A central question for me from this week’s readings is the relation between spatiality and identity. More specifically, insofar as our dominant epistemologies consider being as being something determined, to what extent do we think the determination of being primarily in spatial terms?

Both space—and place—and identity are analogously structured: as concepts, both are made coherent by the drawing and policing of boundaries, of particular (spatialized) conditions of interiority and exteriority. Semantically, this is indicated by everyday parlance wherein to ‘place’ someone is to identify and categorize them; historically, this has been further confirmed through the articulation of some of the most potent (both in terms of resonance and social efficacy) identity categories through (usually) spatially demarcated constructions (e.g. the nation, the tribe, the home). In this sense, identity (as the determination of being within a certain classification) is spatial precisely insofar as classification—determination of being—takes place only through the erection of spatialized boundaries.

Smith seems to suggest as much when he writes that, “by setting boundaries, scale can be constructed as a means of constraint and exclusion, a means of imposing identity, but a politics of scale can also become a weapon of expansion and inclusion, a means of enlarging identities.” Thus a spatial politics (or, within a different set of coordinates, a ‘politics of scale’) is always and necessarily an identity politics. Any reappropriation of space will necessarily be, therefore, a reappropriation of identity—and the conditions of inclusion and exclusion (the demarcations of space as place) will likewise necessarily require analogous conditions vis-a-vis identity (and thus dwelling and belonging) within that space.

Here is the danger inherent in Heidegger’s understanding of place and dwelling, which Harvey rightly points to: that there is an easy slippage between postulating an idealized space, and the kinds of phenomenological attachments (the ‘spiritual unity’) between persons and things to exist in that space, and proposing an idealized community—and hence who/what should dwell in such a place—should be obvious. This danger indicates towards, as Harvey implicitly suggests, the need for a spatial politics which manages to constantly, dialectically, transcend its own boundaries—just as it would require an analogous constant, dialectical, transcendence of the determination of the identities those boundaries ground.

This link between identity and space is likewise apparent in Mathews’ work, with a central aspect of his monograph being how normative classifications (class, ethnicity, nationality, etc), and the spatial-conceptual divisions between those classifications, are muddled within the place/space of Chungking Mansions. A complication of static classificatory identities thus accompanies the warping of spatial boundaries (both absolute, relative, and relational) that Chungking makes visible/affects; the multi-sited-ness of the denizens of Chungking, of both their movements and their affective attachments, as well as of the spatial linkages of Chungking itself, weakens our ability to determine the people and things that ‘dwell’ within Chungking. This raises the question of how the work of identitary localization—the, as Harvey alludes to, putting-into-place of identity categories—‘takes place’ when spatial demarcations become increasingly porous, differentiated, or complex.