

Some popular cultural geographies, starring Cyrille Regis, Delia Derbyshire, an Ewok, Mickey Mouse, Napalm Death, the Sylvanian Families, and anonymous hate mail...

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Abstract

This essay is about many things including, but not limited to, Cyrille Regis, Delia Derbyshire, an Ewok badge, Mickey Mouse, Napalm Death, the Sylvanian Families, anonymous hate mail, bereavement, the luminous popular cultures of the often-deprecated English Midlands, the absence of so many amazing popular cultures from *Social & Cultural Geography*, and my own recurrent failure to write about these things. It is part of a Special Issue on *(Em)placing the Popular in Cultural Geography*. The essay opens out a set of questions and prompts for reflection about the relationship (or, more often, the weird *non*-relationship) between disciplines of Social and Cultural Geography and contemporary popular cultures. At its heart, you'll find six fragments of autoethnographic writing dealing with: popular cultural *absences* and *silences* in the written canon of Human Geography; *joy* and *recognition*, but also the *burden of doing justice* to popular cultures; and manifold *antipathies* towards academic work on popular culture.

Keywords

Popular culture, autoethnography, badges, West Midlands

Introduction

The Special Issue on *(Em)placing the Popular in Cultural Geography* is an important intervention in, and moment for reflection on, Social and Cultural Geography's engagements with contemporary popular culture. The Special Issue made me reflect deeply on my own practice as a geographer attempting to develop research on/with contemporary popular cultures (Horton 2018, 2019). In this provocation I share six fragments of autoethnographic writing which reflect on my experiences of working at the sometimes-tense intersection of pop culture and contemporary academic/disciplinary/institutional norms. They recall moments of encounter (or, more often, weird *non-encounter*) between disciplines of Social and Cultural Geography and contemporary popular cultures. Their sequencing is intended to prompt reflection on three related problematics. Fragments 1-2 are haunted by *absences* and *silences*: the peculiar, troubling, persistent effacement of so many popular cultural forms, scenes, figures, materialities and moments from the written canon of Human Geography, not least in *Social & Cultural Geography*. Then, fragments 3-4 highlight the joy, recognition, solidarity, love, care and creative potentials of academic engagements with popular culture but are simultaneously troubled by what to do with these feelings: how to do justice to the amazing vibrancy of popular cultures within the normative formats, styles, languages and methods of academic practice? Then, fragments 5-6 recognise the considerable antipathy that can exist towards academic work on popular culture, whether manifest through hate mail or more polite, tacit normative professional languages of, for example, 'Mickey Mouse degrees'. In so doing, the essay opens out a set of questions and prompts for reflection in relation to the Special Issue on *(Em)placing the Popular in Cultural Geography*. Throughout, the essay adopts a personal, playful, fragmentary, first-person reflective narrative voice which is – in itself – meant to challenge the kinds of normativities and marginalities explored in the following sections¹.

Unexpectedly, this piece has also become a focus for grief and remembrance. While writing this, I learnt that my doctoral supervisor Paul Cloke and also my disciplinary colleague Clive Barnett had passed away. Both had, and continue to have, a profound influence on my work on popular culture. I hope that their appearances in the following discussion give some measure of my heartfelt gratitude, and my depth of feeling at their passing.

Fragment #1: badges, 1995

<figure 1 about here. *Figure 1. Badges, 1995*>

...I used to love badges. I used to acquire them, buy them, have them around my room, wear them on my rucksack – an evolving, ever-changing selection. Each one invested with a memory or connection to a moment, place or person; and for onlookers, I imagined, a little cryptic clue to my identity. On my 1st day at university I wanted to make sure my badge game was strong. I remember I had my best Cyrille Regis² badge, my hot pink ‘demolish serious culture’ badge³, one of many badges acquired from gigs by Napalm Death⁴, and a baby ewok⁵ (see figure 1).

The reason I remember the badges so clearly is because of what happened next. I remember it with a sense of shame, and a heavy heart...

Joining the queue of freshers at the Geography Dept I quickly realised that I kind of stood out, with my BHS⁶ cagoule and my Doc Martens⁷ and floppy hair and my badge bag and my crushing shyness and my then-thick West Midlands accent. I didn’t want to stand out so much. I ducked in the toilet and swiftly removed the badges. Hid them all in my pocket. I just wanted to blend in. 25 years later I find myself holding the badge, saying ‘Sorry Cyrille’...

Fragment #2: mapping Coventry's popular cultures, 2022

...Planning my keynote at the *(Em)placing the Popular in Cultural Geography* conference in Coventry⁸, UK, I think it will be a fun, instructive opening ruse to look at geographers' engagements with the city's many iconic, well-known contributions to British popular culture... off the top of my head, I'm thinking of 2Tone⁹, Delia Derbyshire¹⁰, George Eliot¹¹, Jaguar and much of the British automotive industry, Neil Kulkarni¹², Coventry Cathedral¹³, the band Cathedral¹⁴, Pete Waterman¹⁵, the 1987 FA cup winning team featuring my hero Cyrille Regis, and (at time of the conference) the Turner Prize¹⁶ for visual arts... Fair to say, some genuinely profoundly important moments, phenomena, scenes, characters in British popular culture...

