

From 'follow the thing: papaya' to followthethings.com

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What follows is a reflection on 'Follow the thing: papaya' which was first published in 2004 in *Antipode: a Radical Journal of Geography* (Cook *et al*, 2004). It takes the form of an interview about its making and reception, how the spoof shopping website followthethings.com emerged from this (Cook *et al*, 2011-date), and the approach this work has taken to academic research and activism in relation to consumer ethics. I asked the questions.

Where did your papaya paper come from?

It was an ethnographic study conducted across a number of connected sites in the UK and Jamaica where people grew, picked, packed, shipped, ripened, procured, sold and maybe ate fresh papaya. It was inspired by my failed attempts to make World Regional Geography interesting to first year undergraduates at the American university where I did my Masters degree. What did events around the world have to do with the students in the classroom? I struggled to find examples to show that their everyday lives were affected by and influenced what was happening elsewhere in the world (see Cook *et al*, 2007). Back in the UK, starting my PhD, I set out to study one example and that example ended up being one fresh fruit grown on two farms in Jamaica and sold in the major UK supermarkets at the time. I imagined students being able to shape trade relations like the ones I would study in various ways, within and outside the classroom and in their post-graduation lives. They could talk to people about the relations and responsibilities that they were studying. Many would end up in careers where they would have to manage such relations themselves. They needed to be prepared.

How would you describe it?

It's as rich an ethnography as can be squeezed into a standard journal paper. Its intellectual arguments are 'between the lines'. It responds to David Harvey's influential (1990) appeal for geographers to "get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market' to make powerful, important, disturbing connections between Western consumers and the distant strangers whose

contributions to their lives were invisible, unnoticed and largely unappreciated' (in Cook *et al* 2004, 643). It starts with a proposition: 'if we accept that geographical knowledges through which commodity systems are imagined and acted upon from within are fragmentary, multiple, contradictory, inconsistent and, often, downright hypocritical, then the power of a text which deals with these knowledges comes not from smoothing them out, but through juxtaposing and montaging them ... so that audiences can work their ways through them and, along the way, inject and make their own critical knowledges out of them' (Cook & Crang, 1996, 41). It then presents 'The Thing' - the papaya - and 'The Following' - 13 sections of descriptive writing, six of them about people: Mina the buyer, Tony the importer, Jim the farm manager, Philipps the farm foreman, Pru the fruit packer and Emma the fruit consumer. Referees described it as 'brave', a 'breath of fresh air' and 'almost unreadable'. It took off.

Why ethnography?

I learned to be an ethnographer at the University of Kentucky from one of its earliest and most brilliant advocates in Geography: Graham Rowles. He had spent years living and working with elderly people in both urban and rural settings in the USA (Rowles, 1978a&b). As a confused undergraduate in London, his arguments jumped off the page, moved me, caught me. His careful, detailed, empathetic portrayals of the lives of four people ageing in place took me into their worlds, and made me think of and better understand my grandmother's curtain-twitching behaviour. I applied to study with him. The Master's research I did there mimicked his, but with a small number of people who lived with visual impairments. Each chapter of my thesis, like those of Graham's book, presented one person's worldview from a combination of detailed participant observation and interview research at home and walking from place to place. The power of ethnography to evoke the lives of others, and the ways in which Graham wrote so honestly and vulnerably about what this research was like to do, what responsibilities you end up feeling towards your participants, and what they leave you and your readers with, was a brilliantly provocative contribution to the geography literature. I loved what it could do.

Why multi-sited ethnography?

Clifford and Marcus' (1986) *Writing culture* made waves and my Kentucky peers were reading and talking about it. We read it with Paul Willis' groundbreaking ethnography *Learning to labour: how working class kids get working class jobs*. The problem with Willis' half thick description, half theoretical argument, Marcus (1986, 186) argued, was that its ethnography 'makes the lads real,

but [its theory] reifies the larger system in which they live'. Yet, 'What is 'the system' for the lads', Marcus explained, is the middle class' 'cultural form' (*ibid.*). The kind of work that was therefore needed, Marcus and Fischer (1986, 91) argued, was that which took 'as its subject not a concentrated group of people in a community, affected in one way or another by political-economic forces, but 'the system' itself – the political and economic processes spanning different locales, or even different continents. Ethnographically, these processes are registered in the activities of dispersed groups or individuals whose actions have mutual, often unintended, consequences for each other, as they are connected by markets and other major institutions that make the world a system'. People were doing this, Marcus later argued (1995), by following people, plots, stories, allegories, lives, biographies, conflicts and things. Connecting worlds of production, distribution and consumption comprised 'circumstantial activism' (*ibid.*). This was how to do it.

What does that paper have to say about consumption ethics?

There are two sections at the end. One is about Emma 'The papaya consumer' who lives in London and doesn't eat fresh papaya. The other is about 'Papaya consumption' which argues that extracts of papaya, particularly the enzyme papain that it secretes when it's picked, can be found in all kinds of commodities like (her) beer, jumpers and toothpaste. Papain isn't commercially farmed in Jamaica, but in East Africa and Sri Lanka. So Emma doesn't have any direct connection or responsibility for what happens to Mina, Tony, Jim, Philipps or Pru. But she and they aren't the only actors. They told me. The world of fresh produce doesn't like a vacuum. Papaya plants change sex with the weather. The legacies of sugar, slavery and their race relations are everywhere. The argument is intellectual and empathetic. You can identify with any or all of its actors. It isn't didactic. It doesn't recommend what you should do. Responsibilities shift (Young, 2004). It doesn't offer a whole argument. That's impossible to assemble from multi-sited fragments. It gives you things to think with. It might affect you too. It's written to have a life beyond its publication, for academic and other readers. It ends with a question and an invitation: 'What can any 'radical' and/or 'sustainable' politics of consumption realistically involve? If things are so. Discuss' (Cook *et al*, 2004, 662-3).

