Space n the Side of the Road Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America KATHLEEN STEWART

A SPACE ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

CULTURAL POETICS IN AN "OTHER" AMERICA

Kathleen Stewart

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For my mother, Claire Driscoll Stewart, and my father, Frank Stewart

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This is a story about the fabulation of a narrative "space on the side of the road" that enacts the density, texture, and force of a lived cultural poetics somewhere in the real and imagined hinterlands of "America." It takes place in the hard-core Appalachian coal-mining region of southwestern West Virginia—a region that constitutes an "Other America" not because it is somehow "outside" or marginal to "America's" cultural landscape but because it has, through a long history of exploitation and occupation by an industry and an incessant narrativization of a cultural real, come to imagine its place within its spaces of desire.

This makes it "other" than the story of "America" that arises in the abbreviated shorthand account of nationalist myth-a second-order semiological system that empties cultural signifiers of their history and sociality by appropriating them to an abstract rhetorical project of its own (Barthes 1957). Here we are told over and over again, in a chant of certainty, that the story of America is a story of the West versus the rest, of capitalism and modernization, of individualism, materialism, education, reason, democracy. An exegetical list of traits comes to us as if from a news brief from Washington or from the memory of a fourth-grade textbook on American Civilization. Here, the cultural productions that constitute an "America" of sorts are frozen into essentialized "objects" with fixed identities; a prefab fandscape of abstract "values" puts an end to the story of "America" before it begins.

The narrative space that I am calling here a "space on the side of the road" is the site of an opening or reopening into the story of America. In West Virginia, and in other like "occupied," exploited, and minoritized spaces, it stands as a kind of back talk to "America's" mythic claims to realism, progress, and order. But more fundamentally, and more critically, it opens a gap in the order of myth itself—the order of grand summarizing traits that claim to capture the "gist" of "things." The "space on the side of the road" is both a moment in everyday stories in West Virginia and an allegory for the possibilities of narrative itself to fashion a gap in the order of things—a gap in which there is "room for maneuver" (Chambers 1991).

Like so many other encompassed and de-centered places in the United States and around the world, the coal-mining region of West Virginia is a place that insists on the necessity of gaps in the meaning of signs and creates a place for story—for narrativizing a local cultural real. Here a prolific narrative space interrupts the search for the gist of things and the



quick conclusion with a poetics of deferral and displacement, a ruminative reentrenchment in the particularity of local forms and epistemologies, a dwelling in and on a cultural poetics contingent on a place and a time and in-filled with palpable desire.

In the daily practices of textualizing "thangs that happen," a local cultural real emerges in a precise mimetic tracking of events and grows dense with cultural tensions and desires. Local voices are launched from within a space of contingency, and the "truth" of things is lodged in the concrete yet shifting life of signs—a network of tellings and retellings, displacements and re-memberings. Here, unlike in the "America" of listed traits and abstract values, it is not only possible but compelling to imagine the life of signs as a "first-order" semiological system where precise interpretive practices flesh out the story of an "Other America" in-filled with texture and the force of imagination and desire. This is a space of story, then, that both back talks "America" and becomes the site of its intensification in performance.

The "space on the side of the road" begins and ends in the eruption of the local and particular; it emerges in imagination when "things happen" to interrupt the expected and naturalized, and people find themselves surrounded by a place and caught in a haunting doubled epistemology of being in the midst of things and impacted by them and yet making something of things. This is the space of the gap in which signs grow luminous in the search for their elusive yet palpable meanings and it becomes hauntingly clear that, as they say in the hills, "thangs are not what they seem." It is a space that marks the power of stories to re-member things and give them form. In it, the West Virginia coal-mining camps and hollers become a place that is at once diffused and intensely localized, incorporated into a national imaginary and left out, intensely tactile and as ephemeral as the ghostly traces of forgotten things. These hills-at once occupied, encompassed, exploited, betrayed, and deserted—become a place where the effects of capitalism and modernization pile up on the landscape as the detritus of history, and where the story of "America" grows dense and unforgettable in re-membered ruins and pieced-together fragments.

