

Neon bright: *Cool Places*, youth cultures and hopeful political-theoretical futures

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Abstract

This article provides a reflection on Skelton and Valentine's (1998) book 'Cool Places'. The article focuses upon the excitement, vitality and sense of challenge that the book first afforded when the two authors first encountered it. From these personal memories, the article then offers two sets of wider considerations. In the first, and prompted by the authors' use of the book in their teaching, it articulates how useful, relevant and engaging even contemporary students find the book, and how it offers a key point of reference within and beyond the teaching of 'children's geographies'. In the second, the authors seek to re-engage the book's lively, hopeful, yet critically-political orientations, offering a series of challenges for future scholarship in the geographies of childhood and youth. Like the rest of the article, these orient around a sense of what 'matters' in and to geographical scholarship on childhood and youth.

Keywords

Politics; relevance; youth cultures; teaching children's geographies; growing up; materialities

Preface: NEON BRIGHT

We both have mouldering, inky, decades-old photocopies of chapters from Skelton and Valentine's (1998) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. Among all kinds of notes, underlinings, arrows, asterisks and annotations, John's copy of Valentine et al's (1998) introductory chapter features a post-it note (bright pink, capital letters): 'NEON BRIGHT; THIS MATTERS'. It was that kind of book...

FIGURE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE: Neon Bright: This Matters

Encountering *Cool Places*

It is rather alarming to realise that twenty years have passed since the publication of *Cool Places*. For both of us it was a profoundly important, formative read. In this essay we reflect on how the book mattered to us on its publication. Then – moving beyond personal nostalgia and pretentious youthful post-it poetry – we celebrate the book’s remarkable, enduring vitality and significance for so many. For *Cool Places* remains a vivid, neon bright inspiration for diverse readers and – we argue – an important, hopeful political-theoretical waymarker for geographical research with children and young people.

We both first read *Cool Places* soon after its original publication, at a similar, early stage in our research careers (as undergraduate Geographers studying at British universities), and at a particular moment in the nascent development of geographical scholarship about childhood and youth (certainly before the prevalence of taught courses and textbooks on this topic). Although our first, parallel encounters with the book were embedded in personal circumstances, interests, cares and positionalities (see Table 1), we are stuck by two commonalities.

Table 1 GOES ABOUT HERE: Parallel Encounters with *Cool Places*

First, for both of us, *Cool Places* was one of the first readily available geographical texts about childhood and/or youth. Literally, in the institutions in which we worked, it was among the very first texts we found which explicitly and unreservedly legitimised and called for geographical research with children and young people. This was a time, for example, before the existence of *Children’s Geographies* journal (first published 2003), before the publication of *Children’s Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning* (Holloway and Valentine 2000), and before childhood, youth or families figured in most Higher Education Human Geography curricula or textbooks in the UK. Our education to that point had just not exposed us to the rich seam of work geographers were doing, not far away, at that time in relation to childhood and youth. For example, as far as we had been taught, Stuart Aitken was a leading auteur in film studies (Aitken and Zonn 1994), Hugh Matthews was lauded for historic

locational analyses of Britain's chemical industries (Matthews 1978), Tracey Skelton was principally known for research about ragga music and Montserratian economic development (Skelton 1995, 1995), and Gill Valentine and Chris Philo were primarily known as hot 'up-and-coming' references for essays in rural studies (Philo 1993, 1994, Bell and Valentine 1995, Valentine 1997). For us, and for many contemporaries, then, *Cool Places* was important in signposting geographical research with young people. It was instrumental in making us aware of exciting, pioneering research on all manner of geographies of youth cultures and, in so doing, helped us to get our bearings and begin to appreciate the possibilities of a nascent subdiscipline of Human Geography. It helped to widen our worldview by introducing us to research topics and ways of working which we had not really encountered within the parameters of our geographical education beforehand.

Second, we were both struck by the book's *full*-ness and neon bright vividness. The book was so *full* of ideas and critical openings. The chapters provided primers to cultural studies, feminism, critical race theory, subcultural studies, disability rights, cultural studies, activism and more. We had both been inspired and galvanised by these ideas already, but the contributors explicitly legitimised and developed geographical encounters with these bodies of theory in a way which felt radical, brilliant, thrilling, and worthy of pink post-it notes (John may cringe at his pretentious pink juvenilia, but he still remembers the *neon bright* feeling of reading the book and discovering new possibilities).

