Made in... ? Appreciating the everyday geographies of connected lives

Ian Cook, **James Evans**, **Helen Griffiths**, **Lucy Mayblin**, **Becky Payne** and **David Roberts** look at our relationships with the random objects we encounter in everyday life.

Many of us pay little or no attention to where the things in our lives come from. We may be concerned about factory conditions in other parts of the world, but not feel any direct sense of connection with the people working there. 'Made in...' labels and ingredient information don't tell us much about these connections and relationships. But they can be starting points for 'geographical detective work' (Hartwick, 2000). This can allow teachers and students to piece together their understanding of commodities and their complex geographies, and provoke classroom discussion about the impacts of consumers' decisions, which inevitably draw upon the key geographical concepts including:

- globalisation
- uneven development
- interdependence
- scale and connection
- proximity and distance
- relational thinking
- identity
- responsibility
- futures

(see Griffiths, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Massey, 2004).

This article illustrates the kinds of connections and issues that can be made and raised through such detective work, and introduces the additional concepts of 'cyborgs' and 'commodity fetishism' that this draws upon.

Verrucas, dirt, cold, pain. Whenever I am barefooted, unpleasant things tend to invade my feet, and that's why I like socks. They are barriers to my discomfort; I am secure, safe in their company. Yet, I do seem to like them a little too much. They take up a whole drawer in my room after all. I can't imagine life without them.

But socks are strange beings. In improving my life, offering comfort, warmth and protecting me against disease, they seem to have sacrificed their own identities. They are the only free item of clothing I have – free from tags, labels or any clues to their origin or even what they are made from. I have to delve deeper, literally, into my bin and retrieve the packet before I can make out that they were 'Made in Bulgaria'. By buying them in my local Marks & Spencer store in London, I became part of an intricate and wide-reaching network of people and machines.

In purchasing these socks, I was one of 15 million customers in one of 400 M&S stores in the UK that employ 65,000 people (Anon, 2005). The socks that ended up on the checkout conveyor-belt are part of the countless number transported from a factory in Rousse, Bulgaria, packaged by automated production lines and made by over 600 workers (Anon, 2002) who knit, sew, seam, bleach, iron, shape and sort my socks assisted by 200-needle single and double-cylinder machines (Anon, no date). Not to mention the thousands of workers in Bulgaria involved in manufacturing the polyamide and elastane lycra, the farmers planting, tending and cultivating the cotton plants, and those getting these and other materials to the factory.

This simple transaction links me with hundreds, thousands, millions(?) of people across the world. If my socks could become more than mere garments – sock puppets who could talk! – what would they tell me about the conditions, education, wealth, future of the people involved in putting them on my feet (Cook *et al.*, 2006)? This transaction links me to more than just individual people.

The factory in Bulgaria, contributing to hundreds of job losses in the UK (Anon, 1999), is owned by Delta Socks, an Israeli company fighting its own battles against boycotters who have identified how its Israeli factories benefit from operating on illegally confiscated Palestinian land by employing labourers in dreadful non-unionised conditions (Scheid, 2002). The headquarters of these sock boycotters are located in London, just a couple of Tube stops away from the M&S I bought them in.

Putting my foot into the oh-so-fluffy, comforting sock, it seems I'm helping to perpetuate the Arab–Israeli conflict, to disrupt the lives of hundreds of fellow Brits, and to contribute to the lives of thousands in Bulgaria. Who lives, dies, profits or suffers depends, in a small part, on me. My socks have spoken, and what they have said matters. Oppression doesn't sit well with me – and what I do with my money. I can change what socks I buy. I must change. Sacrificing quality for ethics is a small price to pay. I may be just one person, but what I do makes a difference, to a lot of people, in a lot of different places.

But I'm not the only one that can or should act differently. Surely, this can't all be my responsibility as a consumer. Others are shaping my options and they have to change too, including M&S bosses, and the people who decide what socks get onto their shelves. A new range of fairtrade cotton socks has just started to appear there (Anon, 2006a; 2006b). Would you believe it? Their marketing pitch was 'Your M&S: Look Behind the Label'! Just what I was doing. Their cotton is grown by farmers in Gujurat, India. It's good for them. But what about those sock workers in the UK, Bulgaria and Israel/Palestine (O'Nions, 2006)? What 'good' has this done them? And what should I do with the socks I've already got? The ones lying in my drawer? Put them on, as usual, I suppose, for a run this morning, then to walk into uni.

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I really enjoy the walk into uni. Striding out, breathing in the morning air – just me, my socks, my shoes and the pavement working in perfect harmony, like a well-oiled machine. We're out on our own in the urban wilderness doing what we do best, what we came together to do. S**t! Trod in some chewing gum. Can't walk properly, the gum is sticking shoe and pavement together, interrupting the flow of the system. I hate chewing gum, never chew it, yet here it is, invading my life. The chewer must have only dropped it a minute ago. Their DNA, now stuck to the bottom of my shoe, could tell me all kinds of intimate details about their life – a life which has intruded upon my own and stuck to me like a parasite.

