

Editorial: Culture matters

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Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. (Martin Luther King, Jr; < <http://www.amnesty.org.au/shop/index.html> > accessed 5 November 2002)

This quotation, for us, captured the spirit of this themed section, 'Culture Matters'. Beginning our editorial by reflecting upon our means of coming across the quotation also seemed to be an appropriate way to introduce this collection. One of us was sitting at the dining-room table, at that time containing a collection of articles about cultural geography, social geography and the material, pondering how to begin the editorial. Distracted by the arrival of the mail she turned to the Amnesty International Catalogue. There, amongst the T-shirts with a variety of human rights slogans, was the quotation from King, a prominent American civil rights leader. Amnesty T-shirts that are sold and worn will either circulate this slogan on bodies through social interactions that are part of everyday place-making processes, or be ignored amongst the competing slogans that adorn chests. Amnesty International attempts to both spread its messages and to raise funds for its activities through the sales of goods such as T-shirts. The work of Amnesty, it seems to us, is simultaneously so-

cial, cultural, political and material. The T-shirt sales operate symbolically, asserting through a cultural form what matters for Amnesty International. Politically, the T-shirt sales operate through raising material resources to fund activities that aim to improve the lives of those not accorded equal human rights. These cultural, political and material processes of activism seem to us complexly and inextricably interconnected.

Paralleling the processes by which Amnesty International T-shirts produce and circulate meanings, the guest editors of this edition of *Social & Cultural Geography* reflect upon how this collection of 'special' papers provides a forum for Australian cultural geographers to express what things 'matter' in cultural geography. In this editorial we draw attention to the circumstances that shaped the special edition and examine the themes that run through the articles.

Having a 'turn': networks in Australian cultural geography

Academic productions involve social and cultural interactions and occur through particular institutional settings that are temporally and

spatially located. The articles that appear here stemmed from a meeting of the Cultural Geography Study Group of the Institute of Australian Geographers (IAG) held at the University of Newcastle (Australia) in December 2001. As is the case in other parts of the world, study groups are important institutions that enable geographers to network with each other. As Hanson (2000) has recently pointed out, networking is both a glue and a lubricant, which binds groups of scholars together and lubricates the relationships between those scholars. The Cultural Geography Study Group of the IAG has a broad membership, comprising cultural geographers working in Australia, and Australian cultural geographers working overseas. The contributions in this special edition reflect the people in the network who were able to attend the conference. The papers themselves are very obviously linked to trends in cultural geography, particularly in the UK at present. We contend, however, that the particular approach taken to addressing these concerns reflects the unique disciplinary history of Australian cultural geography.

Cultural geography, its purpose, methods, focus and politics have been the subject of considerable debate in the past few years. The articles that launched this journal (Jackson 2000; McDowell 2000; Smith 2000) inspired some of the most recent manifestations of this debate. Other authors have similarly been thinking through the character of cultural geography and connections between cultural geography, social geography and other branches of the discipline such as urban and economic geography (Barnett 1998; Jackson 2002; Lees 2002; Nash 2002; Peach 2002; Philo 2000; Valentine 2001) as well as the connections between geography, the 'cultural turn' and policy (Dorling and Shaw 2002; Martin 2001). Key to these debates is the idea that there are things geographers should be doing, that some of the

things that they are doing are unimportant (or immaterial) and that geographers need to 'return' to things that really matter (these calls are explored in greater detail in Kearnes, this issue).

Australian cultural geographers are familiar with criticisms of doing work that 'doesn't matter'. Referring to such critiques Dunn (1997) and Stratford (1999) argue that the work of Australian cultural geographers is politically informed and demonstrates the intertwined nature of the cultural, the political and the material. Similarly, Anderson and Jacobs (1997) trace the history of their own studies in Australian cultural geography, highlighting the insistently political nature of work in the discipline. Thus, in the latter years of the 1990s a number of Australian cultural geographers had resisted attempts to cast their work as immaterial, and in particular had argued that material and symbolic forms of oppression are mutually constitutive (as Valentine 2001 argued is also the case for British cultural geography).

As a consequence of the debate in Northern Hemisphere geography over the role of cultural geography and previous Australian responses to similar criticisms, the Cultural Geography Study Group of the IAG organized the study group meeting mentioned above. In calling for papers, conference participants were asked to reflect upon debates about cultural geography, and how these debates might be illuminated through consideration of their current empirical and theoretical work. As expected, at the conference there were a diversity of views expressed about cultural geography, its purpose, methods and focus. Insights from the conference were brought into editing this special edition. The participants generally agreed that demonstrating *how* and *why* culture and matter were important was a crucial intervention at this moment in the history of the discipline. However, while there were many points of

agreement between Australian cultural geographers, there were also a number of points over which they are happy to argue (especially over a meal). This is demonstrated through the range of ways that the authors in this collection have grappled with the theme 'culture matters'.

