Engaging Geographies
Engaging Geographies:
Landslides, Lifecourses and Mobilities

Edited by

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# Table of Contents

List of Figures ............................................................................................... vii
List of Tables ................................................................................................. ix
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... xi

Chapter One ................................................................................................. 1
Connecting Landscape, Lifecourse and Mobilities
*Michael Roche, Russell Prince, Juliana Mansvelt and Aisling Gallagher*

**Part I: Landscapes**

Chapter Two .............................................................................................. 13
Sparky Geographies: Engaging Journeys through Landscapes of Teaching and Research
*Juliana Mansvelt*

Chapter Three ............................................................................................ 29
How Infrastructure became a Structured Investment Vehicle
*Phillip O’Neill*

Chapter Four .............................................................................................. 45
Policing Art: Political Potential of Creative Practices in Aotearoa New Zealand
*Gradon Diprose*

Chapter Five .............................................................................................. 63
Responding to Changing Fortunes: The Experiences of Small Town New Zealand
*Etienne Nel*
## Part II: Lifecourses

Chapter Six ................................................................................................ 87  
Governing Motherhood: Parenting Services and Maternal Empowerment in Ireland  
*Aisling Gallagher*

Chapter Seven .......................................................................................... 101  
“That’s life isn’t it”: Investigating Inequalities in Older Age  
*Mary Brehney, Christine Stephen and Juliana Mansvelt*

Chapter Eight ........................................................................................... 117  
The Uncertain Spaces of Great-Grandparenthood  
*Ruth Allen and Janine Wiles*

Chapter Nine ............................................................................................ 137  
The Paradoxes of ‘Home’ within a Palliative and End of Life Care Context  
*Merryn Gott, Lisa Williams and Tess Moeke-Maxwell*

## Part III: Mobilities

Chapter Ten ............................................................................................. 155  
Parents’ Understandings of the Intergenerational Decline in Children’s Independent Outdoor Activity  
*Karen Witten, Robin Kearns, Penelope Carroll, Lanuola Asiasiga and Nicola Tava’e Fa’avale*

Chapter Eleven ........................................................................................ 175  
Moving to Learn/Learning to Move: New School Environments after the Canterbury Earthquakes  
*David Conradson, Maria Connolly and Ross Barnett*

Chapter Twelve ....................................................................................... 191  
Topologies of Mobile policy: Neoliberalism and Creativity  
*Russell Prince*

Contributors ............................................................................................. 207

Index ........................................................................................................ 213
## LIST OF FIGURES

4.1 Henderson Free Store showing line of participants .................................. 53

5.1 New Zealand main centres and small towns researched ..................... 67

5.2 Aggregate urban population growth rates: 1911-2006 ....................... 69

5.3 Aggregate population change in the two smallest categories of urban settlements .................................................................................. 70

5.4 Changing aggregate business numbers in key categories of small towns in Canterbury .................................................................................. 72

5.5 Changing aggregate business numbers in key categories of small towns in Otago-Southland ......................................................................... 72

5.6 Changing aggregate business numbers in key categories in selected settlement types in Otago-Southland – Canterbury .................................. 73

10.1 Factors influencing children’s active travel, informal play and formal activities .................................................................................... 165
# List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Population change in key Categories of Canterbury &amp; Otago/Southland towns</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Participant characteristics</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Post-Earthquake Site Sharing Arrangements for Christchurch Schools 2011</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>2011 NCEA Results for Site Sharing and Non Site Sharing Schools</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>2011 NCEA Results for Short and Long Term Site Sharing Schools</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>Questionnaire Participants from the Case Study School</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>Junior Students’ (Years 9-10) Perceptions of the Impact of the Sharing Arrangements</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>Senior Students’ (years 11-13) Perceptions of the Impact of the Sharing Arrangements</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Michael Roche
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CHAPTER ONE

CONNECTING LANDSCAPE, LIFECOURSE
AND MOBILITIES

MICHAEL ROCHE, RUSSELL PRINCE,
JULIANA MANSVELT AND AISLING GALLAGHER

Introduction

The chapters comprising Engaging Geographies are derived from papers originally presented at the 2012 New Zealand Geography Conference. This meeting of the New Zealand Geographical Society was held in Napier, a city destroyed by earthquake in 1931 and predominantly rebuilt in Art Deco style. It was also the first occasion on which the society has met in a non-university city venue and in that sense was a conscious effort to connect with a neglected part of our constituency. This endeavour was mirrored in the conference theme of ‘Connecting Landscapes’.

