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Mundane objects in the city: laundry practices and the making and remaking of public/private sociality and space in London and New York.

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Mundane objects in the city: laundry practices and the making and remaking of public/private sociality and space in London and New York.

Abstract: The paper considers how shifting laundry practices and technologies associated with dirty washing have over time summoned different spaces, socialities and socio-spatial assemblages in the city, enrolling different actors and multiple publics and constituting different associations, networks and relations in its wake as it travels from the home and back again. It argues that rather than being an inert object of unpleasant matter, whose encounter with humans has been largely restricted to certain categories of person for its transformation to re-use, and thus passed unnoticed, the paper explores how laundry practices have figured in producing and reproducing gendered (and classed) relations of labour, and enacting multiple socio-spatial, and gendered, relations and assemblages in the city, which have largely gone unnoticed in accounts of everyday urban life.

Keywords: Public space public realm, Everyday life in the city, laundry, London, New York

That cities are spaces of social interaction, diversity and encounters with difference is now well understood (Young, 1990, Fincher and Jacobs 1998). Over time there has even been a shift in focus from the Habermasian public realm of the coffee house, through to the Richard Rogers idealised notion of the piazza as a space of democracy, to the public spaces of the edge, the boundaries, the margins or even the more liminal, symbolic or less visible public spaces of the city, where multiple publics are formed and re-formed (Sennett, 1990, 2010; Watson, 2006). As cities become more and more unequal, with the rich having access to privatised spaces of consumption and pleasure, the significance of public space as a space of conviviality, inclusion, and possibility becomes ever more salient. Yet with cuts in expenditure on public infrastructures and provisions, public spaces are increasingly under threat, while at the same time, spaces for encounters across difference are dramatically eroded as different populations, rich and poor, White and Black, are consigned to different parts of the city to live and work (or not).

In much of this discussion of the public realm and public space though, the city is dematerialized, it has no physical substance or solidity; rather it appears as a container, where matter, objects and infrastructural elements are ‘blackboxed’ into invisible infrastructure. This has been challenged from a number of directions, from Swyngedouw’s (2006) and Kaika’s (2005) attention to the technological and ‘natural’ governance of the city to the socio-material view of publics which foregrounds the constitutive role that different objects and materials play in making up, separating, allowing and limiting different publics- which themselves are seen as heterogeneous assemblages of materials, actors, technological elements and discourses (Marres and Lezaun, 2011, Farias and Bender 2009). Besides interests in urban networks and large infrastructures (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Coutard and Guy, 2007; Gandy, 2002), some Science and Technology Studies (STS) researchers have explicitly focused on the “everydayness” of cities (Amin and Thrift, 2002) and insisted on the multitude of material objects that participate in the day-to-day shaping of urban areas (Latour and Hermant, 1998) and that constitute a “non-human urban ecology” (Farias and Bender, 2010; Denis and Pontille, 2010).

But there is another set of stories to tell about the making and unmaking of publics, politics, and encounters, stories which derive from mundane objects and sites in the city which enrol actors and connections in less obvious ways, but which are equally

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3 important in thinking about public spaces, urban spatialities and socialities.
4 Molotch's research on turnstiles (2010) and edited collection on public toilets (with
5 Noren 2011) illustrates well the purchase of these lines of enquiry exposing the
6 politics and making of publics enabled by these street objects, while Marres and
7 Lezaun (2011) and others in a special issue of *Economy and Society* have explored
8 how materials and devices have mobilized public participation and engagement.
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11 What has received less attention are those mundane domestic objects- particularly
12 those associated with the body- which in various ways and at various times move out
13 of the home and animate an assemblage of multiple spatial forms and socialities in
14 the city, that go largely unnoticed in our accounts. One explanation for this lies in
15 our sense of disgust at body effluent and waste, the 'simple logic of excluding filth'
16 or expelling things that are seen as abject (Kristeva, 1982), or our need to exclude
17 uncleanliness to maintain boundaries (Douglas, 1988, p.41), or in an implicitly
18 racialised notion of dirt as dangerous (Sibley, 1995). My argument here is that the
19 very invisibility of these processes also lies in their gendered nature. My matter of
20 concern here is dirty washing- probably one of the most mundane objects of all. This
21 is not to say that there have not been fascinating and excellent accounts of the
22 history of laundry and the gendered nature of laundry practices, often by feminist
23 scholars (Shove, 2003; Mohun, 1999).
24