The problem of this book is how to imagine this "space on the side of the road" without freezing its moves in a grand totalizing scheme of "objects" and "gists." As an "object" "Appalachia" already has its place in an American mythic imaginary. There is the list of traits that has been assigned to it as a "poverty region" and "backwater" or as a "folksy" place. There is the easy assumption that "it" is essentially "other," "outside," and "resistant." here is the place it holds in the romantic, antimodernist dream of escape from "America's" list of traits that make

it seem not one thing ("modern," "materialist," "fast-paced," "alienated," etc., etc.) but another ("simple," "essential," "authentic," "timeless," "lived," etc., etc.). The very distance that holds the mythic story's cultural "objects" at bay and captures their "gist" turns on itself to wax nostalgic for the cut details, the sensate memories, the remainders and excesses excluded from its own abbreviated account.

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Across the distance of all such totalizing schemas, culture itself appears elusive and mysterious and gathers into signs of life grown luminous across a lyrical divide like picturesque scenes at the far end of a cultural landscape. There is a dream that somewhere out there—in the space of marginalia and ex-centricity—there are "places" still caught in the ongoing density of sociality and desire. Places to which "we" might return—in mind, if not in body—in search of redemption and renewal. The place of the hills of West Virginia snaps into place in the "black" and "white" order of "center" and "margin," "self" and "other," "dominant" and "resistant" culture. Seen against the backdrop of the empty list that is "America," "difference" itself marks the space of culture and is at once confined in a bounded space on the margins and given license to "be itself."

With things so "black" and "white" it is not surprising that African-American culture has become the talisman of "cultural difference" or culture-that-makes-a-difference in America. Within this frame, the politics of "othering" and the marking of difference remain subject to the old enclosures and to perverse appropriations. The problem remains, then, how to imagine and re-present cultural differences that make a difference in a way that might itself begin to make a difference.

In order to re-present the "space on the side of the road," then, we need more than assertions that the local has its own epistemology or that everything is culturally constructed. We need to approach the clash of epistemologies—ours and theirs—and to use that clash to repeatedly reopen a gap in the theory of culture itself so that we can imagine culture as a process constituted in use and therefore likely to be tense, contradictory, dialectical, dialogic, texted, textured, both practical and imaginary, and in-filled with desire. That is, the theory of culture itself must be brought into the space of the gap between signifier and meaning—the "space on the side of the road"—so that we can begin to imagine it as a "thing" that is not self-identical with itself but given to digression, deflection, displacement, deferral, and difference. Culture in this "model," if we can call it that, resides in states of latency, immanence, and excess and is literally "hard to grasp." This, I think, is the implication of the work of theorists like Barthes, Bakhtin, and Benjamin who each in his own way pointed to this "hard-to-grasp" quality and the sense of a "something more" in culture: for Barthes, there is the textedness of things, the indeterminacy of

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"meaning" in the text, the importance of concepts of the void or the gap, and the "something more" of pleasure; for Bakhtin there is the radical dialogics of cultural production, the genealogical "meaning" of signs and forms discoverable only in their social and historical usage, and the ungraspable "something more" of genre and especially voice; Benjamin is the most explicit in his claim for a "something more" in a redemptive critique and in the divided, dialectical "meaning" of images and objects. The point is not that culture is a "complex" "thing" but rather that it cannot be gotten "right," that it is, as they say in the hills, "nothin' but just talk is all," or the tense rhythm of action and "just settin"," or a hunting for "signs" in the face of the inexplicable. It is not an end, or a blueprint for thinking and acting, but a constant beginning againa search, an argument, an unfinished longing. The very effort to imagine it, then, is itself a continuous effort to reopen stories, and spaces of cultural critique, that are just as continuously being slammed shut with every new "solution" to the problem of culture and theory.

This book, then, does not propose a solution to the problem of representing cultural difference. If anything, it is an argument against the search for the perfect text and the quick textual solution in which the author attempts to cover all the bases with formal representations of self-reflexivity, self-positioning, and dialogic exchange. These are all important interpretive moves in the process of writing culture, but the question is how to fashion them into a productive gap in the theory of culture itself—a space that gives pause to consider the density and force of cultural politics.