I look for each of these things using *Social & Cultural Geography*'s online search tool and find... basically nothing. Essentially no mentions in the journal's entire 25 year back catalogue¹⁷...

I widen the search, checking the back catalogues of fifteen Anglophone peer-reviewed Human Geography¹⁸ – literally millions of words, thousands of papers, decades of work – and find that these diverse, iconic pieces of popular culture have either never been mentioned or have been only barely/fleetingly/minimally mentioned 1-2 times. Searching for these things and people in the written canon of peer-reviewed journals in Human Geography, you quickly get the impression they never existed or never mattered... My immediate response is actually quite emotional and childish: it's *not fair*; I don't want to inhabit a discipline which acts as if Delia Derbyshire and Cyrille Regis didn't exist or, worse, that they didn't *matter*...

I want to argue that these two moments – my covering up of badges/identities, and my sadness at the lack of geographical work on Coventry's popular cultures – are emblematic of a much wider geography of absence. Fundamentally, when thinking about the relationship between Human Geographers and contemporary popular cultures, we need to acknowledge that this has overwhelmingly been a landscape and history of *absence* and *silence*. So many absences; so many silences. So many hidden scenes, hidden figures, hidden spaces, hidden subcultures, hidden stuff, hidden emotions, hidden stories, and

hidden communities: so much has gone unsaid and ostensibly unregistered by Human Geographers over the last five decades. Of course, there are important exceptions: but that fact that we could probably name brilliant, exceptional individual publications (Keighren & Norcup 2020, Halliwell 2021), conference sessions (Rose et al., 2019) or specific pockets of work (e.g. on popular geopolitics (Dittmer & Larsen, 2007, Dittmer & Dodds 2013, Woodyer & Carter, 2020) and postcolonial discourses (van Gent & Jaffe, 2016) makes the point that there has generally tended not to be a critical mass of geographical work explicitly thinking about/with contemporary popular cultures, which seems troubling and problematic given the thousands of other things that get seemingly written about more readily and normatively.

A central challenge, then, is that although popular cultures matter *deeply* for geographers and communities they work with, geographers have rarely demonstrated an explicit commitment to engaging popular cultures in their work and academic identities. (As my autoethnographic fragments imply, I am certainly complicit in this myself: in my covering-up of my popular cultural identities in academic spaces; in my serially-daunted loss-of-faith in writing projects on popular cultures, even things that I care deeply about, even “things that really endure...that we keep, hold on to and which stay with us...that we use to narrate [our] self” (Gregson, 2007, p.162)).

As a kind of creative/critical gesture in this context, I find myself returning to acts of *listing* popular cultural stuff that geographers have never been written about – of which my futile searches for Coventry’s popular culture are just the latest example. For example, to mark the 25th anniversary of *Social & Cultural Geography* I set out to write a review essay on work about popular cultures in the journal (Horton, 2019). One might imagine that *Social & Cultural Geography* would be a natural home for work of this kind, and that social/cultural geographers would have naturally written about some aspects of popular culture over the preceding quarter century. But actually, despite (re-)engaging with some wonderful stand-alone papers (Chouinard, 2009, May, 2010, Woods, 2020), I became fixated and frustrated and moved by *absences*, instigating an intense process of researching and listing things that had never been mentioned in the journal (Horton, 2019), culminating in a list of around 500 popular cultural objects,

<Figure 2 about here. Figure 2. Small detail from Horton (2019) – some of the many hundreds of things never mentioned in *Social & Cultural Geography* >

personalities, genres, forms and enthusiasms which were conspicuously absent from the journal (for a small detail, see figure 2). This process – and this excessive list – led me to reflect on the perplexing way that *Social & Cultural Geography* had, in many ways, made space to foreground popular and media cultures, yet all manner of popular cultural phenomena (Elvis Presley, Donald Trump, Godzilla, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Bollywood, Disney, telenovelas, and so much else) have gone unsaid.

Around the same time, in my subdisciplinary niche, I undertook a similar exercise in an essay about cuddly toys in *Children's Geographies* (Horton, 2018). Given the focal importance of play, everyday spaces and consumption for children and young people's everyday lives, one would think, again, that, much work in this context would have explicitly written about toys, gaming, popular cultural phenomena, celebrities, youth subcultures, digital interfaces, social media and so on. But, again, this

<Figure 3 about here Figure 3. Detail from Horton (2018) – some of the many things never mentioned in *Children's Geographies* journal>

was not the case and it proved sadly too-easy to compile another super-dense list of things-never-written-about

(see figure 3)¹⁹. Again, I was struck by how many contemporary and historical geographies of children's popular cultures had gone unacknowledged in precisely the academic journal where they might be expected to be most visible. These acts of listing may seem futile. But I find it moving to recognise, name and mention these popular cultures, making space for them – however fleetingly – in academic contexts where they have never previously been written-about. For me, the resulting dense, excessive lists stand as moving memorials to absence, to geographical work that never was/might-have-been, and to missed opportunities for engagement with the vivid, poignant, epic beautiful, monstrous cool stuff of popular cultures.

