

Following publication: defetishising commodities in a humid tropics biome?

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NOT FOR CIRCULATION BEYOND THIS GROUP!

NB I previously circulated two papers which this paper discusses: Cook et al (2004) 'Follow the thing: papaya' and (2000) 'Social sculpture & connective aesthetics: Shelley Sacks' Exchange Values'. This paper may make more sense if you have been able to read one or both of those. Sorry for the extra reading. Photographs and film taken on a recent visit to the Eden Project will be shown as part of the introduction to the discussion of this paper... Finally, please excuse the looseness, inaccuracies and lack of proper referencing here. This is very much a first draft.

I:

Roger Sanjek published a great paper in 2004 about the way in which his ethnography of the New York community in which he lived – *The future of all of us* (1998) - became a public document. In part, this was because participant observation is, at its heart, a public methodology. It's undertaken with people, it's a collaborative form of learning, there's a history of co-authorship with research subjects, and it's not unusual for authors to check written interpretations with those who are part of the story. What's perhaps most interesting about Sanjek's paper, however, are the efforts that he made to encourage its wider readership post-publication. First, there was the way in which it was written: it was deliberately both an academic and an accessible public text. Rather than writing different versions for different audiences, he wrote a single text that could be read differently by different readers. Narrative writing can engage wider audiences, but academic – often jargon-heavy - arguments don't have to be waded through in the main text for them to make a difference to how this writing is read. These arguments can be present implicitly in a narrative, in between the lines, helping to shape it and the research that it's based upon. And they can be argued out more explicitly elsewhere - in footnotes, endnotes, text boxes, other publications – for readers who require or get interested in such detail. Sanjek is not alone in this. Timothy Mitchell's (2002) *Rule of experts* or Ann-Marie Mol's (2002) *The body multiple* are well-known examples of this kind of writing. Second, there was the way in which he publicised his book. He was keen that its life didn't end on the bookstore shelf. He sent copies to fourteen TV, print and radio journalists working locally, regionally and nationally. More than one read it from cover to cover, and he gave a number of them tours of the neighbourhood to show them what he had found about how city-wide and national issues to do with multiculturalism, tax development policies, etc. were at play there. His contact list grew, as other

journalists picked up this story and got in touch. His work was publicised on TV, in print and radio journalism, via interviews, phone-in shows, and more at local, city and national levels. He ended up on National Geographic and was even on BBC radio in the UK (his worst experience with journalists). He even ended up being a policy advisor to the New York City Democratic Party mayoral candidate in 1997 and 1999, whose ‘campaign message and economic policies resonated with what I had learned from my fieldwork’ (452). All the way through, he accepted invitations to give talks on the New York bookstore circuit. He became well known as a local anthropologist. People stopped him in the street. Reading his book and hearing his stories, many added their own. And this time-consuming, post-production work began to shape as much as to disseminate his research. This book wasn’t the end-point of the research process but, rather, an important part of the research process. He described this really nicely. What he learned about this process was that “your material by itself is ‘active’” (452).

II.

Sanjek’s work is part of an emerging ‘public anthropology’ literature. Similar things are happening – perhaps most noticeably – in Sociology, but also in Geography. I read Sanjek’s paper as part of the literature review process undertaken by a working group on public geographies at the University of Birmingham (where I worked until August this year). What we were keen to do was a) to get out into the open the public engagement work that we already did, b) to try to legitimate this as something that we ought to be doing as part of our academic labour (some of us were fed up with these things being treated as our ‘hobbies’); and c) to learn from others how to do this public work better. One of the main impetuses for getting this group going was the reaction within my Department to one of the most exciting things that had happened in my career. In December 2005, I went with a colleague to a conference at the London Mayor’s building on World Food Day. It was called: “If food could talk: hidden stories from the food chain.” During a coffee break, he introduced me to a man he’d met called Andrew Ormerod, who would be interested in my research on papaya commodity chains and in what I knew about a social sculpture about the international banana trade by the artist Shelley Sacks. Andrew, it turned out, was the economic botanist in charge of the humid tropics biome at the Eden Project, in Cornwall in South West England. I’ll say more about the Eden Project later, but all we need to know now is that this is a botanic garden, designed to re-connect people with the plants, people and environments that they rely upon unknowingly in everyday life, a millennium project, built in part with European money targeted at poorer regions, the largest greenhouse in the world in an abandoned china clay pit, a runaway success story and, very quickly, a national and international icon (used, for example, as a set in the latest James Bond film). Andrew was at the conference because the tropical fruit display in his biome was being revamped. He was interested in these ‘hidden stories’ and asked if I could send him some of my work. Something about Shelley’s work. Other stuff too. So, I sent him copies of my (2004) *Follow the thing: papaya* paper, my (2000) *Social sculpture & connective aesthetics: Shelley Sacks’ Exchange Values*, told him about Shelley’s *Exchange Values* website, and lent him video-tapes of a couple of documentary films following Mange Tout peas and pineapples.

