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Identities

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Introduction: Identity and Geography

The idea of identity tends to take us towards closure. To identify something/someone, or to be so identified, means to delineate and define, to pin down what/who this thing is. It is a word that pulls us towards the assumption that we are able to know what a thing or a person really is; that there is somewhere in the murky eddies of selfhood or the collective being of a group, a truth to what we are that can be named. On the basis of such reified identities, wars are fought, territories claimed and murder carried out – think of the role of nationalism in the Second World War, the role of religious fundamentalism in terrorist acts, or the patriotic sensibilities that justify US imperialism. It is thus unsurprising that the question of identity has been much examined over the last century. Although it is a word that continues to be used as if identities were fixed and self-evident, scholarly thinking and debate is broad ranging. One way of looking at identity is that it is how we become meaningful as human beings: you have an identity as a student, for instance, and such an identity has certain cultural meanings which shift depending on context. The study of identity is the study of *who we are* – as individuals, and as part of families, networks of friends and colleagues, the nation-state, a religious group and a global society.

Identity is a particularly important question in Western philosophy, wherein much consideration has been given to enquiring about the nature of the self, often lending priority to the sense of a ‘true self’ (*be true to yourself*) associated with an identity that we (individual humans) can indeed possess, know and represent. In an essentialist tradition, concerned to locate the seemingly true or underlying ‘essence’ of a thing, identity can be thought of as something fundamental and unchanging. This might be biological: you are born male or female, and in different ways it shapes who you are and how you live your life. It might be to do with race or ethnicity: you were born with white or black skin, born an Australian, or Greek, or Indonesian, or Afghanistani – this determines your first language and can shape the way you are treated by the people around you and the cultural norms with which you grow up.

There is also an anti-essentialist tradition in which identity is conceptualised very differently. Here all forms of identity are changeable and seen to relate to transient and always changing cultural and societal norms. For contemporary cultural theorists and human geographers, identity tends to be understood more on these terms – as something that changes with time, something we construct, something that is closely connected with operations of power in contemporary world whether at the level of global politics or that of the politics of everyday life. Here, scholarship is more likely to think about identity in the plural and imagine how human beings inhabit multiple identities in the course of daily life. The term ‘subject position’ is important here and refers to a discursively constructed ‘position’ that individuals take on, and can (to a degree) move between. For example, an academic may see themselves taking up pre-existing subject positions that they move between as they move from the university (where they are ‘professor’) to home (where one is positioned as wife, partner, flatmate) to the field (where one is positioned as researcher, adopted daughter, consultant) to the pub (where one is positioned as a friend, compatriot, tourist).

The idea of ‘positions’ has also been problematised, however, because it still relies on the presence of some pre-existing and largely stable ‘position’ for the self to occupy. Stuart Hall (Hall, S. and Du Guy, P.1996) argued that, instead of thinking in such reified terms, we should move to speaking of ‘identification’: a sense of who we are that is formed through solidarity or allegiance with another person/group/ideal. Identification focuses on a process that is never complete, shaped by ongoing, rarely settled discursive (talked-through) inscriptions made by both ourselves and others around us, and this formulation takes the view that we are always *becoming*. It resists the notion that there is any essential or underlying identity and rather moves towards more fluid understandings of discursive subject formation. Hall’s characterization of identity as a *becoming* is what we wish to focus upon in this chapter. It is as ‘becoming’ that identity is at its most slippery and most potent. As ‘becoming’ it begins to describe the passionate sense of selfhood that can mobilize political struggles, the small and seeming everyday practices through which we transform ourselves, the way change happens in an endless process that never seems to reach a satisfactory end-point. We are always and everywhere engaged in becoming what we are, and exactly what that thing is can never quite be completely defined. And, as we elaborate in the following text, identifications are always political – inscribed and imagined through relations of power and critical to diverse political transformations.

These notions of identity as becoming, and as plural and political, guide our explorations of geographies of identity in this chapter. Identity claims are necessarily political because they almost always involve conflicted and contested claims about what the world is, and how we fit into it. Delving into identity claims that seem self-evident inevitably reveal complexities. For example, the fact of having a child may make you a mother, but what it means to be a mother, what actions and what being a mother entails are highly contested. These kinds of contestations are the heart of identity politics with which much human geography is concerned. We suggest that much geographical thinking on identity is an overtly political project that emphasizes openness, flux and transformation, rather than closure and fixity. We begin with an overview of theoretical and empirical lineages of identity in human geography and an exposition of its current conceptual framings in the discipline. The rest of the chapter exemplifies these framings through a focus on four spaces/places of identity: birth, home, car and development practice. We draw the chapter to a close with a consideration of who geographers are – what does it mean to be a geographer thinking and acting in the world? In short, what is 'our' identity?

Theorising Identity

Geographers have tended to be most interested in identity in terms of how it interacts with processes of political and social change. A focus on identity provides a way of thinking about and understanding the politics embedded in social and cultural practices. It also provides an insight into the ways in which deliberate efforts for change are achieved, as individual and group senses of identity are harnessed through political movements of various kinds. A series of pivotal intellectual movements have been drawn upon by geographers in this work, including Marxism, feminism and a poststructural focus on language and power. Other less overtly political inspirations have also been important. Psychoanalysis tends to examine identity from less politicised angles, but this too has been influential in contemporary human geographies where it is often harnessed towards political analysis. Finally, the heterogeneous area of new materialities, including Actor Network Theory (ANT) and non-representational theory (NRT), are becoming increasingly influential in geographies of identity and provide a counterpoint to the focus elsewhere on politics. In the next section, we give a flavour of these movements and how they have influenced geographical work on identity.

Marxism, Gramsci and Hegemony

The lineage of Marxist thought in geography has been core to considerations of identity, especially identity politics, notwithstanding that Marxist frameworks deployed in human geography have been predominantly focused on the economy. Indeed, there is a strong tradition within Marxism that focuses on identity, in which subjectivity is located in a social formation of a definite time and place with specific characteristics, and with class identities determined by particular modes of production (see Rutherford 2010). It was the Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci who made one of the most influential contributions to Marxian analyses of identity. Gramsci's concept of hegemony links identity formation with ideology and objective power in order to try to understand how political struggles work (and ultimately to inform the way he hoped socialists would be able to gain power in Italy).[1] Gramsci's work on hegemony recognised the potency of identity as a political tool, a way to achieve change and to motivate citizens to act. At the core of any hegemonic system was something with which people could identify, an ideology, an identity that would bring people together.