Given that the papers in this special edition were drawn from the conference, we make no claims that they are broadly representative of the views of Australian cultural geographers. However, the papers do reflect some of the work done by Australian cultural geographers more generally,¹ including research on the cultural constitution of: race and ethnicity (Anderson 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Anderson and Jacobs 1997; Fincher and Costello 2003; Gelder and Jacobs 1998; Gooder and Jacobs 2000; Pulvirenti 2000; Shaw 2000); sexuality (Costello 1999; Costello and Hodge 1999; Kirby and Hay 1997); citizenship (Gelder and Jacobs 1998; Gooder and Jacobs 2000); the access to space of marginalized groups (Leary 1999; Stratford 2002; Stratford and Harwood 2001; Winchester and Costello 1995); activism (Anderson and Jacobs 1999; Fincher and Panelli 2001); resistance (Hughes 1999); embodiment (Sharpe 1999; Winchester, McGuirk and Everett 1999); geographies of music (Carroll and Connell 2000; Duffy 2000); and geographies of the media (McFarlane and Hay 2003; McGuirk and Rowe 2001).² The work presented in this edition has been nourished through active engagement with other Australian geographers working on these issues. And, as the papers show, they are also nourished through continued engagement with developments in cultural geography elsewhere. Clearly the papers also draw on developments in other branches of the discipline, such as economic geography.

As it happened, our approach to addressing debates in cultural geography through the lens of our own theoretical and empirical work accorded well with the editorial policy of the

journal. As is stated in the instructions for authors:

Social & Cultural Geography publishes original, theoretically-informed empirical research, book reviews and analysis which is international in scope as well as in authorship. The journal also seeks to address topical issues relating to social and cultural geography and foster scholarly debate.

Hence the particular approach to producing our texts had an institutional form suitable for disseminating them. As Gibson (in this issue) shows, having an appropriate institutional setting is vital for the dissemination of all sorts of cultural products. Therefore the articles produced by the authors were fashioned to fit with an approach of both the journal and the study group.

Culture matters

The authors in the special edition have chosen to examine the terms 'culture' and 'matter' in a range of different ways in their contributions, but a number of general points about the use of these terms emerges from the papers. Most obviously, when writing about the cultural the authors refer to symbolic meanings, representations and value systems. Many of the authors examine how symbolic meanings are discursively deployed, to the (material) advantage of some groups, and to the detriment of other groups. As Anderson states:

Cultural geographers continue to insist upon the need to take people's signifying systems seriously, especially those which are constitutive of broader moral and material systems. (Anderson 1999: 12)

Another argument made in the papers concerns the importance of examining culture as an active *process* through which values are created, reasserted, reinforced and challenged.

The authors examine the interconnections between the practices of culture and political, economic and social practices. Following Valentine (2001) and Anderson (1999) the authors argue, for the importance of seeing value systems as mutually constitutive of other forms of power relations. Finally, a number of the authors examine the links between ideas of culture and embodiment. For these authors, culture is a process that is performed through bodies that bear the inscriptions of culture.

There are a number of different, but interconnected ways that notions of matter are utilized in the special edition. The first concerns an attention to what sort of matter we deploy when we speak about the importance of materiality (examined in detail by Kearnes). In a related fashion all the authors in the special edition seek to highlight the mutually constitutive relationship between the 'material' and the 'discursive' or 'symbolic'. Taken together they challenge the notion that geographical studies of representation and discourse are immaterial. The papers argue both that there are material effects of discursive practices and discursive effects of material practices, and these have important impacts on the life chances of members of socio-cultural groups. As Valentine has so eloquently argued in a more general discussion of cultural geography:

these studies do not necessarily prioritise the 'real' over the constitution and contestation of meanings, nor the material over the immaterial. Rather, the very significance of these, and other social research, lies in the ways that some of these studies ... demonstrate how meanings and definitional disputes can underpin many forms of social injustice and oppression ... In this way, notions of social exclusion and marginalisation—in which these concepts are understood in terms of the inability of citizens to participate in 'normal' life rather than merely in terms of their access to particular material

assets ... have replaced notions of social justice expressed in terms of the wide scale distribution of resources. (Valentine 2001: 170)

The other related sense in which matter is explored in this special edition is in terms of importance. As we noted above, considerable effort is currently being expended in geography defining what is important and what isn't. As Massey (2002) has recently noted, much of this effort is concerned with defining (sometimes not terribly clearly) some work as political and important, and other work as non-political and unimportant. These papers argue that cultural geography pursues issues that matter because oppression and resistance in various forms are inherently cultural and political (and are important). These papers represent a resistance to calls to narrow the field of politics in human geography (Massey 2002) to policy. Nonetheless, as is the case with Dunn's and Waitt's papers, there are obvious connections between the policies of governments and community groups and the cultural practices investigated in these papers.

