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'It's more than just what it is': Defetishising commodities, expanding fields, mobilising change...

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Abstract

Commodity geographies are politically weak. Geographical pedagogy isn't particularly engaging. Radical geography should make connections. But it rarely leaves room for interpretation. Too much seems to be too didactic. And to preach to the converted. That's a problem that needs attention. So, is it possible to develop a radical, less didactic, geography? With research funding, publication and teaching the way they are? To engage more students, more heartily, in the issues studied? To promote social justice, critical citizenship, and participatory democracy? But not by setting out the right ways to think, be, or act. Some film-makers, artists and writers have been able to do this. It seems. Subtly and cleverly. Through projects attempting to de-fetishise commodities. But their politics have been placed largely in the background, between the lines of, or separated out from, the presentation of scenes, things, relations, bodies, lives and voices. Seen and unseen elements of their audiences' lives. Re-connected. Perhaps. Through communication strategies giving audiences something to think about and to think with, to argue about and to argue with. Putting themselves in the picture, in the process. These less didactic materials may be difficult to master for an exam or an essay. They may not make it clear who or what's right or wrong or what audiences are supposed to do. But they could engage them in less direct ways. When they're shopping for petrol or fish, or when they're doing or thinking about completely different things. Things that may not even come under the heading of 'production' or 'consumption'. This approach might be labelled as 'weak', 'relativist', a bit too 'cultural' 'post-modern', or 'defunct'. But it's an approach that may be radical *in effect* because its 'politics' *aren't* so straightforward or 'up front'. This paper is about changing relationships between research, writing, teaching, learning and assessment; expanding fields of commodity geographies to include classrooms as sites not only of 'instruction', but also of learning, for researchers and their students[1]; showing how such learning might usefully shape research and writing elsewhere in these fields for those engaged in this defetishising project.

Keywords: Commodity fetishism; Radical geography; Material culture; Critical pedagogy; Autoethnography; Expanded field

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[1] This paper is written to illustrate, as well as to advocate, a 'co-learning' process (Le Heron, R., Baker, R., McEwan, L. 2006. Co-learning: re-linking research and teaching in geography. Journal of Geography in Higher Education 30 (1), 77–87) taking place across a number of sites in the authors' expanded fields (Clifford, J., 1997, Spatial practices: fieldwork, travel, and the disciplining of anthropology. In: Clifford, J. (Ed.), Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century. Harvard University Press, London, pp. 52–91; Katz, C., 1992. All the world is staged: intellectuals and the projects of ethnography. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 10, 495–510; Katz, C., 1994. Playing the field: questions of fieldwork in geography. Professional Geographer 46(1), 67–72). In 2001–2003, we were involved in a final year undergraduate module on the *Geographies of material culture* as lecturer (Cook), postgraduate teaching assistant (Evans) and undergraduate students (Griffiths, Morris, Wrathmell).

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1. 1989, *Lands and peoples of the non-Western world*

It was one of those introductory courses often taught by graduate students to fund their studies. And the University of Kentucky was keen that undergraduates should gain some knowledge about the wider world. They'd need this, for example, to 'sell more pick-up trucks in Guatemala'. We had a lot to get through. Latin America one day. Southern Africa the next. China the next. And so on. That's how the textbooks organised things. This was the regional geography that separated out lands and peoples, ''overvalorising localism'' and ''obfuscating connectedness'' in the process (Mitchell, 1995, p. 111). Most of the students didn't seem that interested. In Ian's class, at least. However interactive or entertaining he tried to make his lectures. The number one question was still 'Will this be on the test?' At the time, he couldn't find much geographical work that could allow him and his students to appreciate the connections between their lives and those of the people they were studying. The world was out there and had to be learned, bit by bit.

2. Sarah's first journal entry: 'You are cyborg?'

BEEP...
The bloody alarm clock's going off.
BEEP...*BEEP*...
I lurch towards it to deaden the *BEEP*...*BEEP*... (*annoying*!)...*BEEP* shrill sound and bang the button 'OFF'. After 10 minutes of fighting time, hoping the clock will stop, allowing me further minutes buried under the warm covers, I sit up. Straight.

I'm met with a blur of shapes, colours, maybe images? The start of *my* day, unaided by the object in my top drawer, in my bedside table. A haze. `This is the first 'gaze' through which I view the world`. Short-sighted.[2] Unable to attribute clear meaning to the blobs I see in my room. Not helped by the fact that I've just woken up! To shower in 'sight' or 'short-sight' that is the question. I'd rather the latter in my 'state'!

Fresh from the shower and feeling like a new person. Suppose I am now: transformed by the bath gel, shampoo, not forgetting the water, and countless other taken-for-granteds, the remnants of which remain on my body in the perfume and silky-touch of my skin.[3] And the pat-pat-pat of my damp feet through the kitchen...no longer clean! I'm *looking* better too. Until I reach into that drawer and put on my `Glasses. The second 'gaze' through which I understand the world.`

This 'corrected vision' enables me to see the world in a whole new light – literally. A process that I don't really understand. Something to do with the lens' shapes in my glasses. Corrects the images that my eyes produce. My muscles aren't tight enough. Is that right? It doesn't matter. I rely on the optician.[4] They send out 6-monthly reminders to attend an eye appointment. They are just there. Living a life independent from my everyday? Connected through my glasses, we are.[5] The glasses do the connecting...These musings, subconscious, as I peer into the mirror...

I'm trying to transform my body into another 'me'. Not the me that wakes up and goes to sleep in that room, in that house, but the me that walks around the other spaces. Shielded by the perfume, the trainers (very old and in need of repair!), the blouses, trousers and sweater, the deodorant... They are simultaneously a part of and apart from my *persona*. The very word underlining the embeddedness of guise and façade in my *character*...Done it again, without meaning to. What is integral, integrated...inherited in me? Even hereditary passing of genes to next generation is fabricated replication, never pure...[6] How to express this? My frustration grows throughout the day as I walk around, looking for the people, the things that aren't cybernetic: not connected, infiltrated, altered...

It's evening. To go out-on-the-town I need an image refinement. Understatement! My cybernetic mask thickens with the make-up and lip-gloss, hair-spray... A reach for the wardrobe and a selection of T-shirts. Removing my glasses I read the small print – `a third 'gaze': no-glasses-close-up-focus` but not *understanding*. Black tops from Hong-Kong and EEC. Or should I go to Greece? Or with the red tops – more classy – to Thailand, England (no?!), Indonesia? I must emphasize never having looked at the origin of my clothes before. Think I'll wear the silver one that has no label. Safer not to know where it comes from. Would 'Made in Syria' really make a difference? I still wouldn't know how, where, when it was made

[2] I use sight as a means to structure my thoughts as my glasses and contact lenses help me 'reconstruct' my everyday image – a concept important to Kunzru (1997), reflecting upon Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto'. Hence, 'it's possible to construct (my) identity' (*ibid* np) through their use. My reliance upon them in order to 'clearly' see around me reflects the cyborg reconfiguration of self:world relationships integral to Haraway's work (1991).

