REGIONALITY

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One ventures from home on the thread of a tune.
—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1987

In the willows along the river at Pleasure Bay
A catbird singing, never the same phrase twice.
—Robert Pinsky, 2002

Let's say we're in a small town north of Boston.

The seasons are magnetized to tones of voice and a quality of light.

The winter is a dark tunnel. The men slide off the roofs. The voices carry over the muffled surfaces. "Hey Joe, what happened to ya lights?" "Hey Bob, where's ya tree? What happened?"

October is saturated in color. The air is biteable. In May it swells.

Regionality here is an event that jumps between landscape and bodies of all kinds. It is ambient, and therefore atmospheric (Massumi 2002). It seeps into "the inconsequentials . . . odors, exhaustions, sounds of voices, errands, changing light" (Barthes 1992, 7). It strikes the senses. It pulls hard matter into alignment with a composition.

When my father's heart burst on a Christmas Eve, there was an ice storm so severe that four out of every ten trees in the forest snapped in half. They bent under their accruing loads of ice 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, the sharp explosions sounded like the gunfire in Vietnam. These were my father's trees, his mode of attachment and attunement to place and a neighborhood of men, now snapping in two, like a thousand-gun salute, as his heart exploded.

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 in an intimacy of jokes about competence and the human condition and the things that can happen in their world. ("Hey Joe what happened to ya tree?") 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.

Regionality here is what pulls things into the consistency of a laugh.

It is what happens when the muteness of things metamorphoses into a contact aesthetic.

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Singularities incite it. It matters here, for instance, that windows are uncurtained and left open through the night, even in the deadest cold of the winter. People walking the neighborhood peer in at the still lifes of others inside reading the newspaper on the couch, or up early, as usual, drinking their coffee on the kitchen stool. Lamps are favored over overhead lighting, lending texture and specificity to scenes spied in ordinary, no-big-deal display. Drawn curtains are a sinkhole in the neighborhood—not just a sign of something amiss (depression, withdrawal, indifference, dysfunction) but the actual physical shadow of a state of being. Curtained houses reduce the gestural economy of seeing and being seen to an occluded vision in which objects are dark, shadowy outlines with blank cores, like a world seen through a ripe cataract.

This is a place that needs its windows. It attaches itself to the aesthetic of yellow light passing out of windows to yards. Tweaked to a high pitch and hardwired to the senses, it becomes a habit of mapping tactilities. A collective lunge for sensory design.

Each town here is a sharply tuned spatial logic whose muscled core is an affective attachment to place so powerful that it's as if there's an invisible gate at the town line. You can feel it in your gut when you drive over a town line. People don't cross them without a sense of danger, hassle, inordinate distance. They don't know street names one town over; you can get lost 2 miles from home. A shopping trip to Target 3 miles away in the next town seems hard, even disorienting and dangerous. "You went all the way over theyah?"

In the blink of an eye, a jump from gritty mill town to green, green grass and a sparkling town pond viscerally registers differences of class, ethnicity, race. But passing from one green, green grass to another is also a hard sensory edge. In the currents of difference, affiliation, history, ordinary dullness, and comfort, characters and their stories, that gather on a town line, something throws itself together. You are either in that something or you are "out of it."

To be in place here, in other words, is to be at the edge of something (Mules 2005). It is to pull yourself into alignment with something tentative, ephemeral, incidental though powerfully felt. Something atmospheric distributed across a geography of elements that swell. A thing that turns scenes, spaces, and bodily effects into envelopes that produce worlds out of thin air (Sloterdijk 1998).

The cartography of what happens here, or what comes to matter, is lodged in a sensory certainty to which disorientation is foundational. Displacement, and singular forms of getting lost, are bubble worlds that reinvent the self-in-place by testing its limits. There is a habit of setting out alone, without a map. A venturing into a world that remains palpably unpredictable and seductive beyond the carefully cordoned zones of familiarity.

There is, for instance, the dry run. The preliminary test drive to an unfamiliar place intended to stave off anxiety by scoping out routes, driving time, and potential parking places. Or there is the not exactly accidental exercise of getting yourself lost. Such forms of disorientation are prismatically related as if each were an

angle, like an angle of light, that pulls the subject, agency, sociality, and an affective infrastructure into a line, or a particular refrain that becomes collective and transmits affectively across generations. The tune of a ditty or a dirge.

My father was into the dry run. Once I was giving a talk at Harvard, 25 miles from the place where he and my mother were born and lived their lives. But this was Cambridge, Boston, unknown and terrifying territory for driving because you could get lost in a loop, get shunted in heavy traffic, and end up completely lost, stuck, in a panic. So they took the dry run together the day before and emerged triumphant—piece a cake.