Reflecting on our first encounters with the text we feel nostalgic. This nostalgia is undoubtedly personal (as we recall bygone moments of optimistic, enthusiastic scholarly exploration in our own lives) but also marks a wider yearning (recalling scholarship which was so *full*, open and vivid in its engagement with politicised, interdisciplinary theorisations of social and cultural geographies).

Through the following sections we consider how the political-theoretical work done in/by *Cool Places* can and should way-mark future geographical research with children and young people.

Twenty years on: continuing engagements with *Cool Places*

Twenty years on, we have found that *Cool Places* remains an engaging, inspirational read for geographers developing research in relation to childhood and youth. Despite its advancing years, both

of us still use *Cool Places* in our teaching with UK undergraduate students – both in final year modules dedicated to the geographies of childhood and youth, and in teaching (and publications) that have a far wider remit. We begin with teaching because our experiences of reflecting on the geographies of childhood and youth with students over the past fifteen years speak volumes – both about the enduring impact of *Cool Places* and the subsequent points we raise about the relationship between children’s geographies and youth (sub)cultural studies.

With colleagues, Peter has for many years taught modules on children, youth and the geographies of identity that required students to engage in a series of reflective tasks – to remember and witness *their own* youth ‘cultures’. The students took part in a series of class-based activities about fitting and misfitting – about (post-)subcultural styles, norms, assumptions, exclusions, habits and materialities on campus and beyond. They also completed an autoethnographic assignment that required them to write (or otherwise represent) moments from their childhood or youthful years, using these to reflect critically upon some of the predominant theoretical frameworks that have been developed by children’s geographers.

In this light, *Cool Places* offered a key touchstone in two senses. Firstly, in the absence of either much systematic or, especially, *recent* writing by geographers on youth *cultures*, the book afforded a key touchstone for framing to students – in often quite straightforward, prefatory ways at the beginning of the module – how and why youth cultures should *matter* to geographers. It provided – and still provides – one of the most compelling articulations of the *spatialities* of youth cultures. Second, although it is no longer true to say that children’s geographers have ignored older youth (see guiding examples such as Hopkins 2010; Jeffrey 2013), despite offering a huge range of more recent texts about youth on his reading lists, he has found that students routinely turn to *Cool Places* as a source of inspiration and guidance for their work. Simply put, the book and its many case studies (ranging from computer games to clubbing to television) just seem to resonate with contemporary students in ways that other texts do not, especially as they try to make sense of their own experiences through autoethnographies.

John also uses the book extensively in undergraduate teaching and research training – most notably, actually, in modules which are not primarily about youth geography. He continues to find the book a really useful resource, full of powerful case studies which animate diverse lectures on geographies of disabilities (e.g. Butler’s chapter on intersections of youth and disabilities), consumption (Malbon on clubbing), subcultures (Leonard on riot grrl), homelessness (Ruddick on homeless youth cultures), space and place (Massey on the spatial construction of youth cultures) and spatial exclusions (Watt and Stenson on race and ethnicity). He notices that undergraduate students continue to find the chapters accessible, engaging and affecting: both as illustrative empirical cases and as openings for engagement with multidisciplinary theorisations of social and cultural geographies. While there has been a proliferation of new textbooks and innovative teaching resources for Human Geographers since 1998, *Cool Places* remains a key reference across wide-ranging taught modules. It continues to serve as a way-marker, providing political-theoretical coordinates for geographers finding their way in a complex, expanding discipline, just as it did for the authors twenty years ago.

