant discourses regarding the need to shelter children from market influences, and the cultural work that these parents engage in to draw distinctions between the types of consumerism that are acceptable for their families and those that are not. I conclude with a discussion of the relevance of my findings for social theory and understanding contemporary inequalities.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	ix
List of Figures .....	x
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Moral Careers, Institutions, and Ethical Consumerism .....	2
Mueller .....	9
Organization .....	14
Chapter Two: Ethical Consumerism in Context: Self-Interest and the Greater Good in a New Urbanist Neighborhood .....	19
Ethical Consumerism: Neoliberal Individualization or Strategy for Distinction? .....	20
Self-Interest and Ethical Consumerism .....	27
The Mueller Neighborhood .....	33
Methods .....	36
Findings .....	41
Context .....	42
Alternative Moral Discourses .....	49
The Economic and the Ethical .....	55
Discussion .....	60
Chapter Three: Diversity, Community, and New Urbanism in Creative Austin ...	64
Creative Austin .....	65
New Urbanism, Mueller, and Community .....	68
Community .....	70
Diversity .....	74
Methods .....	79
Findings .....	84
Buying into New Urbanism .....	84
Community Found .....	89
Community and Diversity .....	96

Discussion .....	105
Chapter Four: “I’d never get my kids that. What an awesome gift!”: Parenting, Consumerism, and Circuits of Commerce .....	116
Parenting the Commercial Child.....	117
Consumer-Parenting .....	122
Methods.....	126
Findings.....	131
Sheltering .....	132
The High Cost of Non-Consuming .....	137
Circuits of Commerce .....	141
Discussion .....	147
Chapter Five: Conclusion .....	151
Appendix A: Interview Guide.....	162
References.....	165



## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Interviewee Demographics .....	18
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## List of Figures

Figure 1: Porches in Mueller opening onto sidewalks.....	110
Figure 2: Porches in Mueller leading to communal gardens. ....	111
Figure 3: Shady sidewalks in Mueller. ....	112
Figure 4: Hidden alleys in Mueller. ....	113
Figure 5: Mueller Master Plan .....	114
Figure 6: Austin Racial Dot Map.....	115

## Chapter One: Introduction

I ran into Kate, one of my respondents, near the sandbox at one of the children's playgrounds in the Mueller neighborhood about a week after I interviewed her for this project. Kate shared that she had been thinking about our interview while on the neighborhood's online forum earlier in the week. In the forum Kate got into an argument with a few of her neighbors over what they should do about a group of children who had been riding their bicycles while not wearing helmets and horse-playing near younger kids. Some neighbors suggested posting the kids pictures online to compel their parents to intervene; others argued that neighbors should take it on themselves to intervene more directly. Kate felt that the entire situation was "ridiculous" and had been blown way out of proportion. She had seen these kids ride past her house and, according to her, they were doing nothing out of the ordinary. "You know," she told me, "we're not all perfect," referring to herself and fellow Muellerites. "We all make mistakes and get on each other's nerves, but I'm confident that we are all generally good people."

This dissertation examines how people understand themselves—and, therefore, others like them—to be "good people." Recent decades have witnessed enormous changes in the American cultural landscape, changes which have eroded, replaced, or transformed many of the institutions which Americans once more exclusively relied on (at least ideologically) to construct their moral identities. In this dissertation I argue that today where, how, and what people buy matter a great deal in how they define

themselves as good people. These consumer choices, moreover, contribute to new forms of social inequality. The following section will review research on “moral careers,” the changing institutional landscape in the U.S., and consumerism as a moralized practice. I then introduce my field site, the Mueller neighborhood, before outlining the organization of the dissertation.

### **MORAL CAREERS, INSTITUTIONS, AND ETHICAL CONSUMERISM**

Erving Goffman formulated the concept of moral career based on his research in a mental asylum (1961). Goffman’s asylum was a coercive organization which sought control over the patient’s behavior—in many ways a metaphor for “society.” As he observed, control was accomplished by stripping patients of their pre-asylum identities and subjecting them to the asylum’s rules, rewards, and punishments. “Total institutions” such as the asylum were efficient in rebuilding patient’s internal selves in ways that the institution deemed acceptable. Importantly for Goffman (1961), patients’ re-training of their “self” implied a moral re-training, too. Goffman maintained that the ways in which we present ourselves imply certain rights and duties on behalf of others (and ourselves) as to how each should be treated. These moral identities and obligations, therefore, are built into self-presentations. For example, to the extent that one presents themselves as a professor one expects a certain degree of deference and respect from students—interactional rituals which rely on shared moral understandings. Goffman’s concept of “moral career”—the acquisition of moral systems through participation in social worlds

or institutions, such as the asylum—is thus essential for highlighting the social sources of moral ideas.

What are the social sources of moral ideas for people who do not reside in total institutions? Family, religion, and work are a few oft-cited institutions through which individuals have historically constructed their “moral careers.” These are also institutions which are currently undergoing rapid transformations. For example, Cohen (2014) argues that it is today impossible to point to a “typical” family. While in 1960 65% of children lived in a household where parents were married and only the father was employed (83% of children lived in households with married parents), today 22% (and 56%, respectively) live in these types of arrangements. Cohen (2014) suggests that when it comes to family composition diversity is now the norm. Despite these trends, however, family remains a valued and moralizing institution. Anxious over what they perceive to be the loss of “traditional” family arrangements, defenders of the “traditional” family have vociferously warned about an impending reality where “middle-class wives lord over their husbands while demoralized single men take refuge in perpetual adolescence” (Coontz 2012). In a similar moralization of marriage and family, Edin and Kefalas (2005) find that poor, unwed mothers postpone marriage precisely because they revere the institution. These women held marriage in such high regard that they preferred to postpone marrying until they felt that they and their spouse were emotionally and financially prepared to assure that marriage would be a promise they could keep. Gays and lesbians, who until recently were largely excluded from the heteronormative institutions of marriage and family, too

place a high value on family and marriage (Whitehead 2011). Lewin (2009) similarly found that gay—and, by extension, non-gay—men desire to become fathers because having a family provides men with a “grownup” and “responsible” status difficult to achieve otherwise. Though it is becoming increasingly elusive for those who believe in “traditional” families, American’s continue to find ways to construct their moral identities through the institution of the family.

Similar to families, in recent decades religion and work have likewise undergone significant transformations. Hout et al. (2013) have noted how, especially since 1990, it has become increasingly common for Americans to express no religious institutional preference. In 1990 8% of adults claimed no religious affiliation, 12% in 2000 and more recently 20% in 2012, a trend which has been spread across every demographic. This is not to say that fewer Americans today believe in God. Instead, this trend in secularization is best understood as a decline in religious institutional authority: religious beliefs and sentiments have remained relatively stable over the past decades; what has changed is the authority that religious institutions have in mobilizing those sentiments (Chaves 1994). During this period the structure of work has too been transformed. Since the early 1980s the U.S. job structure became grown increasingly polarized between high- and low-wage jobs, while traditionally middle-class jobs have declined. Kalleberg (2011) describes the trend in which workers find themselves either in “good jobs” with high earnings and benefits, opportunities for upward mobility, and considerable autonomy, control and job security, or “bad jobs” with low wages, meager (if any) benefits and opportunities for

advancement, and high job insecurity. Middle-class jobs with some degree of autonomy, authority, and security have withered. Workers have responded to these changing circumstances, Kalleberg and Marsden (2013) argue, by reducing the relative “sense of accomplishment” they expect to receive through paid labor. Taken together, the transformations in family, religion, and work have forced Americans to reimagine how they construct themselves as good people and concoct new moral careers (e.g., Cooper 2014; Pugh 2015).

In this dissertation I highlight the growing role that consumerism plays as an institution through which people define themselves as moral. During the past decade sociologists have paid increasing attention the question of “ethical” or “political” consumerism. In recent decades products marketed as socially and environmentally responsible have grown in popularity. Since 1990 annual sales of organic products, for instance, grew by almost 20% while the growth of Fair Trade products has often exceeded 100% annually (Howard and Allen 2010; Martin 2009). Moreover, this growth of ecological practices in food and energy consumption seems to have spread across class-boundaries as evidenced by the emergence of farmers’ markets in inner cities and organic foods and eco-products in big-box stores such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot (Johnston 2008; Schor 2010). Nevertheless, Eckhardt et al. (2010) describe the reality of ethical consumerism as disheartening at best, given that the market share held by ethical products is minuscule. Even compared to expected levels of ethical consumerism based on survey data, actual levels remain abysmally low (Eckhardt et al. 2010). The fact that

ethical consumers are overwhelmingly high cultural capital consumers can partially explain this dearth of widespread ethical consumerism. These relatively scarce high cultural capital consumers enact a set of ecologically oriented high-status tastes that have become central to their identity projects (Carfagna et al. 2014). Even in these cases, however, claiming to be ethical consumers does not necessarily translate into actually consuming ethical products. Rather, what is important for the present study is that a number of high cultural capital consumers employ an ecological or societal consciousness when thinking about their consumerism and the relationship between their consumerism and the greater good. As Carfagna et al. (2014) find, these consumers think about, often in the form of myth, how their consumer choices might generate sustainability and social harmony by encouraging progressive social changes and environmental sustainability (see, for example, Johnston 2008; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012).

Recent studies analyze the potential of consumers to raise awareness and affect change on political, social, and ecological issues through shopping. Many of these studies center on questions of who ethical consumers are and what influences them to shop ethically. Nielson and Paxton (2010), for example, examine the relationship between levels of social capital and levels of “political consumerism,” finding that higher levels of social capital correlate with higher levels of political consumerism. Similarly, Johnston and Cairns (2012) look at the relationship between “foodie” discourses and political awareness. As with others in this tradition (e.g., Binkley 2003; Micheletti et al. 2006;



Soper 2007), the underlying question is how different (sub)cultures make the influence of moral imperatives on market behavior more or less likely.

More recently, sociologists have begun exploring new ways in which consumerism and morality intersect. An emerging “moralized markets” thesis views markets as intensely moralized and moralizing entities. This literature focuses on the moral schemes people deploy when they participate in the buying or selling of goods and services (Fourcade and Healy 2007). Viviana Zelizer’s work stands out among sociologists working within the “moralized markets” thesis. Zelizer’s (2007) study of the ways economic activity and intimacy sustain each other, for example, proposes what she terms a “connected lives” approach to understand how economic behaviors are embedded within social relations. We construct our “connected lives,” Zelizer argues, by negotiating and adopting meaningful ties to other people and then marking the boundaries between different types of ties “with distinctive names, symbols, practices, and media of [economic] exchange” (2007: 33) that feel appropriate to a given relationship. People signal their relations to others by adopting economic practices that conform to cultural understandings of the particular relationship at hand. As Zelizer (2007: 3) explains:

In everyday life, people invest intense effort and constant worry in finding the right match between economic relations and intimate ties: shared responsibility for housework, spending of household income, care for children and old people, gifts that send the right message, provision of adequate housing for loved ones, and much more.

Zelizer thus shows how social relationships encompass “appropriate” corresponding economic arrangements. These “appropriate” economic arrangements are, consequently, a significant part of how we construct ourselves as moral subjects, as “good” citizens, partners, friends, and parents. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of market exchange and moral commitments allows us to perceive how identities, relationships, and moralities are actively constructed and maintained through market exchange (Fourcade and Healy 2007: 20).

In an article I published with Christine Williams (Cabrera and Williams 2014), I argued that contemporary discourses on consumerism posit the greater good as achieved when responsible consumers and businesses incorporate their societal and environmental concerns into their economic decision making. Within these discourses ethics and morality are the purview of socially advantaged individuals and businesspersons who can afford to do business and consume with their vision of the greater good in mind. This dissertation builds off of this research by showing how people draw on popular consumerism discourses to construct themselves as properly consuming citizens and parents in their everyday lives. Specifically, I analyze how a relatively privileged group of consumers define themselves, in Kate’s words, as “good people” through their consumer behavior. While there have been several studies conducted on how different groups construct themselves in a positive moral light, these studies have tended to focus on stigmatized populations. For example, researchers have analyzed the role of gang tattoos in prisoners’ moral projects (Phelan and Hunt 1998), the moral careers of “true

believers” in militia groups (Melder 2013) and men “on the run” from the criminal justice system (Goffman 2014). By focusing on how a non-stigmatized, generally privileged population constructs themselves as good, moral people, this dissertation illuminates the cultural work performed by privileged groups to present themselves in an honorable light, work which tends to become mystified or go unnoticed in social life.

## **MUELLER**

Like other Sun Belt cities Austin, Texas has grown dramatically since the 1950s. The Robert Mueller Regional Airport was built during the 1920s on what was then open farmland northeast of Austin’s city center. By the late 1980s, however, the city’s urban footprint had grown around the now centrally located Airport. In 1999 Austin International Airport opened on a decommissioned Air Force base a few miles south of the city, leaving 700 acres of unused, city-owned land in the middle of the city.

Soon after Mueller airport ceased commercial operations the City of Austin approved a Master Plan prepared by the San Francisco based ROMA design firm for the repurposing and redevelopment of the former airport grounds. The plan imagined a mixed-use, privately and publicly funded urban village designed according to the principles of new urbanism. Mueller, then, was to be a diverse, mixed-income neighborhood where homes, schools, offices and transit are within walking distance, with easy access to parks and places to jog, bike and play, and from which residents, neighboring communities, businesses and the environment would benefit (Calthorpe 1993, Flint 2012). Largely a response to suburban sprawl and the social and

environmental ills that had become associated with it, new urbanist developments like Mueller are designed according to a tripartite vision of urban sustainability: economic prosperity, ecological integrity, and social equality (Gibbs, Krueger and MacLeod 2013). One journalist described Mueller as “a kind of paradise” where the refrigerators tell stories, the roofs are paved in solar panels, and there are more electric cars per capita than in any other neighborhood in America (Goldmark 2014). The Mueller Master Plan includes 6,000 homes (houses, apartments, and townhomes; 25% of which are designated as “affordable housing”), 4 million square feet of office and retail space, and 140 acres of public open parks.

In 2004 the City of Austin sold the old Mueller airport land to Catellus Corp., the private developer the city partnered with to oversee the redevelopment. Construction on the neighborhood began soon after. Mueller residents (hereafter Muellerites) began moving into their new homes in 2007. At the time of my fieldwork in mid-2014 about 600 houses had been built and over half of the development had been completed. Construction has taken place slower than residents and developers expected, in part due to a dip in home purchases and new constructions during the “Great Recession” (Grusky et al. 2011). About eight months before beginning this research my family and I moved in to an apartment a few blocks west of Mueller. Between then and when I moved from Austin in the summer of 2014 I spent a considerable amount of time in Mueller. My family and I were members at the Children’s Museum in Mueller, we would visit the parks on average about four times a week, did much of our shopping within Mueller, and

participated in organized events (farmers markets; July 4<sup>th</sup> parade; Halloween; etc.) in the neighborhood.

While new urbanism defines itself in opposition to the suburbs, new urbanism and suburbanization are both attempts to design what Fishman (1989) calls a “bourgeois utopia.” In their origin, suburbs were evangelical Londoners’ attempts at establishing a “utopia” of home and family removed from—though still economically tied to—the dirty and disorderly city. In the villages surrounding London, merchants and bankers constructed the first modern suburbs, bourgeois utopias of leisure, neighborliness, and family life. Soon thereafter American architects applied their knowledge and affection for English architecture in their versions of suburbs, thus providing wealthy Americans with residential neighborhoods largely removed from industry, commerce, and the poor (Fishman 1989). Suburbia reflected values deeply embedded in bourgeois culture, such as women’s domestic roles segregated from the world of power and work and a union with nature—suburbs were originally touted as the ideal balance between town *and* country (Rome 2001). This vision of utopia, however, was short-lived. In the years following WWII, homebuilders were hailed as heroes; tract housing in booming suburbs became the foundation for a nation of homeowners and a mass-consumption economy. Yet by the 1970s suburbs had become symbols of environmental and social devastation, generally seen as the impetus behind abandoned downtowns, ghettoized public housing, traffic gridlock, and a general decline in the quality of the urban environment (Rome 2001; Vanderbeek and Irazabal 2007).

New urbanism is the latest iteration of attempts to create a “bourgeois utopia.” As defined by its proponents (Duany et al. 2010; Hall and Porterfield 2001; Talen 2005), new urbanism’s goal is to restore urban centers and reconfigure suburbia in ways that produce positive social change. Like the suburbs once did, new urbanism reflects values embedded in contemporary middle-class culture such as community, neighborliness, and diversity, and seeks to promote these values through architecture and planning. While new urbanism has become fashionable in urban planning and housing policy nationwide (Hall and Porterfield 2001; Stephenson 2002; Vale 2013) this process has been largely ignored by sociologists.

For this project I conducted in-depth interviews with 31 Mueller residents who were parents of young children. Some see the type of self-reporting interviewees engage in as too abstracted from lived experience to provide valuable information about people’s behavior (Jerolmack and Kahn 2014). For example, in their interviews with employers, Pager and Quillian (2005) find that they express a far greater willingness to hire black male ex-offenders than a previous audit study would predict, suggesting that self-reported behavior can not be a stand-in for actual behavior. At most, these authors argue, interviews provide ex post facto (often contradictory) justifications for behavior. Accordingly, I do not see my interviews as accounts of people’s behaviors. Instead, following Lamont and Swidler (2014), through interviews I seek to collect data about the cultural contexts within which social actors are embedded: the representations, classification systems, identities, imagined realities and cultural ideals available to social

actors. This is to say, instead of simply probing about people’s behavior I seek to understand how people “live imaginatively—morally but also in terms of their sense of identity—and what allows them to experience themselves as good, valuable, worthwhile people” (2014: 159).

Through my interviews, therefore, I seek to learn more about culture than actual behavior—not what people do but what people say they think and do (Jerolmack and Kahn 2014). As Pugh (2013) suggests, interviews can provide powerful accounts of cultural contexts and how individuals are embedded in those contexts. Through answers to factual questions, statements about what they think, or folk theories about causal explanations, interviewees work to present themselves in an honorable and admirable light. The display work interviewees engage in allows access to different levels of information about the culture—the motivations, beliefs, meanings, feelings and practices—that people use. Here I define culture as a set of frames, representations, and repertoires that actors draw on to build “strategies of action” and utilize interviews as a window into the frames that actors use to explain their actions and anchor their identity (see, for example, Lamont 1992; Swidler 2001; Young 2004). Table 1 contains demographic information for my interviewees. Each of the following chapters includes a methodological section discussing particular methodological considerations corresponding to the chapter’s research questions.

[Table 1 here]

## **ORGANIZATION**

The three chapters that make up the body of this dissertation are each written as full-length stand-alone journal articles. The articles are loosely linked around themes discussed in this introductory chapter. Chapter 2, “Ethical Consumerism in Context: Self-Interest and the Greater Good in a New Urbanist Neighborhood,” explores how ethical consumerism is experienced by those living in the Mueller neighborhood. In this chapter I draw on Muellerites’ experiences with ethical consumerism to challenge conventional understandings of (1) what compels people to engage in ethical consumerism, and (2) the relationship between self-interest and civic behavior. Conventional accounts of ethical consumerism rely either on Bourdieuan or neoliberal frameworks to make sense of ethical consumer behavior. In this chapter I illustrate how in the case of Mueller ethical consumerism is a product of particular social settings. Moreover, this chapter also contextualizes ethical consumerism as a contemporary iteration a quintessentially American tendency which Tocqueville observed almost two centuries ago. I argue that, for Tocqueville as for Muellerites, self-interest can operate as the path to the greater good. Conventional understandings of self-interest and the greater good posit self-interest and the greater good as existing in opposition to each other. In this chapter I demonstrate how self-interest and ethics can not only coexist in people’s experiences with ethical consumerism, but also how this coexistence can generate both increased ethical participation and individualism.



Chapter 3 is titled “Diversity, Community, and New Urbanism in Creative Austin.” Austin is a rapidly growing city and much of this growth is taking place within the city’s traditionally poor and minority neighborhoods. Although Mueller is an infill development (no one’s home was torn down in order to build Mueller), neighborhoods immediately surrounding Mueller tend to be (decreasingly) poor, black and Latino. This chapter explores how liberal, progressive ideals held by residents of Austin—and Mueller in particular—coexist with gentrification and persistent inequalities in surrounding neighborhoods. I find that Muellerites choose to live in the neighborhood because of its proximity to downtown, new urbanist design, and because they see it as an opportunity to live near the central city while not defining themselves as gentrifiers. Moreover, residents tended to highlight what they see as the larger societal benefits of the neighborhood’s diversity and strong sense of community. While I claim that Muellerites may exaggerate their neighborhood’s actual diversity, it is nevertheless significant that they exalt their neighborhood’s diversity. In the contemporary cultural context, notions of diversity have become associated with civic mindedness and social justice causes. Privileging diversity and demanding acceptance of differences—regardless of what the objective measures of diversity in Mueller may suggest—is one way that Muellerites are able to understand and present themselves in an honorable light. In this chapter I discuss the ideological roles played by notions of community and diversity, as well as Mueller’s role within a larger context of increasing residential displacement and inequality.

Chapter 4, “‘I’d never get my kids that. What an awesome gift!’: Parenting, Consumerism, and Circuits of Commerce,” examines how Mueller parents’ understand themselves to be properly consuming and caring parents amongst their children’s commodity-rich worlds. The chapter explores how middle-class parents interpret and negotiate ideals regarding sheltering children from market influences and the cultural work that parents engage in to draw distinctions between the types of consumerism that are acceptable for their families and those that are not. I find that, as Pugh (2009) did in her study, even parents who claim not to buy much for their children nevertheless describe patterns of substantial spending on their children. I locate the sources of these contradictory beliefs and practices in the how parents negotiate and understand different types of consumerism in their lives. I discuss two different strategies that parents employed to resolve the tensions their children’s commodity-rich worlds created for them: (1) parents differentiated between their spending on “cheap” mass produced goods and the monies they spent on what they described as “experiences.” While the latter were major sources of parental expenditures, parents did not consider this consumerism as threatening to their children. (2) Parents accumulated significant amounts of consumer goods for their children through participation in what Zelizer (2008) calls “circuits of commerce.” By obtaining goods (e.g., hand-me-downs and gifts from family and friends) through circuits instead of the market parents were able to redefine the meanings these commodities had for their families in ways that did not challenge their middle-class consumer-values. I conclude this chapter by discussing how these findings add a layer of

complexity to understanding of ethical consumerism. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the sociological implications and limitations of this study.

Table 1: Interviewee Demographics

Name	Age	Income (in 1000s)	Race/Ethnicity
Adam	36	\$425-\$450	White
Alex	30	\$175-\$200	Latina/o
Ana Lucia	38	\$75-\$100	Latina/o
Ben	33	\$200-\$225	White
Carol	38	\$175-\$200	White
Charlotte	35	\$150-\$175	White
Christian	35	\$200-\$225	White
Christine	32	\$100-\$125	Asian
Cindy	31	\$50-\$75*	White
Damon	33	\$150-\$175	White
Danielle	42	\$125-\$150	White
Desmond	36	\$150-\$175	White
Elizabeth	35	\$225-\$250	Latina/o
Eloise	40	\$150-\$175	White
Esther	33	\$100-\$125	White
Hugo	37	\$225-\$250	White
Jacob	37	\$100-\$125	White
James	32	\$175-\$200	White
Jill	32	\$50-\$75*	White
Juliet	33	\$200-\$225	White
Kate	37	\$150-\$175	White
Kevin	40	\$175-\$200	Latina/o
Laurie	37	\$175-\$200	White
Linda	39	\$150-\$175	Asian
Nora	32	\$50-\$75*	White
Penny	32	\$200-\$225	Asian
Rick	39	\$50-\$75*	White
Rose	40	\$175-\$200	Latina/o
Sarah	30	\$150-\$175	White
Shannon	33	\$150-\$175	White
Sun	38	\$175-\$200	Asian

All names are pseudonyms.

\*Purchased home through Affordable Homes program.

## **Chapter Two: Ethical Consumerism in Context: Self-Interest and the Greater Good in a New Urbanist Neighborhood**

Ethical consumption has become an important component of the contemporary consumer culture landscape. In recent decades the popularization of Fair Trade goods and organic food, and the rise of advertisements linking consumer goods with social or environmental causes have, for many, transformed shopping into a form of social activism (Johnston and Szabo 2011; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). This is in many ways paradoxical, as consumer capitalism has been routinely associated with self-interest and the abandonment of the public sphere. In fact, sociologists have long associated consumerism with self-interests and ethics with the public good, suggesting that ethics and consumerism exist in opposition to each other. Even when people do engage in ethical (e.g., Fair Trade or ecologically conscious) consumerism, this behavior has tended to be conceptualized as a an individual choices incited by neoliberal doctrines which absolve the state while downloading societal and ecological responsibility to individuals, or as consumer's backhanded efforts at reproducing class inequalities while masquerading as a social good.

In this article, I investigate how ethical consumerism is experienced by those living in the Mueller neighborhood. Mueller is a newly constructed new urbanist neighborhood in Austin, Texas widely recognized for its commitment to ecological and social sustainability, earning the title of “America’s Smartest City” by Time Magazine. Drawing on in-depth interviews I explore how Mueller residents’ experiences with

ethical consumerism challenge conventional understandings of the relationship between self-interest and civic behavior. Moving beyond binary understandings of self-interest and civic behavior, I explore how social settings may produce ethical consumerism, and how, as Tocqueville (1988) observed almost two centuries ago, Americans continue to attempt to serve the greater good through self-interested behavior.

### **ETHICAL CONSUMERISM: NEOLIBERAL INDIVIDUALIZATION OR STRATEGY FOR DISTINCTION?**

Ethical consumption has become an important component of the contemporary consumer culture landscape. Broadly defined, ethical consumption is consumer behavior that is influenced by non-utilitarian ethical concerns. Ethical consumer discourse, which arose out of the environmental movement and was quickly adopted by a range of other social justice causes, posits that shoppers can satisfy individual needs while generating sustainability and social harmony for society as a whole (Johnston 2008). The fundamental premise of ethical consumption is that shopping can lead to progressive social changes and promote environmental sustainability. For many, shopping has even been transformed into a form of social activism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012).

