
Atmospheric attunements

Kathleen Stewart

Department of Anthropology, 1 University Station C3200, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712, USA; e-mail: kstewart@mail.utexas.edu

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Abstract. This paper proposes an analytic attention to the charged atmospheres of everyday life. It asks how circulating forces are generated as atmospheres per se, how they spawn worlds, animate forms of attachment and detachment, and become the live background of living in and living through things. Writing through several small cases selected out of countless potentially describable moments and scenes in which the sense of something happening becomes tactile, I try to open a proliferative list of questions about how forces come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments. How do people dwelling in them become attuned to the sense of something coming into existence or something waning, sagging, dissipating, enduring, or resonating with what is lost or promising? I suggest that atmospheric attunements are palpable and sensory yet imaginary and uncontained, material yet abstract. They have rhythms, valences, moods, sensations, tempos, and lifespans. They can pull the senses into alert or incite distraction or denial.

This is a writing and thinking experiment aligned with forms of nonrepresentational theory (Thrift, 2007) including ‘weak theory’ (Sedgwick, 1997), ‘fictocriticism’ (Muecke, 2008), and the material semiotics of actor-network theory (Latour, 2007). In the spirit of experiment, these approaches attempt to create new spaces for thinking about and imagining what might be going on. They do this first by trying to dedramatize theory, to loosen the formal narrative binds of a hyperactive story shored by banks of moralism and the heavy presumptions of a proper and automatic relationship between thinking subject, concept, and world. Instead, they might propose a pause, or to try to write theory through stories, or try, through descriptive detours, to pull academic attunements into tricky alignment with the amazing, sometimes eventful, sometimes buoyant, sometimes endured, sometimes so sad, always commonplace labor of becoming sentient to a world’s work, bodies, rhythms, and ways of being in noise and light and space (Nancy, 1997). Often they create digressions around quick reductionist claims and explanations into the cul de sacs of situations in which elements of all kinds assemble into something that feels like something (Berlant, 2010). These things require a kind of haptic description in which the analyst discovers her object of analysis by writing out its inhabited elements in a space and time.

Following these tendencies to rethink theory and writing, my point here is not to expose anything but to pencil in the outline of what Thrift (2007) calls a geography of what happens—a speculative topography of the everyday sensibilities now consequential to living through things. An attention to the matterings, the complex emergent worlds, happening in everyday life. The rhythms of living that are addictive or shifting. The kinds of agency that might or might not add up to something with some kind of intensity or duration. The enigmas and oblique events and background noises that might be barely sensed and yet are compelling.

I am suggesting that atmospheric attunements are a process of what Heidegger (1962) called worlding—an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds. Here, things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements.

In the everyday work of attunement to worlding, spaces of all kinds become inhabited. Modes of existence accrue, circulate, sediment, unfold, and go flat. I am asking how questions of form, event, viscosity, and circulation open and problematize attention to the ways that forces take form as worlds or dissipate (or get stuck, fester, shelter something ...). How do rhythms and labors of living become encrusted and generative? How do we now describe the activity of sensual world-making, and what kind of theory is being built in this way? What happens if we approach worlds not as the dead or reeling effects of distant systems but as lived affects with tempos, sensory knowledges, orientations, transmutations, habits, rogue force fields ...? What might we do with the proliferation of little worlds of all kinds that form up around conditions, practices, manias, pacings, scenes of absorption, styles of living, forms of attachment (or detachment), identities, and imaginaries, or some publicly circulating strategy for self-transformation?

The little, random cases of atmospheric attunements that follow here are meant to suggest something of the plasticity and density of lived compositions now proliferating in ordinary scenes of living through what is happening.

1 Bees

Bees

In every instant, two gates.

One opens to fragrant paradise, one to hell.

Mostly we go through neither.

Mostly we nod to our neighbor,

lean down to pick up the paper,

go back into the house

But the faint cries—ecstasy? horror?

Or did you think it the sound of distant bees,

making only the thick honey of this good life?

Jane Hirshfield (1997 *The Lives of the Heart*)

The ordinary hums with the background noise of ruts and disorientations, intensities and resting points. An atmospheric fill buzzes with the resonance of nascent forms quickening or sloughing off, materialities pressing into the expressivity of something coming into existence.