Andrew read, looked at, and watched these and got back to me very enthusiastically. At the start of 2006, I was in Cornwall with Helen Griffiths, one of my PhD students, discussing the revamp

with its designer, the head of signage, someone from the education department (this is a popular place for school trips), and Andrew. They were really keen for the display to include ‘voices of the farmers’, as well those of others along the supply chain. They wanted their botanic display to have more of a socio-economic ‘edge’. There was already part of a container ship’s hull in amongst the plants. But they wanted to include a banana conveyor, carrying the bananas on board, a container that people could walk through to hear the voices of dockers, merchant sailors, supermarket buyers, shoppers, others and – further along the display - a listening post where you could press a button and hear banana farmers talking about their lives, work, and threatened livelihoods. This was very pro- small farmer and pro-Fairtrade, like the whole of Eden. But, although a lot of the planning had been done before Andrew and I met, all this talk of ‘hidden voices from the supply chain’ had – apparently - been inspired by what I’d sent him and what he’d circulated and talked about among Eden staff. I was keen to tell my Head of School at Birmingham, but was advised that she wouldn’t be anywhere near as excited as I was by these developments. The Research Assessment Exercise was coming up. I should be writing papers for scholarly audiences only. Anything else would be a distraction. I really ought to keep this quiet. So, with others, I set up this ‘public geographies working group’ – to try to legitimate this kind of work within and beyond the School – and later left Birmingham to work in Exeter, where these geographies were legitimate to pursue and where it was easier to pursue them because Exeter is much nearer the Eden Project. It’s only two hours on the train now rather than five, and last Friday I visited again to see and to ask questions about how my work and Shelley’s work had gone public there. Why had he been so enthusiastic about it? How had he disseminated it, and/or word of it, through the organisation? Who had read or watched what? What, in particular, had people latched onto? What exactly had it prompted them to do differently? And how had this worked out in practice? Part of the reason why this paper is so last-minute is that Andrew suggested that, while I was there, I could give a 30 minute presentation about my research to 20-30 Eden staff – botanists, education people, retail people, guides, whoever was around. I had to say yes. This was important to me. I wanted to collaborate with these people in the future. The kind of work that I – we – have been doing for years, and the kinds of imaginations and relationships that we’re keen to foster between consumers and producers of foods around the world, could gain a massive public audience here. The Eden Project opened in 2001, and 1.8 million people visited each year for the first two years. This was a golden opportunity, and an especially weird and interesting one because the core concept that Andrew seemed to have latched onto in the work I’d sent him was ‘commodity fetishism’. He only asked me last week where I’d picked that up from...

III.

There’s been a lot of talk in the commodity geographies literature about the way that Marx’s concept is being used in a body of literature that this work fits into - that which attempts to ‘defetishise’ commodities through post-disciplinary, multi-site, follow-the-thing ethnographies (see Cook *et al* 2006 for a review). Some say that the concept of ‘commodity fetishism’ is being simplified and caricatured - the fetish is the veil that must be swept aside to reveal the truth – and requires more detailed theorising (Goss 2006). Others argue that it, and any related attempts to ‘de-fetishise’ or ‘get with the fetish’, is defunct (Barnett & Land 2007). But it’s not clear whether they’re criticising the caricatured version, or the more complex one that the literature is arguably

missing. I've argued (Cook *et al* 2007) that the problem might be that we're not accustomed to thinking through the 'activities' of our work following publication. It's not only important to understand the relations between the production and consumption of the foods that we follow, but also of what we write about those relations. In a recent review of food following research in *Progress in human geography*, I argued that:

"If we want to make a difference, ... [our] radical postdisciplinary food studies need to be less disciplined *and* less finished in order, as Rich Heyman (2000: 299) puts it, to 'Keep . . . open the problematics of knowing beyond the end of writing'. This is perhaps the problem that's caused Barnett *et al.* to be so pessimistic about the value of the work being advocated here. We could make our writing much more widely accessible, leave things open to interpretation, give our readers (and other audiences) some sense-making to do, so they can get more involved, put more of themselves into the picture, draw upon their existing knowledges, ethical frameworks, and so on. And they might get sucked into our stories, the lives of the people (and other) we set out to meet, and the connections we set out to gain a better feel for" (Cook *et al* 2006).

We can't expect or hope that our writing might sweep aside the veil of any fetish, expose readers to the horrible worlds of commodity production and trade, tell them what's wrong and what to do about it, and thereby transform their lives to the cause of ethical shopping or wider trade justice. That approach too often puts people off. It's often too didactic. And thus radical in tone but not necessarily in effect. Less didactic, more subtly radical approaches working through the research process from planning to post-production might be worth thinking about some more. Especially, for me, because the pedagogical approach of the Eden Project has – over the years – become less and less didactic and more and more dialogic; less about facts, figures and delivery and more about narratives, lives and dialogue. To me, this 'follow the thing' research and this botanical garden seem to be works and projects that have been waiting their whole lives to meet each other. But there is this problem of translation. How can an 'aesthetics of connection' be developed that might work across the media of print, sculpture, film, and botanic display? How, for example, can the aesthetics of film – which might include a fixed viewer, techniques of juxtaposition and montage, and 90 minutes of viewer attention – be translated successfully into the aesthetic of botanical encounter – walking past lushly planted beds in the steamy heat, reading some signage, possibly talking with a guide, spending less than a minute on each type of plant? And/or, how could the latter encourage visitors to seek more detailed understandings of connections through the former? How can encounters spark commodity connections and stories which can 'enchant' them?

