

For the love of cuddly toys

Abstract

This essay reflects upon a particular moment at the end of Chris Philo's *Children's Geographies* lecture (see Philo 2016), when discussion turned to cuddly toys. I recall a particular mood constituted in and by this moment: of apparent bashfulness, hesitancy, things-left-unsaid, and disinclination to discuss cuddly toys within the space of an academic conference. I suggest that this incident might be understood as indicative of three sets of silences which, still, characterise a great deal of work within the fantastically vibrant subdisciplines of Children's Geographies and Cultural Geographies. This argument is accompanied by photographic portraits of three particular toys: Angus, Arnold and the B.B.D. I hope that the presence of these portraits helps bring to the surface something of the often-silenced geographies – of memories, affects, intimacies and vulnerabilities, of play, fun and care, and of material and popular cultures – upon which my argument is focused.

Keywords

Children's geographies, Philo, cuddly toys, memories, play, popular culture

Introduction

A funny thing happened after Chris Philo's wonderful 2015 *Children's Geographies* lecture at the Annual Conference of the UK's Royal Geographical Society / Institute British Geographers (see Philo 2016, this issue). Maybe I am overthinking it. Maybe it was nothing, but it made me worry nonetheless...

Philo's remarkable lecture began with a line – 'after the dark of reason' – from John Betjeman's prose poem *Summoned by Bells*. In contextualising this verse, Philo noted that Betjeman has often been figured, pejoratively, as a somewhat 'childish' figure within the canon of twentieth century poetry, not least because of his lifelong attachment to two cuddly toys: Archibald the bear and Jumbo the (unimaginatively named) elephant (figure 1).



Figure 1. Jumbo and Archibald. Childhood toys; poetic muses; alleged Nazi sympathisers; deathbed companions; possible inspirations for the character of Aloysius in *Brideshead Revisited*; family heirlooms (see Wilson, 2007, Oxford Times 2012). Photograph copyright www.bearsandbuds.com, permission granted

At the lecture's conclusion, questions and discussion (re)turned, several times, to the topic of Archibald and Jumbo, and it was here – rather than in the content of Philo's lecture per se – that I began to worry and wonder.

During the discussion – and for reasons that escape me now – audience members were asked to raise our hands if we still owned, somewhere, a childhood cuddly toy. In an audience of seventy Children's Geographers and Cultural Geographers I reckon *four* hands went up straight away. After some hesitation, nervous laughter, jokes and smiles some more hands went up. Most were half-raised, apparently bashfully; certainly, still fewer than half of the audience had their hands up. Now, there are all kinds of reasons why this might have happened: like, a general aversion to audience participation; or, collective fatigue and malaise towards the end of a large, stressful international conference; or perhaps, in 2015, most conference-attending Human Geographers genuinely do not own any cuddly toys. But still, I found myself looking around the space of the lecture room, wondering about all the people who were not putting their hands up: 'I *know for a fact* she's got a teddy bear'; 'I'm *sure* he must have some kind of cuddly toy'; 'why aren't more people *joining in* with this?' And, perhaps more importantly, I found myself worrying about the peculiar flavour of awkwardness, bashfulness, hesitancy and things-apparently-left-unsaid which seemed to be constituted in and by this brief moment. So this *Viewpoint* is written from that worry, and a wish to ask: 'what might it mean, and how might it matter, if many Children's Geographers and Cultural Geographers seem disinclined to talk about their cuddly toys within the space of an academic conference?'

I want to suggest that the incident described in the preceding paragraph might be understood as an indicator of – or at least a metaphor for – three sets of silences and silencings which, still, seem to characterise a great deal of work within the fantastically vibrant subdisciplines of Children's Geographies and Cultural Geographies. This argument is accompanied by photographic portraits of three particular toys: Angus, Arnold and the B.B.D. (see figures 2, 3 and 4). I hope that the presence

of these portraits helps bring to the surface something of the often-unsaid geographies (see Nixon 2013) – of memories, affects, intimacies and vulnerabilities, of play, fun and care, and of material and popular cultures – upon which my argument is focused.

