

What do Northerners' experiences in London reveal about how the North-South divide shapes regional identity and socio-cultural perceptions in the UK?

REGIONAL IDENTITY

Northern identity is both rejected and romanticised in UK media, art, and culture, revealing systemic class and regional inequalities. This is maintained through hyperreal portrayals in media, barriers in creative industries, and lived experiences of cultural exclusion.

My essay explores how Northerners' experiences in London show how the North/South divide has shaped regional identity and socio-cultural perceptions in the UK. I will discuss how decades of British history have had ripple effects on today's climate, including public health levels, the education system, and professional industries. I will explore how we identify ourselves based on our regional background, upbringing and current situations. I will investigate the contradiction of rejection and romanticisation of the North, through media representations, art, and lived experiences to reveal how Northern identity is shaped by the system, long-standing stereotypes based on classism, accent biases, and cultural commodification, highlighting tensions between authenticity and hyperreality. I will discuss my research surrounding these topics as well as analyse them using case studies of artists, including Martin Parr and Corbin Shaw.

Growing up in the North, I've always been aware of the stereotypes associated with different regions of England. Since moving to London two years ago for university, I've had to confront and reassess the assumptions I was raised with about Southerners, whilst also facing the stereotypes placed on me as a Northerner. This has highlighted how closely regional identity intertwines with perceptions of class, often complicating the North/South divide and social class itself.

I can explain these stereotypes through a "cats and dogs" analogy, as follows: Northerners (the dogs) are seen as friendly, down-to-earth, and approachable, valuing loyalty and close-knit communities. They tend to engage openly with strangers and rely on each other. Southerners (the cats) are perceived as more independent, reserved, and selective with their social circles. However, this analogy only scratches the surface of a deeper cultural divide that encompasses assumptions about class and social status.

Recently, I was speaking to a tutor about my project, he was helping me connect with Northern creatives for interviews. During the conversation, he mentioned an artist's name that I didn't recognise. I felt embarrassed and worried he'd think I was ignorant and "uncultured". A peer overheard and jumped in with, *"Surely you should know who that is - he's famous!"*

The comment stung and made me feel even more self-conscious. I snapped back, *"Not all of us have artist parents like you."* That moment crystallised something for me: I didn't have the same exposure to art and culture as many of my peers. My mum and stepdad were prison officers – not architects, designers, or curators. We didn't spend weekends at galleries or attending shows. For many people on my course, that kind of cultural immersion is a given, a part of their upbringing. For me, it's something I've had to seek out and build for myself.

And it's not just about exposure, it's about resources and time. I work part-time because I need to support myself, and I don't have the safety net of financial stability to fall back on. Unlike some of my peers, I don't have the financial means or time to spend volunteering at galleries to build connections. It's frustrating when peers suggest these kinds of unpaid opportunities as if they're universally accessible.

A TRAITOR UP NORTH, AN IMPOSTER DOWN SOUTH

I grew up in a small town near Bolton, Greater Manchester, in a family with a mixed social class background. My gran came from a working-class background whilst my grandpa came from a middle-class background. Because my gran didn't have access to a good education, she encouraged my mum and her siblings to do well in school and work hard. My dad and stepdad both grew up on council estates in the 1970s and '80s. My mum and stepdad, both prison officers, and my dad, who worked in a company making furniture, all worked their way up to give us stability. But our working-class roots never fully left us. It's a blend of experiences shaped by where we're from and the people around us. This dual perspective informs my understanding of social class.

Class experiences are fluid and nuanced, influenced by personal histories, family backgrounds, and geographical context.

After a few months in London, I started to experience what I call the “Northern/Southern paradox.” Back home, people thought I was “getting too posh,” but down here, I’m not posh enough. It’s like living in a limbo where I don’t fully belong in either place - a traitor up North, an imposter down South.

Stuart Hall’s autobiography ‘Familiar Stranger’ discusses his experience as a Jamaican immigrant moving to London. Whilst Stuart Hall’s writing is about his experience immigrating to London from Jamaica, a much bigger move than my own, some thoughts he revealed resonated with me. He shares the feeling of not being able to fully identify with any one place or culture. Hall describes a process of “de-identification,” (Stuart Hall, 2020) a feeling of losing touch with his roots and being reshaped by his new environment — a process of merging identities to create a new self. Similarly, I’ve felt torn between my Northern roots and the need to adapt to Southern norms. Hall’s statement, “much of my life can be understood as unlearning the norms in which I had been born and brought up,” (Stuart Hall, 2020) captures my own experience of softening my Northernness to fit in.