I tend toward the not-exactly-accidental act of getting lost. This time, my mother is dying in the nursing home. I have been bearing her anguish for some days and nights with so little I can do. I escape for lunch, walking several somewhat uncertain "shortcuts" involving hiking about 2 miles through the woods to the Pizza Factory on the highway to get a Greek salad with chicken and pita bread. This is an adventure and I am alone, anxious but also setting off. On the way back I see a new path going up over the hill; I decide to take it because I am not done with this exercise that somehow depends not just on testing competence but on giving it up. Time passes with no clearing, no sight of the nursing home. I begin to dehydrate, to panic. I cut through brush to hilltops where I think I should be able to see the nursing home nestled in the valley in the distance, but I cannot catch a glimpse of it. I circle back, find the familiar paths around the lake, ask a woman how to get to Edgewood. Now I am very thirsty, becoming physically disoriented, it has been three hours and, strangely, I cannot find the path that, from the lake, should be obvious. Finally, I retrace my steps all the way back, find the original branch in the path and, after a rushing few minutes, catch a glimpse of the white and gray buildings on the far side of a long, wooded patch of overgrown bushes and briars and poison ivy and I am running through it, clothes torn and skin scratched but determined to get back to the hardtop and this place where it seems that things have just been waiting, on hold. The event, its affective structure, is familiar from childhood and strangely satisfying, like a loop I had to make, an emotive-agentive place I had to check in with. It's an investment, too, in my dead father and dying mother and their town.

Regionality comes into view at a limit (Nancy 2004). It has the character and texture of an edge fashioned into a background composition. It charges subjectivity with attunements to its forms and rhythms. But this is only because it is decentered by what it sets in motion, hollowed out by the labyrinth of its trajectories and the scenes that, in their very perfection of form, demand precarious alignment. Even when a regional aesthetic hardens into iconic scenes of living—let's say the maple tree in October, the white colonial houses surrounding the town commons, the preponderant whiteness of the people in New England—these are scenes of recognition not of a naturalized order per se but of the visceral complicity of those laying claim to a place and a lifeworld. To say that categories or representations produce regionality is to ignore the tactile compositionality of things and

the way that strands of influence pulled into a plane of expressivity become a milieu that stretches transversally, as affect, from land to heart and habit.

Regionality's compositions push matter itself into a state of emergent expressivity.

Hard and impersonal, it permeates the contours of the landscape, the rocks the glaciers left, the climate, the layers of determinations laid down by histories, the leftovers of everything that has happened. It gathers itself into a plateau at which intensities become expressive, form a territory (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). It becomes an impassive corporeality: a mantle of redemption, a glacier of impatience, a high desert of anxiety dissected by fault lines of rage. It has drama, intensity, an energetics of tension and release, build up and lateral shift. In its registering circuit, intensities pass from body to body—human bodies, animal bodies, machine bodies, bodies of thought, ecosystems, visceralities, and noumena spread out across a vast atmospheric field.

On the one hand, regionality is a sheer recognition of a sheer recognition—we're from here (Heller-Roazan 2006). But this very recognition is constituted in moves and encounters that continually reset the self–world relationship. The regional habit, here, to venture out mapless compulsively produces a vulnerability that marks those "from around here" as active survivors of the unexpected encounter and knowing readers of emergent situations.

I went to get my mother's car inspected. I was anxious about how it was done here because I knew there would be rules and a lot of edginess about them—a bad combination. At the garage, the owner warned me. He gave me a large sign with the number four on it to put in the windshield. He very carefully explained that I was to position my car in the tiny parking lot and wait my turn. I was not to leave and come back for any reason—it would cause a problem. But as I was trying to get my car into position two big trucks pulled in, blocking the way. So, rather than weight anxiously in the road, I distracted myself by driving to the ballet store across the street to buy my daughter a leotard. Ten minutes at most. When I came back there was a car with a number five on its dashboard. I squeezed into a spot and waited. The woman in number five was on her phone, yelling, for a long time. She squeezed her car past me to get it inspected before mine. I was getting more anxious. Then a number six squeezed by. Finally, the owner came over to my mother's car, his body weighted with dread or hassle or something. "I have a problem with you." I had left my spot. He had warned me. The image of the woman on the phone flashed into my mind. I went abject. Then the man became apologetic. He gave Ariana a lollipop. We were humans together. Irish Catholics, I imagined. Townies. From here. Not that woman on the phone. She would be a newcomer, a lawyer or something who works in Boston and for whom this place is a bedroom community appealing for its look, its housing, its hills and lake, the schools.