At least two key problematics underpin these absences. First, geographers overwhelmingly haven't explicitly written about (or *with*) the creative, cool, politicised, contested, complex, deeply cared-for popular cultures that they (that *we*) love. Perhaps this reflects some persistent, troubling, starkly classed/gendered aversions towards low, faddish, 'childish' 'vulgar' cultures (Kinsley, 2016)? or some enduring, and arguably deepening, senses of what matters, what 'counts' and what is 'proper' in research in the contemporary academy? Or some disciplinary and generational shifts which have which

constituted a disinclination towards research that seemed to be about ‘representations’ and/or wedded to tools and frames of reference of earlier ‘new cultural geography’? Or some subdisciplinary norms and boundaries which somehow precluded engagement with brilliant work in cultural studies or other bodies of work? Or perhaps it still feels somehow not OK to put our lives, positionalities, passions and things we care deeply about popular cultures into academic identities? Second, relatedly, the very narrow, exclusionary demographics of Human Geography as a discipline have overwhelmingly tended to efface cultures outside the aged, gendered, classed, ableist, Anglophone, Anglocentric, barely-postcolonial normativities of the academy. So much has been outside the normative worldview; so much has been excluded or overlooked; and so much has gone unsaid. Sadly, it is simply too easy to find things that geographers have never written about (yet) and, like the contributors to the *(Em)placing the Popular in Cultural Geography* Special Issue, I wish it were otherwise. Indeed, this Special Issue constitutes an urgent challenge for social and cultural geographers to value, explore, recover and engage a much more diverse range of popular cultures, enabling all manner of surprising, challenging, previously-unwritten geographies of popular cultures to surface.

So when we speak about the written canon of work that is unequivocally labelled Human Geography, we must acknowledge that this has been, and continues to be, a weird canon of exclusion and absence. For me, Barnett’s (2015, np) quip that Social and Cultural Geography seem “a bit un-Pop”, seeming “to be constituted as if radio and television were never invented, or indeed as if The Beatles, Elvis, or The Supremes never happened” continues to be a brilliant provocation, gesturing towards the countless global popular cultural technologies, phenomena, materialities, subcultures, meanings and affects which are somehow absent from the discipline’s written canon. Moreover, it is sobering to recognise that works which are routinely cited as foundational popular/media geographies (Burgess & Gold, 1985, Duncan & Ley, 1993, Aitken & Zonn, 1994) “appeared at a time when a the Commodore 64 was the state of the art home computer and DVDs had not yet been invented” (Adams et al., 2014, p.2), pre-dating mobile phones, social media, countless popular technologies/cultures, and the lived experiences of diverse communities interfaced with contemporary digital geographies (Davidson, 2008, Lancione, 2014, Longhurst, 2016).

In the context of all these absences:

- Where to begin? Which of the countless marginalised, absent popular cultures should be priorities for Social and Cultural Geographers now?
- Practically, pragmatically and conceptually, “how might we better accommodate geographies of ‘popular culture’ in our cultural geographies? (Kinsley 2014, np)”
- Even in a Special Issue and renewed focus on (em)placing the popular, who and which kinds of popular cultures are still underrepresented?
- Which ‘lost’ popular geographies should be recovered? Do all absent popular cultures matter equally? Do any not matter?
- What conceptual and ethical commitments and methodological challenges should underpin answer to these kinds of questions (Dittmer & Gray 2010, Bartolini et al., 2016; Rose, 2020)?

Fragment #3: Sylvanians, 1996 (thanks Paul)

...when it came to choosing a topic for my undergraduate dissertation research project, I had some ideas about children's popular culture but didn't feel brave enough to instigate a discussion with a potential supervisor. Eventually, my friend practically marched me to Professor Paul Cloke's office to set up a meeting. It turned out that Paul was down-to-earth, relatable, and *beamed* with enthusiasm when I managed to get some words out about my ideas. 'I think you're gonna *love* this', said Paul, grabbing a journal and leading me to the nearest photocopier. Paul made me a copy of Houlton and Short's (1995) paper about Sylvanian Families²⁰.

<figure 4 about here. *Figure 4. Thanks Paul*>

I still remember the tingle of excitement when little pictures of Sylvanian panda toys starting coming out the photocopier. I'd never seen anything like that – an academic paper that was unapologetically about something recognisable from my own life/childhood/community. I can still catch my feeling of excitement. I bounded out of the building, grinning, heart full, couldn't wait to show my friend the pandas!... 25 years on, I still have that A3 photocopy, now falling apart and overlain with decades of notes, but still visible is the smiley face I drew when I first read it (see Figure 4). Thanks Paul...

Fragment #4: Footnotes, 2022

...I won't lie, it feels like the writing is going badly. I'm pretty sure the footnotes are *terrible*...

