

# On EMBODIED KNOWING AND RESISTANCE In Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space

Rose Cullis

Now I a fourfold vision see/ And  
a fourfold vision is given to me/ Tis four-  
fold in my supreme delight/ And threefold  
in soft Beulah's night/ And two-fold al-  
ways/ May God us keep from single vision  
and Newton's sleep!

A narrow and desiccated rati-  
onality of this kind overlooks the core and  
foundation of space, the total body, the  
brain, gestures, and so forth. It forgets  
that space does not consist in the projec-  
tion of an intellectual representation,  
does not arise from the visible-readable  
realm, but that it is first of all heard (lis-  
tened to) and enacted (through physical  
gestures and movements)?

When I was a child I was a fierce animist. As  
a result, I have a vivid memory of the way the  
tenets and practices of the society I opened  
into required me to constrain my sense of the  
whole world as wildly alive and responsive.  
My attachment to this kind of sensibility was  
so pronounced and extended that my friends  
took to teasing me about it by kicking dis-  
carded potato chip bags down the street for  
the sheer pleasure of seeing me care. And so I  
engaged the process of learning to care a little  
bit less – of learning that *that* kind of being in  
the world is not only unnecessarily tortuous –  
but also epistemically suspect in its appeal to  
a kind of ecstatic subjectivity. In this manner  
the narrative that aligns dispassionate analysis  
with rationality in western approaches to  
knowing engaged my physical being.

And this truncated sensibility was  
further produced and supported by the spa-  
tial texture of the material world I inhabited.  
The suburbs where I grew up were a bleak ex-  
cuse for a landscape, for instance. It felt like  
a world of flattened affect – and the indus-  
trial parkland, hydro fields, corner plazas de-  
signed for cars, and rows of houses with alu-  
minium siding and burnt lawns, offered me a  
geography that was as implacable and un-  
yielding as the rules that our society em-  
ployed to manage “reality”.

In the following essay I want to  
draw on Henri Lefebvre's contemporary criti-  
cal theory of the production of space in order  
to explore his suggestion that recovering as-  
pects of our embodiment might serve to chal-  
lenge the aggressive spatial practices of con-  
temporary capitalism. In his text, *The  
Production of Space*, Lefebvre contends that  
social space is socially produced. Space has  
texture and content, according to Lefebvre –  
it is not an empty “void” awaiting content.<sup>3</sup>  
He differentiates between three “moments” in  
the production of social space: spatial prac-  
tice, representations of space, and representa-  
tional space. In our contemporary spatial  
practice, Lefebvre suggests, *representations of  
space* – that is, planned space, the built envi-  
ronment – steadily encroach upon and seek to  
dominate *representational space* – the lived  
space where we actively make meaning  
through the production of art, symbols, tem-  
ples, rituals, etc.

It is in representational space that a  
robust fecundity is located, according to  
Lefebvre. Here our shared experience creates a  
kind of erotic economy in the production of  
space. We engage in a constant process of  
making new meaning together. We co-mingle  
and spill over in a manner that challenges and  
destabilizes any fixed and finalized experien-  
tial parameters.

The following discussion will pro-  
ceed by leaps and bounds. My primary inten-  
tion is to map out some of the concerns and  
issues that emerge around the politics of em-  
bodied knowing in Henri Lefebvre's approach  
to the production of space – and to use them  
to roughly fashion a way of imagining how  
our embodied agency might function.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACE AND REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE

At times the body, which we  
have yet to explore, gets covered up, con-  
cealed from view, but then it re-emerges –  
then it is as if it were resuscitated. Does this  
suggest a connection between the history  
of the body and the history of space? (196)



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INVITES



PEOPLE

I want to begin this discussion of  
Lefebvre's account of how embodied knowing  
aligns itself with emancipatory activities in the  
production of space by drawing some analogies  
between his project and theoretical approaches  
in the philosophy of language. My intention  
here is not to conflate the two areas of study –  
rather, I want to tease out certain striking and  
shared problematics in order that they can  
“play” together. In particular, I want to suggest  
that “correspondence theories of meaning” –  
where language is understood as a user-neutral  
tool that provides transparent access to real en-  
tities – betray an urge to master meaning in a  
manner that is analogous to Lefebvre's descrip-  
tion of how the space produced by capitalism  
ultimately functions (and seeks) to constrain  
lived (transgressive) space. On the other hand,  
Wittgenstein's “network theory of meaning” –  
where meaning in language emerges in the so-  
cial practices and activities it is embedded in –  
shares with Lefebvre's approach a sense that our  
lived experience has a productive, constitutive  
function.<sup>4</sup>