A frictional zone aligns overwrought (and not quite functioning) rules with schemes and anxious sidesteps. The very intensity of the exercise demands some recompense—a dreamy high road of redemption, a middle finger whipped out, a

scream of rage and a quick escape. All of this famously lends driving here the strange combined qualities of aggression and abjection—the horns constantly honking, the aggressive edging into lines of traffic, and the kind of anxious driving that is more like a gesture than a plan: eyes straight ahead, neck rigid, you whip out of blind driveways, around packed, chaotic rotaries, into rushing lanes of traffic as if driving on a prayer, as if the game is always already lost—fuck it, I'm going, hope for the best.

Once I hit and dented a car in a drugstore parking lot. I waited. When the owner came out, I apologized. I saw the losing it building up in him. But then he gathered himself around an eye contact, a handshake, the utterance of a phrase turned into a refrain "It's OK. Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas, don't worry about it. No problem." He drove away with a sincere smile on his relaxed face, didn't even take my insurance information. We were "from here" in a world made intimate through forgiveness, denial, detachment flowing in after a surge of something bad—a close call. We were adjusting ourselves to the done deal that things happen.

Scenes like this are not just encounters; they're exercises. A flexing of regional muscle over the taut skin of tense possibilities. Regionality's sheer recognition is incited by circuits of reaction. Two strangers in a supermarket notice a woman losing it in the congested aisle. They exchange the glance of recognition. The slightly raised eyebrows, the way they hold their blank stares for a few comic, straight-faced seconds signals "We're from here."

This place hangs together as a thing, then—a recognizable entity with qualities, lived modalities, and a history of its social production and uses—not because its elements are coherent imprints or effects of something else but because they have qualities and affects. They shift or roll. They can accrue, sediment, unfold, wear out, or go flat. There are stakes in the elements of a place as living forms that generate a zone of connectivity not because of what they are but literally because of what they do, the machinery they provide.

Let's say, then, that regionality here is the blue laws, the seasons, the color red, the ordinary intimacy of bars that feel like 1970s basement recreation rooms, a taste for Lorna Doone cookies and Pecan Sandies, the preppies versus the townies, the Yankees versus the Catholics, the parish structure that spawned the culturally marked ethnic diversity (Irish, Italian, French Canadian, German, Portuguese, Jewish, Lebanese, Puerto Rican, Dominican Republican, Haitian), the practice of psyching out ethnicity ("What's her last name? Oh, is she Jewish?"), the anti-Semitism, the racism, the way that some consider Italians garish (pink houses, statues of Mary in their yards), the fear of cockroaches and heat waves, the old town centers dating back to the early colonies but only aestheticized as the circle of white houses around the town commons at the turn of the twentieth century, the elitism of the historical societies, the history of early and widespread industrialization and the elaborate recognition of class, the Native American names of landscape features, the central determining force of the Merrimack River, the low divorce rate, candlepin bowling, low rates of out-migration, lime rickeys, the high-tech

industry, higher education, New England English, the influenza epidemic of 1918, the Boston accent split into fifty distinct town accents, the discerning ear for precise town accents, the one-way streets, the rotaries, a lexicon of locally used words (a "blinker" is a car's directional signal, a "clicker" is a remote control, a "bubbler" is a drinking fountain, a "carriage" is a shopping cart, "bundles" are full bags of groceries from the supermarket, "jimmies" are chocolate ice cream sprinkles, a "hoodie" is a small cup of ice cream that comes with a flat wooden spoon or, very offensively, a teenage girl, "elastics" are rubber bands, a "packie" is a liquor store, "pissa" means great, "wicked pissa" means extremely good, a "tonic" is a soft drink), the depression here, what the World Wars did, abolitionism, the origin of the antinuclear movement, the Red Sox, the Celtics, the Bruins, the Patriots. New England hot dog rolls are split on top instead of on the side, low-water-use toilets here flush soundlessly and gently, sidewalks are widespread.

This is a rickety infrastructure that makes perfect sense as a pieced-together, arcane affective atmosphere. My father's hand held a clicker on the night he died; he nodded, as usual, to his neighbor John across the street as the two men sat on their stools at the kitchen counters drinking coffee long before dawn.