The chapters in this book, echoing many of the conference presentations reflect the ways geography has developed in its thinking about space, while still being interested in the discipline’s core concerns with space and the spatialities of people’s lives. This comes through in the book in two ways. Landscapes are a typical geographical concern. But human geography also recognises that geographies are not just resting on the landscape, they emerge around people as well. Through our lives our geographies change as the world expands and contracts, as we age and negotiate its social, spatial and structural complexities which can be both enabling and disabling. And geography has always been concerned with change, particularly tracking the flows of mobile people and things, from trade flows to migration flows. Each section of the book speaks to these overarching and historical themes of geography. A further dimension of ‘engagedness’ comes through in the affiliations of authors of the chapters, particularly in the case of those who are geographers by background but now work in other institutional settings and those who are not geographers.
but who have found it useful to interact with geographers and geography particularly around lifecourse and mobilities.

But on closer inspection the chapters also demonstrate the way geographical thinking has moved on from the relatively stable conceptions of these aspects of geography, considering how landscapes are not fixed, or how lifecourse geographies can change dramatically between and within generations and between and within different places, or how mobility is not an exception to the normally stable world reflecting the movement of things between otherwise stable places, but how mobility is always a part of the world and how apparent stability might be the exception rather than the rule.

We have sought to capture and some of the energy of the conference in this volume which brings together 11 chapters of selected and revised papers derived from the original presentations. In doing so we are mindful that with cessation of the New Zealand Geography Conference Proceedings series in 2003 the tone and insights from the conference as a whole are dissipated without trace. While acknowledging that individual papers from previous New Zealand Geography Conferences have routinely been published in a range of journals and that special issues have also emerged (e.g. Gorman Murray, 2012), by and large the distinctive flavour of the discipline as captured at the conference now tends to end with the conference. This volume does not fully counter this tendency but it does endeavour to bring together a body of writing that captures something of the flavour of human geography in New Zealand in the second decade of the 21st century.

Engaging Geographies contains three connected clusters of chapters organised around the themes of 'landscape', 'life courses' and 'mobilities'. The contributors are human geographers and allied social scientists working from Australia and New Zealand and the chapters offer insights into the trajectories of geography as a discipline written from the Southern Hemisphere. The majority of the chapters have an Antipodean orientation and make selective use of suitably adjusted conceptualisations employed in Anglo-American geography. Thus the content for Northern hemisphere readers may be accessible but not entirely the same as that with which they would typically engage.

**Landscapes**

Anglo-American geographers in the middle of the 20th century were somewhat mired in the consequences of translating landschaft into English as landscape, but by the 1980s landscape had regained some renewed
 vigour as ‘a way of seeing’ through amongst others the efforts of Dennis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (1984). The first section of the book is headed ‘Landscapes’ and the term is used simultaneously in several senses. In a more orthodox fashion it provides an entry point into geography’s concern for place and space and spatial interactions where this provides a ‘container’ in which ‘life courses’ have an implicit temporality. Even where it is not measured simply in terms of industrial time discipline, concepts of landscape can enrich the ‘timelessness’ of space encompassing aspects of mobilities which evokes geography’s longstanding concern with movement across and space. Moorings in contrast point to anchor points and enclaves of certainty, stability, and stillness in times of flux, and moments and spaces of fixity which are necessary in order to make people and things flow (Cresswell, 2010).