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26 But the notion that the unimaginably large amounts of laundry produced in cities,
27 from the clothes and sheets of private homes, to the table ware, towels and bed linen
28 of hotels, might have an impact of city life, public space and sociality, has passed
29 largely unnoticed. Funnily enough, the processes associated with the management
30 of the other major effluent of the body- arguably even more abject and potentially
31 provocative of disgust- urine and shit – has been widely researched and explored
32 (Gandy, 1999; MacFarlane et al. forthcoming; Molotch, 2010), perhaps because this
33 calls into play complex technical infrastructures and the hard stuff of the city, the '
34 serious' stuff, perhaps because it is 'sexy' to talk of really dirty things (the stuff of
35 swear words), or perhaps because this is not intrinsically the affair of women (which
36 isn't to say that these authors ignore the gendered dimensions of sanitation and
37 toilets in their work). The fact that changing washing technologies and practices
38 have rarely been constituted as a matter of concern by urbanists, despite their
39 centrality to everyday life in the city, reflects the lack of importance paid to largely
40 feminized domestic activity, a point consistently raised in feminist work on gendered
41 divisions of labour over several decades (Beechey, 1979; Oakley, 1972; Barrett,
42 1980). It is no coincidence that the idiom 'airing your dirty laundry in public' - is
43 deployed to describe revealing aspects of your private life that should remain secret.
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47 The paper considers how shifting laundry practices and technologies associated with
48 this mundane object have over time summoned different spaces, socialities and
49 socio-spatial assemblages in the city, enrolling different actors and multiple publics
50 and constituting different associations, networks and relations in its wake as it
51 travels from the home and back again. It does so in two parts. First, it looks at the
52 laundry practices of individuals and families enacted both in, or near, the home.
53 Second it follows laundry from these proximate sites to the commercial laundries
54 scattered across city. The shifts and changes in washing practices, enabled by
55 mechanisation- itself a reflection of changing labour patterns and costs, have shaped
56 and reshaped public/ private boundaries in the city, as well as impacting on high
57 streets and suburban areas where these activities have been concentrated.
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3 The research was conducted during 2012/3. This article draws on interviews with
4 owners of launderettes in Camden, London, (and as a minor point of comparison,
5 Manhattan, NYC), users of laundrettes/laundromats, key players in the commercial
6 laundry sector in London and the Guild of Cleaners and Launderers and the
7 Worshipful Society of Launderers, a planner and an archivist at the Peabody
8 Association, secondary sources and archives, and participant observation in
9 laundries/laundromats at different times of the day in London and New York.
10 Interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the observation periods a diary
11 was used to record the socio-demographic characteristics of the users, conversations
12 held, and social interactions. First, a caveat, this paper was based on research in two
13 cities of the Global North, where washing and laundry practices bear little
14 comparison with cities of the Global South, where the luxury of plentiful water
15 supply, and the widespread current use of domestic washing machines, is the
16 privilege of but a few (Gender and Water Alliance, 2003). Instead washing is
17 largely a public affair, where water is available at streams, rivers, wells and pumps,
18 with contrasting configurations of public/private and gender relations. To do this
19 comparison justice would require extensive research and a different paper.
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23 ‘Private ‘ Laundry – from the home to the streets and back again.

24
25 Domestic clothes and linen washing practices in Europe and USA over the last
26 century or more have taken a variety of forms articulating different
27 gender/class/ethnic relations and private/ public spaces as technical innovations in
28 the industry changed. For women in wealthier households in the early twentieth
29 century, and for some even later, dirty washing magically returned clean from hours
30 of the hidden labour of domestic servants or washer women in private homes who
31 earned around 3s a week, with enhanced earning power of 3s a week if they were in
32 possession of a mangle power (Mayhew, 1861, Vol 3, p.306). Laundry practices
33 also took a more visible form; where a stream or river was close by, the women took
34 the washing there gathering with others in a communal form of employment
35 (Sidbury, 1997) resembling contemporary practices in much of the Global South.
36 Essential materials for washing at home included a tub of hot water, a washboard-
37 initially constructed of wood and later fabricated in metal, and a bar of laundry soap,
38 or a dolly tub with a dolly stick (like a peg) to stir the washing, and a mangle or
39 wringer. Limited supplies of soap meant economies of use, at least until the latter
40 part of the nineteenth century (Old and Interesting, 2013), and everyday linen might
41 only be washed with ash lye, especially in poorer households and was typically
42 performed by women. By the early twentieth century mass-produced tongs replaced
43 sticks, and wet washing moved from public to more private, but still visible, sites to
44 dry as clotheslines and pegs in back yards and gardens took the place of drying on
45 trees, banks and bushes. Photographs and paintings of the growing industrial cities
46 are littered with fluttering lines of washing (insert photograph 1).
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49
50 The mechanisation of the industry from the latter 1900s had a profound impact on
51 both domestic life and city spaces. Mechanisation came late to the laundry industry
52 (arguably due to its gendering), shifting from a cottage industry to the power laundry
53 between 1870 and 1914, as steam power and the commercial development of steam
54 heated flat work machinery and mechanical rotary washers enabled large quantities
55 of washing to be undertaken at the same time (Goodliffe and Temperley, 2009, p. 5).
56 This shift of domestic and local laundry practices, to the commercial laundry, largely
57 the privilege of the higher income classes, had distinct social and spatial effects on
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3 the city as we see below, providing new sites of sociality and conviviality for the
4 laundry workers, and in the case of the US, new racialised labour relations.
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6 But for poorer households, dirty washing and its associated practices, remained
7 closer to home particularly in the public and philanthropic housing sectors in
8 London, from the turn of the century. In response to growing concerns about the
9 sanitation, cleanliness and public hygiene of the urban poor (Cox, 2008), the Public
10 Baths and Wash Houses Act of 1846 in the UK legislated for the provision of public
11 baths and laundries by local parishes and many of these were built over the
12 following 50 years (and remained as an essential public service until the latter part of
13 the twentieth century). In the early 20th century, many Londoners lived in crowded
14 courts with no internal water supply, and right up to the late 1930s, shared
15 standpipes and outside lavatories were common. Even when water was piped to a
16 house, there was often only one tap in a scullery, shared by all tenants (Museum of
17 London, 2013). Public baths and washhouses provided hot water and laundry
18 facilities, where the washhouse supplied large tubs for washing clothes, as well as
19 mangles and driers, and these became important sites of sociality for women as they
20 carried out the family's laundry. ([http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Collections-
21 Research/Research/Your-Research/X20L/Themes/1382/1202/](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Collections-Research/Research/Your-Research/X20L/Themes/1382/1202/)). By the twentieth
22 century power driven washing machines began to replace the old washing tubs.
23 According to one George Hargreaves who worked with Bradford and Tullis - the
24 main suppliers of washing machines to local authority laundries, the public
25 washhouses ' were, in effect, the original launderettes' (Goodliffe and Temperley,
26 2009, p. 89).
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30 Even closer to home, laundries were constructed as an integral part of public and
31 philanthropic housing developments. The first Peabody Estates, which opened in
32 1864, were built with communal facilities including shared sinks and WCs on
33 landings, and bathhouses and laundry blocks with washing tubs and drying
34 cupboards. There were 3 designs for the laundries (interview with Peabody
35 Archivist)- an outside block, a laundry across the whole of the top floor serving 22-
36 23 flats, and partly open to the elements for drying purposes or one on each floor
37 containing tubs and drying cupboards (Photo 2) for the flats there to share. Similar
38 accounts are given as to the significance of these communal facilities for women's
39 sociality. According to the Peabody Archivist, after modernization of the blocks
40 during the 1950s- 70s, despite appreciating the self-contained facilities- many of the
41 tenants described missing the contact with their neighbours.
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44 The Rise of the Launderette.

