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Weak Theory in an Unfinished World

ABSTRACT: This article suggests the value of a kind of cultural theory that attends to the cultural poesis of forms of living. Its objects are textures and rhythms, trajectories, and modes of attunement, attachment, and composition. The point is not to judge the value of these objects or to somehow get their representation “right” but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already present in them.

I’VE BEEN WRITING ethnography in the U.S. for almost thirty years. This has been a slow, and also sometimes sudden, accretion of modes of attunement and attachment. A kind of attending to the textures and rhythms of forms of living as they are being composed and suffered in social and cultural poesis. A noticing that gropes from a haptic space in the middle of things. The objects of such a practice are things noted obliquely, as if out of the corner of the eye, but also, often, as punctums or punctures. Things that have impact. Things caught in a circuit of action and reaction. Not simple or self-contained things, but things like the way the senses literally jump in moments of spacing out or ducking for cover, or the sad sagging of trajectories that held promise just a minute ago, or the serial build-up of the sense of being *in* one thing and then another, or all the disappearing acts people perform in search of escape or rest or the perfect life.

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The perspective I find I have developed over these years and in these practices of attending and attuning to things is akin to what Eve Sedgwick calls “weak theory” (1997). Theory that comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don’t just *add up* but take on a life of their own as problems for thought. She calls this “reparative” theory—a good thing—in contrast to a “paranoid” or “strong” theory that defends itself against the puncturing of its dream of a perfect parallelism between the analytic subject, her concept, and the world—a kind of razed earth for academic conversation.

Something like this “weak theory” has become a habit for me not only in intellectual practice but also in the structured seductions and perceptions of ordinary life. And not just for me. People are always saying to me “Don’t get me started; I could write a book.” What they mean is that they *couldn’t* and they wouldn’t *want* to. Wouldn’t know where to start and how to stop. They have stories, tangles of associations, accrued layers of impact and reaction. What a life adds up to is a *problem* and an open question. “Don’t get me started,” they say. “I could write a book.” It would be a book of singularities that don’t add up but are always *threatening* to. What people mean by a life—as in “get a life”—is always something about getting yourself *into* something or getting yourself *out of* something you’ve gotten yourself into and then on to the next thing (if you’re lucky). It’s a mode of production through which something that feels like something throws itself together. An opening onto a *something*, it maps a thicket of connections between vague yet forceful and affecting elements.

As Wallace Stevens writes in “July Mountain,”

We live in a constellation
 Of patches and pitches,
 Not in a single world

 The way, when we climb a mountain,
 Vermont throws itself together. (1989:140)

The “Vermont” that throws itself together in a moment is already *there as a potential*—a *something* waiting to happen in disparate and incommensurate objects, registers, circulations, and publics. It’s in fall colors, maple syrup, tourist brochures, calendars, snow, country stores. It’s in Vermont liberalism but also in the fight over gay marriage. It’s

in racial homogeneity but also in white lesbian couples with babies of color everywhere you look. It's in the influx of New York wealth long ago rushing in to shore up that certain look of rolling hills and red barns but it's also in the legacy of the dairy industry written onto the landscape and property laws, and in the quiriness, quaintness, dullness, and violence of village life in this time and place. What interests me about this "Vermont" is not the effort to pin down exactly where it came from—its social construction—but the moment itself when an assemblage of discontinuous yet mapped elements throws itself together into something. Again. One time among many. An event erupting out of a series of connections expressing the abstract idea "Vermont" through a fast sensory relay. Disparate things come together differently in each instance and yet the repetition itself leaves a residue like a track or a habit. Each instance of "Vermont" coming together is a singularity of a cliché but that doesn't mean it's dead or just one example of the same. It remains an event—a moment when something happens to produce the quality of being in a scene. In other words, it's a composition—a poesis—and one that literally can't be seen as a simple repository of systemic effects imposed on an innocent world but has to be traced through the generative modalities of impulses, daydreams, ways of relating, distractions, strategies, failures, encounters, and worldings of all kinds.