[3] For Haraway 'being a cyborg isn't just about the freedom to construct yourself. It's about networks' (Kunzru, 1997, np). Thus my shower is not just about changing my image. It is immersed in countless networks of others' lives: of things and people (Haraway, 1991).

[4] I may meet the optician, but who made the glasses and that little cleaning cloth, designed them even? I could go on. The most fundamental question for me is the cost of the new pair of specs. An object, a commodity, a 'thing with a price' (Cohen, 1997, p. 11) reflects on Marx's commodity fetishism where the price emanates from the core of the glasses: we do not see the people who crafted them. Sight to be bought and sold.

[5] My understanding of myself as a 'node' in a network, derived from Haraway's (1991) 'Cyborg Manifesto', means that as the optician affects my life, I similarly affect hers. My £20, in exchange for my appointment, may be used to buy the clothes for her children perhaps? I wouldn't know.

[6] Of course, I acknowledge that an essentialised 'pureness' does not exist, with the notion of purity problematised through cyborg ontology (Gonzalez, 1995).

and by whom.[7] And it goes with my chain – connecting my outfit as well as me with the world.[8]

Glasses: an amalgam of metal, twisted, contorted, with the odd screw, adjusted to fit me. Personal and yet a foreign body, perched on my nose, which I never feel comfortable with – when I look in the mirror...I hate my glasses – the image they portray. Ironically they 'correct' my sight, give me images that I seek to reject, changing the way I look as well as see... I can't 'go out' in glasses. A freak. 'Men make passes at women with glasses', or so the saying goes: passes, not in the desirable sense either!

So to the finishing touch, I lie, integral part of my soirée image. My contact lenses[9] and fourth 'gaze' and re-transformation of me as cyborg through sight. As reflected in the mirror. Much more sexy. And a part of me – in spirit. I don't want a visible structure in front of my eyes – easier for me to deny I'm a cyborg, and for others. Don't have to think of the connections. Taken for granted. Just like my sight 'til it became a 'minus'. I'm now −3.5... and getting worse.

Alarm bells ring in my ears: Will I succumb to the ultimate cybernetic infiltration of the organic body? The final 'gaze': corrective laser eye surgery.[10]

3. Ian's conference paper (i)[11]

You may have read Harvey (1990), Jackson and Thrift (1995), Cook and Crang (1996a), Leslie and Reimer (1999), Jackson (1999), Hartwick (2000), Castree (2001) or other manifestos for, and reviews of, geographical research aiming to 're-connect' the lives of producers and consumers.[12] Most place Marx's writing on the commodity centre stage. But none seems complete without passing comment on other theoretical approaches and their politics. Debbie Leslie and Suzy Reimer, for example, have argued that research abandoning linear commodity chains in favour of "virtually endless" 'circuits of culture', can effectively throw out a political stance and a language around which, they say, "we can mobilise" (1999, p. 407). Elaine Hartwick (2000, p. 1182) pushed this argument on by condemning 'trendy' postmodern notions, and the 'deflections' of actor network theory, for their – quote – "vague and undefined politics ... based on an acceptance of the status quo"; as forms of contemplation from which "little or no political practice" can emerge. For her, 'geomaterialist' commodity chain research has the radical 'edge' that stimulates political praxis. It *alone* can provide clear "strategies for action and formulas for change" (*ibid*, 1178).

While by no means occupying the same theoretical ground,[13] Noel Castree has similarly taken issue with Peter Jackson's (1999, 2002)"essays-cum-manifestos" about research into the "geographical lives of commodities" (Castree, 2004, p. 22). What this commodity research requires, he argues, is "greater analytical precision, a sharper normative edge, and a more forthright expression of the academic voice" (*ibid*, 23). Many won't pass proper judgement on who and what is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong', in these geographies. They won't foreground their ideas about how things 'ought to be'. They tend to let others – notably their research participants – do the talking there. For Castree, that's "judgemental relativism" (*ibid*, 24) and Jackson and others could be criticised for failing, I quote, "to specify what the proper {*sic*} normative role of the researcher might be" (*ibid*, 28). Jackson *ought* to have said what relations between producers and consumers *ought* to be like, and what 'Left wing' commodity researchers *ought* to be doing about this to be properly 'critical'. These researchers need to be *more* didactic.[14] They need to come up with those 'strategies for action and formulas for change'. But this didactic role is complicated by issues of "voice, message and audience", Castree also wrote (*ibid*, 31). We couldn't agree more.

[7] Again, the concept of 'commodity fetishism' is important. As a cybernetic being I am embedded in global networks and yet I am unaware of those that I connect.

[8] Through the clothes that I wear I am connected not only to the people who made them but to the machines themselves that manufactured my outfit. As a cyborg, are those machines a part of me? The amalgam of man (sic.) and machine, to which Haraway's (1991) 'cybernetic organism' alludes, where does it end? What is the extent of my hybridity?

[9] The contact lens is so discreet and yet so intimate and hence embodies 'the realities of everyday life' that Haraway writes of where the relationship between people and technology can no longer be seen.

[10] I have used sight and its 'gazes' to demonstrate my continual image change throughout the day to highlight my relationship with cybernetics. Yet, paradoxically, these multiple images of me are the very distinctions that Haraway's 'cyborg' tries to destroy. Hence, through her cyborg ontology, whilst noting the impact of the individual optical tools I use to help my vision, I realize that I was as much of a cyborg when I awoke as when I put on my glasses. I am a cyborg in mind as well as matter, this journal has convinced me.

[11] This and the following conference paper sections are based on Cook et al. (2003).

[12] More recent reviews include Crang et al. (2003), Bakker and Bridge (2006), Bernstein and Campling (2006a), Bernstein and Campling (2006b), Bridge and Smith (2003), Goss (2004), Goss (2006), Hughes and Reimer (2004), and Jackson (2004).

[13] See Castree (2002a).

[14] One dictionary definition of 'didactic' that seems to work well with these arguments goes as follows: "Something which is intended to instruct. Sometimes, to be morally instructive. "Didaktikos" is a Greek word that means "apt at teaching." It comes from "didaskein," meaning "to teach." Something didactic does just that: teaches or instructs. Didactic conveyed that neutral meaning when it was first borrowed in the 17th century, and still does; a didactic piece of work is one that is meant to be instructive as well as artistic. Genre painting and sculpture – narrative and often allegorical – is apt to be didactic, especially when its aim is to teach a moral lesson. Didactic now often has negative connotations, because something didactic can be over burdened with instruction to the point of being dull. Or it might be pompously instructive or moralistic" (source: http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/Df.html, accessed 17 July 2003).

