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THE
EMBARRASSMENT
OF CO-PRESENCE:
AU PAIRS AND
THEIR ROOMS

ABSTRACT  This article explores the ways Slovak au pairs living in London relate to their rooms through decoration and alternative aesthetic strategies. In this article the theme is neither the appropriation nor the refusal of personal spaces, but rather an ambivalence that becomes evident through the detailed study of au pairs’ material culture. The source of this ambivalence lies both in the transience of their residence and in the contradictions inherent in the au pair scheme, causing a relationship that I explore as the embarrassment of co-presence. The evidence suggests that au pairs find themselves torn between a desire to settle and appropriate a space and an equal desire not to be present or not to make an impact upon this space.
This emerges not only from strategies of (non-)decoration, but also from au pairs’ exploitation of the parameters of tidiness and mess, and alternative foci of self-expression such as the individual body.

Though researchers focusing on paid domestic labor\(^1\) have acknowledged the physicality of the home as essential for negotiating relationships between families and domestic helpers (e.g. Henshall Momsen 1999: 11–12; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Rollins 1985; Yeoh and Huang 1999), little has been written, for example, on the spatial restrictions experienced by domestic workers (Cox and Narula 2004), or the location and furnishing of their rooms, which are taken merely as signs, for example, of domination, resistance, and subversion (Henshall Momsen 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Rollins 1985). Less attention has been paid to the home itself as central to these relationships.

On the other hand, within material culture studies, home interiors have sometimes been used as case studies within the larger field of consumption. The concern has been with how people personalize and decorate their rooms as a means of creating their identity. The dominant theme in studies of home interiors is that of the appropriation of space through the activity of decoration (Buchli 1999; Clarke 2001; Miller 1988). More recently some studies have included cases where people are either unable or unwilling to appropriate their living space. For instance, Parrott (2005) has written about the position of patients in a medium-secure mental hospital in London. While the authorities in this institution strongly encourage patients to decorate and personalize their own space as a means of reconciling themselves to their current situation, many of those living there refuse to engage with any such activity because they want to insist that this is not their home but a transient space; everything resonant of home remains outside and in their past or future.

In this article the theme is neither the appropriation nor the refusal of personal spaces, but rather ambivalence in au pairs’ relations to their rooms. In particular, au pairs find themselves torn between a desire to settle and appropriate a space and an equal desire not to be present or not to make an impact upon this space. This emerges not only from strategies of decoration, but also from au pairs’ exploitation of the parameters of tidiness and mess, and alternative foci of self-expression such as the individual body.

Bourdieu (1999) established the academic refutation of the idea that taste as a form of aesthetic preference is an idiosyncratic individual choice. His sociological work *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1999) clearly demonstrated an overall relationship between individual taste and the workings of class in French society. Nevertheless, claiming an aesthetic preference remains throughout *Distinction* an
individualized activity, and the individual is fixed as an aggregate within a social field (Clarke 2002: 147). Conversely, Clarke’s (2002) ethnographic study of household consumption shows taste in action as it shifts to constitute particular forms of relations. On the other hand, she observes social relations as changing in response to particular manifestations of taste. Similarly, when examining au pairs’ choice of (non-)decorative strategies, their class, age, gender, education or rural vs. urban background are not salient variables. The same can be said about host families. Rather than seeing them merely as markers of identity or reflections of aggregate values such as class, gender, and ethnicity, decorations and possessions are seen here as active agents in the construction of social relations. In particular, the sheer variety of strategies au pairs employ in relation to their room reveals a complex of contradictions inherent in the au pair institution, ranging from the ambivalence of a pseudo-family relationship, through the association of an au pair with dirt, to the perceived transience of one’s stay juxtaposed with an endeavor to feel comfortable in an offered room.

SOURCES OF AMBIGUITY
Au pairing combines elements of paid domestic work undertaken by temporary migrants, cultural exchange defined by national and international law, and basic living arrangements. By law (European Agreement on Au Pair Placement 1969; Immigration Directorates’ Instructions 2003), au pairs are young foreigners, who stay with families for up to two years in order to learn English and acquire a better knowledge of the country. Au pairs must live “as part of family.” They receive food, accommodation, and “pocket money” (i.e. not a wage) in return for childcare and/or housework. Au pairs are not supposed to spend more than five hours per day helping families, and should have two rest days a week. In the United Kingdom, they must be between 17 and 27 years old, unmarried, without dependants, and originate from a specified group of largely European countries. Families are bound to treat au pairs as equal (European Agreement on Au Pair Placement 1969); the Immigration Directorates’ Instructions (2003, Ch. 4, section 1, paragraph 1) and agencies usually suggest treating them as family members. As legal conditions are only vaguely defined and there is no institutional control of particular arrangements, conditions and relationships depend on individuals, varying from quasi-familial to fairly distant and from generous to (much more commonly) exploitative.2

Since the early 1990s the dynamics of au pair exchange has significantly changed, with a new generation of au pairs coming from the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Cox 1999; Hess 2001, 2003; Williams and Baláž 2004); many of them from Slovakia, the country with the world’s highest number of au pairs per capita (Bahna 2005a,b). Given the importance of English in the
global hierarchy of languages, a relatively large number of 200 Slovak au pair placement agencies specialize in UK placement (Williams and Baláž 2004). Indeed, Great Britain is the main destination of Slovak au pairs, where they belong to the most numerous groups even in absolute numbers (Bahna 2005a).