To tell the story of "America" and the fabulation of "Other" spaces is to tweak the anxieties and desires that motivate the master narratives of center and margin, self and other, and naturalize an order of things "in here" and a space of culture "out there." It is to imagine an imaginative life that stands as a remainder both to the list of traits that put an end to the story of "America" and to the dread and romance of a cultural real "somewhere else."

This is a story, then, that cannot be told from the safe distance of a relativist chant or gathered into a collection of discrete and bounded "cultures" organized like rocks on a world map. It cannot simply claim to debunk stereotypes, or to counter romance with realism, or to "disprove" the myths of an "American" ideology. It depends instead on the more painful, dangerous, and perpetually unfinished task of unforgetting (Heidegger 1971) the complicity of cultural critique-as-usual in the story of "America" in order to begin again with a story that catches itself up in something of the force, tension, and density of cultural imaginations in practice and use.

This book, then, is not a smooth story that follows the lines of its own progress from beginning to end as a master narrative would but a collection of fits and starts in the moves of master narrative itself. It is made up of moments of encounter, shock, recognition, retreat. It grows nervous, and whatever "system" it is able to glimpse is itself a nervous system (Taussig 1992). It is a story in which there is always something more to be said. It is an attempt not to set the story of "America" straight but to open a gap in it so that we might at least begin to imagine "America" and the "spaces" within it. It tells its story through interruptions, amassed densities of description, evocations of voices and the conditions of their possibility, and lyrical, ruminative aporias that give pause. It tries to dwell in and on the formed particularity of things and the spaces of desire (and dread) they incite in the imagination. It fashions itself as a tension between interpretation and evocation, mimicking the tension in culture between the disciplinary and the imaginary (Cantwell 1993). It attempts to perform the problematics of the American imaginary—the problematics of subject and object, power and powerlessness, distance and closeness, certainty and doubt, stereotype and cultural form, forgetting and re-membering—so that these become constitutive elements of the story itself.

It is a nervous, overstuffed, insistent story about a nervous, overstuffed, insistent place on the margins, and in the interstices, and at the center of "America." It mimics and attempts to perform the diacritical cultural poetics of an "Other" (story of) America—the "space on the side of the road" with its incessant compulsion to story things that happen to interrupt the progress of events, its endless process of re-membering, retelling, and imagining things, its tactile mimesis of decomposing objects and luminous signs that speak to people and point to the possibility of the "something more" in culture.

The project has itself been a process of re-membering and retelling, and the resultant account stands as an allegory of the cultural processes it is trying to re-present. It began with two years of fieldwork from August 1980 to September 1982 and continued through a dozen return visits in the years that followed and through the twists and turns of field notes, tape recordings, memories, photographs, phone calls, postcards, letters, telegrams, and professional papers. Over time, it has become a process of long dwelling on things re-membered and retold, forgotten and imagined.

The fieldwork began and ended with hanging out with people and stopping to talk to people on the street. I used a tape recorder when I could, but, as they say in the hills, "thangs happen" and more often than not I was forced to rely on memory. I would run off to scribble notes in shorthand and then fill them in in as much detail as I could in long hours

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dwelling on every phrase and word and scanning for signs of "culture." Gaps would appear in the notes where I could not remember a strange phrase or follow all the endless digressions in a flood of stories. Those missing phrases and strange moves in a story then stood out as signs when I heard them again, and they became objects of fascination for me and the site of a further rumination on things ephemeral yet tactile, empirical and imaginary. Missing pieces and unknown meanings taught me to listen not just more intently, but differently—a listening in order to retell. Over time, as I came to recognize patterns in modes of telling, it was easier to follow along with stories and to remember them verbatim. And of course over time it became necessary to tell stories in a local way with words so that people would still visit me and stop to talk.