4. Helen, Sarah and Becky: in the classroom

In the beginning, we were confused by the tall guy and his *Geographies of material culture* course. On the first handout, there was that question. 'You are Cyborg?' We had to answer others in our first journal entries. 'What is a cyborg?' 'How and why am I a cyborg?' And, 'why should it matter?' In our first class, we wrote down what the Tall Guy said. Like good little students. Because that's what he wants...isn't it? That's what academic geography's about. And he said: thou shalt read and there shall be light and understanding. So on the first day we read... On the second day, we wrote our cyborg journal entries. Like Sarah's. He gave us a week to do this. We had to write from our own perspectives. Make connections. Read some Haraway, or less tricky interpretations of her work. Situate that knowledge. Write theoretically informed first person narratives. A good, grounded story in the main text. Knowledgeable discussion of readings in footnotes. A new style of writing.[15] Strangely, it worked for us. But not everyone was converted. How were our lives of academic import? And why should we confess all to the Tall Guy? How did our lives fit into his big plan? Were we just lab rats in some sort of educational experiment? He writes about these things, you know. On his own, and with others.[16]

On the third day, we signed up for reading groups. The course wasn't just *about* networks, it *was* a network. Getting set materials. Informing group discussions. About consumption. Production. Connections. Week by week. *They* talked. The people in those materials. Through ethnographic descriptions. Direct quotations. In books. Or documentary films. Describing and explaining *their* 'lived experiences'. Other situated knowledges. Of those producing the things we consume. Music. Cigarettes. Food. Sneakers.[17] Materials inviting *our* interpretations. That's what the course was about. In class, *we* talked. The Tall Guy said unto us: let the classroom be rearranged. For small discussion groups. No lecturing here. He just wandered around. Watching. Listening in. Were we saying what he wanted to hear? Or were we in control? Somehow. Group thoughts had to go on flipcharts. To guide a whole class discussion. Here, discussion was more than academic debate.

Our voices mattered. We better understood our roles in these networks and systems. But how could we theorise these messy connections? Supplementary reading lists pointed us towards Commodity Chains, Circuits of Culture, Actor Network Theory. But not towards the right answer. Just more questions. The Tall Guy saw that it was good. But we no longer noticed him watching us. We talked together, with those others from our readings.

We felt more responsible. Some of us. To the unseen people and things helping us to become who we are. *Be* who we are. We'd discovered our inner-cyborg. And we no longer felt we were in a classroom. Detached from reality. Our cyborg spectacles were becoming cyborg eyes. We were seeing the light. Just in time for our second journal entries.

5. Ian's conference paper (ii)

Perhaps the most important 'audience' for academic research are students. Those we teach ourselves. And those in other people's classes who read what we write. That's how the discussion has gone in some recent articles in *Antipode*. Here, Castree [again] has asked why it's often assumed that "our radicalism (however, we define this) is best directed *outside* the precincts of the university?" (Castree, 2002a, p. 675) when "students remain the one audience [we] can influence in material and potentially lifelong ways" (2000; in Hay, 2001, p. 141). But, as Euan Hague pointed out, too much of the work that geographers produce is written in a "dry and uninspiring standardised academic style" which is unlikely to "stimulate student debate" (Hague, 2002, p. 660). For Marvin Waterstone, the need for theoretical fine-tuning often results in specialist and insular work that "preach[es] to the cognoscenti" and is, therefore, "not exactly the stuff of practice" (Waterstone, 2002, p. 663). And for Heyman (2000, 2001), geographers seem to pay much more attention to relationships between theory, politics and practice *in their research*, than in their teaching. In the classroom, the content and effects of radical geographic research are often, therefore, glaringly at odds.

Take the literature on consumption. Consumers, we know, aren't dupes or blank slates. They often don't understand or use commodities in the ways that producers would like them to. They enrol commodities in identity performances: embodied and grounded in different places, social relations, financial circumstances, power relations and so on. There's a place for rational decision making, but much 'consumer behaviour' is habitual, done without much thought, driven by powerful sensations and emotions, peppered with dilemmas about doing the right thing, and affected by unique but shared biographies. So, if academics give lectures, get their students to read, and then ask them to re-present this work to them in the form of more-or-less the 'right' answer to an exam or coursework question, aren't they missing the point? This work, itself, is commodified for a particular group of consumers: students, and their teachers (Barnett, 1998; Littler, 2005; Goss, 2004). They're not dupes or blank slates. They don't understand or identify with the arguments being made in the same ways, for the reasons just mentioned. So, research can be as radical as you like on paper but, if it's fed through the educational 'banking system', it cannot help but be conservative

[15] Module handouts in which this way of doing things, and the overall architecture of the course (including the journal marking scheme), are available at www.gees.bham.ac.uk/people/draftpapers/327a/327a.htm.

[16] The introductory handout now states that: "No formal research project is being undertaken on this course. Nothing will be recorded or written down about what happens in class, office hours, etc. All publications discussing the course have been written with the consent and/or co-authorship of the students involved".

[17] Set 'readings' included, for example, Hebdige (1987), Parker-Pope (2001), BBC, 1999 and Vanderbilt (1998).

in practice (Heyman, 2001). Treating students as empty vessels to be filled with the right knowledge devalues their experiences and their powers of critical thought. It disempowers them. That's an old idea. Paulo Freire's (Heyman, 2000).

6. Helen's second journal entry

To celebrate our anniversary I decided to show off my culinary talents and cook us an 'authentic' Mexican meal to remind us of the 'Tex-Mex' restaurant we visited in Spain this summer. When I looked at the recipe for Salsa, 'tinned tomatoes' were the main ingredient.[18] Being a student, I have come to regard the familiar blue and white label from the 15p '*Sainsbury's low price chopped tomatoes*' as a life-saver, providing endless bowls of tomato and basil soup. This time, however, my cyborg spectacles were in place and my views on the world were about to be changed by this mundane item. Knowing that everything I did is affected by, and affects, hundreds and thousands of different people, objects, and materials, made me stop and think (for a very long time!), shopping basket in hand, in that Sainsbury's aisle, faced with the daunting prospect of which tin of tomatoes I should buy.[19]

Until last weekend, food shopping filled me with practical frustrations. Now my frustration is concerned with different matters. Until now, I just *expected* them to be on the shelf. I never questioned *how* they had gotten there, or what processes had to have happened for them *just to be there*.[20] Now I found myself asking questions, and with every question I found myself wanting to ask more questions and wanting, no *needing*, to know more about the hidden networks behind what was soon to become part of my body...

I have always wanted to be a moral citizen and do an annual fast for Oxfam to 'help all those starving kids in Africa'. However, something about the look on the 'authentic' Italian tomato picker's face on the can of '*Napolina Chopped Tomatoes*', made me realise that I was doing my good deed for all the wrong reasons.[21] I never *really* thought that I could make that much of a difference. My mum has always been into ethical shopping and donating to charities, but it is only now that I realise the difference her actions make. 'Every-penny-counts-Helen' used to tell her mum she was wasting her money buying organic couscous and Traidcraft chocolate because no one really bought them; it's not as if they're easy to find on the supermarket shelves. But yesterday it was *me* telling my mum about a 30p off coupon for some "Feel Good Ethically Traded Organic Medium Roast Coffee" in *Tesco Vegetarian Magazine* (I will *always* spot a bargain!). I cannot dash across the globe wiping out all pain and suffering, but this does not mean that I cannot do anything.[22] Changes, which are so easy for me to make, yet are just as easy to brush away with the view that 'one person won't make a difference' *do* matter and *can* make a difference, even if it only *matters* for one person/thing... to begin with.[23]

[18] Similar to Sarah's use of sight, I take food as being my cyborg object, which connects my bodily self to an infinite network of humans and non-humans (Haraway, 1991), stretching the extent of my body to tomato pickers in Mexico (Torres, 1997) or a canning machine in China (see www.shinican.com).