This study is based on a year-long ethnography of fifty Slovak au pairs staying in the London area. Most of them came to London for a period of six months to a year, usually through arrangements made by specialist au pair agencies. They were between 18 and 31 years old. Half of them came from urban regions and the other half from rural areas. Only eight of them were university graduates; they tended to have more working- and less middle-class backgrounds. Only five of them were men. There was always a complex mixture of motivations and reasons why they opted for au pairing. Typically, all interviewees addressed the social and economic situation of present-day Slovakia, unemployment, and necessity to learn English “to be successful.” However, as interviews and especially participant observation revealed, some of them were trying to escape difficult relationships or followed a partner, many of them simply wanted a gap year and came along for experience—“to see the world, grow up and have fun before I settle down,” as one au pair put it. Most of them were not sure for how long they would stay abroad. Neither did they know whether they would like to return to Slovakia after finishing their au pair stay or would try to find another job abroad instead.

For their part, au pairs expected some kind of family-like integration (see also Hess and Puckhaber 2004). As they all were used to helping with domestic work within their parental households, they expected to do a similar share of the tasks and for it to be reciprocated by appreciation, caring, and integration into their host families. Au pairs were frequently shocked either to encounter more distant and professional relationships where status distinctions were more apparent or to find out that family-like relations often lead to exploitation (Anderson 2000; Gregson and Lowe 1994; Hess and Puckhaber 2004; Rollins 1985).

Nevertheless, au pairs also find the actual realization of this pseudo-family ideal hard and temper it with other concerns. For instance, a couple of au pairs interviewed were expected to share a room with a child. Though both of them had been comfortable sharing bedrooms with their siblings in Slovakia, they did not accept this arrangement and finally changed families, because they lacked privacy and could not negotiate their free time. The fact that “[they] actually were not any family” was apparent. In addition, au pair work in the home was sometimes seen as a necessary means to an extended stay abroad (Hess 2001, 2003) and some of my informants had no intention of developing any kind of family-like relationship with their host families, or of staying with them for a longer time.
Simultaneously, most host families are quite ready to acknowledge that they chose au pairs over other forms of childcare and house cleaning largely because it was what they could afford. It is most commonly a means by which they can continue in full-time or part-time employment, providing more control over childcare than chilmdminding and cheaper than a nanny (Anderson 2000; Gregson and Lowe 1994). Furthermore, having a live-in au pair runs contrary to the powerful English concern with domestic privacy, especially amongst working-class households, where even neighbors are not usually invited within the private home (Clarke 2001). It also runs contrary to the upper- and middle-class upstairs/downstairs tradition of separate domestic service (Dawes 1974).

Therefore, many host families try to limit their interaction with the au pairs to a polite minimum. The interviews revealed that most host families had hardly any knowledge of their au pairs’ background, of their country of origin, or of their lives in London. In general, families make less effort to disguise this distance and indeed coldness after they have had their first two or three au pairs. By the twelfth au pair the sense of weary routine is palpable.

Yet it is only too evident to both sides that whatever this relationship is, it is not that of family. This sense of distance is partly manifested in the sense of many au pairs that they just do not understand the house, its rhythms, norms, and expectations, whether they should respond to the calls of children when they are off-duty, which meals are for them, whether it is appropriate to watch television with the family or discuss their relationships with them.

The problem then becomes reconciling this distance or the failure to have unexploitative family-like relationship with the necessary intimacies of co-presence. The usual result is embarrassment.

THE AU PAIRS

In the summer of 2005 (along with Daniel Miller) I revisited several rooms in au pairs’ previous homes in villages of northern Slovakia. These rooms are usually crammed full of ornaments and decorations, often including several items relating to Christian worship, homemade decorative forms (e.g. embroidery), and collections (e.g. of china). The accumulated paraphernalia of childhood, such as toys and presents, are complemented by recent pictures of family and friends. There are also many signs of global cosmopolitanism ranging from hip-hop CDs to internationally branded toiletries. If there was a dominant aesthetic, it was an emphasis on display, and abundance. Decorations had strong discursive and practical connections with homemaking. One might expect that they would adopt similar aesthetics in relation to the rooms offered by host families in London.