I spent the first year in Egeria—a place named after a biblical story of an idyllic oasis—in a remote mountain cabin with views on all sides of dispersed settlements where people still kept chickens and cows and pigs and had fields of hay and huge gardens. It was imagined, locally, as well as in my own "American" imaginary, as an old timey place indexing a nostalgia for a time and place apart from the cities and the postindustrial present of life in the hills. Yet people here, like those living in the fragments of the old coal camps in the hollers below, worked in the mines when they could or in the new supermarkets in town or were enabled to "return" to this place to "retire" only through devastating disabilities incurred in long decades of backbreaking work in the mines and in the northern cities.

Not through isolation alone, but also, and at the same time, through long, close participation in "America," local ways of talkin' and ways of doin' people have become metacultural markers of a local way of life in deliberate distinction from the demonized ways of the cities. The seemingly "natural" or "immediate" way of life in Egeria is itself a production of the scripts of stories and a constant scanning for signs. An elaborate taxonomy of ways with words indexes precise forms of representation and ways of reading them: the term lying refers to highly stylized, performative competitions, usually between older men, as each one claims to be able to do the other one better; an appreciation for poetic performance is indexed in the recognition that so-and-so has a nice turn of phrase or is good to talk to; people who cannot turn a phrase are considered backward and no account, yet there can also be accusations made that someone is just talkin' or runnin' their mouth; the accusation that someone may be braggin' or preachin' at people warns of the social consequences of socially irresponsible speech, and there are subtle distinctions made between how one speaks to a neighbor or a relative (distant or near), an older person or a younger person, a Christian or a sinner; talk of ideals

and signs points to a mysterious sensibility that there is something more to things than what meets the eye. Claims that people are squirrelly, holed up, down with the nerves, or runnin' the roads index states of depression and restless anxiety. Claims that there are confusions in families and churches or that people are carryin' on up the hollers or that thangs have got down index intense states of social conflict and the political-economic malaise of a subjected region.

My own effort to re-member and retell, too, grew dense in the thickets of a storied sociality. Things happened and were retold in ways that drew people together or pushed them apart. There were people and places I knew to avoid from the stories some told about them. Talking to some neighbors, I found myself prohibited from talking to others; attending a church, I found myself isolated from the "sinners" and their ways and unable to keep beer in the house or to play country music. When the church went into the confusion of a violent schism, I became associated with one faction and cut off from the other half of the congregation. Eventually I moved, joined by my colleague, Elizabeth Taylor, to Amigo—a coal camp in a dark holler with one of the worst reputations in the area for people "carrying on" and living all piled up in the remnants of an industrial landscape. Here there was endless talk, not only about the hills versus the city, but about the character of one camp versus another or one section of Amigo versus another or those wild places way up the holler away from the hard road. And here I not only heard and learned to retell the stories that people told me but listened, as well, to the stories that Betsy heard and retold. I can no longer always remember who originally heard what since by now we have both retold the "same" stories, though differently, in notes and talks and papers. In my own experience with constant re-memberings and retellings, then, I can imagine something of the epistemological effects of a thoroughly narrativized cultural real.

The final writing of this book, then, began with an effort to make a space for these stories in an "American" academic discourse and to insert the storied sensibility of culture as a "truth" that is performed and imagined in precise practices of retelling. Culture in this account is a space of imagination, critique, and desire produced in and through mediating forms. It is not something that can be set "straight" but it has to be tracked through its moves and versions, its sites of encounter and engagement, its pride and regrets, its permeabilities and vulnerabilities, its nervous shifts from one thing to another, its moments of self-possession and dispersal. Nor is culture in this sense easy to re-present. I have used every trick I could imagine to catch the reader up in the dialogic provisionality of its "truths" including dense descriptions with amassed details, direct

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polemics, reproduced stories, realist assessments and romantic interludes, evocations and exegeses, seductions and confessions, and direct appeals to the reader to "picture" this and "imagine" that.