There are countless such moments in which something throws itself together—moments that require a kind of weak theory, or a space in which attending to such things is made habitual (Stewart 1996). Not an innocent or uniform space, but one that *takes place* in the course of historical forces such as the collective saturation of the senses, the voracious productivity of the marketing industry, the hard-edged, caste-like quality of relations of race and class, the seamless sprawl of the built environment, the chronotypical changes in time and space, and all the things that happen to the status of the event itself. To inhabit a space of attending to things is to incite attention to co-existing forms of composition, habituation, performance, and event and to the "weak" ontologies of lived collective fictions comprised of diacritical relations, differences, affinities, affects, and trajectories (Stewart 2007). For me, then, the point of theory now is not to judge the value of analytic objects or to somehow get their representation "right" but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them as a potential or resonance.

Take, for instance, the scene in a cafe in a small West Texas town.

A biker couple comes in limping. All eyes rotate to watch them as they move to a table and sit down. They tell me they hit a deer coming into town and dumped their bike. The room comes to a dead stop. Slowly, people begin to offer questions from their tables, drawing out the details. Then there are stories about other collisions and strange events at that place on the west road. Some people make eye contact across the room. A *we* of sorts opens, charging the social with lines of potential. I imagine that people will keep their eyes open for bike parts when they travel the west road and that there will be talk about the overpopulation of deer, or the new law legalizing riding motorcycles without a helmet, or speculation about what parts would break in a speeding encounter with a deer caught in a headlight. Or that talk might turn to the image of hitting the open road, or to abstracted principles like freedom, fate, and recklessness. But one way or another, the little accident will compel a response. Shift people's life trajectories in some small way by literally changing their course for a minute. It might unearth old resentments, or set off a search for lessons learned. It might pull the senses into alignment with simple choices like good luck and bad, or polemics about laws and liberties, wild rides, and common sense.

The poesis of the ordinary draws attention and becomes habitual because things don't just *add up*. *Something* throws itself together and then floats past or *sticks* for some reason. Some such things have *meaning* per se; most have force in some other form.

Weirdly collective sensibilities seem to pulse in plain sight. A stranger shows up at my door in the middle of the afternoon. She and her husband are thinking of buying the big house across the street. She wants to know if anyone uses chemicals on their lawns, or dryer sheets. At first I have to wonder what a dryer sheet *is*. But then images pop into my head: the sweet smell of dryer sheets coming in with the breeze on a cloudless day, the little orange flags sticking up out of the grass at the schoolyard, warning that chemicals have been sprayed, the ChemLawn trucks parked up on Widows' Hill in front of the places with the big lawns. I mutter some kind of shorthand version of these things to the woman standing at my door, but really all it takes is a *look* and the woman is *gone*, leaving little seeds of anxiety to sprout.

Two middle-aged people sit awkwardly together in a breakfast diner on a town square in Ohio. The thin, blonde, carefully-tanned woman is having a grapefruit. The heavy-set, pasty man is eating biscuits and gravy. It's an odd scene. Clearly their first meeting. The woman is talking about

her workout schedule and what she eats. She says she's not obsessive about it but she likes to keep her body in shape. She pulls out bottles of vitamins and herbal supplements. "I take two of these when I wake up, these are with meals, these in the afternoon. These are good for energy if I feel a little low. . . ." She takes out lotions and rubs them into her skin.

He maintains a careful look of interest. But things don't seem to be going well for him.

A few minutes later, the grapefruit woman says to the biscuit man, "Of course, you'd have to lose thirty pounds." He's nodding. "Of course, oh yes." He's looking down at his biscuits and gravy. His eyes wander around the table at a level well below the range of possible eye contact. Then he lowers his head over his plate and eats.

Who knows how these two people found each other. This was before Internet dating (if you can imagine). Maybe they used personal ads in the local newspaper. Maybe they were the only two single, middle-aged people in the county and someone set them up. Whatever it was, it was an experiment. Just to see what would happen. And things were *happening*, all right, even though "*it*" was so "*not* happening."

Things jump into form, whether the scene is of the beaten-up coal mining camps in West Virginia, or the proliferation of little worlds budding up almost indiscriminately in Las Vegas, or the twisted aspirations of homeless men to inhabit some kind of world, or the way that a spectral apparition of a "mainstream" pops between dream and matter.