[19] The fact that we have a choice between twenty different tinned chopped tomatoes, instead of only one choice, or no tins and only fresh tomatoes indicates the power we, as consumers, have to determine everyone/everything else behind the tinned tomato network. If, through our consumption, we are helping to maintain such networks, then our actions *can* make a difference; "*Mobility and durability-materiality-are themselves relational effects*...Texts only order if they are not destroyed *en route* and there is someone at the other end who will read them and order their conduct accordingly." (Law, 1994, p. 102)

[20] Harvey writes that "the grapes that sit upon the supermarket shelves are mute; we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them or tell immediately what part of the world they are from" Harvey (1990, p. 422). How many Americans eating *tamales* (tortillas) realise that in order for them to sit in their commercialised Tex-Mex restaurants a woman is losing her eyesight from absorbing the sulphur present in maize husk packaging plants? (Long and Villareal, 1998). There is a need to *re-humanise* these disembodied networks; to visualise the actual people behind the commodities we buy. If, every time you went to buy tortillas you saw Eleanor's (a maize husk worker) blood-shot, watery eyes, then maybe you wouldn't think twice about paying the extra 50p for Fair trade flour tortillas which help to improve working conditions for Elena in that particular packaging plant in Ayuquilia, Western Mexico (see Long and Villareal, 1998, p. 731 for Elena's case study). As Cohen puts it: "All of these things are commodities and they all contain stories encompassing geography and time, supply and demand, raw materials and market forces, and people. People with names and toes and sores and wages and fancies and parents and memories." (Cohen, 1997, p. 13–14).

[21] When I fast it makes me feel good about myself, as if I were some kind of 'Saint' for sending money to help others. But who am I actually helping? My ego by feeling like I have done my good deed for the day? After the first Material Culture discussion I was upset at how selfish I had become; I always say how I want to help those less fortunate than me. It's easy for me to say this, feel better about myself, then push it to the back of my mind next time I visit *Gap* (renowned for its 'sweatshop' labour, see Ross, 1997) and see a nice pair of jeans. Cook et al. (1998, p. 162) refer to this as "a structural ambivalence of identity" where "consumers have both a need to know and an impulse to forget the origins of the food they eat", or the clothes they buy.

[22] For lists of ethically minded companies from business services to energy suppliers see www.ethical-junction.org/, or visit www.bafts.org.uk/buyingFairtrade/shops.htm for a list of Fair Trade shops.

[23] I will not throw away my cyborg spectacles when I have finished this course. On the other hand, I haven't turned into a fully-pledged moral citizen; I am human and do have moral responsibilities to myself i.e. to stay alive! Certain things I have read have *mattered* to me and I am making the smallest of changes to my life, which could have considerably bigger consequences on other people's/thing's lives. Knowledge isn't everything, but it's what you *do* with that knowledge which makes a difference. As Law states: "It is true that we cannot know absolutely. But this does not mean that we cannot know at all. Rather, it means that we have to attend seriously...to finding ways of building on, convincing, persuading, those who share enough of our concerns, our interests, or our standards to make any kind of interaction possible" (Law, 1991, p. 15). Although my view through my cyborg lenses has been rather misty at times, I now have clearer (not perfect) vision. Many people turn a blind eye to these issues because they want to do everything and do it now, but patience is required and cyborg spectacles enable you to look into the future!

7. Ian's conference paper (iii)

This is border pedagogy (see Cook, 2000; Giroux and McLaren, 1994). Cyborg pedagogy (see Angus et al., 2001; Gough, 2004). Where students adopt Haraway's cyborg ontology (1991), and her epistemology of situated knowledge (1988). For ten weeks only. Allowing them to bring what they know, what matters to them, what they care about, and how they judge right from wrong, good from bad into the classroom. To have that valued, but also to have it challenged. By bringing the lives of connected by 'usually unseen others' – near and far – more closely into their own. In a bodily, cyborg sense. Addressing academic calls to defetishise commodities (Castree, 2001; Cook et al., 2002; Hartwick, 1998; Hartwick, 2000; Miller, 2003). Trying to show abstract relations between things as social – cyborg – relations between people, animals, others. Trying to work out how abstract arguments about 'relational ethics' (Whatmore, 1997) might work as everyday practice. But also being realistic about it. Recognising that any changes made are likely to be small, building on what people already know, do, feel, etc. (Hobson, 2002, 2003a,b). Many students can't identify with calls by self-identified, exemplary 'left-wing', 'radical' or 'progressive' ''teacher-writers'' saying that they *ought* to join them on that tightrope walk towards the promised land (Heyman, 2001, p. 2). Although they may have a go for the sake of an essay or exam answer (see Read et al., 2001). Our argument is that 'radical' geographical practice, however defined, could be more affecting if it was *less* didactic: i.e. less instructive, less moralistic and using forms of assessment that encourage students to think about how their lives are tangled up in the issues they study.

For geographers, less-didactic ways of presenting research to students are nothing new. There are all sorts of classroom activities (such as role-playing exercises), the experiential learning that can come through organised field-trips and individual dissertation research, and the use of popular geographies (such as non-academic books and TV documentaries) to stimulate discussion. If you have had to do a Postgraduate Certificate in Education before being let loose on students, you'll be an expert on this.[24] Those teaching about commodity geographies will probably be familiar with the BBC *Modern Times* documentary following mange tout (snow peas) from a UK home counties dinner party, through Tesco's supermarkets, to some of the people growing and packing them on a farm in Zimbabwe (see Freidberg, 2004; Gregson, 2000; Wrigley and Lowe, 2002). They might also be familiar with Amos Gitai's documentary *Ananas* (*pineapple*) which tries to do more or less the same thing with a tin of Dole pineapple rings (see Cook & Crang, 1996b). Few will have had the opportunity to experience Shelley Sacks' social sculpture *Exchange values: images of invisible lives*, in which banana farmers in the Windward Islands were able to directly address the people who ate the fruits they grew. But there's plenty to read about it (e.g. Cook et al., 2000; Cook et al., 2002; Desforges, 2004) and a useful website (see www.exchange-values.org).