This sense of displacement speaks not only to the differences between Northern and Southern identity but also to how social class shapes these stereotypes. There is a common perception that Northern accents indicate a working-class background because of cultural traits associated with the region. My accent is sometimes mistaken for a lack of education or sophistication, leading people to correct my pronunciation or question my intelligence. Even for Northerners who come from middle or upper-class backgrounds, this perception tends to stick, demonstrating the powerful influence of regional stereotypes and social class assumptions. It’s impacted me personally, especially in my writing — I’ve found myself second-guessing every word to make sure I’m being understood.

Some members of my family use regional linguistic variations, and their phrases have rubbed off on me. For example, my dad and stepdad, who are from Atherton, often say things like “I’ll borrow it you” instead of “I’ll lend it to you,” or “send it you” rather than “send it to you.” Since moving, I’ve trained myself to avoid these phrases so that I blend in and don’t get corrected (which I have been).

OUT OF PLACE

The relation of regional identity and social class creates a complex cultural division where Northerners can feel out of place in the South, not just because of their accents or attitudes, but because of the deeply rooted social codes that vary across regions. Although London is known for embracing global diversity, it still struggles to fully integrate different British identities. This is apparent when it comes to acknowledging and valuing Northern culture. Bridging these divides means recognising that the North-South differences are not just about geography or cultural quirks, but about deeper issues of class and belonging.

At first, I assumed most Londoners were middle or upper-class based on their speech, lifestyle, and social circles. But over time, I’ve realised the city’s diversity also includes many people from working-class communities who experience similar biases to those from up North. For instance, those with strong East London accents often face similar stereotypes, being perceived as less educated or taken less seriously simply because of how they talk.

The North of England, with its industrial heritage, has a strong sense of pride. Towns and cities in the North were historically centres of industry, where tight-knit communities developed around coal mines, steelworks, and textile mills. This shared history of working-class struggle and resilience has developed a deep sense of local identity and pride, with people embracing their roots as a badge of honour. There is a cultural narrative in the North that values being down-to-earth, straightforward, and community oriented. We have lots of traditions up North; Yorkshire puddings, Lancashire hot pot, Eccles cakes, parkin, scarecrow festivals...I could go on for hours. But the point is, a lot of “British culture” comes from the North of England.

One moment that still sticks with me was when I made a traditional Lancashire recipe, “black peas” that my dad used to make every year to celebrate Bonfire Night. I wanted to share a bit of Northern culture with my friends. It took me hours to prepare, and most of my friends were excited to try it. But one friend raised the

cup to his face, took one look, and by the time I'd turned back, I heard the cup hit the table. Later, I saw him scraping it into the bin. At the time, I brushed it off, telling myself that maybe it wasn't to everyone's taste. But the more I thought about it, the more it hurt. Then I started thinking: if my friend from China had made a dish from home, or if my Caribbean friend had cooked something their grandparents used to make, how would that have been received? I'm certain people would have shown more respect, knowing the racial and cultural implications of turning their noses up at food from non-Western cultures. But when it comes to regional cultures within the UK, like the North, there's no such reflection. It feels like these cultural dismissals aren't even acknowledged.

NORTH'S CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This got me thinking: these issues dividing the North and South go far beyond accent bias and stereotypes. They are rooted in deeper problems of respect and understanding – or rather, the lack of it. The marginalisation of Northern identity isn't just about preconceptions; it reflects a broader unawareness and dismissal of the North's cultural and social contributions.

The cultural contributions of Northern England are often overshadowed, sidelining the North despite its vital role in shaping Britain's history and culture. Drawing on research and sociological theories, this section examines how Northern achievements are dismissed, romanticised, or exploited. It also explores the impact of the North/South divide, regional stereotypes, and class bias, highlighting how inequalities in education and industry continue to marginalise the North and influence perceptions of its identity.

Many aspects of British culture are romanticised in a national context without fully crediting Northern towns and cities as the epicentre of these changes – this goes for the Industrial Revolution, historical movements such as suffragettes, foods and other traditions. The focus on London maintains the idea that the rest of the country, particularly the North, is peripheral. This centralisation isn't unique to the UK; capitals often overshadow other regions. However, in England, this imbalance feels particularly evident because of the North's economic, cultural, and historical contributions that rarely receive equal weight.

