

Title: Cultural geography and enchantment: the affirmative constitution of geographical research

Abstract: Thrift (2008, p. 65) has identified disenchantment as “[o]ne of the most damaging ideas” within social scientific and humanities research. As we have argued elsewhere, “[m]etanarratives of disenchantment and their concomitant preoccupation with destructive power go some way toward accounting for the overwhelmingly ‘critical’ character of geographical theory over the last 40 years” (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013). Through its experimentation with different ways of working and writing, cultural geography plays an important role in challenging extant habits of critical thinking. In this paper we use the concept of ‘enchantment’ to make sense of the deep and powerful affinities exposed in our research experiences and how these might be used to pursue a critical, yet more cheerful way of engaging with the geographies of the world.

Keywords: enchantment; cultural geography; play; enthusiasm; critical thinking

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Main Text

Cultural geography and enchantment: the affirmative constitution of geographical research

Being enchanted

“How do I write about play when it is inherently something that exceeds representation?” Tara pondered on this problem as she walked along a street of childhood familiarity, and found herself dragging her hand along wire fencing, plucking a leaf from a bush to run between her fingers and hopping up and down the curb. These banal features that often go unnoticed in the background of the street appeared to matter – and yet she wasn’t quite sure how to give voice to this or who would want to listen in any case. From this point, she was drawn to non-representational approaches to make sense of this excess.

Whilst writing this paper, we discussed what it would be like to live every day excited by the world, taking pleasure as a child would in a ladybird balancing on a blade of grass or the feel of sand between our toes. What stops us living like this? The blogging community had some suggestions: it’s routine – “we get caught up in the news and media and allow ourselves to be trapped in the fear that that creates. We worry about bills, looking good and status...How did we ever come to this?” (<http://thewellnessdoer.com>). We had to agree. Indeed, why can bloggers write about a sense of wonder and academics (beyond their blogging) remain nervous, even reticent, about discussing it with less artistically and poetically oriented communities? The praise we have received for the vulnerability of our work on enchanted ways of being exemplifies this. The tongue-in-cheek, yet telling comments about ‘proper geography’ from colleagues of different geographical persuasions goes some way to explaining this. How can we embrace and nurture a child-like enthusiasm for the world; how can we encourage others within and beyond our sub-disciplinary audiences to turn up the color and tune in?

This excitement for the world is not restricted to the young. Hilary witnessed it in the retired men she was working with on a project about enthusiasm for counting birds. She was sitting by an estuary. A buzzard had flown overhead and disrupted the sitting birds. Hilary sat quietly with her research participant, together watching the smaller birds rise and fall as they circuted the estuary. She asked him

why he counted wetland birds. He told her, it was the way birds can be on the ground one minute and up in the sky the next. It's an attraction and mystery that stays with him. Hilary draws on emotional geographies to make sense of this passion.

An invitation

What emerges from the accounts above is the central place of materiality in relation to feelings of awe, excitement and wonder. Here our sensibility conjoined with natural and machinic, human and non-human things to inspire new intensities in, of and with the world (Bennett 2001) – the very stuff of cultural geography. In this paper, our affective attachment to the world offers us a means to explore how, as cultural geographers, we might understand these engagements and potentialities, the different forms they might take, and the ways in which we might put them to use. As our opening section suggests, this is part of a broader project within cultural geography to recognize affect and emotion as vital components of geographical research (Thien 2005, Pile 2010). A criticism leveled at these cultural geographies of affect and emotion are that “they only speak to relatively small, self-defining disciplinary audiences” (Wylie 2010, p. 212), yet, as we argue, enchantment provides “an environment in which this type of cultural geography [is] not subject to censorious comments about self-indulgence and pretentiousness, or about purportedly exclusionary levels of conceptual abstraction, and [is] not judged wanting in terms of critical and political purchase” (Wylie 2010, p. 212). Indeed, as we demonstrate later in the paper, enchantment provides an environment in which productive connections may be made between cultural geography and wider spheres of the geographical discipline.

Rather than threatening or defending cultural geography as it is today, we seek here “to discover new opportunities – whatever those opportunities may become” (DeLyser and Rogers 2010, p. 188), specifically “to encourage a less repressed, more cheerful way of engaging with the geographies of the world” (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013, p. 196). We draw on the notion of enchantment, a term used “to express delight, wonder or that which cannot be simply explained” (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013, p. 196), in order to make sense of the deep and powerful affinities exposed in the research experiences used to open this paper. We argue that these are hopeful and productive forces, revealing the ordinary and everyday experience of enchantment, namely “a mood of fullness, plenitude or liveliness” (Bennett

2001, p. 5) and of being caught up in the moment.

