For geographies of children, young people and popular culture

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Abstract

This paper calls for more direct, careful, sustained research on geographies of children, young people and popular culture. I present three sets of empirical and conceptual resources for researchers developing work in this area. Part 1 signposts classic work from cultural/media studies, marketing and sociology, which has been centrally concerned with *meanings* of popular culture designed for children and young people (e.g. via critiques of the gendered content of iconic popular cultural phenomena). Part 2 foregrounds nascent conceptualisations of social-material geographies of childhood and youth. I argue that these conceptualisations can extend and unsettle classic work on popular culture, by questioning how popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena *matter*. Halfway through the paper is a 'commercial break'. Here, I present some personal reflections on working at the intersection between the ideas discussed in Parts 1 and 2. With reference to a specific popular cultural artefact (the *Toys 'R' Us* Christmas toy catalogue), I argue that both *meanings* and *matterings* are crucial for geographers engaging with children and young people's popular cultures. In conclusion, I argue that more geographers should engage with the literature and issues outlined in Part 1, but also that the geographical concepts discussed in Part 2 demand new modes of research, thinking and writing in relation to popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena.

Introduction

A large body of research within the disciplines of cultural/media studies, marketing and sociology has addressed the "shared repository of commercials, television programmes, movies and music...books...toys and mass-market commodities…woven into the fabric of [many] children's lives" (Seiter 1998, p.297). However, as Buckingham (2007), Horton (2010, 2012) and Woodyer (2008, 2011) note, surprisingly few geographers have directly explored the considerable importance of popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena for many children and young people's everyday geographies. This paper calls for more geographical research directly addressing children and young people's popular cultures.

The following sections juxtapose three sets of empirical and conceptual resources for geographers developing work in this area. **Part 1** signposts key lines of research and critique from cultural/media studies, marketing and sociology. I note that this work – which has been seriously influential in framing academic, popular, political understandings of popular culture – has been centrally concerned with *meanings* of popular cultural phenomena. To illustrate this point, I highlight feminist critiques of the normatively gendered content of iconic popular cultural phenomena (e.g. Barbie and GI Joe). I argue that geographers working with children and young people have, rather problematically, often shied away from direct engagement with these kinds of popular cultural texts, objects and representational politics. **Part 2** foregrounds some nascent – perhaps more tentative, modest, obliquely-related – geographical conceptualisations of childhood and youth. I suggest that these conceptualisations have the potential to extend and unsettle classic work on popular culture, by questioning how popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena *matter* as constituents of children and young people's everyday geographies. I argue that, in a range of ways, recent geographical conceptualisations demand new ways of researching, writing and thinking about children, young people and popular culture. Halfway through the paper is a '**commercial break**'. Here, through reflection upon a specific popular cultural artefact (the *Toys 'Я' Us* Christmas toy catalogue), I develop an argument that both *meanings* and *matterings* are crucial for geographers engaging with children and young people's popular cultures. I also highlight some broader challenges of attempting to think and research at the intersection of the ideas discussed in Parts 1 and 2. In conclusion, this argument is configured as a set of challenges for future geographical research in relation to children, young people and popular culture.

However, I also contend that these challenges might have a wider resonance, to any human geographers seeking to reconcile classic (characteristically representational) accounts of culture and society and more recent (constitutionally nonrepresentational) geographical conceptualisations.

Part 1: what children's popular culture means

Classic research in Anglo-American cultural/media studies, marketing and sociology constitutes a significant resource for geographers interested in children and young people popular cultural geographies. Since the 1970s, this body of work has provided an imperative, vocabulary and methodology for studying all manner of popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena. In this context, research has typically been motivated by three kinds of questions about the *meaning* of popular culture (and, as shall become clear, critiques of particularly iconic popular cultural characters like Barbie and GI Joe recur widely in this work).

First, many researchers in this context have been concerned with the **representational content** of popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena – and the effects of these representations. A longstanding arc of research within cultural/media and marketing studies has employed discourse analysis techniques to unpack the images, narratives and iconographies circulated via literature, television, toys, advertisements, magazines or pop music produced for children and young people. This work has been important in unveiling the 'limited scripts', stereotypes and (gendered, heteronormative, consumerist, conformist, conservative Americo/Euro-centric) norms which characterise many of these popular cultural forms (Kline 1993). It is argued that these meanings and representations have become so numerous and normalised within contemporary cultural geographies that they have a significant effect upon children and young people's socialisation, norms and ideals.