Silence 1: personal stories, intimate memories

First, for me the embarrassed (non)disclosure of cuddly toys prompted reflection upon things that often go unsaid within many spaces of academic and disciplinary life. I wonder whether the public spaces of large academic conferences are sites in which many people feel disinclined to talk – or where it can feel like not the ‘done thing’ to talk – about all kinds of stuff, like personal stories, memories, emotions/affects, enthusiasms, intimacies, embarrassments, loves, worries, cares, happinesses, sadnesses, awkwardnesses, idiosyncrasies and vulnerabilities. It feels odd to be thinking about this in the wake of such an engaging and intellectually generous lecture, within the relatively collegiate, supportive subdisciplinary space of a *Children’s Geographies* lecture. And it feels particularly odd to be thinking along these lines even after so many interventions to develop more inclusionary spaces of academia (WGSG 1997; Smith et al 2008) – and also the cultural and emotional/affective turns more broadly (Philo 2000; Bondi et al 2007) – within Human Geography. But still, I know I am not alone in sometimes feeling a bit tense, stressed, not myself, ill-at-ease, sometimes-a bit-ill, putting-on-a-front, and out-of-my-depth in some conference spaces. Not always, and not in all conference spaces: indeed, time-spaces inbetween and after conference sessions do afford many opportunities to catch up with friends and colleagues and discuss the vital stuff of in-jokes, institutions, biscuits, careers, comings and goings, families, relationships, births, marriages and deaths. However, broadly, I do still feel as if normative modes of professional-personal interaction within many more public spaces of academic conferences are ‘not my cup of tea’, as people from my kind of geographical/class background are wont to say. I know from research by Horton and Tucker (2014) that this is an experience shared by many academic geographers. So, putting aside the bigger question of why we do this stuff to ourselves, I worry about the many things

which habitually go unsaid, and the many silences constituted and perpetuated within, prestigious, large-scale events of academia.

In this context, I find experiments in autoethnographic and creative writing by authors like Owain Jones (2005, 2015) really important in constituting spaces and methods for thinking otherwise. I find Jones's autoethnographic pieces about childhood and family-life on and after a Welsh farm so vivid, affecting and haunting in their evocation of both the exuberant joys and affective rawness of that life-time. His work manages to convey the *joi-de-vivre* and multifaceted, more-than-human richness of some particular childhood landscapes, but also a discomfiting, disclosive sadness which can take one's breath away. Reading his work makes me realise how seldom one *feels* like this when reading publications by Children's Geographers and Cultural Geographers. In its touching vividness and piercing disclosure of personal vulnerabilities, Jones's work challenges us to write, think and speak about stuff which can, still, often feel normatively unsayable in many contemporary spaces of academic life. In highlighting his work here, I am not particularly advocating the need for more specifically-autoethnographic research by Children's Geographers (although that would no doubt be interesting); rather I would encourage more Geographers to write and work – in the same kind of spirit as Jones – from stuff that matters, and develop our own styles of thinking-writing-researching for making plain and taking seriously that mattering (see also Skelton 2013).



Figure 2. Angus. Gift given by author's parents, from one of their last holidays; speaks with poorly-rendered stereotypical Scottish accent; performs and awards medals at younger relatives' re-enactments of major sporting events.

Silence 2: playfulness

Second, and more specifically, the (non)discussion of cuddly toys after Philo's lecture made me worry about the peculiar, perhaps-marginalised status of playfulness and fun within the interdisciplinary context of Children's Geographies. Children's Geographers have done so much to evidence the importance of spaces, pleasures, sorrows, mobilities and politics of play in diverse global contexts (McKendrick et al 2000; Punch 2000; Thomson and Philo 2004; Thomson 2005; Änggård 2015; Holt et al 2015). However, while Children's Geographies has constituted a rich resource of research and writing *about* play, I tend to share the concerns of critics like Woodyer (2012, Woodyer et al 2015), Pyyry (2014), and Rautio (2013, Rautio and Jokinen, 2015) who suggest that normative disciplinary spaces, practices and concerns have often tended to foreclose *playfulness* itself. For example, Woodyer (2012, 322) calls for Children's Geographers to not only study how play matters, but also to cultivate more ludic modes of academic work and being, 'to mark the critical and ethical potential of playing, more explicitly'.