In popular culture, ethical consumption has grown steadily since the 1980s (Lang and Gabriel 2005) and has come to be associated with an array of themes, ranging from unfair global trade, sustainability, diseases, and other general concerns over social justice (Einstein 2012; Johnston 2008). Corporations have encouraged ethical consumerism through corporate social responsibility and cause-marketing efforts, potentially raising

awareness for political, social, and ecological issues (Binkley 2003; Einstein 2012; Johnson 2008; Micheletti et al. 2004; Soper 2007; Trentmann 2007). While this trend has been critiqued given the ease with which this type of activism is appropriated by corporate interests—Einstein (2012), for example, noting the hidden costs of the “corporate takeover of caring” (see also King 2006)—the effects on the consumer landscape have been conspicuous. The market for organic products, for example, grew by almost 20% annually between 1990 and 2008, and the growth of Fair Trade products often exceeded 100% per year during the same period (Howard and Allen 2010; Martin 2009). In fact, while it once seemed futile to expect organic produce in large supermarkets because of their niche appeal, even big-box discount retailers such as Walmart now stocks organic and Fair Trade products (Johnston 2008).

In some ways ethical consumerism can be understood as a continuation of the historical tradition of boycotting in American consumerism and politics. Throughout American history consumers have refused to buy British tea, avoided goods from segregationist shop owners, and boycotted Nike shoes during the “no-sweatshop” movement of the 1990s (Cohen 2003; Glickman 2012). Today’s ethical consumerism, however, is unique in several respects. First, in addition to refusing goods with objectionable ties, consumers are encouraged to purchase “socially conscious” products for ethical, social, or political reasons. The type of cause marketing that pledges a firm’s support for a given social cause in exchange for customers’ participation in revenue

producing activities has become part of the standard curriculum of marketing schools (Cabrera and Williams 2014).

A pressing and unresolved theme within the ethical consumerism literature is the question of what motivates people to engage in this type of consumerism. In recent years two leading explanations have emerged. These suggest that people engage in ethical consumerism either (1) because of individual choices incited by neoliberal doctrines which absolve the state while downloading responsibility over societal and ecological problems to individuals, or (2) as an elite strategy for distinction masquerading as a social good. In both cases, self-interest and the common good are seen as at odds with each other.

Arguing the former, Guthman (2008) highlights the ways that even organizations critical of the inequalities have embraced ideas that undergird neoliberalism. Focusing on the agricultural food sector, she details how food activism has come to incorporate neoliberal characteristics. Through, for example, the Fair Trade voluntary food labeling schemes, consumer choice has supplanted state regulation. This shift is neoliberal in that governance and regulation happen not through state or other collective apparatuses but through the self-regulated choices made by individual citizens. These schemes likewise replace expertise with the rationalities of competitions, accountability, and consumer demand, thus substituting regulations with informational campaigns to encourage people to “make the right choices” (Guthman 2008, 2014; see also Rose 1996).



Some scholars are optimistic about this trend. Michelletti (2003) for instance sees ethical or political consumerism as an opportunity for ordinary consumers to express their political preferences. Ethical consumers make purchasing decisions based on considerations of justice or fairness, and this constitutes a new form of political participation which she terms “individualized collective action.” By “voting with their dollar,” individuals offer industry incentives to manufacture green products or to comply with self-imposed regulations. This type of individualized collective action is possible, she argues, as citizens have become collectively aware of their new responsibilities for enforcing individualized and market-based regulations. For Michelletti and colleagues (Micheletti 2007; Micheletti and Stolle 2007; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005), people engage in ethical consumerism as a form of activism, one which turns shopping into a democratic statement.

Others who also see ethical consumerism as a form of neoliberal individualization interpret ethical consumerism as having an opposite, depoliticizing effect. For example, studies of voluntary simplicity groups—people who reject consumerist and materialistic lifestyles—have suggested that while their lifestyle choices are couched in terms of principles of sustainability and social justice, participants tend to be mainly interested in bringing about individual change, and hence incapable of addressing social problems. Instead of making a democratic statement, these authors suggest that some ethical consumers are best understood as escapist and apolitical (Grigsby 2004; Maniates 2002). Similarly, Littler (2009) and Willis and Schor (2012) argue that ethical consumerism as

an individualist form of politics plays an important role in the atrophying social safety net as this aids in shifting societal responsibility onto individuals as well as crowding out more effective forms of activism. Moreover, Littler (2009) questions the radical or progressive nature of ethical consumerism given the role that corporations play in promoting this type of behavior. In these cases, participation in ethical consumerism is understood as a consequence of hegemonic neoliberal discourses which encourage individuals to incorporate a sense of responsibility for societal or environmental wellbeing into their individual consumer choices. According to these scholars, people engage in ethical consumerism as individualized choices that serve to reinforce neoliberal forms of regulation.

A competing interpretation regarding why people engage in this type of consumerism posits ethical consumerism as an elite strategy for distinction. This perspective is strongly influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who highlights the relationship between consumer preferences and inequality. Bourdieu showed that consumer tastes varied by class even in areas where differences in economic capital could not on their own explain differences in taste, such as preferences for certain forms of music, art, and film. Bourdieu explained this trend by arguing that differences in taste are embodied forms of class inequality. Privileged classes in society form their tastes based on an “aesthetic gaze”—a set of dispositions or “habitus” for evaluating art which demands that the viewer reject any consideration of the use-value or function of a work of art, instead evaluating it purely on its merit as art for art’s sake. Bourdieu argues that

the “aesthetic gaze” is a result not of any innately superior tastes, but of a prolonged distance from economic necessity that is uniquely experienced by the dominant class. Regardless of its social origin, in society the aesthetic gaze functions as a marker of superior taste and style. This results in the social origins of tastes being obscured, and works to legitimize existing inequalities as the social position of the dominant class is understood as an outcome of their innately superior tastes and dispositions. In this process economic inequalities are converted into (seemingly) superior tastes, which in turn work to reproduce economic inequalities. Therefore, according to Bourdieu (1984), people who can afford to will engage in forms of consumerism that are considered superior (including ethical consumerism) as a way to become more “cultivated” or to “get ahead.” In either case the result is the same: engaging in these practices works to reproduce social inequality by legitimizing privileged class’s social positions vis-à-vis those lower down in the social hierarchy.

This Bourdieuan perspective has been influential within scholarship on ethical consumerism. For example, Carfagna et al. (2014) have recently updated Holt’s (1995) findings on how cultural capital structures American consumerism to reflect the ways that ethical consumerism has become implicated in the reproduction of class inequalities. In the mid-1990s Holt’s (1995) pioneering study of cultural capital in the American context found six major binaries which distinguished the consumer preferences of high and low cultural capital consumers. Those with higher cultural capital or a more “aesthetic gaze” tended to prioritize consumerism that was anti-waste yet allowed for self-expression, as

well as value the authentic, exotic, and the eclectic (Holt 1995). While Carfagna et al. (2014) find many similarities between Holt's high cultural capital consumers and today's, the authors also point to important differences. For example, since the mid-1990s privileged consumers have come to incorporate ecological concerns into their consumer practices, outlooks and behaviors. Carfagna et al. (2014) understand this shift as not only reflective of a general valorization of environmental consciousness in society, but also as a re-articulation of high-status tastes in the U.S. As the authors explain, expressions of a taste for ethical consumerism are not only a characteristic of individual high-cultural capital consumers, but have come to form what they label as an "eco-habitus" characteristic of elite consumers as a group. Therefore, given that ethical consumerism has become a marker of high cultural capital and distinction, consumers who engage in ethical consumerism do so (conscious of this or not) in part as a strategy to legitimize their positions in the social hierarchy.

Johnston and Szabo (2011) find a similar dynamic operating among shoppers at Whole Foods Market (WFM), a corporation frequently touted as an ethical market actor. In their interviews with shoppers, the authors found that the primary motivation for shopping at WFM, even for the most politicized and reflexive shoppers in their sample, was to access a highly pleasurable consumer experience. While shoppers articulated ideals of shopping at WFM as a form of citizenship or concern for the greater good, these concerns were diluted by the prioritization of their consumer desires. Shoppers spoke of enjoying the range of ethical choice available to them at WFM, yet were clear that they

were not willing to voluntarily limit their choice in exchange for more sustainable or socially responsible options. As with the eco-habitus described above, this interpretation of ethical consumerism suggest that the choice to consume ethically is in reality a selfish choice masquerading as a social good.

In this article I draw on interviews with residents of the Mueller neighborhood to explore what motivates their ethical consumerism. Some Mueller residents moved into the neighborhood because they valued the neighborhood's emphasis on sustainability, while others only began integrating ethical and sustainable practices into their consumerism after moving to the neighborhood. In the case of Mueller residents, however, ethical consumerism was neither an individual choice nor a selfish choice masquerading as a social good. Instead, as I will show, for Muellerites ethical consumerism was often the product a particular social context.

### **SELF-INTEREST AND ETHICAL CONSUMERISM**

Questions about what motivates people to engage in ethical consumerism speak to longstanding questions in sociology regarding the relationship between self-interest and public commitment. Specifically, sociologists have long debated whether behavior inspired by self-interests necessarily undermines civic-mindedness, or if—and how—the two can coexist. As Lichterman (1996, 2006) argues, since the early twentieth century sociologists have relied on a seesaw metaphor to highlight the tensions between self-interestedness and public commitments: either self-interests or public commitments could be “up” at a given moment, but never both. Zelizer (2010) posits this problem as a

tension between the “nothing but” and “hostile worlds” approaches. According to the former approach public commitment or civic-minded behavior turns out upon inspection to be the same thing, “nothing but” rational, self-interested calculations. For the latter approach civic commitments and self-interests exist in independent, “hostile worlds”—to the extent that they combine in practice they necessarily pollute each other. Consumerism in particular has been understood to exist in a realm hostile to civic behavior, the former being associated with selfish pleasure and status-seeking difference and the latter with the common pursuit of the social good (Cabrera and Williams 2014).

Over the course of the twentieth century analysts have tended to follow the “hostile worlds” thesis, interpreting the seesaw of American culture as tilting towards self-interestedness—a tilt that has been said to happen at the expense of public and ethical concerns. Communitarian arguments lamenting the rise of a culture of self-interestedness were made most forcefully in reaction to the emergence of mass-consumerism in post-war U.S. For instance, sociologists such as Lasch (1979) argued that Americans had left behind politics for indulgent consumerism and “self-examination,” while Bell (1976) suggested that mass consumption had produced a self-centered ethos only concerned with play, fun, display and pleasure. With this tilt, it was argued, citizens’ commitment to goods and resources enjoyed by a broad public in common, such as clean air or more democracy, withered (Lickterman 1996).

A number of contemporary studies have continued to explore the relationship between self-interest and public commitment. Bellah et al.’s (1985) study of culturally

patterned language, for instance, found that Americans are most comfortable speaking in their “first language” of individual benefits and good feelings. While people sometimes spoke in a “second language” which emphasized the greater public good, this was far less common. The fact that Americans’ “second languages” go unpracticed suggests to Bellah et al. (1985) a weakened commitment to communities or the public good. Beyerlein and Vaisey’s (2013) findings support this thesis, as they show that people whose moral worldviews stress civic responsibility are more likely to volunteer when compared to people with worldviews stressing personal fulfillment.

Wuthnow's (1993) study of the vocabularies people used to explain why they engaged in volunteer activities similarly analyzed how people combine individualistic and community-bound language of commitment. He found that individualism did not necessarily inhibit people’s likelihood for volunteering. Instead, individualism encouraged volunteers to define their volunteerism in terms of comfortably limited, "doable" commitments. In addition to limiting their volunteering efforts, self-interestedness also limited the bonds they felt with the people they were working with. Both Wuthnow (1993) and Bellah et al. (1985) suggest that people who think and speak with community oriented worldviews or “languages” are more likely to engage in acts for the greater good. However, even for the most community-oriented Americans, they argue, the language of individualism is always on the tip of the tongue. In almost all cases, they argue, Americans are quick to slip into individualism when pressed to explain

their views in detail. These authors conclude that this self-interestedness serves to undercut the possibility and intensity of public commitment.

Americans' habit of prioritizing their self-interest above the common good, however, is not a twentieth century phenomenon. As Tocqueville famously observed in *Democracy in America* (1888), Americans have embraced their self-interest since at least the early-nineteenth century. Contrary to communitarian sociologists, however, Tocqueville noted that for Americans self-interest was a path to the greater good. This is what Tocqueville understood to be unique to democratic America: sentiments on behalf of the greater good arose out of self-interest. Unlike in 19<sup>th</sup> century European societies, Americans did not face the aristocratic obstacles (titles, ceremonies, traditional duties and obligations) that stood between individuals and their desires. Embracing these self-interested desires, Tocqueville theorized, led people to form "free associations"—or interest groups—which in turn generated a new kind of interdependence. By regularly participating in these free associations people are able to develop a sense of collective responsibility and habits of working together. Tocqueville observed that in this way Americans turned the aristocratic tendency to conceal self-interests as virtues on its head: in America, to serve the common good required an initial self-interest given that, as the aristocratic ties that held aristocratic society together were absent in America, self-interest was the only legitimate path to association and interdependence. Because he saw these free associations leading to new, democratic forms of interdependence, individuals



deciding for themselves what is or is not moral or tasteful was in itself American's virtue (Tocqueville 1988).

Lichterman's (1996) study of volunteers in environmentalist organizations substantiates Tocqueville's findings. He finds that in some environmental organizations self-interest works to sustain rather than undermine public commitments. Members of these organizations did not unite over any particular goal or shared experience. Within these organizations, Lichterman (1996) explains, members celebrate individual expressiveness and interests, encouraging each other to enact environmentalism how they individually see fit. Lichterman (1996) observed that members understood activism as developing and expressing articulate, individual viewpoints about how environmentalist values work in their own lives. Organizational norms valued these individual expressions, as evidenced by an emphasis on everyone having their say during group decision making. While members' definitions of advocacy ranged from community empowerment, lobbying against corporate polluting, to removing their mercury tooth fillings, members took their own efficacy for granted and saw themselves as highly empowered individuals. This shared exaltation of individual members' self-interest, Lichterman (1996) concludes, united the group and facilitated their more collective civic behavior, such as participating in green-party politics.

Self-interested politics is, however, a stratified social practice. Members in Lichterman's (1996) environmental organizations were overwhelmingly white, college educated, and possessed rare cultural skills that were taken-for-granted and valued by

members. For example, having experienced a four-year college education, members in these organizations had years of training in individualized self-expression and self-directed achievements (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). These relatively uncommon cultural skills functioned both as “entry fees” for participating in the organization and allowed members to establish their particular type of group togetherness (Lichterman 1996).

In sum, sociologists have tended to conceive of civic or public-minded commitments and self-interestedness in binary terms, often warning of the potential for self-interestedness to threaten democratic processes. The seesaw has been a popular metaphor, as self-interest has been thought to exist at the expense of civic-mindedness and *vice-versa*. Tocqueville (1988) and, more recently, Lichterman (1996) propose an alternative interpretation, highlighting instead how public commitment can arise through self-interested behavior.

In this article I explore what ethical consumers can tell us about how people today experience the relationship between the purportedly “hostile worlds” of self-interest and moral principles. Given that consumer capitalism has been routinely associated with self-interest and the abandonment of the public sphere, how do recent trends in the popularization of ethical consumerism challenge or reinforce understandings of self-interest and civic behavior?

## **THE MUELLER NEIGHBORHOOD**

To address questions about what motivates ethical consumerism and the relationship between self-interested and civic behavior I draw upon my research in the Mueller neighborhood, a middle-class new urbanist development in Austin, Texas. New urbanism is a movement in architecture and urban planning that advocates “traditional” American small-town design as a remedy for the social and environmental ills linked to suburban sprawl and inner-city decay. The movement is rooted in a conviction that improved urban planning can promote economic prosperity, ecological integrity, and social equality (Gibbs, Krueger and MacLeod 2013). New urbanist developments are therefore designed to be diverse, mixed-income neighborhoods where homes, schools, offices and transit are within walking distance, with easy access to parks and places to jog, bike, and play, and from which residents, neighboring communities, businesses and the environment would benefit (Calthorpe 1993, Flint 2006). Mueller is a 700 acre public and privately funded infill development of the defunct Robert Mueller Regional Airport in Central Austin designed according to the principles of new urbanism. When completed Mueller will comprise of 6,000 homes (25% of which are designated as “affordable housing”), 4 million square feet of office and retail space, and 140 acres of public open parks. Mueller was instantly praised by residents, businesses, and the City of Austin for its emphasis on “smart growth,” affordability, sustainability, and diversity, even winning the 2001 Award of Excellence at the Congress for the New Urbanism. In recent years Mueller has been frequently featured on national media outlets such as New Tech City,

PBS Newshour, NPR's Cities Project, and Time Magazine for its leadership in environmental and "smart" initiatives.

Mueller is unique in the extent to which the neighborhood has implemented sustainable design and infrastructure, in large part due to Mueller's participation in the Pecan Street Project. Homes, offices, and retail spaces in Mueller are built using resource efficient, non-toxic, recyclable materials and its LEED standards are described as among the most aggressive in the country (Gregor 2009). To further decrease the ecological footprint Mueller is designed with ample green spaces that attempt to preserve the natural landscape, and builders have committed to plant one tree for every four parking spaces in order to maintain the neighborhood's walkability. Mueller also has an on-site power plant ([muelleraustin.com/thinking-green/](http://muelleraustin.com/thinking-green/)).

Mueller is the locus of the Pecan Street Project Inc., a research and development organization focused on developing and testing advanced technologies and researching consumer energy usage behavior. Pecan Street is a joint project between local utility companies, researchers, government agencies, and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), and private contractors and vendors such as Intel, Whirlpool and LG Electronics to research the energy use patterns within Mueller. The Pecan Street's "Smart Grid Demonstration Program" is anchored in Mueller and collects minute level data on consumers' energy use. The Demonstration Program claims to be "the nation's most significant creator of original customer energy use research data." Aside from research, Pecan Street's goal is to reduce carbon emissions in Mueller by 64% compared to an

average Austin neighborhood (edf.org). For participating in the program Pecan Street has provided incentives to over 200 Mueller residents for installing rooftop solar photovoltaic systems; 75 residents have received rebates towards the purchase of plug-in electric vehicles and Level 2 charging stations; and most homes have been retrofitted with smart water and gas meters (pecanstreet.org). These incentives have helped Mueller become the largest concentration of solar-powered homes in the world (edf.org).

The Pecan Street Project and the Pikes Power Lab, the research lab which monitors and analyzes consumers' energy and resource usage which is housed in Mueller, are funded through a \$30 million initiative by the City of Austin in collaboration with Environmental Defense Fund, Austin Energy, and the University of Texas. Given the combination of the neighborhoods' emphasis on sustainability and participation in the Pecan Street project, Mueller residents have a heightened awareness of and access to more sustainable or ethical consumer choices.

For this reason, too, the Mueller neighborhood is an interesting case in which to explore questions of what motivates ethical consumerism and the relationship between self-interest and concerns over the greater good within consumerism. In this article I draw on interviews with residents of the Mueller neighborhood to explore what motivates their ethical consumerism, and how their ethical consumerism challenges or reinforces certain understandings of the relationship between self-interest and civic behavior.

## **METHODS**

During the Spring and Summer of 2014 I conducted 31 in-depth, semi structured interviews with residents of the Mueller neighborhood (“Muellerites”) who had young children. I chose to focus my study on parents living in Mueller for several reasons. First, quantitative studies have shown that middle-class households with children are most likely to partake in ethical consumerism (Micheletti et al 2004; Nielsen and Paxton 2010). As discussed above, in Mueller, ethical consumer practices are encouraged through formal and informal neighborhood institutions. Relative to residents of other neighborhoods, Muellerites are likely to be more regularly exposed to and keenly aware of civic-minded ethical consumer discourses. Moreover, recent studies on vaccine refusal and school choice, for instance, have found a trend among middle-class and affluent parents that seems to contradict ethical consumer discourses. Middle-class and affluent parents, research finds, tend to bracket concerns over the greater good in decisions that involve their own children. Reich’s (2014) research on vaccine refusal finds that mothers’ choices to refuse vaccines for their children focused solely on the perceived well-being of their own children. These mothers circumvent concerns over the greater good by rejecting assertions that their choices undermine community health, while ignoring how their children benefit from group immunity to infections. School choice too seems to follow a similarly self-interested logic for middle-class and affluent parents. Logan et al. (2008), for instance, found that after the dismissal of desegregation policies in the early 1990s an increased trend in private and charter schooling were partially responsible for

increasing levels of segregation in metropolitan school districts. Through an analysis of magnet school applications, Saporito (2003) similarly found that white parents avoided applying to schools with higher percentages of non-white students or poverty rates, leading to increased racial and economic segregation.

On one hand participants in my study—given that they live in Mueller—are regularly exposed to ethical consumer discourses which emphasize the greater good in individual decisions. On the other hand, as middle-class parents, I expect them to exhibit a tendency of prioritizing self-interest, specifically their children’s perceived self-interest. Mueller parents, therefore, provide a “critical case” (Flyvbjerg 2006) for analyzing what motivates ethical consumerism and the relationship between self-interest and concerns over the greater good within people’s everyday lives. While Mueller parents are not representative of ethical consumers—most ethical consumers will not live in planned communities such as Mueller nor be the parents of young children—this population provides an analytically interesting case. Here, the competing discourses emphasizing self-interest and the public good are most likely to be present and germane to respondents’ everyday consumer decisions.

In-depth interviews were chosen to illuminate how Muellerites experience and resolve competing discourses in their consumerism. While surveys have been used in the past to quantify levels of ethical consumerism and its distribution within a given population, my goal was not to probe “behavior” but to understand shared experiences and meanings of ethics and consumerisms. In-depth interviews can reveal otherwise

inaccessible aspects of Muellerites experiences with ethical consumerism, such as how residents define what is and what is not ethical as well as “magnified moments” that give meaning to ethical behavior (Hochschild 2003). I located respondents through online community forums, during participant observation in the neighborhood, and through snowballing. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted either in person or over the phone. All interviews were conducted by the author. The in-person interviews took place at coffee shops or restaurants within the Mueller neighborhood or in the respondent’s office or home. Interviews covered the following topics: the process of moving to Mueller, experiences as residents, and views on how consumer choices relate to ethical behavior. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author.

To locate potential respondents I spent time in the parks, shops, the children’s museum, and attended community events in the neighborhood. My daughter served as a crucial “wedge” in helping me gain access in the neighborhood. As Levey (2009) argues, bringing one’s children to the field can aid in facilitating relationships by providing immediately relevant and often relatable information about the researcher. As a male seeking to gain access to people with young children I was concerned with being perceived as a pedophile or sexual predator.<sup>1</sup> Whenever possible I took my then two year old daughter along during visits to the neighborhood. Moreover, when I contacted potential respondents whom I had not already met in person I made it a point to identify

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<sup>1</sup> When it was revealed that none of the adolescent male skateboarders he was studying were his son(s), Petrone (2007) was often accused of being a pedophile. Philippe Bourgois (1995) similarly took his toddler to his field site to diffuse concerns about his relationship to law enforcement. For an insightful discussion of the role children play in qualitative research see Levey (2009).



myself as a researcher *as well as* a parent who frequented the neighborhood with my daughter. By giving me access to parks, the children's museum, and other places where neighbors congregate my daughter facilitated efforts to build relationships with residents and gain a foothold into the neighborhood. In addition, I felt that being able to relate to parents as a parent—especially, as was the case in these interviews, given that our children were roughly the same age—made interviews more friendly, open, and informative. In fact, several respondents reported having agreed to the interview in part to meet fellow parents in the neighborhood (a number of respondents realized during the interview that I was not myself a resident of Mueller), and all interviewees expressed looking forward to meeting again in the capacity of parents in the parks or at the museum. Though she was critical for gaining access to respondents I never brought my child to the interviews.

My respondents had been living in the neighborhood for at least six months at the time of the interview. Four respondents had been among the first wave of residents to move in to the neighborhood in early 2008. Several respondents had moved to Mueller from out of state, though the majority moved there from within Austin. Of those who were already living in Austin the majority had previously resided within the city limits. All but one respondent owned their home.

The Muellerites I interviewed were between 29 and 45 year of age. Twenty-one were female, ten were male. To the extent possible my sample mirrored the demographics of the neighborhood. As of the 2010 census the Mueller neighborhood

(along with approximately 10 blocks south-east of the neighborhood that fall in to the same census tract) is approximately 70% white, 16% Hispanic, and 2% black (Census 2010). Five of my respondents were Latino/a, four were Asian (two of whom were non-native born), and the remaining 22 were white. Seven of the nine non-white respondents were in mixed-race relationships with white partners. Two respondents (both female) had same-sex partners; all of my interviewees lived in two-parent households.

Four home-owning respondents bought their home through Mueller's Affordable Homes program. Requirements for purchasing a home through the Affordable Homes program stipulate that a household's income must be lower than 80% of the median family income in Austin for families of the same size. A family of three, for example, must therefore have a household income of at most \$52,700 annually. Furthermore, mortgage payments for affordable homes cannot exceed 30% of a family's gross income, and net assets cannot exceed \$150,000 (excluding "gifts" that may be applied towards a down payment). Only one of four families in my sample who bought through the Affordable Homes program was actually living within this range. The rest supplemented their income by some combination of working off-the-books, regular financial assistance from family, and having received a raise or taken on a new job since applying to the affordable homes program. Most residents, including those in the Affordable Homes program, worked stable, white-collar jobs and held advanced degrees. Market-rate rents for Mueller homes, while rare, average about \$2,700 per month for a 3 bedroom home. Average home prices during the first wave of sales in 2007 were in the high \$200s; today

market-rate homes sell for an average of \$480k. These prices are somewhat lower compared to historically upper-middle class neighborhoods in Austin, yet higher than the immediately surrounding neighborhoods. The average income for respondents in market-rate homes was approximately \$160k per year, ranging between \$90k and about \$400k. The vast majority of interviewees were dual-income.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed following the qualitative analysis techniques described by Strauss (2003). I read and coded each transcript carefully using open coding techniques.