Research exploring the idealisation of particular forms of femininity in Anglo-American commercials, magazines, commercials and toys designed for young females is a key example of this first line of work. Feminist scholarship in cultural/media studies has been significant in highlighting how many of these popular cultural forms have been profoundly gendered in content and design, providing a limiting set of "models of behaviour for children to

observe, interrogate and reproduce in their continuous socialisation as participants in public culture" (Bickford 2008, Bristor & Fischer 1993, Walkerdine 1998, Saltmarsh 2009). For example, McRobbie's (1991) classic work drew attention to the overwhelming prominence and normalisation of topics such as fashion, beauty, body image and (heterosexual) romance in popular British magazines for teenage girls. Other critiques made plain the profound, polarised gendering of contemporary Anglo-American toys and toyshops: evident in the (then) commonplace division of toyshops into blue aisles containing toy vehicles, tools, weapons and muscle-bound action figures, and pink aisles containing baby and fashion dolls (Willis 1987, Seiter 1992, Fleming 1996, Cross 1997). Iconic popular cultural phenomena like Barbie and GI Joe often feature prominently in critiques of this kind. Barbie, in particular, has been widely critiqued as a 'condensed' representation of normative ideals of 'emphasised femininity' and female body image (Freedman 1986, Rogers 1999, Messner 2000):

> With her long, silky, blonde hair, perky breasts, cinched waist and mile-high legs Barbie represents mainstream definitions of physical perfection, the paragon of beauty and ideal femininity. Her shiny pink corvette, swanky townhouse, and oodles…of perfectly accessorized outfits indicate her success within the consumer culture machine. Collectively, her physical and material assets (Eurocentric beauty, white-skin and class privilege…), represent the collective dream spun by post-WWII advertisers and reinforced by the culture at large (Feminist Fatale, 2010, unpaginated).

Barbie is thus understood as a limited 'model of ideal teenhood' (Rand 1998, p.383); "an icon – perhaps *the* icon – of 'true' white womanhood and femininity" (DuCille 1994); a stark idealisation of "purchase of the proper high-status goods, popularity with their peers, creation of the correct personal appearance, and the visible achievement of 'fun' through appropriate leisure activities" (Motz 1983, p.122). Indeed, following this line of critique, all manner of scholarly, media, online and popular commentators have argued that popular cultural phenomena like Barbie are instrumental in shaping the desires, self-image, norms and lifestyles of many young females:

> the Barbie Body is a part of our collective female psyche. Most [North American females] grew up with Barbie. We changed her outfits and marvelled at her perfect blond hair, her large nippleless breasts, her inconceivably small waist, and, of course, those long, long legs. Barbie has no body fat, no lumps, no bumps, no bulges, no unsightly veins – she is pure plastic perfection. We began to believe (either consciously or sub-consciously) that this was what we would look like when we became women...On a logical level, most women understand that Barbie's anatomy has little to do with reality. Just look around…Yet on a deeper level, most of us, in our heart of hearts, still yearn to look that way (Coopersmith 2006, p.13).

Second, a slightly more recent line of research has explored **the meanings that children and young people make** via engagements with popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena. This work has been important in insisting that children and young people do not passively and uncritically absorb normative representations from books, television, toys, advertisements, magazines or pop music. Instead, research in diverse contexts has highlighted how children and young people *actively* consume contemporary popular culture: they frequently *do* original, creative, unanticipated, affirmative stuff with popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena, and in so doing *make their own meanings*. Contemporary popular culture is thus recast as an array of symbolic resources for children and young people's agency, identity-formation and social relations. It is noted that children and young people often effectively subvert, parody or challenge the intended or normative meanings of popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena: and it is argued that new digital and online media create unprecedented opportunities for this kind of resistive play with meanings (Cassell & Jenkins 1999, Kline et al. 2003).

