
Critical media and communications studies necessarily converge around interdisciplinarity and a willingness to critically activate various types of interventions and methods of inquiry. These qualities enable a malleability for analysis and application, allowing for appropriate configurations depending on the context of the inquiry in question. Across a range of different events and instances, the nebulous body of media studies allows a capacity for importing nuanced ideas and revisions around interrogating media and communication as academic, interpretive, and lived practices. Pushing the notion of developing analytic and theoretical capabilities, perhaps the most pertinent and valuable exercise is continually locating alternative trajectories for self-consciously considering various methodological and epistemological terrains. So, to further critical media studies, it is arguable that concerns of critical geography are not far off.

In Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries, Robyn Longhurst offers a theoretical and ethnographic intervention using case studies to explore the intersections of material bodies, mediated spaces, and dominant cultural narrative discourses. Longhurst ruminates on the processual generation of cultural knowledge and the interconnected and adherent discontents of social power. Using the planes and fields of late modern everyday life and the site of the body as a highly mediated space of varying geographies, Longhurst self-reflexively maps out a meta-discursive critique of the development and fixing of traditional dominant modes of geographical knowledge. In interrogating the mediated spaces of the everyday that both invite embodiment and necessitate the circulation of physical material human bodies, Longhurst urgently challenges status quo constructions and productions of geographical academic knowledge by studying the relationships between power, places, and people. Longhurst challenges what she argues to be hegemonic, masculinist discourses in the generation of geographical knowledge—a disciplined site that ideologically elides and denies the discussion of gendered locations of messy, material, fluid bodies. The conceptualization of bodies, both geographically and in the social and cultural space of the academy, is the organizing mandate of Longhurst’s study. With fluidity comes the problematizing of solid boundaries and limitations, both in the politics of people and place and also in the production of power and authority around bodies of geographical knowledge. Longhurst’s approach is appealing to the larger body of communications and media studies in its reliance on a definitive mix of critical social theory and cultural studies. Inhabiting a space at the margins of critical geography practice, Longhurst positions her work within the confines of a debate that questions the “doing” of scholarship and theory, geographically or otherwise. Hence the potential for similar considerations in critical communications and media studies. The margins here urgently map onto modes of inquiry around emergent, critical discourses of Western post-structural epistemology. Beyond the rudimentary mandates of deconstruction and motifs of suspicion and skepticism, this “post-structural” is a constellation of approaches that is acting and has already acted as a vehicle for multiple epistemic revisions and radical theoretical permutations in the academy. Yet it locates a critical geography and a way of inquiring into mediated spaces: sites of contested communicative practices in language and discourse, with hegemonic and instituted practices that define and circumscribe “naturalized” events, narratives, and phenomena. This critical cultural approach allows for the emphasis to be put on everyday practices and how they are coded, regulated, iterated, and eventually self-regulate mediated activities to inscribe dominant semiotic regimes and circuits of power.

Longhurst’s study is first a useful theoretical arc that maps the discursive terrain of critical geography. It then moves to a series of ethnographic case studies that interrogate the
status of messy, material bodies in specific places. Her framework is ubiquitously feminist, which is to say that it seeks to negotiate masculinist discourses that govern and manage the implications of study and the larger discipline. Longhurst’s conceptual methodology is corporogeographical. A concept generated by critical geographer Gillian Rose in reference to the lack of critical mappings of actual material bodies in space, Longhurst uses it to address the current “body craze” in critical discourse. According to Longhurst, negotiating hegemonic discourses of geography means moving through and beyond these post-structural and postmodernist conceptualizations of bodies as sites of textual inscription. This is not to say Longhurst denies the discursive, political, and theoretical importance of theorists such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Rather, Longhurst allies herself with fellow feminist critical geographers with interests in theorizing a corporeal, messy material body—Rose and Elizabeth Grosz—thus privileging embodiment that does not “[take] flight from fluids and mess” (p. 133), which locates fluidity as a subversive borderline, liminal state. In thinking about fluids and corporeality, Longhurst also develops the thinking of both Grosz and Julia Kristeva around abjection. Abjection comes to mean exclusion and Other for Longhurst, the thing that is ugly, evacuated of pleasure, and disgusting in the face of more culturally desirable bodies in space. It is something that describes both an object and a zone. In this, disgust and desire are dialectically related, and in relation become a consideration that material bodies intentionally and unintentionally negotiate in spaces of cultural and social circulation. Abjection also allows Longhurst to set up the binaries she seeks to undermine and question in discourse: solid/ fluid, mind/ body, rational/ irrational, public/ private, concept/ corporeal, male/ female, desire/ disgust, enunciation/ erasure.

The case studies interrogate the spatialization of bodies and the discursive authority of certain gender-specific cultural narratives available to actual material bodies in space. They explicitly address three culturally significant instances that, in terms of traditional conceptual methods of geographical inquiry, she recognizes as having been symptomatically silenced and voided of any substantial treatment in scholarship: the circulation of pregnant bodies in public spaces; accounts of male bodies in relation to private toilet and bathroom use; and the movement and disciplining status of managerial bodies in urban business districts. These subordinate bodies emerge from the problematic theoretical and epistemological concerns Longhurst privileges, namely the hierarchization and subordination of leaky material bodies in public space to a feminized and subaltern status and the subsequent reluctance of geographers and academic modes of inquiry in general to adequately theorize and consider these bodies and spaces. Positioning herself in opposition to the “natural” body of geographical knowledge, Longhurst’s conceptual fluid-based approach forwards interpretations to provide a motivation for revising, rethinking, and re-articulating critical geographies. This approach emphasizes the discursive and unobtrusive regulation and disciplining of corporeal bodies. Longhurst is concerned with feminized bodies, conceptually coded as such to be delegitimized and devalued in opposition to the normative and naturalized masculine notion of solidity and control—bodily figures invested with power, legitimacy, and status. The abject and pervasive threat of leakage and fluidity of feminized bodies across her three studies necessarily undermines the presumed dominance of idealized unitary masculine bodies: leakage is the actual corporeal norm that is being disavowed and effaced.

