Who Are "We"? An Important Question for Geography's Future

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AG President Alec Murphy's invitation to reflect on "where we have come from and where we stand" sent me scurrying to Preston James and Geoffrey Martin's official history of the AAG's first seventy-five years (James and Martin 1978). There, in the book's very first sentence is a 1935 quote from Charles Colby reminding us that geography is, or at least was at that time, an activity undertaken by men: "The men who founded our Association were, in their turn, preceded by a long list of scientifically experienced and geographically minded men—a list which carries back to the beginning of our country" (cited in James and Martin 1978, 1). Indeed, nothing appears in the book's remaining 278 pages to dispel the notion that geography in 1978 remained an overwhelmingly male pursuit, and quite unselfconsciously so. I didn't really need to read that first sentence of James and Martin's book to know that my response to the question of "Where we have come from and where we stand?" would be to ask "Who are 'we' and how have the remarkable changes over the past century (mainly the past quarter century) in who 'we' are changed the discipline?" So that is the focus of this brief essay: How have changes in the composition of the discipline (who "we geographers" are) changed the discipline and especially the questions we ask as geographers?

Why should it matter so profoundly who constitutes the "we" of "we geographers"? It matters because the questions we ask—the questions that define the discipline and energize us as geographers, usually, quite literally, by propelling us into the field—reflect in part the nature of our experiences, individual and collective. Such experiences depend not only on our disciplinary training but also on when, where, and in what circumstances we live, which, in turn, depend on whether we are female or male, gay or straight, able-bodied or wheelchair bound, black or white, and so on. These various identities and social locations are shaped by—and help to shape—the web of social, economic, and cultural relations that differentially constrain and enable us.

That different people can observe an event or a portion of the world (such as a dump) and come away having seen rather different things (e.g., consumption patterns, gender relations, the transportation technology that enabled the collection of refuse over a certain area, toxic threats to groundwater) is stock in trade in introductory research methods texts, not to mention the run-of-the-mill mystery novel. This ability for some to see what others do not is the essence of the creative process in science and the humanities and reflects, in part, variations in the viewers' social locations and experiences.

Along with the notion that geographers have basically been men, this idea that personal and collective experiences shape the nature of the questions geographers pose is also evident on the first page of the James and Martin (1978) AAG history. Here these authors attribute the original focus of American geography, which emphasized organic response to the inorganic world (Davis 1906), to Americans' struggle for survival in an unfamiliar environment: "In the New World the inhabitants underwent a wilderness conquest experience. Hot summers, cold winters, a growing season of length unknown, and an unfamiliar topography were circumstances with which the early settlers were obliged to struggle. Men overcame hardship or were overcome by it" (James and Martin 1978, 1).

What I hear these authors saying is that research questions emerge in large part from the times and places in which the askers are living; such questions cannot be separated from the geographic and historic societal contexts in which the questions are embedded and from which they are posed. I would add that these contexts vary not only by place and time but also, and importantly, according to how a scholar is positioned within any given place and time. In my view the research questions we ask should serve society, a society that is richly diverse. Because a scholar's location within that diversity affects the questions he or she poses, if we are to serve the full range of concerns in society, "we," the

askers, need to encompass the range of social positions and life experiences represented in society. No, I am not saying that a scholar's race or gender determines the questions she or he will ask, but I am saying that there is a connection between someone's life experiences and the questions that person deems important enough to warrant investigation. So, I do believe that who "we" geographers are matters to the questions we ask.

As AAG membership has increasingly become more representative of the population of its home region and indeed of the world, the variety of life experiences and of life geographies encompassed within the Association has multiplied. This increased diversity in who "we" are is one change—though by no means the only one—that has contributed to amplifying the variance in the set of questions we ask. How do we geographers retain the "we," our identity as geographers, as the questions we ask become ever more diverse? Are we destined to disintegrate into a disparate set of nonconversing tribes (a.k.a. specialty groups)? Before I engage this question toward the end of this essay, I want to explore in more detail first, how the composition of our Association has changed, and second, how the changes in who "we" are have altered the kinds of questions we ask.

Who Are "We"?