Brian Groom's book, "Northerners: A History, from the Ice Age to the Present Day", dives into the North's cultural heritage, celebrating writers like the Brontës and Elizabeth Gaskell, activists such as Emmeline Pankhurst, and musical icons from The Beatles to Britpop. The book examines the evolving North/South divide and concludes by contemplating the current meaning of 'Northernness' and the North's potential role in shaping Britain's future (Groom, 2022).

In 2022, in an interview with Reaction, Groom talks about how even though most of England's history comes from the North, there aren't many books about its history published. He talks about the controversial question of where the 'North' is and what makes a 'Northerner'. Groom says a 'Northerner' is someone who thinks of themselves as such – it's a cultural question as it's not a defined government area. People have drawn boundaries, but they are always changing – historians call it a "Jurassic divide". They talk about the North being seen as a wasteland, forgotten and overlooked until the Industrial Revolution and how Northern stereotypes started to appear in books like Dickens, describing Northerners as "exotic figures". (Reaction, 2022)

"OTHER COUNTRIES HAVE POOR BITS. BRITAIN HAS A POOR HALF."

'Other countries have poor bits. Britain has a poor half.' (The Economist, 2020). The history of the North/South divide stretches way back, and we still don't quite know where it began, but we do know some of it stems from the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath. This divide is closely intertwined with the British social class system, reflecting disparities in wealth, opportunity, and political power.

The Industrial Revolution began in the North of Britain in the mid-1700s. The South's proximity to London brought in a lot of wealth, whereas towns and communities in the North grew around mines, which were central to the region's wealth and identity.

In the 1970's the North came to be viewed as a burden, as Northern industries (like mining) were increasingly seen as "lame ducks industries" — a term used to describe struggling sectors holding back Britain's economic progress. The government stopped supporting the mining industry, leading to the Miner's Strike in 1984. During this time, the growing rift between the Southern middle class and the Northern working class widened. Thatcher closed the mines, dismantling communities, history and soul built around the mining — it also caused lasting unemployment and poverty in former mining areas. (The Northern Echo, 2013)

The ripple effects of the North/South divide are still evident today. Evidence shows that Northern poverty rates remain higher than those in the rest of England and health outcomes and productivity levels are lower in the North (Health Profile of England, 2006). Lower income contributes to limited access to nutritious food, often resulting in poor diets. These dietary patterns influence the traditional foods from Northern culture. Many of these meals, while valued as cultural staples, are not typically considered healthy. For example, the "Wigan kebab," a pie served on a bread roll (known locally as a balm), demonstrates this intersection of tradition and struggle.

RIPPLE EFFECTS

Educational disparities persist as well. Southerners are more likely to attend university, which improves job prospects and social mobility, while Northern graduates often migrate South in search of opportunities, further draining the region. Olivia Blake, the Labour MP for Sheffield Hallam said, 'There are deeply ingrained structural issues...we really don't get enough money for education. We get less per head than a lot of the other major cities and it's hundreds of pounds disparity. That really comes out in our GCSE results.' (Geographical Magazine, 2021) This could partly explain why Northerners might feel out of place in London. Moving South can feel like they're betraying their roots, yet limited local opportunities leave them no choice.

Promises to "level up" the North have often fallen short, politicians have frequently made grand statements about addressing the divide, but these promises have rarely translated into meaningful change. "It's clear that central government simply hasn't put its money where its mouth is when it comes to rebalancing the economy. Levelling up will be consigned to the list of hollow, unmet promises made to people in regions like the north for a long time now." (Jonathan Webb, 2022) Despite this, Northern culture is often exploited as a symbol of "Britishness" to attract tourism, while little is done to invest in the region or address systemic inequalities.

Just as Northern culture is commodified while its challenges are ignored, the concept of social class reflects similar complex and often contradictory external perceptions.

Defining what labels someone as a certain social class is extremely complicated as it depends on many factors (including income, education, job, etc.) but also personal perceptions. For instance, a person might identify as a certain social class, depending on their values and environment such as beliefs, upbringing, political views and the communities they feel a part of. While others might downplay their wealth due to feelings of discomfort or shame.

This aligns with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), which explains how nations or groups construct a shared identity, even among people who have never met (Anderson, 1983). Similarly, Northernness can be understood as an "imagined community" where people share ideas and values associated with the North, even without knowing each other. The North is often closely linked to working-class roots, and people from the region may feel a strong connection to this identity. Family histories and the ripple effects of systemic inequality may shape their values, reinforcing a sense of community and influencing their social attitudes.