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46 At the end of the Second World War the importation of the coin- operated washing
47 machine from the US summoned new gendered socio- spatial relations and a new
48 urban landscape into play. A prevailing emphasis on the nuclear family and pressure
49 on women to create the perfect domestic suburban home (Wilson, 1980 Friedan,
50 1963) after six years of relative freedom from domestic drudgery during the war,
51 created a fertile environment for the American based company Bendix to import the
52 coin operated machine. The first launderette in the UK was launched in Queensway,
53 London in 1946, and was an immediate success attracting 800 customers in the first
54 five weeks (Bloom, 1988, p.14).
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57 Bendix Company, who held the initial monopoly in the industry in the UK,
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3 controlled their expansion through the 1950s ensuring that each launderette was only
4 one mile apart (Goodliffe and Temperley, 2010, p.89). By the mid 1950s
5 launderettes had received widespread acceptance and 500 coin-operated
6 launderettes, now also supplied by other manufacturers such as Westinghouse and
7 Whirlpool, were to be found across the UK. The changing technology and ease of
8 access to local launderettes was accompanied by shifting attitudes to the washing.
9 Addressing the 1958 Annual Conference of the Institute of British Launderers, the
10 Director asserted: ' Not so long ago there was considerable pressure on the
11 housewife to do the same as her neighbour; and to send all her household articles to
12 the laundry. Certainly...she would not wish to hang her washing out on the line for
13 all to see. But nowadays all that has changed and I cannot think of anywhere ...
14 where washing cannot be seen hanging out, and where the housewife is bothered in
15 the least in seeing it hanging there, indeed one even sees it in the better class
16 districts, and on Sundays as well!' (Ibid, p. 90).
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19 The rapid rise of the coin operated laundry-the launderette- mobilised a new set of
20 socio- spatial and economic relations in towns and cities. Washing, hitherto a
21 relatively privatized activity- consigned to the home (or close by) or commercial
22 laundries, and invisible like much of women's work, takes on a public face, marking
23 the high street with its presence. On virtually every city street, at any time of the
24 day, a group of mainly women could be found sitting by a washing machine, rubbing
25 along in the same space in casual encounters (Watson, 2006) or engaging which each
26 other or the manager in animated conversation. At the same time, investment in
27 launderettes provided a new form of small business investment - 1500 were owned
28 by single family units in Britain in 1968, and were particularly popular in industrial
29 areas with 3 shift working hours (Mitchell, 1963, p. 7). By 1975 a peak had been
30 reached of 8400 units across the UK. Such was their success that the new industry
31 engaged in continuous processes of refurbishment and modernisation (a point
32 reiterated in the interviews with current self service and commercial laundry
33 owners), as illustrated in an Industry manual in 1963: 'Many came into being in the
34 50s- their design at the time seemed modern and up to date- just like the coffee bar.
35 But just like the coffee bar of 1953 with its fake rubber plants, bamboo screens and
36 Spanish bull - fighter posters, looks tatty and old fashioned in 1963 so some of the
37 original self- service laundries with their simple damp -wash service, their tungsten
38 light fittings and their utility décor now appear thoroughly "old-hat"' (Mitchell,
39 1963, p. 56). From this writer's perspective diversification and innovation were far
40 more common in the US, where launderers had introduced shoe repairs and even
41 beauty parlours and coffee shops into the site- a far cry from the 'one man
42 launderette business in a British high street, with its 12 year old machines,
43 mouldering paintwork, fly blown posters and an elusive stench of old clothes' (ibid,
44 p.60).
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49 My argument here is that not only did launderettes shift a gendered activity from the
50 home to the street, which enabled the potential de- gendering of the practice as
51 private chores became public- they also constituted a new form of public space in
52 towns and cities. Launderettes notoriously were spaces of interaction, with shifting
53 populations, atmospheres and intensities from day to night as students and single
54 people, replaced the largely female or older populations of daylight hours. Though
55 not typically recognised as such, these were quasi public spaces of previously
56 domestically performed work, which through the emergence of the coin operated
57 washing machine and tumble drier, and associated time needed for the task to be
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3 performed, assembled washers in casual relations of sociality and encounter. Several
4 of the interviews with customers and owners nostalgically referred to the hours they
5 passed in the launderette during their hey day: For example, a British African an
6 woman in her 40s (laundry interview 12.10. 2012 Camden) referred to spending
7 hours as a child in the local laundry where she played by the machines while her
8 mother conversed with other women doing the household wash there.
9