Also materials au pairs come prepared with follow this expectation: along with clothes, other practical items and presents for the host
family, au pairs always take some small items of sentimental value, for example, fluffy stuffed animals, photograph albums, and small ornaments both from their own rooms and purchased to become decorations in their new rooms in London. As with most Slovak students, for packing Martina preferred a huge, practical rucksack and filled it with old clothes she intended to wear out as well as few of her favorite pretty clothes for special occasions. She rejected any clothes she feared might be considered sexy in view of the common stereotypes about sexual ambiguity in relation to fathers in host families. She also took her dictionary and Bible. Based on her experience in creating personal space within the dormitories she lived in as a student, she also included pictures of nephews, photographs of Slovak scenery, and a small wooden horse, a gift from an ex-boyfriend. Also, as was typical, she ended up with various items such as teddy bears slipped into her luggage by friends at her farewell party. Martina found most difficult of all the impossibility of bringing her favorite houseplants.

The au pairs’ packing mirrors research on identity and personalization: as the range of migration studies suggests, migrants live with more mobile and mediated experiences of home as well as with more portable concepts of their homes. Indeed, possessions have been increasingly recognized as a vehicle used by migrants to rearticulate their identities in a new place (Belk 1992; Mehta and Belk 1991; Petridou 2001). Objects such as guardian angels and small stuffed bears brought by au pairs to London are intended to preempt potential feelings of loneliness and separation and help them to appropriate their new rooms and feel “at home” there. However, their London rooms showed different attitudes.

THE ROOMS
There is no single type of au pair room. Quite often these are furnished with whatever surplus materials happen to be available in the house in question, but in those cases where furnishings have been purchased specifically with the idea of making a room available for an au pair there is a remarkable degree of uniformity. It seems that most families did not think twice before deciding that IKEA represented the perfect source of au pair style. Not just IKEA in general, but specifically white melamine furniture, which was found in approximately half of the photo-documented au pairs’ rooms. IKEA, just like the au pair herself, is generally seen as inexpensive, generically European in a young modern style, and is characterized by cleanliness, functionality, and efficiency, hopefully is reasonably long lasting, and is quite easy to replace.

Indeed in some cases, such as that of Mária, every single object in the au pair’s room—though not in the house—could be recognized from the IKEA catalogue (Figure 1). Within this recently bought and newly furnished house, this room had been equipped specifically
in order to accommodate an au pair. The setting was also made appropriate. Every inch of her room bar the window panes was painted white, even the carpet was white. Other IKEA touches ranged from the white melamine-faced chipboard furniture to the faux Henry Moore/Barbara Hepworth table light with a hole in the middle. The desk was particularly plain; a rectangle of wood resting of four white cylindrical legs, on which was placed the au pair’s television and the CD system. Further, there was a mirror in a white melamine-surfed chipboard frame placed on a white four-drawer chest without handles, so that one could barely discern the drawers from the chest.

As was the case for Mária, no au pair is offended by this kind of room; their expectations dovetail quite neatly with those of their hosts. As one au pair told me in an interview: “…and the room furniture is great, it is all IKEA!” Unlike passed-down or second-hand furniture, it is not loaded with family memories. Such rooms have a relatively neutral style, are clean, easy to tidy, functional, modern, and bright. Indeed in Slovakia this brand is considered somewhat upmarket. At this point the neutral aesthetics of such rooms fit well with the au pairs’ expectations of personalization through decorations.

THE EMERGENCE OF AMBIVALENCE

Although most host families actually think that they are acting in accordance with their responsibilities to the au pair, indeed most report that if anything they were remarkably “soft” and accommodating to them, there are actually many ways in which their basic ambivalence communicates itself to the au pair. For their part the au
pairs are extremely sensitive to any sign of ambivalence, precisely because these mirror their own feelings of ambivalence. While white melamine may be functional, no one would see it as exactly warm, and there is often a distinct coldness to the reception of au pairs in the London area that is quickly evident. This is often literal as the au pair soon recognizes that she has ended up in the coldest as well as the smallest room in the house. Often the result of a conversion of a garage or loft, it is also often the most distant room from the main part of the house.

There are usually other signs from which au pairs pick up on this sense of disregard. Furniture that had clearly been bought and sized with children in mind who had now outgrown it and was now seen as suitable for the au pair was common. In other cases it is clear that the family continues to see an au pair room as a temporary storage area for their overflowing possessions. One such room was a strong dark green and lined from top to bottom with full bookcases (Figure 2).