SOCIAL CLASS

The BSA 39 report discusses social class and regional influence on attitudes, looking at the values of people in England and the cultural or social influences specific to a region. For instance, a region with more low-income residents will likely show more left-wing attitudes and people living in economically deprived areas may develop left-wing views regardless of their income. This gives us the potential influences on contextual effects,

such as interaction with lower-income individuals influencing the attitudes of others. It is important to treat social class as something always changing, looking at how different levels of economic comfort, cultural awareness, and social mobility impact one's experience.

Misconceptions about the lower class often lead to misunderstandings. People on benefits are frequently labelled as lazy or unmotivated, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. These preconceptions extend to those with Northern accents, who are often assumed to be from a lower class solely based on how they sound. This creates a double layer of stereotyping: assumptions about class, intensified by regional bias, neither of which reflect reality.

This layered stereotyping feeds into the perception of certain communities as different, unusual, or even lesser than others. It highlights the deeper issue of how societies construct "the Other" – those who are seen as separate or distinct from "us."

THE OTHER

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) explains that when we define and label others as different or "the Other," we also shape our own identity in contrast to them. This process relies on binary thinking, which divides the world into opposing categories, such as "us" versus "them."

The concept of 'the Other' is useful in understanding how the North is often marginalised and seen as something strange and different compared to the South. "Self–other describes the ways in which individuals and collectivities define themselves in relation to others [...] that involves the misrepresentation of individuals, groups, and whole cultures." (Sibley, 2009).

This reinforces stereotypes and creates barriers between "us" and "them." For instance, the South's portrayal of Northern grit and resilience often isolates Northerners as different or lesser. These stereotypes have been ingrained over centuries, shaping perceptions of Northern identity.

Karl Spracklen is an author and professor of Sociology of Leisure and Culture. His research, "Theorising Northernness and Northern Culture" (2016) suggests that Northern identity has been shaped by stereotypes and media representations that often cast it as the "Other" to the South. Spracklen suggests that this divide, perceived largely through Southern perspectives, presents the North as gritty, resilient, and alien, reinforcing it as a cultural and class-based counterpart to the more "civilised" South. Spracklen focuses on popular culture to demonstrate how representations of the North are aligned with working-class culture for middle-class sensibilities. (Spracklen, 2016).

Spracklen's discussion of *cultural hegemony* (Gramsci, 1971), which refers to the dominance of one group over another, suggests that powerful groups (such as Southern elites) often define and stereotype Northern identity, locking it into a limited, fixed set of traits – an 'essentialised identity' which "becomes an unchanging and unchangeable part of who they are as a person" (Haslam and Abou-Abdallah, 2015).

Spracklen suggests Northerners might "perform" this identity – the idea that they act in ways that align with societal expectations or stereotypes to fit a particular narrative or context. This performance can be conscious or unconscious, often shaped by external pressures or internalised ideas of identity. Stuart Hall's experience of "dis-identification" connects to this notion, where individuals reshape their behaviour or speech to navigate different cultural spaces.

Spracklen argues that the North is often depicted through simplified, media-driven stereotypes: gritty industrial towns, working-class communities, and cold weather. This aligns with Jean Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality" – this doesn't mean creating something entirely fictional, it often starts with aspects of real life which are simplified or exaggerated, creating an image that feels "more real" than reality itself (Baudrillard, 1981). The problem lies in how these representations are received, audiences often interpret them as the full truth, even though they only present a surface-level version of reality. This disconnect can lead to a misunderstanding, where people engage more with the exaggerated portrayal than with the complex reality it stems from, so instead of engaging with the real world on an emotional level, they interact with these heightened portrayals. (Baudrillard, 1981).

In this context, the media's portrayal of the North creates a "hyperreal" version of it for Southern audiences. This is evident in media portrayals, such as the book, *Wuthering Heights* (1847), (Spracklen, 2016). This is complicated because Northerners do not intend to write stereotypes – they write about their own experiences and imagery of the North. Spracklen states these depictions are inaccurate, yet if they are documenting their own experiences, how can they not be accurate? This could suggest they are "performing" their northern identity. Writers like Emily Brontë were often writing from authentic and personal experiences. Still, the reception of their work was shaped by Southern readers and critics who filtered these portrayals through their own expectations and biases. So, while Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* genuinely reflects her experience of the Northern landscape and wasn't necessarily designed to cater to Southern stereotypes, it was still received and popularised through that lens. Southern readers from her time (and after) were inclined to see the rugged Northern landscape and people as exotic, a view that played into established ideas of the North as the "wilderness", distinct from the "civilised" South.