## **FINDINGS**

The following analysis explores three themes related to self-interest and concern for the greater good unfolds in Muellerites' everyday lives. Findings are organized as follows: (1) *The Context of Ethical Consumerism*: Living in Mueller often provided residents with unexpected yet welcome opportunities to shape their consumer behavior in more environmentally sustainable ways. (2) *Alternative Moral Discourses*: Muellerites tend to be ethical consumers. When Muellerites' consumer behavior did not conform to normative ideals of ethical consumerism they drew on alternative schemes to frame their behavior as morally on par with normatively ethical consumerism. (3) *The Ethical/Economic*: While research on ethical consumerism tends to posit this as a choice between self-interested "convenience" and "moral virtues," in their accounts of consuming ethically Muellerites' seldom described their ethical consumerism as belonging specifically to either one of these categories. Instead, they tended to describe

their consumerism as fulfilling both self-interested and collective goals. Thus Muellerites were able to draw on individualized notions of morality to frame their consumerism as ethical.

### **Context**

Research has tended to understand ethical consumerism as a high-status marker of class privilege (Guthman 2003; Johnston 2008) whereby people enact a set of ecologically oriented, high-status tastes as markers of distinction (Carfagna et al 2014). What motivates people to incorporate ethical concerns into their consumerism and, consequently, their identities as responsible citizens? The Mueller residents I interviewed tended to be surprised by the range of opportunities for ethical consumerism that came with living in the neighborhood. While some Muellerites moved to the neighborhood in search of like-minded ethical consumers, for many their ethical consumerism took shape only after moving to the neighborhood. These opportunities, which in Mueller took the form of composting, installing solar panels, and driving an electric car, often entail lifestyle changes which they had not given consideration to prior to moving in. As one interviewee explained, “there are certain things that I would not have done if we did not live here. I know that all of these opportunities are not exclusive to Mueller, but I do feel there is a big push for it here.” In all but one case, interviewees felt that living in the neighborhood allowed them to become “better” ethical consumers. This section explores how living in the neighborhood influenced resident’s consumerism, which often took the form of encouraging residents to incorporate ethical concerns into their consumerism.

Kevin was initially attracted to Mueller as a potential place to live because of its walkability. Jim and his wife had recently moved to Austin from New York City, and “walking to the park as opposed to getting in a car with our kids and driving” appealed to them mainly because, as they had become accustomed to in New York, they could “get exercise without even thinking about getting exercise.” Kevin was only vaguely aware of the Pecan Street Project when they bought the home, unaware that the Project provided incentives for adopting green technologies. As he remembers, “once they pitched the idea, we were all about it.” Working through the program Jim and his wife have since installed a 6KW solar array on their house and are now both driving electric cars. Kevin is enthusiastic that, as he explains, “we are generating our own electricity and our car runs on sunshine!” While Kevin is quick to highlight the environmental benefits of their car choices and solar panels, like many respondents he shared that before moving to Mueller “I never thought that in my lifetime I would have these things.” Once he had experienced making these “ethical,” environmentally conscious consumer choices, it “became apparent” to Kevin that consuming with the social good in mind is not only “simple” but “it works really well.”

Like Kevin, the residents I interviewed tended to report significantly increasing their “ethical” consumerism after moving to Mueller. When I asked residents what they had found surprising since moving to the neighborhood most responded with a discussion of how “green” they had become. Shannon, for instance, shared that “five years ago I would have laughed if you told me that I would have solar panels and an electric car.” As

Shannon explained, while being more environmentally conscious is “great,” she thinks that in her previous neighborhood these purchases “flat out would never have happened.” She feels that the Pecan Street Project made this shift in consumer practices “realistic” for her family, and admits to feeling “shameful” about how little she thought about sustainability before moving to Mueller. Sun drew similar comparisons between Mueller and her previous neighborhood. Before Mueller, Sun and her family lived in an upper-middle class neighborhood in West Austin where, she claims, “the solar, the composting, the electric cars—none of that was on anyone’s mind, including us!” “It just wasn’t the same type of people” who lived in that neighborhood, she explained. Sun remembers that she and her husband “did not do that much research” when buying their home in Mueller as their primary concerns were location and new construction. They surprised themselves when they decided to install solar panels and begin composting, finding that “there were a lot of things in the philosophy of environmentalism that we agree with.” Sun feels “very lucky” that the neighborhood provided them with opportunities for a more environmentally friendly lifestyle and feels a strong investment in the long-term success of the neighborhood. As she explained:

Some people imagine that they need a lot of space, a huge house, a backyard, and all that. But I’m glad that there are enough people, like me, who don’t need those things. Because it makes so much sense, environmentally. You see the sun beating down on you every day while you’re in an air conditioned space and most people don’t think about how little sense that makes! So it’s good to have options

such as Mueller, because it's a supply and demand issue. If there are people who want to buy in to this type of neighborhood builders will build them. Builders will look at Mueller and say "Oh, these types of places are really worth building!"

Sun's investment in the neighborhood is rooted in an ethical consumerism philosophy where responsible consumers voice their environmental concerns through consumer choices and producers respond accordingly. To live in Mueller and engage in ethical consumerism, for Sun, "makes sense" individually as well as for the greater good. For both Shannon and Sun the neighborhood provided unexpected yet welcome opportunities to shape their consumer behavior in more environmentally sustainable ways. Moreover, as was the case for many respondents, Shannon and Sun came to embrace more sustainable consumer and lifestyle choices, taking pleasure, as Shannon describes it, in "living it. It's great being part of it." In these cases the values promoted by the neighborhood and held by many of their neighbors shaped Muellerites' behavior in ways that, often unexpectedly, they came to take pleasure in.

A second theme in residents' accounts of how living in the neighborhood influenced their ethical consumer practices was through social norms within Mueller. Specifically, residents felt that norms in the neighborhood promoted ethical consumerism. This was true even for newer residents who arrived in the neighborhood after the Pecan Street Project stopped offering incentives. For example, the solar panels and generally smaller footprints of Mueller homes were a few of the features that drew Kate to the neighborhood. Kate had never composted before, yet, she explained, "the fact

that two of our immediate neighbors do it inspired us to start looking into it.” She and her partner were inspired by how many people in the neighborhood compost, in particular by one couple who had people donate money for a composting system in lieu of presents for their wedding. Moreover, while her home did not have solar panels already installed when they moved in, she is currently shopping around for a contractor to install them despite no longer being eligible for the Pecan Street incentives. As she understands it, the difference between having solar panels installed in Mueller compared to neighborhoods in which they had lived previously is that in Mueller “you can go to the neighbors and ask who they used and what their experiences were like.” She explained that living in Mueller makes what would otherwise be a potentially “difficult, isolated path” easier, not only because so many have already had solar panels installed, but because “other people share the same environmentalism beliefs as well.” The fact that so many of her neighbors have solar panels and that there are electric car charging stations located throughout the neighborhood makes “it feels like everyone, at least most people, are on the same page” in regard to ethical consumer choices.

Eloise’s experiences in the neighborhood are likewise demonstrative of how the neighborhood’s norms influence ethical consumerism. Before they moved to Mueller Eloise describes her family as “the most not-green people in Austin.” “I’ve always had to nag my husband just to recycle,” she recalls. As a long-time resident of Austin, which Eloise describes as a “weird, green, and hippy” city, she was familiar with discourses surrounding sustainability. Eloise feels that in Mueller these discourses are “very



concentrated” and thus become magnified. “Of course it is good to be environmental,” she explains, “and I think that we try our best.” Nevertheless, she feels “a little bit ashamed that I’m not at the same level of greenness as some of my neighbors.” To ease these feelings Eloise has taken extra steps to encourage her family to engage in more sustainable practices, even if it means “pretending a little bit” for the sake of appearances. Eloise has enlisted a compost service which makes regular visits to her home to pick up her compost and is looking into installing solar panels. As she explains: “I never saw myself as a gardener or anything like that, but now I grow herbs in my backyard. I think [the neighborhood] has influenced us to be a little bit more environmental. We’ve probably assimilated a little bit.”

Though all respondents spoke of the environmental and societal benefits of encouraging this type of consumerism, some felt that these norms were accompanied by a particular type of ethical or eco-competitiveness. For instance, Sarah is generally happy in the neighborhood and, like the rest of my interviewees, feels that the neighborhood’s emphasis on sustainability is “great.” Nevertheless, she is slightly troubled by the Mueller residents whom she describes as “the most proactive of vocal people in the community.” She finds these neighbors “annoying” because their high expectations for the neighborhood. She describes their expectations for a “perfect” ecologically conscious and socially inclusive neighborhood as “*really*, exceedingly high.” Sarah nevertheless acknowledges the ways that these neighbors’ efforts have influenced her own consumer choices. Sarah describes her own role in the neighborhood as “sort of passive,” yet she

and her husband make it a point to attend neighborhood meetings to keep up with “what’s coming up next.” They do “support the initiatives that come across the community that we feel passionate about,” such as the solar panels and composting, but, compared to some of her neighbors, she prefers to take a “quieter approach to standing for things.”

Likewise, Rose expressed feeling that “people in Austin generally, and Mueller in particular, think very highly of themselves,” a trait which she sees manifested in Muellerites’ ethical consumerism. She described this attitude:

I see people who have an attitude like “look how green I am. I drive a Prius. I compost. I recycle.” They ask each other: “How green is your house?” You see that so many people have solar panels; it has sort of become a marker of “look how green I am,” or “look what it is that I have!”

Reflecting on this topic, Elizabeth similarly told me that she understands why some people draw similarities between Austin—and Mueller in particular—and the pretentiousness many associate with cities like Dallas. Mueller has, she explained, “its own version of pretention” where “you are supposed to eat organic, like local businesses, and be green.” While she does not feel like this influenced her decision to install solar panels on her home, she feels that for many having solar panels or an electric car is their own “version of saying you have a Gucci purse. It’s like Mueller’s own version of the Joneses.” Residents such as Rose, Sarah, and Elizabeth valued the neighborhoods environmental initiatives and even took advantage of the incentives to engage in environmental practices themselves. Nevertheless, they felt uneasy with what they and

other residents perceived to be the competitive ethics that they saw as driving much of this behavior.

When talking about their ethical consumerism Muellerites did not discuss this behavior in terms of political participation or as an aesthetic taste for the authentic, eclectic, or ecological. While they acknowledged the ecological benefits of their ethical consumerism, they generally did not speak of ecological concerns as motivating their ethical purchases. Instead, contrary to what dominant theories regarding ethical consumerism discussed earlier would suggest, Muellerites highlighted the centrality of both context—here taking the form of institutional and social factors within the neighborhood—in accounting for their ethical consumerism.

### **Alternative Moral Discourses**

For the most part there was a consensus among Muellerites that ecologically sustainable and socially conscious purchases constituted ethical consumerism. Some Muellerites, however, described moments when their consumerism did not conform to normative ideals of ethical consumerism. In these cases they did not frame their consumerism as amoral or as driven by strictly self-interested concerns. Instead, Muellerites sometimes drew on alternative moral schemes to justify and explain their consumer choices that did not fit within normative understandings of ethical consumerism.

For example, Damon and his wife are parents to a three year old daughter. Damon feels that it is important to be good consumer-role model for his daughter and goes out of his way to be a conscientious and green consumer. For example, he collects her toys' spent batteries and brings her along to deposit them at the recycling center. Nevertheless, he recalls moments in his life when these types of concerns "went out the window." For example, one such period was the first three months after his daughter was born, a time when he feels that "anxiety and lack of time" dominated his consumer decisions—what he described as a sort of "survival mode." Damon feels that during these months he was not as careful as usual with his purchasing decisions, resulting in him buying many things which turned out to be wasteful. Instead of behaving as an ethical consumer, Damon explains that in the moment he was concerned with being a good father and husband. He explained: "I want to be responsible and do good for the environment but for those few months I threw that out. You're not really making sound decisions, I was only thinking about keeping my wife and baby happy." As he summarized, during this period he "I didn't want to be a good consumer, I want to be good at this baby!"

Danielle described similar experiences with her consumer behavior and early parenthood. "A lot of parenting comes with desperation," she explained, "and there were times I felt so desperate that I've found myself making those 2 a.m. Amazon purchases on stuff that turned out to be useless." For Danielle these purchases were "consumerism at its worst" as she felt that they "went against my concerns for sustainability and waste reduction." For example, during one of those moments she remembers wondering "why

is my kid not sleeping? What can I buy to help get him to sleep?” Like Damon, Danielle rationalized these purchases as a temporary requirement for being a good parent. Although she claims to have since “returned more to the type of shopper I was before becoming a mother” she feels hypocritical about those purchases. “It is a tension I grappled with,” she explains, in that she wanted “to be eco-friendly, down to earth and conscious with my consumerism, but at the same time I have the money and I could just pay for what I needed to while I was trying to survive and adapt to being a mother.” Both Damon and Danielle acknowledged that some of the consumerism they engaged in following the birth of their children was “not sound” or “hypocritical” given their usual standards. Yet they also understood their behavior as an effort to be good parents, both discussing how they reverted back to normatively ethical consumerism once they were able to combine good parenting with ethical consumerism.

As discussed earlier, middle-class and affluent parents tend to bracket societal concerns when making parenting decisions. In the cases discussed here, parents insist on ethical consumption and thrift for themselves, but fall short of applying these same standards of consumerism for their children. This discrepancy seems to be a previously underexplored consequence of contemporary middle-class and affluent parenting ideologies. Lareau (2003) has shown that middle-class parents see themselves as responsible for “cultivating” their children in ways that attempt to ensure that they become successful adults. This parenting style, especially for mothers, has become more child-centered, labor-intensive, and expensive than ever before (Hays 1996; Bobel 2002).

“Natural mothering” has become fashionable among middle-class and affluent parents, compelling parents to favor “instinctual” mothering practices over advice from medical experts, a process which identifies individual mothers as responsible for their children’s physical and psychological well-being (Blum 2007; Singh 2004). Parenthood, mothering in particular, thus became a parallel—and often competing—moral discourse which parents found themselves deliberating with when making consumer decisions. In my interviews proper parenting often prevailed over normative understandings of ethical consumerism.

A second way that Muellerites contextualized their consumerism within alternative moralized discourse was by framing their consumerism as “frugal” or “thrifty.” Kate, for instance, described herself as “one of the least green people in the neighborhood” and “a little anal about saving and financing.” Over the past few years she has moved “further up” in her career and her income has increased accordingly. Yet she has been careful to not increase her spending. “If your lifestyle expands as your income does,” she explains, “you don’t have any more freedom and choices—keeping your spending down and saving money gives you freedom.” “What if one day you decide that you hate your job,” she wonders, or “you suddenly decide that you need and want to book a vacation,” if your income “is tied to your regular expenses, you don’t have that freedom.” While Kate is familiar with ethical consumer discourses popular within the neighborhood, she does not experience the same value in prioritizing green or ethical consumerism. Instead, she values the “freedom” she derives from her frugality.

Sarah similarly exalts her thriftiness over what she feels are societal expectations to consume more. In fact, she claims to “consider thriftiness a virtue,” a value she shares with her partner. Like many of her neighbors, Sarah is familiar with ecological consumer discourses. “I think we are already using up too many resources—the earth is only so big and there are only so many natural resources,” she tells me. Simply by living in Texas, a “super air-conditioned environment,” Sarah feels that she is “using far more than my share of natural resources” compared to people in other parts of the world. Regarding her own consumerism, she explains to me that “on a personal level it is good to tone consumerism down a little bit.” Especially given that her two young children “wear out a lot of things,” she feels that she and her family are “already doing our jobs as consumers,” in reference to Keynesian notions of consumers’ responsibilities to spend in order to sustain production, employment, and a general the standard of living (Patterson 1997). She attributes the overconsumption of natural resources to the “societal expectations” created by living in a society saturated by advertisements compelling people to buy. Unlike many of her neighbors, however, Sarah responds to these concerns not by engaging in normatively ethical consumerism, but by consuming as little as possible. Sarah has made a conscious effort to “opt out” of societal expectations to spend, and explains that she and her family “do good by not spending much.” For example, in an attempt to support “a healthy sort of circulation” that creates as little waste as possible Sarah buys and sells on Craigslist whenever possible. Sarah also recycles and composts because they are “free,” and keeps track of “how much garbage we generate as an

indicator of how much impact we have on the environment.” Sarah shares with her neighbors an aspiration to modify her own consumerism according to ecological consumer-discourses. However, instead of buying products that in some way support the environment, she engages in her own version of moralized thrifty consumerism.

Penny expressed a similar approach to her consumerism. She described her family as “pretty frugal people” as she buys non-organic and discounted foods for herself and her husband, only splurging on organic food for their daughter because of health reasons. Penny is, like her neighbors, concerned with sustainability. She bikes wherever she can, for example, because “you’re getting exercise and it’s good for the environment.” Moreover, beginning to compost has been on her mind, which she describes as “a positive movement, less waste and good for the environment.” Penny nevertheless feels a disconnect between her and many of her neighbors, one that she traces to her parents instilling in her and her siblings a value “to save money and to not be excessive in our spending.” “It was our culture at home,” she explains, “to save money and, though we’ve been blessed with a lot that we could spend, if we don’t *need* to buy it then why would we?” Like Sarah, Penny saw value in her thriftiness leading to “less stress, not living paycheck to paycheck. Being more free.” For the most part, Penny did not see Muellerrites as thrifty people. “I think most people in Mueller have money and are willing to spend it,” she explained. Instead, she describes Muellerrites as “generous.” As she explained:



I think that all those things, the solar panels, the composting, it costs money, obviously. For example, the solar panels—to get them you had to put a lot of money on the front end and hope to make it back later. Rain barrels are similar—you are collecting water which is expensive, but you're hoping to use it later.

The way that Penny experienced her thriftiness has meant that these initial investments were not worth the reduction in her savings which, for her, signify freedom from stress and necessity.

While in general Muellerites could generally be described as ethical consumers, for many their consumerism did not always conform to normative ethical consumer ideals. In these cases, nevertheless, living in Mueller continued to affect how they experienced their consumerism. Given that the social and institutional setting of Mueller compelled residents to think about their consumerism in moralized terms, forms of consumerism that were not normatively ethical were nevertheless moralized. Muellerites who bracketed societal concerns when making parenting decisions, for example, spoke of their obligations to be “good parents,” while interviewees who valued thriftiness spoke of their consumerism not as individualistic or competitive, but as valuing a higher, moralized ideal such as freedom.

### **The Economic and the Ethical**

Charlotte is a small business owner who moved to Mueller shortly after getting married in 2012. She expressed an approach towards ethical consumerism that captures

the sentiments of most of my respondents: “I view myself, right or wrong, as not idealistic.” “Yes, I want the world to be more sustainable, and I want to take steps to do that,” she continued, “but I don’t want to be crazy about it. It has to make sense in my life, financial and in terms of convenience.” Charlotte, like all of my interviewees, accepts that she has a role to play as a consumer to make the world “more sustainable.” Moreover, she is happy to take on this role as long as it fits within her self-interest, here expressed as making financial or practical sense in her life. In fact, she describes ethical consumerism that goes against her practical or financial sense as “crazy.” While the Muellerites I interviewed tended to share Charlotte’s sentiment, for most (Charlotte included) ethical consumerism often did make sense. Muellerites generally did not experience their ethical consumerism as a choice between self-interested “convenience” and “moral virtues” (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). Instead, people reported engaging in ethical consumerism when both ethical and self-interested imperatives came together. This tendency reflects a discourse common among Muellerites which posits them as caring, responsible individuals, as opposed to environmentalist fanatics and negligent, indulgent consumers.

Kevin, for example, has been involved with the Pecan Street initiative since it first began operating in the neighborhood. In addition to installing solar panels on his home, he composts, drives an electric car, switched the light bulbs in his home to LED, and makes an effort to purchase only organic, locally sourced food products. These are lifestyle changes, he explains, which have allowed his family to “cut back further” on

their spending. As a volunteer in the Pecan Street project Kevin received rebates for the purchase of the car and solar panels in addition to the city and federal rebates available to people living in other parts of Austin. Combined these rebates saved Kevin about 75% of the full cost of solar panels. “The solar was about saving money,” he explained, in addition to being “a step in the right direction.” Kevin, an engineer, exalted both the economic and sustainable benefits of Mueller. He explained the “tremendous amount of economic savings” for the city from developing Mueller, a dense neighborhood near the urban core that does not require extending utility services. Equally importantly, he added, was that Mueller “is more sustainable” compared to expansions into the suburbs that “keep mowing down more and more natural landscape.” Kevin understands living in Mueller and participating in the Pecan Street project in moral terms: he is happy to disassociate himself with “people who want acres of land for their big, rural style homes,” a mentality which he sees as the source of many of the social and ecological issues facing U.S. society. In Kevin’s account his ethical consumerism is the economically rational decision for himself and the city, as well as the most sustainable option.

Like Kevin, Juliet also has solar panels and drives an electric car, both of which were partly subsidized by the Pecan Street project. For Juliet moving to Mueller has been accompanied by an unexpected “lifestyle shift” in her consumerism. As she explained, becoming more ecologically conscious in her consumerism is something that she did not “see coming, or anything that I would ever have set out to do.” Nevertheless, becoming a

more ecologically conscious consumer was not a difficult shift to make. In Juliet's experience "making the house greener" went hand-in-hand with "saving money," and was one of the "cool things" that came with moving into the neighborhood, not a tradeoff between her economic interests and societal concerns.

Even interviewees who were already adamant on issues surrounding sustainability before moving to Mueller did not experience these as a tension between their ecological and financial concerns. Christian, for example, described that he has long made his best efforts to keep his consumer choices "well intentioned," which he defined in contrast to those who "generate lots of waste" by, for example, "buying all of these plastic things that they maybe shouldn't have purchased in the first place." Even for an environmentally conscious consumer such as Christian, the "underlying concern for the environment" is only one factor influencing his consumer choices. Choices also have to be "a good financial move," he explains, and his choices are motivated by finding those situations "when the two happen to overlap and it's a win-win." In Christian's experiences, ethical consumerism is not only better for the environment, but it also becomes an opportunity to make safe, financially prudent decisions.

In my interviews Muellerites also described instances when otherwise environmentally sound purchases were sidestepped because of financial reasons. For example, Elizabeth had the opportunity to receive rebates on electric cars through the Pecan Street Project but opted not to because their current cars "worked fine." Though she understood their ecological advantage, she could not justify the purchase as a

“financial decision.” Moreover, though Elizabeth would prefer not to, she nevertheless runs major appliances such as the dishwasher during “peak times,” and, she explains, “I’ve only started composting because it is easy and cheap. If I *really* had to compost I wouldn’t do it.” A similar logic applies to her purchasing organic and Fair Trade food items in that, though she is “not a purist when it comes to buying organic, as it has become easier and less expensive I’ve done it more and more.” While Christian and Elizabeth had differing levels of conviction over issues of sustainability, they both highlighted those instances when ethical consumerism and financial concerns lined up to become a “win-win” situation.

Linda was one of the few residents I spoke to who opted to not participate in the Pecan Street Project. Linda and her husband looked into the solar panels while Pecan Street was offering the rebates but, according to their calculations, “it really didn’t seem like it was worth it.” “Our electric bill was already actually relatively low,” she explained, “so it was not worth the cost of having them installed.” Like her neighbors, however, Linda is aware of the environmental discourses and speaks enthusiastically of composting and gardening both of which “save money and make us a little bit more environmental.” For Linda environmentalism is a laudable goal, yet the potential long-term environmental benefits of solar panels did not outweigh the short-term economic costs of having them installed.

While research on ethical consumerism tends to posit this as a choice between “convenience” and “moral virtues,” or self-interest and ethics, in their accounts of

consuming ethically Muellerites' seldom spoke of purchases that made economic sense and those that made ethical sense as discrete categories. For the most part, Muellerites described ethical consumerism as going hand-in-hand with convenience or financial considerations. Ethical consumerism that did not, for the most part, was deemed "crazy" or "not worth it."

Since the early twentieth century sociologists have understood self-interestedness and public commitments as existing in opposition for each other. Influential authors such as Bellah et al. (1985) and Wuthnow (1991), for example, see a necessary trade-off between self-interests and public commitment. Muellerites, however, discuss their ethical consumerism as satisfy both personal (economic) and public (ecological) objectives. Contrary to the dominant seesaw metaphor, Muellerites experience self-interests and public commitment—as Tocqueville (1988) described—as a "win-win."

## **DISCUSSION**

Consumer capitalism has historically been associated with self-interest and the abandonment of the public sphere. Though ethical consumption has become an important component of the consumer culture landscape in recent decades (Johnston and Szabo 2011; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012), analysis has nevertheless tended to take consumers' self-interestedness for granted. Even when people engage in ethical (e.g., Fair Trade or ecologically conscious) consumerism, their behavior has been conceptualized either as an individual choice in line with neoliberal political-economic rationalities, or as class-based distinction work which attempts to reproduce class privileges while

masquerading as a social good. Are these our only options?