...I started writing this with a smile on my face, feeling lighthearted, overjoyed to be writing about some things that are of huge significance, personally, culturally, affectively and conceptually. I felt galvanised to be redressing the historic absence of so much popular culture from the written canon of Human Geography: to write the first geographical paper to acknowledge Cyrille Regis, Delia Derbyshire et al has got to count for something, right?... But now I have started writing, I feel disheartened and inadequate. Burdened with responsibility. Like, I want to do justice to these wonderful people and popular cultures, but I feel my writing will never be good enough to achieve this. I can't do it. The footnotes are a particular site of angst for me at the moment. I started off excited by the prospect of using dense footnotes to introduce the complex ecologies of popular cultural icons, movements and terms I'm dealing with. And I've spent ages trying to get the footnotes right, but when I read them back the prose feels flat, cringeworthy and lifeless, inadequate to the task of conveying the amazing vibrant significant of any of these popular cultures. At one low point I considered deleting the footnotes altogether, or maybe scrapping the whole essay, worried that I was just descriptively mansplaining things. It is hard, and involves considerable emotional labour, and whenever I write (or try to write) about popular culture, I experience this kind of draining away of joy as I confront the limits of my writing to convey the *brilliant* sensations, solidarities, spatialities, politics, affects of popular cultures. Again, but for different reasons, I feel like saying 'Sorry Cyrille'...

Here I want to acknowledge, and hold together, two distinct feelings. On one hand, consider my beaming smile, seeing an academic paper featuring little Sylvanian pandas emerging from that photocopier: a joy of recognition (seeing popular culture from my own life, at last, in an actual proper Academic journal); of youthful hope, optimism and dawning scholarly exhilaration (when was the last time you bounded to a library, or felt like drawing neon smiley faces on an academic paper?); of the

sheer fun and funniness of the incident; of gratitude (thanks Paul, for this moment and for everything). Twenty-five years on, it still makes me smile. I find myself tearing up, then worrying that my writing is inadequate and does disservice to the event.

On the other hand, then, consider my heavy heart, my sense that this very paper is going badly, my sense of burden, failure and inadequacy to the task. You may note, through this essay and its footnotes, a kind of recurring pattern of moods and behaviour: I *love* the idea of researching about/with brilliant, beautiful, vibrant, incredible, sometimes-ridiculous popular cultures... but my attempts to do this are characterised by abandoned projects and losses of faith. When writing about popular cultures, I always seem to end up feeling this way (notably, this doesn't happen so much when writing about other kinds of topics in which I am maybe less personally invested in). In large part, I think this feeling is to do with a sense of responsibility: I want to do justice to popular cultural things, events, phenomena and communities that *matter* so much, but/so I question whether I am up to the task. Then I start to worry whether normative modes of academic research and language can ever do justice to the joys, sorrows and complex ecologies of sensations, solidarities, spatialities, politics, materialities, affects, embodiments, politics, exclusions, intersectionalities, power relations, processes, technologies, temporalities and mobilities that constitute contemporary popular cultures (de Block & Buckingham, 2007)... Then I usually have a loss of faith and delete what I've written. These kinds of anxieties and plural senses of failure are widely experienced (Berg et al, 2016, Horton, 2020a) and especially intense for scholars occupying precarious and diversely minoritised positions within the contemporary neoliberal academy (Bono et al, 2019, Oliver and Morris, 2020, Hall 2020)). Indeed, in so many ways, deepening trends and socio-economic inequities in the contemporary academy are structurally antithetical to the kinds of exploratory, joyful, careful engagements with popular cultures advocated by this Special Issue. It is hard for such work to happen amidst unmanageable workloads, dwindling opportunities for academic headspace/fun/creativity, contractual precarities, institutional restructurings and redundancies, no opportunities for early career scholars, and intensifying socio-economic marginalities which make it less, rather than more, likely that scholars occupying minoritised positions can carve out academic careers (Mullings et al, 2016, Harrowell et al, 2018). Such trends, coupled with

performance management processes which explicitly valorise ‘major’, ‘impactful’ normative modes of research and writing (Horton 2020b), provide a deeply-challenging operating context for social and cultural geographers, especially those of us hoping to develop work which is exploratory, experimental, creative, playful or somehow non-normative. In the context of these complex emotions and deeply-challenging contemporary trends in the academic landscape, this Special Issue should prompt reflection on:

- What actions can geographers take to spark joy and foster inclusive spaces/opportunities for new/renewed engagements with popular culture, even amidst the challenging emotions and marginalities of the contemporary academy?
- What networks and solidarities might support and sustain new geographies of/with popular cultures, especially through support and care for scholars occupying minoritised positions?
- How can geographers play with *enthusiasm*, joyfulness, care, emotions and hope in/of popular cultures (Geoghegan & Woodyer, 2014, Liu & Cai, 2014, Hayes, 2016, Woodyer et al., 2016)?
- How can we ‘do justice’ to popular cultures, and what political, ethical, conceptual or empirical considerations should underpin this notion of justice?
- what kinds of innovative interdisciplinary, collaborative, participatory, co-created, creative, boundary-blurring or playful modes of practice (Zwaan et al., 2014) might widen the scope of social and cultural geographers to do justice to issues, objects and spaces of contemporary and as-yet-unimagined popular cultures popular cultures?

Enmities // teddy bear hate mail // ‘Mickey Mouse’ degrees

Fragment #5 Cuddly toys and hate mail

...So I wrote quite a silly, soppy, playful paper (Author 2018) about cuddly toys and popular culture. Surely totally innocuous and benign, twee even, with its portraits of notable cuddly toys (although not the *most* important ones – even when writing autoethnographically, I don’t put too much of myself on the line). It got some lovely feedback. Then weird things started to happen...

