

Chapter 6

Beginnings - Towards (un)fit geographies

This thesis has had three inter-related aims. First, it has sought to contribute to the current rethinking, within and across the boundaries of the academic discipline of Geography, of the ways that contemporary embodied lived environments are constructed. It has tactically deployed theoretical perspectives drawn from critiques of contemporary technoscientific constructions of the world in order to illustrate the ways in which environments are constructed as hybrid networks of human and non-human actors by particularly powerful centers of translation. It has attempted to illustrate that these theoretical developments offer languages with which to engage the ambiguities of contemporary embodied environments. One of these has been the figure of the cyborg, suggested by Haraway, a figure which facilitates an engagement with the gendered construction of human-machinic hybrids by the discursive and material practices of technoscience. However, the figure of the cyborg has been mobilized in combination with, but to a lesser extent than, the amodern perspective offered by ANT theorists, most notably Bruno Latour, largely because such an amodern perspective offers a better means of conceptualizing how such cyborg fusions are constitutive parts of much longer hybrid networks, mobilized by particular centers of translation.

Despite the differing focuses of their perspectives, both Haraway and Latour contribute to the critical blurring of the ontological categories from which environments are discursively constructed as clearly bounded spaces. Taken together then, the interrogative terms of analysis they offer can be used to problematize the construction of environments. Most importantly, rather than spaces, bodies, and machines being conceived as clearly bounded entities, they must be regarded as mutually constitutive of built environments. Working within such a view means that environments are not seen as passive backdrops or as containers within which human subject control and manipulate passive non-human objects.

Second, this thesis has sought to facilitate such a provisional rethinking of the construction of environments through an examination of what have been called “fitness” environments. In particular, it has engaged with the ways in which fitness, as a global concept arising out of hybrid political and discursive economies of risk, flexibility, response-ability, responsibility, and consumption, is implicated in the construction of environments through the consummative governmentality of networks of human and non-human actors. The contemporary imperative to be fit has been situated within the context of what Luke (1989:122) calls a shift from Fordism to “Fondaism”, a shift which means that “every personal asset must be mobilized and put into optimal operational condition” in order “to meet the rigorous demands of the global marketplace”. Within this context, it seems reasonable to suggest that attempts at machinically mediated self-mobilization, self-management, and self-discipline are manifestations of efforts to work-out the body the way that particular centers of translation tell us that the body, biologically and socio-economically, most efficiently works. In this context, for the individual consumer, being fit depends on one’s own ability to be mobilized, under the guise of self-mobilization, within hybrid

networks of human and non-human. It seems therefore, that an answer to the question of “who is working who”, or “what is working what”, is extremely difficult to answer in either/or terms.

This thesis therefore has also been an attempt to map contemporary efforts to become fit through machinically-mediated self-governmentality into much longer networks of risk, flexibility, responsibility, response-ability, and consumption. In illustrating this, attention has been paid to the case of NordicTrack, which, it was shown, by acting as a center of translation, attempts to mobilize a range of actor networks including bodies, technologies, consumers, families, and technoscience. Such a claim must however be qualified by recognizing the danger of granting too much coherency to the workings of the strategies and tactics of governmentality, and to the techniques of self-discipline and self-management that are part of these networks. It is not the case that corporations such as NordicTrack effortlessly map and regulate the space of individual bodies, that great armies of bodies are marshaled into fitness facilities and homes in order to become actively responsible employees and consumers. Yet, at the same time, the evidence and discussion presented in the previous chapters does suggest that the discourses of corporate advertising give performative force to the identification of the home as a disciplinary environment for self-governmentality through the “right disposition of things” such as home fitness equipment and the bodies that enter into intimate relations with them, “arranged as to lead to a convenient end”.

The third aim of this thesis has involved using this inter-related rethinking of the material and discursive construction of “environments” and “fitness” as a means to examine the politics of positioning within such environments. In doing this, I have pointed to the profound ambiguity of these environments, an ambiguity registered, as shown in chapter 5, in the difficulty of positioning the boundaries between categories such as subject and object, nature and culture, human and non-human, and in the difficulty of mapping the topographies characteristic of these environments. However, as noted in the same chapter, despite the fact that the mobilization and translation practices of corporations such as NordicTrack are integral to the blurring of such boundaries, these same practices also lead to purification, in that particular environments, and the embodied subjects who partially constitute these, are positionally purified as either “fit” or “unfit”. Critically engaging with such simultaneous processes of translation and purification requires a geographical imagination that is responsive to the possibility that political, ethical, and most importantly, moral communities are relational outcomes of networks that include both humans and non-humans.

In seeking to achieve these aims however, it is important to draw attention to the extent to which this thesis itself has been an exercise in the assembling, translating, and representing of various actors. It has focused in particular on various texts and images drawn from academic, technoscientific, and corporate literature. Such texts have been chosen partly as a result of the limitations of what can be completed in a study of this size, but also because of the importance of these texts and the words and images that constitute them in the building of legitimate and acceptable worlds. Their importance in this process of “building complex and enforceable worlds” depends on “the way in which they encapsulate the world that their author wants to

build. They juxtapose elements, suggest their appropriate relationships, and simultaneously make an argument about how the reader should fit into that world. Properly built they thus constitute a formidable class of translation operators” (Callon et al, 1986:222).