2 Pockets

In *The Garden of Last Days* (2008) Dubus describes a bouncer in a strip club watching for ‘pockets’ to open up.

“It was September, the low season, but the place was filling up, and he leaned back against the bar with his ginger ale and scanned the club for pockets, those dark human spaces in the room where something has just changed: above the music a man lets out an appreciative yell when before he was quiet; one of the dancers out on the floor laughs a little too hard or steps back too fast; a chair leg scrapes the carpet—something Lonnie can’t hear, just feels, a shift of objects in the space there, this change in the air, a pocket of possible trouble” (page 38).

Looking for pockets is a labor of attending to a space opening out of the charged rhythms of an ordinary. There’s a pause, a temporal suspension animated by the sense that something is coming into existence. The subject is called to a state of attention that is also an impassivity—a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap into place. Events and outcomes are immanent, unknown but pressing. As Lauren Berlant (2010) puts it, the subject

finds herself in a situation—an event that does not yet have its form, a moment of unforeclosed experience.

In a situation, things hanging in the air are worth describing. Theory becomes a descriptive *method* awkwardly approaching the thing that is happening by attuning to it as a thing of promise and contact (Berlant, 2010). The unfolding of a pocket slowed and amplified to see what might be in it.

3 West Virginia

When the composition of worlds takes place in situations, “... one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and hypervigilance that collects the material that might help to ... maintain one’s sea legs ...” (Berlant, 2010, page 5).

I was living in the coal mining camps in West Virginia when Reagan was elected. Right away everyone knew that something was happening, that we were *in* something. Right away the stories started about the people who were getting kicked off social security disability—why *her*? She’s a widow with diabetes, no car, no running water, no income. Why *him*? He’s crazy and one legged; he’s got *nobody*. Old people were buying cans of dog food for their suppers; you’d see them at the little rip store—just maybe six cans of dog food on the conveyor belt and that was it. Young people were living in cars; the stories traced their daily movements over the hills—where they were spotted parking, how the baby’s dirty diapers were piling up in the back seat. These were extreme stories—dense and textured stories that made a scene out of the end of the socially responsible state as it had been lived in this place until just yesterday. Sort of. None of this was a surprise. Just a shock. Just the recognition. When things shifted in the political economy of coal, the big mines closed and people were getting killed in the deadly little punch mines. Then it was over. The union died one day in the middle of a strike. Word came down that the company wasn’t negotiating. A feeling of stunned defeat settled on huddled bodies. The bodies wheezed. They reeled. They were hit by contagious outbreaks of ‘the nerves’. People ‘fell out’. They said it was like they were being pulled down by a hand that grabbed them in the middle of their back. The force of things amassed in floods of stories and in ruined objects that piled up on the landscape like an accrual of phantom limbs. This was not just some kind of resistance, or even the resilience of a way of life, but the actual residue of people ‘making something of things’. The material, sensory labor of attending to an emergent and enduring hum that stretched across the world as they knew it. People said the place smothered them and they ‘wouldn’t never want to leave’.

The worlding of the place accreted out of opening events. A story, a gesture, a look, or an outbreak of the nerves would establish a trajectory and pick up crazy speed or disperse, or settle into a still life, or blanket the place like a premonition spontaneously generated in the lives of all those attuned. The barer the life became, the more its worldings proliferated and accrued. The attending to what was happening became the direct materiality of people’s shared senses. Intensity was the air they breathed. Bodies were on alert—marked, readily engaged, always talking, gathering the eccentricity of characters, exercising the capacity to affect and to be affected. Snake handling boomed in the churches 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. Sometimes there were phantasmagorical eruptions, 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. Later, when the talk shows started, young people who were

overweight or ‘didn’t talk right’ were flown to Hollywood to be *on* the shows. Fast food chains in town became the only place to work; the beat up pickups went, and the beat up Ford Escorts came. When the idea hit that the young people were going to have to leave and go to the city for work, the girls all started taking Karate lessons in preparation, so now there are a lot of black belts in West Virginia and Cincinnati. Wal-Mart happened in West Virginia. 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 after years of standing there untouched, they faded away. 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.