A poster for the Lions Club gives travelers on the interterminal train at the Denver airport something to ponder on their three-minute journey. Picturing a white woman, a black man, an Asian man, and a white man (all appearing to be relatively young), the poster entreats "Look at Lions Now," doubtless an effort to erase the perception that Lions Clubs remain the exclusive bastion of old white men and, more pointedly, to boost flagging membership rolls. Imagine the AAG with practically no female, no African American, no Hispanic, no Asian members. That would be the AAG in 1904—the fortysix white men and two white women who founded our Association. With a similar composition today, our current membership would be reduced by 40 percent (from about 7,500 to about 4,500),² and the AAG would find itself, like the Lions Club, trying to broaden the membership base as a measure of sheer self-preservation. In one hundred years we've grown from 48 to more than 7,000,³ but these figures obscure the fact that our Association remained tiny and extremely homogeneous in terms of gender and race for most of that century.

Remember that in the Association's early decades, membership was by invitation only, reserved for those few elite geographers who were deemed to have "published substantial research contributions" and who could muster nearly unanimous support from the existing members (James and Martin 1978, 43). Such a membership policy practically guaranteed that the AAG would remain small, which it did,⁴ but, in light of what we now know about the homophily of social networks, the policy also meant that membership composition would remain relatively homogeneous. Not until 1963 did AAG membership become open and voluntary (for those willing to pay the dues), yet women and visible minorities continued to comprise only a tiny portion of the Association well after that time. As Jan Monk has demonstrated for the case of women, however, absence from the AAG did not mean absence from the discipline (Monk 2004).

James and Martin (1978) were not far off in portraying the Association of a quarter century ago as populated essentially by white men. Between 1950 and 1970 only 6 percent of geography PhDs were awarded to women (Lee 1990).⁵ By 1975 women comprised 16.7 percent of AAG membership, but only 7 percent of all PhD members; less than 1 percent of AAG members were black, about 1 percent were Asian, and less than half of one percent were Hispanic (AAG Newsletter, August 1976).

Since then, we have become somewhat more diverse, most notably in our gender and international composition. Of AAG members in 2003 who provided information on place of birth, more than one-quarter (28 percent) were born outside the U.S.; our current members work in sixty-one different countries. The most recent published statistics show that women had increased to 31 percent of the membership in 2002 and, more important, nearly half (45 percent) of student membership (AAG Newsletter, June 2003).⁶ Still, less than 8 percent of AAG members self-classify as Asian, black, or Hispanic—groups that together account for about 30 percent of the U.S. population.⁷ Although women now comprise a substantial minority in the AAG, we remain, in Laura Pulido's (2002) words, "a white discipline." In assessing the impact of the changes in who "we" are, I will focus primarily on our altered gender composition.

Numbers like these are just a beginning to understanding the potential for the composition of a discipline to effect change in the questions deemed important. Creating, sustaining, and changing a discipline is above all a social process, one that depends on diverse and frequent interactions. Calling attention to the social basis for the creation and acceptance of research agendas and disciplinary paradigms means asking how various groups gain influence over disciplinary questions. As Jan Monk (2004) has shown for the case of women in

geography, the potential for impact has depended not only on numbers but also on status—and, quite literally, location—within the discipline. Women have been located disproportionately (vis-à-vis men) in smaller, more teaching-oriented institutions and, significantly, in nonacademic settings. A recent report prepared for the AAG Council found that "approximately 30 percent of female members are neither students nor professors" (Raleigh 2001). Within academe, women remained marginalized throughout the 1980s; in 1988–1989 only 3 percent of full professors were female, a figure virtually unchanged since 1970 (Lee 1990).8 All of these factors speak to women's ability (or inability) to influence the research agenda within geography.

The Questions We Ask

To be sure, the questions we ask have changed since 1904, in part because the times in which we live have changed but also because the life experiences of those posing the questions have broadened. At the same time, looking closely at the themes of papers presented at the first seven annual meetings of the AAG, I was struck by how enduring are the problems that fascinate "us" as geographers. Also noteworthy in the records of those early meetings is how central geographic education was to the mission of the Association at its inception. In this section I first look briefly at the questions that claimed the attention of geographic scholars in the Association's earliest years and then even more briefly consider the nature of the geographic questions asked today.