I argue that they are not. In this paper I have shown how the consumer-experiences of parents living in the Mueller community offer alternatives to conventional understandings of the relationship between self-interest and civic behavior. I find that what motivates Muellerites to engage in ethical consumerism is not individual choices or distinction. Instead, Muellerites' ethical consumerism is produced out of a particular social context. Through both institutional and social channels, Mueller and Muellerites enabled and encouraged ethical consumerism within the neighborhood. While the neighborhood's design incorporated ecological principles and the Pecan Street Project offered initiatives for ethical consumerism, neighbors also relied on each other, offering moral and practical support for achieving their individual ethical goals. For many residents the neighborhood provided unexpected opportunities to shape their consumer behavior in more environmentally sustainable ways. All of my interviewees welcomed these opportunities. Several, however, spoke of their disregard for the type of eco-competitiveness which they saw operating in ways that mirrored traditional forms of consuming for distinction (e.g., "keeping up with the Joneses" or purchasing luxury brands). In this way Muellerites' ethical consumerism was best described as neither an individual choice nor a selfish act masquerading as a social good.

Crucially, residents did not experience their ethical consumerism as a tradeoff between their ethics and self-interest. Instead, in most cases ethical consumerism for Muellerites was a "win-win" for both the greater good (ethics) and their economic

interests (self-interest). While analysts have tended to conceive of self-interest and the greater good as existing in opposition to each other, Muellerites' experiences point in a different direction. The fact that Muellerites see their ethical concerns and self-interest as merged reflects a quintessentially American habit of conceiving of self-interest as a path to the greater good. As Tocqueville observed almost two centuries ago, Americans have a tendency to conceive of self-interest and ethics in ways that allow for their coexistence. In fact, for Tocqueville as for the Muellerites I interviewed, self-interest can operate as a path to the greater good. To the extent that ethical consumerism was experienced as in-line with their economic self-interest, Muellerites were able to engage, individually and collectively, to further ethical consumerism. This was evidenced, for example, in the institutional and social supports that facilitated residents' increasing their ethical consumerism after moving to the neighborhood. Moreover, as Lichterman (1996) found in his study of environmentalist organizations, for Muellerites ethical consumerism was also an opportunity to further individualism and self-interest, as Muellerites were able to articulate individual viewpoints about how ethical consumerism worked in their own lives. This was the case, for example, with residents such as Damon and Kate who emphasized proper parenting and thriftiness as individual (in Damon's case, temporary) ways of enacting ethical consumerism. Muellerites' experience, therefore, demonstrate a particular way that self-interest and ethics can coexist in people's experiences with ethical consumerism, and how this coexistence can generate both increased ethical participation and individualism.



The findings in this article are limited by my exclusive focus on residents living within Mueller, a predominantly white, liberal, middle and upper-middle class new urbanist neighborhood. These residents could generally afford to consume in normatively ethical ways by purchasing, for example, Fair Trade foods and new electric cars. Furthermore, residents tended to accept the virtue implicit in this type of ethical consumerism. How might the processes described in this paper differ if residents had expressed greater variation in how they understood what counted as ethical consumerism or social activism? A more diverse sample may also speak to important questions about how capital—both economic and cultural—operates as an “entry fee” into the institutional and social supports that encouraged ethical consumerism.

This paper contributes to our understanding of ethical consumerism and the relationship between self-interest and concerns for the greater good. By situating this study within a single and in many ways unique neighborhood, this study adds to our understanding of why people engage in ethical consumerism by highlighting the role that social context can play in people’s consumerism. Moreover, by drawing on a Tocquevillian framework this paper contributes to research on ethical consumerism by highlighting the role that both self-interest and ethical concerns play in people’s ethical consumer decisions.

## **Chapter Three: Diversity, Community, and New Urbanism in Creative Austin**

For the past twenty years residents of Austin, Texas have unofficially proclaimed “Keep Austin Weird” the city’s slogan. The weird for Austinites refers to the city’s “nonconforming quirkiness,” “cultural diversity,” and left-leaning politics—a proverbial “island of blue” within the “sea of red” that is Texas (Long 2010). Despite liberal values, in Austin, like other “creative” new economy Meccas such as San Francisco, Portland, and Boulder, the influx of high-tech industry and workers has exacerbated social inequalities. Austin’s recent economic boom has grown in tandem with poverty and gentrification despite the city’s reputation as a tolerant, progressive, and culturally dynamic city (Auyero 2015; Kneebone 2014; Tang 2014). This had led many to wonder: how do liberal, progressive ideals held by residents and promoted by the city coexist with gentrification and persistent inequalities?

Today traditionally poor black and Latino neighborhoods in East Austin have become highly sought-after by home buyers and developers. Given the combination of East Austin’s proximity to downtown, relative affordability, and increasing property taxes, long-term residents are leaving for suburbs beyond the city limits while young professionals are moving in. So drastic are these social and demographic shifts in Austin that the city is unique for having a shrinking African American population among rapidly growing U.S. cities (Tang 2014). To understand the lived experiences in rapidly changing cities like Austin I explore how people living at the forefront of these spatial and

demographic shifts in Austin experience their neighborhoods and the changing landscapes around them. Specifically, I examine how residents in the Mueller neighborhood, a new urbanist infill development in East Austin, experience their neighborhood. The Mueller neighborhood, located about two miles northeast of downtown and sandwiched between two traditionally black neighborhoods, plays an important role in the redevelopment of East Austin. Though not technically a case of gentrification since the Mueller neighborhood was built atop a defunct airport, Mueller residents share many traits with traditional gentrifiers. Moreover, Mueller and its residents play an important part in redefining East Austin as a dynamic and attractive place to live. In this paper I ask: How do people moving in to East Austin, many of whom were attracted to the city and neighborhood because of their “weirdness” and liberal, socially progressive values, experience being at the epicenter of Austin’s dramatic economic and demographic transformation? What benefits or drawbacks do they experience living on this geographic frontier? Do they experience tensions between their liberal ideals and the roles they play in the city’s gentrification? If so, how do they resolve these tensions?

## **CREATIVE AUSTIN**

Austin has been among the fastest growing cities in the nation for the past 20 years. Most of this increase in population has been due to immigration rather than natural increases; city demographers estimate that the Austin metropolitan area is currently gaining about 110 new residents daily (Barnett and Toohey 2014). In addition to people,

Austin has also been attractive for high-tech industry, establishing itself as the “technopolis” of the southwest (Swearingen 2010). While the metropolitan population increased by over 30% during the 1990s, employment in the high-tech sector grew by 80%. Given Austin’s prolonged economic growth combined with the natural beauty and the recreational potential of the surrounding environment, by the beginning of the twenty-first century the city had risen to the top of every list of economically vibrant, high-amenity cities (McCann 2004).

Austin’s growth has been often understood through the frame of the “creative cities” thesis. Popularized through Richard Florida’s (2004) work on the “creative class,” whom he defines as highly educated workers in knowledge-based industries, cities which attract workers in these industries are distinctive in that they foster the lifestyle amenities required to attract and retain creative workers. Specifically, people employed in these industries are said to crave street-level culture, cafes, sidewalk musicians, galleries, bistros, and an “intense experiences in the real world” (2004: 166). Through the 1990s much of the growth in these creative, knowledge-based industries happened in suburban offices and manufacturing sites west of Austin’s urban core. In response local environmentalists teamed with city officials and affluent suburbanites to oppose further development of these lands, many of which are the habitats of endangered species and lie over the city’s drinking water aquifer (McCann 2007). In 1997 the City of Austin initiated a Smart Growth Initiative to combat sprawl by channeling resources from new

suburbs into the central city and surrounding older suburbs “to restore community and vitality” (Barna 2002).

These older suburbs, in particular those east and northeast of the central business district, tend to be Austin’s poorest places and home to a large proportion of the city’s black and Latino population. When the city of Austin institutionalized city planning in the early twentieth century, areas east of downtown were zoned as industrial districts, many of which allowed for hazardous and polluting industries (Walsh 2007). East of downtown and central Austin is also where the city established the city’s “negro district.” There the city clustered segregated black-only schools, parks, and other municipal necessities. While Latino segregation was not mandated by the city, informal policies such as restrictive housing covenants pushed blacks and the majority of Latinos into east Austin neighborhoods (Busch 2013).

The city’s Smart Growth policies of the mid 1990s included substantial investments to rebuild and “revitalize” large sweeps of East Austin, transforming these neighborhoods in the image of the creative city. These policies included, for example, waiving permit and zoning fees for East Austin developers, rewriting the zoning codes to allow for lofts, condominiums, and mixed-use housing and retail buildings near downtown, and tax-incentives for investments in the arts in East Austin, including sponsoring the yearly East Austin Studio Tour (Walsh 2007).

Ensuing rising property values and taxes have resulted in the displacement of low-income renters and home owners. Between 1990 and 2000 home values in some East

Austin neighborhoods nearly tripled. While sustained city-wide growth resulted in a median increase of 30% for homes throughout Austin between 1999 and 2005, the average price for a single-family home in east Austin rose over 100%, from \$58,000 to \$120,000 during this period. Many low-income homeowners were unable to keep up with increasing property taxes; by the mid-2000s East Austin accounted for 15% of Austin's housing stock and 50% of all property tax delinquencies (Walsh 2007). Like in other gentrifying areas across the country long-time residents of East Austin are compelled by a host of reasons to leave their neighborhoods for housing further from the city center (Hyra et al. 2013). Unlike other rapidly growing major cities, however, Austin is unique in that it has experienced a net loss in its African-American population. While the overall population growth rate has been 20.4% between 2000 and 2010, the African-American population decreased by 5.4% (Tang and Ren 2014). This is a pattern, Tang and Ren (2014) argue, that does not square with Austin's reputation as a tolerant, progressive, and culturally dynamic city. Moreover, this trend raises questions about commonly held beliefs that liberal politics dovetail with the concerns of African Americans and other minorities. As Austin continues to grow and develop its creative and idiosyncratic urban environment, growing inequalities and residential displacement may pose a threat to these new forms of development.

### **NEW URBANISM, MUELLER, AND COMMUNITY**

To investigate the apparent contradictions between residents' liberal, progressive ideals and displacement and gentrification in East Austin, I draw upon my research in the

Mueller neighborhood, a new urbanist development in Austin, Texas. Mueller is a 700 acre public and privately funded master-planned infill development of the defunct Robert Mueller Regional Airport in east Austin. New urbanism has become fashionable in urban planning and housing policy nationwide, significantly altering how American cities and suburbs are being (re)built (Hall and Porterfield 2001; Stephenson 2002; Vale 2013). Described by one of its founders as the “second coming of the American small town,” new urbanism promotes “traditional” urban design as a means to combat sprawl and revive a sense of community in peoples’ lives (Duany, et al. 2010).

In Austin Mueller has become a symbol of “smart growth” for its emphasis on diversity, affordability, and environmental sustainability. When unveiled in the early 2000s, the Mueller master plan was praised by residents, businesses, and the City of Austin, and won the 2001 Award of Excellence at the Congress for the New Urbanism. In recent years Mueller has been frequently featured on national media outlets such as *New Tech City*, *PBS Newshour*, *NPR’s Cities Project*, and *Time Magazine* for its leadership in environmental and “smart” initiatives. Design-wise Mueller is the archetypal new urbanist neighborhood. For instance, lots in Mueller are small and private yard space is kept to a minimum. All homes in Mueller have front porches that open either onto sidewalks or communal gardens [Figures 1 and 2]. Walking and social interactions are further encouraged through the use of wide, shaded sidewalks [Figure 3] and on street or hidden parking. Eliminating the need for driveways, garages in Mueller are located behind houses and accessible only by rear alleys [Figure 4]. Mueller is also a “mixed use”

neighborhood. The master plan [Figure 5] includes 6,000 residences (apartments, townhomes, and detached houses), 4 million square feet of office and retail space, and 140 acres of public parks and green areas.

## **COMMUNITY**

One of the core social goals of new urbanism is creating a sense of community among residents (Talen 2002). Community is a term that resonates across social settings though it is rarely defined. Research highlights its symbolic and socio-psychological dimensions such as feelings of belonging, attachment, and shared expectations (Cohen 1985). In the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sociologists operationalized community as a group of people within a geographically defined area who shared a meaning system. This is the understanding of community underlying classical sociological “community studies” (e.g., Lynd and Lynd 1959; McKenzie 1924; Anderson 2000). More recent analysis on community by social capital and network theorists has largely focused on the mechanisms through which practical and material benefits are conferred to people through membership in networks (Granovetter 1974; Marsden and Lin 1982). The pressing question motivating much of this research is what types of network ties best facilitate the exchange of instrumental benefits (Portes 1998; Putnam 1994, 2001; Woolcock 1998). Moreover, the geographic boundaries which once considered central to the experience of community have been found to be redundant as people sharing interests, beliefs, or experiences do not necessarily live in the same place. This is the case



in “virtual,” “gay,” or “imagined” communities (Driskell and Lyon 2002; Gieryn 2000; Wellman et al. 2001; Flaherty and Brown 2010).

New urbanist theory is rooted in a “community lost” understanding which characterizes modern society as lacking in the types of civic engagement that once flourished in American life. Bellah et al. (1985) and Putnam (2001), perhaps the most widely cited theorists of this perspective, describe modern individuals as detached from civic life, engrossed with work and consumerism at the expense of community. New urbanist architects and planners attempt to rekindle this sense of community by reimagining what neighborhoods should look like and do (Kelbaugh 1997). Echoing the community lost theorists, new urbanism posits that close-knit communities were once commonplace in the United States. These communities, however, are thought to have been lost due to middle-class migrations to low-density suburbs and subsequent inner-city decay—a shift that, in addition to stifling community, contributed to environmental degradation and social divisions (Kunstler 1994).

For new urbanists, the key to creating and strengthening this lost sense of community is a combination of reclaiming design elements of “traditional” American small towns while incorporating modern elements of environmental sustainability (Ellin 1999; Calthorpe 1993; Duany et al 2010; Katz 1994; Langdon 1997). Though rarely defined, new urbanism’s “traditional” design refers to an imagined, pre-suburb, less regulated urban form: mixed use neighborhoods, built to a human scale and therefore walkable, with lively town centers and a mix of building types and architectural styles

(Duany et al. 2010). These traditional small towns are thought to have fostered community by promoting frequent, usually unplanned interactions between neighbors. The design of modern suburbs, on the other hand, is seen as stymieing these types of interactions (Grant and Curran 2007). To recapture “traditional” design elements new urbanists create walkable, “mixed use” neighborhoods where homes, shops, and parks are all nearby (Talen 2010). Parks and green spaces are imperative as they provide residents with a place and reason to come together, serve as venues for larger community gatherings, and improve overall quality of life (Langdon 1994). To further increase the likelihood of interactions new urbanism promotes increased neighborhood density through smaller home lots. Driveways, lawns, and private yards—design features deemed to create distance between neighbors—are replaced with front porches and alleys (Talen 2010).

Research on whether new urbanist neighborhoods exhibit higher levels of community when compared to traditional suburbs have so far yielded mixed results, suggesting that self-selection into a neighborhood—not urban design—may best explain varying levels of community (Cabrera and Najarian 2013; Lund 2002; Nasar 2003). Moreover, while much of the literature paints a positive picture of community, scholars have also highlighted the tendency of communities to not be very community-like. In fact, communities have long been known to be rife with divisions and power imbalances similar to those in economic or political institutions and to foster intolerance and hostility towards freedom and innovation (Brint 2001; Rieder 1988). Inter-community relations

have shown to be equally problematic as people routinely commit horrific acts in the name of community (Powell 2011). Joseph (2002), for example, shows how the notion of community can naturalize and normalize inequalities even within a “radical” community. By highlighting how a gay and lesbian community theater maintained a hierarchical social order that privileged a gay identity at the expense of race and class inequalities among members, Joseph’s ethnography describes how ideological notions of community blind participants to the relations of domination that operate within communities (see also Creed 2006).

The continued appeal of community should be understood alongside dominant discourses that romanticize and mystify community. As Patricia Hill Collins (2010) has argued, “core ideas” such as “family,” “sexuality,” and “community” structure people’s relationships while giving them meaning. These “core ideas” are ideological in that they promote and naturalize certain forms of social relationships. For example, to the extent that “family” is understood as natural and taken-for-granted, patriarchal and racialized social relations are essentialized and even idealized as “family.” Community, on the other hand, has been largely exempt from critical analysis, leaving its ideological underpinnings unexamined (Collins 2010).

In this article, I investigate how residents of a new urbanist neighborhood think about and experience community. New urbanist architects and planners attempt to cultivate this sense of community through urban design, but what community means to residents of their developments is unexamined. Drawing on in-depth interviews, I explore

how Mueller residents experience a sense of community in their new urbanist neighborhood.

## **DIVERSITY**

Despite their nostalgic underpinnings, new urbanist attempts to build communities are not attempts to recreate the traditional communities of the past. Communities in new urbanism are imagined as “diverse” iterations of earlier racially and economically homogeneous communities. Among new urbanists residential diversity is understood to contribute to the vibrancy and richness of local communities as well as help reduce the social and economic isolation associated with poverty and public housing (Bohl 2000; Joseph et al 2007; Kleit 2005). Like community, diversity is an intended consequence of new urbanist land use, architectural styles, and housing prices (Grant and Perrott 2009).

Mueller is designed to promote diversity through land use and housing prices. Twenty-five percent of the housing stock in Mueller is earmarked as “affordable” housing.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Mueller, a predominantly white, middle class neighborhood, is located on the historically black, Latino, and poor—though rapidly gentrifying—east side

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<sup>2</sup> Developers sell affordable homes at market rates. The Mueller Foundation (the non-profit organization that manages the Mueller Affordable Homes Program) achieves “affordability” by taking a second lien on homes purchased through the program. This second lien reduces the buyer’s initial mortgage amount by about 22 - 30% of the home’s market value. Assuming that the buyer does not default on the initial 30 year lien the second lien comes due after 30 years. The disadvantage from the buyers’ perspective is that the Mueller Foundation retains “ownership” over the home’s appreciation. If buyers sell their Affordable Home before paying the second lien in full their share of the home’s appreciation is limited to 2% of the initial purchase price per year that they owned the home. The remaining balance on the home’s appreciated value is reinvested by the Mueller Foundation into the Affordable Homes Program.

of Austin, bordering two traditionally black and one traditionally Latino neighborhoods (Straubhaar et al. 2012), increasing the potential for interaction between diverse groups.

However, while new urbanism stresses diversity, the movement has been criticized for what some see as its implicit class and racial biases. While “diversity” has become orthodoxy in new urbanist planning (Feinstein 2005), critics suggest that this form of diversity is a “diversity of the elite,” catering exclusively to highly educated, “creative” people (Florida 2002). Critics argue that new urbanist developments appeal and cater to white, upper middle-class homeowners while eschewing the housing and neighborhood needs of disadvantaged groups (Cabrera and Najarian 2013; Diaz 2012).

Planners rarely address the underlying economic and racial inequalities that influence who participates in and benefits from new urbanist communities (Al-Hindi 2001; Cabrera 2013; Day 2003; DeFilippis 2001; Markovich and Hendler 2006). Moreover, studies on “diversity” as both a discourse and practice have found the relationship between diversity and equality to be anything but straightforward. Bell and Hartmann (2007) found that while diversity discourses have become part of American cultural and institutional life, people tend to have underdeveloped and contradictory understandings of diversity. Instead of helping to challenge the socio-structural roots of inequalities, they find that “happy talk” about diversity functions as a euphemism that obscures the sources and consequences of existing inequalities. Similarly, in her study of a multiethnic, mixed-income neighborhood in North Carolina, Sarah Mayorga-Gallo (2014) found that racial stratification persisted despite the neighborhood’s racial and

ethnic diversity. While technically “integrated” and home to liberal white residents who lauded the neighborhood’s diversity, she found that social norms in the neighborhood reinforced social distance along racial lines. Mayorga-Gallo (2014) explains these apparent contradictions as a symptom of the “diversity ideology,” a dominant meaning system which serves to reconcile a national emphasis on egalitarianism with pervasive racial inequalities. By privileging diversity and demanding acceptance of differences, white middle-class residents were able to associate themselves with civic mindedness and social justice causes while ignoring structural inequalities. This type of diversity discourse has largely replaced civil rights and affirmative action frameworks for understanding and addressing inequalities. In this new context the focus has shifted away from outcomes and towards intentions (Mayorga-Gallo 2014). Others have similarly documented how diversity discourses downplay problems of structural inequalities in higher education (Ahmed 2007; Berrey 2011; Moore and Bell 2011; Marvasti and McKinney 2011) and the business world (Edelman et al 2001; Embrick 2011; Williams et al. 2014).

Kahn (2011, 2012) discusses a parallel trend in how contemporary inequalities are reproduced by highlighting the “paradox” of elite institutions becoming simultaneously more diverse (in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) and unequal (in terms of class). Kahn describes this type of inequality “democratic inequality” given actors’ emphasis on openness and fairness. Given the earnestness with which privileged institutions promote openness and diversity, Kahn (2011) argues that we can no longer

explain inequality simply as an outcome of social closure or exclusion. Instead, Kahn points to the ways dominant discourses about diversity and openness mystify structural inequalities by creating the illusion that unequal outcomes are the product of an individual's close-mindedness and refusal to take advantage of the possibilities available to them. Taken together, "diversity ideology" and "democratic inequality" provide useful frameworks for analyzing the role that the construct of community plays in the various forms of power relations operating within this community.

Advocates of new urbanism tend to see critiques of new urbanism and community as short-sighted, instead highlighting new urbanism's tangible benefits, adaptability, and the lack of additional alternatives to urban sprawl (Ellis 2002). Like other popular understandings of community and diversity, new urbanists imagine a robust and diverse community as both a straightforward consequence of urban design and as a solution to societal problems such as poverty, anomie, crime, declining civic participation, and even road rage (Bounds 2004).

This embrace of popular community and diversity discourses has been an important contributor to new urbanism's popularity (Hall and Porterfield 2001). Since the founding of the Congress for the New Urbanism in the early-1990s, new urbanism has diffused widely among architects, planners, and in urban policy nationwide (Stephenson 2002; Vale 2013; Friedman 2007). By 2006 over 500 new urbanist developments planned or under construction in the U.S.; today new urbanism has cemented itself as the most important movement in design and architecture of the past 30 years and shows no signs

of waning (Talen 2005; Gillette 2014). Despite forfeiting many traditional suburban comforts (e.g., private yards, square footage, and autonomy over design), new urbanism remains the dominant trend in urban and suburban (re)development nationwide. Moreover, in the current context where cities such as Austin are striving to attract creative workers and industry, new urbanist developments provide the type housing options that appeal to creative workers (Florida 2004).

Because Mueller is an infill development it does not fit standard definitions for gentrification in which socially and economically marginal areas are transformed for middle-class residential use (Zukin 1987). Nevertheless, Mueller plays an important role in the revitalization of East Austin and its redefinition as a dynamic and attractive place for the affluent to live. Moreover, Mueller residents share many traits with traditional gentrifiers in that they seek to tame the “frontier” while making an investment in the social, economic, and cultural future of a place (Brown-Saracino 2004). Research on gentrification has focused primarily on its causes and consequences, locating the causes of gentrification either in the tastes and desires of gentrifying populations (Friedenfels 1992) or as an outcome of capitalist political economy (Abu-Lughod 1994; Smith 1996; Zukin 1982). In terms of investigating consequences researchers have documented how gentrification has revitalized older city neighborhoods through upgrades in housing, services, and local commerce (Anderson 1990; Zukin 1982). On the other hand, these same forces have contributed to increasing housing costs and residential displacement (Cybriwsky 1978; LeGates and Hartman 1986). Little is known, however, about how the



gentrifiers themselves experience these processes. In this study I ask: how do Mueller residents talk about moving to East Austin? Specifically, what attracted them to Mueller? What, according to Muellerites, are the benefits and drawbacks of living in their neighborhood? How do concerns over the diversity of the city and neighborhood matter (or not) to Muellerites? Answers to these questions will allow for more nuanced understanding of the social and demographic changes taking place in creative cities such as Austin in terms of (1) the coexistence of progressive, liberal politics and inequalities, and (2) the social construction of discourses of community and diversity.

## **METHODS**

During the Spring and Summer of 2014 I undertook an ethnographic investigation of the Mueller neighborhood. I conducted 31 in-depth, semi structured interviews with Mueller residents (“Muellerites”) who had young children. Middle-class parents make careful decisions about where to live as they tend to see their neighborhoods as crucial pathways to educational and social resources for their children (Lareau and Goyette 2014; Pugh 2009). Therefore, given that all residents are relative newcomers—the neighborhood did not exist in 2007—of all groups living in Mueller I expected parents to be best able to articulate their reasons they choosing to live in this neighborhood, what they value about Mueller, and the long-term role they see the neighborhood playing in their family’s lives with heightened precision. In-depth interviews were chosen to illuminate how Muellerites experience and make sense of community in their new urbanist neighborhood. While surveys have been used in the past to quantify levels of

community, often in order to compare levels of community between types of neighborhoods, my goal to understand shared experiences and the meanings of community in this neighborhood. In-depth interviews can reveal otherwise inaccessible aspects of Muellerites experiences with community, such as the emotional dimensions of community (Pugh 2013), “magnified moments” that give meaning to community (Hochschild 2003), and fantasies Muellerites have about themselves and their community (Lamont and Swidler 2014). I located respondents through online community forums, during participant observation in the neighborhood, and through snowballing. Interviews gathered information on respondents’ experiences in choosing to live in Mueller, their experiences in the neighborhood, and how they approached being good people, good parents, and responsible citizens. The experiences of the Muellerites I interviewed provide clues about why the idea of community continues to reverberate throughout society.