It was in West Virginia, in the heavy and diffuse social living I was doing there, that I got into the habit of watching things arrive in the company of others. Things like a shift in the sensorium, or the stink of some national transformation settling over the hollers, or the sheer weight of power coming down, or the weirdly giddy possibilities that popped up with the advent of a Wal-Mart over the mountains in Beckley. It was then that I began to think, along with others, that nameable clarities like family or friendship or love or collapse or laughing or telling stories or violence or place are all atmospherics. All forms of attending to what’s happening, sensing out, accreting attachments and detachments, differences and indifferences, losses and proliferating possibilities.

4 The senses

The senses sharpen on the surfaces of things taking form. They pick up texture and density as they move in and through bodies and spaces, rhythms and tempi, possibilities likely or not. They establish trajectories that shroud and punctuate the significance of sounds, textures, and movements.

In his novel *Atonement* Ian McEwan describes the migraine of a woman of means in bed at home as a “black-furred creature beginning to stir”. It’s 1935. She has developed an acute sensory attunement to the atmospherics of the house:

“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” (2001, page 63).

Every attunement is a tuning up to something, a labor that arrives already weighted with what it’s living through. The intimacy with a world is every bit about that world’s imperative; its atmospheres are always already abuzz with something pressing. Edward P Jones opens *The Known World* with this scene:

“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 wrapped 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, pages 1–2).

What affects us—the sentence of a situation—is also a dwelling, a worlding born from an atmospheric attunement.

5 The way we live now

We could say that there are some important aspects of atmospheric life as we now know it: the collective saturation of the senses; the voracious productivity of the marketing industry; the hard-edged, caste-like quality of relations of race, class, and gender; the seamless sprawl of the built environment; chronotypical transformations of time and space; and so on. But how are such elements constituted *as* an atmosphere for living? How do they sometimes and for some people hang together to produce a felt, or half felt, or barely felt sense of something happening? Do their transformations constitute events? Do they take on the texture and density of a background hum? How are people attuning to them through hypervigilance, denial, cocooning, the proliferation of little worlds of all kinds, or the explosion of tracks of self-transformation that slide the subject into the world in some way or constitute a grating against some aspect of life or an adjustment to some big explanation of what’s going on?

Everywhere now I overhear the question “how’d you get into *that*?” What *is* that? I never *heard* of it. Wow. Ha. Ya. Anything can feel like something you’re in. A condition, a pacing, a scene of absorption, a serial immersion in little worlds. This is not exactly intended or unintended, not the kind of pure agency we imagine marching forward, like a zombie going doggedly after what it wants (Terada, 2001), and not ‘couch potato’ passive either, but a balling up and unraveling of states of attending to what might be happening or the sheer buzzing of atmospheric fill. It’s an attunement to possibilities opening up and not necessarily good ones. But maybe.

A scene might appear of something that looks like ‘getting a life’. Or maybe, as it turns out, the life you’re *in* is just a bad relationship you *now* see you’ve literally *spent* yourself *enduring*. Your life is a stuckness of some sort. You might suddenly find yourself in a desperate financial situation where you have to catch up with what’s been going on unbeknownst to you, or *sort* of. Some publicly circulating strategy for self-transformation or some ordinary life attunement to illness, faith, body-modification, hoarding, or *whatever* can become a mania or a scene; it can start to take on the weight of a *life* from time invested, identities invented, or the *need* for something. Not to mention the labor of inhabitation that starts right away. A sexuality might be finally lived, or it might stay on the edges of things, or drop out of sight altogether. ‘Fuck it’. All of a sudden your job at Wal-Mart morphs into the deadly dull game of being an associate in a team. Or you live in the undulating intensities of racialized experience. Or one day you notice you’re one of those women-with-kids suffering from ‘anger illness’—an epidemic of unknown origins and implications.