These films and this sculpture have important things in common. First, they attempt to defetishise commodities through multi-site, (more or less) ethnographic studies of the geographies of material culture. They show how people's lives are connected through their very different involvements in producing and consuming specific things. They humanise commodity relations by (re-) attaching voices, (sometimes) faces, and lives to things. Second, they contain accounts of why certain things are produced by certain people in certain parts of the world for others elsewhere.[25] Each, in its own way, outlines, explains and illustrates the extreme, grinding socio-economic inequalities and injustices inherent in 'free-market' economics, global trade and supermarket shopping. Third, as well as being thoroughly grounded in the 'facts' (as others might see them), they are also highly creative and imaginative pieces of work whose aim is not only to be accessible, vivid, engaging and matter of fact, but also to juxtapose (deliberately and accidentally) different explanations of, and justifications for, the connections made. But, third, none of them do so didactically. They don't have narrators telling their 'audiences' how the various parts of what they're given fit together, or what they should think or feel about this. Their intention is to mobilise rather than dictate meaning, to give audiences/participants materials to think with, to provoke questions about what this work is about, what the 'moral of the story' might be, how they 'ought' to respond. Maybe. These are 'spaces for imagination' to be inhabited and enlivened by those who enter them (see Rosen, 1990; Sacks and Cook, 2000). And the filmmaker or artist is the architect of that space. Shaping but not determining how understandings can unfold within it.

[24] This is a probationary requirement for new lecturing staff in UK universities.

[25] In all three examples, these explanations are provided in part by the people to whom the film-makers and artist talk, but extra textual information is provided on screen in *Ananas* and in one short essay on the gallery wall, and in many more essays in the exhibition catalogue (Sacks, 2004) and website, for *Exchange Values*.

8. James and Ian as students in their own class: Group D's 'presentation'

Like the other discussion groups, Group D had 30 min to do a 'presentation'.[26] Ian asked everyone to take this opportunity to try to 'push things', go into 'greater depth', take this *Material culture* class off in 'new directions'. Group D produced a handout. It said that we had to bring our phones and make sure they were switched *on* in class. The room was set up like a TV studio for a Jerry Springer show, or the UK's near-equivalent: Trisha. 'She' – played by Helen – had an interesting panel of guests today. They were trying to work together to get a message through: a phone designer, a rechargeable Chinese battery, a radio mast, and a gorilla. The first two guests told 'Trisha' how it takes a lot to get a mobile phone to fit into your hand and to work. Central Processing Units, speakers, microphones, batteries, digital-analogue chips, analogue-digital chips, fascias, casings, transistors: over 50,000 tiny components.[27] And, the mast interrupted, that's before you start walking and talking. Satellites switching you from cell to cell every couple of kilometres. Each cell made up of collections of radio masts and signal boosters.

Then the gorilla started to talk. We had to concentrate. The rubber mask muffled his voice. He'd been found on Leonardo di Caprio's website.[28] In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gorillas like him were being killed because of mobile phones. And that wasn't all. He explained. Miniaturised technologies like mobile phones and laptops require metals that conduct a very high electrical charge to allow the use of so-called 'pin-head' capacitors that control the electrical flows on their circuit boards. Tantalum capacitors, in particular, are renowned for their long life, small size and capacitance extension. On average, they are less than a quarter of the size of equivalent aluminium electrolytic capacitors.[29] Columbite tantalum, or coltan, is the metal that allows these capacitors to do what they do. He says that 80% of the world's coltan resources are found in DR Congo. In many parts of the country, people have quit farming to 'mine' it. It's like gold panning. Or digging up mud. Anyone can do it.[30] And 'miners' were earning up to US$50 a week, compared to the average Congolese wage of US$120 a year.[31] The rush to mine had led to the breakdown in social relations and food production in the area. The consequences were dire. Especially the destruction of national parks, as people hunted and killed the endangered Eastern lowland gorilla. For food.[32] But not only that. The illegal trade in coltan was funding warring factions inside the Congo, as well as the Rwandan army, to the tune of more than US$250m.[33] Following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the Tutsi government forced hundreds of thousands of Hutu, many of whom had perpetrated the religious genocide, into the Congo. Rwanda overthrew President Mobutu with the help of African allies and the discreet support of the United States, leading to the collapse of the Zairian regime. The central African region has since been engulfed in a low intensity-high casualty conflict.

He then finished up by outlining the highly convoluted path that Congolese coltan took through world markets. Much of it was processed in Kazakhstan, and then shipped to southeast China. This was where the tantalum capacitors in mobile phones, as well as other components like rechargeable batteries (using Chilean cadmium and nickel), were manufactured, and where phones themselves were assembled for export. 'Made in China'. Nokia phones were 'made' in a place called Dongguan.[34] Twenty years ago, this had been a fishing town. It had quickly grown into an industrial city of one million people. The rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of the Guang Dong Province had caused a proliferation of social and environmental problems. In Dongguan factories, wages were low, hours were interminably long, working conditions were unsafe, living arrangements were cramped and dangerous, supervi-

[26] Here, the 'presentation' handout states that the "aim here is for you to take what you have read, discussed and written about so far and to *push things further*, go into *more theoretical and empirical depth*, and *tackle some of the tricky issues* that have come up in the course so far." In practice, these presentations often turn into group performances. By de-stabilising classroom relations between teacher and student and student and student, room is created for 'creative exorbitance' (Thrift, 2000, p. 213) that disrupts abstract forms of knowledge communication, literally 'playing' in both senses of the word (Gough, 2004) – de-fetishising and re-humanizing the commodity, playing with networks by exploring 'multiple entryways as opposed to the tracing which always comes back to the same' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 12).

[27] See www.savethechildren.org.uk/rightonline/ra_34_6.html. This website breaks down the separate components of a mobile phone and traces them back to their origins.

[28] See www.omnileonardo.com/gorillaphones.html.

[29] NEC (2004).

[30] See the photographs of this 'mining' on BBC (2001).

[31] Group D provided us with a list of recommended readings to flesh out this part of the story. One, for example, described how the technology boom of the 1990s saw the demand for coltan explode, fuelled further by national defence stockpiling. With world prices reaching $400 per kilo, the region became a major provider despite internal civil strife. But, with the global economic slow-down, and sober reassessments of the telecommunications industry, the demand for coltan decreased sharply in 2001, exacerbating the poverty and environmental degradation (BBC, 2001). Long-term problems were also emerging as babies were being born with birth defects due to their parents' over-exposure to coltan. For a more detailed report on the state of the coltan mining industry in the Congo see Hayes (2002).

[32] See Attwater (1999) and Redmond (2001) for more.

[33] See Prunier (2005) and Scherrer (2001) for more.