This story, so far, might give the impression of two worlds colliding and the problem of translation possibly being insurmountable. But it's important to talk about this coming together of 'follow the thing' research and the Eden Project revamp as the latest in a long line of comings-together, of translations of 'connective aesthetics' across different material-semiotic realms and spaces of encounter. What I want to talk about are the relationships between that papaya paper, that pineapple film (*Ananas*, released in 1978 and directed by Amos Gitai), and that social sculpture.

IV

That paper comes from my PhD research, which was undertaken in the early 1990s. There, I aimed to ‘defetishise’ a commodity grown in the tropics and sold in the UK; to show how what often seemed to be an abstract relations between things and money were social relations between people; and to learn how consumers were insulated from the hardships in other people’s lives which we rely upon. This was a multi-site ethnography involving participant observation research on two Jamaican papaya farms and interviews there – with workers and management – elsewhere in Jamaica with export development officials, and in the UK with pre-packers and supermarket buyers. When it came to writing up, I found it impossible to make sense of the study as a whole; all was very bitty, contradictory, and the commodity system seemed to work in part because it was that way i.e. *because* people had only partial knowledges of the whole commodity chain. At the time, while people were *calling* for this kind of research, I couldn’t find any worked through example of these ideas in practice. I was stuck. But then my supervisor told me about this documentary film about pineapples. It was just like my PhD, she said. I didn’t watch it at the time, but did so shortly after I got my PhD. Its director, Amos Gitai, seemed to have had the same trouble that I had following a tropical fruit and not being able to tell a coherent story about it. This was no straightforward film. Luckily, I found, there was loads of writing about Gitai and his films. And, luckily, the British Film Institute had had a Gitai retrospective (which meant that his films were touring art cinemas at the time, and that I could rent a VHS copy of this film from the BFI). The BFI had published books detailing all of his films (see BFI 1985 and Willemen 1993), including extended interviews with, and essays by, Gitai. A Warwick University film theorist called Paul Willemen had edited that 1993 book and published a paper about Gitai’s editing in a 1992 edition of *Screen*. There was a lot to read about *Ananas*. It was a film aiming to find out what went into a tin of Dole pineapple rings (labour, fruit, history, etc.). It was a multi-site ethnographic film (moving between San Francisco, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Japan). It had a simple structure (a follow the thing mystery trip) but the editing involved lots of overlapping of sound and pictures. Gitai described how he worked like an architect of ‘spaces for imagination’. The film had no overarching narrative to tell you what was going on or what to think about it. It was filmed and edited to leave in the contradictions of multi-site work. A lot of the sense-making work was supposed to be done by the audience. It was supposed to provide an imaginative space to inhabit, and material to think with, to discuss. It didn’t have to cohere to work...

The key words that came up again and again about Gitai’s film were ‘juxtaposition’ and ‘montage’. Film-makers, photographers, artists, novelists, academics, musicians and others have been using the technique of montage since at least the 1920s. Dictionary definitions cast montage as a process of creating one text/photograph/film/artwork/etc. from apparently unrelated or disparate fragments of others. Whatever their medium, montage-makers do their work through overlaying, overlapping, superimposing, cutting and/or juxtaposing these fragments with the overall aim of setting up new meanings that don’t come from within the fragments but, instead, from the way that they work with and/or against one another. But how could I write like this. How could I write a paper like Gitai made that film? To try to have the same effect on my readers and his film had had on me? I needed to develop some kind of ‘cinematic imagination

geared to writing'. A phrase taken from George Marcus (1994) who, apart from being the person who – for me at least – had coined the phrase, and explained how ethnographers could, 'follow the thing' (see Marcus 1995), was arguing that this imagination was necessary for the writing that would come out of the multi-site work that he was advocating. I read everything I could find about Gitai's approach and wrote a paper – never published – with Phil Crang about *Ananas* (Cook & Crang 1996), and what it could bring to the food geographies literature. This *Ananas* paper was in the back of my mind when I wrote that papaya paper. But, much later, when I was writing the writing chapter of a book called *Doing ethnographies* (Crang & Cook 2007) with Mike, Phil's brother, I boiled this process of translation down into eleven top tips for 'follow the thing' filmic montage writing. If you've read the paper, you will have noticed that the inclusion of strip of photos to start every other section makes it seem a bit like a storyboard, and the quotations that start the others give a sense of the kinds of voices you might hear. These two didn't make the top 11, though. Here was the advice that, I thought, Amos Gitai, Paul Willemen, George Marcus and others might have given me:

- i. see writing as a form of architecture (creating spaces for imagination);
- ii. don't tell your readers about your key theme or structure: let it *emerge*;
- iii. include academic justifications for this approach in your abstract / intro;
- iv. write short coherent 'capsules' faithful to parts of your research;
- v. raise issues that will be returned to in similar/different ways later;
- vi. include at least one 'jewel' from your research findings in each capsule;
- vii. think how readers might be able to personally engage with this writing;
- viii. think how you can include academic arguments in these narratives;
- ix. play with your readers' possible expectations (e.g. of linear narratives);
- x. don't expect to be in control of what sense readers make of this; and
- xi. keep rewriting, adjusting, amending until writing *feels* right (imaginatively, academically, politically, emotionally, and so on).