In addition to interviews I conducted participant observations within the neighborhood over the course of three months. By spending time in the parks, shops, the children’s museum, and attending community events I was able to experience firsthand many of the types of interactions described in the interviews. My daughter served as a crucial “wedge” in helping me gain access in the neighborhood. As Levey (2009) argues, bringing one’s children to the field can aid in facilitating relationships by providing immediately relevant and often relatable information about the researcher. As a male seeking to gain access to people with young children I was concerned with being

perceived as a pedophile or sexual predator.<sup>3</sup> Whenever possible I took my then two year old daughter along during participant observations. Moreover, when I contacted potential respondents whom I had not already met in person I made it a point to identify myself as a researcher *as well as* a parent who frequented the neighborhood with my daughter. By giving me access to parks, the children's museum, and other places where neighbors congregate my daughter facilitated efforts to build relationships with residents and gain a foothold into the neighborhood. In addition, I felt that being able to relate to parents as a parent—especially, as was the case in these interviews, given that our children were roughly the same age—made interviews more friendly, open, and informative. In fact, several respondents reported having agreed to the interview in part to meet fellow parents in the neighborhood (a number of respondents realized during the interview that I was not myself a resident of Mueller), and all interviewees expressed looking forward to meeting again in the capacity of parents in the parks or at the museum. Though she was critical for gaining access to respondents I never brought my child to the interviews.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted either in person or over the phone. All interviews were conducted by the author. The in-person interviews took place at coffee shops or restaurants within the Mueller neighborhood or in the respondent's office or home. Interviews covered the following topics: the process of moving to Mueller, experiences as residents, experiences with community, and views on

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<sup>3</sup> When it was revealed that none of the adolescent male skateboarders he was studying were his son(s), Petrone (2007) was often accused of being a pedophile. Philippe Bourgois (1996) similarly took his toddler to his field site to diffuse concerns about his relationship to law enforcement. For an insightful discussion of the role children play in qualitative research see Levey (2009).

how consumer choices relate to ethical behavior. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author.

My respondents had been living in the neighborhood for at least six months at the time of the interview. Four respondents had been among the first wave of residents to move in to the neighborhood in early 2008. Several respondents had moved to Mueller from out of state, though the majority moved there from within Austin. Of those who were already living in Austin the majority had previously resided within the city limits. All but one respondent owned their home.

The Muellerites I interviewed were between 29 and 45 year of age. Twenty-one were female and ten were male. To the extent possible my sample mirrored the demographics of the neighborhood. As of the 2010 census the Mueller neighborhood (along with approximately 10 blocks south-east of the neighborhood that fall in to the same census tract) is approximately 70% white, 16% Hispanic, and 2% black (Census 2010). Five of my respondents were Latino/a, four were Asian (two of whom were non-native born), and the remaining 22 were white. Seven of the nine non-white respondents were in mixed-race relationships with white partners. Two respondents (both female) had same-sex partners; all of my interviewees lived in two-parent households.

Four home-owning respondents bought their home through Mueller's Affordable Homes program. Requirements for purchasing a home through the Affordable Homes program stipulate that a household's income must be lower than 80% of the median family income in Austin for families of the same size. A family of three, for example,

must therefore have a household income of at most \$52,700 annually. Furthermore, mortgage payments for affordable homes cannot exceed 30% of a family's gross income, and net assets cannot exceed \$150,000 (excluding "gifts" that may be applied towards a down payment). Only one of four families in my sample who bought through the Affordable Homes program was actually living within this range. The rest supplemented their income by some combination of working off-the-books, regular financial assistance from family, and having received a raise or taken on a new job since applying to the affordable homes program. Most residents, including those in the Affordable Homes program, worked stable, white-collar jobs and held advanced degrees. Market-rate rents for Mueller homes, while rare, average about \$2,700 per month for a 3 bedroom home. Average home prices during the first wave of sales in 2007 were in the high \$200s; today market-rate homes sell for an average of \$480k. These prices are somewhat lower compared to historically upper-middle class neighborhoods in Austin, yet higher than the immediately surrounding neighborhoods. The average income for respondents in market-rate homes was approximately \$160k per year, ranging between \$90k and about \$400k. The vast majority of interviewees were dual-income.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed following the qualitative analysis techniques described by Strauss (2003). I read and coded each transcript carefully using open coding techniques.

## **FINDINGS**

Though Mueller residents may share many characteristics with traditional gentrifiers, I find that little about how they understand and experience Mueller is at odds with their liberal, progressive values and ideals. Residents moved to Mueller because of its proximity to the city center and because they saw the neighborhood as an alternative to gentrification. Residents also tend to feel part of a vibrant community in the neighborhood, one which adds to their quality of life. Moreover, residents see their community and their neighborhood as diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, class and sexualities. These experiences with diversity help to reaffirm their progressive self-understandings. These experiences, however, happen within a larger context of increasing residential displacement and inequality. In this section, I report my findings on three topics: reasons Muellerites gave for buying into new urbanism; experiences of with community in Mueller; and experiences with diversity in Mueller. I conclude by discussing how these findings help us to understand the coexistence of creative and unequal Austin.

### **Buying into New Urbanism**

The Mueller residents I interviewed explained their reasons for choosing to live in Mueller in terms of the neighborhood's proximity to downtown; their affinity for new urbanist ideals; and as an opportunity to live in the central city while not as gentrifiers. Location, however, was usually the first thing respondents mentioned when asked what brought them to the neighborhood. Sun and her husband, for instance, moved to Austin

for graduate school and were initially looking to buy a downtown condo. They found, however, that while downtown was close to the university it was not as walkable as they hoped, and parking posed an additional “hassle.” For Sun, Mueller offered the advantages of being centrally located without the downtown hassle.

Adam was similarly looking for homes in centrally located neighborhoods, though before discovering Mueller he had focused his search on neighborhoods in central Austin and “just on the edge” of East Austin. “We liked the idea of being close to town and closer to stores,” he explained. For many the desire to be close to downtown was linked to the location of their workplaces. As Jacob explained, “my wife was working at an advertising firm downtown and I worked pretty close, too.” It was important for them both to cut their commute time down—they had previously been living in a northeastern suburb of Austin—as this would allow them to spend an extra hour and a half with their kids daily. Shannon and her husband had similar reasons for wanting to stay close to downtown when they moved to Austin from New York. Her husband worked downtown and since she was going to be looking for work she figured that a central location would be ideal. Since moving to Mueller, however, both Shannon and her husband have found new jobs in Austin’s western suburbs, resulting in her spending “an hour, maybe an hour and a half” of her day in the car. While it would be easier for them to live in the suburbs, they nevertheless prefer to remain in Mueller as it allows them “to be part of the city life, the hustle and bustle of the city.”

Residents also spoke of moving to Mueller because of their affinity for new urbanist design. For most this came as a realization during their home search. Desmond, for example, explained that when he and his wife began looking for a new home, a large yard was first on their list of desirable attributes. “We have a very active dog, so our thought was always we need a big yard, we are looking for big yards,” he explained. During their search Desmond’s wife took a job at a medical office in Mueller, and after spending some time in the neighborhood they came to a realization: “We don’t need a yard! With all of the parks and the pool we said OK, we can probably live without a yard.” Similarly, Linda worried about moving into a planned neighborhood with a Home Owners’ Association. She likewise wanted a house with an enclosed yard and was worried about “getting fined for leaving my trashcan out or that type of thing.” In the end, she came to embrace the concept. She grew to “really like having the porches out front, the sheer number of parks and the community feel of the neighborhood.”

Most residents described the neighborhood in idealized terms, as having met all of the characteristics they were looking for. Sarah describes her and her husband as “not crazy about housework” and appreciated having “just a tiny bit of space in the front and in the back of the house” to maintain. Moreover, they were thrilled at the possibility of stepping out of their house and being a quick, two block long walk from stores, parks, a farmers’ market, and the children’s museum. Other residents, such as Rose and her husband, had been looking to move into the neighborhood for some time. They had signed up for the original lottery to buy one of the first homes there but Rose was unable



to find a job in Austin to replace the one she had in Dallas. From the outset they liked “that the houses were really close together” and that the neighborhood did not look “cookie cutter,” which is how she described her previous suburban Dallas neighborhood. The green areas were also appealing to the couple, as was the neighborhood’s push to have retail throughout the neighborhood. They imagined this solving the feeling of isolation they experienced in the suburbs where they consistently felt “so far away from everything.”

Several residents compared Mueller’s new urbanist design to northeastern cities in which they had previously lived. Kevin and his wife used to live in Boston where they “didn’t even own a car.” Until they discovered Mueller they were concerned that they would not be able to find that such a “good, urban quality of life” in Austin. The parks immediately sold them on the neighborhood, he recalls. “We liked the idea of being able to walk to the museum, the grocery store; we just like that pedestrian friendly environment,” he explained. Jacob similarly valued “not having to get in my car and drive twenty minutes in each direction to go to stores, cafes, bookstores, and grocery shopping.” He also wanted to live in a neighborhood that was “a little denser, not so spread out like the suburbs” as he looked forward to neighborly interactions. Esther, who received her undergraduate degree in city planning liked that Mueller “checked all the boxes in terms of what you’re supposed to be trying to do with cities that you learn about in city planning school.” Before her home was even built she looked forward to “the

density, interspersed retail, nice parks, walkable streets, sidewalks, and the sense of place” she imagined new urbanism providing.

A third theme in resident’s accounts of choosing to live in Mueller was Mueller’s simultaneous proximity and distance from the rest of East Austin. For Sarah, who lived in a neighborhood about a mile west of Mueller while completing her undergraduate degree at the UT- Austin, Mueller represents an opportunity to remain close to the neighborhoods in which she spent her youth without “some of the struggles you see in East Austin.” The struggles Sarah is referring to are the “interesting relationships” some of the older communities have with gentrifiers. “You can’t talk about Mueller being gentrification,” she explains, “because no one lost a house here. This was empty parking lots and this is undoubtedly better for the neighborhoods despite the growing pains. ” Christine similarly wanted to live in “a funky neighborhood” like the East Austin neighborhoods undergoing gentrification. Those neighborhoods, however, did not feel safe or walkable to Christine as “gentrification is happening so patch-illy.” One day, she recalls, they happened to stumble upon Mueller and immediately recognized it as a “safe place to walk around” while still being in East Austin. Damon’s experiences closely mirror Christine’s, as Mueller represented for him a place that was “geographically close” to work and city life, while also feeling like a “safe, suburban family world.” Damon sees this proximity the downtown combined with “the edgier East-side of Austin” as “the perfect mix of everything” for him and his family. Moreover, since moving to Mueller he has become more aware of the “politicized climate of the East side.” Damon

has grown increasingly critical of the “cutthroat mentality” with which he sees gentrification taking place in East Austin, and wishes that the city would take more action in mitigating the historical injustices suffered by long-term East Austin residents. Though he describes Mueller as the “least guilt inducing option” for living in East Austin, he nevertheless feels it’s important to remain sensitive to the city’s problems with inequality.

Mueller thus provided residents who wanted to live near downtown or East Austin with what to many felt like an ideal mix of “edginess” and “suburban” feel. Muellerites also found the neighborhood’s new urbanist, mixed-use design appealing, highlighting the ways this contributed to their family’s quality of life. Importantly, Muellerites felt that Mueller provided these advantages without directly contributing to the gentrification happening in other East Austin neighborhoods. While they recognized this gentrification as problematic, Muellerites generally did not see their neighborhood as directly contributing to gentrification.

### **Community Found**

In my interviews I found Mueller residents enthusiastic about their newfound community, exalting the ways community improved their and their family’s quality of life. Most Muellerites I interviewed described their interactions with neighbors as friendly, warm, and supportive. In almost every case, feeling a sense of community in Mueller was a defining and valued characteristic of the neighborhood. Penny’s experience was typical of most residents’ experiences with community. She and her

family moved to Mueller because it was a good location and because she had heard through her friends' network that Mueller was "very friendly." I asked Penny if she had found the neighborhood to be the friendly space was hoping for. She responded by explaining that Mueller is "a great community" where people "are very caring." Because she has a dog, she explained, she regularly walks the neighborhood which has allowed her to meet and befriend many of her neighbors. Before living in Mueller, she explained, "I didn't realize how much I wanted community." The fact that she is "able to get out and see people and have conversations with neighbors," or that she "can walk across the street and go hang out with" a neighbor have changed the way she thinks about community. "Honestly," she told me, "when we moved in I didn't really have expectations—but now having been here I think this is really great." While location was the primary reason they became interested in the neighborhood, over time Penny came to see community as an essential aspect of living in the neighborhood. Before moving to Mueller, Penny, like most of my respondents, had expectations of a friendly neighborhood. Over time, however, she came to see the community as central aspect of living in the neighborhood.

Some residents were surprised by how community oriented they became after moving to the neighborhood. Before Mueller, Christine lived in a downtown condo and did not consider herself a "neighborly" person. In fact, she had always been protective of her personal space, going out of her way to avoid neighbors for fears that she may not like them but have to interact with them anyways. After moving to Mueller Christine

surprised herself by how well she got along with her new neighbors, quickly coming to trust and even depend on them. Similarly, Jacob, who in 2007 was among the first wave of residents to buy homes in the neighborhood, was taken aback by how much people in the community “reach out, really trying to get to know each other.” None of Jacob’s or his wife’s family live in Texas, and over the years they have worried about having to leave to be closer to the support structure of his extended family. Since moving to Mueller, however, Jacob is finding that the “neighborhood is providing us with a very good support structure.” Jacob quickly became “pretty close friends” with several, and “really close” with a handful of his neighbors. He and his neighbors even started buying food and cooking together. Jacob is delighted by the fact that he and his neighbors feel comfortable showing up at each other’s homes without calling ahead or needing a reason to visit. These experiences have produced for Jacob a much stronger sense of community than he had anticipated—so much so that the Mueller community has stepped in for roles he had previously only imagine family could occupy.

While some residents found community after moving, a few respondents moved to Mueller specifically for the community. Laurie and her husband, for example, spent months “stalking” the neighborhood when they were in the market for a home. They were looking for four bedrooms, a garage, and community. The bedrooms and garage they knew they could find anywhere, but they felt that Mueller was the only neighborhood in the city where they could find the community they were looking for. When I asked her to describe what it was that community meant to her, she explained:

We'd spend Saturdays driving around Mueller—we would drive around and see exactly what we wanted. We would see people who know their neighbors and interacted with them. People aren't isolated. The number of times we came around here and just witnessed groups of people hanging out, interacting, ... That felt like the community I wanted because it wasn't a forced thing, it was unplanned. You don't see people hiding in their houses or people driving in and immediately closing their garage doors.

Even with her heightened expectations for the neighborhood Laurie feels that in Mueller she has found a "village" of "people that you can count on." As she reflected on how gratifying it has been to have her hopes for community realized, Laurie recalls being invited to parties in the neighborhood immediately after moving in. "Our first week here," she recounted, "our next door neighbor threw us a welcome to the neighborhood get together. They told us to not bring anything; to just come meet your neighbors." Laurie was impressed by her family's reception in the neighborhood. She laments what she sees as society's trend towards "a time when everybody's a stranger and everything is really scary," and is relieved that Mueller "is a neighborhood where you can trust the people that live around you, and it's a nice feeling." "People are looking out for each other" in Mueller, she explains, "even if I have to run inside to go do something and my kid is outside, someone's watching out for my child." Laurie experiences the Mueller community as a safe haven from the "scariness" and anomie she associates with contemporary urban life. Her narrative of society having "moved to a time" that is more

freighting and dangerous reveals a nostalgia for an imagined, safer past which she uses to compare to her community in Mueller.

Muellerites' cloaking their understandings of community in nostalgic narratives was a common theme in my interviews. Jill, also a "Mueller pioneer," similarly described the community as "what it used to be a long time ago." I asked Jill what she meant by "a long time ago":

I don't even know if people know what they mean by that. Maybe like a generation ago or, when everyone—I don't even know if that ever existed—some idealized past that people are talking about. But we really do know everybody on our street. We socialize together, share stuff, help each other with our kids and it's like that in general.

Jill's response acknowledges the dubiousness of the nostalgic representation of "a long time ago" that she compared to the community in Mueller. Nevertheless, she quickly reclaims this imagery as a useful category with which to understand their present community. While not every resident compared their community to those of a previous era, all but one of the Muellerites I spoke to did highlight the significant and vibrant sense of community in the neighborhood.

Explanations Muellerites gave for the strong sense of community in Mueller tended to revolve around recurrent planned and unplanned encounters with neighbors, as well as their neighbors' "friendliness." Kate, like most of my interviewees, explains the

sense of community in Mueller as an effect of the neighborhood's design. "Houses are very close together," she explains, and "people just want to get to know their neighbors. You see the same people at the pool, at the parks, you start to care about them, talk to them. ... It becomes a cohesive place." It helps, she continues, that her and her family have "received nothing but warmth [and] welcomeness" from their neighbors. Elizabeth similarly explains that "part of it [sense of community] was the distance of the houses. I mean they are so close together. I found that just the way they set it up is somehow forcing you to get to know people. I mean you don't have to, but it makes it a whole lot easier."

Most interviewees also discussed how they came to feel part of the community through planned community events. There are a number of yearly recurrent events organized by the neighborhood association, such as the July 4<sup>th</sup> parade, Easter egg hunt, Halloween carnival, and the lighting of the old airport control tower for the Christmas holidays. James, for example, told me about how participating in the "big events" such as the tower lighting or egg hunt have made him feel as if "you are part of something." Similarly, during her first year in the neighborhood Gloria was delighted by the "fun" and "quirky" 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade and impressed by the turnout. The following year she joined the Mueller Hula Hoop Drill Team (formerly the Mueller Lawn Chair Drill Team), a group of about 20 all-female neighbors who organizes and leads the parade, an experience which she describes as solidifying the connection she feels with her neighbors.



For some these encounters began before or immediately after moving in to the neighborhood. Jill, who bought one of the first homes built in Mueller, remembers her and her future neighbors' excitement about Mueller. A sense of community existed for her even before moving in largely, she explained, given a shared excitement and sense that "you're in this together" among early Mueller "pioneers." Consequently she and her soon-to-be neighbors had become friends and started meeting in coffee shops before the framing on the homes had even been completed. Other community members such as Christine had not even finished unpacking when they began to feel part of the community. She recalled:

The day we moved in our next door neighbor popped his head over the fence and said "Howdy ho neighbors! It's nice to meet you! Want a beer? We're having a BBQ, come on over." That was the day we moved in! Afterwards we would go to dinner or catch a movie with them every once in a while. When our next door neighbor on the other side moved in we did the same. It was all very friendly and warm. So that's just been how it developed, organically.

Christine's characterization of the development of her sense of community as "organic" is shared by many of the Muellerites I spoke to. Others described this process as "easy," "serendipitous," or "natural," the general theme being one of residents not having to go too far out of their way to establish a sense of community, mainly because of the neighborhood's design.

Even the small minority of interviewees who did not feel the same sense of community understood their experiences as peculiar and unfortunate divergence from the norm. Like other Muellerites Carol was hopeful about community in Mueller. Before moving in she had fantasies of making lifelong friends and gardening with neighbors. Unlike most of her neighbors, however, Carol feels that the “big porch where you are supposed to sit out on and have conversations” and the “push towards getting people to interact that isn’t as common in other neighborhoods” have for her not resulted in a sense of community. Carol is aware of the overwhelmingly positive experiences her neighbors have had with community, but to her, Mueller feels like “living in a hotel.” Even so, like her neighbors Carol frames community in terms of the neighborhood’s design. Carol speculates about whether her home facing a different direction or having a walking trail run closer to her home might increase her feeling of community attachment.

For Carol, as in almost all of my interviews, Muellerites understood community as an inevitable outcome of repeated planned and unplanned interactions. The frequency with which the unplanned interactions happen is explained by residents as a product of the neighborhood’s density and amenities (parks, the pool, planned events, museum, supermarket, etc.).

### **Community and Diversity**

Every one of my interviewees expressed a preference for living in a diverse neighborhood. Even those who took issue with the community’s diversity did so from the perspective of desiring more diversity in the neighborhood. The importance residents

placed on diversity was not done so in an attempt to recreate the diverse neighborhoods in which they had previously lived or grown up. In fact, most residents described their childhood or previous neighborhoods as relatively homogeneous or simply as “blah.” For instance, Kevin had fond memories of his childhood in the “white bread” town of Abilene, Texas, yet appreciated Mueller’s “diversification.” He enjoyed being able to take his kids to the park and see them “get to play with all kinds of different children.” Kate also grew up in what she describes as a uniformly middle class neighborhood but wanted something different for her family. Rick, who grew up in a white, working-class suburb of Dallas, expressed similar sentiments about not wanting to live in “a bubble” where everyone was wealthy and spoke English at home.

Muellerites often understood their preference for a diverse neighborhood in practical terms, particularly in the context of preparing their children for the “real world.” Linda, for instance, expressed feeling that diversity is “what’s best for the community” as well as local public schools. She explained her rationale:

Because the world is diverse, and to only expose yourself to small portion just doesn’t prepare you for the real world. Or it makes you think certain things don’t exist, or it doesn’t teach you the social skills that you need. Or it makes you spoiled and entitled.

Preparing children, as well as themselves, for participation in a globalized economy and diverse society was a common theme among Muellerites. Moreover, as Linda expresses above, there is a sense among Muellerites that living in a homogeneous neighborhood

may hamstring one's ability to be a responsible citizen by not exposing one to the realities of the world. As Jacob explained, living in a diverse community benefits "everyone." He continued: "we learn from each other. And, the more you are able to relate to people who are different from you, the more introspective you can be. It brings richness into your life."

Muellerites' sentiments seem to be at odds with what we know about neighborhood preference and residential segregation. Segregation remains a common pattern in the U.S. (Pager and Shepherd 2008), much of which can be accounted for by whites' racial preferences (Charles 2000) and discrimination in the housing search process (Fischer and Massey 2004). For whites, moreover, neighborhood integration—especially with blacks—tends to be associated with a sense of loss of status, safety, and order (Quillian and Pager 2001; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004). These trends would suggest that diverse neighborhoods remain less desirable, particularly for those who could afford to live elsewhere.

Nevertheless, experiences such as Cheryl's are common in Mueller. Cheryl and her partner, both white, bought their home for \$45k more than they had budgeted when the opportunity to live in Mueller presented itself. From the outset the "mixed community" made the neighborhood attractive, both because of the diversity itself and also because of the type of people they imagined diversity would attract. She explained: "if you live here you want to live in an urban area with people who are like you and different than you. It's like no one fell into—grew up in this neighborhood and are still

here and they hate it.” While Cheryl found some commonalities with her neighbors (such as people who want to be around diversity), she made it a point to highlight how individually “different” they each are:

It was so interesting—we did this one night with our street, we went down our street and just pointed out the different races, different ethnicities, different religions, and different types of careers. It was interesting to go around. We were like holy cow! Our street is full of very different people!

Cheryl’s account exemplifies how the majority of residents I spoke with experience diversity in their neighborhood. As they survey their community and the people in their neighborhood, residents tend to arrive at the conclusion that Mueller is the most diverse place they have ever lived.

Importantly, in every instance when Muellerites discussed diversity the implicit reference was to people with fewer resources or privileges. While Kate, for example, stressed the benefits of living in a diverse neighborhood so that her children could learn to “value what you have and want to be able to care about people who don’t have what you have,” she in the same breath asserts to not “want to just be surrounded by people in the same income level as me and higher.” One could imagine a diverse neighborhood populated by families wealthier than Kate’s where her daughters still learned to value possessions and care for others, perhaps by learning to identify and empathize with the less privileged. In Mueller, talk of diversity was always articulated from a position of privilege and part of an effort to enact a sense of *noblesse oblige*, a sense of responsibility

among the affluent for addressing social problems. In the contemporary cultural context, notions of diversity have become associated with civic mindedness and social justice. Muellerites tended to understand themselves and their community in contrast to those living in Austin's traditional wealthy suburbs, intentionally segregated communities that they did not associate with this type of civic concern. Privileging diversity and demanding acceptance of differences—regardless of what the objective measures of diversity in Mueller may suggest—is one way that Muellerites are able to understand and present themselves in an honorable light. Muellerites' exaltation of their neighborhood's diversity, therefore, should be understood in the context of their self-image of not living in a traditional wealthy suburb.

Muellerites' understanding of their community as diverse often creates a disjuncture between how they see themselves and how outsiders view their community. Sarah, for example, discussed tensions at the nearby local public elementary school between parents from neighboring communities and Mueller parents. She is dismayed at parents who portray Muellerites as “the haves” and non-Muellerites in adjacent neighborhoods as the “have-nots” at PTA meetings. Sarah feels the need to fight against stereotypes that nonresidents have of Mueller as a “gated community” or “conservative think-tank that is out to wipe out all the other smaller local Austin communities.” She has lost track of the number of conversations she has had with outsiders to make the point that “we're not that way, it's more diverse than you think. ... [We're] just crunchy people, granola people that have a new house.” Sarah, echoing the sentiment of most

residents I spoke to, describes the “diversity in terms of ethnicity” in Mueller as “pretty incredible” and “more diverse than I’ve experienced in other places in Austin.”

Damon likewise described his struggles to get his friends to stop making fun of him for living in Mueller. These friends, who Damon describes as “hipsters” and “cool,” jokingly refer to Mueller as “Pleasantville,” “Disney Town,” or generally make references to the neighborhood as sterile and artificial. Damon accepts that there is a kernel of truth in these characterizations given that Mueller is a planned community. However, he sees critiques of Mueller as “just for upper-middle class white people” as a mixture of exaggeration and misinformation. Damon’s defense of the neighborhood is couched in an affirmation of the neighborhood’s diversity. Mueller is “very diverse,” he argues, “ethnically and you know in terms of sexual orientation and ages.” What makes diversity the neighborhoods’ most redeeming quality, Damon explained, is that a diverse neighborhood gives him the “opportunity to do the things that are important for being a good person.” Even though he admits it “sounds very white,” he explains his perception of the neighborhood:

I do want a place that is multicultural and multiethnic. Where you walk around and you can interact with people of all different shapes, and sizes, etcetera. As I walk around the park in Mueller sometimes I’ll think to myself, gosh, I know I hear criticisms about not providing enough home owning opportunities for African Americans etcetera, but man when you walk around this park this is a

melting pot of people. You see people that come from outside the neighborhood, people from within the neighborhood, it's a United Colors of Benetton ad!