Iveta, the au pair living there, was a beautician by training and not

Figure 2
Iveta’s room serving as a temporary storage area for the host family’s possessions.
much given to reading. She loathed the room. In another case it was evident that the au pair room had been used to store, amongst other things, books of photographs, Czech glass, and other obviously unwanted gifts, the legacy of a string of previous au pairs.

However, there are families who are very thoughtful and try to help their newly arrived au pairs to appropriate their rooms. For instance, one family bought for each of their dozen au pairs a small ornament chosen by the au pair herself in recognition this could help her to cope with her new environment and settle down. However, the clashes may not necessarily be the result of any particular insensitivity. One family asked the au pair to choose the color they would repaint the room in and the poster to decorate the wall. The problem was that the next au pair that replaced her could not stand the bright pink and detested the poster of a leather-jacketed rocker on a motorbike.

In turn, the process of appropriation is limited by the ambivalence of the host family. While au pairs are generally happier with an IKEA scheme as opposed to a room filled with family materials, they assume they will be granted sufficient autonomy to personalize and decorate the room in question. The problem is that one of the first things they may be told is that this process is subject to restriction, as in “please don’t put anything on the walls,” or the hosts may say something not intended to be particularly restrictive, such as “please use blue tack when putting things on the walls,” but which is experienced by the au pair as amounting to the same thing. As a result most au pairs find themselves doing less room decoration than they had expected.

The story of how she accommodated to her new room takes up a substantial part of Martina’s diary. Martina was not comfortable with the positioning of the furniture as she found it. She spent three days pacing the room thinking about how to reposition things. She decided to move the bed further from the door to avoid overhearing noise from the rest of the house, and to reposition the wardrobes and a writing desk. She then asked Mrs. Cowan about the possibility of moving the furniture around. She asked this as a purely rhetorical question as she considered the au pair room an equivalent of a Slovak student accommodation room: a place one does not really own, but is free to appropriate and decorate, to put anything on the walls (even repaint them) or to move furniture around. Hence she was completely taken aback to find out that although she was permitted to move her bed away from the door, she was not allowed to move the wardrobes without Mr. Cowan’s agreement and supervision. Actually Mrs. Cowan was afraid that the old wardrobes might fall to pieces when moved. But as Mr. Cowan could never find time to inspect the wardrobes to determine whether they could be moved, Martina deduced that he did not want her to do anything with them at all. Similarly, Mrs. Cowan was appalled when she realized Martina had
put up her pictures and posters on the wall and asked her to take them off. However, later she had provided Martina with a cork board to put her posters on.

This was one of many occasions when the problem was not that the family was inconsiderate, but rather that misunderstandings had led to the au pair looking to find offense in their actions and statements. In this case the family was generous and considerate towards the newcomer’s needs: when Martina, for instance, asked Mrs. Cowan where she could listen to music, explaining that she never watched the TV that had been provided for her room, the Cowans bought her a CD player. Nevertheless, Martina felt restricted in what she considered her natural right: to decorate what she saw as her own space in whatever way she wished.

She decided she could not fully feel at home here. Though originally only the luggage limits had prevented Martina from bringing her houseplants to London, she never subsequently brought a plant into her room. As a result Martina considers her room as bare as a desert, that in the absence of plants and flowers it is more like a storeroom than a real room. For her it stands as evidence of her host family’s general failure of care and consideration. Although she could easily have afforded such plants she preferred to claim that they were too expensive and rather to use the room as evidence to support her complaints against the family.

