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Words in Worlds: An Interview with Kathleen Stewart

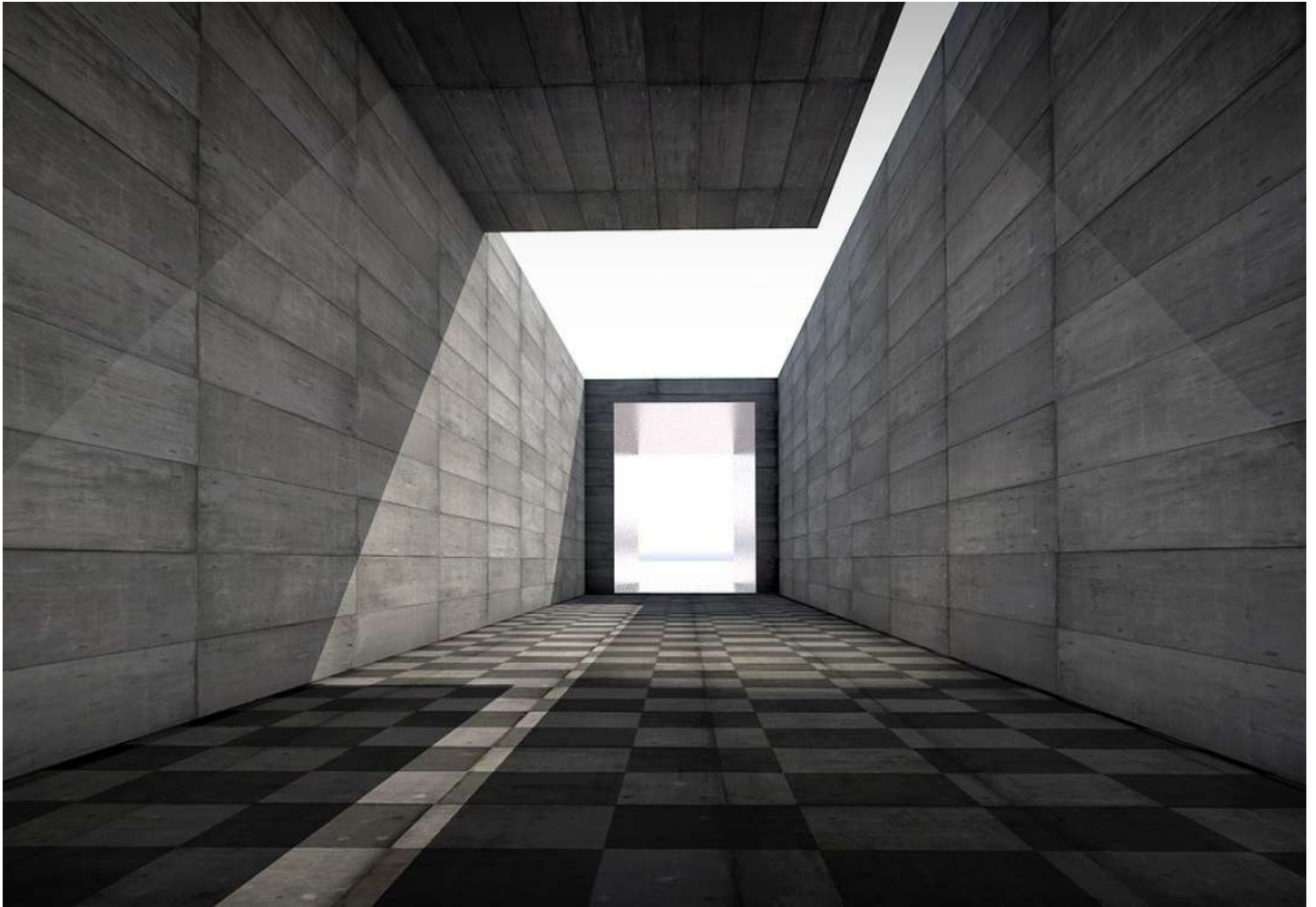


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This post builds on the research article “[In the World that Affect Proposed](#),” which was published in the **May 2017** issue of the Society’s peer-reviewed journal, *Cultural Anthropology*.

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Andrés Romero and Toby Austin Locke: When you began your academic career, attention to affective intensities was arguably not yet as prevalent in anthropology or, at least, such questions were being asked in terms of other categories (e.g., emotion) and analytical pursuits. We wondered if you could take us back to your early training and fieldwork experiences. What kinds of texts and ethnographic encounters led you in the direction of affect?