10 So significant were these spaces of imagined possibility and encounter, often
11 sexually inscribed, that they found their way into numerous instances of popular
12 culture, from the song by the Detergents in 1963 '*Leader of the Laundromat*' (a
13 parody on the Shangri Las song '*Leader of the pack*), and *Coin Laundry* - a song
14 performed and written by Australian singer-songwriter Lisa Mitchell about finding
15 love at the coin laundry, to the launderette in *East Enders* which was a central focus
16 of life in the community. The launderette didn't just feature in songs and soaps, in
17 1985 Levi's launched a now famous advertisement where a sexy young man
18 exhibiting retro chic walks into a launderette to the lyrics of Marvin Gaye's
19 '*Through the Grapevine*' removes his Ray Ban sunglasses, casts an alluring gaze at
20 the other customers, and seductively takes off his jeans and places them in the
21 washing machine, apparently leading to a 20 fold increase in sales figures of 501
22 jeans in Britain. As Sir John Hegarty, the creative brain behind the ad later described
23 the ad: 'We wanted an egalitarian environment, somewhere you would find almost
24 anyone, and the launderette had that' (Khan, 2010). While the more cosy or parodic
25 representations of everyday life in the launderette were given a further twist in the
26 British film *My Beautiful Launderette* - a 1985 British comedy-drama film based on
27 a screenplay by Hanif Kureishi, which depicts the reunion and eventual romance
28 between Omar, a young Pakistani man living in London, and his old friend, a street
29 punk named Johnny, tackling homosexuality and racism during the dark days of
30 Thatcher's Britain.
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34 By the mid 1980s, the growing affordability of washing machines and tumble driers
35 signalled the gradual demise of the launderette as a commonplace feature of the
36 British high street. According to the National Association of the Launderette
37 Industry (NALI website), numbers in the UK peaked at 12,500 in the early 80s
38 dwindling by 2012 to 3,000 across the UK. Unlike the earlier shift of washing from
39 private to public or commercial space, this shift did not derive from technological
40 change. Rather it reflected the new prevalence of this mundane domestic object, the
41 washing machine, in the domestic sphere, as purchase costs diminished, on the one
42 hand, and repair costs for launderette washing machines increased on the other. The
43 move of the machine into the home was also entangled with changing gender
44 relations, as more women entered the workforce full time (militating against regular
45 visits to the launderette), and new expectations of cleanliness meant at least two to
46 three family washes per week. For Pink (2007) domestic laundry practices also
47 constituted a route to satisfy a 'quest to create a home and gendered self they
48 [women] believe is morally satisfactory. Cowan (1983) similarly saw domestic
49 laundry as reflecting an enduring commitment to the preservation of practices
50 regarded central to family life. The penetration of the home by washing machines
51 was firmly in place by 2003 when Shove (2003, p. 117) found that the average
52 British washing machines were used 274 times annually (392 cycles in the US) and
53 washing machine ownership had reached 98% of all households (92% in the US). As
54 Shove argues, domestic laundry practices are continually framed by typologies and
55 classificatory frameworks creating new habits, as systems are held together through
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3 the coordination of materials and meanings by the people who carry out the washing
4 (p.140-1). The space of the public launderette, of shared machines and facilities, I
5 suggest, affords lesser potential for such re-scripted practices.
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7
8 Launderettes in public and social housing estates also went into severe decline over
9 the latter decades of the twentieth century, as increasingly these spaces had become
10 neglected and vandalized, leading to the installation of surveillance cameras, and the
11 infrequent use of machines as tenants took their custom elsewhere or installed
12 washing machines in their flats. This public shared space for low-income tenants
13 now long gone, has more recently been adapted for other uses. In Southwark for
14 example, on the Kingswood Estate the council have adopted a strategy of converting
15 the old laundries to create new homes. Councillor Ian Wingfield, cabinet member for
16 housing said, "This is a brilliant, innovative scheme...(which) literally creates space
17 for homes from nothing. It's difficult to believe that what were such dingy, unused
18 spaces have been transformed into such bright new flats, which will very soon be let
19 to tenants"