Gramsci's work has had an important role in understanding and inspiring social movements, during the 1980s and 1990s, in which demands for change were bound up with the constitution of new identities. In these social movements, group identity became the basis upon which to engage in a political struggle – but it was struggle with a difference:

> What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of 'universal humankind' on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect 'in spite of' one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different. (Kruk 2001: 85)

Where Gramsci had envisaged that shared identity could provide the foundation for creating new state-based hegemony, the emergence of social movements focused on recognition and maintenance of difference has necessitated a rethink. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) took up the challenge with a poststructuralist re-interpretation of hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe's work is in part an anti-essentialist critique of Gramsci's idea of hegemony, and emphasizes the necessary incompleteness of hegemonic formations and the partiality of their processes of subjection. For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is never final, identity never singular nor complete. Political struggles take shape around competing ideologies, and are nourished by the identifications that people form with those ideologies, seeing themselves and their interests represented. But hegemonies, like identities, are never fixed or absolutely dominant. Concomitantly, there are not 'counter-hegemonic' movements as such, but endlessly proliferating hegemonies that all push against each other (in a process of agonism or antagonism) while seeking to draw together dispersed interests around a shared political identity – labelled the empty signifier.

Geographers have challenged the spatiality implicit in Laclau and Mouffe's work on hegemony, including their lack of spatial critique (Massey 1995) or the implicit assumption that hegemonic struggle takes place at the scale of the nation-state (Sparke 2005). Others have taken ideas of hegemony to analyse political change in post-apartheid South Africa (Peet 2002) or the politics of development practice (McKinnon 2007, 2011). The conversation between the work of Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe has informed analysis of contemporary social movements within geography. Gillian Hart's (2013) analysis of populism in contemporary politics seeks a rapprochement between Gramsci's work on language and Laclau's take on how hegemony works by articulating a vision of the world that is broad enough to encompass the interests of diverse interest groups.

Poststructuralism and Language

Much contemporary thinking on identity is responsive to the central role of language in constructing the world, an approach that is increasingly common in feminist work, as we suggested earlier. The work of Ferdinand Saussure, and of philosophers that have engaged with his ideas about semiotics (such as Jacques Derrida, and postcolonial thinkers Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha), has shaped much of the way in which identity has come to be understood as a discursive construction. These thinkers focus upon how our understanding of the world, and the way in which the world is made meaningful for us, is based upon language. Language itself is understood to operate according to a systems of signs in which the words that we have to name things (signifers) possess only an arbitrary relationship to the things that they name (signifieds). Rather than words reflecting some innate character of the things that they name, they acquire meaning only in relation to other words and other things: we know that 'this' is 'this' only because we know that it is not 'that'. The idea that language gives the world its meaning, and that this meaning is established relationally, has had a significant impact on how we think about identity. The implication is that, if language and meaning are indeed relational, then they can shift and change – nothing that we know about the world is anchored to it and instead it becomes possible to unpick the processes through which we give meaning to the world. As a consequence of this unpicking, we begin to see that the labels given to people, the names we take on as identities, are themselves things constructed within a particular social, cultural and political milieu. Identity can no longer be seen as something fixed, the names we give as identities can no longer be seen simply to reflect essential traits, but rather in fact to construct them and to inscribe them. Identity becomes understood as a process – one no longer has an identity but creates it, performs it in a never-ending process of becoming, a process of identification.

For human geography, the significance of this concern with poststructuralism and language principally lies with its infusion through most of the frameworks that we describe here. For example, J.K Gibson-Graham and others' work (2001) on poststructuralism and Marxism has substantially shifted thinking on class in the Marxian frame, while a concern with language underpins feminist geographers' engagements with Judith Butler (see the following) and also an interest in materialities.

Feminism

Feminism has significantly reshaped the ways we understand identity. With the catch-phrase, 'the personal is political', feminist thinking has interrogated the question of how sexed subjects are formed both inside and outside the private sphere of family, with the marking of sexual difference stretching across social, political and economic spaces. Feminist understandings of identity occur through a number of theoretical variants – liberal feminism, socialist feminism, poststructuralist feminism (see Johnson 2009). In human geography, socialist feminist frameworks have underpinned explorations of how workplaces and work practices constitute gendered identities and also the ways in which identifications of workers are strongly connected to familial expectations and practices (see Pratt and Hanson 1995). More common over the past 10 years are poststructural feminist frameworks, strongly influenced by the thinking of Judith Butler.

Butler focuses on the construction of gender identities and the way gender is inscribed on to the body. For Butler, central components to this are performativity and repetition. She argues that identities are sustained as if they were fixed, essential things because we, human beings, continue to 'perform' them (by performing femininity/masculinity, for example, in the choice of what colour our children wear – pink for girls and blue for boys). Butler also argues that as we repeat our performances we alter the identity, sometimes only subtly, sometimes dramatically and with a deliberate challenge (as when a man takes on a female persona and performs that role in a 'super-feminine' way – think of Dame Edna or the divas in *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*). So while we are subjected to relations of power and are unable freely to choose who we are or what those identities mean, for Butler there is still room to manoeuvre, room to challenge and to change.

The concept of performativity permeates feminist geographical analyses of identity. This includes, for example, explorations of the gendered identities performed on the trading floors of stock exchanges (McDowell and Court 1994). The political edges of Butler's theory are explicitly developed in David Bell et al.'s (1994) work on ‘lipstick lesbians’, highlighting the challenging of the status quo through ironic appropriations of stereotypical femininities. Nonetheless, there is not one framework that dominates feminist geographical analyses of identity – poststructuralism and non-representational theories, as we illustrate next, are also prevalent.

Foucault and Power

Power has become a core consideration with the rising popularity of the work of Michel Foucault. To an understanding of identities as being fluid and constructed, the work of Foucault brings an analysis of how relations of power construct identities. Foucault’s accounts of modernity in Western Europe offer a genealogy of contemporary forms of power, and of the institutions and identities that they have brought into being. With Foucault, it becomes possible to see how a given identity – the criminal or the insane, for example – has come into being as it has through shifting modes of power and the emergence of new kinds of governing practices. What it means to be a criminal has changed with new forms of statecraft and the emergence of new techniques for governing the population. For Foucault, this does not mean that there is a ‘big bad state’ out there manipulating identification in order to subjugate the population. It is a much more nuanced and less conspiratorial process than that. What it does mean is that the relations that define identity are inevitably relations of power. Our ability to stand outside those relations of power and choose ‘who we are’ is limited – we are all subjected to these relations.

While Foucauldian approaches to identity in human geography are diverse and have a long history (e.g. Philo 2001; Crampton and Elden 2007), there has been a focus on the notion of governmentality and the ways in which the work of government (spanning both state and non-state actors) is also the work of fostering subjects, of constituting identities. Thus there are numerous geographical inquiries into the shaping of conduct that occurs through governance processes, constituting, as they do, the identities of citizens, neighbourhoods and environmental subjects (see McGuirk and Dowling 2011; Rutherford 2007). This scholarship also produces insights into the spatial regulation of such identities, and remains a significant contemporary thread. In much of this work, the key question around identity making is the push and pull between agency and subjectification, how an individual will interact with the structural forces that shape us and our behaviours in certain ways. Put simply, it is a question of how much we are able to determine our identities and how much is determined for us.