Most au pairs reported that their arrival was accompanied by a powerful feeling of self-consciousness beyond anything they had anticipated. The simple fact of not knowing when and where it was appropriate for them to be within this new house led to considerable anxiety. It was here that ambivalence surfaced around the transient nature of their presence. Afraid of over-identifying with something they know is going to be temporary, alongside their disappointment as the true nature of their relationship with the host family becomes evident, they become much less certain about how far they actually want to impose their personality upon this space. Just as the families (especially after the first couple of au pair experiences) start to feel it is not worth the “bother” of investing in a deeper relationship, the au pairs also wonder whether there is much point making this more of a home. Indeed a common decorative element is some form of diary, a calendar or even an advent calendar used to in effect count down the period until their next visit home or their return home. For instance, the most prominent decoration of Lenka’s room was something Slovak au pairs refer to as tapeta (wallpaper) or nástenka (noticeboard). This is actually large sheet of paper, which au pairs cover with English vocabulary, bus timetables, contact telephone numbers, and other useful information. In Lenka’s case it included in large Slovak letters the words “only three months to the twelfth of December,” and the time and platform of the coach that would take her home for Christmas (Figure 3).
If anything this is exacerbated by the materials the au pairs have brought with them. The very act of putting out on windowsills photographs of their family, the boyfriends they left behind, pictures of friends when on camp together, and paraphernalia from their own childhood, all serve to distance themselves at least as much as to impose themselves upon this new space. For instance Silvia made her room “her castle” precisely through decorating and distancing it from the rest of the house. While she did not feel at home in the house of an English family that wanted her to work more than seven hours a day without overtime paid and appeared to be “treating her just like a servant,” she “felt fully at home in her room, because she had all her things from Slovakia there.” Silvia put on display all her postcards, magazine cuttings, and inspiring quotations from her favorite novels and poems. She took her jewelry out of its small box, and hung it over the mirror, brought dry autumn leaves from the neighborhood park, and arranged them into the small vase she had bought in a charity shop. The only missing ingredient in her decoration was pictures of her family and boyfriend. She considered these as part of her private life to be kept as something specific to her. She felt her life and the host family’s lives overlapped too much anyway—they ate together, her schedule and her work were fully dependent on the dynamics of their household, she knew what they ate, when and how they spent their times together, when they quarreled... Hence she decided to keep some things just for herself. She thought there was something vulgar or exhibitionist in displaying pictures of her loved ones. So her photo album stayed in her drawer, though she took it out frequently to view it herself.
The children in particular are fundamental to this growing ambiguity. While in most cases the parents and the au pair negotiate reasonably clear boundaries, young children cannot be expected to view their au pairs as a close and warm relationship until 5.30 pm, after which they are supposed to entirely transfer their affections and ignore the relationship that dominates the rest of the day. The fact that children may come in without knocking and at times when au pairs are not formally working can become irksome and difficult to deal with.

On the other hand, au pairs usually want to feel they are accomplished at this caring relationship, which provides more emotional reward than cleaning. Hence the au pairs’ rooms are frequently also filled with drawings by the children they are looking after placed alongside the decorations that come from Slovakia. Indeed, pictures of these children are the most common decoration for the au pairs’ rooms. Some families put them there even before their au pairs move in, as an invitation into their circle, or on special occasions such as child’s birthday. Even au pairs who are not happy with their work or their relationship with their host parents sometimes carry and display pictures of the children after leaving the family and former au pairs display them back in their own homes.

After a while things from their home in Slovakia and from the new home become integrated. Some of Lenka’s friends used to comment that her room in her home in a small town in southern Slovakia looked more like a museum it was so crammed with memorabilia. And at least a few of these objects had migrated with her. There was her pillow with “sweet dreams” over a sleeping teddy bear. It sat on her bed next to a big gray hippo, a present from the friends she had made in London since she arrived, which rather dwarfed her curly white teddy that she had brought from Slovakia and was now sitting on the middle shelf. The teddy had company in the form of a china guardian angel given to her by her mother and a calendar with the horoscope. The photos from the Christmas she had spent at home with her family were now set on the wall in big paper frames decorated by the children with finger painting, and also included a photo of the children alongside the classic photo of her parents holding her when she was a child (Figure 4).

There are several additional strategies alongside decorations that provide au pairs with a means of accommodating themselves to their rooms. One response is simply to see their room as a place of mess, in opposition to their role as cleaner in the rest of the house (Figure 5). Indeed one au pair, who found herself constantly expected to clean surfaces that could never be regarded as dirty, deliberately left a surface in her bedroom uncleaned just out of curiosity to see how long it would take before it actually became dusty. Hence they cover surfaces with clothes, with emptied out handbags, and other materials that bring a disorder that asserts a certain agency and
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Figure 4
Photos in the frames decorated by children.

Figure 5
Disorder in Martina’s room.
separation from the rest of the house. Eva left everything everywhere in her room (Figure 6). There were her bras lying about on the floor, and a mass of her clothes placed on top of her suitcase. Piles of CDs and English textbooks were placed in tidy lines on the floor. There were piles of her cosmetics and toiletries proudly displayed on the top of her chest of drawers. Though she consciously decided not to decorate the room, it was apparently “her” room and her territory, as her things just were everywhere. Iveta, the beautician that was
faced with a room filled with bookcases took another route, which was to concentrate on the personalization and aestheticization of her own body rather than the room. Photographs of her room show surfaces mainly covered by cosmetics and various lotions or hair products rather than the more usual photographs and ornaments (Figure 7).

HOW NOT TO MAKE AN IMPRESSION
These examples all focused on the au pairs’ relationships to their rooms. But it should be borne in mind that after a short time many au pairs become much more interested in the activities of their leisure time and the friendships and quarrels that go on outside of the house. Within the house even time that is supposed to be leisure ends up being time spent with the children and is in effect experienced as “work,” or at least as boredom associated with not having found a good reason to get out of the house. Thereby many au pairs associate themselves less with the host families’ households and consequently with their rooms. This leads to a series of strategies that represent forms of self-erasure; a desire to both be present and not present or at least to accentuate the transience of their presence. In effect, rather than wanting to make a good impression, au pairs become increasingly concerned not to make an impression at all.