Correspondence theories of mean-  
ing assume that terms in language can be  
made to correspond directly to representa-  
tions/entities in the “real world”. Language is  
ideally *transparent* in these accounts where “to  
know the truth requires that general notions  
be broken down into their component parts,  
which are the *reflections of reality itself*.”<sup>5</sup> In the  
1920s and 30s, for instance, the logical posi-  
tivists sought to strip language of its subjective  
aspects in order to gain access to “pure objec-  
tive reality”. The idea was that it might be pos-  
sible to describe phenomena directly without  
reference to any corrupting concepts or ideas.

An observational report would  
consist merely of descriptions of experi-  
enced colours and shapes (for example, a  
brown rectangle with four protrusions in  
each corner) but the object as such would  
not be classified (as a table). The purpose  
of the method was to eliminate from sci-  
entific observation any contamination by  
metaphysical assumptions.<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein was originally part of  
this project to master language by fixing the  
conditions of its meaningfulness. In his  
*Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* he attempted to



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develop a "picture theory of language" that would serve to establish certain *a priori* axioms for meaning in language.

Eventually Wittgenstein completely abandoned this effort – identifying and rejecting in the process some key problematic assumptions with it. In particular, Wittgenstein suggested that realism and idealism are expressions of the same pernicious notion that "reality" exists in some fixed and finalized way outside of its expression – and that we can seek to represent it "accurately."<sup>7</sup> In his later work Wittgenstein instead grounds the emergence of meaning in the *bodiliness* that makes social exchange possible. The meaning of a term is determined by its usage – by the gestures and activities that accompany its application. Furthermore, that usage's coherence is embedded in "forms of life" that provide the conditions that both constrain meaning and make its *emergent* expression possible. Thus, the terms in any given language will drift associatively and their meaningfulness will reflect (and effect) the network of relations (material and linguistic) that inform them.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary theory is full of examinations and interrogations of the manner in which meaning (the subject, experience, gender, nature, sex, the body etc.) is constructed.<sup>9</sup> In many senses, Lefebvre's examination of how we produce space is another in a series of a collective project of identifying and understanding new sites of cultural artifactuality.<sup>10</sup> What Lefebvre shares with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is a particular way of thinking about the production of meaning as something grounded in material relations that exhibit emergent possibilities. Under these conditions any attempt to fix and finalize meaning prior to its expression betrays a misunderstanding of the constitutive part of the equation – of the way that we not only find, but also make new meaningful spaces together.

In Lefebvre's critique of capitalism's project of domination, for instance, he describes the way an attempt is made to capture space and hold it fast for the purposes of supporting relations of production that have been naturalized as "real" (and by that

process, concealed from awareness). But because new spaces emerge in practice, this project is continually threatened by contradictions – by the creative fertility of what it needs to possess.

The bourgeoisie and the capitalist system thus experience great difficulty in mastering what is at once their product and the tool of their mastery, namely space. They find themselves unable to reduce practice (the practico-sensory realm, the body, social-spatial practice) to their abstract space, and hence new, spatial, contradictions arise and make themselves felt. Might not the spatial chaos engendered by capitalism, despite the power and rationality of the state, turn out to be the system's Achilles' heel? (63)

I have already introduced what Lefebvre describes as three key (always interconnected) "moments" in the production of space – but they need some additional "fleshing out" here. A society's *spatial practice*, according to Lefebvre, is the concrete, material expression of the way that any particular society negotiates the relations between representations of space and representational space. This is the space that we perceive – the fleshy, windy, rocky (in our case polluted, depleted) "is-ness" of our world – the texture of the space we occupy.<sup>11</sup> According to Lefebvre, spatial practices reflect a society's mode of production, and tend to reproduce the particular social relations that support them.<sup>12</sup>

Representations of space refer to a space that is *conceived*, and constructed on the basis of that conception. This is the space of "scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers" (38), and includes the production of that society's "physical plant" – its buildings, roads, bridges, etc.