To revisit the questions geographers were asking one hundred years ago, I browsed through the first volume of the Annals, which appeared in 1911; in it are four full articles and the titles (of all) and abstracts (of some) of the papers presented to the Association at the annual meetings from 1904 to 1910. In view of the small size of the Association in those early years and the stringent gate keeping that the Association's original members exerted over the membership process, it is not surprising that the papers in the earliest Annals reflect their authors' interest in and adherence to William Morris Davis's concept of geography: the impact of the physical ("inorganic") environment on the biological ("organic") environment. To the extent that one can discern a paper's contents from its title or abstract, almost all of these early papers followed this theme. Although most, by far, dealt with questions in physical geography, papers on urban, population, transportation, and regional geographies were also represented within this environmental deterministic framework. Perhaps more significant, in terms of eventual impact on the discipline, was the first

trickle of papers in economic geography. This branch of the discipline, which emerged before the close of the nineteenth century, posed a fundamental challenge to the Davis paradigm by recognizing human beings as agents who actively shape their physical surroundings, rather than simply as victims of "inorganic controls" (James and Martin 1978; Fellmann 1986).

Despite the predominance of the environmental determinism theme in those early papers and despite the relatively narrow *range* of questions posed (how does the physical environment shape the activity of humans and other species?), what is striking is the continuity in the issues that command the attention of geographers: human–environment relationships, regional analysis (recognizing the place-dependence of processes), tools and methods for geographic analysis, and the impact of connections and linkages over space.

It seemed to me that the authors of dozens of papers presented at annual meetings during those first few years of the twentieth century (1904–1910) could readily find sessions here at these hundredth-anniversary meetings that they would like to attend. Just a few of these titles are:

Climate and Disease: How Are They Related? (R. De C. Ward)

Map Making in the United States (Cyrus C. Adams)

Scientific Topography (R. E. Matthes)

Notes on the Mississippi River Flood of 1903 and on the Floods of Other Years (R. M. Brown)

Home Geography (F. P. Gulliver)

The Influence of Changes of Climate upon History (E. Huntington)

The Distribution of the Discoglossoid Toads, in the Light of Ancient Land Connections (L. Stejneger)

Some titles sound as if they even could have been lifted from the 2004 program:

An Example of Flood Plains Produced without Floods (N. M. Fenniman) (an example of post-modern physical geography?)

The Effects of Gold and Silver Mining on the Character of Men, Individually and Socially (George D. Hubbard) (would this be in a GPOW session or one organized by the Ethics Specialty Group?)

A New and Abridged Method of Finding the Locus of Geographical Position, and Simultaneously Therewith the True Bearings (G. W. Littlehales) (an early example of GPS?)

And today's policymakers would no doubt be interested in some of these early papers:

The Flatness, Aridity and Severe Winter of North Dakota in Relation to the Life of the Region (Wallace Craig)

Earthquake Forecasts (G. K. Gilbert's Presidential Address in 1908)

A Reconnaissance in the Arctic Slope of Alaska (E. D. Leffingwell)

Some Results of the Recent Census in Cuba (H. Gannett)

The Capacity of the United States for Population (A. P. Brigham)

The Foundations of Economic Progress in Tropical Africa (Cyrus C. Adams)

Keep in mind that these early AAG meetings bore little resemblance to our current extravaganzas, which now attract some 4,000 geographers from around the globe and require forty concurrent sessions. At that first Philadelphia meeting in 1904, participants presented a grand total of twenty-two papers, but even then the

organizers found the schedule to be so full that nine of the twenty-two had to be "read by title," so only thirteen papers were actually presented in full. ¹⁰ It's somewhat comforting to know that we geographers have been struggling with time management at the annual meeting for a full century. Not until 1910 did the number of papers presented at the annual meeting exceed thirty, with a good portion "read by title" throughout those early years.

In view of the small size of the discipline and of the annual meetings, the relatively high number of presentations on education in geography stands out (see Table 1). Not only were educational issues clearly on the agenda of these early AAG members (who, remember, were supposed to be the research hotshots of the day), but look at the large number of different geographers who authored papers or led roundtable discussions on education. Education in geography was thoroughly integrated into the intellectual mission of the Association at its inception, and certainly "significant scholarly contributions" included research on geographic education. This is a part of our heritage we should value and continue to strengthen.