In the retelling of the stories themselves I have used ethnopoetic notations in an effort to evoke something of the intensely elaborated cultural poetics of this speech (see Hymes 1975, 1981, 1985; D. Tedlock 1972, 1983; Derrida 1978) and to mimic the effects of poetics in performance (see Bauman 1977, 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1990). I use bold lettering to indicate emphasis, line breaks to indicate pauses or gaps, and occasional representations of spoken pronunciations to evoke the differences between Appalachian dialect and "Standard English." This, of course, is a process of translation both of the oral to the written and of a local (and stigmatized) language to a particular audience for desired effects. It is by no means an effort to represent a purely objective linguistic reality but an ideological strategy informed by Bakhtin's translinguistics (1981, Volosinov 1986), which traces forms in their social and political use. It is an effort to evoke some of the density and texture of expressive forms that voice a cultural poetic embedded in a way of life and the politics of its constant subversion and reproduction in the face of national and transnational forces and precise encounters with the story of "America."

To the same end, I use italics throughout the text to indicate culturally marked local terms or terms that have some marked cultural relevance in their social use. Many of these terms are italicized only the first time they are used or only at moments when it seems necessary to mark off their local usage in a particular context or in the structure of a particular sentence. These are terms like camps, hollers, the old timey, the anymore, thugs, scrip, holed up, ramps, smothering, the nerves, the dizzy, confusion, aggravation, studyin' on thangs, makin' somethin' of thangs, just settin', the stand, what nots, big meanings, foolin' with thangs, takin' to thangs, ornery, mean, no account, backward, showin' hisself, ignorance, cuttin' up, tearin' up, roamin', tradin', visitin', getting squirrelly or getting tickled, crazy, white trash, runnin' the roads, runnin' your mouth, lyin', braggin', and things that just happen or just come to people. A few terms are marked as specifically local throughout the text, and so remain in italics, because of their central place in the local imaginary. These include the terms places, remember, ideals, signs, and often talk or iust talk.

The chapters of the book move through some of the particular issues in othering and storying in America and some of the twists and turns, determinants and effects of stories in an "Other" America, including the shape of their social imaginary and the "space on the side of the road" from which they arise. Each chapter condenses and performs a set of particular associations of place, home, memory, history, exile, excess, spectacle, so-

cial performance, encounter, contingency, agency, social hierarchy, the body, the mythic, talk, ideals, and imagination.

Chapter 1, "The Space of Culture," evokes a home place emptying out and the fashioning of the "space on the side of the road" for narrative re-membering. It posits an immanent critique capable of tracking the sensibilities of mimesis in narrative and the densities of a textured and remembered landscape. Finally, it introduces the sociality of narrative performance and the doubled epistemology of narrative that both places people in the midst of unfolding events and elicits a metadiscursive attention to modes of telling.

Chapter 2. "Mimetic Excess in an Occupied Place," explores the social imaginary of a place at once subject to the booms and busts of an industry and locally occupied in its own right. It describes its restlessness and rumination, its poetics of encounter, sheer action, and intensity, its abjection, its states of exile and dreams of return, its spectacles of impact, and its experimental activities of foolin' with things. It traces the negative, reversible logic of hope or faith arising out of the signs of a world got down.

Chapter 3, Unforgetting: The Anecdotal and the Accidental," argues that the disciplinary apparatus of the bourgeois social order forgets and interrupts cultural particularity and texture through a rigid distinction of "subjects" and "objects" and a hierarchy of reason, idea, and truth claim over the anecdotal, the accidental, the contingent, and the fragmentary. It then traces the practices of unforgetting in the watchful narrative attention to things that happen and forms that relate moments of surprise.

Chapter 4, "Chronotopes," explores the dialectics of a historical perspective based on roaming the ruins of life in postindustrial America and an allegorical poetics of melancholic intensification that imagines a utopic potential still clinging to fragments. At moments when organized conventional symbols and signs meet a signification that is receptive, uncertain, undetermined, and inconclusive, a ruined landscape becomes a dense signification of social memory and meaning. Encountered places and scenes become social texts in themselves that enact the traces of a political unconscious.