Representations of space must therefore have a substantial role and specific influence in the production of space. Their intervention occurs by way of construction – in other words, by way of architecture, conceived of not as the building of a particular structure, palace or monument, but rather as a project embedded in a spatial context and a texture which calls for "representations" that will not vanish into the symbolic or imaginary realms. (42)

Like the project of the logical positivists there is a certain stolidity – a sort of impervious determination to be in a particular way – in the way representations of space operate.<sup>13</sup> Lefebvre suggests that this "moment" tries to fix itself in time – that representations of space are acutely impositional over time under a capitalist mode of production which

"begins by producing things and by 'investing' in places" (219). Eventually capitalism functions to *reduce* time in a manner that interrupts the development of those social relations that make new meaning possible.

The relationship between space and time is critical here. "Time is distinguishable but not separable from space" (175) Lefebvre tells us. But under capitalism representations of space predominate in such a way that an "abstract space" is created that "relates negatively" to the way time destabilizes and reconstitutes fixed meanings. Abstract space functions instead to absolve any subtle and disturbing distinctions in our lived experience – and to recategorize them under "a sort of super-signification that escapes meaning's net". It reifies rigid and crude distinctions, and mines lived experience only to pickle those "parts" which subvert critical awareness.

Abstract space functions "objectally", as a set of things/signs and their formal relationships: glass and stone, concrete and steel, angles and curves, full and empty... A symbolism which is derived from that mis-taking of sensory, sensual and sexual which is intrinsic to the things/signs of abstract space finds objective expression in derivative ways: monuments have a phallic aspect, towers exude arrogance... A characteristic contradiction of abstract space consists in the fact that, although it denies the sensual and the sexual, its only immediate point of reference is generality: the family unit, the type of dwelling (apartment, bungalow, cottage etc.) fatherhood and motherhood, and the assumption that fertility and fulfillment are identical. (49)

So purposive is the urge under abstract space to overwhelm and manage all aspects of spatial practice that even the "everyday" emerges as a category or an area of study – and subject as such to the incursions of expert judgments and summaries. In the name of public health, public education, or "human resource management" the social sciences have steadily defined new study parameters for observing human behavior, for instance. Theories of "optimal lifestyles" are painstakingly defined and articulated and ultimately function to align themselves with relations of power in the production of space.

Representational space, alternatively, is *alive* – it "embraces the loci of passion, of action, and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time" (42). It is the site of lived space – the locus of our symbolizing activities – the space where we find and

make meaning together. This is the space of lived experience – the space where our embodied awareness (interpenetrated with spatial practice and representations of space) is expressed in works of art, temples, childhood memories, dreams – all those “products” of our sensuous/imaginative engagement with the world that elude abstraction and tidy categorizations.

Representational spaces, on the other hand, need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness. Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history – in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people. Ethnologists, anthropologists and psychoanalysts are students of such representational spaces, whether they are aware of it or not, but they nearly always forget to set them alongside those representations of space which co-exist, concord or interfere with them... (41).

How does our embodiment relate to these moments in the production of space? Lefebvre suggests that our bodies – our living, breathing bodies with their polyphonic sensual expressiveness – function within representational space to insist upon that kind of emergent meaningfulness that cannot be reduced to abstract laws with their causal generalizations. In representational space a shift occurs “from the space of the body, to the body in space” (201).

But what is the nature of this shift, and how does it reflect our body’s “radical potential”<sup>14</sup> under the thrall of abstract space? In Lefebvre’s work our embodiment exhibits and inhabits a fertile and contradictory space that cannot be reduced to parts – it eludes the detached incursions of abstract space because its fluid emergent living operates differently. In recovering our embodiment as a source of knowing, we engage in a practice that is revolutionary because it is *participatory*.<sup>15</sup>

### THIS BODY OF MINE THAT ISN’T

Indeed the fleshly (spatio-temporal) body is already in revolt. This revolt, however, must not be understood as a harking-back to origins, to some archaic or anthropological past: it is firmly anchored in the here and now, and the body in question is ‘ours’ – our body, which is disdained, absorbed, and broken into pieces by images. Worse than disdained – ignored. This is not a political rebellion, a substitute for social revolution, nor is it a revolt for freedom: it is an elemental and worldwide revolt which does not seek a

theoretical foundation, but rather seeks by theoretical means to rediscover – and recognize – its own foundations. Above all, it asks theory to stop barring its way in this, to stop helping conceal the underpinnings that it is at pains to uncover. Its exploratory activity is not directed towards some kind of ‘return to nature’, nor is it conducted under the banner of an imagined ‘spontaneity’. Its object is ‘lived experience’ ... there can be no question but that social space is the locus of prohibition, for it is shot through with both prohibitions and their counterparts, prescriptions. This fact, however, can most definitely not be made into the basis of an overall definition, for space is not only the space of ‘no’, it is also the space of the body, and hence the space of ‘yes’, of the affirmation of life. (201)