Way-marking hopeful political-theoretical futures

On reflection, we worry that the political-theoretical fullness and excitement of *Cool Places* has not always translated into more recent scholarship in children’s geographies. The insights and criticality of cultural studies, feminism, critical race theory, disability rights and activism remain vital (perhaps more than ever), but seem to have become more subliminal and implicit in much geographical work with children and young people as the identity and theoretical lineages of the subdiscipline have developed (see, for instance, Aitken 2018). In making this comment, we walk in some ways over well-trodden ground (e.g. Horton and Kraftl 2005; Vanderbeck 2008); and we are cognisant of a raft of more recent and exciting scholarship on children’s P/political geographies and youth citizenship (e.g. Kallio and Häkli 2013; Mills and Kraftl 2014; Mills and Waite 2017; Hsieh and Skelton 2018). Yet the sense of the ‘political’ in which we are interested here is related to, but somehow distinct from, the kinds of P/politics afforded space in contemporary work. Our more specific argument is that, since the publication of *Cool Places*, children’s geographers have not, in the main, established

the kinds of cross-disciplinary relationship with youth studies scholars that might have enabled a *fuller* discussion of the *manifold* kinds of issues that – as we have found in our work with (generally youthful) undergraduates – continue to *matter* to young people. Our argument is not at all that the diverse range of issues with which children’s geographers have grappled do not matter; rather, that they do not always map onto the yet-more diverse concerns of young people themselves (even if some of these concerns seem, at face value, somewhat more banal).

Since the publication of *Cool Places*, it is fair to say that there has been little systematic cross-fertilisation between children’s geographies and youth studies scholarship, despite the obvious resonances between these fields. There may be good reasons for this: on the one hand, reflecting a disinclination amongst geographers to engage in the sometimes more broad-brush representational and textual analyses of youth popular-cultural studies (see Horton 2010 for a more detailed critique); and on the other hand, marking an unwillingness to remain engaged with questions of structure and agency that still dominate youth studies research (Kelly and Kamp 2015). Yet, whilst these approaches may to some extent seem *passé* to children’s geographers, they should not be dismissed. For – alongside specific lines of theorising in (post-)subcultural studies – they delineate a range of P/political concerns that remain live and that, more pointedly, could well complement the P/political domains studied by children’s geographers. In particular, we think here of the *cultural* politics of representation that are central to young people’s struggles for recognition around the world – whether in terms of (at the time of writing) renewed questions about gender equality following scandals in the film and cultural industries, or in terms of the economic, political and cultural conditions that are constituting conditions of widespread precarity (in terms of housing, employment and more) amongst the current generation of young people (Horton 2016). Certainly, youth studies do not have all of the conceptual answers to support these struggles; but neither have children’s geographies scholars grasped the *fullness* of these struggles, and especially the imbrications of the cultural – of lifestyle, popular and especially digital cultures – therein. Although representing a starting-point rather than a final statement on these kinds of struggle, and on the possibilities for cross-fertilisation between children’s geographies and youth studies (and more), what we are advocating here is a return to the

kinds of interdisciplinary open-mindedness, enthusiasm, care, passion and criticality role-modelled by *Cool Places*.

Possible challenges for children's geographies

It is our strongly-held conviction that whilst the world has moved on since the late 1990s – and the issues facing children and young people have become arguably more pressing – the bigger questions, politics and sensibilities espoused by *Cool Places* remain relevant. The book continues to offer a range of challenges for contemporary and future children's geographers. Here – and writing from the position of our own research and conceptual agendas – we outline just three possible challenges for children's geographies scholarship over the next decade (and more).

The first challenge is not so much to redress the balance in terms of the relative absence of older young people in the geographies of childhood and youth; rather, it is to find conceptual and methodological languages to witness the range of continuities and discontinuities that characterise 'growing up' (or, as we have termed it, 'going on' [Horton and Kraftl 2006]). To do so is not to efface the obvious fact that the issues and everyday cultures of young children, teenagers and young adults will be different. Instead, it is to start from a position that does not necessarily assume that these different age groups represent *de facto* different objects of study (also Hopkins and Pain 2007). In a range of research projects, we have worked with samples of children and young people across the age range. For instance, a current project in Brazil on food/water/energy involves young people aged 12-25 through a range of methods including a large-scale survey, interviews and app-based research. Empirically, and especially through instruments such as large-scale surveys and datasets, this range offers exciting opportunities for the comparison of experiences and multivariate analyses across age and other variables. At the other end of the methodological spectrum, a greater openness to working across age may enable a range of creative approaches – such as the autoethnographies we have used with students – that could emphasise the significance of individual and collective memories (and other histories) in (re)conceiving what we mean by 'children's' geographies' (e.g. Kraftl, 2017) and, thereby, the *fullness* of youthful experiences over time.