Who was it written for and how would they find it?

Why spend time researching and writing academic papers that so few people get to read? I posted drafts online like Lancaster University's sociologists were doing. People found them, got in touch, asked questions, invited me to do things. *A Manifesto for cyborg pedagogy* (Angus, Cook & Evans, 2001), for example, outlined a 'follow the thing' undergraduate module inspired by Paulo Freire's (1996) pedagogy of the oppressed and Donna Haraway's (1991) cyborg ontology. Students wrote first person accounts of their intimate, bodily, material entanglements with the lives of people who grew, for example, picked, packed and shipped the leaves in their morning cup of tea. An email from a geography school teacher said her class had become cyborgs. Could I offer them some advice? It seemed I could make a difference in the world by writing freely available academic papers for more than academic audiences. But how do you write in intellectually rich and accessible language? Develop 'a cinematic imagination geared to writing', Marcus says (1994, 45). Read about ways in which filmmakers, artists and others engage audiences in commodity followings in warm, affective, critical ways (see Cook & Crang, 1996; Cook *et al*, 2001). 'Follow the thing: papaya' is poetic, filmic writing (Crang & Cook, 2007). In 2009 it was made [freely available](#) online by *Antipode*. Loads of people have read it.

Who's Ian Cook *et al*?

That's the nom de plume I use for 'single-authored' publications. But nobody works alone. These papers aren't my solo creations. They're created out of conversations, collaborations, sharing ideas, making things together. Always. I'm not the only name-changer. Gloria Watkins writes as bell hooks, 'to construct a writer-identity that would challenge and subdue all impulses leading me away from speech into silence' (1989, 9). J.K Gibson-Graham is the collective authorial voice of Julie Graham and Kathy Gibson (e.g. 2006) which calls into question the 'research culture ... [which] interpellates academics as sovereign actors who are forced to compete in a veritable marketplace of ideas and influence' (Anon, 2002, 1332). Both work for me (see Cook *et al*, 2008-date). In 'my' papaya paper, the '*et al*' includes Mina, Tony, Jim, Philipps, Pru and Emma. Each of them, in turn, is an '*et al*' because they're composite characters who can say more with anonymity (see Crang and Cook, 2007). The paper's readers are in there too, making meaning by piecing together its deliberately unfinished contents. More people are in the acknowledgements and reference list. Then there's Haraway's cyborg ontology, the thing/body hybrids - including papaya and papain - that bring material geographies, relations and responsibilities into the '*et al*'. Nobody and nothing is outside (Cook *et al*, 2005).

How have things moved on since you wrote that paper?

I designed and now run the spoof shopping website followthethings.com (Cook *et al*, 2011-date). It showcases my '*et al*' research on 80+ examples of 'follow the thing' work made by filmmakers, activists, journalists, students and others, across nine departments, from Fashion to Auto. It's the recommended text and publication platform for students taking the module I mentioned earlier (see CASCADE, 2013). It's so far had 300,000+ views from 90,000+ visitors in 190+ countries. Its [blog](#) and [twitter feed](#) have 2,000+ followers. The 'follow the thing' approach to studying international trade is embedded within the UK's National Curriculum for Geography (Anon, 2014). We've produced a variety of educational resources including advice on how to follow things yourself (Cook *et al*, nd). We designed and ordered 5,000 followthethings.com reusable shopping bags, live tweeted their travels from their factory in China to our HQ, and gave them away (Cook *et al*, 2013). 'With only modest resources', Joe Smith (2015, 16) has argued, followthethings.com 'play[s] sophisticated games with the tools of corporate marketing. The results give a rich account of, but simultaneously critique, the market and other realities that shape the experience of producing, consuming and disposing of products.' It's 'IMDB³ for Everything' (Davis, 2013, np). I met George Marcus and gave him a bag as a thankyou.

So this 'follow the thing' approach is everywhere now?

Yes. It seems to be. It's really hard to keep track of it all. Stolle and Micheletti (2013) argue that this area of research lacks a solid empirical base and, beyond single case studies, hasn't provided much insight into its creation and reception. But followthethings.com documents, researches and analyses the diverse forms and impacts of work across this *genre* of cultural and scholar activism. We scour open access online sources for comments made by their makers, audiences and recipients. We edit and arrange them on each example's webpages. We identify a) the tactics it employs to bring its subjects and audiences into relation, b) the ways in which its audiences respond to its content, and c) the impacts it is said to have had on its subjects, makers, audiences, corporations and others. Our analysis will, we hope, help to create a comprehensive vocabulary for 'follow the thing' critique that can shape future academic debate and activism (see Cook *et al*, in press), inform ongoing collaborative work with artists (see Crutchlow, Cook *et al*, 2016-date) and activists (see Ditty, Cook & Hunter, 2015) and encourage publics to 'Be curious. Find out. Do something' (Cook, 2015).

3 Internet Movie Database (<http://imdb.com/>)

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