In the second section of this paper, I will very briefly consider some concerns that have been articulated among various cultural theorists and feminist scholars about whether “embodied knowing” is predicated on notions of essentialism and individualism that have been employed to “naturalize” constructed categories and subvert critical analysis. These theorists question the politics of appeals to the “essential” or “innocent” identities suggested by “spontaneous” experience. In light of these critiques it is important to consider whether Lefebvre’s notion of the role of embodied experience in the production of space addresses any of these issues.

In Michel Foucault’s seminal texts the body is “inscribed” by regulatory practices that the “enlightenment fiction” of the autonomous self-aware individual only serves to help conceal.<sup>16</sup> Unproblematized accounts of personal experience can support existing power relations by failing to acknowledge the way that subjects and their bodies are constructed by the regulatory regimes and discursive practices of that society. Similarly, early feminist practices that strove to link the personal with the political by relying on accounts of personal experience are being challenged by textual approaches that seek to uncover how gender is produced without postulating alternative ideal subject identities.<sup>17</sup> Thus in Judith Butler’s theory of “gender performativity”, for instance, fissures and cracks in the body politic (such as parodic or “obsessive” behaviours) constitute a set of actions that are shaped and made possible by the very regulatory social practices their resistance highlights.<sup>18</sup>

Such studies of how identity is produced and reproduced by socio-economic conditions are of critical importance – but perhaps we need to be wary of the way that these activities can also function to support

our society’s tendency to conflate self-knowledge with dispassionate analysis, so that,

The space of this body is reduced to that of two measurable but problematic tropes, sexuality and observability, conflated through the critique of representation. These bodies remain in an abstracted space, a philosophical space, rendered as a space of surfaces, which is to say, no space at all!<sup>19</sup>

Is this an example of representations of space encroaching upon “lived, representational space” in the production of knowledges? “The body” becomes a site to be studied from the outside in; even critical analysis inexorably aligns itself with this activity.

Suppose we think instead of the body with/in space, as Lefebvre does. A relationship is disclosed that reveals a fertile tension where “each living body *is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space” (170). This generative “give and take” between what shapes the body, and what the body shapes is both analytically accessible and discursively irreducible. It is analytically accessible because we can describe and seek to understand the particular codes and practices of a given society. But our bodies are also discursively irreducible because studying those codes and practices presupposes and depends upon an embodied context that makes that activity meaningful and that we can never be fully aware of.

In Lefebvre’s account then, the body is characterized by a rich assortment of symmetries and surfaces that inform one another, and that cannot be collapsed without losing “tensive aliveness”. As such, our bodies provide a kind of “site in process” where the unity of time and space serves to preserve “difference within repetition” (203). And this living being is productive, according to Lefebvre – it accumulates and discharges energy to produce new spaces and contexts for ways of knowing.

A body imagined like this – simultaneously occupying space and occupied by space – subverts appeals to essential identities. Thus Lefebvre’s formulation of bodies in space is of critical interest, and it suggests that any abstract analysis of the subject needs to be supported by testifying from that multifaceted awareness that is our embodiment. When the subject is produced by and productive of a space that is held open by a tension attributable to all that it simultaneously is and is not – then we need to spend time attending to how we feel as well as interrogating possible sources of feeling.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Ruby. Leonard's just one of those people for me. When I'm with Leonard I'm stupid, needy, insane...

Charlie. ...That's OK. When I'm with Leonard...

Hm!

(she pauses to think about it)

Ruby. ...You know how some people make you feel like a particular kind of person? Even my body feels different with some people. Like sometimes, with some people, I feel bony and awkward...

Charlie. ...No, I know what you mean. But when I'm with Leonard...

Ruby. ...And with other people, I feel wiry, more energetic...

Charlie. ...I guess I feel like Leonard.

Ruby. (getting it - she's sensed it) Oh yeah...?

Charlie. It freaks me out actually...