The implication for Longhurst is that dominant academic versions of geographical methodologies and modes of inquiry operate by Othering supposed alien bodies that reveal or call attention to this; hence the subaltern, marginalized status of fluidity. This is quite a claim. Yet while media theorists and communications scholars may think a revisionist project such as Longhurst’s has already left its tracks through their respective corners of the academy, her considerations install an increased impetus for avoiding reversions to hege-
monic frames, which privilege certain conceptual and methodological approaches and formations determined by entrenched ideological biases. For Longhurst, the terrain of the everyday is a highly contested yet policed, prohibitive, and often colonized place. This sense of space versus place elucidates not only a politics of everyday life, intersecting and locating social and cultural activities, but also implicitly maps these everyday political tensions as colonizing forces across and through the academic territories. Longhurst demonstrates that any contestation is often predetermined and that power lies in proving who and what is sufficient and able—usually solid masculine bodies. Via this privilege, these mediated spaces geographically become power-laden places inviting little subjective negotiation. Deliberations concluded otherwise are displaced and disavowed. Longhurst argues that the greatest irony is that leaky bodies are in fact the most flexible. Yet, hard solid bodies enjoy easier movement in normative culturally mediated spaces, their solidity displacing the terms of a real fluid flexibility to political and ideological underpinnings in geography, power, and discourse. Bodies coded as “not flexible” are then ugly and abject, and Longhurst claims this ideologically reinstalls a monolithic rendition of idealized and normative bodies that naturalizes the notion of culturally biased “truth” about attractiveness, ability, and value.

What finally comes out of Longhurst’s corporeal analysis of bodies and spaces as neither separable nor stable is thinking around what she labels “close(t) spaces.” The notion of boundaries—as retaining and reinstating a veneer of order and unity across otherwise disparate and discontinuous spaces in corporeal materiality, public subjectivity, or cultural geographical spaces and contexts—is always being contested. According to Longhurst, ignoring closet spaces ignores anything coded as intimate, queer, other, or marginal, and this ignorance is a strategic absence with respect to geographical discourse, allowing tropes of masculinity to retain hegemonic status within the discipline as built in to generations of theoretical and methodological configurations. Ultimately, this is a pointed and political critique: “Close(t) spaces need an opportunity to come out in geography” (p. 124) Corporeal codes and conceptualizations are then both abstract signifiers of value and distinction while also providing the site for the practice and contestation of power in the contemporary mediated spaces that converge with social and cultural practices of late modern everyday life, both lived or in the academy. Subtleties, unconscious structures, naturalized and normative behaviours and interactions, and “common sense” protocols are all thrown into a questioned relief: these things become micropolitical spaces of complex cultural encodings and decodings that are accepted, negotiated, and perhaps opposed by the corporeal and conceptual bodies both mediated by and mediating spaces and powerfully politicized places.

Thus Longhurst’s critique of geography’s epistemological frameworks offers an alternative consideration of communicative events and an alternative corporeal conceptualization of space. This doing of critical geography serves to map the tensions in cultural practices that structure relationships and identifications with coded, common understandings that define a series of powerful social relations. Locating these tensions allows an opportunity to describe and explain how such understandings are imposed, imparted, and regulated as cultural meta- and micro-narratives of discipline and surveillance in the place of the everyday and historically across critical conceptualizations of media, communications, and geographies. The re-articulation of bodies and fluidity in the space of critical geography suggests the need for theory and academic inquiry to remain especially politicized. Longhurst clearly develops an understanding for a decisive and at times debilitating economy of power existing in academe. Critical discourse is and becomes a measure of power and abjection: what can be studied and how and what is closeted and foreclosed is very much the issue. With this, Longhurst traces the tension she can never really alleviate, which is the ironic re-mystification of bodies that now-formalized (conservative?) post-structural analysis tends to reduce to the space of the textual. Although bodies are leaky and
messy, does “out of control” actually mean anarchic and random, something to be “unknown”? I suspect not, and Longhurst is consistent in describing how spatialization and corporeality are sites of negotiation where cultural/ideological bodies of knowledge have conceptually coded them in certain ways. Thus mystification is not paradoxical but tactical, part of a strategy of altering and problematizing the reproduction and production of material bodies and knowledges.

Longhurst’s contribution is notable in the simple fact that her topics of treatment are lacking elsewhere. Studying leaky corporogeographies and fluidity—actually and discursively—articulates a recognition of these instances and scenes and acknowledges the lack of sufficient critical treatment and consideration in terms of mapping the constellations of power she addresses. Longhurst activates a different point of departure and mobilizes a sound dissenting voice from the margins of the academy. She seeps, as do her scenes and subjects, across the porous boundaries that seemed to be so solid. She questions not only the authority of certain cultural events, narratives, and practices but locates how the subordinate bodies and the material trajectories they follow indicate the play of power in the larger circuits of the academy as an institution. In Longhurst, authority vested in apparent solidity is exposed itself as leaky, closer to an always-permeable barrier constantly subject to fluid movements.

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