Chapter 5, "Encounters," explores the diacritics of encounter between the story of "America" and its storied "Othered" places. Against the smooth surfaces of finished codes and projected concepts, the "Other" insists on the logic of encounter itself and heightens its differences from "the center" in performances of semiotic action. Signs of place and agency are enacted and made tactile in plastic performances of the body as a subjected subject and concretized metaphors of situation and locale.

Chapter 6, "The Space of the Sign," explores the poetic gap in signification that displaces the purely nominative and referential functions of 12 PROLOGUE

language into a cultural real and shakes the conviction of a naturalized Real World with the intimation of unseen forces and unrealized agencies. Naming itself becomes an act caught up in the densities of mediating social and aesthetic forms of seeing, acting, and talking. Signification grows inflected with the weight of social responsibility and care. Accusations of shamelessness and meanness embed abstract hierarchical identities of class, race, and gender in a space of social performance that marks the possibility of dramatic eruptions of heroic agency, mysterious forces, and loudmouthed back talk.

Chapter 7, "The Accident," demonstrates moments of fate or the sudden, forceful revelation of the inescapable relatedness of things. In the face of unspeakable events, narrative plot fragments into overwhelming lyric images that stand as revealed signs of an immanent sensibility uncaptured by the order of things. Narrative, in other words is not just the recounting of events but the thread of a thought that traces the precise turn of events in which the possible becomes probable, the mythic reveals itself within the ordinary, and the immanent or emergent is instantiated in the actual.

Chapter 8, "The Place of Ideals," pits the accusation that everything is just talk and people are just runnin' their mouths against an order of ideas—pronounced, significantly, as ideals—which betray a sense of something more emergent in the inescapably mediated space of a narrated world. The very gap between word and world becomes an object of fascination signaling unforeseen possibilities. The world speaks itself as a story filled with narrative coherence, and yet claims to ideals, like everything else, remain a form of talk in social use and are filled with the density and texture of sociality, history, and cultural politics.

The final chapter recalls the place of the nervous and ruminative, contingent and intensely imagined "space on the side of the road" in the "American" cultural landscape. It is a space often crowded into the margins, and yet it haunts the center and reminds it of something it cannot quite grasp.

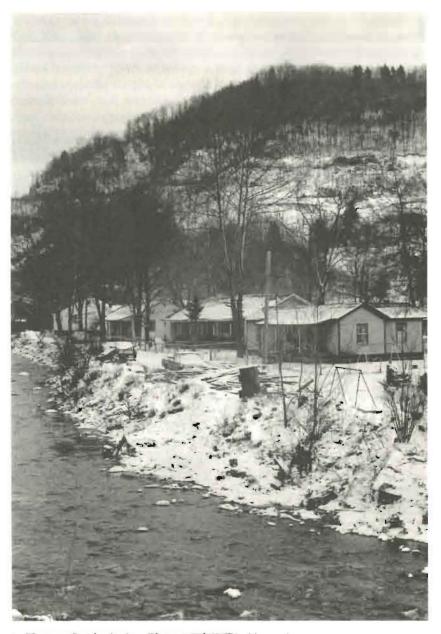
1

The Space of Culture

PICTURE HILLS so dense, so tightly packed in an overwhelming wildness of green that they are cut only by these cramped, intimate hollers tucked into the steep hillsides like the hollow of a cheek and these winding, dizzying roads that seem somehow tentative, as if always threatening to break off on the edges or collapse and fall to ruins among the weeds and the boulders as so many others before them have done. Picture hills so tucked away that the sun shines down on them for only a few hours a day before passing over the next ridge. Picture hills slashed round and round with the deep gashes of strip mining like a roughly peeled apple and hilltops literally lopped off by machines the size of ten-story buildings. And these creeks—this ever-audible soundscape to the everyday—that in the spring swell and rage at the bridges and overhanging shacks and leave behind a wake of mud and trash that extends high into the trees. Picture mountainous slag heaps of mining refuse that catch fire from internal combustion under all the thousands of tons of their own weight and burn for months or years at a time, letting off a black stench of oily smoke. Picture how the hills burst into red and orange flames at all hours of the night and how the flames are likened to the pits of hell. Picture sagging creek banks shored up with tires, rusted trucks, and refrigerators and treacherous slag "dams" holding back lakes of black oily water from the mines. Picture how, when it rains, the men go on watch through the night, climbing the steep hills to peer into the blackness and wonder if the dam will hold through the night.