Being "from here" nests in concentric rings stretching out from encounters to tastes, bodies, neighborhoods, a valley, a state, a geographical region. Town meetings hold the line against development. Massachusetts registers as a progressive state through gay marriage, universal health care, services for the homeless. It also registers as a place of bad drivers, the racism of the school-busing controversy in South Boston—the tip of an iceberg—and Democratic. Once a family from Texas moved in across the street from my mother. This was strange, a curiosity. But neighboring happened in ordinary material and visual ways, and the new family was given the benefit of the doubt. Sympathy was actively gathered when it was discovered that one of the children had a learning disability of some sort. Then one day the new neighbors stuck a republican political sign in their front yard. "They're Republicans!"

The Merrimack Valley registers a gritty industrialism: the textile mills pulling young women and children off far-flung farms to work and live; labor conditions and labor organizing—the Industrial Workers of the World, the Bread and Roses strike, horrific events; immigration and the parochial structure of the place—twenty-nine languages spoken in Lawrence alone at one point. On the valley level, everything rose and declined very quickly here. The mills closed; modernist prosperity tipped into drugs and violence. "Forty-Fives" is an arcane, trick-taking card game played only in a handful of towns in the Merrimack Valley and in Ireland (where it originated in the sixteenth century), and parts of Newfoundland, Labrador, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Novia Scotia. The version played in the Merrimack Valley is closest to the sixteenth-century game. It is thought that the game moved south into the Merrimack Valley with French Canadian immigrants in the 1920s. It is also popular, quite specifically, with Boston College graduates—the Irish Catholic bastion of higher education in the area.

New England registers as American history because of the powerful domination of this region in historical writings and the abundant visual and material artifacts in museums and private collections. But also the old houses and graveyards scattered around and the sharp cultural marking of the ponds and hills where children, over generations, skate and sled. History stories "are as if in the air—did it happen to your father or to someone he heard of, did it happen in his generation or another? It is as if the stories are alive, and the people temporary containers, which is to say it is like a form of possession" (Pinsky 2002). My grandmothers worked in the mills. One was a dyer, the other a threader. One witnessed a young woman scalped when her hair got caught in the machine. These were stories we heard; they were my grandmothers' memories. Or something.

During the Salem Witch Trials 50 people out of 600 in this town were accused. The town was known at the time for dabbling in what Cotton Mather called the "wicked little sorceries"—astrology, fortune-telling, an attunement to specters. The court trials centered on dreams and visions, animal familiars, and the touch test in which the accused were forced to lay hands on their accusers so that the signs of energetic transference could be read. "William Barker Sr. admitted getting into 'the Snare of the Devil' because he had a large family and 'the world went hard with him.' He provided details of a meeting of one hundred witches held at Salem Village. Barker had been haying all day, so his spectre went" (Mofford 2004, 33). The carpenter (and fortune-teller) Samuel Wardwell made a bargain with the devil after a Barker maid refused his love. It was in front of Captain Bradstreet's house that a cat suddenly assumed the shape of the devil and promised Wardwell he could live comfortably and be a captain. When I reported having read of these events, the reaction was a sheer recognition of street names and living descendants—Foster, Johnson, Marston, Osgood, Parker Street. The Barkers still have a tiny farm stand—the last remaining in town. Eight very elderly Barker siblings live in a house together; none of them ever married.

Regionality is an edgy composite of trees and grasses, barns and steeples, commons, colors, ecosystems, noumena, haircuts, performed socialities, the spiciness of food, a robustness in cold weather, a hyperactive sense of practicality. Its elements are traces of quietly lived existential crises, industrial accidents, Hallmark greeting cards, and the fear, hate, and love of sharp-edged collectivities like race, ethnicity, class, gender, generation, and religion. In its field, any given element may be linked to any other in a machinery of connection, which is also a perpetual disconnecting (Nancy 2004).

It has a prismatic ecology. The redness of the maple tree here became iconic of the region as it traveled through picturesque calendars, a body of poetry, leaf tourism, the once-in-a-time maple-sugaring cottage industry, and who knows what kinds of desires. The history of the dairy industry, the circulation of Norman Rockwell's images and Robert Frost's poetry, the creation of *Yankee* magazine and its popularity all over the country as the invented romance of steady old no-nonsense ways, the local-color movement in the 1930s and again in the 1970s

(Conforti 2001). The quality of redness itself, the spark from red leaf to red barn to red apple against white snow, white steeple, white houses, green grass, green mountains dark, dark ocean, lakes, ponds, the white red blue of flags everywhere, buntings, the primariness of color here. Even the houses were originally not white but bright red, green, blue.

As an intimate, compositional process of dwelling that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds (Heidegger 1971), it throws together in scenes what is potential, problematic, funny, or complicating to an "us" defined by a moment, a situation, a habit, or a style of expression.