The argument that some aspects of cultural geography lack politics and critical application is probably familiar, and we fully expect that some people might argue that our enchanted stance is another addition. Yet, as Wylie (2010, p. 212) attests, this argument “makes less sense when one considers the often highly political and emancipatory aspirations of so much art, writing and performance”. Consider also, how dwelling in the small and seemingly inconsequential often affords respite and strength in abject situations; fleeting moments that can accumulate and sustain hope in times of real difficulty. This potential is recognized as an oft-used literary trope. Take for example, the comfort and strength sought from and shared through the wonder of a cloud, soggy newspaper and lolly wrapper by a young Jewish girl in the confusing, traumatic world of Nazi Germany in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. We might situate this argument within on-going efforts to promote more ‘peaceful’ geographies. This requires an ability to think differently, to imagine a world in which we can be enchanted by the small and seemingly inconsequential – the beauty of bird flight, the smoothness of a leaf - and in which it is permissible to hope (Inwood and Tyner 2011, Loyd 2011). It’s necessary for geographers to provide positive counter-narratives to, and challenge the scalar tendencies of the often cynical grand narratives of critical social theory (Pain 2009). As such, we argue, it is the job of cultural geography to create *and share* something that is “at once critical and creative, scholarly and story-like” (Wylie 2010, p. 212); to feel something and describe it so as to share its power, rather than be consumed with analytical debunking. Our enchanted approach has two important threads to it: (1) sustaining cheerfulness and continuing to relish fieldwork in the face of dystopian realities; and (2) acknowledging the value of engaging with more cheerful topics. The latter involves developing the refined art of being “serious about the frivolous and frivolous about the serious” (Dibbell 1991, np), knowing the credibility of such work is assured by its basis in thorough, critical and committed research (Cook and Woodyer 2012).

We ask you then to imagine with us how we might work with this kind of engagement, specifically “an open, ready-to-be-surprised ‘disposition’” (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013, p. 196). We want you to dream with us about what an enchanted stance might offer us as a means to practice and make relevant cultural geography. In the following sections, we situate the recent move in cultural

geography towards enchantment within a much longer geographical lineage in order to absorb the strength of conviction this affords. We then offer some ways in which enchanted ways of being and working have and might continue to be embraced. We conclude with some suggestions for keeping enchantment alive in and through cultural geography.

Enchantment in cultural geography

Inspired by the affection, passion and vitality we've witnessed during our research on impassioned knowledges (Geoghegan 2009, 2013) and ludic geographies (Woodyer 2008, 2012), our work encompasses, first, the affective, material, emotional, cognitive, sensual and social knowledges and practices that make life worth living, and second, leads us to interests in the critical and ethical potential of enthusiastic and playful ways of being and doing. Shifting away from objective moralistic judgment, we use our experience of and interest in enchantment to open up new possibilities and potentialities for the future through the cultivation of affective attachment.

A focus on enchantment is important now for three key reasons. Here we are speaking from a particular set of aspirations, interests and a disposition circumscribed by our UK location. First, we are responding to a rather depressing feeling in the UK as universities undergo "a new research funding and auditing regime that potentially places a premium on external grant income, on work from which a certain type of economic 'impact' may be derived, and that steers funding towards 'science' per se" (Wylie 2010, p. 213). We imagine this situation resonates with scholars beyond the UK, with research into affective attachments being regarded as a low priority (see Rogers *et al.* (2014) on the Impact Agenda and Human Geography in UK Higher Education). This leads us to our second point. Our interdisciplinary home of geography is frequently identified as being well-placed to deal with global issues, and the scale of issues such as climate change or social injustice have the potential to leave us paralysed. Disenchantment, which has supported the critical nature of geographical theorising for nearly 40 years, is behind some of this paralysis, thriving on a detached, discerning, masterful knowing – put simply a negative way of being. So powerful is disenchantment, Thrift (2008, p. 65) described it as: "[o]ne of the most damaging ideas that has swept through the social science and humanities" (see Woodyer and Geoghegan (2013) for a fuller discussion of the effects of disenchantment on

geographical research). In light of this, we argue, enchantment offers us a means of being energized rather than paralyzed by the prospect of such issues, creating space for the exploration of possibilities and potentialities, and feeling vital and alive to the world. This contributes to our third, and perhaps most important motivation. Cultural geography needs to be taken more seriously by our colleagues. As Wylie (2010, p. 214) has noted, the ‘cultural’ aspect of geography is often used as a supplement or even eschewed as geographers define themselves in terms of the substantive topics they address. This has the effect of obscuring the critical and political purchase of cultural geography approaches. As we will show, enchantment provides a valuable vocabulary for interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration, as exemplified by the adoption of an enchanted approach by geographers engaged in geomorphology and climate science.