This had seemed to work - something that had been implicit in writing that paper had now been turned into a list - and enabled me to write something whose substance and style complemented one another. It's an unsettling read, which was just what I wanted it to be. That research had unsettled me, and I wanted to pass that on...

V

I'd first heard about *Ananas* in the early 1990s, and written that paper with Phil in 1997. In 2000, a friend returned from a Feminist Studies conference at Warwick university, having seen an 'art exhibit' – again - just like my PhD. She sent me the *Exchange values* catalogue. I couldn't believe this. The artist – Shelley Sacks – worked in the UK, at Oxford Brookes University. So, I contacted her asking if we could get together to discuss our work and how it was related. Our conversation was an epic. It seemed that this human geographer and this artist had an amazing amount in common, concerning the ethical, method-based and aesthetic elements of the connections we were trying to make between Caribbean producers and UK consumers of tropical fruits. I'd tape recorded our discussion and later asked Shelley if I could use it as the basis for a short paper in a new 'Cultural Geographies in Practice' section of the journal *Ecumene*. I tried to

write the paper to described an encounter with this sculpture – how jarring, warm, spooky, etc... it might be to hear the voices of the people who grow things we eat, to see and smell those panels of banana skins, to wonder about those loose ones in the middle, and to read things into those encounters (e.g. what I knew about the ‘banana wars’ at that time). In writing this *Exchange values* paper – which I did before writing the papaya paper - it was easy to develop an “artistic imagination geared to writing’. Talking to Shelley, and transcribing the words she used to describe what she had done, had an effect on the way that I wrote about it. Some of the words that she used, the phrases, and the way she was an artist of the imagination creating spaces for imagination, really struck me. So I used these words and phrases them, and wrote in a way that followed – I hope – the principles she outlined, and the way she spoke. You couldn’t write something *about* social sculpture. It could only be a part of the social sculptural process, thoughts provoked by the encounter, shaping imaginations, making connections. As Shelley described it, *Exchange values* wasn’t a didactic space - in which she offered a definitive interpretation of what was wrong with the international banana trade and what visitors should do about it. Instead, it was a ‘space for imagination’, a space where interpretations of the same thing - the role of bananas in people lives and how relations between these people were and could be shaped - came together, to provoke thought and discussion, within and beyond that gallery space. It was also a multi-sensory experience - sight, smell and sound - all being part of the experience. The materiality of the sculpture – those skins and headphones – was so important not only to visitors’ experiences, but also to the long drawn out social sculptural process that these was part of. Visitors were facing the skins touched by farmers, peeled off and thrown away by people like them. It was a ‘touching’ experience, very different from looking at photos and text, or watching a film.

Best known through the work of Joseph Beuys, social sculpture has six key principles: i) that all human beings are artists who can creatively shape the worlds in which they live; ii) creative agency and freedom should be valued and empowered in ways which are in tune with the needs of human and nonhuman others; iii) artists should engage in transformative social practices which do not simply lead to "acquiring information and developing research, but (involve) ... aesthetic or enlivened making and doing; connectedness that dispels numbness and anaesthesia; shaping new institutions and ways of living; dealing with difficult habits and facing contradictions; overcoming denial; and joined up thinking and doing" (Sacks 2002 p.7); iv) artists should construct installations and events which bring ideas, accounts and materials together to encourage audiences and other participants to feel, picture, discuss, reflect upon, and re-imagine connections, responsibilities and potentials to shape more just and sustainable futures; iv) artists need a sense of how certain materials and objects can have a powerfully engaging role in this process; and, vi) these installations and events should be important stages/sites in an ongoing, expanding, transformative social sculpture process (Luckenbach 2001; Schmidt 2000, Sacks 1998). According to Shelley, the multi-sensory ‘imaginative space’ of *Exchange values* enabled consumers to “enter the situation of banana growers, to picture the world economy, to consider what sustainable agricultural production would mean and (their) potential power ... to decide what they will consume and why” (Sacks 1998 p.6). But for the farmers, too, the whole process had been genuinely transformative. At *Exchange values*’ first showing in London, a number of stakeholders had been invited to workshops in the gallery space, and "by the time the

installation came down it was quite unbelievable how much discussion had taken place: farmers who had felt powerless and were completely isolated had begun to talk with one another; organisations that could support each other, but prior to the project had avoided contact, had begun to speak with each other" (*ibid.*). What is important about social sculpture is that what's in the gallery space isn't an end product. It's just part of an ongoing, provocative, transformative social sculptural process that continues, 'following installation', and not just as an afterthought.

VI.