Picture the tattered remnants of the old coal-mining *camps* crowded into the hollers, how people's *places* perch precariously on the sides of the hills or line the roads with the hills pressed hard against their backs. Some stand freshly painted in yards filled with kitsch figurines and plastic swimming pools. Others bear the faded pastel blues, greens, and yellows they have worn for many years, the paint worn through in places to weathered boards, their porches starkly swept and lined with chairs. Others still are deeply decayed, with broken porches, partially caved-in roofs, broken water pipes gushing out the underside, and relatives' trailers packed tight into their yards for lack of land to rent or buy.¹

Picture the places way up the hollers in a wilder, more dangerous zone away from the hardtop and neighbors. Here whole compounds may be



1. Tommy Creek, Amigo. Photograph © Em Herzstein.



2. A place up the holler, Tommy Creek holler, Odd. Photograph © Harriette Hartigan, Artemis.

pieced together with the remains of the *old places* now long fallen into ruin. A main house may be surrounded by tiny shacks made out of scrap metal and no bigger than a bed, where grown sons or crazy relations stay. There may be an outhouse, a cold cellar, a pump house, chicken coops, a pigsty, and several small gardens. Or there may be only a grassless yard heaped with metals and woods, bits of toys, and dismembered machines. There will be chairs stuck out in the middle of it all—the *place* where Fred or Jake or Sissy sits—and further out, encircling the compound, a ring of rusted, disemboweled trucks and cars, a pen filled with baying hounds, and, beyond that, only the hills themselves where you will come across the graveyards, the orchards, the ruins, the named *places*, the strip mines, the trucks belly-up, the damp, decayed mattresses, some scattered items of clothing, some campfire sites, some piles of beer cans, some bags of trash...

Imagine life in a place that was encompassed by the weight of an industry and subject to a century of boom and bust, repeated mass migrations and returns, cultural destabilizations and displacements, and then the final collapse of mining and the slow, inexorable emigration of the young. Imagine a history remembered not as the straight line of progress but as

a flash of unforgettable images. Remember the old timey cabins in the hills, the fires, the women dead in childbirth, the slick company representatives who dropped by unsuspecting farmers' cabins, stayed for dinner, and casually produced a bag of coins in exchange for parcels of "unused ridgeland" (Eller 1982:54), the company camps that sprang up around mines like someone else's mirage complete with company scrip, company stores, company doctors, company thugs, company railroads, company schools, company churches, and company baseball teams. Company thugs carried sawed-off shotguns, policing who came and went on the trains. They say the thugs stood sentry in the hills over a camp in the night. You could see their lanterns and that's how you knew they were there. Then the lights would go out and you didn't know. Imagine all the arresting images of strikes, lockouts, house evictions, people put out in the alleys with their stuff all around them and the snow coming down.

They was a settin' in chairs

like they was in their own livin' room.

And that's the truth.

They had nowhere to go and the snow comin' down right on top of 'm.

People lived in tents and the babies lay upon the guilts on the ground.

Armed miners holed up on a mountain and the federal government was called in to drop bombs on them from airplanes.

There were the dizzying swings of boom and bust, the mechanization of the mines, the mass migrations of the fifties and sixties, the final boom during the oil crisis, the final mine closings in the eighties, the collapse of the place, the painful hanging on, the unthinkable leavings. Imagine how the place became a migrational space that caught people in the repetition of drifting back and forth from the hills to the cities looking for work (Ardery 1983; Coles 1971; Cunningham 1987; Gitlin and Hollander 1970). How country songs of heartache and displacement became their theme songs. How ecstatic fundamentalism boomed in a performative excess of signs of the spirit and dreams of another world beyond. How the place itself drew them back to dig themselves in-"so far in I ain't never comin' out." How the place grew palpable to the remembered senses: the smell of snakes in the air, the sound of slow voices chatting in the yard, the breeze striking the tin pie plates in a garden, the taste of ramps and dandelion greens.