Psychoanalysis

In a psychoanalytic tradition the core questions are very different. The foundations of psychoanalysis emerged with Sigmund Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious (Hall, 1996). In relation to identity, Freud's work highlighted how identities are formed in interactions between the 'inside' and the 'outside', and the role played by the unconscious. Far from the vision of a human being as a cohesive entity that is either manipulated by the imperatives of governmentality, or free to 'decide' what and how to be, 'psychoanalytic approaches theorise persons as conflictual, decentred and 'other' to/than themselves' (Bondi 2005: 12). It is the idea of the unconscious in particular that provides a radical counterpoint to the agency–structure debates[2] and reinserts an opaque essentialism to discussions of identification: essentialist because psychoanalysis claims here to locate a root or core to human identity, and opaque because the unconscious only makes its presence felt through 'drives' and habits, being 'implacable in the face of attempts to 'resignify' its contents' (Callard 2003: 304). Felicity Callard points to how this core idea of the unconscious challenges the way that geographers' engagement with psychoanalytic theory tends to have insisted on using psychoanalysis to 'inform a politics of resistance, of position and of subjectivity' (Pile 1996: 167). For Callard, the politicisation of psychoanalysis misses what is most significant, whereas for many geographers such politicisation is entirely appropriate, if not vital (Nast 2000; Pile 1996; Sibley 2003; Wilton 2003).

Paul Kingsbury (2005, 2008) uses the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* (enjoyment) in his analysis of Jamaican tourism. For Jacques Lacan, identity is formed around an always unattainable ideal image of ourselves. The expectation of achieving that ideal image, and the enjoyment that it will entail, drives us on, but the moment we are there is disappears. For Kingsbury, the tourist experience is predicated upon a set of expectations of what it means to enjoy the tourist experience in Jamaica, but it is an enjoyment that is forever out of reach; and the brochures and fantasies that create expectation are inevitably an unrealistic and impossible ideal that lived experience can never match. What these psychoanalytic geographies of identity have in common is the attention given to the ways in which identities can be pre- or other-than-cognitive, meaning that they are *not* always 'known to the people in question … and hence unavailable as resources' (Philo, personal communication, 2012). Where various interests in identity politics seek to harness identity making as part of a process of remaking the world, psychoanalysis recognizes that not all aspects of selfhood are 'bare' to examination and manipulation.

New Materialisms

Those aspects of selfhood and identity making that are outside conscious articulation are also the purview of new materialist geographies, evident in much work on affect and emotion. NRT and ANT are notable influences in this movement. With Bruno

Latour and the group of contemporary social theorists allied with ANT, the question of what identity is and how it shapes our world (or can be used to shape our world) shifts entirely. For Latour, theorists like Foucault or Laclau or Butler are fundamentally mistaken in their analysis of the social world. They are mistaken because they take as a given that there is such a thing as 'society' through which relations of power move, in which we make meaning about the world through language, and whose resources we mobilize in a hegemonic politics (Latour 2005). For Latour, there is no such thing as 'the social', there are only associations – networks of relations that are formed and reformed constantly. Included in this network, moreover, are not only the human participants. Latour argues that, as active and influential as the humans are, the non-human actors, objects, artefacts, tools, animals and elements enable certain things to be done or seen or felt. ANT methods seek an account of these complex and ever-expanding networks through an acute attentiveness to the relationships that come into being between things, and what those relationships produce. 'Identity' is not a concept for which Latour has much sympathy (Latour 2002), at least not as an essence, but as a becoming, it seems that there is much scope for exploring identity through ANT lenses; but it is now recast as a thing that comes into being in and through the active engagement of a particular set of networks and relationships (Michael 1996). Through ANT methods, it becomes possible to see identities as things that are not performed, assigned or occupied. By focusing on how identities are constituted through particular networks, specific actions and the collected engagements of diverse actors, ANT shows us how such identities are constructed, how they are assembled. Work to trace the constitution of assemblages and consider the role of various actors has hence brought ANT together with geographic interest in politics and place. Gerda Roelvink (2009), for example, reflects on the World Social Forum during which she (and others) were 'learning to be affected' (Latour 2004: 206). For Roelvink, the process involved a reconfiguration of her sense of self, away from a critical and already-knowing researcher to one member of a 'hybrid collective' that was working to 'create new worlds' (see also Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2009). The hybrid collective shifts attention away from closed identities and individual positions to a collective identity, characterized by diversity, and assembled around a shared desire to create change.

Latour has also been used productively within geographical discourse to understand processes of identification with the 'more-than-human' world (see Whatmore 1999). An illustrative example is Russell Hitchings' (2003) elaboration of different gardening identities as illuminated from the perspectives of plants and humans. From their own perspective, gardeners understood themselves as moulding plants and expressing the primacy of human will. In contrast, if, as ANT suggests, the agency of plants is recognized analytically, 'the gardener now pictured him or herself as the contented 'plantsperson' working with a lively and dynamic set of non-human companions' (Hitchings 2003: 107).

Taking seriously the relationships between human and non-human has also brought back an explicit politicisation of identity making. Sarah Wright et al. (2012: especially 51), for example, list 'Bawaka Country' as one of the co-authors in explicit recognition of the role of the more-than-human presence of aboriginal Country in the process of research: 'this is knowledge generated with humans and nonhumans *at*, *through* and *with* Bawaka' (2012, emphasis in original). With this recognition, the identities of the academics are reconfigured at the same time as Bawaka Country is given voice in the academic text. In Australia, where respect for and responsibility to

Country is too often lacking, giving authorial identity to Bawaka is part of a political call, at least to 'think about the ways that we are immersed in and responsible to the peoples/places/Country with whom we research' (Wright et al. 2012: 58).

Concerns with affect, and with the pre-cognitive, reflexive nature of embodied practice is a core focus of NRT, another branch of new materialist thinking and one that is increasingly influential in geographic thought. Focusing on the pre-cognitive aspects of human experience, NRT (like psychoanalysis) takes us away from thinking through the conscious intentionality of identity making, and thus the potential to harness identity for politics. Indeed, this is one of the core critiques levelled at NRT. Rachel Colls (2011), for example, discusses how critics of non-representational geographies are disturbed by the lack of differentiation across human experience, and thus the ways that NRT undermines the importance of race/class/gender/sexuality/disability in shaping opportunity (see also Cresswell 2012). What NRT does do, however, is to provide a vocabulary and an intellectual nudge towards thinking through those aspects of identity that are before- and other-than-representational, for instance, when race or gender identities become embodied and affective in processes that seem to take place outside our will to reshape what and who we are (see, for example, Arun Saldhana's (2007) work on whiteness in Goa's trance scene). Entering these moments into the realm of representation, as every NRT scholar does with her/his writing and speaking, brings them into the realm of the political – a realm where conscious re-shaping can occur, the reconfigurations of selfhood that can create new kinds of affect (an idea that we will explore more in the section on birth).