In this statement Damon emphasized both the neighborhood's diversity and the ease with which he is able to "walk around" and "interact with [different] people." The fact that diversity in Mueller does not detract from the "safe suburban family world"-feel of the community is equally important aspect of Damon's experiences in Mueller, yet one which he admittedly feels hesitant talking about compared to highlighting the diversity. He prefers to leave this aspect of the community out of discussions about Mueller's diversity because something about it feels to him like "thinly veiled racism."

Similar to Damon, some Mueller residents reported feeling that Mueller may not be as diverse as some describe it. During our interview Carol rhetorically asked herself: "Am I the only one [in Mueller] without a PhD?" Carol feels that by moving to Mueller she has "entered a socioeconomic world that I wasn't in before, so I do feel a little out of sorts personally and it leads me to again feel less comfortable in Mueller, because it's *so* white collar." She hopes that the neighborhood continues to diversify socioeconomically as she does not want to "feel like I live in a gated community!" After a recent dinner party Jill too felt uneasy about the people she was surrounding herself with in the neighborhood. While it was "a great dinner" Jill explains:

We left and I said to myself: Everybody was talking about their solar panels and their European vacations. And that freaked me out a little bit. It gave me a little



bit of anxiety to feel that I was surrounding myself only with people who had enough money to worry about solar panels and European vacations!

While Jill is friends with her neighbors and remains enthusiastic about the Mueller community she, like Carol, expresses concerns over the neighborhood's class homogeneity. In both cases there is a disjuncture between how they think about their community (as diverse and progressive) and their experiences in the community (as resembling an upper-middle class enclave).

In my experience, many of the visitors who make up the “melting pot” Damon describes likewise value the neighborhood because it feels safe and family friendly to them. Particularly on the weekends, an exceptionally diverse crowd of visitors spend time in the main park in Mueller. In my observations, at least half of these visitors are non-white. Hispanic, black, Asian, and white families regularly can be seen taking walks with their kids or dogs, fishing, picnicking, playing in the children's play areas or in pick-up soccer, football, or basketball games. Whenever possible I joined pick-up soccer games and allowed my daughter to gravitate towards new playmates, partly in order to strike up conversations with fellow visitors. In my conversations I learned that visitors lived in neighborhoods all around the city, often planning their day around their visit to Mueller. These visitors often talked about enjoying and feeling welcome in the parks, though on several occasions people shared wishing that they did not have to pay to visit the children's museum across the street (where patrons tend to be overwhelmingly white). I did not, however, witness the interactions between Mueller residents and visitors that

Damon described. These two groups seemed closed to outsiders: Muellerites were focused on their children or catching up with other Muellerites while visitors found it odd that a stranger such as myself would strike up a conversation with them. When I joined in the pick-up soccer games, for instance, there were always a few tense moments between myself and fellow players (who were overwhelmingly Latino and Spanish speaking) until they heard me speaking Spanish. Muellerites were overrepresented in organized activities in the parks, such as children's soccer camps and yoga, and tended to arrive and leave the parks in accordance with the activity's schedule.

Visitors, moreover, tended to stay outside of the residential part of the neighborhood, despite there being smaller public parks scattered throughout. On three occasions when I approached non-whites in the smaller parks to ask if they were residents of Mueller and interested in interviewing with me, visitors leaned in and, in a lower voice, told me that they did not live there. On those occasions I felt as though they were asking me for permission to be in the park. The vast majority of non-whites I encountered within the residential parts of the neighborhood were Asian, either Mueller residents or their extended family. In these residential areas, moreover, is where I witnessed—and where Muellerites described—most of their neighborly and communal interactions taking place. Specifically, Muellerites tend to gather in one-way alleyways behind their homes. Given the low traffic, these alleys tend to be where Muellerites preferred their children to gather and play. These alleys have no sidewalks and can be confusing to navigate and are

therefore not welcoming to outsiders; here the only people Muellerites would expect to see are the neighbors who live on their block or their guests.

## **DISCUSSION**

Over the past two decades, Austin, Texas has established itself as a creative city akin to San Francisco and Portland. Austin's vibrant street-level culture, cafes, sidewalk musicians, art galleries, and bistros have served as magnets for high-tech industry and workers. Meanwhile, however, inequalities have been exacerbated. In Austin gentrification has pushed low-income residents further away from the city center, even leading to a decrease in the city's African-American population—a unique demographic trend among rapidly growing U.S. cities (Tang 2014). These patterns seem to not square with Austin's reputation as a tolerant, progressive, and culturally dynamic city, raising important questions regarding how well liberal politics in reality dovetail with the concerns of African Americans and other minorities.

My interviews with residents of the Mueller neighborhood, many of whom were attracted to the city and neighborhood because of their “weirdness” and liberal, socially progressive values, highlighted how residents experience being at the epicenter of Austin's economic and demographic transformation. The residents I spoke with choose to live in Mueller because of the neighborhood's proximity to downtown and its new urbanist design. Because Mueller is an infill development built atop a decommissioned airport, residents also saw Mueller and as an opportunity to live near the central city while not defining themselves as gentrifiers. Mueller residents saw the neighborhood as

an opportunity to live in East Austin while not contributing to the “cutthroat mentality” of the gentrification happening in other parts of East Austin. They further distanced themselves from the gentrification in surrounding neighborhoods by highlighting that their movement in to the neighborhood had not pushed anyone out of their home. Residents also highlighted diversity and a strong sense of community as a defining characteristic of the neighborhood. Residents understood both of these as unique to Mueller and felt that having community has improved their quality of life. Muellerites also highlighted the diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, class and sexualities of their community, as well as the interactions the neighborhood facilitated with the diverse populations who visited the neighborhood. Residents expressed a preference for living in a diverse neighborhood as they felt that living among a diverse group of people better prepared them and their children for the “real world.” These experiences with diversity help to reaffirm their progressive self-understandings. These experiences, however, happen within a larger context of increasing residential displacement and inequality.

I cannot say whether Mueller is in fact more diverse than residents’ previous neighborhoods, or even if Mueller is diverse compared to other affluent neighborhoods in the city. The most recent 2010 census data suggests that Mueller is, at best, marginally more diverse than traditionally middle- and upper-middle class neighborhoods in Austin. As Figure 1 shows, neighborhoods immediately south, east, and north of Mueller show noticeably higher concentrations of black and Hispanic residents. Given that the pace of development in the neighborhood has only increased since 2010, it is possible that

diversity has increased in recent years. Based on my time in the neighborhood I am skeptical that residents of the neighborhood are considerably more diverse than other predominantly white middle- and upper-middle class neighborhoods in Austin.

Anecdotal evidence likewise suggests that diversity and race relations in Mueller experience many of the same difficulties as other neighborhoods. As reported on NPR's Cities Project in February of 2015 (Greene 2015), a Muellerite called the police to report a suspicious black man in the neighborhood. In my conversations Muellerites often expressed frustrations with property theft in the neighborhood, so calling the police to report suspicious activity or persons was a common occurrence. In this case, however, the black man turned out to be a fellow Muellerite who had dropped by to pick up a chair which the caller had posted as free for the first taker on an online neighborhood forum. While once they became aware of their mistake the police-calling resident called off the police and apologized profusely, this event triggered Muellerites to begin a series of conversations about race in the neighborhood. In line with how Muellerites I interviewed talked about diversity, these discussions on race seem to have been well received in the neighborhood. Also in line with sentiments expressed by my interviewees, several white residents profiled in the NPR story were surprised that this kind of racism could happen in their progressive, well-educated neighborhood. They expressed a collective sense of outrage, shock and sadness, agreeing that in general white people need to get to know more black people in Austin (Greene 1015). Despite how racially diverse Mueller

actually is, the Muellerites I interviewed overwhelmingly experienced their community as an exceptionally diverse space.

The findings of this article are limited by my exclusive focus on residents living within a new urbanist infill development. While these residents were able to draw upon their valuation of and lived experiences with diversity to reaffirm their liberal and progressive self-concepts, to what extent are more traditional gentrifiers able to draw on their own experiences with diversity? Additionally, research is needed to understand the experiences of long-term residents in gentrifying neighborhoods. Do these residents make similar distinctions between traditional gentrifiers and residents of neighborhoods such as Mueller? Future studies should also explore how long-term residents in gentrifying neighborhoods understand and experience diversity and community.

While the tolerance and progressiveness embraced by creative economy cities such as Austin appear to be at odds with the persistent inequalities and gentrification, this paper contributes to our understanding of how people living on this demographic frontier experience and resolve these tensions. The notion of community has been largely exempt from critical analysis, sometimes functioning to maintain hierarchical social orders (Collins 2010; Joseph 2002). Diversity discourses, having become part of American cultural and institutional life, similarly operated to obscure the sources and consequences of structural inequalities (Bell and Harmann 2007; Mayorga-Gallo 2014). In Austin and other creative cities inequalities have been exacerbated through the influx of high-tech workers and industry (Auyero 2015; Kneebone 2014; Tang and Ren 2014). The Mueller

residents I spoke to highlighted not only the sense of community they experienced in the neighborhood but the diversity of the neighborhood as well. This diversity and community, moreover, served to frame their neighborhood and their community as desirable, both in their individual lives and for the greater good of society. In doing so, residents were able to neutralize concerns over existing inequalities, thus facilitating the coexistence of inequality and progressive ideals.

Figure 1: Porches in Mueller opening onto sidewalks.





Figure 2: Porches in Mueller leading to communal gardens.



Figure 3: Shady sidewalks in Mueller.



Figure 4: Hidden alleys in Mueller.



Figure 5: Mueller Master Plan

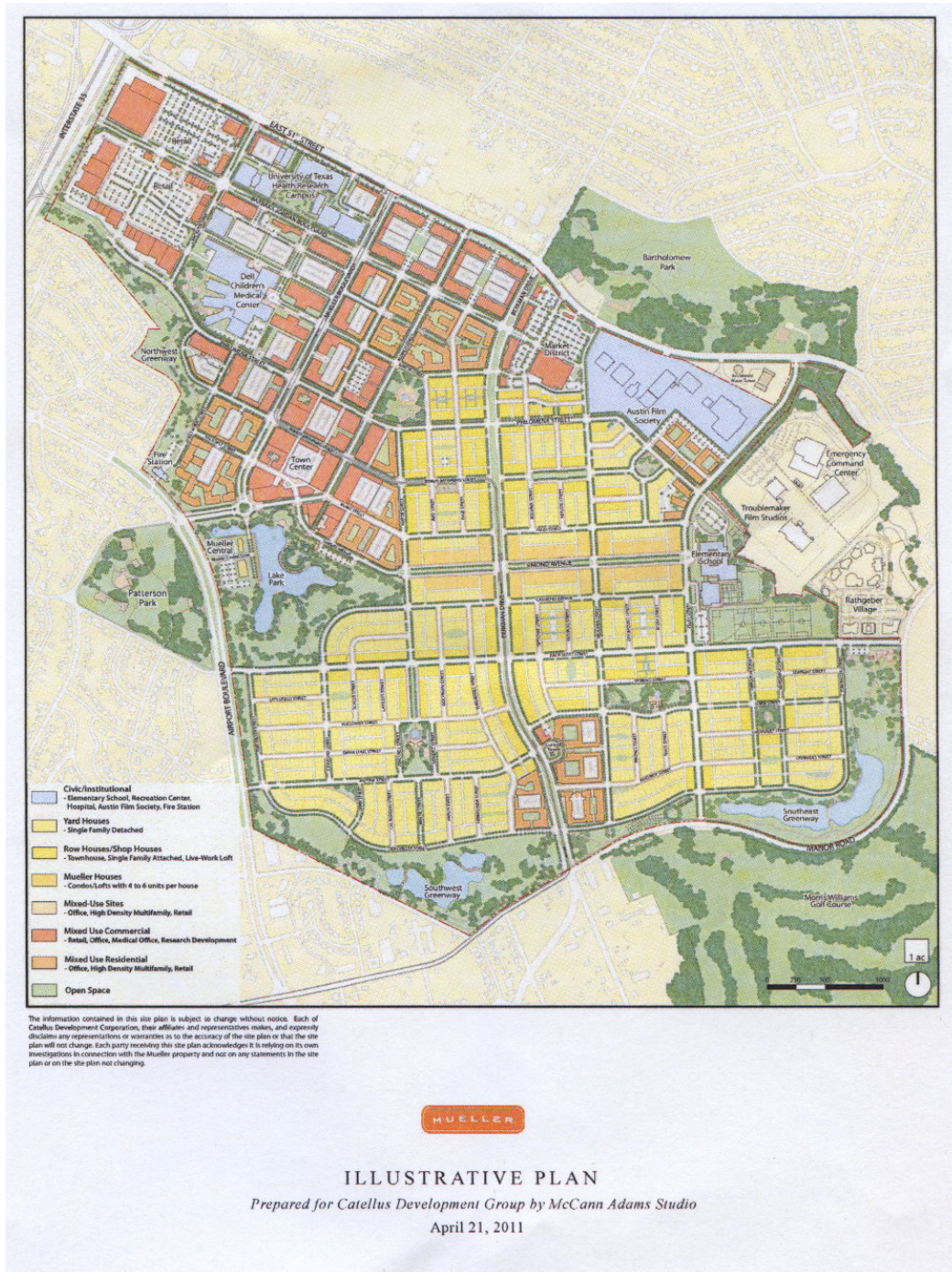
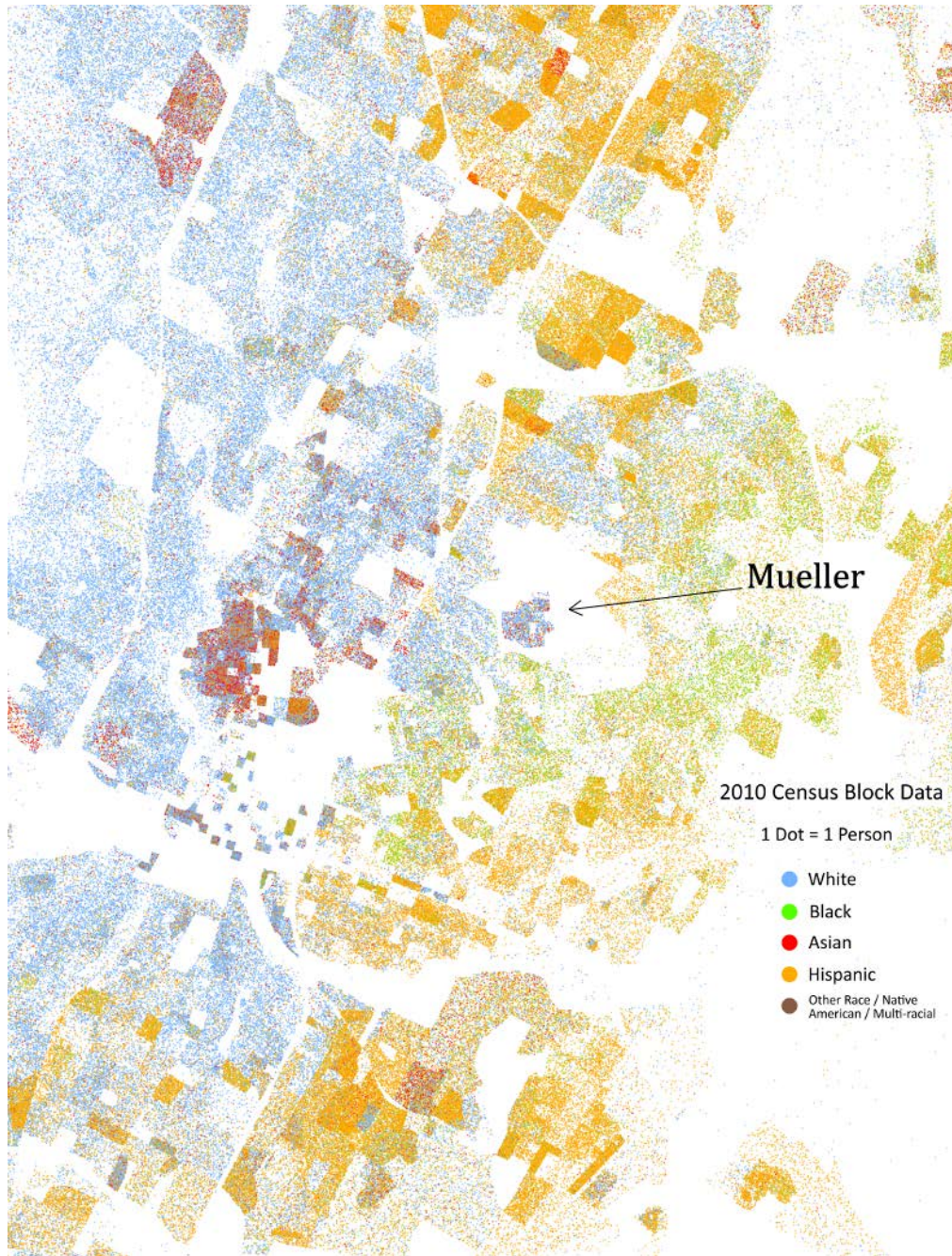


Figure 6: Austin Racial Dot Map



Source: Racial Dot Map. 2013. Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, The University of Virginia. (<http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/Racial-Dot-Map>)

## **Chapter Four: “I’d never get my kids that. What an awesome gift!”:**

### **Parenting, Consumerism, and Circuits of Commerce**

Family life is firmly enmeshed with consumer practices. From the neighborhoods families live in to birthday presents and the meals they eat, family life is inseparable from consumerism. While privileged in many ways, middle-class parents find themselves caught between competing edicts regarding the appropriate role of consumerism in their children’s lives. On one hand, parents to want to provide the best they can for their children, both in terms of material and social wellbeing (Pugh 2009). However, dominant discourses have long portrayed the market as harmful to children, compelling parents to shelter their children from exposure to commercial culture (Cross 2004; Jacobson 2004; Mintz 2006). Despite their best attempts at balancing children’s consumer desires and protecting children from the market, middle-class childhoods tend to be saturated with consumer goods—more so than their parent’s middle-class consumer norms would prescribe.

This article examines the consumer-parenting discourses and practices in a middle-class neighborhood in Austin, Texas. I focus on parents’ consumer ideals, the consumerism that they actually engage in, and contradictions between these. I explore how middle-class parents interpret and negotiate ideals regarding sheltering children from market influences; how parents talk about the consumerism that they do engage in; and the cultural work that parents engage in to draw distinctions between the types of consumerism that are acceptable for their families and those that are not. The overarching

question undergirding this research is: how do middle-class parents' understand themselves to be properly consuming and caring parents amongst their children's commodity-rich worlds?

In her study on children's consumer culture Allison Pugh (2009) found that middle-class parents of school-aged children engage in consumerism on their children's behalf in order to ensure children's ability to fit in among their peers. Pugh finds that while parents are disapproving of their children's consumer desires, few parents deny their children the goods they need to relate to other children. In the case of parents with school-aged children, then, children's social needs oblige middle-class parents to defy their values. Extending these findings, I investigate how parents with children too young to perceive their own social needs manage similar competing consumer-parenting discourses. Do parents of babies, toddlers, and pre-school aged children similarly transgress middle-class consumerist values? And if so, how can we make sense of their transgressions? And what can their experiences tell us about ethical consumerism more broadly?

#### **PARENTING THE COMMERCIAL CHILD**

Parents say that they want to provide the best they can for their children, both in terms of their emotional and material wellbeing. Parents, however, tend to be unaware of how their definitions of "the best" for their children are shaped by the norms of their social class (Lareau 2003; Pugh 2009). Over the course of the last century "good enough" parenting has become increasingly time- and resource-intensive. Middle class parenting

ideologies in particular—especially for mothers—are considerably more “intensive,” child-centered, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and expensive than ever before (Hays 1996).

In the early twentieth century children were expelled from the paid labor force and thus rendered “economically useless.” Parents, meanwhile, came to value children for the “priceless” emotional contributions their innocence and purity contribute to family life. Zelizer (1985) explains this shift as an outcome of parents’ understandings of children as “innocent” and “pure” and in need of protection from the corrupting influences of the market. As family life became increasingly child-centric, parents’ expenditures on children have become higher than ever before both in relative and absolute terms, particularly among middle- and upper-income parents (Lino 2013).

One way to understand the rising emotional and economic costs of parenting is to contextualize childhood within varying strategies that parents have employed over the last century to protect the sacred boundaries of childhood. In the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, notions of children as innately impulsive spendthrifts with unquenchable consumer desires circulated widely among the middle class (Jacobson 2008). In response, good parenting became equated with sheltering children from the potentially corrosive effects of mass culture and commercialism. For parenting experts of the time a lot was at stake in maintaining a careful balance between sheltering from the market while not becoming too child-centric. On one hand they worried that as families became increasingly smaller and child-centered, parents would lavish children with too much care



and affection, creating tyrannical, demanding, unmanageably spoiled children (Jacobson 2008). On the other hand, experts implored parents to provide children with child-specific toys and play spaces (e.g., art spaces and supplies, puppets, blocks, and educational toys) that would keep them absorbed in wholesome play at home, away from the streets. Children's classrooms, playrooms, and playgrounds were to be sheltered from the market's fads and indulgences (Jacobson 2004). Affluent parents often resolved these tensions by removing their children from the home and city altogether, thus giving rise to American summer camps and boarding schools (Paris 2008; Kahn 2012).

Middle-class parents in the early part of the twentieth century thus found themselves balancing imperatives to shelter children from the market while not becoming overly-protective and producing spoiled, tyrannical children. At stake for these parents was children who developed bad taste, lacked self-direction, and succumbed to the low-brow, mind-numbing thrills of mass culture. For example Jacobson (2004) highlights parents' and parenting experts' responses to the popularization of children's radio shows in the 1930s. Experts argued that advertisement-filled radio shows weakened children's morals by preying upon their gullible and suggestible minds. Parents were simultaneously warned, however, that without some exposure to money and the market children would never outgrow the base passions that animated children's fixation on consumer goods (2004: 201).

As popular understandings of childhood and the market changed so did the "sheltered childhood" ideal. In the post-war years, as people generally began to associate

the consumption of mass produced goods with both the private and public good (Cohen 2003), children's impulses and consumer desires likewise came to be seen as benign and even useful, allowing mothers entering the workforce to work their "second shift" while children occupied and entertained themselves (Jacobson 2004; Pugh 2005; Seiter 1993). These more lax approaches to sheltering, however, allowed marketers in the 1950s to begin bypassing parents by advertising goods such as sugared breakfast cereals and candies directly to children (Cross 1997). Parents and child interest groups mobilized to protect children from marketing, culminating in the Federal Trade Commission passing a wave of regulations designed to shelter children from "unfair" practices in the 1960s. These regulations were short lived, however, as a wave of deregulations in the 1970s and 1980s codified "children's rights" to consume, desire, and be informed (Cook 2000; Pertschuk 1982). These newfound "rights," moreover, exacerbated parents' concerns over marketers' adultification and sexualization of childhood (Cook and Kaiser 2004; MacPherson 2005)

To many contemporary observers, the challenge of sheltering children from the market while still providing a "good enough" childhood has become increasingly difficult. Annette Lareau (2003) describes contemporary middle-class parenting as "concerted cultivation," a time and resource dependent parenting style where "good" parents involve themselves in developing their children's interests and talents through participation in organized activities. Meanwhile, parents must also contend with the aggressive marketing that is often thought to have converted today's children into an

unhappy, brand-conscious, and entitled group (Schor 2005; Zukin 2005). In this context parents have developed new strategies such as simplicity circles, gift-less birthdays, and home schooling in an “anti-spoiling crusade” against the influence of commercial values (Jacobson 2008).

Other parents—specifically, mothers—engage in “precautionary consumption” to protect their children from potentially harmful industrialized food products (Mackendrick 2014) or refuse state-mandated vaccines for their children (Reich 2014) in defense of the “organic child,” an idealized notion of a “pure” child in need of sheltering from industrialized food and medicine (Cairns et al. 2013). Moreover, parents may also attempt to resolve the tension between providing and sheltering through participation in what Zelizer (2011) refers to as “circuits of commerce.” Zelizer (2004; 2011) defines “circuits of commerce” as a form of economic interactions in which members of a group establish shared meanings and moral understandings of the economic transactions that take place between members. Zelizer cites, for example, a group of Latina nannies in Los Angeles who meet regularly to exchange child and health care, food, companionship, and other services as an example of a “circuit of commerce.” Through these “circuits” nannies were able to create community and buffer themselves against the stigma and precarious job conditions associated with their profession (Armenta 2009). Within circuits consumer goods are exchanged within bounded, complex webs of meaning which may redefine children’s consumer goods in ways that address parents’ concerns. For

parents these strategies have the double effect of shielding children from the harmful effects of the market while modeling proper consumerism for children (Pugh 2009).

In this article I explore how middle-class parents think about the market's influence on their children and how this relates to their roles as parents. Middle-class parents tend to understand children as projects which need to be cultivated (Lareau 2003). Given children's increasingly commercialized environments, middle-class parents find themselves managing the competing demands of sheltering children from the market while still providing a "good enough" childhood. As I will show, parents employ creative strategies in order to provide their children with the material and cultural resources necessary for participation in middle-class cultural contexts while still shielding children from the market and modeling proper consumerism.