Research exploring what young Anglo-American females actually *do* with popular cultural icons of normative femininity illustrates this second line of research (McRobbie and Garber 1976, Brown et al. 1994, Baker 2004). Research of this kind makes clear that there is often a gap between adult interpretations of phenomena like Barbie, versus the meanings that children and young people make with them: thus, "we condescend to children when we analyse Barbie's content and then presume that it passes untransformed into their minds" (Rand 1998, p.384). As Messner (2000) observes, young females in diverse social, cultural, economic and ethnic positions play with Barbie quite differently, engaging in creative acts of meaning-making where Barbie dolls are appropriated

into their everyday spaces, lifestyles and concerns. For example, Chin's (1999, p.306) research with African-American girls in Connecticut notes how her young research participants "worked on their dolls materially and symbolically, blurring racial absolutes by putting their hair into distinctively African-American styles using beads, braids, and foil". Elsewhere, several studies of Barbie play include instances of humour, 'anger play' or 'torture play' in which Barbie dolls are defaced, mutilated or destroyed in all manner of inventive ways that "range from removing the hair to decapitation, burning, breaking and microwaving" (Griffin et al. 2008, p.15; Messner 2000). Participants in these studies explicitly describe their violence in terms of a rejection of Barbie's 'perfect' femininity (Kuther & McDonald 2004). Other critics describe instances of play with Barbie's cultural and sexual identity – "turn[ing] Barbie punk, set[ting] her on fire, ma[king] her f*** Ken, Midge or GI Joe" (Rand 1995, p.3, Kehily 1999, Abowitz 2000) – which have been meaningful moments in the articulation of individuals' sexualities, subcultural identities or political consciousness.

Third, many classic accounts of popular culture argue that popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena are meaningful because of **what they tell us about the state of contemporary childhood, youth and society**. For example, it is argued that the shifting form, content and popularity of particular toys, texts or fashions is indicative of much broader social-historical change (Cross 1997, 2004). Likewise, many accounts have suggested that media and parental 'panics' around particular popular cultural media are important moments in the wider social construction of notions like childhood and family. Perhaps most influentially, a great deal of research within Anglo-American cultural/media studies, marketing and sociology has considered the way in which children and young people have increasingly been targeted as a market segment within contemporary consumer capitalism (Zelizer 1985, 2002, Steinberg & Kincheloe 1997, Gunter & Furnham 1998, Langer 2002, Marshall 2010). Many key studies have highlighted the sophisticated, globalised and aggressive corporate systems of cultural production, marketing and commodification which have constituted a distinctive 'child market' for popular cultural products (Seiter 1992, McNeal 1992, Kline 1993, Roedder 1999, Cook 2004). The economic value of this market is considerable: for example, in 1999 it was estimated that children in the USA spent $23,000,000,000 on consumer goods, and prompted a further $188,000,000,000 of purchases, each year (McNeal 1999).

Research exploring the development of a lucrative 'tween girl' market for popular cultural commodities exemplifies this third line of work. Here it is noted that 'tween' (i.e. 'between' childhood and adulthood) females have increasingly been positioned as "significant players in the economy" and "a major target of the culture industries" in many minority world contexts (Russell & Tyler 2002, p.625, also Rogers 1998, Bickford 2008). Attention is drawn to the proliferation of 'boy bands', toys, fashion/beauty/lifestyle/culture/celebrity magazines, brands and retail experiences specifically marketed to 'tween' females. The sociologists Russell and Tyler (2002) provide an in-depth case study of one such retail experience: the UK chain 'Girl Heaven'. Through textual analysis, interviews with the chain's founders, and ethnographic research with young shoppers, they identify some marketing rhetorics and performative/spatial strategies deployed to appeal to the purchasing power of 'tween' females:

> Girl Heaven tends to be clearly distinguishable from other retail outlets…Customers are enticed into the stores by the glittery theatricality of what it has to offer…This is experienced through a combination of music, abundant use of glitter, bright white lighting and flooring…chrome fittings, pink lettering and iconography (hearts and stars) as well as sparkly costumes and make-up…Girl Heaven is a store…that sells a relatively narrow range of (largely own brand) hair and beauty products designed for the pursuit of a feminine aesthetic, whilst also seeking to ensure that shopping there is an aesthetic experience in itself (Russell & Tyler 2002, pp.626-627)