We are advocating the adoption and communication of a certain disposition, which radiates out into and through our research, teaching and writing, and the ways we carry ourselves as cultural geographers; rendering our research, teaching and writing more evocative and powerful than they might otherwise be. Over the last decade, Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001, p. 156) has proven a popular work for geographers, with many papers citing her definition of enchantment: “a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence; it is to be under the momentary impression that the natural and the cultural worlds offer gifts and, in so doing, remind us that it is good to be alive”. However, if we are to make the most of what enchantment has to offer geography as a discipline, and cultural geography more specifically, we need to move beyond Bennett and embrace our own modes of enchantment. We can do this by revisiting earlier work by geographers.

A sense of enchantment has long been a defining feature of geographical study, albeit marked by contrasting approaches towards it. We can begin in the late 1700s with the work of Alexander von Humboldt, a key figure of German Romanticism, who believed that wonder was the foundation of science. He was followed later by the geographer J.K. Wright, who regarded perception and imagination as integral to shaping geographical knowledge, and charted his emotional and aesthetic engagement with the landscape through accounts that are representative of both a sense of charm and uncanniness (a feeling described by Hilary’s bird counters) – what we call enchantment.

In the second half of the twentieth century, it is possible to discern significant moods of change

in the UK and North America. Following the discipline's cold brush with the rationalization of spatial science and disenchanting ways of being, humanistic geographers looked to phenomenology to reawaken a sense of wonder with the earth and its people (Tuan 1974, Seamon 1979, Relph 1985). At around the same time in the UK, scholars such as Jackson (1989), Cosgrove (1984) and Duncan (1990) were paving the way for the 'new cultural geography'. Cultural geography was "electrified" during this period (Olwig 2010, p. 176), this shift offering "another way of 'doing' geography rather than modelling, hypothesis-testing or exposing the ills of capitalism. In so doing, enjoyment, indeed the 'soul' – of the subject was kept alive" (Pocock 1994, p. 356). This movement was followed by Magical Marxism dreaming of a better world (Merrifield 2011), through to more contemporary engagements, informed by affirmationist philosophical trajectories and poststructuralist formulations of the subject. This recent work has brought together materiality and affect (Maddern and Adey 2008, Wylie 2009).

Appreciating this historical trajectory "goes some way towards tempering arguments about the radical (and in some cases subversive) nature of work conducted from an affirmative stance, specifically work that tends to be descriptive rather than explanatory" (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013, p. 211). It is important for cultural geographers, regardless of career stage, to acknowledge the importance of our sub-disciplinary lineage to avoid the creation of unproductive intellectual silos. If we ignore our heritage we are guilty of "denying the significance of historical continuities, exaggerating the coherence of different "schools" of thought and encouraging hostile caricature rather than accurate characterization and constructive critique" (Jackson 2000, p. 9). As Philo (2013, p. 185) has recently argued, this heritage is in itself enchanting, highlighting a persistent "distaste at the continuing effects of the discipline's Enlightenment heritage". Indeed, this has been our experience of engaging with it as early career cultural geographers. Despite learning and developing our trade in UK-based departments known for their cultural geography strengths, and proudly labeling ourselves 'cultural geographers', this was a heritage largely unknown to us until recently. While this will not be the case for many readers, it does raise important questions about how we make sense of the sub-discipline we are passionate about, and how, why and when we communicate its strengths and value. So what does an enchanted stance look like in 2014?

Putting an enchanted stance in motion

Appreciating enchantment's central role in geographical endeavors, our attention now turns to how we, as cultural geographers, can harness it more consciously and directly within our research and take the lead in establishing its wider import. In this section we take strength from our longer-term engagement with questions of awe and wonder to set out an aspirational and progressive trajectory for cultural geography – placing enchantment at its heart. As we have argued elsewhere (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013), enchantment enables us to develop ways of working that allow for experimentation with alternate worlds and possibilities. Against the common charge of cultural geography being apolitical, this is an ethical-political way of working based on being open to the ongoing enactment of the world. Our enchanted stance involves opening up geographic enquiry and shifting our understanding as the humanistic and new cultural geographers did, describing rather than explaining wonder away, harnessing the positive energy enchantment affords to encounter alternate ethical-political ways of being and doing in real terms.