...The paper got picked up by a North American social media community that specialises in often-hateful, right-wing take-downs of what they would term liberal, ‘woke’, immoral, offensive, pretentious academic research. For 48 hours my work email was full of horrible anonymous rants explaining – in lurid, violent, sexist and homophobic language – the worthlessness of my work. For the most part, I was able to delete the emails and put it down to experience... But still, one phrase from one of the emails sticks in my mind: ‘I hope you get cancer, then you will understand how your research has wasted public money’...

Fragment #6 ‘Mickey Mouse’ degrees

Countless times, I have sat in meetings where people talk about ‘Mickey Mouse degrees’: a kind of pejorative term which positions some HE disciplines – principally linked to arts, humanities, liberal arts, cultural studies, popular culture, and all kinds of things that seem to me to be cool, fascinating opportunities – as inherently worthless. Cards on the table, I’d love to do a Mickey Mouse degree, or a cuddly toy degree, or a pop culture degree. I’ve always been fascinated and worried by this kind of easy, reflex co-option of ‘Mickey Mouse’ as label/avatar for things perceived as base, daft and pointless, lacking instrumental value. It strikes me as a particularly violent form of shorthand ... – labelling a subject as ‘Mickey Mouse’ is too-often successful in immediately connoting it as self-evidently a waste of time and resources. There is a kind of depthless venom behind its usage, and the guffaws one sometimes hears when it is said...

Finally, I want to acknowledge and share experiences of some ways in which geographies of popular culture are, still, being marginalised in some important and troubling ways in the contemporary neoliberal academy. I suspect all colleagues who research popular culture will, at some time, have experienced some degree of questioning, quizzical looks, criticality or even ridicule over their choice of

subject. In my own case, when doing my doctorate I always tended to pre-empt such responses by describing my research in bland, defensive, foreclosive terms ('children's everyday geographies') rather than owning up to the – much more interesting – fact that I was being funded to study *Postman Pat*²¹, *S-Club-7*²², *Pokémon*²³, *Harry Potter*²⁴ and *Wallace & Gromit*²⁵.

I guess my defensiveness comes from a felt sense that research about popular culture (maybe especially playful, 'poppy', 'fun', children's popular culture) is somehow not proper, serious, important, valid, worthy, BIG, impactful, heroic, changemaking, bankable scholarship. I worry that these norms continue to be perpetuated and intensified via multiple sites and mechanisms within the contemporary academy, where major, high impact, high worth research is a contractual expectation and performative ideals mitigate against fun, playful, experimental, provisional, non-'serious' modalities. When mapped onto profoundly challenging academic employment markets – and contracting institutional ecologies for arts, humanities and social sciences – these logics make it increasingly hard to be optimistic about futures for early career researchers, particularly those from marginalised/minoritised communities, interested in engaging popular cultures.

My unfortunate encounters with aca-trolling communities represent one extreme manifestation of norms about the worth(lessness) of certain kinds of research. There and then, my research and me were explicitly labelled as worthless, invalid, fake research, and much worse. I still feel tangible sadness and anxiety from this incident, but I also recognise my privilege and relative ontological security in being able to move on and view it as an isolated incident. Sadly, this kind of trolling pile-on – and this weaponisation of academic and personal worthlessness – is a much more frequent, recurrent, persistent and intense happening for colleagues working in feminist, intersectional, fat studies, critical race theory, LGBTQ+ rights and trans activism contexts (who, it should be highlighted, are often precisely the colleagues who already occupy the most minoritized and precarious situations within the academy; and whose exposures to harm in research, fieldwork and institutional contexts are rarely adequately considered or supported by academic workplaces (Pearce 2020). I can also say that the incident

described in fragment 5 would have profoundly affected me, and made me lose faith in research per se, had it happened when I was an earlier career researcher.

In many UK Higher Education contexts, the language of ‘Mickey Mouse’ subject is widely mobilised as a shorthand denoting the ostensibly inherent worthlessness of particular modes of (typically arts, humanities, cultural studies and social scientific) study and research. I find it a fascinating trope: explicitly mobilising a popular cultural icon to constitute and justify exclusionary labellings of certain modes of scholarship. But I also find it a dangerous and troubling term: for the ease with which it is deployed; for the smiles and chuckles it prompts; and, particularly, for its discursive interoperability, simultaneously functioning as a pejorative label in polite, professional institutional spaces and in bilious online communities beyond the academy. Indeed more consideration should be given to how seemingly lighthearted notions of ‘Mickey Mouse degree’ are thematically and structurally connected to more explicitly violent online discourses about the worthlessness of certain forms of academic praxis. For some time, I have thought about doing some online/social media content analysis to explore the use of ‘Mickey Mouse’ degree as a category and concept, but honestly, within minutes of searching online I am in despair at the violent, horrible discourses on my screen. I don’t want to go there and so, not for the first time, I worry that I am losing faith in the project...