Spaces of Identity Making

While there is a chronology to our presentation of these pivotal frameworks, it is not the case that successive frameworks supplant and supersede those prior. Rather, processes of identification are myriad and as such require diverse lines of enquiry. Thus, understanding lived human geographies of identity relies upon diverse frameworks, crossing a vast range of contexts and realms of identities. In the rest of this chapter, we present four 'spaces' of identity as a means of illustrating the different theoretical frameworks through which geographers comprehend identities: birth; home; cars; and development. In birth, we explore the potential of new materialisms for providing insights into a pivotal moment of identity making. The coming-into-being of woman as 'mother' and the moment a child enters the world are intensely physical and emotional experiences. At the same time, birth is a moment heavily over determined, often by sets of competing discourses, making the affective and the cognitive inseparable. In 'home' we take a more conventional focus on axes of identity, including Foucauldian governmentality, and trace identities produced in and through the suburban house and neighbourhood. Spaces of mobility are the focus of our third section, where, through an emphasis on the car, we illustrate the relational and material constitution of identities over spaces. Finally, we view identity making in the spaces of development through the lens of post-Marxism and the work of Laclau. Here we return to the explicitly political dimensions of identity making, as the practice of being a certain kind of development professional is articulated closely with certain kinds of ideological positionings.

Birth

The moment of birth is a foundational moment of identity making. When a child is born, its world and the world of its family are involuntarily transformed. In that moment, new identities come into being as a woman becomes a mother, a foetus becomes a child, and is welcomed into the world and placed in the social and cultural order. A girl is ‘girled’ (Butler 1993), a baby named, a new patient entered onto the hospital register. With these actions come conscious acts that begin to identify the child in certain ways. And as parents begin to parent their child, again decision are made, actions taken that bring into being the identity of mother and father in particular ways. Even at that moment of birth, that moment of transition and transformation, mothers, babies, birth attendants and medical staff are enacting particular kinds of identities that differ with each different birth. Some of these actions are conscious and deliberate: for example, the midwife enacting a particular philosophy of birth or the mother consciously creating the environment she hopes will lead to the birth that she wants. Other actions exist beyond the realm of rational conscious thought and representation, the involuntary contractions of muscles, the effects of opiate-based epidural drugs, or the extra-rational state that many women enter when in the labour ‘zone’. As all these influences are present at births and shape birth experiences and the experiences of becoming mothers, in this section we explore how tools of discourse analysis and new materialisms are helpful in unravelling how identities take shape in the spaces of birth.

For some mothers (and some midwives and obstetricians), the way that birth happens is understood to have lifelong implications. There is a body of literature, with both popular and scholarly versions, that links a birth in which the mother is empowered with better outcomes for mother and child. In particular, links are made between the experience of a natural birth, in which mother and child experience the full benefit of labour hormones, with better health outcomes, stronger attachment between mother and child, more confident parenting and lessened likelihood of post-natal depression (Douglas 2010; Gaskin 2011; IsHak et al. 2011; Leng et al. 2008;

Bakermans-Kranenburg and IJzendoorn 2008; Skrundz et al. 2011). Ultimately it is suggested that the birth itself will influence capacity for love and empathy that will shape the child's social engagements for the rest of their lives:

> If we hope to create a non-violent world, where respect and kindness replace fear and hatred ...We must begin with how we treat each other at the beginning of life. For that is where our deepest patterns are set. From these roots grow fear and alienation ~ or love and trust. (Arms 2012).

The claim that the patterns set at the beginning of life provide the roots of love and trust is only tangentially backed up by the science (Heinrichs et al. 2008; Kosfeld et al. 2005). What does seem fairly conclusive is that the cocktail of hormones that flood through the mother and child's body during labour are the hormones active in the physiology of love and empathy in the brain, and also play a crucial role in breastfeeding (Buckley 2010). These hormones are suppressed when women are given synthetic oxytocin (such as Pintocin) to help speed labour. The result for some women is that their birth experience is deeply troubling when they find they are unable to welcome their new child with the love and joy they expect:

> *So, I'd asked for the epidural already and the anaesthetist came at quarter to 12…. one thing I really loved, I'm sad to say this, when the epidural kicked in, I made sure I said hello to everybody and looked them in the eye. I was like, oh hi, that's a relief to be back to my normal self. I felt like I was being rude while I was in labour and not being able to look at anybody or to have good manners. ... So I then got told to push, but I couldn't feel anything. So, they're getting me to watch a monitor to try and push with the top of a contraction. So, it's not me working. I'm just trying to do something I can't even really feel…. I knew that I only had – they had a rule – two hours of pushing otherwise it's an emergency C-section ... there was a clock in the room and I kept on looking at that clock thinking I've got to push this baby out otherwise they're going to give me a caesarean. It took me an hour*

> *and a half to push Jack out ... [Because of being on synthetic hormones] I was completely numb in my feelings when Jack was born. So, I faked joy to welcome him. I didn't want him to suffer, even though I was just completely numb. I had no emotion. It just felt really awful. ... I really wanted a beautiful experience and it had just been kind of horrific. ('Jane', interview May 2011)*[3]

For Jane, the birth experience challenged her expectation of the kind of mother that she would become, and contributed to the state of post-natal depression that she entered after the birth of her first child. In her telling, the birth experience itself, and the post-natal assistance she received in learning how to care for her child, contributed to a sense that she could not be a good mother, that somehow she did not know how to give birth, or how to parent – that her very identity as 'mother' was somehow compromised.

Jane's second birth experience was very different, and so too were her feelings about her own abilities as a mother. Not wanting a repeat of her first experience in hospital, she decided on a homebirth:

> *So, it was really dark. Jack's asleep upstairs. It's a long weekend. I'm in this beautiful space that I really love that I've created. My husband's just been able to concentrate on me while [my friend] runs around and changes music ... So I just stayed in that pool. ... Every now and then [the midwife would] say you need to change that position; you've been in that position for a long time. Because it was so intense, I didn't really want to move. I was just in that water. ... I didn't say anything. I just was completely in. It went to second stage and then that's just when I let out these three huge banshee screams. I just did a huge [push] and out came Charlie into the water. That's the ecstasy I meant.... I had an ecstatic [birth] – I held her. We were in the water. I had all those feelings. I had feelings. I was just so ecstatic*

> *and it was the best thing in my whole life. It was dark and watery and I was at home. I had friends. I had a lot of support around me.*

Jane's birth stories reflect how the experience of birth in itself can be transformational. Midwife Ina May Gaskin argues that:

> Giving birth can be the most empowering experience of a lifetime – an initiation into a new dimension of mind–body awareness – or it can be disempowering, by removing from new mothers any sense of inner strength or capacity. (Gaskin 2011: 2)