In order to achieve these aims, we need to challenge the extant habits of critical thinking. Current tendencies aim to negate the possibility of surprise, such as that experienced in moments of enchantment. Geographers have challenged this mode of thinking around the frames of utopianism and hope (Pinder 2002, Anderson 2006). There is also broader multidisciplinary discontent with this way of working and being (Bennett 2001, Sedgwick 2003; Latour 2004), concerned with the performativity of knowledge – what the pursuit and production of knowledge does - for as Law and Urry (2004, p.404) argue: “To change our understanding is to change the world, in small and sometimes major ways”. In expressing the uncanny alongside the charming, the good alongside the bad, enchantment frees us from the paralysis often experienced in the face of repressive cultural narratives. It challenges us to not simply seek out what we already know but be open to surprise. This is aptly demonstrated by Gibson-Graham's (2008) documentation of ‘marginal’ economic activities and movements, challenging the cultural narrative of the impossibility of social good within a system of capitalist relations and its destructive power.

Our approach (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013) has already been adopted by a range of geographers, and please indulge us for a moment as we share several examples here to highlight the

utility of this open way of thinking and doing. First, in their work on participation in environmental volunteering, UK-based researchers acknowledge how: “Where enthusiasm is supported by enchantment [confidence in altruistic motivations for participation] becomes more persuasive, developing heightened energy for action and interest in engagement” (Harrison et al. 2012, p. 11). Second, in the theory and practice of geomorphology, physical geographers based in Australasia, China and South Africa are embracing enchantment in order to develop “radical or ‘outrageous’ hypotheses”. “Intriguing challenges and opportunities are presented in relating geomorphological interpretations of landscapes to approaches that sit outside conventional scientific delineations [...] These framings can support efforts to engage with local communities and stakeholders” (Brierley *et al.* 2013, p. 16-17). Third, Australian-based geographers committed to exploring the possibilities of grassroots renewable energy initiatives in changing climate have outlined how “[a]gainst the paralysis and sense of defeat that so easily arises when the facts and figures on climate change are spelled out ... an ethos of hope is needed in order to seek out openings and possibilities. This is a form of hope that “opens the crack in the here and now” (Anderson 2006:705), focuses our attention on the “margin of maneuverability” that is present in every situation (Massumi 2002:211-212), and thereby provides the basis for action (Solnit 2004)” (Cameron and Hicks 2013, p. 1). In these examples, the authors have embraced the spirit of enchantment – to “explore rather than judge” (Gibson-Graham 2008, p. 620). This generosity of spirit allows us to encounter other possibilities – environmental volunteering, ‘outrageous’ geomorphological interpretations of landscapes, grassroots renewable energy initiatives - in real terms Through the embodied experience of enchantment and its affirmative, energizing power, new possibilities for life and living may be witnessed, invented and acted upon. We, and the authors above, are not exposing real truth, but inventing other truths.

Enchanted cultural geographers in practice

In this penultimate section, we set out our disposition, what it means to be attentive to the small things, open to surprise and in turn nourished by this. As we have said above, being enchanted means opening up and not closing down geographical endeavor, it involves a positive energy and an attention to the exploration of alternate possibilities. So how do we as cultural geographers do this in practice?

First, we appreciate the small and seemingly irrelevant. By this we mean material things (a hand running along wire fencing, watching birds circuit an estuary), gestures (being open about our research methods, taking delight in the unexpected), and ‘telling small stories’ (Lorimer 2003, p. 200), which in turn challenge histories that have been “dominated by grand, scholarly stories”. Drawing energy from our disciplinary heritage, this appreciation for the material world combined with embodied acts and their attendant affects and emotions is something that we actively seek to strengthen through our work. For us, as Price (2010, p. 208) so eloquently suggests: “The mundane, everyday, small-scale, contingent, and intimate spaces are prioritized over the grand, paradigmatic, and impersonal”. Our ability to feel and harness the power of play and enthusiasm has enabled us to make the marginal visible and highlight its potential within ‘serious scholarship’.

Second, and linked to the above, is our attempt to redefine what is considered to be ‘serious’. Our discussions over the last six years about enchantment and our research interests in enthusiasm and play have revealed to us that we do not take things or ourselves too seriously. This does not mean that we are not engaged in serious scholarship – as we have both argued elsewhere enthusiasm and play are significant ways in which people make sense of their relationship with the material world (Woodyer 2012, Geoghegan 2013) – but we’ve struggled with expressing the contribution our work in these areas makes to geographical knowledge. Developing an appreciation of the historical lineage of enchantment within geography has helped us, giving us conviction. Through enchantment, we experience the world as our research participants do and co-produce knowledges *with* them through the sharing of these experiences (Woodyer 2008). As Cresswell highlights, in many instances, “a cultural approach is insistently and sharply critical. It delineates how ways of thinking and being come into being – ways of thinking and being that also have a role to play in the arrangement of power and its effects” (2010, p. 173).