A number of other interrelated themes emerge through these 'culture matters' papers. As was noted above, one important theme concerns notions of 'matter' and the 'material' and how geographers use them. This theme is explored most explicitly by Kearnes. Kearnes details recent calls for a return to the 'material' in cultural geography. He argues that such calls are flawed due to the lack of attention paid to what is actually meant by 'matter' and 'materiality'. Kearnes argues that more thorough consideration of 'the wayward expressiveness of matter' can enrich geography.

The special edition also examines the interconnectedness of the representational and the material, a theme that appears in various ways in all papers in the collection. Kearnes explores how calls for a return to the material are

framed by notions that limit an understanding of the interconnectedness of the material and the representational. Dunn demonstrates the inseparability of representational inequality, the practice of citizenship and access to material spaces. Waitt shows that the representation of some bodies as deviant influences the way those bodies perform in space, and the spaces that those bodies inhabit. Dowling and Mee reveal the intertwined nature of social worlds and cultural representation through a case study of a film specifically designed to draw attention to social problems. And Gibson argues representations of the unique nature of work in the cultural industries have deleterious material consequences for workers in these industries.

The relationship between embodiment, the material and discursive is another important theme of this special edition. Waitt draws on notions of embodiment to examine reactions of gay men to the Sydney Gay Games. He shows how representations and perceptions of embodiment by these men influence their attitudes to the games. Kearnes draws on feminist ideas of embodiment to examine the limits of current understandings of materiality.

As we argued earlier, papers in the special edition are also linked by investigations of the relationship between representation, marginality, oppression and resistance. Dunn explores the relationship between representations of Asian and Islamic Australians and considers how these representations operate as constraints on their everyday lives. He also documents active resistance to this oppression, and notes that such resistance takes on both symbolic and material forms. Waitt explores how heteronormativity has operated to exclude and constrain gay men. He examines the Gay Games as a site of resistance to such heteronormativity. Drawing on recent conceptualizations of community, he argues that some forms of resistance can be seen as reinforcing stereotypes that oppress

marginalized groups. Dowling and Mee explore the ways that young unemployed working-class men are both vilified as 'useless' and framed as personally responsible for their 'uselessness'. Rather than directly exploring a specific instance of resistance, they explore the reactions of cultural gatekeepers (film reviewers) to that resistance. Like the paper by Waitt, Dowling and Mee's paper reveals the ways in which resistance to oppression can be re-inscribed as itself oppressive. Gibson explores how representations of music as a cultural industry lead to the exploitation of labour. His analysis stresses the importance of place to understanding the possibilities for resistance to such oppression.

As the previous paragraph makes clear the active production of culture is another key theme that is woven through the papers in the special edition. Dowling and Mee, and Gibson explore this theme through their analysis of what have been termed cultural industries and cultural gatekeepers in these industries. In considering the production of film reviews and the role of venue operators and producers in the music industry, they examine the conditions that regulate the circulation of meanings. Waitt and Dunn examine the active resistance of marginalized groups to their stereotyping through active cultural performances.

The final theme that emerges from these papers is the importance and power of silence. Gooder and Jacobs (2000) remind us of the importance of silence in their consideration of the inability of the Australian prime minister to utter an appropriate and acceptable apology to Indigenous Australians. They argue that what is said, what is not said, and the way it is said can have profound political and material consequences (Gooder and Jacobs 2000). The papers in the special edition also deal with issues of silence and silencing. Kearnes examines the silences in recent calls for a 'return' to the material, and shows the profound implications

of these silences for the possibilities of grappling with materiality. Dunn's investigation points out that claims to authority by 'spatial managers' in Australia silence alternative views of participation and citizenship by Asian and Islamic Australians. Waitt argues that the representations of the Gay Games as creating an inclusive community silence different community visions of those gay men outside the gay sporting community. Mee and Dowling examine the selective production of films reviews, pointing out the ways that these silence other views of films. Gibson shows how the pervasiveness of views of music as 'cultural' silences alternative views of music as 'work'. As Martin Luther King notes, silence and its implications matter.

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Notes

1 In the space of this editorial we cannot do justice to the scope of Australian cultural geography. The topics we

discuss here are those that most directly intersect with the subjects pursued by the authors in this special edition. For more general reviews of Australian cultural geography see Dunn (1997) and Stratford (1999). Anderson and Jacobs (1997) provide an insightful history of their own paths in Australian cultural geography. Nash (2000, 2002) discusses the important work of some Australian cultural geographers not discussed here in her reviews of the discipline more generally. In addition, in this piece we draw primarily on work published since 1997. For reviews of work prior to 1997 see Dunn (1997).

2 We have excluded the work of the authors included in this collection from this discussion. Our purpose is to point to the broader network of cultural geographers in Australia. The work of the authors in this edition is undoubtedly important to this network, and is cited via the individual papers in the collection.

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