Entering Patricia’s room, one could not see a single possession other than her jacket hanging over the chair next to the table. All her other things were hidden in the drawers. When inspecting her room more closely, it became evident that her books, embroidery, and cosmetics on the windowsill were all carefully obscured from view by curtains (Figure 8). In many cases the au pairs decided not
to put anything at all on the walls, at least for the first few months and commonly for their entire stay. In a few cases the room becomes a kind of sacrosanct space that is not theirs but is simply used. Their attitude to this space is just as if it were an expensive hotel room that they could ill-afford; they are terrified lest they create some damage.

When au pairs talk about this minimal use of the space they sometimes phrase it in terms of a fear that they will end up having to pay for some damage they cause, a sentiment that reflects the same fear held by the host family. Mária, over a few months, has become practically obsessed with her desire to leave this room exactly as she found it when she first moved in. At one point she accidentally spilt the powder used to keep flowers alive longer. She was convinced that this had caused a stain in the carpet. For a couple of weeks she would phone me to consult me about different kinds of carpet cleaner, cleaners that she feared would themselves in turn stain the carpet still more indelibly. This was consistent with her failure to decorate or personalize the room; everything was constantly kept as though she could gather her things and leave in ten minutes and the room would have no memory, no impression of the time she had spent there. Even the small crucifix from a silver-like metal, which she has bought as a souvenir in Canada, where she had traveled with young Christians for a meeting with the Pope, was not easily visible. Another time, Mária was aghast because a pair of blue denim jeans left a stain on the white carpet: Mária usually sat on the floor while watching TV, but from then on she always made absolutely sure there was a towel between the carpet and her jeans.

However, the most commonly expressed attitude is simply one of not bothering. Having come to regard their stay as transient and their relationship to their hosts as tightly constrained they no longer feel it is worth investing their time, things, money, and emotions in decorations. They put a picture of their boyfriend on the wardrobe, have their teddy bear on the bed, and that is it.

This desire not to make any impression is not confined to the room. It was commonly reflected in au pairs’ relationship to food and eating in the house. Host families often reported bewilderment in that as far as they could see the au pairs eat “nothing.” Frequently au pairs did not feel comfortable taking any family food, and just did not want to be seen while eating; they preferred to wait for an hour until the kitchen was free to take their glass of orange juice or a meal.

One au pair never felt comfortable eating from the family fridge, especially after her host mother reprimanded her when she took more pieces of ham than she thought was appropriate and drank orange juice not only for breakfast but also during the day, without even mixing it with water. The au pair’s response was to eat in the house as little as possible leaving the house every evening to
visit her boyfriend and ate as much as she wished, without feeling inhibited, because, “she was at home there.”

Anxiety and misunderstandings also arose from the Slovak understanding of hospitality. This meant expecting hosts to ask guests whether they are hungry even when it is perfectly evident that they are not and offer them food on a regular basis. Since au pairs did not feel integrated enough within the home to feel part of the host family, and they also were not treated as guests, there was no clear category they could associate themselves with, and this became particularly problematic when they felt insecure about their access to basic food during the day. As Barbora put it: “here you should be like at home, and yet you feel you can not even eat normally. This is even not civilised.”

Some au pairs did not like eating in the households during weekends for varying reasons. For instance, Danka thought that as she was not working during weekends, and food is part of au pairs’ wages, it was not right for her to take food from the house on weekends.

In fact au pairs most commonly eat from the fridge but never ever want to actually start or finish a product, which would make that act of consumption evident. That way there would be no sense of debt, or obligation, no chance of being accused of greed. The ideal was to be someone who added to the family and to the house, and never to be seen as a person who took something away from it. This attitude is related to that often found in peasant economies, where the ideal of life itself is to see an increase in the house and the patrimony so that the next generation receives more and not less than one inherits from the past (Gudeman and Rivera 1990).

Au pairs are also sensitive of their presence as an extra body in the house. They do not want to be heard while using the toilet or bathroom, nor seen when leaving bathroom after taking a shower. At the same time, they do not feel comfortable hearing someone else using these facilities. Any encounter with bodily functions could be embarrassing. In addition, they feel intrusive to the family as a unit. Hana always left the living room when both of the parents were present watching TV, even though she liked them both, and did not mind staying there when only one was present. She simply felt they should be allowed their own time for each other. For the same reason some au pairs tried not to be in the house during weekends, and instead would hang around London, eating out in cheap fast-food outlets, and coming back only in evenings. They thought their very presence was something that detracted from the ideal of the nuclear family.

AU PAIR AND/AS DIRT

This refusal to leave an impression relates to the wider context of the au pairs’ work and reflects a contradiction by which, on the one
hand, the au pair is present in order to keep the house clean, but at the same time starts to feel that their presence in the house is experienced as a form of dirt.