That said landscape can also be used in a metaphorical sense in terms of ideas and politics as expressed in the landscape which in turn with the values inscribed in it then serves as some sort of mediator of social behaviour. In the case of Juliana Mansvelt’s chapter the ‘landscape’ in question is one that is close to home being that of the academy itself in New Zealand where she explores the place of the teaching-research nexus. In the mid-1980s New Zealand was transformed by a Neo-liberal experiment which extended far beyond the removal of agricultural subsidies, privatisation and state sectors restructuring (Le Heron and Pawson, 1996). Within the university line management models were introduced along with an audit culture, student loans as well as completion amongst ‘tertiary providers’ to use the terminology of the day. The impacts are continuing and include a national research assessment exercise, the ‘PBRF’ (Performance Based Research Fund) to allocate research funding amongst tertiary institutions (Larner and Le Heron, 2005). The New Zealand geography students of 21st century are noticeably different from those of a generation ago and Mansvelt through her personal life-course narrative speaks to some of the challenges and excitement of bringing insights from research into teaching to produce creative and ‘sparky geographies’ (Cook et al., 2007). In doing so she argues for a structural and social landscape which celebrates the diversity of geographical practice and which provides for opportunities to ‘play’ and ‘flirt with space’ (Crouch, 2010), conveying a sense of why geography continues to matter.

Phillip O’Neill’s landscape is an urban-industrial one and his concern is with movement across the landscape facilitated by the development of infrastructure. Simultaneously he engages with ideological and spatial dimensions of infrastructure provision whereby he steps beyond some
conventional categories such as public goods and monopoly goods. Indeed he argues that the neglect of the spatial dimension of infrastructure have actually undermined the Left’s capacity to argue for state involvement of infrastructure provision. In the second part of O’Neill’s chapter he critically examines the notion of categories that can be applied to understanding infrastructure such as public goods, which enables him to develop an argument whereby privatisation of infrastructure, something of a feature of States where Neoliberal experiments proceeded, is not intrinsically bad policy but that financialisation can be used to push finance into infrastructure investment at time when government options for infrastructure are limited. He consequently highlights the importance of the conduits through the urban-industrial landscapes, collapsed under the heading of ‘infrastructure’ that restores spatiality and movement to these environments.

Gradon Diprose situates his chapter in the urban landscape where he theorises the position of an art project in the shape of the establishment of a Freestore in New Zealand’s capital city Wellington in 2010 at time when there were a considerable number of empty office premises in the CBD. The ‘shop’ was staffed by volunteers and open to ‘customers’ who could take un-priced food times from the shelves. The food was donated by local retail and supermarket outlets and would otherwise have been consigned to the tip. Other stores were opened in Auckland and Palmerston North. As an art project, where art was conceived of a set of practices, performances and experiences, rather than as a physical object, the Freestore argues Diprose, was a political moment, one that disturbed some conventional and established categories, refined by a generation of Neoliberalism policy discourse about ‘poor’ and ‘needy citizens. As Diprose further shows ‘place matters’ conceived of as an Art project in Wellington, the Freestore in Auckland was regarded in the mainstream media as a welfare charity around which there was much racialised discourse, particularly about health and ethnicity.

This first section closes with Etienne Nel’s chapter which examines the ebb and flow of small town New Zealand over the last 30 years during which time, in the aftermath of ‘Rogernomics’, many of them experienced limited population growth and in some case decline as well as economic stagnation. Nel deploys concepts of productivism and post-productivism drawn from the UK rural geography literature, where it was robustly debated (Wilson, 2001) and uses it to anchor his analysis of the New Zealand small rural townscapes. In this regard he side-steps the caution and scepticism of some New Zealand geographers over the extent to which these ideas were useful in the local setting (Willis, 2003, Jay, 2005). In all
Connecting Landscape, Lifecourse and Mobilities

Matters of connection, mobility and landscape are also integral to the Life-course section of this book. From birth to death - stillness and movement, varying degrees of connectedness and ones being in place, are integral parts of ‘growing up’ and growing older. One’s identity, the extent to which we are included or excluded from participation in social, economic and political life and our capacity to be socially and spatially mobile are all shaped in place. Lifecourses are relational – framed and punctuated through shifting connections to other people, things and places. Our bodies, the social and spatial trajectories of our lives and our connectedness to others produce and are produced by the operation of power in place, creating material and discursive landscapes which may be both enabling and disabling of our capacity to be, do, move, and make things flow.