For Jane, the care received during and after her first birth set her up for feelings of incompetency as a mother:

> *In retrospect, I didn't really have that much faith of confidence in myself. That's clear to me now. But it definitely was set up from the birth.*

Following her second birth, however, she felt able to care for her child in the way that she thought was best, rather than relying on 'what everyone else was doing':

> *I was able to do my kind of parenting too – straight away. Not have to be in a hospital, to be waiting to get home to start. You can just – I think that sets them up too for how they feel about this world.*

The transformation experienced during birth is not just about what kind of mother a women can become, but for some it is also an experience that gives them a new perspective on themselves as conscious rational creatures. Reflecting on their experiences of labour, many women speak of entering another state of mind in which rational thought processes are temporarily suspended. This is spoken about as entering 'labour land', or turning their attention inwards, being absorbed in the work of birthing, or entering an ecstatic state: 'birthing hormones that take us outside (*ec*) our usual state (*stasis*), so that we can be transformed on every level as we enter motherhood' (Buckley 2010: 3). Gaskin speaks of this as 'letting the monkey do it' (Gaskin 2011: 37) – the primal self, the self who does not care that she is being a trouble maker, that she is not obeying laws of civility, the self that howls like a banshee, and is present entirely and only for the work of birthing. Jane represented this as:

> *... just letting go of that much more present, conscious mind to be able to surrender really – just stay relaxed. You're not in thinking space. I could do that at home. You think when you've got to get in the car. You think when you're on your way to the hospital. You think when you've got to get up into [the bed] – you think when you're in that room about how you want it set up. .... The whole point is not to be thinking, just to be in the labour.*

Most discussion of identity assumes that there is a singularity to that identity. If it is not that you have 'an' identity, then it is that you are a singular being adopting a subject position, or working through your subconscious drives, or responding to the power relations through which you are subjected. If birthing is a process of becoming, of the construction and discovery of new identities, Jane's stories of her own 'birthing becomings' (with many others) gives a complicated picture of what those becomings entail, and who and what shapes them. In Jane's stories, the birthing self and the kind of mother that she feels she can be shift dramatically in response to the actors assembled around her as she brings her children into the world. The active agents are much more than her singular self or the power relations that she enters as she makes her decisions about what kind of care she wants to receive. These actors include the space of home and the space of the hospital; the birthing pool and the bed; the anaesthetist and the midwives; the painkilling drugs and artificial hormones administered and the absence of these; Jane's expectations of birth and mothering, challenged in one experience and fulfilled in another; and finally, her 'monkey self' with its banshee screams and her rational, polite self, restored via epidural. The birthing self and the mother identity brought into being in that moment are far from being singular. Even the body that self inhabits is multiple, inhabited by a rational self and a primal self (not to mention the emerging baby). Here, the words 'identity' and 'identification' both seem inadequate concepts through which to explore the coming into being of a mother.

Home

Home, and in particular an idealized suburban home, has been a fertile space for geographical explorations of identities. Home and suburbs are sites in which identities are formed, and we use them here as instances of thinking about how particular forms of identity become valorized, constituted and contested in space. Gendered identities are critical in suburban life. The family-centred nature of suburban homes, and their strong historical and ideological connection to the notion of separate spheres, necessitates specific gendered norms and relations. Imaginings of suburban homes and home-making practices within them position women as mothers and as primarily responsible for the domestic sphere. Domestic labour and mothering, for example, simultaneously cement, contest and spatially extend this gendered vision of home (see Dowling 2012). In simple terms, the gendered domestic division of labour sees women taking primary responsibility for the day-to-day running of home and the creation of a 'home'-like environment. Women are far more likely than men to be responsible for domestic labour tasks like cooking and cleaning, care for children, as well as managing the everyday running of the household. Home-based activities, and senses of home, are hence argued to underpin some of the dominant definitions of femininity.

Running through notions of suburban home as family-centred is heterosexism: suburban homes are not imagined as the domain of same-sex couples or singles. Social norms, government policies, heterosexist practices and homophobia combined mean that heterosexual identities are constituted through an opposition to, and erasure of, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual identities. For some gay men and lesbians, visible signs of 'gayness' in their houses are removed, while the popular cultural stereotype of gay men (for instance in the lifestyle television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*) locates them in inner city rather than suburban homes. Using the theoretical point that such oppositions are precarious and always partial, recent scholarship has highlighted the ways in which this connection of suburban homes with heterosexism is contested, and subsequently suburban homes 'queered' or made gay and lesbian. For example, detailed ethnographic work on the domestic practices of gay men and lesbians has shown how the suburban home is consolidated as a supportive site for their gay/lesbian identities and relationships (Gorman-Murray 2006).

Racial and ethnic identities are also important to the meanings of suburban homes. Most research in this vein highlights the whiteness of suburban homes – the ways in which architectural forms, ideological norms and material practices maintain white racialized identities. In the United States, for example, legal practices such as exclusionary zoning limit the affordability of suburbs and by implication their racial diversity. Housing covenants and everyday practices of residents similarly confine the norm of the suburban home to those who can economically afford, and culturally practice, white identities. In the context of this longstanding and entrenched racial norm, recent scholarship has pointed out the contexts in which suburban homes are located in racially diverse neighbourhoods and enact more culturally diverse practices. Again using the United States as an example, Andrew Wiese (2004) points out that not only did African Americans live in suburbs, but that they did so because of desires for open space, home ownership and privacy. In creating these suburban homes, they were creating a working-class African American suburban dream.

Class is an important social relation that is reproduced and contested in suburban homes. Indeed, in the United States the suburban home is by definition middle class. These homes embody middle-class cultural ideals, such as home ownership and its signifiers of material achievement and stability. Moreover, middle-class identities are performed in and through suburbs at a number of scales. At the scale of the neighbourhood, legal discourses, exclusionary zoning, practices of local politics (Duncan and Duncan 2004) and housing, and other covenants that prescribe standards of maintenance (McGuirk and Dowling 2011), all rely upon and reproduce a middle-class identity. In recent work in Sydney, Robyn Dowling et al. (2010) found strong associations between preferences for manicured and ordered residential environments and the constitution of respectable, middle-class identities. Moreover, rich ethnographic work in a number of contexts has linked together practices that prioritize care for the physical appearance of houses and yards, as well as ones promoting respectfulness for neighbours, as all constitutive of class identities.

At the scale of the house, class is also produced. The notion of being respectable underpins many aspects of middle-class identities, and performing respectability has long been part of middle-class practices of home, emphasizing a tidy house, tidy garden and the sense that children are under control (Dowling and Power 2012). Moreover, the determination of what constitutes mess, dirt and other excess, and the acts of managing or removing mess, are also clearly constitutive of respectability.