Russell and Tyler note how this retail context has been carefully planned as a space for 'clean, wholesome family fun' – normalising 'consumption as leisure', 'shopping as a magical experience' – through store design (a 'sensory overload' of pink, glitter and hearts), the performative work of staff (who perform dance routines to background music), and opportunities for young customers to be 'made over' and 'transformed into princesses' via jewellery, costumes, hair, make-up and nail styling. As all this talk of pinkness, make-up and glitter might suggest, popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena marketed to 'tween' females have been widely critiqued for valorising normative models of femininity in which 'beauty', 'fashion', 'girliness', awareness of brands and celebrities, and

ownership of consumer goods are assumed to be central to individuals' identity, popularity and cool-ness (Cook & Kaiser 2004, Saltmarsh 2009, Allen & Mendick 2012).

The lines of work outlined in this section raise some major questions for human geographers, especially those of us engaged in research on childhood, youth, families, consumption, gender or identities. However, geographers working with children and young people have rarely engaged directly with the kinds of popular cultural texts, objects, phenomena, representational politics and questions about *meanings* highlighted in this body of literature. Although geographers have researched and written extensively on children and young people's play, identities, consumption, and social/cultural lives in diverse contexts (see Kraftl et al. 2014), specific popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena have typically appeared only fleetingly and obliquely within their work (for a range of examples, see Horton 2012, p.5), and questions about their *meanings* have rarely been directly addressed in the context of geographical research and scholarship. Given the importance of popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena for many children and young people's lives, friendships, families, play, consumption and social/cultural geographies, I suggest that this shying-away from popular culture is rather problematic and puzzling. Perhaps, as Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) argue, research on children and young people's popular culture continues to be somewhat marginalised within the social sciences – even in subdisiplines centrally concerned with childhood, youth or cultural consumption (Martens et al. 2004, Cook 2008) – because it is seen as a fairly 'frivolous', 'fun', niche activity. Or perhaps, as I argue in the following sections, many geographers have tended to avoid thoroughgoing engagement with earlier work on popular culture precisely because of the representational concerns with meaning which characterised this classic literature. Certainly, I suggest that geographers should speak more to and about the questions and work summarised in Part 1; indeed, as I will argue in Part 2, I also feel that geographical concepts should be important in radically extending and contesting much classic work in this area. However, in the following 'commercial break' I develop some reflections on working at the intersection of these two convictions.

Commercial break: browsing *Toys 'Я' Us* Christmas catalogues from 1975 and 2013

Over the course of this paper, I call for more geographical research directly addressing children and young people's popular cultures. I argue that geographers working in this area should be mindful both of (broadly representational) questions of *meaning* from classic cultural/media studies (part 1) *and* (broadly nonrepresentational) apprehensions of *mattering* from recent geographical conceptualisations (part 2). However, in this space *inbetween* parts 1 and 2, I highlight some broader challenges of attempting to think and research at this intersection of representational and nonrepresentational concerns. I will develop this argument with reference to two examples: the earliest and most recent Christmas toy catalogues issued by the North American *Toys 'Я' Us* corporation (see boxes 1 and 2; see Seiter 1992 for background information about *Toys 'Я' Us*).

Box 1 *Toys 'Я' Us* Christmas catalogue, 1975[1]

This two-sided flier was distributed in the neighbourhoods near 51 stores in the USA. It consists of a blue page and a pink page, with about a dozen toys per side. On the blue side: various action figures (superheroes; 'top crime fighters of TV and cinema'; GI Joe plus Sea Wolf submarine and 'squid attack adventure' pack; Six Million Dollar Man 'with bionic power arm'; *Planet of the Apes* General Urko), boxing gloves, toy pistol plus holster, toy chainsaw, tool belt ('with pliers and real hammer'). On the pink side: Drinkee baby ('drinks from nursing bottle and wets'), Barbie ('with long gown and quick curl hair'), Miss Ginny debutante doll ('mint green gown, lace trim, matching hat and lace trim panties'), Baby Dear doll ('sleeping eyes and pink pyjamas'), Happy Family doll set ('combines fun and creativity'), Polly Pretend doll ('learn to use beauty aids').