The papers in the lifecourse section of this book extend a tradition of critical interpretations of the lifecourse (Katz and Monk, 1993) - refuting notions of childhood, adulthood and old age as fixed temporally, socially or spatially. In taking up a view of ageing as occurring across one’s biographical life span, rather than as an issue faced by older adults, we seek to emphasise the nuanced ways in which dimensions of ageing are constructed, experienced and represented across the lifecourse. In that vein recent work in geography has focussed on life course transitions [see papers on ‘Theorising Life Transitions’ in Area (Hörschelmann, 2011)] as well as intergenerational and intersectional concerns (Evans and Holt 2011; Hopkins and Pain, 2007, Valentine and Hughes 2011). Though the chapters in this section cover diverse aspects of the lifecourse such as mothering and childcare, living standards in later life, the ambiguous spaces of great-grandparenthood and death at home, all the authors in the section are interested in matters of power and how this is shaped
relationally. Each speaks to intergenerational concerns and to the intersectional connections that exists between people situated differently with regard to matters of age, ethnicity and social class/position. Life events and disruptions to the norms of everyday life are also identified to provide critical lenses on the taken for granted practices, powers and places of ageing.

Aisling Gallagher’s chapter on the work of new mothers highlights the connections between societal framings of parental anxiety and State concerns about the moral, educational and economic shaping of future citizens. In discussing biopolitical interventions under neo-liberalism, Gallagher examines the intersection between landscapes of governance and those of everyday life with relation to the practices of mothering. Her research highlights tensions between the particular and placed representations of the home as a site of care in Ireland and the governing of subjects in the context of changing relations and powers of Church and State. Through her examination of the practices of a parental home visitation service, concerned with encouraging mothers to care and educate their children well, Gallagher shows how the kinds of structural and discursive framings of parental empowerment drawn on to encourage mothers to become ‘self-reflexive’ parents, may actually re-affirm rather than challenge negative experiences of mothering.

Mary Breheny, Juliana Mansvelt and Christine Stephens also emphasise the ways in which everyday practice and power are connected, but their focus is on older people, inequalities and the differing capabilities their material standard of living affords. Like Gallagher they discuss the varying discourses at work in shaping subjectivities, but focus on the way in which older people’s talk (rather than practice) can provide powerful insights into the kinds of material constraints which impact on their social and economic mobilities as they move through the life-course. Their discussion then focusses on the rhetorical function of talk, noting how it simultaneously draws on material landscapes and gives meaning to self, in relation to bodies and objects. Reflecting on the capabilities of individuals with differing living standards to effect change and act on the world, Breheny et al. demonstrates how discourses of positive and active ageing position older people in various ways; but that these positionings are themselves dependent on individuals’ material and social situatedness.

Ruth Allan and Janine Wiles’ chapter considers the socio-spatial construction of great-grandparenthood in Aotearoa/New Zealand, within a context where the rights and duties of great-grandparents are much less socially defined than that of parent or grandparent. Recognising the growing prevalence of great-grandparents in western societies, the chapter
sheds light on the conflicting positions great-grandparents hold: on one hand publically celebrated and on the other fraught with ambiguity about their position in the broader family structure. Analysing the narratives and ‘storylines’ of great-grandparents the authors capture the sense of uncertainty with which great-grandparents participate in their children’s and grand-children’s lives. To that extent the role of a great-grandparent is shown to be deeply mediated by and within complex familial relations, such that perceptions of ageing by their family members shape their ability to engage with family life (scripting decisions such as the amount of time you get to spend with your grandchildren or whether you are kept informed of all familial events). Finally Allan and Wiles suggest that this mediation of the role of great-grandparents can be experienced as both empowering (in being able to take a ‘step back’ from daily family life) and disabling (in feeling ‘removed’ from familial relations).