Here, hiding mess in separate and distinct sections of the house has enabled householders to maintain familial privacy by keeping the excesses of everyday family life hidden from visitors, particularly strangers. As one woman confessed, if strangers saw this mess, including washing, 'it's opening up another part and […] you feel uncomfortable' (in Dowling and Power 2012: 614). Mess, in other words, was unacceptable in a respectable household, and underpinned the intertwining of gender and class identities. Hiding mess allowed these women to pretend that the mess, or rather the task that it represented, temporarily did not exist. This was an important strategy for reducing the feelings of stress and anxiety associated with messy houses. In sum, in these suburban practices, residents were concerned with the visual appearance of their home to outsiders – that it looked cared for, and that they were in control. These practices and strategies do more than represent and perform 'affluenza'; rather, strong desires for spaciousness become closely linked with strategies of mess management and, by implication, class identities.

The notion of home as a key site of identity construction also flows through recent work on environmental identities and the societal imperatives raised by a changing climate. Here, identities enacted in the wake of transformations anticipated by a new 'anthropocene' (Gibson-Graham 2011) are broadly characterized as complexly entangled with the socio-material world, encompassed by yet exceeding neoliberalized consumer-citizen subjectivities (see McGuirk and Dowling 2011), and explicitly and implicitly associated with new forms of environmental citizenship (Agrawal 2005). Using a governmentality lens, attention turns toward the ways in which governing carbon, and specifically carbon reduction, tightly wraps the individual in a web of self-disciplinary power. Injunctions to consumers to switch off lights, use less water, use green power, count their kilowatts, walk rather than drive, and the like, all appeal to the individual's willingness and capacity to change, to discipline themselves. The Cities for Climate Protection campaign, for example, enrols citizens as consumers in its attempts to change behaviour (Slocum 2004), while Portland's diverse carbon-reduction policies worked through creating a responsible, carbon-calculating individual (Rutland and Aylett 2008). These identities are also formed through relations with technology and new engagements with the material world. Transitions toward alternative septic systems like self-composing toilets, for instance, entail a shift in thinking about bodily wastes as resources rather than waste (Moran 2008). In terms of identity, then, not only is the self-governing, transitioning individual called into being through climate change policies, but these are also connected to the identities and practices of home.

In essence, we could argue that suburban identities are hegemonic: produced through hegemonic discourses of law, planning, sexuality, gender and class, and reliant upon the prioritization of market solutions. Yet, theoretically, hegemony is always partial and subject to contestation and reformation; the example of suburban sexual identities is illustrative of this. Likewise, from anti-essentialist perspectives, identities are multiple rather than fixed. In consciously 'reading for difference', the sense of suburban identities as politically transformative becomes visible, challenging the fixity and hegemony of the suburban identities just sketched.

Mobile Identities

While placing identities remains a crucial focus of human geographers, as our earlier discussion of home indicates, what has been termed a 'mobilities turn' across the social sciences has also has reconstituted human geographies of identity. As part of an emerging body of thought that spans cultural studies, cultural geography, sociology, urban studies and anthropology, a mobilities lens emphasizes that contemporary society is characterized by people and materials that are ‘on the move’, illustrated, for example, by the increasing flows of goods, people and money across cities, regions and the world (Cresswell 2006). This means that identities are not only formed in place, but also relationally across spaces.

Mothering identities, already touched upon in the previous two examples of birth and home, provide one illustration of mobile identities. For mothers on the move and/or displaced, identities are made through engagements with multiple material and imaginative engagements across spaces. At the transnational scale, for example, domestic workers’ identities as mothers are stretched across the country in which their children are located and the country in which they are currently working, often in traumatic ways (see Blunt and Dowling 2006: Chapter 5). Even within nations, practices and identifications of mothering stretch across home, work and recreational spaces. Caring for children and orchestrating family life is not tied to the home. The process of feeding the family, for example, occurs at the dinner table, in the kitchen, at work while writing a shopping list, and in the supermarket when purchasing ingredients (deVault 1991). Mothering identities are also literally mobile, given the increasing importance of car in family life. The car is a site in which familial relationships are enacted and families reproduced. It is in the car (sometimes through ICT, sometimes through the ‘thinking space’ which it provides) that family (and sometimes work) arrangements are made (see Dowling 2000; Laurier et al. 2008). For women who are mothers, the car not only facilitates the mobility required to satisfy children’s spatially dispersed activities, but it also becomes a site valued for its facilitation of domestic conversations, where children and adults share stories of their day. Identities, therefore, are constituted through travel.

Focusing more on the car rather than mothering, we can likewise see the reconstitution of everyday identities and their politics; processes which also illustrate both Foucauldian and ANT framings of identity and the complex mobilization of identities to political ends. The past 100 years has seen the car become not only the principal means of moving around cities and other sub-national spaces, but also a significant symbol of identities: of freedom, of youth, of masculinity, to name just a few (see Urry 2004). Indeed, Katherine Goodwin (2010) has recently argued that the car is essential to what it means to be human: the car is necessary for the accomplishment of progress, satisfaction and 'human flourishing'. In human geography, we also see the flourishing of work on car-constituted identities, including commuting and the car as work (Laurier 2004), experiences of driving (Bean et al. 2008), and the politics of car-based mobility and its relations to axes of social differentiation like gender and socio-economic status (Uteng and Cresswell 2008).

Yet car-based mobility, and the patterns of sociality and spatiality that it produces, is environmentally problematic through the greenhouse gases emitted and the depletion of a finite resource (oil) that it entails (Goodwin 2010). While mitigating and adapting to a changing climate and associated reductions in car use will require seismic shifts in institutional norms, infrastructures and governance arrangements, it will also require, and is already, a process of transforming identities. In understanding the identities currently embraced, and perhaps required, in a less automobile-dependent future, the material and technological assemblages of identities have become a focus of research (see Watson 2012). Hybrid cars, that use both gasoline and electricity, for example, have been proposed as lower carbon alternatives while maintaining car-based mobility. The identities and practices of driving hybrid cars entail embodied interactions between car and driver, arguably co-producing more sustainable driving practice (Ozaki et al. 2012). Drivers' responses to, and shaping of, cues from the car are necessary for sustainable effects to be produced. Driving identities and sustainable effects are a co-production of materials, technologies, practices and dispositions.

Another alternative to the current regime of car-based mobility – car sharing – consists of a different set of socio-technical infrastructures, practices and identities. Car sharing involves a number of people using cars that are parked centrally in dedicated car bays around the inner city. A person joins a car-sharing scheme (private or non-profit are common) and then books a car for his or her own use. Cars are then accessed via a smart card. It is estimated that one car-share vehicle is used by about 20 members, and gets seven vehicles off the road. ZipCar has more than 9,000 cars across cities like Boston, Portland, San Francisco in the United States, and Toronto and Vancouver in Canada (Shaheen and Cohen 2007). In the authors' own city of Sydney, there are three car-sharing organizations operating, the largest of which has been operating for 7 years and has over 10,000 members and 400 cars located predominantly in the inner city suburbs. Car sharing provides unique insights into identities in transition, and in particular transitions away from automobility (see Dowling and Simpson, in press).