A life’s trajectories traverse the materializations of a scene or a pulsation. Ways of inhabiting things coagulate into mysterious partial inevitabilities. How did it happen that everyone now is ADD or OCD (and they’re not that different)? Everyone labors with attentions that go into overdrive or ball up in a paralysis, or spin off in prolific

compositions we come to know as strategies or faults. Hypo and hyper disorders of attention merge and grate. They both require the making of lists in order to get started—a jump start, a reset button⁽¹⁾ that is also an accounting, a taking stock, and a daily or hourly or minute-by-minute tune up. And that's just one thing. ...

What gets sensed, sharply or vaguely, with pleasure or pain, with or without the help of lists or routines or luck or the law is an accretion. All the sensing out and living through *worlds up* in gangly accruals, in the rendering of the something you're in as if it's a beginning or an end, as if it's all, or nothing, or enough, or never enough, or not for you. But still something you're *in*, trying (or not) to attend to what *matters* or what *might* matter *if*. The sensory rinding up of worlds to be *in* is a high stakes labor, both wrote and skillfully precise. It starts young. In her pink phase, my daughter, Ariana, had to wear pink dresses and pink cowgirl boots and any effort to get pants on her would elicit the scream—"I CAN'T BE THE PRINCE!!!" Once, when asked why she didn't speak Spanish in the school playground anymore she said,

"Because we don't care."

"Who?"

"Marisol, Ixchel, Dominique, y *me*—Ariana. Miss Dulce dice Las Princessas cowgirls. Little fingers. That's what Ixchel does (she hooks her two little fingers together). Comprendes?"

"Ya."

When he was in high school, my stepson John skipped classes every afternoon to play basketball with the guys even though it often ended in assault suffered. At night he would disappear to hang out with the budding neighborhood 'gang', and no amount of talk or grounding would pull him back into the *something* of our household instead. Not even close. His buddies shaved gang symbols into his hair and painted the icons on his arms and neck. He got thrown out of school under a no gang tolerance rule. He was arrested for trace amounts of marijuana possession—an event set off by him looking suspicious. And all of that was just the beginning.

Take ten steps forward (alternative high schools, Job Corps, getting kicked out for fighting, enrolling in the military and having his enrollment set aside as fraudulent for failing to report his marijuana conviction even though it had been expunged from his record, getting trained as a nurse's assistant and getting a job and losing it after making it to the certification test but forgetting to bring his ID, living in group housing but getting kicked out for losing his job and not working his program, following a friend to a transitional housing duplex and just staying there until he got kicked out). Then John was becoming homeless. People like to simplify the situation of homelessness as if it is a self-evident process of abject poverty without a safety net or as if it's just a matter of personal blame or failure. But it is also an attunement to a singular world's texture and shine. The body has to learn to play itself like a musical instrument in this world's compositions.

On the street, John learned the sensory labor of attuning as a homeless person. The walking, the finding places to sleep, the broken nose from rolling over on a rock, the encounters with the police, the talk about getting a place of his own, getting himself off the street, getting his job back, "I give it 90 days. Give me 30 days and then I'll be back ... It's not as bad as you think." He and his running buddy had fights, split up, then reconnected; the counselor at the homeless shelter gave them the language of watching each other's backs. Their blankets were stolen. One night when it was below freezing someone threw a blanket over them while they slept. It was like a miracle. He showed me what was different about him; he had no hair on the insides of his calves

⁽¹⁾ Thanks to Susan Quesal for this concept.

because of all the walking to get food—Wednesday night on the east side of town at a church, Tuesday, Thursday mornings a truck down on the tracks, no one likes the Sally, Lifeworks is for the kids. He had had so much milk, no coffee, he'd lost weight. He was proud of his new shirt—it was worth like 20 bucks—and he took a shower before he showed up on our steps this time. He says he still looks good. He says he can't go into the army because of his feet and the swelling in his testicles. I say you need medical attention, these things can be fixed. Not *these* things, he says. Maybe the Navy. He spends all of his time roaming to gather resources to get somewhere, to get something, working hard at being put into motion by a worlding that has arrived. An imperative opening can catch you up and then deflate, pop, leave you standing. Or, same thing, it can catch you in its moves.

The labored viscosity of being *in* whatever's happening renders choices and surfaces already weighty with the atmosphere one is literally attuning to. It produces hard-won attachments that can be hard to get out of once you're in.