Finally Merryn Gott, Lisa Williams and Tess Moeke-Maxwell in examining landscapes of death, challenge conventional spatial understandings of home as associated with a ‘good’ end of life. Like Gallagher and Breheny et al., they discuss ‘home’ as a site whose meaning is not fixed, understanding home space as relational and contested across the lifecourse. Questioning the reductive equation of ‘home’ with a physical space (the home) in end of life, they instead call for an understanding of home space as a malleable ‘spatial imaginary’. In doing so they suggest it becomes possible to find new ways to make people feel ‘at home’ within palliative care, even if it is not their ideal place to be at the end of their life.

**Mobilities**

The theme of mobility has emerged in geographical scholarship in recent years as both a consequence and a driver of geography’s interest in the dynamism of social systems (Sheller and Urry, 2006). As we more and more see past the illusion of settled space produced by scholarship which unproblematically located itself somewhere on the scalar hierarchy from the local through the urban, the regional and ‘up’ to the nation-state, with the latter often seen as the ultimate spatial form, we find ourselves examining movement and mobility not as occurring across pre-existing space, but as productive of space itself. The near constant movement in the world around us, whether it is patterned, random, or somewhere in between, demands attention if we are to understand shifting economic, social, cultural and political spaces.

This is not to suggest that those scalar categories are themselves illusionary, but it is to recognise that they are produced as much by
movement between, across and within different spaces as by any real or imagined semi-permanent border. Indeed, the constraints on and possibilities for movement placed on people by various forces can tell us a lot about the changing nature of particular scaled spaces. In a chapter that overlaps with some of the lifecourse concerns of the previous section, Karen Witten and her colleagues write about the mobility of schoolchildren in Auckland, focusing especially on how this has changed in the last few decades. They reveal an intriguing relationship between children’s mobility and the changing social relations that constitute ‘the local.’ They suggest at one point that there is something of a vicious circle here: parents are more likely to be comfortable with their children having more independent mobility around their neighbourhood if they feel like they can trust their neighbours and so be confident someone nearby will be watching out for them. In the days when there was, perhaps ironically, less mobility amongst people as they moved houses and neighbourhoods less frequently, people were more likely to know, and know whether to trust, the people in their local area. But as people have, for various reasons, moved more and become less connected to the people immediately surrounding them, they have been more reticent about letting their children wander. And as fewer children can be seen on the streets – walking to school instead of being driven for instance – so people are even less confident: and so it goes on. The reasons for these shifts are legion, including economic and political changes since the 1980s especially, but the point here is that children’s mobility can tell us something about the changing circumstances of the social relations that make up the local.

Children are also the subject of the chapter by Conradson et al. which explores the impact of natural disasters on children in the aftermath of the devastating Canterbury earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. The particular context is provided by the consequences of school site sharing arrangements put in place after the earthquakes. In some instances these also dramatically reshaped school hours. Drawing on the limited existing secondary literature, Conradson et al. explores the disruption of attachment to and familiarity with school environments wrought by site sharing through questionnaire data and official information on performance in national school examination performance.

But a focus on mobility does not need to be about the movement of people. Other things move as well, and these also have consequences for the geographies in which we live. One particularly mobile object is public policy, and in recent years geographers have become increasingly interested in the way that particular policies move between cities, countries and continents (McCann and Ward, 2011). In the final chapter of
the book Russell Prince considers the relationship between policy and space, and argues that policies have both topographies and topologies that shape space in important ways. Reflecting on recent debates about the spatiality of neoliberalism and the difficulty of theorising its ‘seeming everywhere’ (Peck and Tickell, 2002) without reproducing an overly monolithic and unnuanced conception of it, Prince argues that policies have topographies, both in their formation and in their rolling out, but also topologies: spatial logics that enable and shape their movement across space. Using the example of increasingly ubiquitous policy programmes that focus on utilising human creativity, he argues for thinking about the relationships between policy topographies and topologies, and the way that space gets both organised and transformed in particular ways by these relationships. Thinking about policy mobility in this way, Prince argues, helps us to grasp the way certain policy regimes can seem to be both everywhere present and yet highly differentiated and diverse across space.