There is a dual representation of Northern culture – either hard-working and resilient or as vulgar and uncouth. Spracklen highlights this in his observation that "new men who founded companies and made their millions from wool or cotton were parodied by southern and landed elites for their ill manners, their oil stained fingers and their lack of standing. They became figures of fun in literature, strange animals with strange accents" (Spracklen, 2016). During this time, the elites either ignored or romanticised the North. This fascination and rejection of Northern identity and working-class culture persists today and can be seen through various interactions with the North ranging from government decisions to the way some creatives appropriate Northern working-class culture, which I'll circle back to in my case study.

My experience with the Lancashire black peas highlights how Northern traditions can be dismissed without much thought. At the same time, debates around cultural ownership reveal how Northern contributions are often appropriated without acknowledgement. Many foods that originated in the North have been rebranded as broadly "British," causing disagreements with Southerners who refuse to recognise their Northern roots. This illustrates how the North is both marginalised and appropriated, a culture undervalued in one moment and claimed in another. This is one example of how some people appreciate a romanticised version of Northern culture, one that highlights friendly accents, hearty traditions, or quaint imagery, while also dismissing or ridiculing its authentic, lived experiences. For some, black peas might seem "gross", leading to embarrassment for those who grew up with it.

After various interviews with Northerners who now work and live in London, I have had responses that validate these theories about accent bias and cultural dismissal but also touch on how leaning into their Northernness came as an advantage. However, I noticed this "leaning" into Northernness only really came from the male interviewees. Spracklen's research offers insight into this disparity, noting that Northernness has been strongly linked with "hegemonic" masculinity, a construct which impacts the ways in which women are represented and visible within popular culture.

Katie Milestone's article examines the emergence of Manchester's creative industries from the 1980s onwards, which have been associated with music and club culture that prioritise 'laddishness' and masculine interests. Drawing from interviews with representatives of the creative industry, Milestone's research points to how the creative sector has been mythologised as a masculine realm where the ideal worker is characterised as being young, male, obsessive, heroic in their commitment to working long hours outside of the home and interested in extreme sports and clubbing. These constructs of the 'ideal' worker have created a clear gendered division of labour which has restricted women's place in the creative industries. (Spracklen, 2016)

ACCENT BIAS

"Public attitudes to different accents have remained largely unchanged over time, with the standard Received Pronunciation accent, French-accented English, and 'national' standard varieties (Scottish, American, Southern Irish) all ranked highly, while accents associated with industrial cities of England, like Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham (commonly stereotyped as 'working class accents') and ethnic minority accents (Afro-Caribbean, Indian) are the lowest ranked." (Levon, Sharma and Ilbury, 2022). These biases can be useful when exploring how people view their own accents versus others. This could provide insights into both internalised and external stereotypes linked to

class and region. These prejudices can lead to a lack of confidence in one's ability and knowledge. These biases not only reinforce inequalities but shape individuals' sense of belonging, further reinforcing regional divides.

This bias is particularly evident in education. "For both university applicants and university students, those originally from the North of England were the most likely to be concerned their accent could affect their ability to succeed in the future (29% of university applicants and 41% at university from the North, vs 10% and 19% respectively for those in the South, excluding London)." (Levon, Sharma and Ilbury, 2022). This evidences how accent bias ties into regionalism, especially the impression that Northern accents are less professional, highlighting broader issues within the education system. It also proves that accent bias plays a part of the "essentialist identity" placed on Northerners.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1977) is a useful framework for understanding how class privilege overlaps with regional identity, as seen in the creative industry. A study finds, "Young people from working-class backgrounds are being "blocked" from entering the creative industries, which remain "elitist" and inaccessible, according to research" (Khomami, 2024). A key barrier is a reliance on unpaid internships, making entry even more difficult for those from lower-income backgrounds. This inequality has been particularly evident to me during university. While some peers come from private schools or well-funded educational backgrounds, others lacked the same level of cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to the resources that influence an individual's social mobility, such as education, language, and cultural knowledge. Bourdieu breaks this down into three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1977). "Embodied" refers to the qualities we carry, such as accents and mannerisms – these are often shaped by one's upbringing and environment. "Objectified" includes physical and cultural resources such as books and art. Private schools or well-funded educational environments often provide access to these, which in turn shape confidence and cultural knowledge. Those who lack these resources may find themselves excluded from elite networks that dominate industries like the arts and media. Finally, the impact of "institutionalised" cultural capital, such as degrees or qualifications, can be seen in the studies discussed earlier on lower education results in the North due to underfunding and fewer opportunities, leaving students from these areas at a disadvantage in accessing prestigious universities.