You know what I mean. It's like I'm blending into him. It's like a sort of... I don't know... possession. When I feel something, I feel like it's Leonard feeling it. When I walk down the street - I feel like it's Leonard's body that I'm wearing. When we have sex, I can't tell whose desire I'm feeling - his, mine. I mean, he pokes it into me and I get lost - you know?<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, since all bodies are (similarly) situated (but differently), the localized, contingent quality of our embodiment makes our engagement with each other "erotically" charged in the sense that our encounters function to create new spaces. We find and make meaning together through complicated and historically contingent gestural systems, for instance (215). By becoming aware of our embodied responses we can make these codes more palpable.

I have tried to suggest here that embodied knowing has an emancipatory potential, and that it is possible to appeal to and speak from experience as a site of knowing without presupposing the existence of any autonomous individual subject. An embodied being is by definition situated, contingent, historically embedded in material processes, unfinished, wide open, etc., etc.<sup>22</sup> To posit embodied knowing it is not necessary to appeal to any innocent, pre-conceptual, politically neutral origin or space of experience - and Lefebvre's critical geography offers us a way of imagining this. It offers a theoretical approach to the body with/in space which has analytic appeal for imagining embodied agency differently.

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## Notes

1 William Blake. "Letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November, 1802" *The Complete Prose and Poetry of William Blake* ed. by David V. Erdman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 722.

2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* transl. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 200. ALL PAGE NUMBERS IN THE BODY OF THIS ESSAY REFER TO THIS TEXT.

3 See Lefebvre, 15. "To speak of 'producing space' sounds bizarre, so great is the sway still held by the idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it."

4 I am referring here to Wittgenstein's later work in the philosophy of language.

5 Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 25. (ITALICS MINE)

6 Polkinghorne, 25.

7 See Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) for a fascinating discussion of Wittgenstein's concerns regarding "truth as representation" in general.

8 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972). See also, Lefebvre, 193. "We also know that symbolism and praxis cannot be separated." Also, Lefebvre, 214. "Are not such gestures, articulated and linked together as they are, more likely than drives to lie at the origin of language? Bound together outside the realm of work as well as within it, could they not have contributed to the development of that part of the brain which 'articulates' linguistic and gestural activity?"

9 See, for instance, Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism" in *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 3-21; Joan W. Scott "The Evidence of Experience" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991) 773-797.; Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason" in *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter eds., (New York: Routledge, 1993).

10 See Elaine Scarry, "The Made-Up and the Made-Real" in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 5, 2 (1992) 239-249, where she introduces this idea of a "collective intellectual project". She comments that "The energy that in an earlier age was directed toward the investigation of 'truth' has been redirected toward understanding the nature of inventing, making, creating..." (239).

11 See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 226e. "What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - forms of life."

12 See Lefebvre, 50, "In spatial practice, the reproduction of social relations is predominant."

13 See Lefebvre, 188-9. "Identifying the foundations upon which the space of each particular society is built... is only the beginning... representations of space, which confuse matters because they offer an already clarified picture, must be dispelled."

14 In my conversations with Rose-Marie Kennedy on emancipatory practices, she spoke of supporting the "radical potential" of any given situation rather than seeking specific goals.

Her use of that phrase has spilled into my thinking on embodied awareness.

15 See, for instance, Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) 247. "Yet feeling has an ontological status different from relationship at a distance: it makes for participation in things".

16 See Michael J. Shapiro, "Language and Power: The Spaces of Critical Interpretation" in *Language, Symbolism and Politics* Richard M. Merelman, ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992) where he suggests that "the politics of discourse is inextricably tied to a politics of space" in Foucault's work (273).

17 See Susan David Bernstein, "Confessing Feminist Theory: What's 'I' got to do with it?" *Hypatia* 7, 2 (Spring 1992) 121-147, where the author explores the political and epistemological implications of an appeal to personal experience and the use of confessional anecdotes in scholarly feminist writing.

18 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

19 forthcoming in Jody Berland, "Bodies of theory, bodies of pain: some silences", *Theory Rules: Proceedings of the Art and Theory Conference*, J. Berland, David Tomas, Will Straw, (eds.), (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

20 Paul Ricoeur introduces the idea of an ontological space that is created by tension between what is and is not in his discussion of metaphoric truth. See "Metaphor and Reference" in *The Rule of Metaphor*.

21 From my play, *Pure Motives*.

22 See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991), where she employs and discusses these sorts of terms.

## Images

*The Joy of Signing* by Lottie L. Rieckhof (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1978)

*Towards a Poor Theatre* by Jerzy Grotowski, © 1968 Jerzy Grotowski and Odin Teatrets Forlag