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PART I:

LANDSCAPES
Performing Sparky texts

If writing the keynote on which this chapter is based caused me some angst, then so too have the challenges of translating the spoken and embodied word into a written text. I began my presentation by holding up a driver’s ‘L’ plate which signalled both my relative newness to the role of ‘keynote speaker’ and the challenge set before me in giving a talk on constructing landscapes through my research and teaching (a topic one could ‘drive a bus through!’). In many ways the presence of the L plate still reverberates in this chapter, a prompt that my own journey through the discipline continues to be a ‘sparky’ experience in discovering and learning. While the L plate was a powerful and tangible prop for a speech (and one which evoked some laughter) its absence in this written text is a reminder of the challenges I find in conveying my excitement as geographer through differing contexts and mediums. In reflecting on my learning journey through the mundane and everyday practice of research and teaching in the pages that follow I am endeavouring to manage the tension between spoken and written text, and between my own personal story and the wider effects and affects which geographers might make as they engage in creative journeys. This tension serves as reminder that my performance as a geographer and academic occurs not just through book chapters, articles and study guides, but through the ways in which I interact online and face to face in a range of contexts both in and outside the university. As I have crafted and ‘played with’ the material for this chapter it has prompted me to consider and attend to the ways in which the personal and the embodied is sometimes embraced and sometimes held at a distance in constructing the products of our teaching and researching
across an academic landscape in which the kind of communicative forms which establish legitimacy as a scholar do not always adequately accommodate our multiple ways of being or doing. My hope in writing this piece is that it will not simply be read as an introspective self-reflection of my own performance and practice, but that it may provoke readers to consider how we can recognise and promote creative ways of doing geography, communicating the contribution of our subject and engaging with a range of participants and audiences both within and outside the discipline.

Cook et al.’s (2007) exhortation to produce more radical and sparky geographies in an article on “Defetishising commodities” was a call for geographers to reflect on the relationship between their theory, politics and practice, a call for a radical geography which is less didactic, less instructive, less moralistic – a kind of geography centred on mobilising rather than dictating meaning. Through the work and writing of his students he shows the reader ‘heartful auto-ethnographies’, arguing these provide ‘mundane yet sparky connections’ with the people’s whose lives they are trying to understand. For him such geographies are “original, absorbing, thought-provoking, and full of life” (Cook et al., 2007, pg 122). Cook’s writing style is provocative and wide ranging in terms of both scale and scope. In fact a title of one of Cook’s previous publications was “You want to be careful you don’t end up like Ian. He’s all over the place” (Cook, 1998) (which could be read as a compliment, given geographers’ claims to space!). Cook et al. (2007) leave open the possibilities for how ‘radical geographies’ might be constituted and the potential means by which geographers might produce meaningful engagements with others, but I appreciate the ways in which his writing encourages me to wrestle with my own beliefs. The term ‘sparky’ is not one you come across too often in geographical journals, but is a term which upon reading, held some affinity for me in relation to my own experiences and my teaching and research journey as an academic.

There is something about the prospect of producing ‘sparky geographies’ that I find inherently exciting. As Valentine (1998) so heartfully expressed on her experiences of being ‘outed’ as a lesbian, our personal and academic lives are intimately connected. Much of my learning has come from considering the ways in which my scholarly and private life intersect. On thinking about the characteristics of ‘sparkyness’, I was reminded of our family dog named Sparky, a friendly little corgi-terror cross (or so we thought) till one day she took a dislike to a courier who was entering my parent’s property. Sparky barked, growled and then launched herself into the air and bit the courier on the bottom. My parents were surprised and
horrified, as was the courier, who promptly showed them the mark the dog left ‘behind’ (literally)! The incident was no laughing matter, but as I have thought about the event and the attributes of ‘sparkyness’ embodied in the dog’s behaviour, being ‘sparky’ implies something more than business as usual, a kind of tenacity, and an element of surprise that leads to something new and enthralling (though in the case of a dog-bite something quite appalling!). There is something about a spark which both draws us to it and creates, if we fuel its growth, a blaze which not only takes in ‘that which makes it stronger’ (thanks to J.K. Rowling and Harry Potter for that phrase) but a blaze which has the capacity, to shed light, create some heat, transform landscapes and provoke action and (re)action.