Table 1. The First Six Years: AAG Papers on Geographic Education

1905

Political Geography as a University Subject (Emory Johnson)

Map Studies for Engineering Students: The Classification of Contour Maps on a Physiographic Basis (D. W. Johnson)

Practical Exercises in Physical Geography (P. S. Smith)

The Place of Economic Geography in Education (J. Russell Smith)

Some Remarks on the Use of Topographic Maps in the Schools (Martha Krug Genthe)

1906

Geography for College Entrance (A. P. Brigham)

1907

Physical Geography in Public Schools (N. M. Fenneman)

Exercises in Physical Geography (W. M. Davis)

The Use of the Wet Laboratory in the Teaching of Physiography (R. S. Tarr)

A College Course in Ontography (J. Paul Goode)

Uniformity of Method in Geographical Instruction and Investigation (W. M. Davis, Round Table Discussion)

1908

How May the Teaching of Geography in Elementary Schools be Improved? (C. T. McFarlane)

On Apparatus for Instruction in the Interpretation of Maps (Wm. H. Hobbs)

The Requisites of a School Wall Map (J. Paul Goode)

Geography for Secondary Schools (R. E. Dodge, Round Table Conference)

1909

The Present Trend of Secondary School Geography (R. H. Whitbeck)

1910

The Purposes of Geographical Instruction and the phases of the subject best adapted to these purposes [sic] (Rollin D. Salisbury, Round Table Conference)

Child Development and the Teaching of Elementary Geography (Archer C. Bowen)

A Swiss School Atlas (Wm. M. Davis)

A Method for Combining the Topical, Regional and Cultural Phases of Physiography Study in the Laboratory (O. D. von Engeln)

Source: Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Vol. 1, 1911.

In sum, most of the questions that engaged the Association's founders—including the two women—had to do with some aspect of physical geography and how the physical environment exerted control over biological (including human) activity. Although many of the topics that claimed geographers' attention one hundred years ago still interest us, the main research questions of the time have lost their fascination. The relatively narrow range of questions posed at that time reflected in part the influence of Darwinian thinking (e.g., Stoddart 1981), the small size and homogenous composition of the discipline, and the relatively few centers of geographic research and education. 11 Because investigating such questions required demanding fieldwork, often located in remote places where investigators lived for weeks in rustic conditions, and because women students and colleagues were not welcome on such ventures (Monk 2004), the male dominance of the discipline was not threatened for many decades.¹²

Set beside these beginnings, the panoply of contemporary geographic questions and approaches to answering them is staggering.¹³ One way of grasping this diversity is to note that current AAG members now choose among fifty-five topical proficiencies, fifty-seven area proficiencies, and fifty-three specialty groups (SGs); in contrast, a maximum of three SGs (one each for members with roots in geology, ontography, and economics) would probably have sufficed in the Association's earliest years (see endnote 9). Browsing through any recent annual meeting program or issue of the Annals is another way of appreciating the amplified variance in the set of contemporary geographic questions. These questions range from "How are humaninduced processes in the physical environment, such as ozone, affecting our physical, social, and economic environments?" to "How do human actions and discourses co-create race (or gender or ethnicity) and place?" "How can spatial analytical techniques improve understanding of geographic processes?" and "How can the distributions of environmental 'goods' and 'bads' be made more equitable?" These examples barely begin to exhaust the rich array of questions in contemporary geography.14

Some evidence supports the notion that the amplification in the range of questions asked—and change in the nature of some of the questions asked—is connected at least in part to our increased diversity, although I certainly do not believe that this is the sole reason. Significant gender differences in AAG specialty group membership, for example, indicate that women are disproportionately (relative to men) asking geographic questions about women, qualitative research methods,

and human–environment relationships, inter alia (Monk 2004, Table 5). Even among physical geographers, women and men have different areas of research interest and use different research methods (Luzzadder-Beach and Macfarlane 2000).¹⁵

Certain questions simply were not on geography's agenda until women began asking them. Examples are:

- the geography of everyday life;
- the links between the unpaid work of caring and work in the paid labor force;
- the impacts of international monetary policy on the lives of women and children
- the relationship of international migration to child care, domestic work, and the sex trade; and
- women's role in changing the face of the earth.