6 A history of forms

'We' others outside *whatever* have problems (that is, lives) of our own. Already *in*, deep as anyone else. But we watch and wait for what's unfolding in some other world as if it might hold a key to understanding something of the worlds we're in or might be in in the future. Sometimes a worlding snaps into form like a force of nature, providing comic relief or a horrifying preview. Erdrich describes teenage trouble hitting 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, page 13).

Things snapping into form can animate expectations, recognitions, judgments dreams, the stab at a truth. Or they can chafe like a heavy, aching body. The state you're in is the state you're in, and yet it takes such fine-tuning, such hard-won accretion, such a labored, consuming response that it also propels. That's why there's nothing dead or inconsequential even in the flightiest of 'chosen lifestyles' or in the starkest of unchosen circumstances. It's the densely felt textures of sensory worlding that fuel generativity. Situations lived are not the kind of thing that follows the prevailing tastes of outside judgments and sensible advice. On the contrary, as we know of addicts and lovers, any undue outside intervention only pushes things into smaller, more intense, perhaps madly troubled worlds that might play themselves out, or sink into a substrate of hardened attunements.

Particular attunements can become habitual and rind up, or they can slough off as they are replaced by what comes next. You might look back on your pile of sloughed-off and still-shouldered rinds as a history of your sensory labor or as a mass of alien bodies dragging on your current hope of pure agency or newness. A history of forms is a defeat as well as company. But in any present moment there is always something to attune to, always the literal registering of forms and forces that bring you into the situation or haunt or offer solace or float lightly around the room or whatever. There is always the living through things. The states of expectation or disgust. The moments of

arrest that mark a recognition or just the habitual pause in a tempo. All the sidling up to things, the serial immersions in one thing after another.

7 Conclusion

An atmosphere is not an inert context but a force field in which people find themselves. It is not an effect of other forces but a lived affect—a capacity to affect and to be affected that pushes a present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event. It is an attunement of the senses, of labors, and imaginaries to potential ways of living in or living through things. A living through that shows up in the generative precarity of ordinary sensibilities of not knowing what compels, not being able to sit still, being exhausted, being left behind or being ahead of the curve, being in love with some form or life that comes along, being ready for something—anything—to happen, or orienting yourself to the sole goal of making sure that nothing *(more)* will happen.

The intensities of living through things accumulate and pool up in worldings and forms of attending to what's happening—trauma cultures, redemption cultures, recreational worlds, public feelings fueled by humor, sarcasm or rage, forms of critique or cocooning, worlds of volunteering or self help or activism or art or exercise. All of these are little worlds that some people immerse themselves in, or dip in and out of, or make fun of, or build a light and temporary link to before they move on to something else. And there are always pockets of things left hanging in the air. Layers of habit, pipe dreams, and power plays skitter or languish all around. Things can remain ungathered into meanings and may not signify at all. Or they can throw themselves into a full-blown ideology. Situations can be pulled into a trajectory, stretched out onto the line of a project, a career, a relationship, an addiction. Or they can go lateral. They can feel like something you're in, or sort of, or just something you're around. Worlds and lives can get tweaked with so much impact that they become a permanent state of alarm or they retreat. People are on alert to what seems to be happening or to have happened, piecing together frayed fantasies half imagined or honed down to hard kernels bigger than life. Throwing out some kind of line to something. Running to the grocery store can be as open and compelling a gesture as tracking down your big dream; mundane as well as grandiose attunements can fill up your life for a while if that's what happens.

Attending to atmospheric attunements and trying to figure their significance incites forms of writing and critique that detour into descriptive eddies and attach to trajectories. This is writing and theorizing that tries to stick with something becoming atmospheric, to itself resonate or tweak the force of material-sensory somethings forming up. The effort requires a clearing—a space in which to clear the opposition between representation and reality, or the mind-numbing summary evaluations of objects as essentially good or bad, or the effort to pin something to a social construction as if this were an end in itself. Attending to atmospheric attunements means, instead, chronicling how incommensurate elements hang together in a scene that bodies labor to be in or to get through. In the expressivity of something coming into existence, bodies labor to literally fall into step with the pacing, the habits, the lines of attachment, the responsibilities shouldered, the sentience, of a worlding.

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