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

In group discussions, I have noticed how jargon or overly academic language from better-educated peers intimidates and alienates others. This causes feelings of imposter syndrome – fearing we are not good enough, educated enough, or culturally equipped enough to thrive in Southern environments. This leads to Northerners either rejecting their identity or "performing" it (Spracklen, 2016) to navigate these issues to secure opportunities.

On the flip side, when individuals from outside the North engage with Northern spaces, their perception could be influenced by their own assumptions or biases. This shapes how the North is represented and understood, often highlighting the importance of perspective in defining a community.

MARTIN PARR: THE LAST RESORT

Martin Parr's work is a good example of this. His photography of the North raises questions about how outsiders, even with good intentions, may portray the region. These portrayals can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, presenting the North as something "Other".

Martin Parr's photographic work offers a vivid, often satirical, lens on British society, capturing the humour, quirks, and contradictions of everyday life. The New Brighton series called *The Last Resort* (1983-85) was the turning point in his career. His use of high contrast, saturated colours, and sharp detail creates an intense, overwhelming visual style that draws the viewer into a raw and vivid portrayal of his subjects. This stylistic approach draws the viewer into his images and creates an almost "hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1981) representation of his subjects. Initially, I assumed Parr shared the same background as the people in his images – "performing" (Spracklen, 2016) his northernness – it felt brave and outrageous. However, when I realised he

was not from that background, my perception of his work shifted. It feels like he is framing the North as different, pointing a finger and mocking this community by portraying them as the “Other” (Said, 1978).

Critics have pointed out how his depictions of working-class and lower-income communities can feel exploitative (The Guardian, 2024). As someone from a higher socioeconomic class, his portrayal of these groups raises questions about power dynamics in documentary photography. Is he authentically representing these lives, or is he fetishising and commodifying their struggles for the sake of art?

TYPICAL BRITISH

For example, the “typically British” scenes he captures often draw from traditions and subcultures rooted in struggle, such as certain foods, working-class fashion and imagery of social interactions that highlight specific lifestyles. The creative industries frequently appropriate these elements, branding them as quaint or culturally iconic, often erasing the struggles that gave rise to them. This brings up broader sociological and ethical questions: Who gets to tell these stories? What responsibility does an artist have to the communities they document? At what point does representation become exploitation?

The Martin Parr’s Foundation and its efforts to archive and promote documentary photography also adds another layer to this discussion. The foundation supports emerging, established and overlooked photographers who make work focused on Britain and Ireland. The foundation is “committed to making the Martin Parr Foundation a place for everyone and to reflect the diversity of British and Irish culture.” (The Martin Parr Foundation, 2014) By helping overlooked creatives from marginalised communities, the foundation’s efforts ultimately seem to serve the greater good — despite feeling somewhat at odds with Parr’s own images.

His work serves as a reminder of the ethical considerations in representing others’ lives and cultures. How can I ensure my own work avoids exploitation or fetishisation? How can I document with respect and authenticity? These questions are crucial not only for my essay but also for shaping my practice as a designer and visual storyteller.

BACKLASH

Parr responded to critiques after the backlash against *The Last Resort* in the 1980s. “People thought it was exploitation, you know — middle-class guy photographing a working-class community, that sort of stuff. The thing is, it was shown first in Liverpool and no one batted an eyelid, because everyone knows what New Brighton’s like. But when it was shown at the Serpentine in London, all hell [broke loose] — because middle-class people there don’t know what the north of England’s like. They haven’t seen the shabby conditions and degraded scenarios that people are sometimes living around.”

While this perspective is valid, it still raises questions about his approach. Parr may be documenting reality, but his position as an outsider means he might lack the understanding or empathy that comes from truly engaging with these communities or being from them. His work can feel detached, as though he’s observing people as subjects. This dynamic brings to my mind the image of someone photographing animals in a zoo — capturing their essence but from a safe, voyeuristic vantage point. He points out these “shabby conditions and degraded scenarios”, showing he is aware of the struggles he is capturing. However, his use of bright, saturated colours creates a satirical tone that can feel insensitive. While Parr insists he is documenting reality honestly, his focus on unflattering and “degraded” aspects of life makes it clear he’s intentional about what he includes in his frames. His fascination with these areas and people can sometimes feel like fetishisation, raising questions about whether his primary goal is to draw audiences or genuinely connect with his subjects. If his intention is to raise awareness, why not adopt a more empathetic or sensitive approach?