20 (http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/161/from_filthy_laundries_to_fresh_new_hidden_homes). This demise of the high street launderette in the UK is
21 nevertheless a spatially differentiated phenomenon, with launderettes still in
22 evidence in medium/ high-density areas dominated by low income or student
23 housing.
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27 All of the 10 UK launderettes investigated for this study were owned or managed by
28 first or second - generation migrants from Asian or Middle Eastern countries, who
29 saw the business as a good source of income and investment. The owner of M R
30 laundry (interview 02.07. 2017) reported consistent profits of £2,500 per calendar
31 month, while successful business was dependent on a high concentration of local
32 students or travellers (as at C S laundry Interview 16.07.2012), and investment in
33 new machines and cleanliness. As the owner of S P Laundry (interview 16.07. 2012)
34 emphasized, when he took over the laundry 10 years ago the place was run down and
35 everything had to be replaced. This offered a stark contrast to the laundry on K T
36 Road which was so dilapidated and dirty that the consumer (whose machine at home
37 had broken down) interviewed there (18.07.2012) complained: *'I wouldn't come
38 back- very dirty- machines broken ...here I would worry about my washing being
39 stolen- I don't trust this area- I wouldn't leave it in here. Homeless people would
40 steal my stuff- it's a good way to get clean clothes...the machine has been kicked in
41 here. They should upgrade this place. The guy who runs it is not friendly at all'*.
42 Others succeeded through diversification of services, the provision of dry cleaning,
43 ironing, mending, or, as at M R laundry, the sale of Indian fabrics and dressmaking
44 (photo 3).
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48 Though these laundrettes remain in some city spaces, it appears they no longer
49 represent a site of sociality and encounter, with the growing practice of service
50 washes and bag drop offs. Where customers stayed they sat with laptops or
51 magazines, while doing their wash, and the only form of sociality I observed was
52 between customers and laundry owners who engaged in familiar banter with regular
53 users. The specificity of laundrette use was confirmed by John Trapp, owner of
54 Associated Liver Launderettes in Liverpool, the UK's largest chain (Kahn, 2010),
55 who claimed that launderettes now have a polarised customer base:
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58 "We have people at both ends of the scale, from newly arrived immigrants with no
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3 access to hot water in their properties, to busy working couples who might have a
4 machine at home, but just don't have time and prefer to have a service wash. Then
5 there is the one thing that everyone owns that none of us can wash at home - a duvet.
6 That brings most people to a launderette at least twice a year'.
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9 Despite the widespread scepticism, shared by the Martin Chief Executive of the
10 Launderers' Guild, and Daniel the owner of Blossom and Brown (interviews, July
11 2012, January, 2013), as to the continuing viability of the high street launderette,
12 there are scattered attempts across the UK to revive launderettes as opportunities for
13 social enterprise or a community hub. The Hilton Street Launderette in Manchester's
14 northern quarter, for example, houses high-speed computers alongside washing
15 machines, and provides coffee and sofas, to attract those who want to play games or
16 watch films online while waiting for their load. While also in Manchester at the
17 Clean Machine on Withington Road, during the summer of 2010 the launderette was
18 transformed into an art gallery for a new exhibition by a local artist (Britton, 2010,
19 p.2).
20

21
22 New York launderettes- laundromats in the local idiom- offered a distinct contrast,
23 not least in their abundance due to high land values and the dominance of apartment
24 housing where restricted space, money or regulations limit the prevalence of
25 domestic washing machines. 12 laundries were visited in mid town Manhattan and
26 the lower East Side in November 2012, the majority of which are still managed by
27 Chinese families. Here the majority of laundromats perform bag wash, and customers
28 express strong affect with respect to their quality with reams of posts on web sites.
29 For example, with reference to Jane Laundromat at 50 80th Avenue, during the
30 research period there were 22 reviews including (sometimes racialised) comments
31 like: ' I picked up my laundry with trepidation ...No weird stains! No holes, no grey
32 whites! I was dumbfounded..I love these guys with the unreserved affection I have
33 for smiling, friendly Chinese owned-family run businesses'. While at Tin Tin on the
34 Lower East Side (20 reviews posted during the research period), one customer
35 posted: 'I put up with this place for a while because.. I don't have a W/D in my
36 apartment building. They ruined two Patagonia jackets of mine. Burnt one in the
37 drier so that the entire outside of the jacket is..all charred/singed. The second I have
38 no idea what they did'.
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41 Self service Laundromats in New York are organized around the concept of wash
42 and fold (photo 4), where large wooden boards for folding occupy the central space,
43 at which customers stand in silence folding their washing while watching large
44 screen televisions overhead. These were bustling places on each of the site visits, but
45 sociality was at a minimum, with no chairs or space for sitting down during the
46 wash. One laundry manager explained the lack of seats as a device for excluding the
47 homeless. Despite this, web posts suggested a high level of emotional investment in
48 these local sites of domestic reproduction. A local NY journalist (Moore, 2012)
49 described her experience thus: 'I live right down the street from the Laundromat but
50 like everything in New York, going there means competing with everyone else for
51 the washer. It means there are 25 washers in the joint but only 5 of them work at any
52 one time..it means figuring out the timeframe when the number of people in there
53 will be the lowest..it means not making eye contact with people as they are putting
54 their dirty underwear into the wash..by the way how weird is it to fold your clothes
55 in front of a group of strangers? You watch people fold their stuff secretly judging
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3 their character on the basis of their underwear'. Starkly reflected in these comments
4 is the ambivalent affect associated with making public intimate bodily matters.
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6 What I have suggested so far is that how clothes get washed is by far from a trivial
7 affair. Rather, laundry practices of the household and the enactment of domestic
8 tasks that both shape and reproduce bodies on a daily basis and summon specific
9 socio-spatial assemblages in the city, have been rather absent from our accounts of
10 everyday urban life. I have suggested that the relative invisibility of these practices,
11 and lack of attention to their urban effects, lies both in their gendered nature, and in
12 the disgust or embarrassment we feel about dirty products that issue from, or are
13 associated with, bodies. Though several scholars, especially feminist scholars, have
14 provided engaging accounts of laundry as gendered work or as implicated in
15 consumption activities, on the one hand, or of the changing technologies of laundry
16 practices since the mid nineteenth century on the other, the socio-spatialities of
17 laundry work have gone unnoticed. What should by now be clear is that laundry
18 practices have had changing social and spatial effects in London and New York. I
19 turn now to the commercial laundries, which represent the most public face of dirty
20 washing and its transformation into clean objects.
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23 Commercial laundry- dirty washing goes public.
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25 The advent of the steam - powered laundry in the mid 1850s had a profound effect
26 on the urban landscape of the industrialising cities. Laundry collection, by horse
27 drawn carriages followed by motor powered vans, became an increasingly visible
28 part of everyday life in towns. As Bell (1900, p.10) described the trade:
29