The story that brought this gum to my shoe is mind-bogglingly complex. A little research – starting with the information printed on a pack of gum[1] – brings stories of factory workers in Plymouth (the only UK Wrigley[2] factory), the fact that E903 (a.k.a. carnauba wax) is also the main ingredient of car polish (Anon, 2004a; 2006c), and allegations of the carcinogenic effects of Acesulfame K, a.k.a. acetoacetamide, (Anon, no date; 2004c) I could go on – for ever it seems – through more surprising connections. Like the one made shortly after the 9/11 attacks between the gum arabic trade and the war on terror:

> *'Early this morning I was listening to the news. One of the commentators said that Osama Bin Laden owns a HUGE amount of stock in the company that makes Gum Arabic. Gum Arabic is known to be in some soft drinks and many other food items. Check your cupboards and refrigerators, if you have products that use Gum Arabic get rid of them and do not buy products with the Gum Arabic additive. If we continue to use these products that contain Gum Arabic we are in essence supporting this man's terrorist attacks against OUR FELLOW AMERICANS! One way that the US helps Osama Bin Laden is, he owns the COMPANY that makes GUM ARABIC mostly used in pop, "MOUNTAIN DEW" IS ONE OF THEM, and other things. GUM ARABIC keeps things from settling in bottles and cans. STOP BUYING ANYTHING WITH GUM ARABIC IN ITS CONTENTS. THE MONEY goes to Bin Laden company. PLEASE SEND THIS TO EVERYONE. This was on the news today'*
> (Mikkelson, 2001).

So, that anonymous chewer wasn't just littering that street (and my shoe), but was also helping to fund international terrorism. I feel better. I never chew gum. So I'm not responsible for any of this. What a relief!

But wait, hold on a sec! The whitening agent in chewing gum is the same chemical that makes my acrylic paint white. Gum arabic is used in all kinds of sweeteners for foods and drinks, not to mention pill capsules and make-up (Anon, 2004a). I put many of those things into or onto my body, every day. I couldn't be myself without many of them. My trainers wouldn't work the way they do without elastomers – the ingredient that gives gum its rubbery texture and cushions my feet. Chewing gum shares properties with car tyres, shock absorbers and glues. So, a stick of gum could be produced from my body and its attachments. I am a walking stick of chewing gum – its/my ingredients are related. Blimey!

I'm in the second row from the back of the computer cluster in the uni library – sitting at a screen, tapping away like the other 34 people in the room. But, thanks to my Apple iPod, I have created my own sonic bubble in which to hide. The instrumental Icelandic overtures of Sigur Ros pulsate through my head, the soft beats rippling from ear to ear, down through my spine and through my limbs, the rhythms dictating the tap of my foot, the speed of my fingers, my mood, my whole psyche, what you're reading now. This innocent-looking white and chrome contraption has me in its grips. As the Apple slogan goes, 'iPod therefore I am'.

This morning I unplugged my little white friend from his nightly recharge, where his internal Sony lithium battery had spent the night sucking the juice from the national grid. I removed him from his cosy plastic dock, inserted the long white headphones deep into my ears and let the powerful vocal harmonising and amplified funk beats of Jurassic Five provide the upbeat soundtrack to inspire my legs to get going for my morning run. As I ran I was transported back in time to the night I saw J5 live. I smiled. Then a pang of guilt hit me. I had copied the J5 CD from a friend, so is listening pleasure illegal? Am I eroding the music industry? I then let the shuffle setting randomly select some of the 2459 songs I have installed and let the various rhythms and melodies determine the speed I move and where my mind wanders. We have been travelling together on powerful musical adventures for 6 months now but I've just realised I have never even asked where he comes from!

My little white friend openly tells me that he was designed by Apple in California and assembled in China, but is less forthcoming about the origins of his hidden components, let alone how many other people's lives he has touched. His sleek exterior doesn't give much away. He's now trying to get me off track by transmitting the smooth grooves of Morcheeba. I'm gone. Somewhere calm. I let the sultry vocals of Skye Edwards and the symphonic strings wash over me. But how did I get here?

Morcheeba recorded. Sire label paid. HMV bought. I bought. Inserted into laptop. Installed onto iTunes software. Connected iPod via USB connection. Data transferred through Sharp Electronics Flash memory chip and PortalPlayer controller chip designed by 134 designers in Silicon Valley; through Texas Instruments 1394 FireWire interface onto the Toshiba 1.8-inch hard drive. Connected headphones. Listen. Now I'm somewhere calm.