It’s interesting that audiences in Liverpool accepted *The Last Resort*, while middle-class Londoners reacted with discomfort. This difference in response may stem from guilt, shame, or simply a lack of understanding of Northern life. Perhaps people from Liverpool brush off the portrayal because they see it as accurate or because they have bigger struggles to focus on. When I asked around about Martin Parr, many of my family

and friends assumed he was a Northerner. They didn't take issue with his work until I told them he was actually a white, middle-class Southern man – their opinions quickly shifted.

This got me thinking about what my family would make of the *Last Resort* photos. The images reminded us of my nan, who would spend weekends sunbathing in Blackpool. My sister said the pictures felt familiar and nostalgic and reminded her of our caravan holidays when we were younger. My mum disliked the pictures. She found them disgraceful and belittling, pointing out how the people being captured are clearly underprivileged, "enjoying" the sun in dirty locations – likely the best they could afford, chippy dinner and catching the best bit of sun possible.

This all made me think that if I saw my own family in Parr's work, I would feel like they were being misrepresented or reduced to a performance of working-class Northern life. This feeling connects to the question of whether Parr's work truly represents the communities or if it's just a surface-level observation that misses the depth of their lived experiences.

Parr's decision to exhibit *The Last Resort* in London further complicates matters. Exhibiting the images in the region where they were taken might feel more authentic, but showing them in London raises questions about their purpose. Is the goal to evoke emotions, provoke thought, or simply profit from them?

While I appreciate the *artistic* value of Parr's work, its comedic style, vividness, and commentary on British society, the "intimacy" of his images, whether it's the focus on daily life, quirky behaviours, or mundane objects, can also create a connection with the viewer, even if you're not part of the community depicted. But I also feel uncomfortable with the idea of an outsider photographing working-class or Northern communities, in a way that feels voyeuristic or reductive.

Ethics around representation are nuanced and complex, and I understand there will always be contradictions. It's difficult to perfect these issues, as art and photography are subjective; what matters is the artist's intention, how the work is received, and whether it feels intimate or intrusive.

"IT'S BASS UP NORTH" - CORBIN SHAW

While some present a simplified image of Northernness for mass consumption, artists like Corbin Shaw push back by reclaiming and reinterpreting what it means to be from the North. Through his work, Shaw critiques the commodification of Northern culture and highlights the barriers that people from working-class, regional backgrounds face in creative industries. Shaw's work resonates with me personally as a student navigating being a Northerner in London and someone pursuing a creative career within an industry that has historically excluded those from my background.

Corbin Shaw (24 years old) is an artist based in East London, originally from Sheffield. His work explores themes of masculinity, working-class, personal and national identity. He uses textiles, flags, and slogans to explore these themes of British northern culture. He pays respect to the people and places that have shaped his northern identity e.g. the retail park, the pub, and boxing gyms. His work is influenced by his upbringing in South Yorkshire which includes reimagined St George's flags, digital artwork, and tactile physical work on a sewing machine. I was drawn to Shaw's work as this is a medium that holds a special place in my own practice; my gran taught me how to use a sewing machine growing up, and to this day, she still encourages me to make tactile artwork.

THE ENGLISH DREAM

His piece "The English Dream" (2020) explores the pressures of growing up in rural England, including the idea that "get a job, get a car, get married, get a mortgage" is the path to happiness. It critiques the pressure on working-class individuals to pursue "serious" and stable careers. This resonates with my own upbringing. My gran didn't get the same opportunities or education so really encouraged me to do well in school and take advantage of the creative subjects open to me. My dad still expresses concerns about the instability of creative careers (he tried to convince me to join the army a few weeks back – had to remind him I'm almost at the end

of my graphic design degree!). The pressure from working-class parents to prioritise stable careers over creative ones reflects the anxieties around economic stability.

Shaw's "Laws to Live by, Laws to Eat Off" (2022) depicts northernness in a nostalgic sense, clearly aimed towards people who relate to Corbin and his background. He expressed his discomfort "that the majority of the people that loved my work wouldn't afford it" (Shaw, 2022). This highlights a systemic issue: the art world often excludes working-class voices and audiences - proving the art world is inaccessible. Despite his attempts to create accessible art, the structure of the art world remains elitist, favouring those with financial and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

This got me thinking...if Shaw's intended audience likely can't afford his work, it raises the question: who is buying it, and why? Is the art world consuming Shaw's work for its "exotic" representation of Northern identity, rather than appreciating it for its authentic cultural expression? If the art world is excluding working-class voices, does Shaw's success come from the consumption of his work by middle or upper-class buyers? This ties back to *essentialism* in regional identities, when art is consumed by an elite audience that doesn't share the artist's background, there's a risk that it becomes a "performance" of Northern identity rather than an authentic representation. Shaw's frustration with the elitism of the art world demonstrates the contradictions that arise when Northern culture is both exploited and rejected by the very structures that claim to support it.