30 'Considering how the laundry trade has grown of late years by leaps and bounds, it
31 would be a difficult matter to find a town, however small, worth of the name without
32 a steam laundry, and the very first and most important outside consideration is a
33 good horse and smart van. This should not be gaudy, but neat, for instance, a black
34 or chocolate ground and gold letters, or a cream ground and crimson letters, or
35 electric blue ground and deliver letters.... The chief point with regard to him (a
36 smart man in livery) is a good character for sobriety and honesty.'
37

38 Laundry buildings, containing large machinery for washing and drying, were striking
39 features of the built environment, typically on the edge of cities, while over a dozen
40 laundry machine manufacturers sprang up across the UK (Goodliffe and Temperley,
41 2009, p.4). Social shifts intersected with technological and material shifts as the
42 growing middle class in cities sent their washing to the power laundry. High levels
43 of set up capital required local investment, but dividends were good, and local
44 wealthy individuals saw them as a good speculative risk. As the prospectus for the
45 Crouch Hill Sanitary Laundry Limited near Sherbourne pointed out: 'The profitable
46 character of well-conducted Steam Laundries is well known, and careful enquiry into
47 the returns of these undertakings shows that as the work extends the proportion of
48 profit is increased. It should be borne in mind by intending investors that they will
49 not only have the advantage of their washing being efficiently done, but also that the
50 cost will be materially reduced by the handsome dividend anticipated upon the
51 shares held in the Company' (ibid, p.10).
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55 Over the following decades the number of commercial laundries increased across
56 British towns and cities, predominantly located in suburban areas. Not only were
57 cities visibly reshaped by the physical infrastructure and transportation practices
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3 resulting from this growth, so also new opportunities emerged for sociality in public
4 space, not now in the washing houses or streams of the earlier period, but in the
5 spaces of work associated with the trade as I discuss below. As a place of
6 employment, laundry remained women's work being considered too demeaning for
7 men, though with the growth of the power laundries a recalibration of gender
8 relations emerged, as men took over the ownership and management of laundries
9 (Mohun, 1999), and involved themselves in the more specialized mechanical parts of
10 the work. Driving the vans became an entirely male preserve (see Photo 5), with
11 photographs from the time showing men dresses in smart uniforms donned in brass
12 buttons standing proudly by their vans. In the US, race added another dimension,
13 where steam laundries across the cities and towns of America were operated by
14 Chinese men from the 19th century, with a further gendered and racialised shift as
15 changing technologies recast the industry as mechanical, scientific and manlike, and
16 white male power laundry owners competed with the Chinese steam laundry men to
17 assert their authority and superiority (Wang, 2002, p.54).
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20 The use of commercial laundries in London by middle and higher income
21 households remained widespread through to the 1960s with laundry vans collecting
22 or delivering laundry boxes a constant marker of wealth in the better off residential
23 areas of cities, freeing housewives from this aspect of domestic drudgery. From the
24 start of that decade their use by private households went into sharp decline
25 precipitated by three factors. The first reflected the intersections of urban/rural life in
26 unexpected ways. Typically higher income households in country areas delivered
27 hampers containing the bed linen, towels and tablecloths to the local station to be
28 dispatched to the laundries in towns and cities by train on a weekly basis. In 1963
29 the Beeching report (Beeching, 1963) aimed at restructuring the British railways,
30 identified 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of railway line for closure, representing
31 55% of all stations and 30% of route miles, with the stated objective of stemming the
32 large financial losses incurred during a period of increasing competition from road
33 transport. According to Martin of the Guild of Cleaners and Launderers (interview
34 18.07.2012) the reduction of the rail system had a considerable impact on laundries,
35 which combined with the availability of cheaper domestic technology, and changing
36 expectations around women's work to reduce their use. The family run organisation
37 of the industry and their location on the edge of towns- in London the Ealing area
38 was known as 'soap suds island' represented further factors in their demise. As
39 towns and cities expanded from the 1950s -1970s the children or grandchildren of
40 the original owners saw profits to be made in selling the sites for residential
41 development (Martin, interview)- often now the sites of suburban housing estates
42 and gated communities.
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46 Commercial laundry work associated individuals and families has become extremely
47 niche, essentially the preserve of A and B households living in the richer boroughs
48 of central London- Mayfair and Central London, or country towns like Cheltenham.
49 Blossom and Brown in Upton East London, which took over Sycamore, a company
50 which has held the royal warrant for 200 years (they proudly showed me the
51 Windsor and Spenser house hampers on my site visit) (photo 6), is the most
52 exclusive of the London laundries catering to the domestic sphere. Daniel (interview
53 14.0 .2013) whose family had owned the business over many generations described
54 current practices and clients thus:
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3 *'we became the only person doing private people in old laundry boxes and*
4 *hampers- like the old ones. Going forward there will always be a niche- Mayfair,*
5 *Kensington. My generation never knew what it is like to have your sheets laundered-*
6 *whereas my parents all of them did this- sent their laundry off in black boxes with*
7 *white writing – Sycamore - on it- very common then- people inherited linens- fabrics*
8 *different in those days - good quality- it would last a life time- at the laundry it came*
9 *back all nice and crisp- now rubbish quality wise- disposable items- throw them*
10 *away- demand changes....People have dailies who iron for them- cheaper. ... Old*
11 *days we had gentlemen's handkerchiefs and socks- not coming through now'. 30%*
12 *of their trade has remained in this sector, where washing (mainly bed linen, table*
13 *cloths and towels) is collected by their vans- still embossed with the old logo and*
14 *dropped back a week later (photo 7). At the same time new material forms assemble*
15 *new washing practices. As Daniel pointed out, duvets have replaced the need for*
16 *sheets, and can be made attractive as they are filled and have body, such that they*
17 *cannot become easily creased. Duvet covers are also, he explained, not amenable to*
18 *being washed in a commercial laundry, since the buttons and bordering militate*
19 *against ironing or finishing through the large flat ironers. For Daniel the importance*
20 *of high quality, well finished and packaged in hampers and cases- 'how items are*
21 *presented marks the distinction between good and bad laundries', and of*
22 *diversification and innovation to keep the business viable was very clear.*