Alphonso Lingis noted the jumpiness of social poesis when he was touring a mine at the Arctic Circle:

the young miner who showed me the mine put out every cigarette he smoked on his hand, which was covered with scar tissue. Then I saw the other young miners all had the backs of their hands covered with scar tissue. . . . when my eye fell on them it flinched, seeing the burning cigarette being crushed and sensing the pain. . . . The eye does not read the meaning in a sign; it *jumps* from the mark to the pain and the burning cigarette, and then jumps to the fraternity signaled by the burning cigarettes. (1993:296)

The jumpiness of things throwing themselves together has become an object of ordinary attention. That's why models of thinking that glide over the surface of modes of attention and attachment in search of the determinants of big systems located somewhere else are more and more like road blocks to proprioception than tunnels that yield understanding.

The moment when things throw themselves together into something that feels like *something* is the kind of cultural production that's often given form in literature and poetry and folklore. Take, for instance, Louise Erdrich's description in *The Painted Drum* of the moment when teenage trouble is collectively sensed on Revival Road in rural New Hampshire:

On my walks I've seen the turbulence of each neighbor child hit like a small quake. . . . Most of the houses on this road are surrounded by a depth of dark trees and a tangle of undergrowth. No two are within shouting distance. Yet you know, merely waving to the parents whose haunted eyes bore through the windshields of their car. You hear, as new trail bikes and motorbikes rip the quiet, as boom boxes blare from their perches on newly-muscled shoulders. The family cars, once so predictable in their routes, buck and raise dust racing up and down the hills. It is a painful time and one averts one's eyes from the houses containing it. The very foundations seem less secure. Love falters and blows. Steam rises from the ditches and sensible neighbors ask no questions. (2005:13)

What she's describing is a collective sensibility lived in the mode of potentiality—a singular mode of production people *wait* to sense snapping into place. And one that can be signaled in short hand through sensory signs that act as metonymic entry points—almost a metonymic explosion into something that's thrown itself together. This is a kind of knowing akin to Barthes' "third meaning." A significance that's immanent and erratic and evident not in semantics but in the way that something picks up density and texture as it moves through bodies, dramas, and scenes (1985).

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan describes the migraine of a woman of means in 1935. The migraine is a "black-furred creature beginning to stir":

Habitual fretting about her children, her husband, her sister, the help, had rubbed her senses raw; migraine, mother love, and over the years, many hours of lying still on her bed, had distilled from this sensitivity a sixth sense, a tentacular awareness that reached out from the dimness and moved through the house, unseen and all-knowing. Only the truth came back to her, for what she knew, she knew. The indistinct murmur of voices heard through a carpeted floor surpassed in clarity a typed-up transcript; a conversation that penetrated a wall, or better, two walls, came stripped of all but its essential twists and nuances. What to others would have been a muffling was to her alert senses, which were fine-tuned like the cat's whiskers of an old wireless, an almost unbearable amplification. She lay in the dark and knew everything. (2003:63)

There's talk here of essences, ontologies, but weak ones. Not just situated or qualified ontologies, but ontologies immersed in the middle of things. An oscillation, a knowing that is *itself* a resonating chamber for what's happening. A contact zone in which what emerges is not a *mirror* of oppression or promise but a *residue* of all the moments of watching and waiting in the mode of the potential, or the very *problem* of a moment of poesis.

A moment of poesis can be a pleasure or a dragging undertow, a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation. It can endure or it can jump into something new. It can sag, defeated, or harden into little mythic kernels. It can be carefully maintained as a prized possession or left to rot. It can morph into a cold, dark edge, or give way to something unexpectedly hopeful.

It's something that happens. An immersive fiction of being *in* something that feels like *something* whether that's a little world with some kind of coherence, or a project of some kind, or a structure of feeling you're stuck in, or a luscious novel, or sobering memoir read two pages a night before falling asleep. It's the effort to stay in a bad relationship, or the upstairs neighbor in Michigan vomiting every morning before going to work in the Ford factory, or the elderly African-American neighbor in West Virginia who kept his windows blacked and sat at night at the far end of the house with his back up against a windowless wall in case there was a racist attack like the one he had suffered forty years earlier. It's my son skipping classes every day to play basketball on the tennis court with his buds and disappearing at night if anyone from the budding neighborhood "gang" calls him to come out and no amount of talk or grounding can pull him back into the *something* of our household instead. It's why my five-year-old daughter has to wear pink dresses and pink cowgirl boots and any effort to get pants on her elicits the scream—"I CAN'T BE THE PRINCE!!!" And why, when asked why she doesn't speak Spanish in the school playground, she said, without having to think, "because we don't care."