I've spent a lot of time wondering how university classrooms could become 'spaces for imagination', in both Gitai's and Sacks' terms. Wouldn't it be great if our classrooms could have that kind of life in them? I experimented with this, using their work to organize and run a *Geographies of material culture* final year undergraduate module at the University of Birmingham from 1999 to 2007. I tried to make the classroom a space for imagination by organising and encouraging reading, discussion, reflection, detective work, and first-person autoethnographic coursework (a.k.a. journal writing) to draw students into commodity stories and the lives of those who - every day and in unknown ways - helped them to be who they were in often intimate ways. An account of *Exchange values* was used as the module's opening scene and *Ananas* was a set 'reading', which would hopefully frame students' journeys through the wider commodity-following/unraveling literature, much of which was about food, and some of which had been written for wider public audiences. That papaya paper was written to work in that classroom - initially - with those students. It wasn't, therefore, openly 'radical'. That kind of writing can turn a lot of people off. It didn't contain any discussion of literature, theoretical arguments, jargon, or many references. Its radicalism had to be deceptive. I asked referees and readers to accept that these academic arguments were 'between the lines'. It was written to provoke discussion, to frustrate those who might be looking to me to provide the 'right answer'. It wasn't didactic. Readers would have to make up their own minds about what it was about, and what it was about was - in part - how they reacted to it, what they picked out, how they discussed it. Between my roles as researcher and teacher, then, there were a whole series of translations taking place: between different kinds of imaginative spaces, and between social sculpture, documentary film, academic texts and student discussions and journal writing for academic credit. I told my bosses that, in this module, my teaching was also my research. That's why one of the four papers I was submitting this year for the RAE would be about this *Material culture* module to the RAE. I learned as much as I professed in this part of the expanded field of my commodity geographies. A major problem in conveying to students a sense that their classroom was a 'space for imagination' was, however, that while *Ananas* could easily be watched by the students, it was very difficult for them to become part of the social sculptural process of *Exchange values* because this was never up and running in a gallery near us. But we did eventually find a way of translating parts of it from the gallery into the classroom and beyond in a way that seemed faithful to the principles of social sculpture. This translation emerged out of our attempt to get *Exchange Values* to a gallery in Birmingham, the workshops we ran in this space for 14-16 year old school geography students, and the way that this led to *Exchange values* becoming a resource for a new school geography course, specifically for one of its core themes: 'People as consumers: the impact of our decisions'.

Exchange values came to Birmingham in May 2004, after we had managed to get financial support and support in kind from Birmingham University's Widening Participation Unit (the University office whose job it was to attract students to the University from non-traditional backgrounds), Creative Partnerships (a state funded organization whose remit was to reduce levels of school truancy through paying for artists, musicians, actors and other creative people to work in schools to help make subjects more engaging for students), and the University of Central England (whose had recently opened its International Performance Space in leafy Bournville where *Exchange values* would be hosted). As well as an opening public workshop with speakers from a banana growers' association in St Lucia, from an NGO called Bananalink, as well as Shelley and myself, we also organized a 'thinktank' meeting involving artists, activists and geographers who had, together and somehow, become part of *Exchange values*' social sculptural process. Perhaps most importantly, however, were the five workshops we organized with kids from local schools. They came in groups of 20, and Shelley, myself and Helen Griffiths (the doing an MSc in Birmingham) organised hour-long workshops. First, Shelley would introduce the sculpture and explain how it had been made. Second, we asked each student to listen to two or three of the farmers' voices from the 19 headphones around the room. They could have been listening to Renicks Doxilly saying that people needed to appreciate that buying someone's bananas was a way to help another human being, or to Vitalis Emmanuel, asking why he had worked the same hours throughout his life in bananas, but had been less and less able to survive on the money he was paid for his labour. Third, we asked them to congregate around the loose skins in the middle of the room to discuss what they had heard and to think about what the sculpture was about. Fourth, we asked the students to get together in groups of four and to go through everything they had on them to find the 'made in...' labels, and to draw lines on a world map between the UK and those places where things were manufactured. After they had done this, we invited them choose one of these items that meant a lot to them and to think about why. How did it help them to be who they were, and how were the people who had made this possible part of their lives? We asked them to imagine that an artist like Shelley had come to their school to meet them. She was putting together a sculpture that would be installed in a factory canteen in the place where that thing was made. Like Shelley had done with the banana farmers, they were asked to imagine that scene, and being able to talk to these factory or farm workers. What would they say? We wondered. They all wrote thankyou notes. For example:

"Dear Nokia Factory worker,

I am writing to you to say thanks you for producing my phone. It has brought me much enjoyment and I couldn't live without it. It keeps me safe just having it with me. If I didn't have it my parents wouldn't let me go round to my friend's house. Your phone also lets me keep in touch with my friends and older sister. Without it I would wouldn't be able to ring or text anyone. I would be deprived. It is essential to me.

Thank you

Heather"

"Dear person in blazer factory, Ukraine,

Even though I don't know who you are it is my daily routine to get up, have a shower and pout on my school blazer, especially made by you. My blazer us essential to me as I wear it

every day to school and it makes me feel part of the school community. If I didn't have one of your blazers, I would look odd compared to other people. If you hadn't made my blazer I would get pneumonia in the winter as it keeps me very warm. I have an education at the moment and could never have enough knowledge or patience to make such an item. I am honoured to wear your product.

I would just like to say thank you

David" (see Griffiths 2004 for more).