[34] The suggested readings fleshed out this story, too. Since the establishment of Nokia (Dongguan) Mobile Phone Co. Ltd in 1995, Dongguan has become China's third most important exporting city. In 1999, Dongguan's mobile phone output reached 3.1 million sets and the product's export value exceeded $200 million. Located about 75 km from Hong Kong, Dongguan has a population of 1.5 million and hosts 13,800 foreign-invested manufacturers including 200 multinational brands. In the first 9 months of 2001 alone, the city exported goods worth $13 billion to Hong Kong, the United States, the European Union, and 120 other countries. For a detailed account of Dongguan's industrialisation, see Yeung (2001).

sors were arbitrary and brutal, and labour rights were doubly constrained by law and managerial repression.[35] Phones (and parts) were being assembled here by Chinese peasants, according to Swedish designs, running UK software, and exported to Western markets. To people like us. In that classroom. Texting or calling our friends, families, others. Organising our social lives. Feeling safer, perhaps, because we can always call someone in an emergency. Being spontaneous, maybe, with our communications. No longer being tied to landlines and phone boxes.[36] The gorilla then concluded. There was a one in five chance that the phones in our hands contained Congolese coltan. Then he stopped. The whole 'performance' seemed to stop. Shit! The room was dead quiet. There was some time and space to think. What had he and the other panellists been on about? Who would have thought about *those* connections before? Imagined them? Brought them *that* close to home? Not us. Then our mobiles began to bleep. All of them. Text messages started coming in. The same one for each of us. ''Mobile phones will set you free''. What?? Didn't we see 'Trisha' playing with her phone? How had she got our numbers? What, and who, had it taken for that that message to get from her to us? She was only a few feet away, for God's sake!

9. Ian's conference paper (iv)

Few commodity geographers are, perhaps, skilled filmmakers, artists or animal impersonators. But we're supposed to know how to undertake research and write up its findings. But how could we do this in ways that are more engaging and less didactic than most of the things we're expected to write? It's not as if this kind of research and writing doesn't exist. It's just that it's rarely done by academic geographers, despite their potential suitability for such a task (see Marcus, 2000; Miller, 2003). Wouldn't it be great if there were readings that had been researched and put together like the documentary films and social sculpture discussed earlier? Something like Leah Hager Cohen's (1997) book *Glass, paper, beans: revelations on the nature and value of ordinary things*. She's an American journalist who was sitting in a Boston coffee house one day and began wondering about the people involved in making the beans her coffee was made from, the glass mug she was drinking from, and the newspaper she was reading. So, she did some 'geographical detective work' (Hartwick, 2000), tracing the historical connections through which these things became things, and travelling to find out about the lives of three people involved in their current manufacture: Basilio Salinas, a Mexican coffee farmer; Ruth Lamp, an American glass factory supervisor; and Brent Boyd, an independent contractor who fells trees with the help of a Timberjack single-grip harvester. The story she tells weaves these histories and lives together with her own, in an account whose central analytical theme is commodity fetishism.

This is the book that students on my *Material culture* course enjoy the most. First, it could have been written for them because it explores ''the hidden values behind ... seemingly insignificant commodities'' (Gordaneer, 1998, np). And, second, like students taking the *Culture and society* option taught by Canadian sociologist Deborah Parnis (2001, np) ''most ... have found Cohen's prose refreshing after regularly confronting what are often very dry and sterile academic texts''. Most non-academic reviews have been equally positive and remarkably consistent.[37] Readers have been impressed by Cohen's exemplary combination of painstaking research and a skill for crafting stories and, in particular, by her ability to move back and forth between the most abstract ideas and the tiniest empirical observations (Hawtree, 1999; Lutes, 1998; Menacol, 1997; Schinto, 1997). They've been impressed with the way that Salinas, Lamp and Boyd are ''carefully characterised'' (Lutes, 1998, np) not as 'producers' or 'consumers' but as ''vibrant'', rounded human beings whom readers get to know intimately through reading the book (Parnis, 2001, np; Gordaneer, 1998; Summit, 2002).[38] And, as Alisa Gordaneer (1998, np) puts it:

> ''By introducing us to the lives behind the objects – the hands which have checked, cultivated and collected them – [Cohen] creates a sense of connection, both between the characters of the book and between reader and character. It's hard, after following Ruth Lamp from her cozy farmhouse to her fluorescent-lit office with the wonky air conditioner, and back to her farm and pet wolf in the pre-dawn darkness, to regard a piece of glassware with the same eye. Every newspaper bears the invisible fingerprints of Brent Boyd, the overwhelming pine fragrance of his freshly cut forests, and the smell of the fish and chips he eats for lunch. And the steam over each cup of coffee rises like the mist over Basilio Salinas' home in Pluma Hidalgo, where he lives with his extended

[35] See Asia Monitor Resource Centre (1997) and Wright (2003).

[36] There was also some information on the handout about the recycling and reuse of mobile phones (see, for example www.oxfam.org.uk/what_you_can_do/recycle/phones.htm for recycling and Anon (2004), and Sidener (2004) for reuse).

[37] It's worth pointing out that many of these reviews are also critical of Cohen's style. Lutes (1998, np), for instance, says that ''the reader barely has a chance to meet the characters before the narrator interrupts the narrative to discuss the meaning of 'fetish' or some other seemingly unrelated topic ... The author simply tries to do too many things at once in this book''. Parnis (2001, np) also points out that a 'handful' of her students find the book ''frustratingly verbose'' (see also Anon nd, AV 1999, Heidmann 1997).

[38] Those with a knowledge of the ethnographic research that was part of Humanistic Geography in the 1970s and 1980s, will see a striking parallel with the approach taken by, and responses to, Graham Rowles' research with elderly people (e.g. Rowles, 1978a; Rowles, 1978b: see Cloke et al., 2004). Both he and Cohen present readers with stories about the lives of individual people in/between geographical contexts, providing the kind of 'sense for the other' that geographers like Paul Cloke are now arguing for so strongly (e.g. Cloke, 2002: see also Saukko, 2002).

> family in an open-air hut and tends the coffee plants not because it's his job, but because it's simply what he does. Suddenly, the invisible hands that bring us our breakfasts and sweaters, our shopping bags and our shoelaces, become eminently significant.''

While the point about commodities being made by people you don't see is hardy a shock revelation, what Cohen does is vividly bring that point to life (Terry, 2002). For Jeanne Schinto (1997, np), her book takes readers on her journey through ''a quirky, clicking little universe of its own in which every piece of the puzzle fits and everybody has a part to play''. For others, entering this 'universe' provided a new, deeply affecting way of appreciating ''the magical connectedness of things'' and the responsibilities that go with this (Menacol 1997 np; Piccione nd). No wonder Deborah Parnis (2001, np) says that, despite lacking a ''cohesive theoretical framework''[39] and being ''unabashedly subjective, mystical and poetic in places'', *Glass*, *paper*, *beans* is, potentially, ''an extraordinary and valuable intervention into the realm of sociology, especially if used as a pedagogical resource at the undergraduate level''. If only more academic/geographical writing could work this way. In combination with the more theory-driven arguments we're used to, of course. But would academic geography journals accept papers like this?[40]

10. Becky's concluding journal entry

You're not going to like this. I love burgers. When I was in France last year, I loved McDonalds burgers so much that when my friend went to the drive-thru without me, I was really upset. You see, for us, a minority body English student population in Aix en Provence, McDonalds was far more than just a burger and chips: it was a symbol of home.[41]

When you think about it, a burger's not much more than a bit of meat squashed between two bits of bread. But it was so much more then. It became so much more, the longer I went without it. It became a bit of an obsession. An object of desire. Jealousy if anyone else came back with one. The adverts showed it to be a succulent gastronomic delight. I worshipped that image almost. I like the relish best. The pictures made me hungry. I wanted to go home.[42] I think I like McDonalds because it's what I always wanted when I was small and went into town with my Mum. She hated it. I didn't. It was a treat.