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26 With the demise of the domestic laundry sector, the proportion of laundry work for
27 the service sector and industry has come to represent the majority of laundry work.
28 Hotels, restaurants, hospitals, healthcare and other public services generate huge
29 quantities of laundry, which is undertaken at a range of commercial laundries from
30 large laundry groups such as Sunlight laundry to small enterprises across the
31 country. Founded in Fulham, West London in 1900 as Sunlight Laundry, like many
32 other companies originally supplied domestic laundry services across the metropolis.
33 It merged with another company in 1928, expanding nationally, to change direction
34 in 1963 with the rise of the domestic washing machine and the development of easy
35 to iron fabrics, diversifying to launder and rent linen for the catering and hotel
36 industries. Recalibrating the urban landscape once again, high urban land costs have
37 forced this industry, where space is essential, to outer city areas. Sunlight
38 headquarters are now located in a business park near Basingstoke. A similar
39 trajectory has occurred for all the surviving laundries though often on a smaller
40 scale.
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44 Conclusion.

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46 Rather than being an inert object of unpleasant matter, whose encounter with
47 humans has been largely restricted to certain categories of person (poorer, female, or
48 – in NY- Chinese) for its transformation to re-use, and thus passed unnoticed, what I
49 have attempted to show instead is dirty washing's vibrant role in making shifting
50 socio-spatial relations in the city. What we have seen is that laundry practices have
51 figured in producing and reproducing gendered relations of labour, at home and
52 away from the home- which have also been imbricated in distinctive relations of
53 class, and have had distinctive social and spatial effects.