### **CONSUMER-PARENTING**

While middle-class parenting norms prioritize sheltering children from market influences over the consumer luxuries that middle-class families could ostensibly afford, research finds that in practice few parents are committed to raising their children in entirely commodity-free environments. In fact, most middle class children live in relatively commodity-rich environments (Auger and Devinney 2007; Eckhardt et al. 2010; Pugh 2009). Gary Cross (2004) and Allison Pugh (2009) offer the most comprehensive explanations for this contradiction of middle-class consumer-parenting. Cross (2004) accounts for this discrepancy by conceptualizing children as "valves" of adult desires. Since the early twentieth century, notions of childhood have operated as

ideological constructs delineating the boundaries between the nuclear family and public life. Where public life has been defined by its cold and calculating rationality, the nuclear family has been understood through a nostalgic quest for simplicity. Within the home, Cross (2004) argues, parents have privately embraced children's consumerism as it allowed parents to participate vicariously in the playful pleasures of childhood—pleasures which adults had learned to repress and control. Cross presents historical evidence of parents taking great pleasure in surprising a toddler with an ice cream cone, adventures in Disneyland, and Christmas and birthday gifts, for example. According to this argument, indulging children with a sense of novelty and wonder through consumer goods allows parents to momentarily escape the tedium and rationality of the market and technology (Cross 2004). In many ways Cross's (2004) analysis mirrors Parsons' (1970) analysis of the nuclear family which, he argued, functions to stabilize adult personalities by providing adults with the ability to act out the childish dimensions of their personalities in ways that counterbalanced with the stress of everyday adult life.

Allison Pugh (2009) similarly found that middle-class and affluent parents articulate critiques of consumerism in line with the "sheltered child" ideal. The parents in her study felt that excessive buying could result in spoiled, wasteful children. Restricting their consumerism was a means to teach children good shopping habits and to signal their worth as parents and consumers. Nevertheless, while affluent parents say they do not buy much for their children they describe patterns of substantial buying. Pugh (2009) explains the inconsistencies between parents' feelings and actions as a result of parents' concerns

for their children's social wellbeing. Pugh finds that children forge community around consumer goods, and that parents work hard to make sure that their children have the necessary resources to participate and "belong" in their social world—resources that often take the form of consumer goods. At times middle-class and affluent parents attempt to strategically withhold purchasing toys and games for their children, a practice she labels as "symbolic deprivation." Pugh (2009) explains that parents do this in an effort to balance their own consumer standards (wooden playthings and simple, noncommercial toys and games) with their children's yearnings. Specifically, parents in Pugh's study were discomforted by their children desiring "the wrong things" such as "junk" toys and violent games. This type of "cheap" consumption was "wrong" because it "failed to do the sort of distinction work that researchers have reported adult consumer practices seek" (2009: 86). Symbolic deprivation allowed parents to (partially) assent to children's consumer desires at arm's length—in effect preserving their own consumer self-identities while still prioritizing children's social lives. Yet, despite these strategies, parents "give in" to their children's desires more often than they would like, filling parents with dread, anxiety, and guilt (2009: 86).

These parental anxieties, for Pugh (2009; 2010), are a reflection of biases in scholarship and popular culture which overwhelmingly emphasize the role of consumer goods in reproducing inequality. Pugh attributes this tendency to the influence of Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1984), whose work on inequality has swayed scholars towards the assumption that people are always looking to move up or "get ahead." Bourdieu argued

that people draw on their readings of cultural capital, such as one's tastes in music, art, home décor, and film, to hierarchically classify and differentiate themselves from those lower than them in the class hierarchy. While tastes and dispositions are a product of one's upbringing within a given social setting, in practice these work to legitimize the social position of the dominant: their privilege appears to others (and to themselves) as an outcome of their innate superiority (Bourdieu 1984). Scholarship on culture and inequality has tended to begin from the Bourdieuan assumption that people's interests are to "get ahead," to make distinctions between themselves and those who are lower down in the social hierarchy, and to assert themselves as different and better. This consensus has blinded observers from those moments when consumer goods are deployed, not to differentiate from others, but to connect with them (Pugh 2010).

In Pugh's (2009) account, parents experience the consumer demands of children's social world as "alien invaders" insidiously channeling the influence of advertising and peer culture into the "fortress" of middle-class family life. For Cross (2004) adults balanced protecting children from the market while still using children's consumerism as an open "valve" to the wondrous world of consumerism. Like Pugh (2009) and Cross (2004), I explore how middle-class parents understand themselves as properly consuming and caring parents amid their children's commodity-rich worlds. This paper builds on their findings on consumer-parenting by exploring the experiences of parents with children too young to channel their social needs or peer-culture into family life. Specifically, I ask how parents of babies and toddlers think about and respond to

consumerism and consumer goods in their children's lives. By shifting the focus away from children's social world this paper highlights the role of parent's own values and beliefs in how they manage consumerism and parenting. Similarly, while Cross (2004) provides historical evidence for children's consumerism operating as "valves" of adult desires within the household, this study investigates the role of neighborhood and community contexts in how middle-class parents manage consumerism and parenting.

## **METHODS**

To investigate contemporary middle-class consumer-parenting I draw upon my research with parents in the Mueller neighborhood in Austin, Texas. During the Spring and Summer of 2014 I conducted 31 in-depth, semi structured interviews with Mueller parents whose oldest child was three years old or younger. Thus far much of the literature on consumerism and parenting has focused on the effects that marketing to children and children's consumer culture have on parent-child relationships (Cook 2000; Pugh 2009; Schor 2005; Seiter 1995). I focus on parents with pre-school aged children in order to highlight parent's own values and beliefs in how they negotiate and enacting proper consumer-parenting. Specially, I set out to investigate how parents construct themselves as properly consuming parents in the years before their children's social needs take precedence.

I situated my study in Mueller, a new urbanist neighborhood, as it provided an analytically useful bounded setting within which to study middle and upper-middle class consumer-parenting norms and habits. Mueller is a 700 acre public and privately funded



new urbanist infill development of the defunct Robert Mueller Regional Airport in central Austin, Texas. New urbanism is a movement in architecture and urban planning that advocates “traditional” American small-town design as a remedy for the social and environmental ills linked to suburban sprawl and inner-city decay. The movement is rooted in a conviction that improved urban planning—and consumers purchasing homes and shopping within these new neighborhoods—can promote social goals such as economic prosperity, ecological integrity, and social equality (Gibbs, Krueger and MacLeod 2013). New urbanist philosophy posits that if consumers agree to forfeit (some) traditional suburban amenities such as large private yards, square footage, and autonomy over design, not only will communities, businesses, and the environment benefit, but residents themselves will rediscover the individual benefits of pre-suburban lifestyles (Calthorpe 1993, Flint 2006).

When completed Mueller will comprise of 6,000 homes (25% of which are designated as “affordable housing”), 4 million square feet of office and retail space, and 140 acres of public open parks. Mueller was instantly praised by residents, businesses, and the City of Austin for its emphasis on “smart growth,” affordability, sustainability and diversity, even winning the 2001 Award of Excellence at the Congress for the New Urbanism. In recent years Mueller has been frequently featured on national media outlets such as New Tech City, PBS Newshour, NPR’s Cities Project, and Time Magazine for its leadership in environmental and “smart” initiatives. As a setting in which consumerism, and specifically consumer behavior which incorporates ethical concerns, the Mueller

neighborhood therefore provides an interesting case within which to study the ethical consumer decisions people make—individually as well as collectively—as parents.

In-depth interviews were chosen to illuminate how parents experience and negotiate consumer-parenting discourses in their own lives. While surveys have been used in the past to quantify “ethical” consumer behavior, often in order to compare levels of ethical consumerism between different groups (Micheletti et al 2004; Nielson and Paxton 2006), my goal was to understand the meaning making and cultural negotiations that parents engaged in while attempting to construct themselves as properly consuming parents. In-depth interviews allowed me to inquire about and probe into the “magnified moments” that cemented or challenged parents’ identities as good consumer-parents (Hochschild 2003), as well as the fantasies and fears that parents had about themselves and their children as consumers (Lamont and Swidler 2014). I located respondents through online community forums, during participant observation in the neighborhood, and through snowballing. Interviews gathered information on respondents’ experiences in living in the neighborhood and how they approached being good parents, consumers, and citizens.-

To recruit participants for this project I spent time in the parks, shops, the children’s museum, and attended community events. My then two year old daughter served as a crucial “wedge” in helping me gain access in the neighborhood. As Levey (2009) argues, bringing one’s children to the field can aid in facilitating relationships by providing immediately relevant and often relatable information about the researcher. As a

male seeking to gain access to people with young children I was concerned with being perceived as a pedophile or sexual predator.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when I contacted potential respondents whom I had not already met in person I made it a point to identify myself as a researcher *as well as* a parent who frequented the neighborhood with my daughter. By giving me access to parks, the children's museum, and other places where neighbors congregate my daughter facilitated efforts to build relationships with residents and gain a foothold into the neighborhood. In addition, I felt that being able to relate to parents as a parent—especially, as was the case in these interviews, given that our children were roughly the same age—made interviews more friendly, open, and informative. In fact, several respondents reported having agreed to the interview in part to meet fellow parents in the neighborhood (a number of respondents realized during the interview that I was not myself a resident of Mueller), and all interviewees expressed looking forward to meeting again in the capacity of parents in the parks or at the museum. Though she was critical for gaining access to respondents I never brought my child to the interviews.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted either in person or over the phone. All interviews were conducted by the author. The in-person interviews took place at coffee shops or restaurants within the Mueller neighborhood or in the respondent's homes or offices. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. The parents I interviewed were between 29 and 45 year of age. Twenty-one were female,

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<sup>4</sup> When it was revealed that none of the adolescent male skateboarders he was studying were his son(s), Petrone (2010) was often accused of being a pedophile. Philippe Bourgois (1995) similarly took his toddler to his field site to diffuse concerns about his relationship to law enforcement. For an insightful discussion of the role children play in qualitative research see Levey (2009).

ten were male. To the extent possible my sample mirrored the demographics of the neighborhood. As of the 2010 census the Mueller neighborhood (along with approximately 10 blocks south-east of the neighborhood that fall in to the same census tract) is approximately 70% white, 16% Hispanic, and 2% black (Census 2010). Five of my respondents were Latino/a, four were Asian (two of whom were non-native born), and the remaining 22 were white. Seven of the nine non-white respondents were in mixed-race relationships with white partners. Two respondents (both female) had same-sex partners; all of my interviewees lived in two-parent households.

Four home-owning respondents bought their home through Mueller's Affordable Homes program. Requirements for purchasing a home through the Affordable Homes program stipulate that a household's income must be lower than 80% of the median family income in Austin for families of the same size. A family of three, for example, must therefore have a household income of at most \$52,700 annually. Furthermore, mortgage payments for affordable homes cannot exceed 30% of a family's gross income, and net assets cannot exceed \$150,000 (excluding "gifts" that may be applied towards a down payment). Only one of four families in my sample who bought through the Affordable Homes program was actually living within this range. The rest supplemented their income by some combination of working off-the-books, regular financial assistance from family, and having received a raise or taken on a new job since applying to the affordable homes program. Most residents, including those in the Affordable Homes program, worked stable, white-collar jobs and held advanced degrees. Market-rate rents

for Mueller homes, while rare, average about \$2,700 per month for a 3 bedroom home. Average home prices during the first wave of sales in 2007 were in the high \$200Ks; today market-rate homes sell for an average of \$480K. These prices are somewhat lower compared to historically upper-middle class neighborhoods in Austin, yet higher than the immediately surrounding neighborhoods. The average income for respondents in market-rate homes was approximately \$160k per year, ranging between \$90k and about \$400k. The vast majority of interviewees were dual-income. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed following the qualitative analysis techniques described by Strauss (2003). I read and coded each transcript carefully using open coding techniques.

## **FINDINGS**

The following analysis explores three themes related to how middle-class parents balance the competing cultural edicts of sheltering their children from market influences while maintaining “good enough” childhoods for their children. These themes are: (1) *Sheltering*: Parents express a need to shelter children from market influences to prevent their children from becoming “spoiled,” which they define in terms of being flawed consumers. (2) *High Cost of Non-Consuming*: parents, including those claiming to not buy much for their children, describe patterns of substantial spending. Specifically, parents spent considerable amounts of money on specialized daycares, camps, travel, and athletic and educational activities. Parents classified this consumerism as distinct from the “cheap” consumerism associated with mass culture. (3) *Circuits*: The parents I spoke with often provided for their children through participation in “circuits of commerce.” In

this way parents were able to indulge their children with consumer goods without jeopardizing their consumer values.

### **Sheltering**

All of the parents in this study expressed a need to shelter children from market influences. As other studies on middle class consumer-parenting have shown, parents were concerned with their children becoming “spoiled” or developing irresponsible consumer habits from exposure to commercial goods (Mackendrick 2014; Pugh 2009; Reich 2014). One way that parents enacted this sheltering was by limiting their children’s consumption of processed foods. Similar to Cairns et al.’s (2013) respondents who felt responsible for preserving their children’s purity through the food choices they made, parents in my study were careful about what they fed their children.

Carol, a mother of a two year old, described a change in her food buying habits characteristic of the experiences of parents in my study. She described how since becoming a mother she has refused to buy meats anywhere other than the farmers market where she feels confident in their “better quality, less processed” options. “I spend more money,” Carol accepted, “but feel safer about giving it to my child.” Similarly, Laurie, a mother of three year old twins, frames her children’s food choices between store-bought organic and home-made food. Before having children Laurie “didn’t care about what I fed myself,” but since becoming a parent feeding her family “hormone-free chicken” and “organic, hormone and antibiotic free” milk has become vitally important. Christine extended this “precautionary consumption” (Mackendrick 2014) not only to the food her

family ate but also to any chemicals that her family may come in contact with. Even though, as she explains, “I know in the end it probably doesn’t make that much of a difference,” Christine nevertheless pays extra for organic body washes, shampoos, and even weed killers. While before having kids she would not think twice about using potentially harmful chemicals if weeds grew in their yard, her approach is now: “can we get some vinegar and water? How can we treat these weeds without using harsh pesticides?”

Some parents in my study, however, were not as resilient as Christine in maintaining certain consumer standards in the face of doubts over their necessity. While these parents had become less stringent in their food choices, they were equally aware of the cultural ideals to raise the “organic child” (Cairns et al. 2013). For example, Eloise “did it [the “organic child”] for a little bit but reached my limit.” She recalled being in the supermarket choosing a sippy cup for her son and feeling tense about others’ “observation of whether you buy plastic for your kid to drink out of, or aluminum, or stainless steel.” Fed up with feeling that her consumer and mothering decisions were being watched over, she bought both a plastic and aluminum cup. “I do feel concern about giving [my son] something out of the plastic cup,” she explained, “but I’ve opted for plastic in certain situations.” Similarly, Sun and her husband Ming framed their relatively lax standards in how they fed their child as a response to a realization they came to about 6 months into parenthood. They decided that they should treat their “first child like a second child.” Unlike first time parents who “go out and buy them [children]

everything *right*,” Sun and Ming grew exhausted by the demands of feeding the “organic child” and made a conscious effort to worry less. Sun and Ming drew on shared understanding of how a presumably experienced and knowledgeable second-time parent would shop for their children to guide the choices they made in feeding their child. “With a second child,” Sun explained, “you just pay way less attention and you care way less.” Parents in this study felt that part of their jobs as good parents was to shelter their young children from unsafe food or chemicals. However, some parents were not able or willing to live up to the ideal of a perfectly sheltered childhood, and in these cases drew on alternative moral discourses to justify their consumer choices.

A second way that parents in my study attempted to shelter their children from commercial culture was by limiting the amount of children’s consumer goods. One parent bluntly expressed a shared sentiment among parents in this study: “we just don’t believe in giving [our kids] a ton of things.” In fact, parents feel uneasy about what their children already have. Elizabeth, for instance, describes her concerns “as an ADD [attention deficit disorder] thing.” She worries that because her daughter has so many toys she will have “too many distractions.” For Elizabeth having only “two or three things” would be better for her daughter as it would “allow her to be more creative, imaginative [in her] play.”

Kevin likewise feels that excessive materialism can be “overwhelming” for a child’s brain. As he explains, instead of sitting in a room full of toys “I would love for them to go play in the park every day and just focus and let their mind work and create



their own games and stories.” In a view that Elizabeth and Kevin share with many of the parents I interviewed, children’s consumer goods are perceived to thwart their children’s creative potential.

Parents also worry that having too much will “spoil” their children. Carol for example describes how she organizes charity fundraisers in place of presents for her daughter’s birthday parties. “I do think she has enough,” Carol explained, and “she doesn’t play with what she has—it’s about her not getting spoiled.” Nora similarly does not want to create a situation where her children “feel like they deserve any toy they want.” She contrasts her approach to parents who use toys as rewards “just because they got themselves dressed in the morning,” a pattern she interprets as a regrettable symptom of “our very market driven culture.” Similarly, even though he understands that at two years old he is too young to understand, it is important for Christian that his son develop an understanding about “how good he has it compared to a lot of people.” Christian has ambivalent feelings about his family’s economic success as he dreads raising his son “in a situation where it looks like we have money to spend without earning it.” While he feels it is great that, from his son’s perspective, food and toys just appear in front of him, Christian says that he and his wife work hard “to instill the same values that we were raised with, of hard work and being grateful for things that you have.” Another mother explained that if her kids had too much “they wouldn’t learn to appreciate it, or they would expect to have whatever they wanted whenever they want.” “And then,” she added, “they’ll grow up and become Anthropology professors and realize that it doesn’t

work like that!” What the parents I interviewed fear is that excessive materialism will hinder their ability to raise responsible, self-sufficient consumers endowed with the proper work ethic. As Adam pondered, “are you giving your kids the right tools to go out into the real world? Or are we going to have a son who’s 20 years old and can’t pay his rent and is calling mom and dad asking for money?”

Parents in this study want and can afford to provide their children with comfortable childhoods. As did parents in Jacobson (2004) and Pugh’s (2009) studies, Mueller parents understand the market as harmful to their children. This harm—which, as Adam illustrates, might not become apparent until 18 years later—presented itself either in terms of harmful chemicals and processed foods, or as “market driven culture” stymieing children from learning values such as hard work, responsibility, and self-sufficiency. However, Mueller parents did not talk about taking pleasures in consumerism on behalf of their children, as Jacobson (2004) suggests. Instead, parents talked about sheltering their children with an earnest sense of urgency. Even when parents’ consumerism did veer from “organic child” (Cairns et al. 2013) ideal they did so out of irritation or for convenience, not childish pleasures. Nevertheless, like the middle-class and affluent parents in Pugh’s (2009) study, children in Mueller lived commodity-rich lives, and their parents engaged in considerable amounts of consumerism on their behalf. The following sections will discuss how Muellerites managed these tensions.

## **The High Cost of Non-Consuming**

In my interviews there were rare instances of parents purchasing goods for their children which they considered beyond their usual boundaries. One mom described herself as a “sucker” for visiting the dollar store with her daughter in search of inexpensive Disney merchandise. A father bought his son a \$300 bike for his third birthday—during our interview he wondered aloud: “Dang, why did I spend \$300 on a toddler’s bike?” Instances of this type of consumerism for children were unusual. Nevertheless, every parent I spoke to described patterns of substantial spending. Specifically, while parents felt discomfort around buying their children “stuff” (or, as some parents referred to children’s consumer goods, “crap”) this uneasiness was entirely absent from their talk of the spending they did on “activities” or “experiences” for their children, such as specialized daycares, camps, travel, and athletic and educational activities. While—these “experiences” required substantial spending, parents work to reframe these as non-threatening by classifying this consumerism as distinct from the “cheap” consumerism associated with the masses.

Travel was a common and expensive theme in my interviews. Charlotte’s daughter is a few months from turning four. Their first trip together was to visit the rainforest in Costa Rica when her daughter was 18 months. Since then they have vacationed in Washington D.C., Florida, and have their first family trip to Europe planned for next summer. Still, if there is anything Charlotte wishes she could provide for her daughter it would be more travel so that she could “see more of the world.” Rose

similarly delights in being able to take her three year old to New Jersey and Chicago every year to visit her grandparents. While visiting grandparents is the premise behind these trips, Rose and her husband strive to maximize these experiences. In Chicago, for example, Rose does not hesitate taking her child “to all the museums” regardless of how “ridiculously expensive” they are. “I 100% do that,” she explains, “because it is an experience they wouldn’t get elsewhere. To see the dinosaur zoo—that’s an experience! I have no problem spending money on that.” Rose is looking forward to when her son is old enough for longer road trips to places like the Grand Canyon and Big Bend National Park.

In addition to travel, parents in this study also regularly spent large sums on organized activities for their children. Annette Lareau’s (2003) work on social class and parenting has documented the association between middle-class family life and organized leisure activities. In their class-specific understandings of “good” parenting, middle-class parents use organized activities as a means to cultivate their children’s interests and talents. While children in Lareau’s study were between eight and nine years old, the pattern of parents organizing children’s leisure time around organized activities was evident—be it to a considerably lesser extent—in the lives of the pre-school aged children in this study. For instance, when Christine realized that her daughter liked to draw she went out and bought “like a million coloring books” in an effort to cultivate that talent. Moreover, although her daughter “just turned three” she nevertheless already spends her days in a relatively expensive daycare where she “has yoga and Spanish” in

addition to the Chinese classes and swim school she does on the weekends. Christine acknowledges the wonderful “opportunities and experiences” available to her family, yet makes it clear that she and her husband have “worked hard to focus more on [the opportunities and experiences] than the material stuff.”

Paid organized activities such as the ones Christine’s daughter attend were common among the parents I interviewed. For example, a few months before her daughter turned two Penny enrolled her in music classes. The monthly membership fees for these classes were about \$85 per month. From Penny’s perspective the classes were a failure; her daughter was completely uninterested in the instruments and too shy to interact with the other children. Penny’s hope was that her daughter would become interested in music and learn to sing and “keep a beat,” as she had heard of other babies her age being able to do. “She’s not very disciplined,” Penny explained, “and she’s not that social.” Still, Penny insists that “It must be useful to know these [musical] things, right? I just imagine that the music is good for her brain in some way.”

Similarly, on one level Sarah understood that her daughter was going to be “fine.” “I’ve read *Freakonomics*, and we have lots of books in the house” she stated, acknowledging the correlation *Freakonomics* highlights between number of books in the home and children’s long-term wellbeing. Yet Sarah worried that her daughter, who had not yet turned three, was not getting enough of an education from her daycare providers. “Sometimes I do worry,” she admitted, “since I’m not giving [my daughter] Mandarin lessons like other parents—I’m not doing bilingual education.” Sarah worries that she,

her husband, and her daughter's daycare teachers were not doing enough to assure her daughter would be able to "compete with her privileged cohorts who are getting a lot of attention." Therefore, Sarah became a member of the YMCA so that her daughter could begin attending gymnastics and swimming lessons there and enrolled her in a local soccer league. Like Penny's music classes, soccer was a disappointment. Sarah described soccer for three-year-olds as "kind of like herding cats" and did not feel her daughter was receiving the individualized attention that would justify the \$135 per term price tag. Nevertheless, when we last spoke Carol was looking forward to swimming and gymnastics and planning on waiting a few years before signing up for soccer again. Other parents frequently spoke of enrolling their children in summer camps designed to teach children about art, nature, or theater.

The previous section showed parents expressing discomfort about buying their children "stuff." In this section I showed that parents did not express the same uneasiness when discussing spending large sums of money on "activities" or "experiences" for their children, such as specialized daycares, camps, and athletic and educational activities. As much as Parents' spent on these activities they never questioned whether this might spoil their children, or whether too many activities would undermine the children's personal development. Even spending on travel to visit family was couched in terms of giving children an opportunity to "see the world." This supports Pugh's (2009) findings regarding parents substantial spending. Unlike Pugh (2009), however, Mueller parents were not driven by concerns over their children's social wellbeing. Instead, Mueller

parents drew on their own values and beliefs about proper consumerism to consume for their children. In fact, children's own interests and propensities were virtually absent from parent's accounts. Often parents were disillusioned with these activities as soccer seemed to devolve into "herding cats" and music classes did not turn out as expected. Nevertheless, parents did not question the centrality of paying for these types of activities for "good" parenting. Penny justified the failed music classes in terms of being "good for her [daughter's] brain in some way," and Sarah was still hopeful that her daughter would one day take to gymnastics. These parenting consumer-practices can be understood as elements of middle-class parenting norms or "concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2003). Moreover, these practices can also be interpreted as valves—not for parents to momentarily experience childish pleasure (Cross 2004), but as valves for children's consumerism to momentarily abide by parent's consumer ideals. As the following section will discuss, Mueller children are richer in commodities than their parents' talk would suggest.

### **Circuits of Commerce**

Despite their parents' sincere attempts to shelter children from the market, all of the children in my study lived relatively comfortable, commodity-filled lives. During interviews parents often grumbled about children's toys taking over their living spaces and described strategies to minimize their children's protests against donating toys they no longer play with. The homes I visited confirmed these stories; I conducted interviews in living rooms which had been converted into children's play areas, played with one

respondents' child in an elaborate arts and crafts station, and watched as an interviewee helped her toddler organize a 12 piece fairy dress collection. How do parents manage sheltering their children in such commodity-rich environments?

Through my interviews I found that parents engage in what Zelizer (2011) calls “circuits of commerce” with their friends and family. Through these circuits parents were able to provide for their children with commodity-rich childhoods while still defining their consumerism in non-market terms. Within these circuits, parents exchanged a wealth of children’s toys and clothes which allowed parents to provide their children these goods without having to turn to the market for them—at least for their own children. Without exception respondents highlighted the centrality of gifts and hand-me-down clothing and toys in their children’s lives and framed these goods as different from normal commodities.

Christine’s experience with her kids’ *Frozen* DVD is illustrative of how these “circuits of commerce” operate. Her daughter received a *Frozen* DVD as a gift from Christine’s friend, Kathy. Christine herself would not have bought her own children the DVD because, as she explained, that would feel “subversive” to their social values. Given that she could have downloaded or streamed the movie, the extra packaging that the DVD required felt unnecessary and in conflict with her environmentalism. Interestingly, Kathy had similarly expressed discomfort with the purchase, explaining to Christine that a different friend had gifted Kathy’s child a *Frozen* Blue-Ray/DVD combo for his birthday. The DVD Kathy gifted Christine was part of that combo. Christine was grateful for the



gift, in part because she knew that simply purchasing the DVD would not have been palatable given her consumer standards. Nevertheless, given that the DVD has entered into her “circuit of commerce” as a gift for a “special event” (Kathy’s child’s birthday), and given that the DVD was exchanged as a gift between friends, Christine felt perfectly happy about her children having a *Frozen* DVD. For the parents in my study, consumer goods came to be deemed acceptable and appropriate through processes similar to this, including purchases that parents would not have made given their own attitudes regarding consumerism.