I also had a 'healthy-option-friend', blabbing on about calories... we should eat chicken nuggets instead. But I found a newspaper article about what's in *them*. There's a lot more to them than meets the eye. The global connections made in order to produce and consume them are immense. The 'meat' is not solely from one country. Bones, flesh, skin and meat come from all over the world. Assembled abroad, or in the UK using a migrant work force. Up to 22 nations. Bovine and porcine products have been found in chicken products.[43] I can't believe it! Healthy option??! I'm glad I had the burger now. I'll eat in ignorant bliss. I'll choose to ignore the networks. Even if I know what could constitute them. Knowing what I know about nuggets, and the networks involved in just them. I just can't get away from anything. Like pigs! They're everywhere.[44] In chairs, ornaments, paracetamol.[45] And I'm not going to stop taking that on Saturday mornings.

[39] Nevertheless, she uses the book to explain and illustrate a wide variety of theoretical insights in sociology's classical tradition, from Marx to Durkheim to Weber to Simmel (Parnis, 2001).

[40] See Cook et al. (2004) and Cook, Harrison et al. (in press).

[41] Donna Haraway (1991) said that this type of representation is because of our *positionality/situation*. Barnes (2000, p. 742) stresses this by stating that situation formulates and stresses 'embodied physicality, social construction and cultural politics'. We all write, read, learn from a particular perspective. So, this idea of *situated knowledge* is important in what or even how we view and embrace: things, ideas. Haraway (1991, p. 195) further links this idea to that of cyborg ontology, in that: 'embodiment is ...about ...nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for differences in semiotic fields of meaning'. However, although situated knowledge is varied, it is 'partial, including the situated knowledge we have of our own knowledge about ourselves' (Barnes, 2000, p. 743). Additionally, Ian Cook et al. (2005), state that our positionality, our situation means that we can also have a go at explaining what *we* want to through perspective, and not solely through what others have produced in their thinking and research. Allowing material 'things' to connect and relate specifically (albeit sometimes unconventionally) to us, the writer. Situated knowledge also helps us to see the world through many more eyes than just two: it means that I, as a consumer can see a McDonalds burger for more than what the adverts, the producers, show.

[42] Tim Dant (1999, p. 15) says that the idea of consumption and the fetishisation of objects 'leads to a new approach that treats the social value of objects as emergent in the way we use...them'. Abercrombie (cited in Lury, 1996, p. 53) reiterates this: 'consumers...try to give their own, new, meanings to the commodities and the services they buy'. So, the same burger that is mass produced and advertised by McDonalds all over the world, is not just a commodity that has use-value. It is also an object. A meaningful object: my homesickness cure. It's interesting that people see themselves, (and their homesickness cures!) in what they consume. Marx (cited in Dant, 1999) states that the link between production and consumption through commodity fetishism is that production (whether it be through advertising or manufacture) itself not only produces something for consumption; but also produces the manner in which it has to be consumed. Lury (1996) links this idea to producer–consumer manipulation via advertising. It's interesting how adverts can twist what things actually look like, or claim to be. It's interesting how this can lead to commodity fetishism. In the case of the burger, its aesthetic representation evokes an idea(l). Sparking off other thoughts: that I need to consume it to cure my homesickness. Appealing to children. Myths. False advertising. Lifestyles. Changing 'culture(s)'. How McDonalds links into them all. Links into cyborg networks. Involving me in these networks. It illustrates the interconnectedness of such a large part of my time in France. Anything from broiler chickens to child psychology. One big lie. Producing one big fetish. Which I fell for!

[43] See Lawrence (2002), Lawrence (2003).

[44] See www.mnpork.com/education/swine (accessed 14 March 2003).

[45] This way of learning and writing has helped me to understand theories in human geography that seemed too complex before. Especially relational ways of thinking. In some ways, 'pig-chair' is my Oncomouse (Haraway, 1997), and has made important connections between its networks and the political choices they present me with (Castree, 2002b).

If something means that much to me, I won't always stop to choose to 'do the right thing'. By whoever's voice. Even my own. Needing things, more than looking at being responsible for others miles away? Being selfish? Knowing what something means or constitutes, but still consuming it anyway as it tastes too good. Because it's more than just what it is.[46] I'm not going to lie. I do think about it. More than I did before. I have the knowledge to be able to do this.[47] But in all reality I'm not going to do much about it because of what it means to me. In my (homesick) life. Sorry to all those I 'trample' on. All the animals I indirectly helped to kill. All those networks I'm blatantly ignoring. Taking off the cyborg specs. Except that now I'm aware. Through ANT and other research. That it's not just me. It's all the others too. Much as Cook (2000) outlines in his title: 'Nothing can ever be the case of 'us' and 'them' again…'. Especially everyday objects. Including the pigs. Illustrating that we can link pigs to everything that we do, touch, consume, produce. The networks are messy and complex. Like cyborg ontology. Like life. Until I get a bit more willpower or change my situation, things will more or less stay the same. Burgers, pills, pigs, chicken nuggets. Thinking twice. Yes. Acting once. Maybe not.

11. Ian's conclusion: sparky geographies

What do you think about these journal entries?[48] What these students have to say, and the way that they're expressing it, in the classroom and on the page? I'm the only person who gets to read them. Usually. Because I assess them.[49] And this is interesting. No two are the same. Unlike those piles of essays where everyone is trying to give you the same answer. While some are better written, better read, more convincing, and more engaged than others, these journals are full of surprises. So many of them are so original, absorbing, thought-provoking, and full of life. The ones included in this paper are the tip of a very large iceberg. It would have been great to reproduce here journal entries handed in as posters, advent calendars, Mother's Day cards, or in Easter eggs, shoes or bottles of Holy Water. But publishers do have their limits. The reason that these journals work so well, for me at least, is that they're 'heartful' auto-ethnographies (Ellis, 1999). They're trying to make situated, mundane but sparky connections, not only with 'ethnographers' and the people whose lives they try to understand, but also with the audience(s) for their work. And they're trying to do this in a way that's 'touching', not only in the sense that they're based on 'things' physically 'touched' by all those invisible hands on their journeys into students' lives (Harvey, 1990),[50] but also because they're often moving, affecting, heart-warming, poignant accounts of students finding out about these connections (Littler, 2005).[51] I hadn't made this auto-ethnography connection until very recently. But this could be 'what it is'! Maybe Leah Hager Cohen's (1997) book works so well in this module because it, too, is (popular) auto-ethnography. It's written to encourage readers to feel and think about the author's life as (a) a consumer with a mundane, everyday taken-for-granted coffee shop routine; and (b) a journalist/researcher who set out to undertake an in-depth "empathetic enquiry into [the] experience" of people whose hidden lives depended this routine (Miller, 2001, p. 234; Saukko, 2002).[52]

So, if 'radical' geographers undertake research and teaching which defetishises commodities in order to 'mobilise' their students into action about the injustices and inequalities unearthed by such work, relations between research, writing, teaching and assessment may need more attention. As Rich Heyman (2000, p. 299) has written:

> "Keeping open the problematics of knowing beyond the end of writing and extending to work *inside* the academy … means developing more sophisticated approaches to pedagogy that *do not reduce knowledge to information that is easily transmissible*. Such an approach will itself be an engaged form of radical politics" (emphasis added).