Points for reflection

Through this essay, I have offered a series of autoethnographic reflections on *(Em)placing the Popular in Cultural Geography* suggesting some of the joys, challenges and ambivalences of academic engagement with popular cultures. I have argued that social and cultural geographers’ work on popular cultures has been characterised by deeply inequitable canonical absences and silences. I have also suggested that doing academic work with popular cultural geographies can, itself, be deeply challenging: the joys, possibilities and recognition available through such work, must be weighed against manifold antipathies towards academic work on popular culture which impact particularly markedly upon scholars occupying minoritised positions in the academy. Against this backdrop, the Special Issue on *(Em)placing the Popular in Cultural Geography* represents a significant achievement,

and a major moment for reflection on geographers' (non-)engagements with contemporary popular cultures. Broadly, then, the Special Issue is an invitation to reflection on what kinds of academic engagements with popular cultures might happen next, and what kinds of collaborations, directions and activities might open up new, creative, brilliant opportunities for (em)placing the popular in Human Geography and beyond. However, as I have cautioned through the preceding sections, the emergence of exciting new opportunities for scholarship around popular cultures must be underpinned by a series of ethical commitments to collaboration, support and care, recognising multiple antipathies towards, and complex emotions of, popular cultural geographies. In particular, readers of the Special Issue should ask what conditions, practices and networks will be needed to support colleagues to retain hope and optimism as popular cultural geographers within the contemporary neoliberal academy. This will require solidarities and networks of co-creation, care and support, as well as careful consideration of the politics and ethics of research, reading, performativity, presentation and (self-)care in/of geographical engagements with popular cultures (Yap, 2011). In particular, there is an urgent need to consider what support, structures and opportunities might be developed for new and early career researchers in engaging with popular cultural geographies, and what networks and solidarities might enable support and care for scholars occupying minoritised positions who are sadly at heightened risk of harm as a result of scholarly practice in this area.

Data access statement

All data underpinning this publication are openly available from the University of Northampton Research Explorer at [doi TBC]

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Figure 1 Badges, 1995



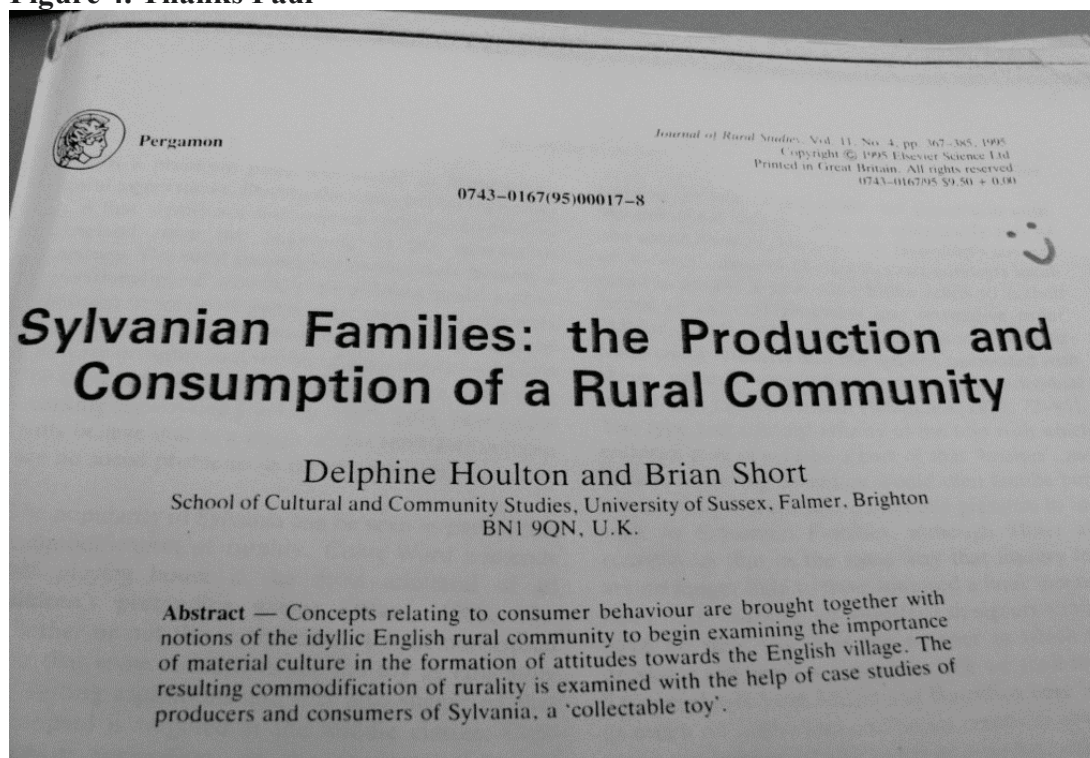
Figure 2. Small detail from Horton (2019)

Muhammad Ali, Amar Chitra Katha, Manal al-
ail Armstrong, Atkins Diet, Jane Austen, Banksy,
erry's, Alan Bennett, Beyoncé, Bhangra, Asha
endum, Justin Bieber, Bikini Kill, #blacklivesmatter,
zin, the Brontë sisters, James Brown, bubblegum,

Figure 3. Detail from Horton (2018)

o, eBay, Elmer, emo, Ewoks, Facebook, fai
Frozen, Furby, Galli Galli Sim Sim, Garage,
the Great Big Enormous Turnip, Grange Hi
py Meals, hardcore, Haribo, Hasbro, Hello