[1] Archived, along with many other toy catalogues from the 1970s and 1980s, at http://192.185.93.157/~wishbook/

Box 2 *Toys 'Я' Us* online Christmas catalogue, 2013[2]

More than 250,000 products can be purchased via a 'differentiated family of brands' and regionally-specific interfaces in 35 countries. In many territories, *Toys 'Я' Us* has taken a corporate decision to foster 'gender neutrality' in its marketing materials. On the UK site, labels like 'toys for girls' and 'toys for boys' have been dropped. Instead, products are catalogued into thematic categories (which can be narrowed by age, price range and brands), including: action figures, animals, apps, bikes and ride-ons, cars, collectables, creative, construction, dolls, dress up, electronic learning, games, jigsaws, kids room accessories, musical, numbers and letters, outdoor and sports, preschool, radio control, robotics, role play, sciences, soft toys, technology and gadgets, video games, and top brands. Barbie is top of the 'top brands'. A click of the mouse brings up 532 Barbie products. A remarkable array of stuff: dolls; accessories, fashions and vehicles for dolls; little pets; accessories and fashions for the little pets; Barbie as a princess, ballerina, mermaid, pop star, ballroom dancer or equestrian rider; limited edition 'collectables'; Barbie on lunchboxes, clothing, trainers, crockery, crayons, tiaras; apps, video games, building blocks, and video games about building blocks; an 'exclusive Malibu dreamhouse'. I estimate that about 80% of these images feature the colour pink. Not just pink; but really bright, vibrant, eyebright, in-your-face, ultra

PINK.

The juxtaposition of boxes 1 and 2 should highlight three challenges for anyone attempting to study children and young people's popular culture. First, it should be clear that popular culture is, perhaps increasingly, not a static, stable, singular entity. For example, the quantity and range of cultural commodities have apparently proliferated quite remarkably over the last three decades: such that the latest catalogue contains 10,000 times more products (including 500 times more varieties of Barbie product), and is available in 35 more territorially-specific online versions, than the earliest. If nothing else, this makes it hard to keep up with the ever-changing landscape of

[2] See http://www.toysrus.com/

children and young people's popular cultures, and increasingly difficult to sustain neat, clear, comprehensive claims about the state of contemporary popular culture *in toto*. The two boxes also bear witness to a great deal of social, cultural and historical change: in the different kinds of toys and commodities designed for children; in the cultural phenomena which have waxed and waned in popularity; in the shifting processes through which popular cultural commodities are marketed and purchased; in the mutable social construction of ideal childhoods; in the multinational corporate expansion of the toy market; and in the ostensibly dynamic cultural politics of toy marketing. But then again, there are so many continuities linking the two boxes: the very notion of a Christmas toy catalogue; the persistent popularity of toy tropes such as fashion dolls, baby dolls and poseable action toys; the enduring presence of popular cultural icons like Barbie or GI Joe; and the obstinate, apparently deeper, gendering of many popular cultural commodities. The relative importance of these changes and continuities is contested. For instance, we can take our pick between media/online commentaries claiming that the 'gender neutrality' of the new *Toys 'Я' Us* Christmas catalogue marks a new, progressive era in the social construction of childhood (Crouch 2013), versus media/online commentaries claiming that the intense pinkness of many items in the catalogue demonstrates that children's popular culture is more deeply, hopelessly and corrosively gendered than ever before.

Second, the boxes may prompt us to consider how tempting and comfortable it is to write and think about popular culture in terms of its meaning. Certainly, as I browsed those catalogues and wrote those boxes, I felt it: the desire to jump to easy conclusions, to critique representations, to analyse images and iconography, to develop a neat argument, to write a surefooted narrative, to hone a critique, *to make a point*. However, I argue that it is problematic to always/only write and think about popular culture in this way. Admittedly, documents like the 1975 *Toys 'Я' Us* catalogue do lend themselves to straightforward critical readings: it includes a manageable array of popular cultural phenomena; it is easy to occupy a critical, politicised standpoint when confronted with a pink page of dolls and a blue page of action figures. There is a kind of satisfaction to be had, writing polemically about 'debutante dolls' versus 'bionic arms'. This kind of angry, urgent criticality is necessary, important and valid. But I find that this mode of clear-cut critique is less sustainable when surveying children and young people's popular culture in 2013. It is harder to locate neat, singular conclusions when confronted with 250,000 different

objects, in 30 thematic categories, purchased by their millions in 35 countries. It is hard to be sure where to begin, what is going on, or what to think. So it is tempting to withdraw from making large, coherent claims about the meaning of popular culture, and focus instead upon more local, personal, microgeographical apprehensions of how popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena matter for individual children and young people.