We were taken aback with these responses, as the students read them out to each other in the gallery space. So, it seems, were some guests from the UK's Geographical Association (the representative organization for Geography school teachers in the UK) and from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (the organization running the UK national school curriculum). They were there because they had worked together to design a new school geography course for 14-16 year olds – known as the 'pilot GCSE' – which, just like my Material cultures module, had student-centred learning, and the geographies of commodities at its heart. I'd met one of them at an American Geography conference about a month before, in a panel session on global education. She had been there to talk about this GCSE breathing life back into a fairly stagnant and increasingly unpopular school subject, and I was there talking about *Exchange Values* coming to Birmingham. To cut a long story short, this was how the *Exchange values* website ended up as a link on the GA's resources webpage for the pilot GCSE, how Helen and I became involved more widely in the GA's national and regional conferences talking about this and other work, and how Helen began her PhD producing curriculum materials for the pilot six months later.

VII.

The *Exchange values* website is interesting. On it, you can find photographs of the sculpture, and of parts of the process through which it came into being and encouraged further dialogue. There's a link to Shelley's account of the way that it came about, as well as a number of texts about it by journalists, activists and geographers (my *Ecumene* paper is there). But what is perhaps most striking are the numbers down the left and right hand sides of the homepage. These are the grower numbers from the boxes of bananas that Shelley gave away 'in return for your skins', the skins from which she stitched those panels (one from each box), and the list of numbers which she took with her to St Lucia to track down the farmers who had grown those bananas. If you click on these numbers, you can see a detailed colour photograph of that farmer's panel, and from that page you can click to hear that farmer (and maybe some members of her/his family, too) talking to you, the three minute loop that plays through the headphones under that panel in the gallery space. When we brought *Exchange values* to Birmingham, we were concerned that hardly any people would get to experience it. The gallery was in an out-of-the-way place and it was there during our University's exam term. So, we discussed how we might be able to expand its social sculptural process via the internet, via a message board on which visitors could post their ideas, reactions and questions to which St Lucian farmers could reply to get some discussion going. This had been a complete failure. It seemed that the materiality, space, multi-sensory nature and individual/collective discussion in/of the sculpture were so heavily intertwined that this was almost bound to happen. *Exchange values* seemed to be able to

work in only one formation, and in only one kind of space. Until, one day, I downloaded the farmer voices and listened to them on my MP3 player when I went food shopping. This was amazing. The voices were inside my head, talking to me as I went from aisle to aisle. The voices didn't seem any more relevant or powerful when I passed the bananas. They were voices from the commodities on the shelves, in my hand, in my basket. Lives and things connected, the supermarket had become a new 'space for imagination'.

The next time I taught my Material Cultures module, I set this as a task for one group of students. In April and May of 2006, it also became a central part of a second Widening Participation Project with a class of pilot students at a local school. We volunteered to help out during a five week period during which they were supposed to be doing their 'people as consumers' work. We tried to simulate the *Exchange Values* experience by giving the students CDs of the farmers' voices to load onto their MP3 players and listen to when they went shopping. Back in the classroom, we then looked for 'made in' labels and found the places in atlases and got the students to imagine who made something and to think about what they'd say to them. But we then encouraged them to go into more depth. They had to do some research on mobile phone geographies for a performance on campus in an undergraduate conference that was part of my Material Culture module. They did an excellent job – their performance was knowledgeable, sad, though-provoking and hilarious - and were pleased to note that theirs was by no means the worst performance of the day. This was confirmed by the person from the QCA who I'd met at that Geography conference. She was in the audience and hadn't been sure which was the school group. After this, we helped them with their coursework - researching the geographies of commodities that mattered to them. One student was keen to read an undergraduate dissertation I'd supervised in which the author narrated her travels to Cambodia to meet, talk to and learn something about a person who had sewn together a t-shirt that she'd bought in H&M, 'made in Cambodia'. Another included an exchange of emails she had had with the WTO complaining about banana farmers' deepening poverty and demanding that the WTO should be doing something about this. We put the project and its resources online for teachers to adapt for their own classes. And I got invitations from geography teachers' journals to write about these 'material cultural geographies' (see Cook et al 2006, 2007), and wrote papers with my undergraduate students based on *their* coursework journals about keys, ballet shoes, socks, chewing gum and iPods.

VIII.

These are not yet the most refined descriptions of the dense web of connections relating the production and consumption of bananas and papayas and the production and consumption of knowledges about the production and consumption of bananas and papayas. That's what I'm trying to produce here. A paper which illustrates the ways in which public geographical or anthropological practice as this relates to food and other commodity geographies cannot – in my experience at least - be a matter entirely of design or delivery of a finished product to an end-user community. Maybe this is just the way that I end up working, but writing in such a way that papers can be engaged with by multiple audiences, making them freely available on the internet, sending them to anyone who expresses an interest, accepting strange invitations, following the afterlives of your publications, providing some 'after-sales-service' and then reflecting on how