Yes, Apple sources the 20GB hard drive from Toshiba (Allen, 2005). But Toshiba gets them from SAE Magnetics. They have a plant in Dongguan, China. Here, there are reports that the predominantly female, rural, assembly workers are forced to work 16-hour days to make the heart of my little white friend. Wages are low and supervisors brutal (Frew McMillan, 2002).

Can I still be calm? It turns out that I and my little white friend are not so independent, individual and innocent as I thought. I can't hide in my sonic bubble any more. I can only feel so separate because I'm so connected – so implicated. iPod therefore I am.

It's amazing what you can find out when you're sitting at a computer, surfing – doing 'detective work', using corporate, NGO and news websites, blogs, photo and video-sharing websites and online encyclopaedias. So much information! Where to start? How to narrow it down?

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Start with the evidence – yes, keywords, right, on those things. Look closely: 'Made in ...' or 'Assembled in ...', company names, brands, lists of ingredients – printed on these things, their labels, their packaging – somewhere.

OK, open browser: 'www.google.com'. Search: 'Marks & Spencer' and 'socks'. There are 49,500 hits including a manufacturer's website, Delta Galil (Anon, no date); a BBC news story: 'King of socks leaves the UK' (Anon, 1999); a PR Newswire story: 'Delta Galil addresses discount request from Marks and Spencer' (Anon, 2004b); interesting: 'Jews for Justice in Palestine' (Scheid, 2002). What would they have to say about my socks? An article in Red Pepper (O'Nions, 2006): what's that saying? That fairtrade cotton in M&S's new sock range is great for farmers in India, but not for anyone else involved in their production, distribution or sale. Right: agriculture, economic restructuring, international politics, boycotts, shifting production, trade justice. In my M&S socks, with my feet, comforting them, protecting them: what geographies are these? My sock geographies...

Now try 'Chewing gum' and 'Wrigley'. There are 190,000 hits, including the factory website. Look at those ingredients. Try 'chewing gum' and 'gum arabic' – 39,000 hits. Osama Bin Laden – crikey! Oh, it's an internet/urban 'legend' (Anon, 2001; Mikkelson, 2001). Interesting though. Try 'gum arabic' and 'Osama Bin Laden' – 1460 hits. The Daily Telegraph online edition? Reporting it like it's true (Bentham, 2001). Right – other ingredients: try 'E903' (chewing gum's glazing agent). What's that? Carnauba wax, 'used in automobile waxes, shoe polishes, ... as a coating for dental floss' (Anon, 2006c). Try 'Carnauba wax' and 'export'. Ah, the Brazil–Arab News Agency says 'it can only be extracted in industrial scale in north-eastern Brazil' (Anon, 2006d). Interesting: terrorism, rumour and truth, the 'Arab' and 'Latin American' worlds, export agriculture, industrial agriculture, food, cars, farmers, scientists, teeth, breath, the internet, coatings, connected. My gum geographies...

Now try 'iPod' and 'hard drive' – 1,590,000 hits. Look at that 'Command tab' blog (Allen, 2005). He's taken his iPod apart to soup it up, and photographed the process to show others how to do it, detailing the component parts and their technical specifications. Right, it's a Toshiba 1.8-inch hard drive. Try 'Toshiba' and 'hard drive', and – why not? – 'China' – 908,000 hits. Wow! A CNN article about working conditions in Chinese electronics factories (Frew McMillan, 2002). Bingo! China, industrialisation, export production, electronics, factory conditions, gender relations, rural–urban migration. My iPod geographies...

There's more, much more: academic sources, too, to corroborate these ideas – flesh them out, critically, giving 'academic rigour' and balance. In academic dictionaries, journal articles, books, chapters, academic studies of these things, these places, the lives of the people who shape and make them. Use the right keywords and you're almost bound to find an academic researcher somewhere who's an expert on what you want to know; someone who's been to the places you have identified, talked to the people involved, or worked alongside them perhaps. The match will rarely be exact. But their writing – especially if it's based on ethnographic research – should help make a better sense of the relations that online research can only hint at; providing more vivid and empathetic insights into the lives of those who don't/can't go online and tell their stories; explaining the processes and actors that shape these relations – hopefully.

Try a search engine for academic research: 'www.googlescholar.com'. Type 'Bulgaria', 'textile', 'factory' and 'ethnography'. There are 50 hits, including a journal article called 'Regions, spaces of economic practice and diverse economies in the "New Europe"' (Smith, 2004). Its keywords include 'clothing industry' and 'Eastern Europe'. It might be worth a look. Next: 'chewing gum' and 'commodity' – 1190 hits, including an online 2003 article called 'Chewing gum and the shadowlands of consumption' (Redclift, 2003), which looks at 'the processes through which consumer cultures have become globalised, leaving the marginalised producers in the "shadowlands"'. Download that, then key in 'China', 'electronics', 'factory' and 'ethnography' – 1140 hits, including a 2005 book whose author 'conducted ethnographic work at an electronics factory in Southern China's Guangdong province' (Pun, 2005). Bingo! Hope the library's got it.