Linda likewise explained how she regularly participated in a similar circuit. Because many of her friends and family have children, her kids receive “a lot of hand-me-downs” and gifts. She describes her daughter as “well stocked with toys” even though she had “never felt compelled to give things.” Sun estimated that “at least half” of her kids’ belongings were acquired as gifts of hand-me-downs. She pointed out how her mother-in-law has taken it upon herself to buy shoes for her daughter. “It’s her thing and I’ve let her do that,” she explains, even if she did not feel that her daughter was in need of new shoes. For Sun these transactions do not represent the encroachment of the commercial world into her family life. Instead she frames it as something done within and “for family.” She does not see her mother-in-law’s behavior as motivated “purely based on consumer needs” but as a way to build a “personal relationship with us.” What Sun does not worry about, however, is her daughter being inundated with shoes or other

goods. Just as people have done for her, she has a network of friends and family ready to accept her daughter's used shoes and clothing.

Alex described a similar situation in her home. "When Christmas time comes around all the kids have their new toys," she explains, "but we err on the side of not doing a lot." For Alex "not doing a lot" does not mean that her kids do not receive gifts. She recalls the most recent Christmas when her daughter got a scooter but, she clarified, "it was a hand-me-down from my niece." Alex is clear about her family's ability to afford new goods for their children. "Other people with incomes similar to ours," she explains, "can be driving a brand new Mercedes." Nevertheless, for Alex it is important to have good "spending habits" and for her that her children "learn this lifestyle." Like other parents in this study Alex felt that she did not want her family be concerned with "stuff" and understood herself as someone who set limits on their family's consumerism accordingly. Again, however, Alex's children were not lacking in toys. For example, her family has a tree house that takes up the majority of their living room. "It's got a slide and stairs and they play on it," she explains, "and I love it!" While it is not something that she would have considered buying for her own children, like so many of her kid's possessions the tree house too was a hand-me-down. I asked Alex if she felt any tension between the tree house in the living room and the consumer "lifestyle" she wants to teach her children. "That's funny," she replied, "but no, that [the tree house] we didn't buy, that was a gift!" As she attempted to explain her logic to me she elaborated on the dynamism of her "circuit of commerce":

We just don't buy a lot of things. Most of my clothes are hand-me-downs from either my sister or neighbors. My daughter is really small so our neighbor is like "Oh, we had the same problem; here, [have our small clothes]." I have another neighbor who wants to give us stuff. Our other neighbors just had a girl so we're giving them stuff. We do borrow a lot of stuff. We're borrowing a balance bike right now because [daughter] is learning how to ride a bike. So we don't buy a lot of clothes. We don't buy a lot of stuff.

Alex, like all parents in my study, works to protect her children from market influences while teaching them proper consumerism by not buying "a lot of stuff." Instead, for the parents and children in my study, much of what they consume is safely acquired through "circuits of commerce."

Often even commodities that go against parents' norms are rendered harmless through these circuits. When I spoke with Sarah, for instance, her cousin had recently gifted her children "this little inflatable donkey that you can bounce on," which she contemplated being "about the most extravagant thing that anyone has bought my children." Regarding the donkey, she explained: "I would have never bought that for my children! Do they actually need it? No! They have tons of things; we do things with them that are fun. Oh I'd never get my kids that [donkey]." Even Sarah's nephews were taken aback, asking their mother why she had not bought them an inflatable donkey. Nevertheless, Sarah was delighted with the gift: "It's fun. It was cute. I was just like, that

is a really sweet thing to get them. I told my cousin “that’s awesome. What an awesome gift!”

Despite the “extravagance” of the donkey and Sarah’s assertion that she would “never get my kids that,” the meanings that the donkey as a gift from a member of her “circuit of commerce” held for her—as “cute” and “sweet”—transformed the donkey from a potentially frivolous and indulgent commodity to a “fun,” even potentially educational (“it teaches them bouncing”) toy. This transformation was immediately obvious to both Sarah and her cousin who, even after gifting Sarah the donkey, still felt that she would not buy her own children an inflatable donkey.

Muellerites resolve the tension between providing and sheltering through participation in what Zelizer (2011) refers to as “circuits of commerce.” A myriad of consumer goods pass through the circuits discussed here. What these goods have in common is that by having been exchanged through these circuits a DVD, an unnecessary new pair of shoes, or tree house for the living room can be transformed for parents from “junk,” “cheap,” or “wrong” things into fun, educational, and emotionally meaningful objects. Given the ubiquity of these circuits in Mueller parents’ social worlds, members of these circuits engaged in exchanges that produced commodity-rich environments for children without violating parent’s anti-consumerist values and beliefs. Whereas in Pugh’s (2009) study children’s social need for belonging accounted for what parents consider excesses in consumerism, this case suggests that parent’s own social world can be the source of the very consumerism which they talk about wanting to avoid.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper explored how middle-class parents understand themselves to be properly consuming and caring parents amid their children's commodity-rich worlds. Middle-class and affluent parents balance their desire to provide their children with the best possible childhood with concerns over their children having "too much" or the "wrong things." These are parents with the resources to provide their children with ample material comforts, yet they believe that giving in to children's consumer desires may spoil and teach them poor consumer habits. Given children's already commodity rich worlds (Pugh 2009) and the increasingly aggressive marketing techniques which bypass parents and sell directly to children (Schor 2004; Zukin 2004), maintaining that balance would seem a losing contest for parents.

My findings provide insight into how middle-class parents manage the contradiction between the cultural edicts which stress sheltering children from the corrupting influence of the market while still providing their children with comfortable, edifying childhoods. In my interviews with Muellerites I found, as Pugh (2009) did in her study, that even parents who claim not to buy much for their children nevertheless describe patterns of substantial spending on their children. Unlike Pugh, I locate the sources of these contradictory beliefs and practices not in the social demands of childhood but in the how parents negotiate and understand different types of consumerism in their lives. I found that parents employed two strategies to resolve the ideological tension which their children's commodity-rich worlds created for them. First,

parents differentiated between spending on “cheap” and “mind-numbing” mass produced goods (Paris 2010) and the monies they spent on what they described as “experiences,” such as specialized daycares, camps, travel, and athletic and educational activities. While these services and activities were often major sources of parental expenditures, parents did not interpret these purchases as a threat to their children’s wellbeing.

The second strategy employed by parents involved participation in what Zelizer (2008) calls “circuits of commerce.” Parents in my study accumulated significant amounts of consumer goods for their children, much of which was acquired through participation in these “circuits of commerce.” Through these “circuits” parents were able to indulge their children with consumer goods without jeopardizing their consumer-values. By obtaining goods (e.g., hand-me-downs and gifts from family and friends) through circuits instead of the open market parents were able to redefine the meanings these commodities had for their families in ways that did not challenge their middle-class consumer-values. In this analysis, therefore, parents provide their children with commodity-rich environments not because their children’s social worlds necessitate it, but because parent’s norms of gift-giving and hand-me-downs encourage commodity-rich childhoods. To understand children’s consumer-environments, therefore, requires looking beyond children’s function within the family unit to appreciate the roles played by fellow parents, friends, family, and community members.

This study is limited because it is based on the experiences of mostly white, middle-class and affluent parents living in a unique neighborhood. Additional research is

needed to explore whether the practices described here are as prevalent among other middle-class populations, and whether these practices are unique to middle-class and affluent consumers. In their research on mothers' preferences for feeding their children organic food, Cairns and colleagues (2013) highlight that poor mothers too incorporate ethical food discourses into their child-feeding decisions yet face unique constraints when doing so. What unique constraints might poor and working class people face to participating in "circuits of commerce"? Also, to what extent are these strategies unique to parents? Are there other areas in people's consumerism where people employ similar strategies for eliding moral concerns in their consumerism?

While this paper deals specifically with parents and parenting, the questions addressed speak to larger issues about notions of individual and collective wellbeing in contemporary society. Today, perceptions of philanthropy and social justice have become entangled with notions of proper consumerism. Throughout U.S. history popular discourses have linked consumption to the greater good. Today, neoliberal consumer discourses propose that the greater good can be achieved if consumers take their societal and environmental concerns into account as they fulfill their needs, wants, and desires in the marketplace. Corporations are expected to play a role in promoting the greater good, too. In order to attract and retain customers, neoliberal consumer discourses suggest, corporations should engage in philanthropic and corporate social responsibility measures which support consumers' concerns (Cabrera and Williams 2014). This is evidenced, for example, by the ubiquity of "pink ribbons" (King 2008), cause-related marketing

(Einstein 2012), and advertisements which increasingly encourage individuals to do their part in promoting the social good by spending their money “ethically.” Social and political organizations, moreover, have increasingly—often enthusiastically—embraced the market as a medium for cultivating solidarity, community, and affecting social change (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). These discourses tend to hinge on assumptions that affluent consumers will opt to sacrifice some amount of capital or comfort in order to engage in “ethical” consumerism. By showing how privileged middle-class and affluent consumers are able to define which aspects of their consumerism are exempt from the ethical considerations or given specialized meanings this paper adds a layer of complexity to our understanding of ethical consumerism. By highlighting the creative ways that parents understand and negotiate ethical or moral consumer discourses in their daily lives, these findings should encourage future research to look beyond whether people consume ethically or not to understand the cultural work that people engage in to define the ethical.



## Chapter Five: Conclusion

In February of 2015 the Mueller neighborhood was profiled in a two-part episode aired on *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. Part of NPR's Cities Project, the first episode discussed the neighborhood's new urbanist principles—how, when done right, urban design can promote environmental sustainability, physical health, and create “meaningful community.” Mueller, it seemed, had gotten it right. The neighborhood had it all: a progressive, welcoming community, beautiful parks, electric cars, solar panels, green buildings, walkability and native landscaping. If one were to raise any criticism of Mueller, the piece suggested, it would be that the neighborhood is too quaint, too utopic.

This episode was, however, just the first act. As in all good storytelling then came the arc: the second part of the series introduced listeners to black residents who did not always feel welcome in the neighborhood. These Muellerites had been assumed by their neighbors to be visitors, they had been followed, photographed, and on at least one occasion had the police called on them for “trespassing.” In the episode, white residents expressed being troubled by these events. Neighbors organized meetings to discuss race; they seemed determined to end racism in their neighborhood. The curtain, however, had been pulled back. Mueller could no longer be that quaint, utopic neighborhood from the first episode. The series closed with a discussion of demographic trends in Austin and a general statement about racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Listeners are left to resolve the story on their own: Is Mueller a better neighborhood? Or is it all just window dressing? Should

the rest of us strive to be more like Mueller? Is Mueller doing something good for society?

My sense is that most of the Muellerites who I talked to would agree that, though far from perfect, they are nevertheless trying to be good and do good. In the Introduction I argued that many of the institutions through which Americans have traditionally defined themselves as good people have been eroded, replaced, or transformed. In the three chapters that followed I attempted to demonstrate that what Muellerites share with each other—and, I suspect, with many others—is a striving to present themselves as honorable people through how they spend their money. Muellerites bought homes in the neighborhood because they did not want to (directly) participate in the gentrification of east Austin; they organize charity donations in place of gifts at their children’s birthday parties; they buy locally sourced, pesticide free produce; more of their cars “run on sunshine” than in any other neighborhood in the country—possibly the world; and they try their best on a day-to-day basis to be good consumer role-models for their children. Muellerites see themselves, like Kate shared, as “good people.”

Yet this is only part of the story. As Muellerites find ways to see themselves as moral they do so within a social context. For instance, as a predominantly white, middle- and upper-class neighborhood in east Austin, Mueller is arguably the epicenter of major economic and demographic transformations in Austin. As the city has established itself among the nation’s premier “creative” cities, a growing population of high-tech and knowledge-industry workers is pushing low-income, Latino, and black residents further

from the city center. While gentrification of urban inner-cores is happening across the country, Austin is unique in that it is the only rapidly growing U.S. city with a decreasing African-American population (Tang and Ren 2014). This led me to ask, how do Muellerites' experience the gentrification going on around them?

I found that Muellerites embrace Austin's "weirdness" and espouse liberal, socially progressive values. However, these values are able to coexist with gentrification and persistent inequalities in surrounding neighborhoods. Muellerites were generally attracted to the neighborhood because they saw Mueller as an opportunity to live near downtown without becoming east Austin gentrifiers—at least in the conventional ways people understand gentrification. Moreover, Mueller provided residents an opportunity to live in what they understood as a diverse neighborhood with a strong sense of community. Previous research has found that diversity discourse (or ideology) has become part of American cultural and institutional life (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Embracing diversity—however underdeveloped or contradictory people's understanding of diversity is—is a way that people associate themselves with civic mindedness and social justice causes (Mayorga-Gallo 2014). Muellerites recognize their neighborhood as exceptionally diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, class and sexualities—a diversity which they embrace and celebrate. They explain that living in a diverse neighborhood was beneficial in a number of ways. First, they say that the neighborhood's diversity enriches their day-to-day and made the neighborhood more interesting given that they are able to regularly interact with people who are different to them. Moreover, they feel that the

neighborhood's diversity better prepares them and their children for participation in the "real," increasingly diverse, multicultural world. They feel confident that growing up in a diverse neighborhood benefits their children by increasing their social, educational, and professional opportunities. Furthermore, living among likeminded people who share similar values also allows Muellerites to develop a strong sense of community with their neighbors.

This dissertation advances our understanding of the lived experiences of gentrification. Gentrifiers are often drawn to the cafes, galleries, and vibrant, tolerant, and progressive culture in urban areas such as Austin (Florida 2004; Zukin 1989). While the values embraced by gentrifiers appear to be at odds with persistent inequalities and gentrification, this dissertation showed how people living on Austin's demographic frontier experience and resolve these tensions. In the case of Mueller, moving to an infield development allows them to ideologically distance themselves from traditional gentrifiers. Meanwhile, their experiences with community and diversity work to reaffirm their progressive self-understandings. Drawing on popular diversity discourses Muellerites frame their neighborhood and community in an honorable and desirable light—both for them individually and for the greater good—thus neutralizing concerns over inequalities and facilitating the coexistence of progressive ideals and inequality. I arrive at these conclusions having examined what Muellerites said to me during our interviews. My embodiment as a Latino male may have influenced Muellerites talk about issues related to race and diversity in ways that do not authentically represent their views

in other contexts. Patterns in their interviews nevertheless provide important insight into how they think about and experience these themes.

While Muellerites are generally able to resolve the conflicts between their values and gentrification for themselves, the underlying tensions remain. As scholars have noted, the type of “happy” diversity talk Muellerites engage in when discussing diversity has largely replaced civil rights and affirmative action frameworks for understanding and addressing inequalities. These discourses are argued to function as euphemisms that obscure the sources and consequences inequalities (Mayorga-Gallo 2014). In the case of Mueller I have shown how people living on the demographic frontier of a gentrifying city draw on ideological understandings of community and diversity in ways that allow them to resolve the tensions between their values and the realities surrounding them.

In Chapter 4 I discussed how Muellerites likewise strive to be good people by being good parents. Like other middle-class and affluent parents they believe that being a good parent involves sheltering their children from what they see as the harmful effects of the market. They believe, for example, that giving in to children’s consumer desires may spoil and teach children poor consumer habits. These parents see sheltering as an important part of their parenting; the increasingly aggressive techniques employed by advertisers to market directly to children (Schor 2004; Zukin 2004) combined with middle-class and affluent children’s already commodity rich worlds have created an urgent sense of crisis for parents. As Muellerites—along with other middle- and upper-middle class people (Carfagna et al. 2014)—prioritize sustainable and conscientious

forms of consumerism, they understand their own consumer-norms to be beneficial for their children and their families, as well as for society.

In order to see themselves as good parents, therefore, Mueller parents are careful in their consumerism. Parents, for example, claim to not buy much for their children and emphasize the efforts they make to be proper consumer-role-models for their children. They ask for charity donations in place of birthday gifts; limit their children's consumption of processed food; and do their best to limit the amount of consumer goods ("stuff") their kids own. As parents eschew the "wrong" types of consumerism they simultaneously spend substantial amounts on what they do value. Mueller parents regularly enroll their children in often costly organized activities and are happy to spend on travel.

Despite parents' efforts to avoid improper consumption while modeling proper consumerism, Mueller children nevertheless live commodity-filled lives. Through my interviews I found that Muellerrites work earnestly to protect their children from the corrupting influences of the market while providing their children with commodity-filled childhoods. They achieve these seemingly incompatible goals through participation in what Zelizer (2011) calls "circuits of commerce." By engaging in the exchange of commodities through these circuits with other parents, friends, and family members parents are able to redefine the meanings that commodities have for their families in ways that do not challenge their middle-class consumer-values. In this chapter I argued that these circuits play an unintentional role in the reproduction of social inequalities.

Contemporary ethical consumer discourses hinge on the assumption that affluent consumers will opt to sacrifice some amount of capital or comfort in order to behave ethically, a type of behavior which confers a certain amount of ethical or moral capital on to them. As Bourdieu (1984) has shown, one way that class inequalities persist over time is that the true sources of inequalities are misrecognized. That is to say, instead of understanding inequalities as culturally determined and arbitrarily unequal relationships between groups of people, those in privileged social positions appear to society (and themselves) to be in positions of privilege as a product of their innate superiority, be it in terms of taste, work ethic, or morality. This chapter demonstrates the role that ethical consumerism plays in privileged groups self-identification as moral and ethical people. By showing how middle-class and affluent consumers are able to give specialized meanings to their consumerism in ways that exempt aspects of their consumer behavior from ethical questioning, this chapter helps to demystify the process through which ethical consumerism confers onto middle- and upper-class consumers' ethical or moral capital.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to our understanding the relationship between self-interest and concerns for the greater good. Most studies of ethical consumerism have tended to make one of two assumptions regarding people's motivation to consumer ethically. People are assumed to either consume ethically as an individual choice which reflects neoliberal political-economic rationalities, or as an attempt to reproduce class privileges while masquerading as a social good. Instead, drawing on the Mueller case I

highlight the role that social context plays in people's ethical consumerism. In Mueller both institutional and social channels enable and encourage ethical consumerism within the neighborhood. By focusing on the context within which ethical consumerism happens I was able to move beyond the binary between self-interest (often associated with consumerist and economic rationalities) and the greater good (often associated with civic or ethical behavior). I show that although ethical consumerism is often experienced and promoted as being in people's economic (self) interests, in Mueller acting in self-interests leads to opportunities to engage individually and collectively to further ethical consumerism (civic behavior). Therefore, while analysis has tended to draw distinctions between the type of behavior considered to be done in self-interest and behavior that incorporates a concern for the greater good, in this dissertation I demonstrated how people experience self-interest and ethics as not only coexisting, but as bolstering each other in ways that resulted in *both* increase ethical behavior and individualism. These findings address a question posed earlier in this conclusion: what are the social sources of morality in contemporary U.S. society? I argue that in order to answer this question we must move beyond binaries which classify behavior as either self-interested or ethical. Instead, as I have shown here, morality and self-interest cannot only coexist, but reinforce and advance each other in everyday life. This dissertation was a step in that direction.

In this dissertation I have focused on the ways that what, where, and how people buy matters in how they define themselves as good people. While my conclusions provide answers to a number of questions, they also raise a number of new questions. For



example, how are Muellerites' experiences with gentrification unique? How do more traditional gentrifiers understand their experiences with diversity in the context of a "diversity ideology"? Additionally, research is needed to understand the experiences of long-term residents in gentrifying neighborhoods. Do these residents make similar distinctions between traditional gentrifiers and residents of neighborhoods such as Mueller? What are long term residents' experiences with community and diversity? Answers to these questions would help contextualize Muellerites experiences.

Moreover, focusing on the relational dynamic between groups involved in the process of gentrification would allow one to ask: Are Muellerites writing the rules in Austin regarding who is labeled as responsible for the city's gentrification and declining black population? This is to say, does Muellerites understanding of themselves and their neighborhood as good people who do good have any purchase with other groups within the city? How do non-Muellerites respond to Muellerites ethical claims? More broadly, this is a question about the workings of status (who is good) and authority (who gets to define good) in contemporary society. Do the types of ethical consumerism that Mueller is recognized for influence, say, how people in less affluent neighborhoods give meaning to and experience Mueller? What about for people in more traditional affluent neighborhoods? Do their neighborhood settings influence their ethical consumerism? How might this the processes described in Chapter 3 operate differently in more and less affluent neighborhoods?

Another pressing question that my research points to relates to how people think about community and diversity. As the chapter discussed, diversity has become an aspiration in much of social and institutional life. Yet, while the Muellerites I interviewed are unanimous in their support of diversity, tensions nevertheless arose between groups, specifically between black and white residents. Might there be something about Muellerites' discourses regarding diversity (that is, diversity as what makes their neighborhood interesting and provides them training for the "real" world) that can account for tensions between groups within Mueller? And if this is the case, how can we imagine living in diverse neighborhoods and cities in ways that transcend the shortcomings of contemporary diversity discourses?

As with other research that works within a "moralized markets" thesis, in this dissertation I have focused on the moral schemes people deploy when they engage in economic activity (Fourcade and Healy 2007). In highlighting the ways in which consumerism and morality intersect for residents living within Mueller, my findings have been generally limited to the experiences of a predominantly white, liberal, middle and upper-middle class population. These are residents who could afford to consume in normatively ethical ways and to provide their children with childhoods free from need. As Pugh (2009) and Cairns et al. (2013) have shown, despite their limited economic resources poor and working class people likewise deploy moral schemes when they shop. More research is needed on what constraints poor and working class people may face to participating in "circuits of commerce," and how (non)participation may affect parents'

moral identities and their children's material and social wellbeing. Likewise, we know little about how "circuits" operate outside of the sphere of parenting. Might, for example, people committed to moralized issues such as environmentalism or social justice draw on similar resources to sustain their ethical commitments while benefiting from consumer goods which they would otherwise not spend on themselves?

Going forward, my hope is that this dissertation provides a starting point for future research on ethics and consumerism that moves beyond questions of who consumes ethically and for what reasons. Instead, as I have attempted to do here, a sociology of consumerism would benefit from focusing on how moral and ethical discourses operate within people's consumerism. As discussed in the introduction, this is essential for understanding how people today define themselves as moral and honorable. How do people's social environments encourage or discourage certain forms of consumerism? What cultural work do people engage in to define *their* consumerism as ethical? And why do some group's definitions of ethical consumerism have more purchase than others'? Answers to these questions are essential for understanding how culture, status, and inequalities operate in society today.

## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

### Section A: Moving to Mueller

1. Where were you living before you moved to Mueller?
2. When did you move to Mueller? 2b. Did you buy or do you rent?
3. How did you decide on Mueller as a place to live? What were the important factors for you in making that decision? (Probe regarding public amenities; public schools; community / sociability; housing prices / affordability)  
  
3b. Were you considering any other neighborhoods to move to? Which one(s) and why?
4. How much did your home / rent cost when you moved to Mueller?
5. What are the positive differences between Mueller and where you lived previously?  
  
Negative differences?
6. Outside of your home, do you spend time elsewhere within the Mueller neighborhood?  
  
6b. Are there areas within the neighborhood that you try to avoid? Why?
7. How did being or becoming a parent influence your decision to live in Mueller?  
  
7b. Do you think that you would have moved to Mueller if you were not a parent?

### Section B: Living in Mueller

1. Do you socialize with other parents in the neighborhood?  
  
1b. Do you see them regularly? Where?  
  
1c. Are there other parents/families in the neighborhood who you try to avoid?  
  
Why?
2. How do you think that living at Mueller benefits your children?

3. Do you use the public amenities within Mueller? (Probe on parks; green areas; farmers' market)

4. Since moving to Mueller, has there been anything about the neighborhood that you have found surprising or unexpected?

4b. Anything about your neighbors that you have found surprising or unexpected?

### Section C: Consumer-Parenting

1. How have your shopping habits changed since you became a parent? (Probe: change in cars; leisure; classes/activities for children; food.)

2. When you started shopping for your child, was there anyone who would help you in choosing how to spend?

3. Did you always agree with their suggestions? Can you tell me about a time when you disagreed? What happened?

4. Is there anyone you are more likely to ask advice from on what to buy, or to discuss shopping for your child with?

4b. Is there anyone you regularly shop with or share information on what to buy with?

4c. Is there anyone who you avoid discussing shopping for your child with?

5. How has your shopping for your child changed since you moved to Mueller?

Are there things you spend more on now? Are there things that you no longer spend on?

6. Since becoming a parent, what have been the most difficult purchases for you? The

ones that created the most tensions for you or people around you.

7. Are there any things you wish you could buy your child?
8. Are there any things you wish you did not have to buy your child?
9. Do you worry about your child having too much?
10. Do you worry about your child not having enough?
11. Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you think is relevant?

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_

#### Demographic Information

1. Age/Sex: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Race: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Highest degree/year of schooling: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Annual Household Income:  
\_\_\_ \$0-49,999 \_\_\_ \$50,000-74,999 \_\_\_ \$75,000-99,999 \_\_\_ \$100,000-124,999  
\_\_\_ \$125,000-149,999 \_\_\_ \$150,000-174,999 \_\_\_ \$175,000-199,999  
\_\_\_ \$200,000-224,999 \_\_\_ \$225,000-249,999 \_\_\_ \$250,000-274,999  
\_\_\_ \$275,000-299,999 \_\_\_ \$300,000-324,999 \_\_\_ \$350,000-374,999 \_\_\_ Above
7. Marital status:    Single / Living with partner / Married
  - Years partnered/married: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Partner's age: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Partner's highest degree: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Partner's occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Age of child(ren): \_\_\_\_\_

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