this process might feed into future research and writing can be quite worthwhile and, I'd argue, essential to the project of defetishising commodities, making connections, and enabling multiple audiences to better appreciate the many injustices and inequalities of world trade that enable us to live the lives that we live. This brings us back to the Eden Project, its humid tropics biome and its revamped tropical fruit display. This is, in a way, the latest stage of the social sculptural process that is my commodity research. When I visited there in January 2006 – just as the Public Geographies Working group was getting underway in Birmingham, and while we were planning that second schools project – I wasn't entirely convinced that it was the best place for this work to be showcased. I'd been there as a tourist some time before, and it seemed that the people whose lives were connected by these crops were Western consumers and 'traditional' communities around the world who used crops in different ways. Here, the connections were being made between Western and non-Western communities, and the latter seemed to be represented as living idealised, simple, 'natural lives'. I remembered a lot of the signage being like this, the prominence of 'traditional' Polynesian huts – for example – in the middle of the rainforest that was growing in the humid tropics' biome. To me, this rainforest represented the tropics of the mythical Golden Age in which so-called 'primitive' peoples could live easy lives as nature produced for them everything they could ever need. The papaya plant I saw there stood alone, rather than in hundreds, in regular formation in field after field, fruits being picked by farm workers hanging off the side of picking trailers bumping along the rutted channels made by previous picking trailers, etc., etc. These fruits didn't appear to be products of tropical agro-industry, international capitalism, structural adjustment, people's labour and its diminishing value. Although, in places – notably the sugar and coffee exhibits – these issues were addressed in signage on a lorry for the former, and on signs near the plants and cargo boxes near that container ship for the latter.

Having said this, it was also clear that the Eden Project was strongly advocating Fair Trade, encouraging visitors to buy from smallholders rather than from big companies, and enabling this through the products available via its many retail sites – restaurants, gift shops, etc – giving the impression that the problems of global trade could be solved by individuals shopping differently. I didn't quite understand why the materials I sent to Andrew were going down so well. But there were some similarities in our work. The biome itself was a multi-sensory experience, its materiality and connective aesthetics apparently carefully thought through. Visiting Eden is a spectacular, awesome experience. It's easy to see why people come back again and again. There's something powerful about seeing all these plants and learning about how and where they grow, and how they are ingredients in everyday products we buy from the shops. And, on the train journey there from Birmingham with Helen, we'd had plenty of time to read two academic papers I'd found about the changing pedagogical approach of the Eden Project's education team (Bowker 2002; Blewitt 2004). Here, the importance of provocation, dialogue, the senses, and flashes of connection, artwork among the plants, the way that education is presented in an engaging manner, and the 'wow factor' that captures people's imaginations were emphasised by many. This wasn't a didactic space. It was all about dialogue – between the guides (or 'pollinators') and visitors - and trying to translate moments of connection into action. At the meeting, they told us that they had really liked the narrative food following approach in that papaya paper – this academic work was unusually readable - and, having listened to the voices

of the banana farmers on the *Exchange values* website, were keen to add some farmer voices to the revamp, at a listening post to be placed on a spacious bend on the path that wound its way up through the tropical fruit display. Shelley wasn't keen to allow Eden to use her voices. They were part of *Exchange values* and wouldn't translate to fit that new context, a context she hadn't encouraged the farmers to imagine when she met them. So, Andrew and his colleagues would have to find other voices, through Bananalink or through their link with WIBDECO, the banana growers' association in the Windward Islands. It was clear that the revamp planning was already well underway. The designer showed us some sketches of the conveyor, the container, and the listening post. Only the latter seemed to have come from the conversations and material I'd passed to Andrew. Our work had got to Eden relatively late in the revamp process.

IX

Andrew and I kept in touch, I told him about the school project that took shape in the Spring of 2006, and in May that year he and I got involved in a flurry of emails relating to a Food Week at Eden. He sent me a passage from a talk that he was giving to link two speaker sessions on the main Saturday:

“Link piece between Sherlock and the Shopping Basket and the Farmer’s behind our Food. OK we have considered some of the factors that may influence us when we go shopping – but do we consider the story of the people who produced the food on our shelves? There are some attempts to highlight farmers on some ‘Fair Trade’ products and also some local products but often the true story of the people behind our food is not evident. Take bananas for example 99% of export bananas are of one basic type – Cavendish. They all look the same, and yet the stories of their production can be quite different. The only clue to these different stories is the packaging and brand labelling and whether they have a Fair Trade logo. I have become interested in these stories through Ian Cook, Senior Geography lecturer at Birmingham University who has been involved in the people who are involved in producing, transporting, buying, selling and packing our food. He has produced a couple of essays “Following the thing” following the transport of Papaya and Chilli sauce from Jamaica. Ian has been involved with a project with GCSE geography students at St Edmund Campion Catholic School in Birmingham to look at ‘People as consumers: the impacts of our decisions’. As part of this exercise some of the students downloaded the voices of Windward Island banana growers from <http://www.exchange-values.org/> on to their MP3 players and went round the shops with the voices of the growers in their ears as they shopped. This stimulated a variety of responses in the form of prose, poetry and art, one student even wrote to the World Trade Organisation about the plight of Caribbean banana farmers. During our food week activity we have three farmers two from Cornwall and one representing farmers from the Windward Islands – so those of you who attended will be able to learn some true stories behind our food. We are also planning to install some voices of banana growers from different parts of the world in our banana exhibit. So let’s hear it for the farmers (and others in the supply chain)!”