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 "frappes." Coffee is the favored flavor. People line up outside the ice cream–stand window all year long. In the winter there are always some in shorts, T-shirts, and sandals. This performance of the townie body unfazed by the cold is a little funny, a little endearing, a little heroic, a little comic relief. 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. Integrated into the circuit of ice cream and donuts is a winking, shrugging performance that pulls the bottom-line human condition into its orbit.

Regionality here tweaks a world and then hedges. The labored viscerality of being in whatever's happening renders choices, aesthetics, surfaces, and materialities a part of something. We want the weight of the world. Bodies labor to literally fall into step with the pacing, the lines of attachment, the responsibilities shouldered, the sentience, of being from some place and in some thing. Then comes the muffling. Scenes of life itself played out in forms of pleasure, acquiescence, deprecation, a bad but human habit, some wicked little sorcery.

It is as if the regional senses here are both overwrought and tamped down to a delicate soft palate, a *minima aesthetica.* Styles of hair and clothes and bodily comportments are markedly no-nonsense, practical, almost hallucinogenically down-to-earth. Spicy foods produce a lingering shock—my lips are on fire! The spiciness, like realizing someone is Republican, is always a surprise, as if it has never happened here before, as if it makes no sense that it could ever happen here.

Moderation is by no means an ideal, yet the very demands of the sensorial acuity of regionality seem to require a discretion, a dampening, as if the very strength of the tweaked regional senses need to be enveloped in the practical facts of life.

You leave your windows bare and open through the winter.

You splurge on donuts and ice cream in the company of others.

You hate overhead lighting and stockpile incandescent light bulbs against their future demise.

You reject clothes driers because they will rip and burn underwear and socks.

You exchange a look.

The list of regionality's singularities is a geography of what happens—a speculative topography of the everyday sensibilities consequential to living through things (Thrift 2007).

A virtual mapping of things in a state of potential.

It is in this sense that regionality is:

What pulls things into the consistency of a laugh or an edge.

What magnetizes things to tones of voice and a quality of light.

A collective lunge.

An attunement that takes form.

A muffling.

The adjective "wicked" marking excess of all kinds, including the excessiveness of its own daily use.

A milieu in which the mouth relaxes into a town accent.

A delicate soft palate.

A disorientation.

A love affair with light and color.

Uncurtained windows.

Sandals in the snow; the pinkened toes.

Extreme practicality.

A wink. A shrug.

The things that happen are incitements to form. Some are fleeting, some rhythmically compelling or addictive or satisfying enough to stick with. So vast and unpredictable is their range, from the obvious and much remarked to the cryptic and situationally precise, that conceptualizing regionality's forms takes improvisation.

Regionality itself takes place in singularity because it is an improvisatory conceptuality.

This writing is an experiment in attuning to tune of such conceptualizing. Approaching regionality means finding ways to sidle up to its peculiar ongoing generativity, the way that its affects become native, attaching to bodies and socialites, to an ethos, to the very possibility of an ordinary.

This place, north of Boston, is a place so weighted that it is always on the dangerous, disturbing cusp of taking form as a composition. A place that writes itself. But it is also an insanely, hysterically practical place that sits on the highly fractured stone of a collective intensity, carefully tempering what expressions leak out of it. It is sometimes called "The Valley of Poets." But it is also a place that doesn't care about writers and writing, a place that is anxious about being written about, adamant, even, that it should not be written about. An extremely practical place.

To approach the tactile compositionality of things is to think about what a concept can do. To move beyond the merely representational and the bad habits

and bad politics of strong theory's tendency to beat its objects into submission to its dreamy arguments (Sedgwick 1997; Thrift 2007). It requires some dedramatization of academic thought and some writerly effort to approach its object slowly and enigmatically, looking for the nonobvious ways it registers and what it makes matter. A descriptive detour or a lyrical evocation can become a method of awkwardly approaching an object by attuning to it as a thing of promise and contact (Latour [2005] 2007; Stewart 2007; Berlant 2011). Fictocriticism and other attempts to write theory differently are now an intervention into thinking of the material and the ephemeral together, form and emergence, air and atmosphere (Muecke 2008). A concept attuning itself to things coming into form is, itself, both abstract and concrete, actual and unfolding. This is theory's labor pulling into proximity to the ordinary work of becoming sentient to a world's bodies, rhythms, ways of being in noise and light and space (Nancy 1997). Depending absolutely on its angle of approach and the way it catches light, writing becomes an energetics of what happens and also a carapace of spent and living forms.

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