Changes in who "we" are has not just enlarged the range of questions asked; it has also helped to expand the approaches we use in collecting and analyzing data and to alter the nature of the theories that guide our views of the world. As Simone de Beauvoir observed in the midtwentieth century, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the truth" (cited in Fox Keller 1983, 15). As the identities of those creating geographic knowledge have become more plural, our representations of the world have gained an added richness and breadth that has enabled understanding of many previously neglected but important questions. I see the increased diversity in questions and approaches as a distinct plus for geography; no doubt my views reflect my background as an urban geographer, for as every urban geographer knows, perhaps the lesson of the city is the link between diversity and creativity.

Yet as "we" geographers become ever more diverse and, in part as a result, pose an ever-expanding assortment of questions, are we destined to disintegrate into ever more-specialized specialty groups? How can we sustain the "we" while encouraging the diversity that is the source of so much energy, creativity, and insight? Is it really even necessary to sustain a coherent "we"? I engage these questions in the next section.

The Geographic Advantage¹⁶

I believe that it is crucially important that we geographers sustain both our diversity and our identity as geographers; it is necessary to the continued vitality and future of the discipline, and it is necessary to serving the multiplicity of society's needs. To be a geographer in the U. S. today is to be repeatedly interrogated about our profession, in part precisely because of this variety in the

questions we ask: What it is that geographers do? What holds the field together? Why is geography important? If society is to appreciate how and why training in geography is essential to addressing contemporary problems, we geographers need to be able to convey to others outside the field, perhaps most importantly to students, what we do and why it is important. One way we convey the importance of geography and connect with nongeographers is surely through the (great diversity of the) specific questions we ask, and here our diversity can be a decided strength as it allows us to show the relevance of geography to a variety of problem areas (access to clean water, responses to climate change, sustaining biodiversity), in a range of settings and scales (urban neighborhoods, smallholder farms, national parks), and to an array of audiences (community groups, NGOs, government agencies). Whereas we geographers may understand—and I believe we do—what holds all this diversity together as "geography," I think we need to be able to communicate to those not familiar with our discipline just what this commonality-producing glue consists of.

We could do this by articulating what we might term "the geographic advantage," a phrase that communicates the truth that geographers have something to offer that others do not. This particular rendition of what constitutes the geographic advantage emerged from a group discussion I was part of last fall; we decided that the geographic advantage confers an understanding of:

- relationships between people and the environment;
- the importance of spatial variability (the place-dependence of processes);
- processes operating at multiple and interlocking geographic scales; and
- the integration of spatial and temporal analysis.

The seeds of the geographic advantage are evident in the topics addressed in the first volume of the *Annals*. Although "we" have become more diverse, this set of interlocking understandings that spans our diversity remains at the core of what we do.¹⁷ The world needs thinkers with the geographic advantage now more than ever to address such pressing questions as:

- How is immigration changing U.S. cities and U.S. connections with the rest of the world?
- How are globalization and transnationalism affecting people's livelihoods and political affiliations and identities in specific local places?

- How do human institutions shape the resilience of places to natural disasters and environmental change?
- What are the relationships between landscapes of diversity and geographies of conflict?
- How do geospatial technologies affect individual and societal decision making?
- How do new technologies (especially those associated with information technology) change the spatial organization of social processes?

These are some of the big questions that geographers are currently asking and that "we" geographers are distinctly suited to address. They reflect the diversity of questions that geographers currently pose, and they demonstrate the power of the geographic advantage.

Conclusion

On this centennial occasion it is worth reflecting on who "we" have been, who "we" have become, and why the question "Who are 'we'?" matters to our future. Certainly the membership of the AAG has never equated with membership in the discipline of geography, however defined. Since its birth here in Philadelphia one hundred years ago, the AAG has been an association focused primarily on scholarship and education, a key site for the creation and exploration of disciplinedefining questions. Because the questions we ask depend in part on who "we" are, changes in AAG membership have helped to broaden, complicate, and enrich the questions geographers pose. My hope for geography is that the membership of the AAG will ever more closely resemble the global society we increasingly serve. As this broadening of the AAG takes place and the variety of the questions we ask continues to amplify, will "we" dissolve into incoherence?