Soon afterwards, I got an email from my brother Andy who worked for the construction company that was continually, it seemed, building more amazing buildings on the site. He'd met

Andrew, and reported that he “was visibly shaking as he described how you have inspired Eden’s food week.” Shelley and I wondered what kind of exhibit could be produced if a social scientist and a social sculptor could collaborate in that space, with those botanists, signage people, guides, etc., with those materialities, and that massive audience. The enthusiasm about our involvement was clearly there, the door was open, yet nothing seemed to be happen. Was it enough for them to be inspired by our work? They seemed quite happy to follow these enthusiasms with little projects of their own. One concern at Eden was that our work was out of date. Shelley’s sculpture had been put together in the late 1990s. Windward islands bananas were now all Fairly Traded. My papaya research had been done in the early 1990s. And that *Ananas* film was made in 1978. So, Andrew commissioned some students from a university in Costa Rica to visit pineapple workers and film them talking about their lives. And he commissioned others to ask banana farmers to talk about their lives and work. None of these commissions, however, resulted in audio or video recordings with the power, passion and directness that came through in *Exchange values* and *Ananas*. This updating work – Andrew admitted - had produced flat results. He described one farmer clip as sounding like a bad local radio interview, and another as apparently having sound effects added giving it a inappropriate ‘Old MacDonald’ feel. Maybe the lack of passion and anger was because Fair Trade had given farmers less to get passionate and angry about, he thought. Or maybe, I subtly suggested, it was because professional filmmakers and artists had done that earlier work. There was much more to what they’d done than capturing some farmer voices for others to listen to. Surely there was room for these connective professionals – academic ones too – to do some more work along these lines, to think about how their work could become part of that botanical encounter, and to help find ways of turning a fleeting sense of connection into a more detailed and enduring one for interested visitors and school parties alike. This seemed like a collaboration waiting to happen. Everything seemed to be pointing in this direction. Until I visited last week. I wasn’t so sure after that. The 3 or 4 days I’d spent preparing that presentation, and the papers I’d photocopied for the 20 or 30 people who would be in the audience, were wasted. Three people turned up. There was little point giving the talk. So we had a discussion about the way that my work and Shelley’s work, and those videos, had been taken up at the Eden project. I needed to have that discussion to finish off the paper I was writing for this seminar. I was determined not to leave empty-handed. There seemed to be a great deal of enthusiasm, but not much else. Andrew had been a big fan and had told people about what Shelley and I had done. Hardly anyone had read anything, but there was some discussion of voice listening and video watching. There wasn’t much more depth to this connection than Andrew had described during Food Week. The ‘fetishism’ he’d picked up seemed to be little more than the caricatured version that was being discussed in the food geographies literature. Nevertheless, the Eden Project in general and the tropical fruit revamp in particular were exciting to wander around for a couple of hours. I could read a lot into a lot here. But nothing big was going to happen for us here. All we might hope for was for *Exchange values* to be installed here for a time, and that when the Eden website was revamped, some of our commodity narratives could be made available online for people to read. I would be surprised if even this happened, though. Just because people are interested in what you do, it doesn’t mean that they will want to work with you.

X.

So what conclusions should we come to from all of this? There are those that I can come to about the work that I'm doing and how it has been shaped, following publication. This might include agreeing with my old bosses that its involvement in this revamp was nothing to get excited about. It didn't make much of a difference as far as I could see, and the voices that were added weren't having quite the effect that I'd envisaged. This isn't to say that the way that the international fruit trade does and can work isn't part of the Eden spectacle. It's just that this still seems to have nothing much to do with us or our work. That was just interesting to one person and some of the people he worked with. It went with the flow of what was going on anyway. It's good that this connection was made, but it wasn't that earth-shattering or public. Our much more low-key work with school geographers, however, is perhaps a much more exciting and influential piece of public geographical practice. The Eden disappointment really brought that into focus. But there are also the conclusions that we could come to more widely, about doing and writing public commodity research. First, what our public geographies working group began to unearth were stories of all kinds of geographers engaging in similar activities and responding to similar kinds of public interest in their work. Many people confessed to us their involvement in 'hobby work': things that they did because they thought it was important, but felt reluctant to tell their bosses about because they might be seen to be 'wasting precious time'. Others had been doing this for years as part of their legitimate academic work. Second, I really like the idea put forward in the scene setting document for this seminar – that we might put together a book from this seminar that was aimed at a more public audience. It seems to me that we are well suited to such a task, and that it's important. This kind of publication won't be new to some, and Ted's (2000) 'How sushi went global' paper in *Foreign policy* is an excellent example of the kind of work of which we could be producing more. My argument, however, is that we don't necessarily have to produce versions of our 'real' research for different audiences. I don't have time to write more than one version of anything. I think my papaya paper shows that it's possible to write papers that are both academically sound and widely accessible, both in terms of their writing style and in terms of people being able to gain access to them, print them out and read them. I like the idea of internet searches being able to unearth academic papers freely available to anyone who's interested. Publishing draft papers on our websites is one way that this can happen. Sending people copies of our work also seems to be a good idea. Sanjek had a point there. If it's lying on someone's desk, they might just pick it up and, if it grabs them from the start, might read the whole thing. There is a lot of post-production work that can usefully be done, but it takes time, can change the research that we do, inevitably involves losing some control over it, can, in retrospect, waste a lot of time, but can also lead to some fantastic opportunities to make our work part of wider debates and struggles. Our publications are 'active', whether we like it or not, but the work needed to foster particular kinds of activity is something that we could perhaps discuss as an important part of this seminar. Doubtless other participants have stories to tell here...

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