Figure 4. Thanks Paul



¹ If you are looking for an extended discussion of this point... First of all, thank you for taking such an interest and making time to read the footnotes! If asked to explain/defend the essay's written style, I would make four points. First, I see longstanding norms and expectations of *proper* research and *refined* scholarly writing and academic *gravitas* and confident rhetorical *fluency* as conceptually and actually exclusionary (being deeply masculinist, classed, ableist and colonialist at heart) (G.Rose 1993, Carretta et al, 2018, M.Rose 2022). I have come to find a playful, personal, 'informal', fragmentary style helpful in thinking and writing otherwise, whilst provoking reflection on what habits of writing are considered not-OK in the contemporary academy (Hayes, 2017). Second, running through this essay is a sense that: (i) a radically more diverse range of experiences, voices, positionalities and popular cultures should be recognised in Social and Cultural Geography; and (ii) readers of *Social & Cultural Geography* should consider our own complicity in constituting academic spaces in which popular cultural diversities have often been effaced. In this context, I have tried to write in a register which is slightly more like my everyday (clumsy, anxious, diffident, scruffy, self-deprecatory, classed-regionally-accented) voice than the confident, self-assured, self-aggrandising 'received pronunciation' of normative contemporary academic writing styles. Third, although I don't feel I have done this very successfully, I set out to write in a style which resonates with the love, care, detail, exuberance, idiosyncrasies and luminosity of contemporary popular cultures and fandom. Even if the essay is really not your cup of tea, I hope I have shared something of how contemporary popular cultures matter profoundly, in ways which have rarely been acknowledged in the otherwise wonderfully-inspiring pages of *Social & Cultural Geography*. The list of cultural references featured herein is idiosyncratic, of particular spaces/times, deliberately excessive, and probably opaque or difficult to follow, but I hope it prompts reflection on the kinds of popular cultures which matter to you and yours, and which have probably gone unacknowledged in the formal research outputs of social and cultural geographers too. Fourth, I recognise that the use of footnotes is divisive, especially when done to excess, but I find them really helpful in adding layers of detail, ambivalence, hesitancy, playfulness, exuberance, commentary, context and counternarrative to the main line of any given paper.

² Cyrille Regis: Brilliant footballer; widely hailed as a pioneering sporting hero who faced down racism, campaigned for social justice, and changed attitudes towards black footballers in the UK. Played for West Brom, 1977-84; later part of Coventry City's plucky 1987 FA Cup winning team. FYI I was nearly named after Cyrille. I've always wanted to write something about Cyrille, but never felt I was adequate for the task.

³ From an installation at Wolverhampton art gallery; evidently a manifestation of Stewart Home's *Art Strike 1991-93* (Mannox et al., 1992).

⁴ Napalm Death: Pioneering grindcore band from West Midlands, UK. Noted for relentless, discordant, excessive, extreme music espousing principles of equality, anti-racism, humanism, socialism, anarchism, vegetarianism, anti-fascism, anti-corporatism and anti-celebrity culture. Saw them loads of times when I was a teenager. A huge formative influence, sonically and conceptually (Titchner 2004, Springer 2016), although a bit of an acquired taste and maybe a bit difficult to listen to now. I once planned to write a book chapter about them, but I lost faith in the project and deleted it.

⁵ Ewok: Peaceable forest-dwelling residents of the forest moon of Endor in *Return of the Jedi* (1983). Basically, they're like teddy bears. I once started writing a paper about them, but I lost faith in the project and deleted it.

⁶ BHS: British Home Stores. British department store, 1928-2016. 'You'll never *guess*, its *BHS!*' was one of their advertising slogans, hinting at their somewhat 'budget', classed market positioning. Alongside other jobs, my mum worked on the shop floor and in the canteen of Walsall BHS every Saturday for many years. Consequently, we got cut-price coats, shoes, light bulbs and *Star Wars* figures. Thanks mum.

⁷ Doc Martens: Dr Martens, Docs, DMs. Clumpy boots; iconic footwear brand associated with punk, skinhead, 2Tone and other youth subcultures. I had one pair which were basically my only footwear for the whole of my undergraduate and PhD years. Much more fashionable now than when I wore them at university.

⁸ FYI I'm not from 'Cov' and, growing up in nearby Midlands industrial town, I learned to disparage it as a supposedly boring, unglamorous, uncool, unattractive place (a football song went 'West Brom *magic*, Coventry *tragic*, West Brom *magic*, Coventry *tragic*...'). So, in this essay – and in British popular at large – Coventry stands for a kind of place which has an arguably humdrum, deprecatory (self-)image but has nevertheless been a fulcrum for beautiful, revelatory, magic, life-changing popular cultures.

⁹ 2Tone movement: 1970s-80s music subculture, epicentre Coventry, UK. Based on genre-bending fusion of ska, punk and new wave, wedded to principles of interracial working class youth solidarity. Principally developed through gigs, scenes, spaces, styles and creative interventions of the 2Tone record label, founded in Coventry and best known for releases by the Specials, the Selecter and the Beat. Beautiful b/w aesthetic. Still amazing.