Shaw's use of symbols, such as the St George's flag, can be seen as a way of engaging with the "hyperreal" image (Baudrillard, 1981) of Northernness. Like other Northern artists, Shaw takes these symbols that are often simplified in mainstream culture and reimagines them through a more personal, authentic lens.

"A WALKING CONTRADICTION"

Metal Magazine refers to Corbin Shaw as "a walking contradiction". They talk about how his work "embodies the culture of the lager-drinking, football-watching emotionally repressed lad. But that's the very archetype that it's trying to deconstruct. He's proud of his working-class Yorkshire roots, which is why he's ran off to pompous bourgeois North London. This may sound like a scathing attack, but it's actually what makes his work so beautiful. There are contradictions within all of us and acknowledging them enables us to break down the performative ideas of identity which have been so deeply entrenched in our society." (Byworth-Morgan, 2023). Shaw being a "walking contradiction" and his journey from Sheffield to London speak to the broader tension that many creatives from working-class or regional backgrounds face – the pull between staying true to one's roots and the need to succeed in an elitist industry. His success in the London art scene, despite the cultural barriers, can be seen as both an achievement and a compromise, especially if his work is being consumed by audiences who may not fully appreciate or understand the lived experiences it represents. This compromise of identity connects to Stuart Hall's ideas from my literature – the notion that you have to merge them to create a new self, to survive in the new place. Northerners moving to London may experience upward social mobility, which could complicate their relationship to their regional roots. This links back to the North/South paradox. Corbin Shaw as a "walking contradiction" embodies this, and evidences how there isn't much choice really because the South is where the opportunities are at.

Corbin continues to speak about his experience moving to London and going to Central Saint Martins, "I realised how different life was in London, especially in those crits and classrooms. At first, I was quite angry realising the massive difference between life experiences [...] I had a real sense of imposter syndrome." (Shaw, 2023) He talks about how he was self-conscious at first, "I was mute for my first year at CSM. I didn't say a single word to anyone." Shaw's experience with "imposter syndrome" when he first moved to London reinforces my earlier discussion of accent bias, particularly in how people from the North (often perceived through their accents) are marginalised or considered "lesser". The Sutton Trust noted how university students, especially from the North, are more self-conscious about their accents than other groups. Shaw's discomfort in the art world, where his background and accent had been "othered," demonstrates this larger issue of accent bias and the ongoing stigma faced by people from the North in elite spaces. His initial feelings of anger and alienation reflect the same anxieties and prejudices that many Northerners feel when navigating Southern-dominated spaces.

“As a creative, if you can make something accessible and digestible, without it being too pretentious then you’ve done your job. If you can explain your idea to someone from outside of the art world and get them on board with it, then I think you’ve done your job. Often people get wrapped up in this pretentious jargon which they think embellishes ideas, but really it just confuses people.” (Shaw, 2023) It doesn’t feel genuine or emotional, feels artificial, academic, unauthentic.

Shaw’s decision to write in his own accent and accessible language goes against the elitism rooted in the art world. He consciously rejects the use of jargon or “high art” language that might alienate those from his background. Shaw’s work challenges these societal biases and by celebrating his accent and identity, Shaw critiques the marginalisation that arises from both class and regional identity.

SO...

The issues dividing the North and South go far beyond accent bias and stereotypes. They are rooted in deeper problems of respect and cultural understanding. The marginalisation of Northern identity isn’t just about preconceptions; it reflects a broader unawareness and dismissal of the North’s cultural and social contributions.

While the marginalisation of Northern identity often stems from systemic inequalities and cultural biases, it’s important to acknowledge that these dynamics do not exist in isolation. Southern identity, too, is shaped by its own set of stereotypes and assumptions, such as perceptions of privilege or emotional detachment, which can oversimplify the complexities of lived experiences in the South. My research has shown that regional identity is not a binary construct but a fluid and multifaceted negotiation influenced by class, culture, and personal history. Southerners navigating these same spaces may also feel constrained by societal expectations, revealing that the North-South divide impacts both sides in different ways.

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