The potential for engaging geographies: attributes of a spark

How then might the ‘spark’ become a basis for thinking about more engaging, creative heartful geographies? Three attributes of a spark come to mind: the potential for sparks to ignite fires, the production of something bigger which results from the combination of a spark with other elements, and the ability of a spark to command attention.

A spark has the potential to burst into flame igniting fires. An oft cited quote attributed (with some debate) to the poet William Yeats “Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire”, might seem trite and idealistic, yet it encapsulates my desire to try and ignite a passion for things geographical in my students, to going beyond delivery of content to develop students’ geographical imagination and to encourage creativity in the ways they represent this (something I try to reflect in internal assessment tasks). A spark has the potential to create a blaze which is beyond control, however discussions about ingenuity and creativity seem to be ‘bounded’ in discussions of its codability and transferability of the phenomenon as part of political economic geographies connected with enterprise culture. The possession of innovative ability and the establishment of a cultural context in which creativity is fostered now regarded as a key source of productivity that pervades an expanding knowledge based economy (Tornqvist, 2011). While Tornqvist (2011, pg 62) argues that “Genuinely creative people and original ideas are as rare as gold in a prospector’s pan” I take heart (and perhaps some comfort) in psychologist Ruth Richard’s (2007) view that creativity is not simply a domain of the eminent or exceptional people, but is a capability that it part of our intimate daily lives and personalities. A desire to acknowledge, learn from and engage with the incredibly creative strategies, tactics and
practices by which people make sense of and manage the lifeworlds has provided a spark for the development of my research and teaching. Part of what makes me proud to be a social geographer is my desire to reflect on the extraordinary relationships and practices and tactics which characterise ordinary life as Holloway and Hubbard eloquently phrase it “Behind our everyday ‘being-in-the-world’ are extraordinary sets of relationships between people and places” (Holloway and Hubbard 2001, pg 6-7)

The second attribute that comes to mind in relation to a spark is that when combined with other elements, it produces a reaction. A spark plug for example, delivers electric current from an ignition system in order to ignite compressed fuel/air mixture thereby combining with these elements together to produce a reaction. The combination of these other elements - the diverse people, practices, ideas and things that constitute the collective networks of academic practice is something that I find ignites my enthusiasm and creativity whether it be at conferences, in classrooms, in research teams, or interviews and focus groups. Durkheim (Tiryakian, 1995) has called this ‘Collective effervescence’, the perceived energy formed by a gathering of people united around a common experience. While such a reaction has its down sides (the potential for individual wills and thoughts and practices to be subjected to the dominant moral norms and actions of a group) I have found the synergism, and creative outcomes of the relations and associations formed through such groups immensely thought provoking and exciting.

Recently we had some more insulation installed in our roof of our home, and the installers came down and told us that one of the electrical connections to the kitchen downlights was sparking. The prospect of a house fire provoked us to ring an electrician immediately. Thus the third attribute of a spark, and the light/flash/heat that emanates from it is that it commands one’s attention. I think recently of the of the debate which occurred over the email list-server of the Institute of Australian Geographers around David Bissell’s and J. D. Dewsbury’s abstract inviting contributors for panel session on “Will Power: creative ontologies for changing difference” for the AAG conference in Los Angeles in 2013. An online comment by an academic about the opaqueness and incomprehensibility of the panel abstract was like a spark, drawing more attention till the multitude of web postings in response ranged far beyond a matter of understanding the session to debates about relevancy, impact, audience, the legitimacy of various voices to engage in the debate, and ultimately matters of what counts as geography. While such a debate was productive in one sense (it certainly provoked discussion on the nature of the discipline our subject and caused me to weighed up and consider my
position and response to the various arguments), the heat it created had the capacity to harm, particularly as the email exchanges remained attached to people in particular and personal ways. Thus like the dog bite, sparky debates and engagements are not always positive and may have unintended impact as they circulate and are constructed and mobilised through different spaces and subjects in ways which we cannot foresee. Recognition of the ways in which sparky debates are framed may mitigate potentially harmful effects (and affects) but need not prevent our endeavours to engage with and challenge others to produce more hopeful geographies (Lawson, 2005).