Moreover, third, I find that if one jumps to write about meanings of popular culture, it is all too easy to overlook how popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena *matter* in practice within people's everyday geographies. For example, as I browsed online archives of toy catalogues, I was so caught up in the immediacy of reading images and text, that I found myself not really thinking about the considerable work, care and dedication (probably 1000s of hours of scanning) which led to these archives being compiled. Similarly, it takes a certain degree of scholarly willpower to think *not only* about how debutante dolls and Malibu Barbie houses should be critiqued for their gendered normativity, *but also* about how these popular cultural items might be actually encountered, used, and cared for in practice by all kinds of people in all kinds of spaces. And now I realise that in jumping to write about all this, I have suppressed (or at least distanced myself from) what I felt as I browsed the 1975 Toys 'Я' Us catalogue and other decades-old toy catalogues: feelings of '*aww*', '*umph*', '*wow*', '*cool*', ' *I remember that*', that are not easy to put into words.

So, I feel caught between two sensibilities: on one hand, I recognise the importance of continuing the lines of enquiry and criticality outlined in Part 1; on the other hand, there are a number of senses in which this work seems (perhaps increasingly) ill-suited to understanding engagements with popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena in practice. In Part 2 I suggest that recent conceptualisations of social-material geographies of childhood and youth might expand and unsettle the chief concerns of much classic research in this context. In this paper's conclusion, I argue that future geographical research in relation to children, young people and popular culture should be concerned with both questions of *meaning* articulated in part 1 and questions of *mattering* articulate in part 2 .

Part 2: how children's popular culture *matters*

To date, as Crewe and Collins (2006) note, relatively few geographers have directly engaged with the literatures and issues outlined in Part 1. Likewise, few researchers addressing these issues within cultural/media studies, marketing or sociology have drawn upon geographical concepts or empirics. However, I argue that recent geographical research on the everyday social-material geographies of children and young people should be an important resource for any future studies of popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena. I suggest that geographical conceptualisations have the capacity to extend and enliven the key lines of research discussed in Part 1 – and to unsettle and challenge some limiting conceptual habits and working assumptions which characterise that work – in several senses.

First, recent work by children's geographers calls for a radically expanded apprehension of the complex **materialities** which constitute children and young people's geographies. This should prompt recognition of the complex materialities which constitute popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena. For example, geographical research on popular cultural phenomena like Sylvanian Families (Houlton and Short 1995), Postman Pat (Horton 2008) and Pokémon (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2003, Horton 2012) show how these characters exist in thousands of mass-produced, multi-textual material forms: what Thrift (2003, p.395) calls complex 'micro-ontologies'; "little fantasy worlds arising from media narrative and total marketing", available for purchase in multiple, interlinked material forms. All this popular cultural *stuff* takes such a profusion of forms, distributed across so many everyday spaces, that it typically defies easy categorisation and exceeds neat, singular forms of narration. Buckingham (2000), Lee (2001) and Thrift (2003) also argue that the popular culture industries often, and increasingly, produce entirely new categories of material object, affording new 'alliances' between children, young people and material objects: for instance, they note that the toy market has been a notable space of innovation and early adoption in relation to digital and interactive commodities.

Second, many geographers have paid close attention to children and young people's taken-for-granted, everyday **practices** in diverse contexts. This should prompt careful reflection upon things that are actually *done* with, and in relation to, popular cultural *stuff*. Geographical studies of play show how popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena are mobilised in play practices which are embodied and sensuous – "involv[ing] sights, sounds, smells, touch, tastes, to varying degrees" – and whose meanings may not be sayable: "as any person who plays knows, there is always part of the practice which cannot be described directly – something elusive, at both a physical and emotional level" (Harker 2005, p.54, 51; also Woodyer 2012). Indeed, Rautio (2013, p.6) notes that play practices may be literally meaning-less: so we should acknowledge that popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena may be mobilised in "things that are done for no apparent reason other than for doing them,…[practices which are] seemingly pointless, yet inherently rewarding for those who engage with it". This acknowledgment should widen the scope of research investigating children and young people's engagements with popular culture: beyond a focus upon practices which are self-evidently meaningful, to an acknowledgment of the multiple practices done with popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena, even those which are ostensibly banal, pointless, meaning-less and irrelevant to the concerns mapped out in Part 1.