I made this point at an economic geography conference in 2004, and it didn't go down at all well. Some seemed quite shocked. Why would you not want to be absolutely clear about what you think, what your politics are? Why wouldn't you want to make clear judgements about 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad'? Why won't you say what ought to happen, what readers ought to think? How could

[46] Being Duped? Being situated. Looking at situated knowledge as the reason for all this. Understanding. that not only is perception and situation going to change how I/we see things, but will also change how others view the same things too. Realising that the commodity fetish is still alive and well. That it has much more power than the consumers give it credit for. The credit that the producers give it. The credit that the networks help accumulate: local, regional, national, global, cyborgal.

[47] I read some of the comments made by students of Ian's course in Lampeter (Cook, 2000), and it's inspired me to write in this journal style. Telling lies or writing what you think one person is going to like, is wrong in this course. I think the valid point in this is that Border pedagogy is unique in that it allows students to write what we think. What we want. For a change. I feel that it would do me and the course structure injustice not to take advantage of this. I have more knowledge about certain things, so I use this to explain my thoughts, argue my way to a conclusion! It's all about having and *informed* opinion. Not just an opinion.

[48] For detailed outlines and reflections on journal writing elsewhere, as well as insights into the diverse topics assessed through this method, see Haigh (2001), Hamilakis (2004) and Park (2003).

[49] For a discussion of the challenges of journal assessment, see Cook (1996, 2000).

[50] Here, reports and video footage illustrating how machines designed to make Disney books safe for western childrens' delicate fingers often damage those of the Chinese factory workers who operate them makes this point in a fleshy and shocking way (see Anon, 2005).

[51] Students have recently started drawing on the 'emotional geographies' literature – e.g. Davidson and Millligan (2004), Parr (2005) – both to legitimate and think through what these latter 'touching' geographies mean for (their) cyborg commodity geographies.

[52] The auto-ethnographies to be added here are those that could be told by those who live these lives (see Butz and Besio, 2004; Besio, 2005).

you 'mobilise' anyone indirectly? I hope we've answered these questions here, much more convincingly than I was able to there. Daniel Miller (2001) has done so in a much stronger and more direct way.

Strength and directness has its place in academia, of course, even if it makes some ''feel uncomfortable'' (Castree, 2004, p. 32). So, if readers are still frustrated that we haven't said what we *really* think they *ought* to do to be properly 'radical' commodity geographers, we're prepared to have a go. Try this:

Step 1. *In the classroom*
- drop the lecture-reading-exam format for a more engaged pedagogy
- provoke and 'orchestrate' discussions, lose some control
- get students to do some 'geographical detective work'
- use less (as well as more) didactic materials in class
- assess through accounts situating commodity geographies in students' lives
- and don't value only *direct* 'causes and effects' of this teaching/learning[53]

Step 2. *Between the classroom and the field*
- learn from students' reactions to make research and pedagogy more effective
- ask what teaching materials worked best and why that was the case
- notice ideas getting stuck, hard questions asked, assumptions made
- take these as the concerns of this 'user community' and research them
- and don't present findings only for 'progressive', 'leftist', 'radical' people

Step 3. *Between the field and the classroom*
- continue writing those detailed, important, fine-line political/theoretical papers
- but also produce vivid and engaging thick descriptions of connected lives
- produce outputs that will allow your readers to enter new 'imaginative spaces'
- write sparky geographies that will provoke discussion about what they're about
- and maximise people's chances of getting hold of them, free of charge, online

Step 4. *Beyond this expanded field*
- convince peers that 'co-learning' messes with the research/teaching divide
- don't describe any output like this simply as 'my pedagogy paper'
- say it's part of your multi-site, expanded field research defetishising commodities
- and try to get it published in a mainstream geography journal like this one[54]

12. Helen's, Becky's and Sarah's conclusion: it's more than just what it was...

It's now June 2006, almost two years since we initially wrote this paper and more than three and a half years since any of us took that *Material culture* module. Ian's conclusions are a lecturer's. But what are ours', the students'? Yes, we'd put our cyborg spectacles on to engage with commodity geographies and to step into the shoes of the invisible 'others' behind the things we bought. But we didn't just think about these things when we were in the classroom. Or even when wearing glasses, cooking dinner, going shopping, or eating nuggets. Boundaries blurred. Research, pedagogy, our degrees and our lives became entangled in new and interesting ways. Even after the course finished. After we graduated. We couldn't throw off those cyborg specs. Turn a blind eye. We did Masters degrees. And now we're doing PhDs. Further expanding those fields. Blurring the distinction between 'teaching' and 'research'. We didn't set out to do this. It just happened. That undergraduate module wasn't just about networks. It was a network. It's more than just what it was. For us.

Helen has gotten into the pedagogical side of things. Her Ph.D. is on new 'co-learning' strategies piloted in English schools that aim to draw on young people's experiences as citizens and consumers to make geography more relevant and interesting to them (see Griffiths, 2004). In 2006, this involved *Material culture* 'presentations' on campus by undergraduate *and* school students learning from each other (see Williams et al., 2006). Sarah did a multi-locale ethnography for her undergraduate dissertation following the travels of tea leaves between the lives of Sri Lankan plantation workers and English tea drinkers (Wrathmell, 2003), and in her PhD is exploring the dis-/re-/un-/connections embroiled in less visible and traceable rubber networks between these places. Becky's PhD, which examines issues of personal and collective identity, relatedness and care regarding blood donation and transfusion, began as work for a *Material culture* presentation. But she's also been doing James' old job for the past couple of years: as the module's 'postgraduate teaching assistant'. She understands what the students are going through. And, although the same themes ('Fair Trade', 'Are we really

[53] As Jo Littler (2005) argues, work that defetishises commodities should do much more than encourage individual audience-members only to shop differently. If students are addressed as more than consumers, issues such as international trade regulation, social and economic justice, sin and redemption, etc. arise as much wider, collective topics to be tackled (through group research and presentations, for example).

[54] Thanks go to two of the anonymous referees for pushing us further in this direction and, of course, to the editors of the journals who have published our previous 'pedagogy papers'.

bothered?' 'Do we really care?') come up over and over again, she is continually amazed at the shifting emphasis on morals, guilt, emotions... that seem to come out from year to year. Especially when she throws bits of her 'bloody' MSc into the mix for discussion (Morris, 2005). She still feels that a constant reassessment of *her own* personal (identity) politics happens each time she enters the classroom. No more journals, answering those questions; rather dishing them out instead, asking the questions that occurred to her whilst she was writing her journals. Thinking twice, acting twice is becoming increasingly important, the more she questions what things really *are* and *mean* to her and to others.

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