Here, I find attempts to foster playful or 'childish' scholarly spaces by authors like Tracy Hayes (2014, 2015) particularly thought-provoking in signalling ways of thinking, writing and researching otherwise. Hayes's work takes the form of playwork, creative practices and story-telling workshops, often featuring a posse of 'Adventure Bears'. These cuddly toys are presented as both objects-to-be-played-with and prompts-for-creative/imaginative/storytelling-workshops. What I think is particularly noteworthy is the way in which the presence of Adventure Bears in academic conference spaces seems to have a transformative impact: helping to constitute a more comfortable, collegiate, playful, reflective atmosphere, in which stories can be told, memories can be shared, pictures can be drawn, laughter can be heard, and important stuff can be discussed. While I would argue that playful practices need not only take the forms of *childhood* play – and certainly, care needs to be taken not to reproduce normative assumptions about play as *only* involving things like teddy bears – I do think that this kind of ludic intervention provides a powerful prompt to think about the often/ordinarily *not*-playful character of a great deal of contemporary academic life. So in highlighting the Adventure

Bears here, I am not particularly advocating the need for more geographical work featuring teddy bears (although that would no doubt be interesting); rather I would encourage more Geographers to try to cultivate an ethic of playfulness, somewhat beyond the normative, habitual, careworn, containing behaviours that so often characterise academic labour. This might experimenting, doing things for their own sake, doing things that make us smile or that we care most deeply about, trying to rediscover the spark, care or interest which got us excited about academic life in the first place, or doing stuff that feels good rather than stuff that looks good on paper.



Figure 3. Arnold. Kind-hearted, well-meaning, though occasionally foolish dinosaur; lives in plants-pots etc; covertly accompanies family-members on stressful trips.

Silence 3: material and popular cultures

Third, more specifically again, I would argue that teddy bears, cuddly elephants, and the many varieties of cuddly toys that Geographers may or may not own are examples of a whole world's-worth of material and popular cultural objects which are curiously very rarely written about by Children's Geographers. The Geographer Clive Barnett (2015, unpaginated) recently quipped that Cultural Geography seems 'to be constituted *as if* radio and television were never invented, or indeed *as if* The Beatles, Elvis, or The Supremes never happened'. In the same way, I think that one could argue that the subdiscipline of Children's Geographies has often proceeded *as if* cuddly toys, and a whole world of analogous popular and material culture¹, had never happened. Reading through two decades' of scholarship in this subdiscipline, one might get the impression that all kinds of popular and material cultural stuff – toys, games, technologies, children's literature, children's television, youth subcultures, fashions and enthusiasms – had never had a substantial, constitutive role in the geographies and politics of so many diverse, global childhoods and youths.

¹ For example, one could mention: 1Direction, the A-Team, acid house, Action Man, Allan Ahlberg, Airfix, the Amazing Spiderman, Amazon.com, American Girl, Hans Christian Andersen, Andy Pandy, Angry Birds, Asterix, Atari, Babar, Baby Annabell, Baby Peach, Backstreet Boys, Bagpuss, ball games, Bambi, Bananas in Pyjamas, Barbie, Barrio Sésamo, Batman, Beanie Babies, Beano, Justin Bieber, Bill and Ben, Malorie Blackman, Black Metal, Black Sabbath, Enid Blyton, BMX, bobble-heads, David Bowie, Blue Peter, board games, Bratz, breakbeats, Raymond Briggs, Britpop, Build-a-Bear, Bunty, Cabbage Patch Dolls, Care Bears, Cars, conkers, crayons, Curious George, the Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, D&B, D&D, Roald Dahl, darts, Dawson's Creek, Dear Zoo, Disco, Disney princesses, Dogtanic, dolls, Doom, Dr. Who, Drone, Dubstep, Dumbo, eBay, Elmer, emo, Ewoks, Facebook, fairy tales, fashion, Fimbles, Fisher-Price, folk tales, the Fonz, football, Frisbee, Frozen, Furby, Galli Galli Sim Sim, Garage, Ghostbusters, ghost stories, GI Joe, Godzilla, Gentle Ben, Goth, the Great Big Enormous Turnip, Grange Hill, Grime, the Gruffalo, grunge, hairstyles, Halloween, Hamster Dance, Happy Meals, hardcore, Haribo, Hasbro, Hello Kitty, He-Man, High School Musical, Hikayat Simsim, Hip Hop, hobbies, Horrible Histories, House music, Honey Monster, hula hoops, Hungry Hippos, In the Night Garden, the Incredible Hulk, Instagram, iPhones, iPods, Jackie, Jason and the Argonauts, Indiana Jones, iTunes, ken, Kenner, Kerrang!, Kinder Surprise, Evel Knievel, Kraftwerk, Ladybird, Lassie, Lego, loom bands, Magic Roundabout, Manga, marbles, Matchbox, memes, Metal, Mickey Mouse, microscooters, Miffy, Minecraft, Minions, mobile phones, Mod, Mog, Monster High, Moomins, Morph, MotD, Michael Morpurgo, Moshi Monsters, Motörhead, Motown, Mr. Men, Mr Potato Head, MTV, Muffin the Mule, Muppets, My Little Pony, Kendo Nagasaki, Napalm Death, Napster, NME, Nintendo, Noggin the Nog, NWA, Octonauts, Old Yeller, Orville, Pac-Man, Paddington, Panini, John Peel, Peppa Pig, piercings, pirate radio, pop, plastic dinosaurs, Play-doh, Playmobil, Playschool, Pokémon, Pondus the Penguin, Pong, Mary Poppins, Postman Pat, Beatrix Potter, Harry Potter, Pound Puppies, Power Rangers, the Powerpuff Girls, Public Enemy, public safety information, Philip Pullman, punk, puppets, Rainbow Magic, Rastamouse, reality TV, riot grrl, R&B, R&R, rubber ducks, Rubik's Cube, Schleich, Scooby-Doo, Maurice Sendak, Sesame Street, Shakin' Stevens, Shoe People, Shaun the Sheep, the Simpsons, Sindy, Six Dinner Sid, Smash Hits, the Smiths, the Smurfs, Snapchat, South Park, Space Invaders, Britney Spears, Spice Girls, Spiele des Jahres, Spongebob Squarepants, sports, Squinkies, Star Wars, Stax, Sticklebricks, SxE, Take That, Tamagotchi, Techno, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Tellytubbies, Tetris, Thunderbirds, the Tiger who Came to Tea, Tintin, Tiny Tears, TotP, Tom and Jerry, Tomy, Toy Story, Toys R Us, Transformers, trolls, t-shirts, Twilight, Twitter, video games, Wallace and Gromit, Wall•E, Weebles, Wham!, WhatsApp, Where's Wally, Jacqueline Wilson, Winnie-the-Pooh, WWE, Xbox, X-Factor, Youtube, yo-yos, Yu-Gi-Oh!, Zhu-Zhu, Zoella, and countless other items of material and popular culture, past and present, far beyond this excessive but clearly-particularly-situated list. Seriously, where is all of the geographical research about this stuff?