The two main roles of the au pairs, childcare and cleaning, both leave them constantly exposed to the intimacies of family dirt in both material and symbolic senses.

For instance, Paula, while cleaning, was regularly finding tissues covered with semen on the bed and floor in the master bedroom, and it was apparent to her that it was she who was supposed to dispose of them. Even if she had decided not to remove them, she had to touch them to make place for more acceptable tasks such as vacuum cleaning or making beds. Though she was shocked and disgusted, she would throw the tissues away without complaining, though commenting to me that “these people have no shame and behave like swines.”

Mirka was working for a single mother with a rather active social and sexual life, and would regularly find piles of erotic lingerie, condoms, and sex toys scattered in her host’s bedroom. She tidied them with a mixture of embarrassment, amusement, and a bit of voyeurism. But what really appalled her was the sheer discrepancy in the enforcement of shared intimacy. While she was confronted with the details of the sexual life of her host daily, her host ensured that she did not have to even contemplate the sexuality of her au pair. As in most host families, she anticipated any embarrassment over seeing or hearing anything to do with private matters by a series of clear regulations. Mirka, as with the vast majority of au pairs, was simply not allowed to have male visitors in her room. Mirka considered herself to be very attractive and thought that London could offer many interesting encounters with men. What particularly infuriated her was the constant babysitting that was required in order to give her host the freedom to entertain men, which was precisely why she was unable to go out and meet men herself. She felt her host enjoyed men and life at her expense.

Not only did host families have the power to exploit their au pairs’ work and define house rules restricting their au pairs’ social and intimate lives, through their work au pairs are regularly embarrassed by confrontation with the host families’ intimacy. It does not matter that an au pair really does not want to overhear the couple quarreling, or a mother losing her temper with her child, or the parents having sex in their bedroom. Au pairs are in turn denied such intimacy, precisely because families wanted to avoid the very same embarrassment. Thus, for Mirka, her host’s sex toys and condoms were above all evidence of the asymmetry and injustice in the au pair institution.

In addition, the au pairs’ work in cleaning seems to be routinely disregarded by the family, almost as though to acknowledge the work of the au pair would be to acknowledge the dirt that they created in the house. They, therefore, commonly prefer to see cleaning as
simply “routine,” something done by rote. Routine allows the family to see dirt as an automatic product rather than the result of their own agency. While this resolves their ambivalence, it effectively transfers ambivalence to the au pair confronted with an unacknowledged act of cleaning.

Furthermore, in doing domestic work, au pairs themselves become associated with dirt. Analyzing the role of domestic workers in reproducing gender identities in Victorian households, Davidoff shows how the employment of servants meant women could negotiate the contradiction between domesticity requiring physical labor and dirtiness, and the cleanliness and spirituality of feminine virtue (Davidoff 1974). While dirt and housework connote inferior morality, white middle-class women transcend these connotations by employing women different from themselves to do the work. “Dirtiness appears always in a constellation of the suspect qualities that, along with sexuality, immorality, laziness, and ignorance, justify social rankings of race, class and gender” (Palmer 1989: 140).

Following Davidoff’s (1974) work, Anderson argues that domestic work is dishonorable work because it is constructed as dirty and is associated with the body and physicality:

To rid themselves of the hated characteristics of pollution and embodiment, they [employers] load them on to another/an Other group of women. While “Other” women may be appropriate to do servicing work, there is often an overt fear of contamination from the bodies of these “Others.” So typically, workers’ [and also au pairs’] clothes have to be washed separately...The domestic worker is embodied by virtue of her gender, her “race” and by her enforced association with (the employer’s) dirt” (Anderson 2000: 142, 147).

However, au pairs are not associated with dirt only for the connotation of paid domestic work with dirtiness and inferior status. In Purity and Danger Mary Douglas (2004) demonstrated that the idea of dirt is linked with more symbolic systems of purity. It is the by-product of systematic classification and ordering of matter and represents inappropriate elements and ambiguous items which do not fit particular systems of classification (Douglas 2004). The fact that au pairs do not fit properly into various categorizations, complicating simultaneously notions of hospitality, paid occupation, and generous reciprocity, family privacy, or motherhood, makes them an excellent example of such ambiguity.

This association is ironic, because the au pairs are officially present as the persons who remove dirt, and never expected themselves to be cast as an ambivalent presence within the home. Consequently, while withdrawing their presence in the endeavor not to make an impression, au pairs bring their role of cleaners removing dirt to perfection.
CONCLUSION

Since the time of Mary Douglas (2004) the literature in anthropology about dirt has focused on the clear establishment of boundaries and the avoidance of ambiguity and ambivalence. As associated with dirt au pairs become subject to explicit or implicit boundaries trying to separate dirt and host family or home. These boundaries might have a form of explicit house rules (Cox and Narula 2004), but frequently are expressed through subtle and implicit means of restrictions in decorations, or au pairs’ own attempts to secure the family’s privacy and not to be “in their way.” Consequently the au pairs’ presence and agency within the home are limited.