A second challenge is to continue to work with but, equally, to critically interrogate the urge to ‘decentre’ children in our analyses in ways that incorporate but extend beyond the more open approach to age outlined in our first challenge (e.g. Kraftl 2012; Aitken 2018; Kraftl and Horton 2018). Significantly – and given our concerns above around connecting with youth studies scholarship – recent critiques of youth studies have paralleled these moves by seeking to decentre youth through theories of assemblage and becoming (Kelly and Kamp 2015). Although similarly inspired by work in nonrepresentational and, more recently, new materialist theorising, a key concern for us has been to ask how the *politics* of childhood and youth geographies – of racisms, of class-based prejudices, of more-or-less silent forms of epistemic violence – are entangled with and articulated by a range of hitherto-effaced social-materialities – of rat-infested playgrounds, excrement-smearred parks and ‘racist groundwater’ (Horton and Kraftl 2017). Critically, these are not challenges that are confined to high theory, nor to the particular sites (playgrounds in London) that spawned these analyses. Rather, children and young people are embroiled in intractable and pressing challenges that cut across the usual disciplinary and thematic biases of academic research – across health, education, environment, technology and more. To pick just one example: we are still only just beginning to understand the effects of air pollution upon humans’ physiological and psychological functioning, and particularly the accretion of pollutants across the lifecourse, as these intersect with the geographical and social positioning of individuals. Yet to fully understand children’s exposure to and the effects on their bodies of air pollution, we cannot keep carrying on with a singular commitment to centring children’s ‘voice’ or ‘agency’ (Kraftl 2013). Rather, that commitment must be (re)combined with/in potentially radical or surprising affiliations of children’s geographers with the environmental scientists who monitor air pollution and its circulation, the urban planners who design and evaluate transport infrastructures, the health scholars and psychologists who can diagnose and track the effects of air pollution in children and across the lifecourse, the urban geographers who can model statistically-significant correlations between increased exposure/risks and variables such as social class, ethnicity or place of residence, and far more besides. A key challenge for children’s geographers must, in our view, then be to develop a certain openness to decentring children (at least, children’s ‘voices’ and ‘agency’). Therein, children’s geographers might cultivate the openness to approaches beyond the

(sub)discipline that has always characterised children's geographies scholarship, but in more radical ways that can broach pressing concerns such as air pollution.

A third challenge is to consider how we might create subdisciplinary spaces in which the kinds of passionate, political-theoretical *neon brightness* of *Cool Places* might continue to be possible within the challenging parameters of the contemporary neoliberal academy. As we described at the outset, the book offered a hopeful sense of recognition: a feeling that people, places, (sub)cultures and exclusions we knew could be central to geographical research. Moreover, we were both affected and transformed by the book's aesthetic, vividness, and the care and passion which evidently underpinned its production: for us, the book offered a hopeful sense that other ways of writing geographically and being a geographer were possible. On reflection, though, we worry about how seldom one *feels* this kind of hope when reading scholarship in the discipline of Human Geography (see also Horton 2018): when was the last time you read a piece of academic writing which moved you to write THIS MATTERS? A different, related worry relates to how we, as individuals, have evidently changed over time: whatever happened to the youthful readers who were moved to write THIS MATTERS, and were the kinds of people who *could* be moved in this way? (Have our exuberance, passion and political-theoretical hope survived the vicissitudes of personal, political and academic life in the intervening twenty years?) Reflecting on *Cool Places* should make us appreciate, and learn from, the craft and care which evidently went into its production. It should prompt us to ask: what can we do to constitute multidisciplinary spaces where this kind of care-ful, affecting, always-politically-theoretically-engaged work might be fostered? It should also prompt us to ask: how can we sustain or recover the joyful, exuberant sense of hope and empowerment which characterised our first readings of *Cool Places*? How do we get (back) to that?

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