Against this grain, authors like Tara Woodyer (2008, 2013a) and David Buckingham (2007) have attempted to engage Children's Geographers with a wider body of social scientific research on children and young people's popular cultural play and consumption. For example, Woodyer's (2008, 2013a) accounts of material, embodied relationalities of playing-with popular and material cultures highlight how habitualised engagements with commercialised cultural constructs *matter* deeply for many children, young people and families, especially in minority world contexts (see also Horton 2010, 2012). Moreover, Woodyer's current research traces some historical and played-with trajectories of military action figures like GI Joe and Action Man, evidencing how,

'through their place in national cultures of militarism, action figures have played, and continue to play an important role in legitimating and sustaining particular geopolitical logics and technologies. It is precisely play's banal and taken-for-granted nature that enables domestication and sanitisation of military technologies and logics, and allows its role in popular geopolitical imaginaries to go unchallenged. Toys do not merely respond to geopolitical climates and cultures, but help to constitute them' (Woodyer 2013b, unpaginated).

In highlighting Woodyer's research here, I am not particularly advocating the need for more geographical work about action figures (although that would no doubt be interesting). Rather I would encourage more Geographers to address, more directly, the ways in which items of popular and material culture have constitutive importance in the everyday lives of so many children and young people (see also Ash and Gallacher 2011, Gallacher 2011, Shaw and Sharp 2013): that is, to proceed *as if* there is no intellectual, normative, academic barrier to writing about teddy bears, action figures and other stuff that matters to children and young people with whom we work.



Figure 4. B.B.D. Short for 'Big Belgian Duck'; money-box; made in China; souvenir from trip to Belgium, wherein it became evident that rubber ducks were very fashionable and could be bought in any number of sizes, varieties and outfits; allergic to 50p coins.

Conclusion

In this Viewpoint I have worried that many academic spaces of Children's Geographies and Cultural Geography may often constitute situations where people may be somehow, somewhat disinclined to disclose personal stories and vulnerabilities, to *do* playfulness and fun, and/or to explicitly discuss children and young people's material and popular cultures. These are by no means the only things that Children's Geographers could and should be doing, but I do suggest that they ought to have a somewhat greater presence and visibility within the subdiscipline. To this end I would challenge readers to develop affecting modes of thinking-writing-researching, to cultivate an ethic of playfulness, and to directly address the presence and performativity of popular and material cultures in whatever contexts you work; to proceed, after Philo [2016] as if these things matter 'big-time' for our work.

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