"Who?"

"Marisol, Ixchel, Dominique y *me*—Ariana. Miss Dulce says 'Las Princessas cowgirls.'

Little fingers. That's what Ixchel does" (she hooks her two little fingers together). "Comprendes?"

"Got it."

A moment of poesis is a mode of production in an unfinished world.

A weak theory that builds connections like the one Edward P. Jones both uses and describes in this scene from *The Known World*:

When he, Moses, finally freed himself of the ancient and brittle harness that connected him to the oldest mule his master owned, all that was left of the sun was a five-inch-long memory of red orange laid out in still waves across the horizon between two mountains on the left and one on the right. He had been in the fields for all of fifteen hours; he paused before leaving the fields as the evening rapped itself about him. The mule quivered, wanting home and rest. Moses closed his eyes and bent down and took a pinch of the soil and ate it with no more thought than if it were a spot of cornbread. He worked the dirt around in his mouth and swallowed, leaning his head back and opening his eyes in time to see the strip of sun fade to dark blue and then nothing. . . . This was July and July dirt tasted even more like sweetened metal than the dirt of June or May. Something in the growing crops unleashed a metallic life that only began to dissipate in mid-August, and by harvest time that life would be gone altogether, replaced by a sour moldiness he associated with the coming of fall and winter, the end of a relationship he had begun with the first taste of dirt back in March, before the first hard spring rain (2003:1–2).

Tracing the worlds that people make out of such contact zones requires a supple attention and the capacity to imagine trajectories and follow tendencies into scenes of their excesses or end points. Mick Taussig, for instance, is driven to an ethnographic fictocriticism to describe the problem of a desperate poesis in Colombia in *My Cocaine Museum*. It's the moment when the agribusiness boom just stopped:

now there is no work at all. . . . That's all over now. The idea of work work. Only a desperate mother or a small child would still believe there was something to be gained by selling fried fish or iced soya drinks by the roadside, accumulating the pennies. But for the young men *now*, there's more to *life*, and who really believes he'll make it past twenty-five years of age? At fourteen these kids get their first gun. Motorbikes. Automatic weapons. Nikes. Maybe some grenades as well. That's the dream. Except that for some reason it's harder and harder to get ahold of, and drug dreams stagnate in the swamps in the lowest part of the city like Aguablanca, where all drains drain and the reeds grow tall through the bellies of stinking rats and toads. *Aguablanca*. White water. The gangs multiply and the door is shoved in by the tough guys with their crowbar to steal the TV as well as the sneakers off the feet of the sleeping child; the *bazuco* makes you feel so good, your skin ripples, and you feel like floating while the police who otherwise never show and the local death squads hunt down and kill addicts, transvestites, gays—the *desechables*,

or “throwaways”—whose bodies are found twisted front to back as when thrown off the back of pickups in the sugar cane fields owned by but twenty-two families, fields that roll like the ocean from one side of the valley to the other as the tide sucks you in with authentic Indian flute music and the moonlit howls of cocaine-sniffing dogs welcome you. (2004:19)

I, too, can trace a series of such moments of poesis in West Virginia over the years as things have come together and taken root or fallen apart and modes of cultural production have accrued layers of substance. I was living in the beaten-up fragments of coal mining camps when Reagan was elected and right away the stories started about people getting kicked off social security disability checks. Why her? She’s a widow with diabetes, no car, no running water, and no other income. Why him? He’s crazy and one-legged, he’s got nobody. *Everyone* knew that something was happening, that we were *in* something. Old people were buying cans of dog food for their suppers. The force of things piled up in floods of stories and objects piled up on the landscape like phantom limbs. This was not so much a resistance, or even the resilience of a way of life, but the actual residue of what people there called *making something of things*. My job there was the chronicling of this incessant composition that had sunk into the ground of the place, grown dense and textured until it had come to feel like a trap people were caught in and never wanted to leave.