So if sparks have the potential to fuel something bigger than themselves, to attract attention, and to emit light and heat, why is that they don’t always blaze - transforming landscapes? Over the nearly two decades I have worked as a geographer at Massey University in New Zealand, there have been many changes associated with the neo-liberalisation of university education and shifts in drivers of research, funding and teaching which have been well articulated in articles and commentaries (Curran and Hague, 2008; Thrift, 2012) which tend to dampen down rather than fuel any sparky moments I may have. Personally, I have felt the weight of the intensification of my work practices across all areas of my job and increasingly struggle manage everyday tasks in serving the university, teaching distance and internal students and conducting researching - all the while having to produce information about these various activities and their relative value and submit evidence of this into a variety of institutional and disciplinary (and disciplining) conduits! The ongoing task of applying for research funding, and of meeting deadlines for reporting outputs, applying for new grants means at times I feel like I concentrate more on acquiring funds and producing the measurable outcomes of the research rather than on the substantive insights of it. I’m mindful of the demands of a range of groups and individuals who seek to frame and measure my worth in different ways, including my students. As a scholar with interests in consumption I am a more than a little suspicious that the commodification of higher education (Molesworth et al., 2009) is gaining momentum when students ask “How many of these references do I have to read to get a C?” I always struggle in my response to this question, recognising that my own teaching and my student’s learning goals appear to be increasingly framed around instrumental and accessible outcomes as part of an implicit educational contract in which I am a complicit commodifying agent rendering education into ‘commodity’ and teaching into contractible forms (Ball, 2009).
Under such conditions sparky moments can be fleeting, and I find a kind of inertia envelopes me, a smothering blanket which squashes any thoughts I might have had about doing things differently, about being creative, about spending time to develop new avenues of engaging geographies in teaching and research. Despite such tendencies, I am encouraged to fan the flame on sparky moments through reading David Crouch’s (2010) “Flirting with Space”. Much of Crouch’s writing has centred on what can seem quite mundane activities, such as caravanning, gardening and art. But through writing and researching these Crouch reflects on these practices to provide a fascinating analysis of the creative interrelationship between space and journey of himself and his participants. Finding a spark in the everyday, he notes:

“The more explorative, uncertain and tentative ways in which our being part of a world of things, movements, materials and life; openings and closures, part openings mixed with part closures; engage in living suggests a character of flirting; spaces of possibility. It can be exemplified in the way in which we can come across very familiar sites finding new juxtapositions of materials, materialities and feelings, as it were, ‘unawares’. The unexpected opens out. Ordinary, repetitive, extraordinary, we find that we can ‘look….for the first time’; feel the world anew (Bachelard 1994, pg 156, cited in Crouch, 2010, pg 1)”

Feeling the world anew: Sparky engagements in learning and teaching

How then have I felt the world anew, in the mundane practices of my research and teaching? There are four aspects of my teaching and research through which sparky geographies emerge.

Engaging with the subjects of our research and teaching

In my first year of teaching two students obviously exceptionally bored with a lecture on research practice, decided to light a piece of paper at the back of the room. This was not exactly what I had in mind when I thought of teaching as ‘igniting a fire’, but it was that experience, perhaps not so mundane in terms of classroom practice, that encouraged me to interact with my students more, to engage them in the learning process and to give them opportunities where I could, to lead the learning encounter. Sparky geographies are also created in learning from and with research participants. There is now a substantive tradition of participatory research in geography (Kindon et al., 2007) but this is only recently an area I have