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56 Doing the laundry has shaped and reshaped public/ private boundaries shifting from
57 privatised work in the home to the social spaces of the early wash houses, public
58 laundries of the philanthropic and social housing estates, or later, of the launderette.
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3 As a private object made public through commercial laundry practices it became
4 visible in the city in a different way, first in the commercial laundries scattered
5 across the cities, and in its circulation in laundry vans on a daily basis, and later as a
6 commonplace site in the laundrettes of city high streets and in local neighbourhoods.
7 As washing machines and tumble driers became more affordable, laundry practices
8 once again departed the public sphere, re-privatised in the home, with the 'public
9 laundry' of the service sectors, and the laundry of the minority upper classes,
10 remaining the only dirty washing to move through the city to the remaining
11 commercial laundries on the fringes of cities out of sight. In conclusion then, this
12 mundane object has had a mobile and shifting history enacting multiple socio-
13 spatial, and gendered, relations and assemblages in the city, which have largely gone
14 unnoticed in accounts of everyday urban life. In exploring the travels of dirty
15 washing and the lives it makes up, this article has added to the growing literatures
16 which explore how material objects, and the practices associated with them, enact
17 social and public spaces in the city.
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24
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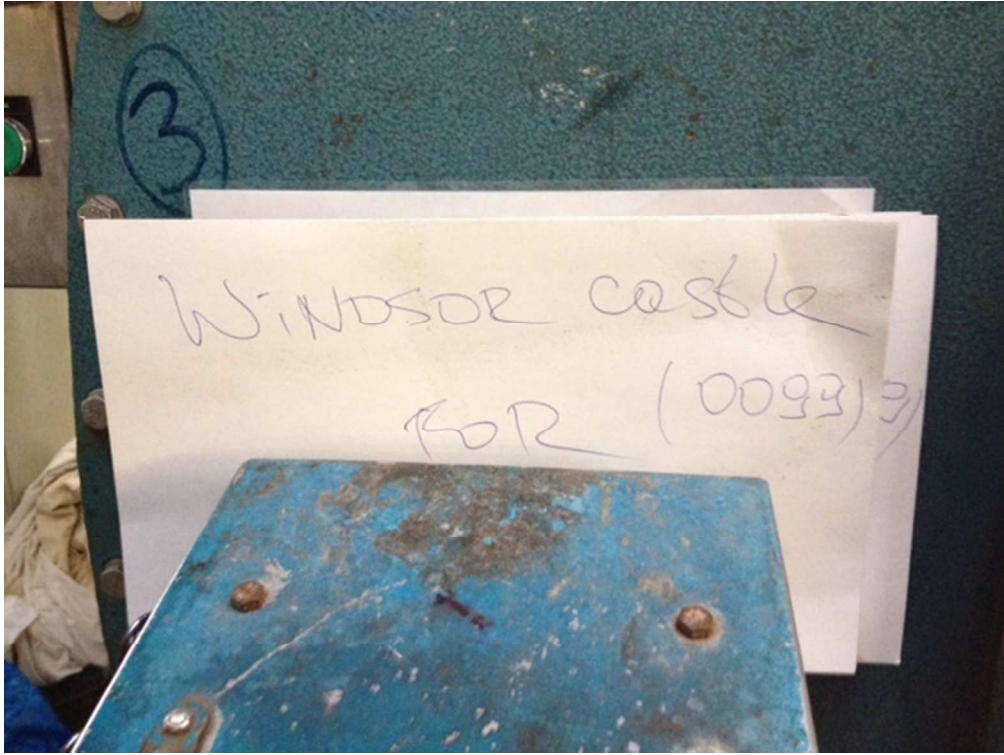
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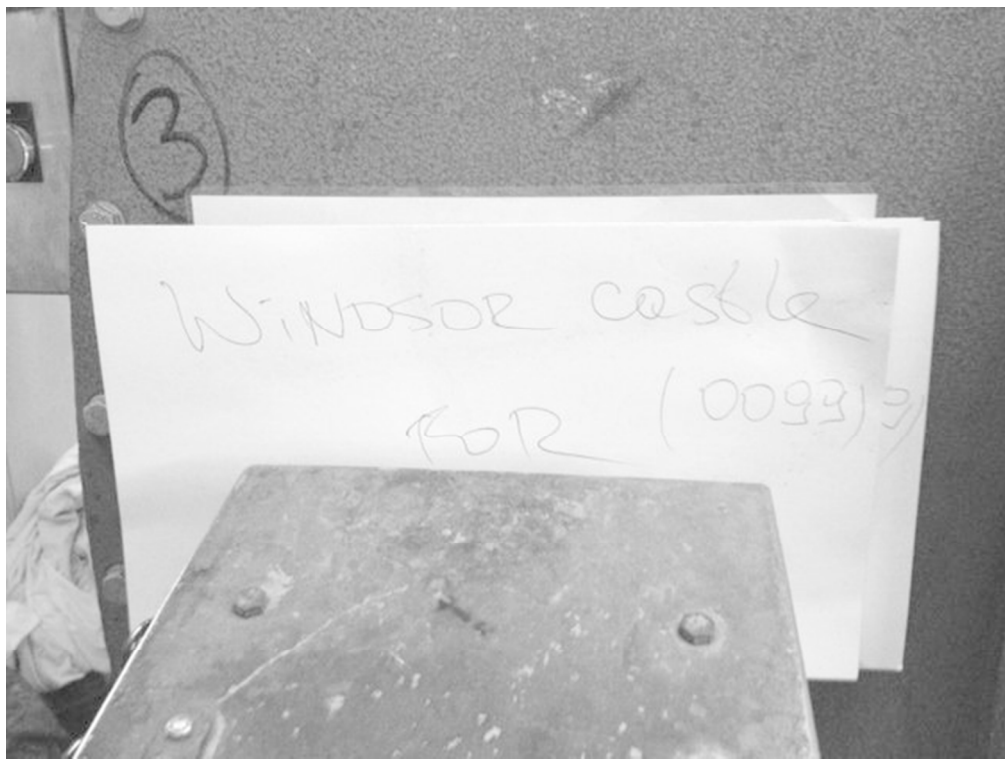
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7 **Mundane objects in the city: laundry practices and the making and remaking of**
8 **public/private sociality and space in London and New York.**
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