I propose that we sustain and even highlight the communal "we" of "we geographers" by articulating, particularly to those who are not geographers, what we might call the geographic advantage. This advantage is the analytical edge that we geographers bring as geographers to understanding the world; it is a set of uniquely geographic propositions that is at the core of our work as geographers. It is what holds us together and allows us to make our distinctive—and diverse—contributions. At some point in each of our own lives, someone managed to convince us that the geographic advantage offered an unparalleled lens for understanding the world. It remains up to us to communicate to others, especially through our teaching, the value of the geographic advantage. As we do so in a diversity of settings, with

diverse audiences, and through a broad range of questions, "we" will continue to grow in numbers and in understanding.

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Notes

- 1. Lions Club membership within the U. S. has fallen steadily since 1970 (the earliest figures available from the organization), such that the organization has lost nearly one-fifth of its membership in the past thirty-three years (from 522,525 to 432,988) (data obtained from Lions Club International).
- 2. This hypothetical assumes that the increased presence of women and visible minorities has neither induced nor discouraged white men from becoming geographers.
- This does represent progress! Those original forty-eight represented 0.0000006 of the U.S. population, whereas currently we account for fully 0.00025 of the U.S. population.
- 4. Certainly, many white men were excluded from the AAG of that time. Membership totaled 167 in 1941 and, after concerted efforts to attract geographers in government, 306 in 1948 when the AAG merged with the 1,094-member American Society for Professional Geographers (James and Martin 1978, 97, 102, 106).
- 5. Lee's figures are based on analysis of listings in the AAG's Guide to Geography Programs, which as Monk (2004) has pointed out, excluded small geography programs, undergraduate-only programs, and, at the time of Lee's study, geographers in government.
- Geography lags the physical sciences and the social sciences, however, in the proportion of bachelor's degrees awarded to women; the proportions are 34.7 percent in geography, 39.8 in the physical sciences, and 50.5 in the social sciences (Pandit 2004).
- 7. In 2002, only 1.2 percent of AAG members were black (cf. 12.3 percent of the U.S. population), 1.3 percent were Hispanic (cf. 13 percent of the population), and 5.4 percent were Asian (cf. 4 percent of the population).
- 8. Women are now about 12 percent of full professors (Raleigh 2001). Substantial gender disparities remain: about one-third (32.4 percent) of the female AAG membership has the PhD, compared to more than half (54.4 percent) of the male membership (more than three-quarters of those in the AAG with a PhD are men, and less than one-quarter are women).
- 9. Fellmann (1986) traces the origins of American economic geography to the historicism that became influential in German economics in the latter part of the nineteenth

- century. When economists dropped interest in time- and place-specific studies, geographers picked it up.
- 10. A complete list of the twenty-two papers presented in 1904 appears in James and Martin (1978, 40, 41).
- 11. It is interesting to reflect on how geographic factors themselves affected the intellectual development of the discipline. James and Martin (1978, 20) note how face-to-face interaction among early AAG members was seriously constrained by the friction of distance: "During this period there was very little contact between geographers working at Harvard with a foundation in geology, geographers at Yale with the ontographic viewpoint, and geographers working at Pennsylvania with a foundation in economics. Travel between these places was not lightly undertaken, and certainly not for casual purposes."
- 12. Women geographers did go into the field, but their field-work was often hampered by their marginalized position within the academy as well as by male exclusionary practices (Monk 2004).
- 13. On the assumption that most readers are familiar with the wide range of contemporary geographic questions, I will not describe this panoply in great detail.
- 14. In addition to asking a multiplicity of diverse questions, geographic researchers now employ approaches that run the full gamut from controlled experiment to ethnography, remote sensing and GIS, archival research, statistical analysis of survey data and of census and other secondary data, and textual analysis. Some rely on fieldwork; others do not.
- 15. Women favor biogeography, men geomorphology; women physical geographers use quantitative methods, whereas men emphasize laboratory methods more than their female counterparts.
- 16. This section incorporates ideas exchanged at a strategic planning meeting for the Geography and Regional Science Program at the National Science Foundation, October 24–25, 2003. Present at this meeting were Ron Abler, Richard Aspinall, Tom Baerwald, Bernie Bauer, Gregory Chu, Roger Downs, Pat Gober, J.W. Harrington, David Hodge, Brian Holly, Nina Lam, Vicky Lawson, Tom Leinbach, and myself.
- 17. In this view I see the field as already pursuing the *union* option, which Turner (2002, 64) sees as an unlikely scenario for geography's future.

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