



PRECARITY'S FORMS

KATHLEEN STEWART
University of Texas, Austin

Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus 1986) cleared a field for an attention to emergent forms. A new object of analysis became legible, took on qualities, trajectories, aesthetics. Writing followed it, pulled into alignment with it, becoming tactile and compositional. Culture was reconceived as an assemblage of disparate and incommensurate things throwing themselves together in scenes, acts, encounters, performances, and situations. Writing became an attunement, a response, a vigilant protection of a worlding. Both writing and culture became potentially generative and capacious. A writing might skid over the surface of something throwing itself together or it might pause on a strand as it moved with other strands or fell out of sync, becoming an anomaly or a problem. Writing could be a way of thinking.

What follows here is a brief composition of precarity. I take precarity to be one register of the singularity of emergent phenomena—their plurality, movement, imperfection, immanence, incommensurateness, the way that they accrete, accrue and wear out. I write through four stories of ordinary scenes in which a form of sensing, thinking, or perceiving is emergent. The four scenes—regionality, frailty, the road, a place called Barton Springs—do not add up to a structure of precarity or some of its types. Rather, the writing hones attention to the way that a thing like precarity starts to take form as a composition, a recognition, a sensibility, some collection of materialities or laws or movements. Writing culture through emergent forms means stepping outside the cold comfort zone of recognizing only self-identical objects.

Some forms of precarity are obvious and totalizing dramatizations of the thing in itself. The concept of frailty now, for instance, a medically defined threatening condition: your weight drops below a certain point, you're not steady on your feet, you've had falls, statistically you'll be dead within three years. But other forms of precarity, and of the living in it and through it, are not metaculturally marked at all, and not moralized. Precarity can take the form of a sea change, a darkening atmosphere, a hard fall, or the barely perceptible sense of a reprieve. Attachments, or ways of living, can be precious without melodrama. Ordinary things that matter because they shimmer precariously. Precarity, written as an emergent form, can raise the question of how to approach ordinary tactile composition, everyday worldings that matter in many ways beyond their status as representations or objects of moralizing.

REGIONALITY

I come from a place where the seasons are magnetized to tones of voice and a quality of light. The winter is a dark tunnel. October is saturated in color. The air is bitable. In May, it swells.

At random, transient moments, a sense of being-from-here happens in a look exchanged, a town accent—a sheer recognition of a sheer recognition. These little scenes of recognition, and these sensory matters, compose place. They do not symbolize or represent it. Rather, they are its always emergent forms—precise actualizations of a field of potentiality. From the perspective of acts of place and its sensory materiality, place is something that throws itself together in moments, things, in aesthetic sensibilities and affective charges.

Here, the precarious, ethereal existence of a place gets hard-wired into senses in a state of sheer attunement. It is not, therefore, a contradiction that place, in this always emergent place, exists as an impassive corporeality. It is a mantle of redemption, a glacier of impatience, a high desert of anxiety dissected by fault lines of rage. These affects are performed in little scenes of recognition.

Habits throw themselves together into an aesthetics. Townies leave windows un-curtained and open through the night and in the deadest cold of the winter. People walk the neighborhood to peer into the scenes of people reading the paper at night or up early drinking their coffee. Lamps are favored over overhead lighting, lending texture and specificity to ordinary, no-big-deal living. Only depressives, or worse, live with curtains drawn. Drawn curtains are a physical shadow of a state of hardening, a rotting from the inside out. Curtained people are a sinkhole in the neighborhood. They suck the gestural, sensory attachments of seeing and being

seen into a world in which things are dark, shadowy outlines with blank cores, like a world seen through a ripe cataract. This place needs its windows, the aesthetic of yellow light passing out to yards, the regular scenes of the precarity, and therefore intimacy, of people in place.

There are five Dunkin' Donuts in this one small town. There are ice-cream stands on every road out of town. The ice-cream cones are piled high. The milk shakes are called frappés. Coffee is the favored flavor. People line up outside at the ice-cream stand window all year long. In the winter there are always some in shorts, T-shirts, and sandals. The townie body unfazed by the cold is a little funny, endearing, a little heroic. Salt of the earth. The pinkened toes in the snow are like homing pigeons swooping the town into a good-natured wink, a shrug. Fuck it. Bring it on. This is *wicked* good.

Even iconic images of New Englandness—let's say the maple tree in October, the white colonial houses surrounding the town commons, the preponderant whiteness of the people—are the scenes of a recognition not of a naturalized order per se but of the visceral complicity of those laying claim to a composed tactility. Regionality here is the charge of the hard surface of matter pulling into precarious alignment. It seeps into what Barthes calls “the inconsequential . . . odors, exhaustions, sounds of voices, errands, changing light” (1992:7). The muteness of things transfixes into an aesthetic phenomenon.