Third, we use the seemingly trivial to track larger issues. Our research on play and enthusiasm has led us into ‘bigger’ topics and agendas. We agree with Crang (2010, p. 197): “Cultural Geography is particularly vibrant at present, energized by a returning tension, namely how to stitch together a dual concern with the mundane and trivial and with the remarkable and significant”. Hilary has been prompted to consider how enthusiasm works on a larger scale with people who are not already

passionate about an issue. She's been working with scientists in their attempts to enrol the public in research projects, specifically as eyes and ears on the ground to monitor new tree pests and diseases in the UK. This challenges the cultural narrative that scientists are the knowledge-holders and members of the public are just consumers of that knowledge (see <http://hilarygeoghegan.wordpress.com/2013/02/01/opal-open-air-laboratories-tree-health-and-enthusiasm/>). Tara has been prompted to examine the crucial role of toys and play, in the expression and enactment of contemporary geopolitics. She's using an ethnographic approach to share in children's embodied practices of play in order to provide a critical response to less grounded cultural commentaries on war play and the broader cultural narrative about the demoralized character of contemporary childhood (see <http://materialsensibilities.wordpress.com/category/ludic-geopolitics/>).

Fourth, we retain our curiosity and inquisitiveness for the world in order to bring enchantment to all of our engagements. In our research, we do not set ourselves up as the experts with preconceived ideas, but rather 'go with the flow' to learn and share with our participants. For example, playing computer games with children or mending telephone dials with technology enthusiasts, experiencing the sensory and more-than-rational aspects of these practices rather than merely observing. Attending to these little things makes us more sensitive to what's going on. Rather than trying to produce something neat, we patchwork our research, avoiding, for example, triangulating our methods to pin down causality. Our intention is always to open up an issue, to produce something that others want to read, to be accessible to our participants. We adopt a non-reductionist approach that describes and makes visible rather than debunks, maintaining a position that does not deny the 'reality' of experiences for research participants. We make the insignificant, more-than-rational, everyday and the fleeting visible, lending it some legitimacy as we go. Our approach is not about being subversive, nor is it about self-indulgence and pretentiousness. It is about communication and engagement, with collaboration and co-production of knowledge at its heart. These sorts of endeavours are complementary to work focused on the structural and governmental, as Gibson-Graham's (2008) work demonstrates.

Keeping enchantment alive in cultural geography

Now, we would not be so naïve as to suggest that it's always sunny in our enchanted world; researching

enthusiasm and play involves negotiating the realities of everyday worlds. Yet, tuning ourselves to the surprise that our everyday realities can afford provides us with the positive energy needed to continue relishing geographical research in the face of repressive cultural narratives and dystopian realities. It encourages us to be ‘serious about the frivolous and frivolous about the serious’, and to encourage others to do the same, thereby sustaining our enchanted stance both within us and beyond us. Story-telling is an important device here in passionately describing the world and how it might be otherwise, after all stories are “world-making vehicles” (Price 2010, p. 207). We argue that it is through our story-telling as cultural geographers that we enchant and are enchanted in return, that we can open up rather than close down, inspire and harness positive energy and reveal new possibilities. As Price (2010, p. 207) argues: “stories are never merely stories (but they can be ‘just’ stories). Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri notes that, ‘We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, we change our lives.’ Powerful fiction, indeed!”

A story we have returned to on several occasions during our conversations about enchantment has been Professor Lewis’s AAG Presidential Address in 1985. He sought to stir the imagination of a generation of geographers. These words have stuck with us and we want them to stick with you too:

Don’t let anybody chill your enthusiasm for the world. You will meet many people, of course, who will tell you in all sorts of ways – through words or body-language or just a raised eyebrow – that it is not chic to be enthusiastic about anything – certainly nothing so banal as an academic subject like geography. It is much more fashionable among such folk to be a bit superior, a bit cynical, a bit bored by it all. ... Young geographers, those people are poison. Those cynics in their self-inflicted boredom have insulated themselves against the world, and they want you to insulate yourself too and come along for company. The cynics will never make any mistakes, of course, because they will never commit themselves to anything. The cynics seldom look silly, because they seldom say anything that can be taken seriously. Nobody will ever laugh at them, because they will never risk doing anything that might turn out to be foolishly wrong. That way, of course, there is no risk at all: just the dead certainty of slow intellectual suicide. (Lewis 1985, p. 475)

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