This thesis then, as a center of translation tactically mobilizing particular actors, has been engaged in the same types of wor(l)d building processes which it has sought to critique. It has done this in order to fit the criteria demanded of it by a particular type of academic “theater of proof”, in the very same way that the technoscientific texts produced by those human-machinic networks attempting to objectively and “truthfully” render the workings of the body visible need to fit into the criteria of a similar theater of proof.

This means that those critiquing the practices that generate fitness environments as embodied worlds are themselves implicated in the same types of practices. It is not possible to engage with questions of purification and translation without recognizing that the “one” doing the recognizing is also implicated in the same practices. Accordingly, the position of the “one” referred to here needs to be problematized. If a claim is being made that environments can be conceived of as networks of humans and non-humans mobilized and arranged to varying ends, then the “observer” also needs to be positioned within these networks. This thesis then, is not merely a product of the work done by a “human”, but rather is the result, or the effect, of work done by human and non-human actors. Significantly, in the case of this thesis the process of translation has involved an attempt to mobilize hypertext documents. And indeed, in its completed and submitted electronic form, this thesis will potentially be available for mobilization by longer networks of human and non-human.

In repositioning the observer like this, the boundary between the subject and object of academic study is then increasingly hard to define insofar as the distance between those claiming to observe and truthfully represent particular networks of humans and non-humans and those networks themselves is very short. This can perhaps be seen in the attempt to reconfigure universities in the shape of fit corporate bodies peopled by fit corporeal subjects. The same forces that lead to the individualization of the responsibility of the actively responsible consumer and employee to become fit do not make an exception for overworked academics who, seeking to spatiotemporally manage themselves may also find attractive the types of home fitness environments such as those supplied by NordicTrack.

In light of such observations, the question must be posed that if the academic theater of proof increasingly becomes aligned with those of the technoscientific lab and the corporate strategy session, as it appears to be doing, then what place do amodern geographies have?¹ The kinds of network, hybrid, and cyborg perspectives which have been tactically, tentatively, and partially outlined here are perhaps not fit for inclusion within a discipline of Geography which is increasingly reconfigured to fit the demands of a streamlined, fit, and flexible academic environment. Indeed, such perspectives might be patently unfit, insofar as they severely muddy

¹ Thrift (1997) develops this point in the context of a discussion of the rise of “soft capitalism”.

the clarity of the categorical lenses employed by many geographers. Attached to a disciplinary body such as Geography they may slow it down, hamper its efforts to be streamlined within the context of University Inc. A cyborg, hybrid, or amodern geographical imagination may perhaps be disabling to the extent that it scatters many of the categories available to geographers seeking the security of disciplinary identity in a context in which this is fast disappearing. However, why try to maintain the effect of Geography's existence as a clearly bounded pure disciplinary environment if this disciplinary environment is rethought of in terms of a collective co-construction between humans and non-humans? Geography is already "impure", yet its efforts at self-purification have severely blinded its collective actors to the processes of translation through which it has been constructed and also the processes of translation through which lived fitness environments are constructed.

Adopting perspectives that do not fit as well into a fast, flexible, and fit institutional environment does perhaps threaten disciplinary existence. At the same time, it may offer a greater ability to track the networks from which contemporary embodied built environments are constructed, and how new standards of embodied purity determine within which environments, defined as fit or unfit, embodied subjects are positioned.

However, such tracking of the (im)mobilizing and positioning of particular actors as constitutive parts of fit and/or unfit environments can only ever be partial. These efforts must avoid the "illusion of infinite vision" (Haraway, 1991:189). Accordingly, there are a number of areas in which scope exists for further study. Perhaps most significantly, there is a glaring absence of ethnographic engagement with the ways in which interpretive embodied subjects map themselves within the types of hybrid environments described above. These questions need to be pursued in further studies, because in this attempt at translating particular fitness environments, there has been no attempt to mobilize the voice of the consumer subject.

Additionally, there is much room for examining how fitness is being inscribed in various spaces through the governmentality of much longer networks of humans and non-humans. Sustained examination of the design, marketing, growth, and clientele of health clubs and fitness facilities needs to be examined. However, this should only be undertaken within the context of an examination of how the networks of humans and non-humans which are mobilized in the creation of these additional types of fitness environments are connected to and disconnected from hybridized/cyborgized consumer, residential, and corporate environments alternatively categorized as unfit or fit within dominant liberal societies. Such engagements will contribute to the critical rethinking of the politics behind the construction of contemporary lived environments, a rethinking which will involve continually tracking the connections within networked environments between different types of actors, both human and non-human. The most important questions will be directed at examining which actors get mobilized within which networks and which actors are immobilized because they apparently lack the self-responsibility to be actively fit participants within the "right disposition of things". This thesis has been an attempt to begin to engage with the construction of such (un)fit geographies.