When my father's heart burst on a Christmas Eve, there was an ice storm so severe that four out of ten trees in the forest snapped in half. They bent under their accruing loads through the cold night. The death snapping began in early morning. Every four or five seconds, another loud crack shot through the hills. To the men up listening in amazed alarm, the sharp explosions sounded like the gunfire in Vietnam. A year later, just back to the area to live for a while, I woke to a morning refrain perfectly composed out of the regional qualities of air, light, and sound. Some men were working on trees in the street. They were calling out to each other, an intimate joking tinted by unspoken themes of competence and the human condition. It was my father's voice. The tone, the timing, the accent, the phrasing, the level of force, the purposefulness of the way that voice lived in light, with trees, in the potentiality of a laugh.

FRAILITY

For my mother, my father's death prompted the hard precarity of unworlding. After all those years of him failing to hold up his end of the world she was always in the middle of propping up and setting in motion, a fissure opened up and swallowed

the whole thing, rage and all. She couldn't even remember what it was she had been so angry about. She said they had had a wonderful life. That winter was horrible. Help dropped by sporadically, and she would try to remember her list of things she needed help with. She became one of those doing what the living do. You make a cup of tea and an English muffin for dinner. You drive the SUV to the drugstore and back; you manage to get it into the garage without hitting the sides, but the hatch is too heavy for you to pull down; you can't even reach it, so you spend hours in the freezing garage trying to rig up something to stand on, finding a rope, trying to attach it to the latch and tie it around your waist, your fingers frozen, fumbling, you don't see well, it gets dark, you have to give up, you turn off the lights in the backseat so they won't run down the battery, you don't tell anyone. You will have to wait until someone comes to visit. Every day is now a useless expenditure of effort. Your work doesn't work anymore.

You want the spring to come; you want the beautiful winter light to stay with you a little longer today, you settle deep into the chair by the wood stove, now converted for gas, you catch a glimpse of the scene of your life and you long for it.

Numbers get hard, then impossible. You are leaving little slips of paper and little notebooks all over the house with phone numbers written on them—your kids, your sisters, your friends, your doctor's numbers. Different versions of the numbers, you're trying to record them, to find a new system that will work for you; your writing is shaky, it goes off the page and you don't even realize it. Your son finally takes your checkbook away when he finds checks half written all over the house.

You lose your license because of the eye sight; a doctor turns you in; you try to enlist help to get it back; you call your daughters with hesitant opening lines for schemes that might work, baiting them to come up with something as they used to do, increasingly desperate at their evasion, the blank where the line of a plan once happened. Now you have to rely on walking downtown for a loaf of bread or your medicine. You realize, through episodes, through experiments, through great efforts, that that's all you can carry.

One day you take a bad fall on Main Street in front of the post office as you are trying to make it to the drugstore. The cobblestones are uneven; there is a deadly large granite curb. You fall on your face. You are taken in an ambulance to the hospital. Everyone knows. Then you fall off the stool in your kitchen. Your hip breaks. You go on, clinging to your life, taking secret falls into corners until, weeks later, your situation is finally discovered. Then an operation, rehab, and home in a wheelchair. That night, in a hurricane, the water-logged hundred-foot oak tree in

the front yard falls and splits the house in half. By 5 a.m. the channel 5 weatherman is standing on the tree shouting through the wind into a microphone and looking into your bedroom where you have him on TV. For days the cameramen bang on the door trying to get in to get a picture of you in your wheelchair, the shut-in.

ROAD REGISTERS

The U.S. road is a national macadam of living form textured into ruts, slick, black-iced patches. A thing droning, spiraling into legislation, money, road crews, place names, city grids, the old days, the Cold War, the accident, the family vacation, terrible losses, texting while driving, drinking while driving, these dead zones all along the highways, the world's largest cherry pie, a giant raisin box. Four million miles of it in the United States literally track the detritus of collective dreaming, the passing of historical presents, the spread of aggressively banal and ugly things as capitalism blanketed the country.

It is not enough to say, vaguely, that the road is an imaginary—a logic of some sort abstracted to become a thing in itself. Rather, it is a thing simultaneously, coterminously real and virtual, abstract and concrete, made not of dreams per se but of laws, ordinary practices, military surges, and construction technologies. Dirt roads, city streets, the streets of gated communities, the Main Streets, the Martin Luther King Boulevards, the roads that hug the coast, all register virtualities that touch down like the path of a tornado. Sediments accrue out of contingencies. Almost accidental sensibilities spin themselves into the genres of the road trips that created the family vacation and the desperate free fall out of, and into, failure and abjection. The vagaries of routine and opportunity orbit the purgatory of grid lock or the fantasies of potential “home” scenes spied, in passing, on the side of the road. In the precarious circuit of the road, intensities pass from body to body—human bodies, animal bodies, machine bodies, bodies of thought, ecosystems, viscerality and noumena, histories, the seamless habitus of supermarkets and credit cards.

