One always inhabits culture. Language is *das Haus des Seins*, quoth Heidegger, and culture as a symbolic system is the house where one lives, where being is politicized and materialized. John Fiske, interested in practices of everyday living and their relation to the study of culture, turns to Bourdieu to recuperate a sense of *dwelling* in culture: “The concept ‘habitus’ contains the meanings of habitat, habitant, the processes of habitation and habit [...] A habitat is a social environment in which we live: it is a product of both its position in the social space and of the practices of the social beings who inhabit it” (Fiske 1992). As habitats, things that are socially constructed – or, culture – are inhabitable for some, uninhabitable for others. Some move freely in these cultural spaces, some are encumbered or without access. Culture is welcoming to some, bleak and hostile to others. Processes of othering make worlds inimical for some bodies, and friendly approach others. Frantz Fanon’s account of black body-formation within a habitat saturated with whiteness gives a phenomenological account of not being at home: “In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. [...] The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (1967: 110-111). Epistemic violence acts like an environmental hazard on subject integrity, a deadening atmosphere, a suffocating habitat for non-white bodies. As bodies are in this way *surrounded by* and *becoming themselves in relation to* the furnishings of cultural constructs, the dis/comforting forces of culture’s materiality become visible and affectively known: culture – that is texts, constellations, images, practices, subjectivities, networks – bids welcome some forms of human life, and remains indifferent, ill-fitting or deadly to others. A sense of misplacement is tangible, things are not where they’re supposed to be. Space is too narrow, too wide, or just wrong. A set of ornate art deco stairs in New York is readable in cultural studies terms – and a site mostly uninhabitable to wheelchair users. Cultural studies methodologies should be able to register how people and bodies oftentimes do not fit cultural constructions and how these constructions offer different degrees of *livability* to people.

Accordingly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes culture and identity as a strictly relational affair – while some forms of life are allowed to fit within cultural givings, others have to edge uneasily against them as *misfits*: “The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together” (2011:...
Forms of life must therefore be taken literally, as well as relationally to cultural formations: round wheels do not fit square stairs, bodies become black by misfitting (in) white looking regimes, and queer performance squats the heteronormative building, with the intention of bringing the house down. Garland-Thomson’s call for a materialist critique of ableist culture that produces some people as misfits within its formations and spaces, provides a relational perspective on culture as something that one inhabits, lives in, is enveloped in, materially, emotionally, by way of thought, experience and action. Cultural constructions are habitations – locations and topoi one has a degree of homeliness with, is habituated with, feels unease in, exclusion from. In them, there is comfort, uncanniness, disorientation.

Gayatri Spivak (1985) writes that culturation (and interpretation of culture) entails processes of worlding, the violent production of engulfing life-worlds. Her examples are imperialist and colonial cultures, whose epistemic aporias constitute the possible versions of what world is. To think in postcolonial terms is to inhabit these paradoxes of colonialist worldings. The question is always, what worlds are produced? To whom are they inhabitable, to whom not? What ways of habitation are enabled or disabled? Who is given to categorical and material homelessness? How does one make comfort in the habitations offered by culture: can they be squatted, can one live queerly in straight corridors? How do habitations alter ways of living, causing them to flourish, vegetate or die? Representational analysis is looking to the blueprint to find out how things cultural are constructed – the perspective of critical habitations looks to the livability of these constructions.

Being in such an environment is a palpable thing, a difference between feeling welcome and constantly struggling for presence. As a metaphor for livability, queer theorist Samantha Allen (2014) has utilized videogames as a pedagogical tool to investigate and teach about social privilege. By modularly changing the difficulty level of shooting games – less ammunition, restricted movement, tougher enemies, smarter AI, asf. – she asks students to experience the digitally enveloping game-habitats as a visceral simile to a world that offers different levels of cultural entitlement and resources to people. Whiteness, she argues, allows one to approach social challenges of Western society on the easiest difficulty. Like the easy mode in videogames, white privilege lets one experience a world that is geared towards homeliness and support. It keeps the player safe and successful, ensures progress, control and enjoyment, and minimizes punishment for failure. At the same time, harder difficulties are less forgiving, encumber performance, bring frustration, tension, and virtual death. Privilege and disenfranchisement in
Allen’s metaphor thus extend environmentally towards the player; they enable and disable, and create atmospheres of being welcome or struggling to survive.