Kathleen Stewart: I was under a lot of influences, which gave me license to conceptualize the intensities of form and force. At Michigan: my teachers, Mick Taussig and Kit Roberts; my reading group and friends Susan Harding, Marilyn Young, Gayle Rubin, Connie Samaris, Alice Echols, Lynn Eden, and Betsy Taylor; lesbian disco performativities; feminist frictions over pornography; prostitution and S&M, teaching in the Women’s Studies Collective and what was going on in the room during meetings (eye contact, smoking, knitting, deep sighs, jitters); learning U.S. labor history.

In the field in West Virginia: Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (2002) *Phenomenology of Perception*, James Agee and Walker Evans’s (2001) *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, country music’s wailing, Emmylou Harris’s perfect pitch and hard-to-reproduce harmonies, being alone, having money problems, learning how to talk, just sitting, the overlapping fieldwork year with Betsy Taylor, our stories creating an echo chamber of difference, circling around the conceptual, sometimes coalescence, becoming attuned to what was happening to people in the camps, the unimaginable in my face, my job to just be there with it, the leaving and how people took that (not well), the guilt, the rough transition back to the America of graduate school.

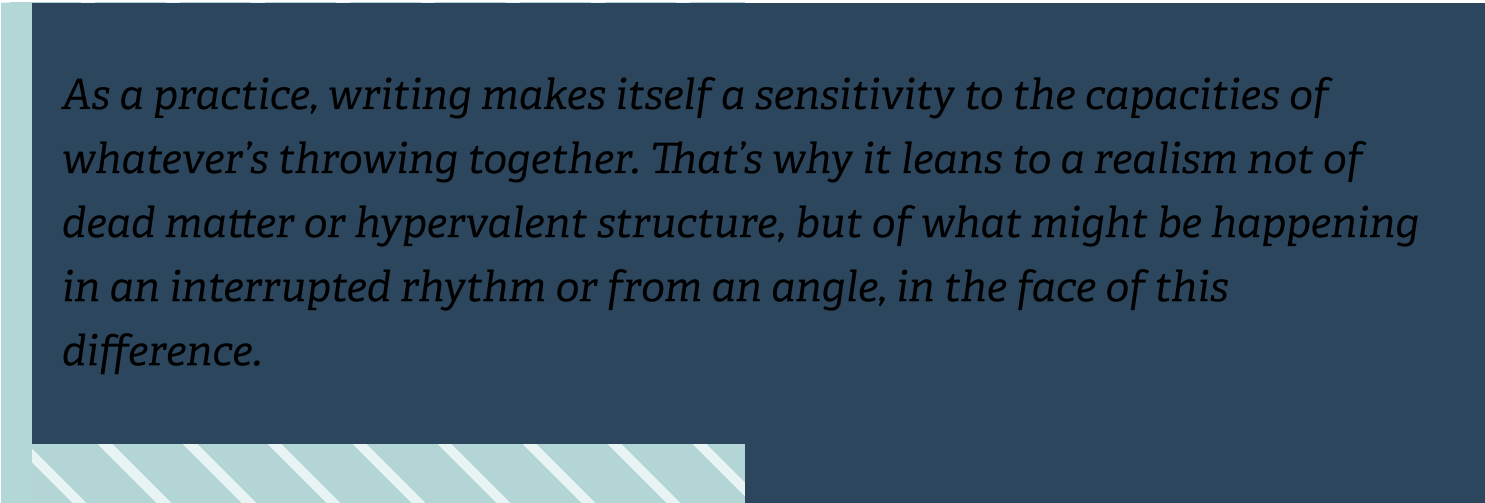
Before all this: the loud storytelling/swearing/laughing/forms of craziness in the Irish Catholic clan I grew up in; the time the priest asked me at my first Holy Communion (age seven) “Have you ever been impure?” and then “Alone, or with others?”; slowly dying of an unnamed illness from ages seventeen to twenty-one and surviving; swimming and skiing with abandon throughout childhood; starting work at 12. This list makes me realize that affect studies has made me feel less alone because before it, there was my lonely emotion and other people’s.

AR and TAL: Could you say something about your role as a teacher of anthropology, affect, and ethnographic writing, among other things? How has your teaching in these areas changed over time, and what influenced these changes? What has remained the same?