Perhaps surprisingly, modes of identification with car sharing and identifying as a car sharer are largely disconnected from an environmental ethos. In Australia, advertising car share barely mentions the environment but instead focuses on those aspects that link car sharing to futuristic and flexible subjectivities. Car sharing is presented as an axiomatic, convenient lifestyle option, or focus on those aspects which link car sharing to futuristic, flexible *and* philandering subjectivities (the future *flaneur*, not necessarily gendered as masculine). As Catherine Simpson argues, these campaigns suggest that owning a car is much like a monogamous relationship that engenders particular commitments and responsibilities, whereas car sharing can just be a 'flirtation' or a 'one night stand' and you do not have to come back if you find it a hassle (Simpson 2009). In Switzerland, where in comparison to Australia car sharing is a more entrenched and accepted part of city living, one local Swiss organisation, called Mobility (http://www.mobility.ch/en/pub/how_it_works/this_is_mobility.htm) uses quite different tactics to entice consumers. Mobility exploits humour to promote car sharing as an indisputable and superior option over other seemingly less attractive (but probably more sustainable) modes of transport (see Dowling and Simpson, in press).

Finally, car sharing relies on the relational constructs of identity, and in particular, notions of sharing and collaboration. Echoing Botsman and Rogers' (2010) concept of 'collaborative consumption', in which consumer items are jointly rather than individually owned and/or consumed, car sharing involves a cultural shift in how people understand mobility and their own subjectivities. In their marketing and promotion tactics, car-sharing organizations often discursively exploit science fiction terminology and generate a subjectivity highly dependent on networks and accessibility. In the suburbs, people park their cars in garages. In car sharing, the vehicles are parked not in car bays or car parks, but in publicly accessible 'pods', which promotes a futuristic, 'sci-fi' experience (Simpson 2009).

The political transformations wrought by car-sharing identities are subtle, proceeding through myriad and minute challenges to the accepted predominance of individualized, car-based mobility. As such, being a car sharer is not an explicitly political identity. Nonetheless, in reworking associations with the materiality and technologies of the car, and in celebrating the pleasures of collaboration, car sharing shifts not only how people move but also the ways in which they think about themselves and their relations with others. In fostering these identifications, it is indeed political.

Spaces of Development

In the world of international aid work and development, identity has a role to play in the kinds of transformations that development work is seeking to enact. The overarching premise of the development industry is one of creating a better world. According to Dick Peet (1999: 1), ‘development is a founding belief of the modern world. … In development, all the modern advances in science, technology, democracy, values, ethics and social organization fuse into the single humanitarian project of producing a far better world’. The rationales put forward by individual development agencies are nearly as grand. Oxfam International states that ‘We believe we can end poverty and injustice, as part of a global movement for change’ (http://www.oxfam.org/en/about), while USAID (the United States Agency for International Development) aims to ‘promote broadly shared economic prosperity; strengthen democracy and good governance; improve global health, food security, environmental sustainability and education; help societies prevent and recover from conflicts; and provide humanitarian assistance in the wake of natural and [hu]man-made disasters,’ while simultaneously ‘furthering America’s interests’ (http://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are) USAID’s explicit referral to ‘America’s interests’ points to one of the major conundrums of development work. The overarching rationale and rhetoric is of providing assistance, helping people out of poverty, and generally improving the lives of those who seem to need help from wealthier nations.

Such altruistic sentiments, however, exist alongside (more or less) explicit political interests. Focusing on the politics of development, we explore here the ways in which identity making is tied to political struggle. We consider what a post-Marxist[4] analysis of the role of identity in hegemonic struggle might reveal about how professional identities take shape in spaces of development.

There is a hidden politics at work every time a development professional puts into practice the work of providing help to those who need it. In every one of those encounters, the development professional and the aid recipient perform an identity configured around the development imaginary – in which the majority world (or Global South) is understood to be *under*developed, *less* fortunate than those in the minority world (or Global North), and *lacking* the resources, skills and technology to 'catch up'. In and through their development practice, professionals make decisions to enact a certain kind of politics and to identify as a certain kind of professional. Some fall very easily into the role of the 'expert' whose role it is to bring 'much-needed' skills and resources to their 'underdeveloped' aid recipients. Others battle against their designation as experts, and spend their working lives trying to persuade funding agencies that the recipients of aid know more than anyone else about what they need. The latter version of professionalism is of course founded upon a participatory approach to development, in which development processes are meant to be handed over to local communities.

In northern Thailand, where participatory approaches have long dominated development discourses, there are still debates about what kind of professional practice qualifies as 'good' participation, and copious gossip around who is able to perform a sound participatory professionalism and who is not. The dynamics of the debate are outlined by David Thomas, a development professional whose career spanned over four decades of community development in the north. In conversation with Katharine McKinnon (2011), he spoke with passion against the 'patronising attitudes' of an old top–down style of project management that conceived of villagers as 'ignorant' and needing education. This is what is different in participatory work, 'the respect for the fact that this is their place, and must be about their decisions' (Thomas, personal communication, 2001). David was sceptical of the success of a participatory approach in transforming institutionalized interventions in the mountains. He observed that, while individual practitioners had learned much over the years, the problem was how to translate this into an institutional setting; in short, how to bring change to 'the system':

> *People with ideals usually quit. ... The system chews them up or spits them out. ... Bureaucracy needs as much research attention as cancer.* (Thomas, personal communication, 2001)

David implied that people are 'chewed up by the system' when they fall back into the role of the 'expert', an expert being somebody who thinks they know how to fix a situation of underdevelopment and disadvantage. In his view, it is much better for professionals to act as someone who will help local communities to find their own solutions to their own problems. Nevertheless, he observed that, in order for development professionals to continue to find work, they must also continue to be represented as 'the expert':

> *The term 'lesser developed countries' is a classic. Professional people wherever, for them it is a career. Without someone to patronise, they are out of a career.* (Thomas, personal communication, 2001)

In Katharine’s conversations with David, a sense of professional integrity was identified through the ongoing need to struggle against the demands of ‘the system’ for professionals to be ‘experts’. By ‘the system’, he was referring to the operations of the mainstream development industry – a system that demands quarterly reporting on project aims and objectives, hires of specialist consultants, and is ruled by the funding cycle. In this system, there is little room for flexible programs shaped around community rhythms and relationships, where objectives might need to shift, spending patterns might not be predictable and outside consultants are not the central decision makers. Many of those interviewed recalled their battles with this system as they tried to make room for local knowledge, local priorities and local decision-making in the early highland development programs. They represented their efforts as a battle against top–down development styles in order to work with and for the people. Through these struggles, professionals like David started to form their own professional identities around a particular set of ideals. They hoped to conduct their own work as a professional who could reject ‘patronising’, top–down practices and approaches and, in so doing, become a more ethical and effective professional subject.