The road's precarity is a hinge of attunement to what might be happening in some little piece of dirt, some high-rise, some abandoned car, some perfectly ordinary road sign, a national shift in the speed limit, the revitalization of a circle of roadside cabins, a white cross, a railway crossing, a streetlight equipped with a camera, privatized fast lanes, policing, all the things people do in cars, bike lanes, a walk across country for cancer or birth defects, road rage, the only public space you can find in a desperate situation, seasonal roads formed by frozen rivers or tundra.

The road is a tone of voice, a comfort, a sleepless night, a route entombed in bodily memory, unsignified intensities, walking your kid to school hand in hand, that bad feeling when the gas prices go up so high you realize you can no longer drive, sex, Sunday drives, the old days traveling over mountain roads, the nausea in the backseat, the West Virginia drivers racing around steep blind curves they knew every inch of, the Vermont mountain road I walked one cold dark night, the footsteps following me in the woods, the sudden appearance of the aurora borealis all across the sky, hitchhiking. I remember lying awake in bed in my grandmother's house listening with dread to the whining of the trucks passing on the turnpike 20 feet from her bedroom window. I still hate the whine of tires on the road. And that turnpike.

BARTON SPRINGS

Newcomers to Austin first see Barton Springs from an elevation. You look down steep, green grassy banks shaded by century-old pecan trees to a river-pool thing 1,000 feet long. Preternaturally long and as wide as the river it is. The water swells against concrete sides built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, its colors almost bruised with force and density. It has a brilliant green and turquoise hue. In places it goes turgid brown and even, where the plants grow thick and rise to the surface, a true black. The spring that fills the river-pool is a tear in the limestone bedrock eighteen feet below the diving board in the dead center of the thing. It pulses like a heartbeat pumping out 27 million gallons of water a day. This water churns in a cold, dense vortex like a wine cooler. It pulls body temperatures down fast on a triple digit day. The bodies twist and flip over it, cutting the surface of the water with a belly flop or the expertise of ten thousand dives here.

At the shallow end, families, young lovers, and rowdy groups of friends make their way precariously over the irregular, algae-slick rock bottom, exploring the cliffs that line one side. There are hairdos, tattoos, swimwear of all kinds, dares, refusals, splashing. People watching is a surround-sound visual submersion experience.

At the far end are the floats. On a hot summer day it is an acre of bumper-to-bumper plastic beds in bright colors, oiled bodies, wrists and ankles hanging in the dark water. Young women strut around topless on the sidewalks. The high grassy banks are a sea of gazes and lazy talk, and drum circles, books, Frisbee throwing, dope smoking, yoga, tai chi.

Lifeguards perch on high stands down the length of the pool, leaning over the water like the great blue herons that lurch over its concrete sides in the early

morning, piles of crawfish carcasses and fish bones at their feet. In the winter an early morning fog rises from the water. Die-hard lap swimmers troll up and down in wet suits. At night, lights sparkle across the water. There is only the sound of the quiet strokes or a giggle. There may be an element of fear.

CONCLUSION

Precarity's forms are compositional and decompositional. They magnetize attachments, tempos, materialities, and states of being. Their slowed, more capacious, description is a writing culture lodged in emergence, generativity, and potentiality. The writing itself attunes us to how things are hanging together or falling apart or wearing out in time that compresses or stretches out into an endurance. Such objects of analysis register the tactility and significance of something coming into form through an assemblage of affects, routes, conditions, sensibilities and habits. Rather than rush to incorporate them into a representational order of political or moral significance, we might ask what it means to meet the world not as representation, interpretation, or raw material for exploitation, but as a nearing, the ringing between composing subjects and objects (Heidegger 1976) "felt as ways of going on in the world" (McCormack 2003:495), as "increases and decreases, brightenings and darkenings" (Deleuze 1998:145) in a cartography distributed across a field of intensities and durations. Writing the culture of precarity's forms is one exercise in reattuning.

ABSTRACT

Writing matters if objects of analysis are to be understood as emergent forms with qualities, intensities, and trajectories that can be described or evoked. Writing is not epiphenomenal to thought but its medium. As it sidles up to worlds, disparate and incommensurate things throw themselves together. As it attunes, spatial and temporal dimensions come into play; writing skids over surfaces, pauses on a detail, grows capacious or pinched. Here, I write four very different scenes of precarity as a form that accretes, accrues, and wears out and one that takes place through attachments, tempos, materialities, and states of being. Such objects of analysis register the tactility and significance of something coming into form through an assemblage of affects, routes, conditions, sensibilities, and habits. [emergence, precarity, writing]

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