KS: Twenty years ago I started teaching affectively. I had a big “Introduction to Cultural Studies” class right after a yoga class I was taking, which always included my falling into a deep sleep during the final relaxation. The yoga disconnected me from my drivetrain. I would wake up a little out of it, surprised, and then walk straight to class. The first time this happened I just stood in the front of the room, looking around, for maybe half a minute. That’s a long time. The atmosphere in the room swelled. The students looked anxiously around and then, to my surprise, started to smile at me. The classroom had become energetic with possibilities, anxieties, eyes seeking contact, bodies shifting in their seats. We checked in. “What’s going on?” They giggled. I waited. We got a topic and wondered out loud about what was going on with that. Then we played games like writing lists of all the things that had happened that day, or what crossed their minds in a minute, or what they worried about, or what they were addicted to, or the one hundred objects they would choose if that’s all they could have in their tiny house. Then we’d talk about what came up and how to think about it.

Ten years ago I switched to teaching all of my graduate courses, and then all of my undergraduate courses too, as writing workshops. The price of admission is five hundred words a week. The only requirement of the writing is that it can’t be just an exegetical discussion of the reading for the week. We want active composition approaching an angle of a project. Describe something and what could happen. Anxieties about expectations have to be relieved. Grades have to be eliminated. The leader can’t be afraid of silence and waiting. There’s a call for a volunteer to read, a wait, a reading, another call, another wait. The others listen actively, taking notes to compose a response. After every four readings, we voice cross-

reading compositional threads; concepts become collective and improvisational as we built habits of response. The room gets intellectual, affective, and social all at once. Thinking in the company of others accrues sediment. Projects develop. Questions became more basic: what is it, what's it doing, where's it going? It's a relief and as simple as pushing a restart button, as ordinary as taking a walk to think things through.



As a practice, writing makes itself a sensitivity to the capacities of whatever's throwing together. That's why it leans to a realism not of dead matter or hypervalent structure, but of what might be happening in an interrupted rhythm or from an angle, in the face of this difference.

AR and TAL: How do you invite students to develop their sensorial attunements to the emergent, to what is unfolding but yet to come? Once students become attentive to this process of mattering, to the moods, intensities, and/or public feelings that may become assembled in the particular scene or place before them, how can they harness their skills as writers with the task of not simply representing what is before them, but rather, offering expressivity to that which resists both articulation and the fixity of pre-existing concepts?

KS: Through the practices of writing and listening. Writing is a world of its own but, like any artful practice or, in other words, any labor of being, it needs materials to work with. It's about words in worlds. If you're trying to describe something, you have to start somewhere (not top-down from a prefab concept that happened somewhere else). In search of precision or some kind of nudge, writing that is open to the world takes what it lights upon: the tendons of a scene, the elements of an actual field forming up. It matters if something is red or yellow, or if a leaf turns the atmosphere from summer to fall in a minute when the wind blows. As a practice, writing makes itself a sensitivity to the capacities of whatever's throwing together. That's why it leans to a realism not of dead matter or hypervalent structure, but of what might be happening in an interrupted rhythm or from an angle, in the face of this difference. In a world already so populated by the prolific, hard-working compositions of practices and all the

forms of significance pinging across bodies and senses, laws and infrastructures, writing and reading are a way to get into what's going on and stay there long enough to begin to think about living now.

AR and TAL: Finally, we wanted to invite your thoughts on what might be called the violence of affect theory, a form of violence or at least negation that results from attempting to represent the elusive and intangible. Affect confronts us with what exceeds linguistic representation, and yet we attempt to approach it through writing. how has this tension unfolded for you in your role as an ethnographer of emergent, open-ended, and contingent domains of inquiry? For example, how does the incomplete and emergent manifest itself in your field notes, and what form do such notes take?

KS: Sometimes people who know, viscerally, something I'm writing about will accuse me of letting out secrets, of writing down things that people living through them recognize and know in certain ways but only to an extent and don't talk about it. In a stronger version of this, my aunt once leaned into me and said "You better not be writing about the family." I had to delete stories from my dissertation when people in the field thought their voices would be recognizable to others. Or academics object to fictocritical writing, which actively mixes composition and theory; they want their fiction kept separate so they can enjoy it and so they know how to think when they're reading academic prose. For me, these are all aspects of the problematic of compositionality.

I think the things that come up when you try to attend to the emergent, sedimented, or occluded come up because they are themselves in states of composition. This being-in-composition is what Raymond Williams meant by *structures of feeling*, and they are what we try to theorize as collective sense or the aesthetics of living with others. It's active, but not rationalist about intention or consciousness. It's all about tendencies reaching a point of expressivity and it can certainly take place as punctums—There it is! That's it!—or condense into tense meanings brought forth through compositions of timing (jokes) or spread contagiously across worlds of practice or identity. It's just not politically summarizable in the kind of language that sets itself up as a judge. People fear and hate the little judges because they interrupt the compositionality of the recognizable gesture, the field note, the sideways glance, or the academic text sidling up to worldly forms of knowing.

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