Third, geographical research has highlighted the complex **socialities** and **relationships** which constitute and characterise children and young people's lives. There is a sense that much classic social-scientific research about childhood and youth – including that summarised in Part 1 – underestimated how social relationships and sociotechnical connections *matter* to children and young people. Studies of children and young people's social-cultural geographies have noted how popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena are frequently important in, and constitutive of, friendship, family and peer relationships, not least through practices like 'pester power', 'peer pressure' and playground conversations (Dover 2007). It is noteworthy that practices like being a fan of a pop band, or swapping a particular series of collectable cards, often entail interactions between a large cast of children, young people and adults. Moreover, such practices may cut across established social groups and divisions: perhaps creating new friendships, dividing extant friendship groups, prompting encounters between groups or individuals who would not otherwise interact, or fostering new group identities, inclusions and exclusions. Note, too, that engagements with 'children's' popular culture are not solely the preserve of children

and young people. This is evident in the intergenerational nature of many popular cultural activities, or in adults' communities of collection, fandom and enthusiasm (Tierney 2010) – or, alternatively, campaigning and critique – around particular popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena. Recognising this extensive cast of people interconnected through popular cultural practices also raises political-ethical questions: starkly exposed in research revealing the exploitative multinational labour practices involved in the production of toys like Lego or Barbie. I suggest that the frame of questions and concerns summarised in Part 1 tended to underestimate the importance of these different kinds of relationships – both for children and young people themselves, and in terms of understanding the complex processes through which popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena are encountered and consumed (Buckingham 2011). On this latter point, Woodyer (2008; also Rautio 2013) calls for researchers to better acknowledge the complex 'relationality' of children and young people's popular cultures. She argues that locating popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena as elements within heterogeneous, contingent socio-material assemblages of interrelated (human and nonhuman) bodies problematises many chief social scientific accounts of childhood and youth (including the classic research outlined in Part 1).

Fourth, a number of geographers have investigated the importance of **diverse modes of consumption, exchange and economic activity**. Here it is noted that chief accounts of contemporary consumerism and popular culture have habitually overlooked the existence of diverse, 'alternative' and socio-economically-patterned practices through which commodities are exchanged, consumed and purchased. For example, Clarke (2000), Gregson and Crewe (2003) and Hall (2013) highlight the importance of spaces like charity shops, car boot sales and other modes of second-hand purchase/exchange in many families' acquisition and divestment of branded and popular cultural commodities. We might also consider children and young people's own practices of swapping, bartering, gambling, sharing or stealing popular cultural *stuff* (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2003, Horton 2012); or the spaces through which adult enthusiasts collect, auction, value or exchange second-hand popular cultural objects, past and present (Tierney 2010); or the spaces through which illicit, cut-price, forged or replica versions of popular cultural merchandise are bought and sold. These examples – and the particular forms of expertise and knowledge each entails – should expand our awareness of the diverse ways in which popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena are purchased in practice. They suggest that the research outlined in Part 1 tended to

reproduce some narrow, normative – and, it must be said, consumerist, minority-world-centric – understandings of popular cultural consumption (see Collins and Hitchings 2012).

Fifth, many children's geographers have called attention to the **emotional-affective** conditions of children and young people's lives, and the emotions/affects mobilised in discourses of childhood and youth. I suggest that conceptualisations of emotion and affect should be important in extending the lines of work outlined in Part 1: particularly by problematising the presumption that popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena are only/mainly important inasmuch as they are meaning-ful. In my own experiences of researching with children engaged with popular cultural phenomena. I have been struck by how research participants did not, typically, neatly talk about what their favoured popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena *meant* in terms of the approaches summarised in Part 1. Instead, they talked, at length and with considerable care, emotion and personal, contingent detail about the multifarious ways in which this popular cultural stuff *mattered*, often intensely, for their everyday geographies, relations, habits and moods. Children and young people can really *care* about popular cultural texts, objects and media, but not necessarily (or, in my experience, particularly), in the terms outlined in Part 1. Research on geographies of enthusiasm (Geoghegan 2012), care (Conradson 2003), friendship (Bunnell et al. 2011), nostalgia (Moran 2002), fun (Woodyer 2012), hope (Kraftl 2008), or the multiple emotions afforded by particular consumer goods (see Pain et al. 2005 on mobile phones, Elliot & Leonard 2004 on trainers) offer ways of extending this line of thought.