Standpoint and Habitat

Jasbir Puar’s salient critique of intersectionality (2011) calls for the recuperation of movement, stalled by the grids of intersecting axes of difference. Acknowledging the fluidity of performances and dynamics of subjectivity, she views the infinite combinations and machinations of difference not in terms of intersectional grids, but as dynamic networks of disparate elements, as ever-changing assemblages. Since the strategic essentialisms of identity politics have been implemented as technologies of identification (racial profiling, homo-nationalism) in control societies, Puar’s call for fluidity and dynamism is also reactive to the re-emergence of representational critique as policing technology, or “soft biopolitics” (Cheney-Lippold 2011). In this change from politics to policy, a room of one’s own has become a personal(ized) cell in the panopticon of minority profiling.

In tandem with this critical turn to subject- and discourse-dynamics, critical habitations propose an alternative to positional thinking. Habitations highlight that locations within a cultural system are always roomier and more dynamic than the punctuations of standpoint theory reveal. They allow for diverse types of performance, affective experience, hiding. Being in culture is, in this view, fundamentally about experiencing space, being orientated within it, doing things in relation to objects and diverse assemblages, and – in Sara Ahmed’s terminology – the sharing of space, or co-habitation. What alternative sites and ways of dwelling are there to be found? Maybe one can inhabit white masculinity like an orphanage and not like a mansion, disability like a fortress. Some co-habitate gender like a cheap hotel or a closet. To inhabit the paradoxes of discursive environments is to make one’s home in there, to find ways of – however uneasily – dwelling in and sharing bodies, spaces, subjectivities.

Politics and Habits

As culture offers habitations of varying livability, the practices of living also give shape to space. A blind person becomes habituated in the adversarial space of seeing culture and changes its confines and meanings. Conversely, white space is reified by sticking to what Ahmed calls the bad habit of whiteness – that is, whiteness “as a series of actions repeated, forgotten, and that
allow some bodies to take up space by restricting the mobility of others” (2006: 129). Cultural habitats are in this view confining, but simultaneously realized and altered by being differently inhabited. A habitation acquires shape through the relational habituation of bodies within it: drag knows her way around gender and finds unexpected queer things to do within and to it. Garland-Thomson attributes epistemological privileges to bodies that misfit in cultural constructs, stressing that habituation in adversarial spaces builds adaptability and inventiveness: “Acquiring or being born with the traits we call disabilities fosters an adaptability and resourcefulness that often is underdeveloped in those whose bodies fit smoothly into the prevailing, sustaining environment” (2011: 604).

The concept of habituation therefore should entail thinking about politics in a way that stresses the resourcefulness of how bodies interact with cultural topographies, making cultural spaces roomier. These politics are arranged less around clear points of intervention, critique and affirmation, but are about feeling one’s way around stuff. In affective encounters with habitations, one makes new sense of the surroundings, sensing out things and bodies, intuitively rearranging their relations, tinkering with the architecture. Queer shame inhabits and rearranges the encasing of sexual otherness in decidedly discomforted and discomforting ways without necessarily moving out of the building. Because you cannot just leave, and old rooms keep the ghosts of former inhabitants. As we are habituated to the cultural sites that (g)host us, even addicted to them like a bad habit, these sites act also like recording devices, bearing our impressions and marks.

Can you breathe?

Emancipatory politics are about a room of one’s own, they are about (re)claiming, creating, or building a habitation. They are also about tearing those constructions down that exchange livability for necropolitics or slow death. They are about detecting and politicizing the ways in which culture affects and prevents living. The international declarations of “I can’t breathe” in reaction to the murder of Eric Garner protest the suffocating and deadly environment constituted by police racism in the U.S. and elsewhere. Cultural studies should register these environmental threats to health and life, created by cultural formations that are racist and ableist, and violently act through moods, atmospheres, climates, spaces, creating habitats that are impoverished, stifling, and deadly.
Critical habitations are about looking into, feeling around, and breaking down these spaces that have been denied, created, given, claimed, poisoned, locked up. How does one live in them, who dies in them? Critical habitations probe the rooms and habitats of culture; to the extent that culture is never just used, consumed, or read, critical habitations ask how one is surrounded by, traverses through, is detained in, shapes and is shaped by – how one dwells, lives and dies – in the landscapes, architectures and chokeholds of culture.

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Works Cited


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