Both au pairs and hosts are equally ambivalent about their respective presence together. As I have suggested, the original source of this ambivalence lies in a fundamental contradiction in the institution of the au pair itself, revealed by a critical review of the explicit discourse around the pseudo-family relationship. Both host and au pair appeal to this ideal, but neither, for their respective reasons, can actually realize it.

Although this underlying structural contradiction is relatively straightforward I am not suggesting a deterministic analysis. This is not simply a confrontation between the habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1999) of young Slovak women and that of middle-class Londoners. Furthermore, there is no direct and simplistic relation between distance or exploitation and minimalism on the one hand and friendly or non-exploitative relation and a happy appropriation of the given room through decorations on the other hand. As I have shown, there is quite a variety of responses to the situation by au pairs as evident in rooms that vary from immaculate to messy, minimalist to cramped. Neither can this variety be explained by different habitus based on au pairs’ differences in class, education or gender, as ethnography clearly revealed.

In turn, the au pairs’ relations to their rooms are bound by complex webs of aesthetic and social discourses that are not merely representatives of given dispositions (e.g. social class, gender, or ethnicity). Many intertwining factors are present, ranging from the age of the children, or the state of the au pairs’ friendships with other au pairs and relationships with their partners, to whether there happens to be a reasonable aesthetic fit between the taste of the au pair and taste of the host family. As a result, quite benign host families may end up with frustrated and angry au pairs, while quite cold and distant host families may suit a particular au pair very well.

What is clear is that the primary expression of this embarrassment of co-presence is likely to be encountered in the specific relationship between the au pair and her own room. This is the place where her lack of agency in other areas may be turned into a messy room, or where her desperate desire not to make an impression in this
transient location becomes an obsession with a possible stain. While this logic may be conscious and intentional, it may also be the secondary consequence of an attitude such as simply not bothering or caring, because one has decided that what matters lies outside of the house itself. A great variety of objects and genres of material culture au pairs find available enable them to accentuate and deal with various and subtle nuances.

In addition, the material articulation of these dynamics is often quite ephemeral. The critical role of material culture is in the way it facilitates ambivalence without this ever emerging as conflict, something au pairs desperately want to avoid with families. Material culture also helps to avoid internal self-conflict, since by being configured through material culture the response to ambivalence is implicit and is not otherwise explicated by the au pairs themselves. However, material objects are the socially acknowledged terms by which such actions could be taken: for their part, au pairs in their homes are accustomed to appropriating space and creating the feeling of homeliness through the use and display of decorations. What is palpable from this discussion is how various denotative and contextual understandings of material culture could be differentially employed.

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NOTES
1. As there is a considerable lack of academic focus on au pairs (though see Bahna 2005; Cox and Narula 2004; Hess 2001, 2003; Hess and Puckhaber 2004), various works on paid live-in domestic workers provide some useful points of reference.

2. Much of the literature on exploitation relates to paid domestic labor (see Anderson 1999, 2000; Constable 1997; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Henshall Momsen 1999; Hess 2004), and this article attempts to expand the focus and concentrate on topics of co-presence, intimacy, and material culture. Though I mention exploitation only when it relates to these topics, it is important to emphasize that the au pair institution is asymmetrical and puts au pairs at a disadvantage. The fact that au pairs are foreigners lacking sufficient networks, fluent English or familiarity with British legislation makes them vulnerable and exploitable, especially given their specific position both within
the global economy and as guests and strangers within the host households. The vast majority of au pairs I interviewed clearly worked more hours than they had agreed. Their overtime work was not paid, and they had little say in their working conditions, time schedules or living arrangements.

3. These quantitative characteristics were important for our decision to work with this particular group. The fact that I am Slovak enabled me to communicate with Slovak au pairs who frequently have only limited knowledge of English and generally tend to socialize with other Slovaks. Fieldwork was conducted in London, which, as a global city (Sassen 1991), has a much higher demand for domestic workers and consequently a higher concentration of au pairs than other parts of the UK (Cox 1999, 2000).

4. For the duration of the project I worked as research assistant to Professor Daniel Miller from University College London, who was the project’s principal investigator. The ethnography was carried out mainly by me, with supplementary interviews with host families who either have or have previously had Slovak au pairs by Daniel Miller. Research methods included participant observation, in-depth interviews with fifty au pairs and a dozen families, as well as photo-documentation of nineteen rooms inhabited by au pairs.

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