¹⁰ Delia Derbyshire (1937-2001): Electrical music pioneer. Luminary of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop through the 1960s. Prodigiously talented but poorly paid. Chiefly remembered for crafting the *Doctor Who* theme music – a profoundly powerful, luminous composition which retains a power to enchant, terrify and transport listeners – although not credited on-screen for it until 2013. Tragically underrecognised and ill-served by normative forms of pop cultural posterity which have left large chunks of Delia's output unavailable and figured Delia as principally famous for influencing successful blokes.

¹¹ George Eliot (1819-80) English novelist; masculinist nom-de-plume of Mary Ann Evans. Chiefly celebrated for an astonishing run of politicised, moving, multifaceted novels, among the most significant work in the nineteenth century English-language canon. Changed attitudes towards women in literature. Spent three decades in/around what is now the conurbation of Coventry, UK.

¹² Neil Kulkarni: Pop critic, author and music journalist, from Coventry, UK. Regular contributor to *Melody Maker* and multiple pop/metal/hip hop/dance magazines since 1993. Consistently a countercultural critic of derivative, nostalgic, exclusionary, blokey, insular, retrograde, white, British, heteronormativities of mainstream pop culture consensus. One of the few British Asian writers to gain prominence in the British music press.

¹³ Coventry Cathedral: Iconic modernist architecture; built around ruins of a medieval cathedral that was bombed out in WW2. A monument to global peace and reconciliation. Arguably transformed attitudes towards architectural modernism and urban design in the UK. A truly powerful, amazing, contemplative space. I'm not a churchgoer, but just sometimes if you stand in front of the stained glass in the nave and the light's right, it is *proper* moving.

¹⁴ Cathedral: V.influential doom metal band, from Coventry, UK. Noted for slow, down-tuned, droney, heavy music. Occasional groovy elements. Obtuse occult lyrics and artwork. Led by Lee Dorrian (former Napalm Death vocalist; leading figure in 1980s Midlands punk/anarcho/crust/metal gig/zine scene; founder of Rise Above records). Seen live, the low-end amps were so loud I felt in an altered state for days afterwards.

¹⁵ Pete Waterman: Astonishingly successful British pop music impresario/producer/songwriter credited with 500 million+ record sales. Was DJ/promoter/record shop owner in 1970s Coventry at the heart of the 2Tone movement. Best known as part of the SAW (Stock Aitken Waterman) production team responsible for countless hit singles in 1980s UK; often derided for rather bland, formulaic, processed teen pop (NB gendered, classed, blokey forms of 'real music' snobbery often pervade this critique) (Rose, 2017). Celeb Walsall FC fan and massive model railway enthusiast. I hope to write a collaborative paper about Pete (or more accurately, the snobby non-celebration of Pete in British popular culture) on day...

¹⁶ Turner Prize: Major annual award for outstanding work by visual artists born/based in UK. The 2021 Turner Prize exhibition was held in Coventry. The prize was awarded to Array Collective for brilliant creative interventions and campaigns principally addressing gendered inequalities, LGBTQ+ identities, and reproductive rights in Northern Ireland. Although personally, I was totally blown away by some of the beautiful work (including a massive whale) created by the neurodiverse artists/activists of Project Art Works collective.

¹⁷ All these assertions and analyses presuppose that academic publishers' online search facilities work reliably, which may or may not be a valid assumption.

¹⁸ i.e. *Annals of the AAG*, *Antipode*, *Area*, *Cultural Geographies*, *Environment & Planning A*, *Environment & Planning D*, *Gender, Place & Culture*, *Geographical Journal*, *Geography Compass*, *Journal of Cultural Geography*, *Progress in Human Geography*, *Social & Cultural Geography*, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *Urban Geography*

¹⁹ Three fun facts about these lists: (i) the published versions had to be heavily edited to meet journal requirements (imagine the original lists – 3+ times longer!); (ii) only two items appeared in both lists – Black Sabbath (influential West Midlands heavy metal band) and *Dawson's Creek* (touching/lachrymose 1990s teen TV drama), which probably tells you way too much about me; (iii) I love the accidental poetry, politics, juxtaposition and serendipity that happen in these acts of listing; there are also three elaborate, extended popular cultural in-jokes in there which no-one has ever commented on, which leads me to think no-one reads my work in detail, which is probably for the best, all round.

²⁰ Sylvanian Families: Peaceable, kind-natured little anthropomorphic woodland animals from the town of Sylvania. Initially a line of flocked plastic action figures launched in Japan in 1992. Now a global, cross-platform, multimedia, pluri-marketed phenomenon with at least 157 families. For example, the pandas pictured in Houlton and Short's paper are the Bamboo family (including, with pleasing serendipity, Bertram Bamboo: an accident-prone academic who "sits locked up in his study for days and days, surrounded by great wobbly piles of old papers" attempting to write (SylvanianFamiliesUK, n.d.)).

²¹ Charming BBC stop-motion animated film about the idyllic village of Greendale (See Author, 2008a, 2008b)

²² Great pop group (see Author, 2010)

²³ Complex multi-platform pop culture phenomenon featuring 'Pocket Monsters' (Author, 2012)

²⁴ A young wizard. I intended meant to write a paper about it, but lost faith in the project. Then I was going to write this other paper about it, but never found time and grew disheartened and lost faith in the project.

²⁵ Magnificent plasticine animation. I was going to write a chapter about it, but got stuck, grew disheartened and lost faith in the project.