Then what about some key concepts that might help better make and think through these relations and connections? Ones already used in this article, like Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' are difficult to grasp in the originals (Haraway, 1985; 1991). But Hari Kunzru (1997) interviewed Haraway for an online article in *Wired* magazine. The 'cyborg' concept is great for thinking through the boundary-blurring body/thing, other/self relations in/of our sock, gum, iPod, other geographies (see also Angus *et al.*, 2001). Here's a flavour of the argument:

'An automated production line in a factory, an office computer network, a club's dancers, lights, and sound systems – all are cyborg constructions of people and machines. Our bodies, fed on the products of agribusiness, kept healthy – or damaged – by pharmaceuticals, and altered by medical procedures, aren't as natural as The Body Shop would like us to believe. Truth is, we're constructing ourselves, just like we construct chip sets or political systems – and that brings with it a few responsibilities' (Kunzru, 1997).

And this cyborg concept works against Descartes' famous saying – aped in that iPod ad – 'I think therefore I am'. Kunzru says that this downplays the importance of networks and interactions in making us who we are, in forming understandings of people's places in the world, and the influence we can have over these processes.

Another good one is 'commodity fetishism'. Karl Marx's original arguments are difficult to grasp, too. But, in a nutshell: 'fetishism' describes the 'magic' properties often given to commodities by manufacturers, advertisers and consumers. Socks are 'comfy', gum 'fresh', iPods 'escape pods'. This is fine, except that commodities are also complex and often controversial bundles and networks of resources, ingredients, technologies, transactions, bodies, lives, processes, judgements, exploitations, poverty and wealth. These aspects of their identities are usually ascribed, respectively, to 'separate' worlds of 'consumption' and 'production'. Calls to 'de-fetishise' commodities are therefore calls to appreciate them in/as one and the same 'world' (see Cook *et al.*, 2002, 2007; Miller 2003).

Using these concepts can help us to research and write about anything, its role(s) in our lives and in the lives of countless, usually unseen, others, near and far. Appreciating geographies as simultaneously there and here, abstract and intimate. Trying to make sense of the complexities and ethics of, and responsibilities for, these relations and connections. No easy answers, no easy solutions – surprise, shock, anger, guilt, cynicism, despair, hope, irritation, appreciation. It's all about questions, and more questions. Why don't journalists or academics ever study how nice it is to work in factories? They're just a bunch of lefties trying to hoodwink us, aren't they? I got that iPod for my 21st birthday – a special gift from my mum and dad. I'm not responsible for where the money went on that. And they'd be really upset if I told them about those factory workers, or if I sold it and gave the money to charity. I'm a poor student. I'd sooner have the money myself. I haven't got much choice about what I buy, anyway. I helped to build a school in Guatemala in my gap year. Does that make me a good person? How can I make a positive difference? And be sure

it's positive, for anyone, anywhere. You can't see where that money actually goes. If you buy a copy of the Big Issue, at least you know that some of the money goes directly to the seller. And charity begins at home, doesn't it? Is it charity or justice? Buying fair trade socks isn't good for all the people involved, is it? Geographies are uneven, unequal. If you can't act 100% ethically, should you bother at all? Isn't being ethical here but not there a bit inconsistent, hypocritical even? Can there ever be a 100% ethical act? Who says what's ethical anyway? And how could you ever find everything you needed to know to make an ethical decision?

Why does it feel like this is all my fault, my responsibility to sort things out, make a change? What about businesses, the government, the European Union, the World Trade Organisation? Don't they set the rules for trade, and change them? Who's lobbying for more ethical trade rules? Could I support them somehow? What about our school? Our university? Who decides what's bought for us, here? It's so bloody complicated! Everything's connected to everything, everyone to everyone, everywhere to everywhere. There's no escape. How can we live in a world like this? I love my iPod, and I need socks from somewhere. ■

Notes

1. A box next to the barcode on the back of the packet said: 'The Wrigley Company Ltd., Plymouth, Devon, PL6 7PR, England. 10 Pieces. Sugarfree coated chewing gum with Sweeteners. Ingredients: Sweeteners (Maltitol, Sorbitol, Mannitol, Aspartame, Acesulfame K), Gum Base, Thickener Gum Arabic, Flavourings Humectant Glycerine (Non-Animal), Colour (E171), Glazing Agent (E903), Antioxidant (E320). Contains a Source of Phenylalanine, Excessive Consumption May Produce Laxative Effects'.
2. This was most likely to be Wrigley's, as they account for 86% of chewing gum sales in the UK (Anon, 2003). The nature of this gum (white, minty) increases the chances of it belonging to the Wrigley brand as the remaining 14% of market share includes coloured bubblegums.

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