Sixth, taking the preceding points together, children's geographers have particularly focused upon the complex **spatialities** of children and young people's everyday lives. By contrast, it is notable that much of the work summarised in Part 1 tended to say little about spaces in which popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena are encountered, or the constitutive role of popular culture in everyday geographies. The geographical conceptualisations summarised here can, collectively, be thought of a set of demands to key understandings of children, young people and popular culture: to explore the complex spaces in which children and young people actually encounter and consume popular culture; to recognise that their complexity makes neat accounts of the meaning, effect or reception of popular culture seem problematically reductive; to understand that popular

cultural enthusiasms and practices frequently transform or animate spaces and time-space routines; to accept that children and young people's geographies are often opaque, "disruptive, impossible, unintelligible", and thus resist and unsettle attempts by adult onlookers to write about them in confident, comprehensive, categorical terms (Lury 2005, p.308).

Collectively, these lines of thought demand new ways of thinking, researching and writing about children, young people and popular culture. They demand:

- a shift in focus, away from neat value judgements and readings of *meaning* (Buckingham 2011), towards more careful, modest apprehensions of *matterings*;
- a shift in register, away from spectacular and iconic examples, and clear-cut political standpoints, towards more nuanced, subtle, complex, modest engagements with details and particularities;
- an open and expanded conceptual range, encompassing concepts of performativity, socio-materiality, embodiment, emotion/affect;
- a turn to include detailed, in-depth, ethnographic, multi-site studies of popular cultural texts, objects and media in circulation in everyday lives;
- a move away from categorical, reductive, deterministic modes of thinking (this must *mean* something) towards more modest, hesitant, complex understandings of how heterogeneous popular cultural texts, objects and media are distributed and matter in/through everyday spaces;
- a shift in analytic style, from the delivery of firm, finished, decided statements which pin down meaning, towards more open engagements with play and popular culture in its becoming (Harker 2005) – "let[ting] go of an insistence on causality, linearity and neatness in our conceptualisations" (Rautio 2013, p.3).

Conclusions

In writing this paper I have found myself making two arguments: on one hand, more geographers should engage with the literature, issues and representational politics outlined in Part 1; on the other hand, the geographical concepts and nonrepresentational sensibilities discussed in Part 2 render many aspects of this classic work fundamentally problematic, and demand new modes of research in relation to popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena. These two arguments (and these two bodies of work) can seem antithetical. However, in the space of the 'commercial break' I began to develop a case for working *inbetween* the political-representational bite of Part 1 and the modest, subtle, conceptual particularities of Part 2. That is, I suggest that geographers should *both* attend to the normative, intractable meanings and representations circulated via children and young people's popular cultures *and* seek to extend, enliven and critique classic research in this context by noticing how heterogeneous popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena are complexly encountered and *matter* in particular, diverse everyday spaces. I suggest that these challenges are broadly pertinent to any human geographers seeking to reconcile classic (characteristically representational) accounts of culture and society and more recent (constitutionally nonrepresentational) geographical conceptualisations.

Certainly, I suggest that this *inbetween* position prompts some specific questions for future geographical research on children, young people and popular culture. Geographers working in this area, and researching children and young people's social and cultural geographies more broadly, could consider the following prompts for reflection:

- What meanings and representations are circulated via children and young people's popular cultures in these contexts? How are these meanings encountered, noticed, accepted, valued, affecting or contested in practice?
- What popular cultural texts, objects and phenomena *matter* (and how) in contexts in which you work?
- Which elements of the discussions in Part 1 and Part 2 might extend understandings of children and young people's social-cultural geographies in the contexts where you work?

- How might it be possible to conduct research acknowledging both the political-representational concerns of Part 1 *and* the excessive contingent detail of Part 2? What new understandings might emerge when one works at this intersection of meaning and *mattering*?

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