The struggle to achieve better, more effective and more ethical development practice is a never-ending one. Development interventions seldom achieve the intended outcomes. The failure of development is a problem that must be faced in the everyday of development work, and for development professionals in northern Thailand, success *ought* to be possible – if only ‘the system’ can be uprooted and local communities afforded more power to find the solutions that they need to the problems which they prioritize. For these professionals, participation forms the ideological core of both their struggle for change and their professional identities. By enacting a participatory professional identity, they hope to also be able to enact the 'right' kind of change.

Using post-Marxist perspectives on hegemony, the manner in which professional identities take shape in development spaces reveals how the struggle to enact certain kinds of professionalism is closely linked with a political struggle to enact the 'right' kind of development. To rethink development and participatory development through the idea of hegemonic struggle highlights that development itself, and the actions of professionals, are part of a political process. That is, they are part of an always incomplete struggle to bring a certain reality into being, and that struggle is informed by the empty signifier (Laclau 1991, 1996, 2005; Gasche 2004): in this case, the empty signifier of development, a fuzzy ideology that holds up values of justice, rights and global equality as its core. Rather than seeing development as a universal good, and something that can be brought into being, it can be reframed as a field for social struggle and a zone of political engagement. As development workers enact their 'pro-local' professional identities, they are themselves the site of a hegemonic struggle, and the identity politics that they play is intimately tied with the effort to enact a particular kind of development politics (McKinnon 2011).

Geographical Identities: Identity in Geography, Identifying as Geographers

As our previous examples have shown, there are many ways to engage with identity in geographical work, and the insights provided by these geographical studies of identity making are varied. But what of our own identities as human geographers? As well as thinking through issues of identity in the empirical world 'out there', it is also vital that geographers interrogate ourselves: what does it mean and what difference does it make to imagine, think and act ‘identity’ as a geographer? Indeed, what is it to identify as a geographer at all? It is a discipline that is often on the margins of academia, and when you say to a stranger that you are a ‘human geographer’, it is a rare person who knows what that is. Usually you are asked: ‘what is human geography exactly? What do human geographers study?’ It remains difficult to answer this question, although the words ‘space’, ‘place’ and ‘process’ tend to be helpful. For us, the real answer is that we do not ascribe to a neat and bounded definition of what it is to be a geographer: we study almost anything, utilize a dizzying array of research approaches, and are not strongly compelled to relate our work directly to the supposed core concepts of space and place. This is a particularly unhelpful tendency on the occasions when geographers and geography departments are asked to defend ourselves by defining who we are, what we do, and what makes our contribution distinctive. But the lack of clear borders around geography, and the lack of a clear, singular disciplinary identity is also what makes geography such a compelling and important discipline. In a world where closed and reified identities cause so much suffering, it seems to us that geography’s own ambiguous and open identity is an appropriate starting point for thinking and enacting a world more accepting of its own diversity and less inclined to seek closure.

The lack of a clear boundary around the discipline can often make it an uncomfortable place to be. This is something Willem van Schendel (2002) alludes to when he notes that, if you are planning to make a prestigious academic career for yourself as an ‘Asianist’, you would be better to become an anthropologist rather than a geographer. Discomfort is increasingly recognized as being central to the production of quality research. In the work of feminist geographers like Cindi Katz (1994) and Gillian Rose (1997), the discomforts of reflexive ethnographic research, alongside the awkwardness of the in-between places that you end up inhabiting as you move in and out of 'the field', are in themselves an important part of research practice. It is not just that geographers ought to take responsibility for acting upon the world (Harvey 1972), but that we also ought to allow the world to act upon us. As Richa Nagar (2003) points out, if the work of geography is to act upon the world, it must also act with the world, in which case being accountable also means refusing the comforts of analytic distance. Allowing oneself to be affected and transformed by the sites and subjects that we study as geographers is perhaps key to constructing geographical knowledge that can both recognize transformations in the world and be, itself, transformative.

Recent work on affect highlights how new understandings of the world can hinge on allowing ourselves to be affected and to shift into new perspectives and new ways of being. The work of J.K.Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2006b) is crucial in bringing this debate into geography. Gibson-Graham develop an ethics for scholarly engagement based on a conscious effort to adopt a 'beginners mind' and an interest in constructing 'weak' theory (after Sedgwick 2003). What this entails is a refusal to know already what the problem is before commencing a study, or to diagnose the ills of the world according to the doctrines of pre-existing theory. Practicing weak theory involves '[teaching] ourselves to come back with a beginners mind' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 8). By doing this, 'a differentiated landscape of force, constraint, freedom, and opportunity emerges and we can open to the surge of positive energy that suddenly becomes available for mobilization' (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 8).

Decentering ourselves, learning to be affected, adopting a 'beginners mind' and a practice of cultivating 'weak theory' are all moves that are about bringing into being new kinds of geographical identities. For Gibson-Graham, these are the first steps towards acting upon the world, with it being necessary first to recognize and to engage with multiple (currently un-identified, even unidentifiable) possibilities. It is also the first steps for the creation of new citizen-subjects who are able to shift their sense of what is possible, and thus act to create new ways of being (Gibson-Graham 2006b: 134). Engaging with community members, troubling and destabilizing fixed narratives of disempowerment, and creating new spaces of identification all provide ethical openings for human geographies of identities. As geographers, with many and varied research interests, engaging with questions of identity provides an opportunity to combat reification, move beyond a sense of identity as closure, and perhaps, after all, contribute to enacting new possibilities.

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[1] Forgacs (1988) and Hoare and Smith (1971) provide an introductory selection of Gramsci’s texts, see also Gramsci (1992).

[2] Debates around agency versus structure can be very simply summarized as a debate around the degree of free will possessed by individuals. There is a spectrum of views on the topic. At one end of the spectrum (typified in geography by the celebration of human creativity in humanistic geography), human beings’ imagination and creativity, and our ability to act outside of or against prevailing social norms signals the power of individual agency and of our free will. At the other end of the spectrum, the system of social and cultural norms into which we are born, and the strength of political power that accompanies those, makes it near impossible for individuals to act with anything close to ‘free will’ – we are constrained by the norms through which we have been socialized and which have shaped our individual identities.

[3] This quote is taken from research conducted by Katharine McKinnon during 2012 as part of a larger project entitled ‘Mapping birth spaces: investigating the social, political and economic dynamics that shape birth experiences in Australia and New Zealand’.

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[4] The term ‘post-Marxist’ refers here to a body of social theory that is closely connected to and inspired by Marxist thought, but also seeks to move Marxist thinking in new directions by drawing on postmodern and poststructuralist philosophy.