The choices were stark. Like being a Christian or being a sinner and the two edges touched, the extreme trajectories of potentiality meeting in a circuit. The churches were bad ass—full of wildness, sexual fantasy, bold-faced moves of force, the dripping sweetness of bodies draped on each other in fellowship, and raucous music with unearthly harmonies. Snake handling boomed whenever the economy went bust. For the sinners, there was drinking and drugs and sucking the gas out of other people’s cars with a tube. For everyone, eccentricity flowered over time, producing some spectacular old people who had a way with words as thick as magma and all you could do when you were with them was to listen as hard as you could and try to come up with *something* to hold up your end of things. The narrative structure of daily stories was almost entirely digressive, haptic. People walked right in on one another without knocking and sat down at the kitchen table without saying a word. Then something would throw itself together. People were living in cars and the stories were tracing their daily progress over the hills—where they were parked, how the babies’ dirty diapers were piling up in the back

seat. Sometimes there were phantasmagorical eruptions of craziness, maybe a teenager going on a week-long burning spree and ending up living under a rock, or racist violence in the dark, in the woods, in a space of condensed displacement—a white on black rape, all men, an escape, and a long night's walk back to the safety of a segregated camp. Never an official confirmation of any kind.

People were getting killed in the deadly little punch mines. And then it was over. The mines closed when oil prices dropped. Then it was the end of the last big contract strike for the UMW. A group of striking miners sat waiting to see the doctor in the poor people's health clinic, their bodies huddled together. It had just become clear that the strike would fail—fail spectacularly—and everyone was saying that the union was dead and the miners had been reduced to “company sucks.” You could feel the stunned defeat settle on the room in a heavy pause filled with the shallow, suffocating breath of black lungs. Then, out of nowhere, Bobby Cadle spun a kind of fairy tale that someday someone was going to scale the high brick walls of Governor Rockefeller's mansion and loot it for all it was worth. The others listened and at the end they were calmer, sitting together as if something had happened. They'd been given a story of power grown palpable as if it could be breached like a wall and then broken up and dispersed like loot. But more than that, it was a little composition to make something *of* the mess they were in, a little *something* offered politely, slightly solemnly, like a gift. They were quiet sitting together. I think they probably felt a little more stuck too—that smothering feeling everyone talked about. An attachment to a life in which potentiality and all its trajectories lie buried and resonating in cultural residues piled so high the present reels.

Things throw themselves together but it's not because of the sameness of elements, or the presence of a convincing totality. It's because a composition encompasses not only what has been actualized but also the possibilities of plenitude and the threat of depletion. Matter in an unfinished world is itself indefinite—a *not yet* that fringes every determinate context or normativity with a margin of something deferred or something that failed to arrive, or has been lost, or is waiting in the wings, nascent, perhaps pressing. Benjamin (2003) notes this poesis in the transmutation of images touching matter. The allegorical transfixing of history and nature is only one example—one that became explicit in West Virginia in the remembering of named *places* and ruins in the hills where accidents, horrors, encounters, and lost utopias hap-

pened. But other things also threw themselves together into affective matter as the place got hit with one thing and then another. When the talk shows started, young people who were overweight or didn't talk right were flown to Hollywood to be *on* them. Fast food chains in town became the only place to work; the beat-up pickups went and the beat-up Ford Escorts came. The idea hit that the young people were all going to have to leave so the girls all started taking Karate lessons in preparation; now there are a lot of black belts in West Virginia. Wal-Mart happened. Oxycontin happened. Tourism *didn't* happen. Falwell's Moral Majority didn't happen either; the little metal stands full of Moral Majority pamphlets appeared in the back of churches but they went untouched and then faded away. The punch mines came back and all the deaths were splayed out for the nation. Mountain top removal came. The kind of utopian thinking that comes of hard drinking flickered on and off through it all like the blue lights of a TV set left on at night.

Vegas, of course, is a different story with different trajectories to trace. And so is the story of the master-planned, and the story of the homeless, and countless other stories that can be told. But they all have their forms of alertness to the poesis of a something snapping into place, if only for a minute. All of these stories of tracing things that come together have their attachments to potentiality and their constant production of the sense of being *in* something—something grand, something degraded, something dumb—whatever. Everywhere now you hear the question “how'd you get into *that*?” Things don't just add up.

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