Imagine a place grown intensely local in the face of loss, displacement, exile, and a perpetually deferred desire to return to what was always already lost or still ahead, just beyond reach. Picture how a home place long threatening to dissolve into the sheer shiftiness of history might grow in-filled with an intense synesthesia of person, sociality, and landscape, how a haunted cultural landscape becomes a dizzying, overcrowded presence. Imagine how people say they smother and are hit by waves of the dizzy and the nerves, how they say they wouldn't never want to leave. Imagine how they find themselves "caught between a rock and a hard place," re-membering a home place that is always emptying out and backing away from the cold impossibility of the foreign land of the cities "beyond" that remains their only option.

Imagine, in short, how culture in an occupied, betrayed, fragmented, and finally deserted place might become not a corpus of abstract ideas or grounded traditions but a shifting and nervous space of desire immanent in lost and re-membered and imagined things. Picture the effort to track a cultural "system" that is "located," if anywhere, in the nervous, shifting, hard-to-follow trajectories of desire and in-filled with all the confusion and aggravation of desire itself. Imagine a world that dwells in the space of the gap, in a logic of negation, surprise, contingency, roadblock, +++ and perpetual incompletion. Picture how it oscillates wildly between its dreams of order and its prolific excesses, how it drifts in the flux of desire and condenses under its weight and force. Picture how it gives itself over to "a thousand plateaus of intensification" (Deleuze and Guattari 1991) and becomes a kind of anticipation, a mode of questioning the world, an incessant search (E. Taylor 1992a).

Picture how the space of desire in such a place could grow at once tactile and imaginary, at once pressingly real and as insubstantial as ghostly traces. Imagine the need to re-member through the constant repetition of images fixed, condensed, studied on, and made visceral, the need to watch, to chronicle, to make something of thangs, the attachment to things that matter, the fascination with objects on which the mind can stare itself out.² Remember all the named places in the hills that mark the space of accidents and tragedies. Imagine how people just set and talk at the old gas stations and stands³—the beat-up old stores on the side of the road that sell daily necessities with long shelf lives like cigarettes, soda pop, candy, cakes, and the canned milk for the endless pots of coffee. Picture how people watch for things that happen and scan for signs. Imagine them sitting on porches at the end of the day as the hills come in to darken the sky. Picture the endless proliferation of stories throughout the day and over the years and on these darkening porches.

Picture the proliferation of signs of a local life written tentatively yet persistently onto the landscape. The tiny wooden or cinder-block post offices that bear the names Amigo, Red Jacket, Ruin, Helen, Black Eagle, Viper, Iroquois, Hard Shell, Winding Gulf, Odd, East Gulf, Coal City, Cook Town, Persistence, Lillybrook. The tiny particleboard entrepreneurial shacks with signs that read "BEeR CiGArETs PoP" in huge irregular lettering. The trucks perched on the side of the road selling watermelons or made-in-Mexico velveteen wall hangings of the Last Supper,

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3. The stand, Amigo. Photograph © Harriette Hartigan, Artemis.

the Sacred Heart, the rebel flag. Hand-painted road signs—"Please Don't Throw Your Trash Here," "Anteeks," "Eggs For Sale," "WATCH IT! Road Washed Out Up Ahead Aways." Church signs advertising a welcome and a warning: "Sinners Welcome," "Sinners Apply Within," "Repent, For The Day Is Near." The massive coal trucks rushing around steep curves, their names mounted in bold letters on the grille—"Heaven's Highway," "Good Time Buddy," "Let the Good Times Roll." At one curve, two hand-painted billboards crammed with biblical quotations face each other in a heated debate over how literally to interpret the signs of the End Times. At another, a hand-painted road sign perched at the top of a treacherous hill offers only the starkly haunting warning: "ETERNITY AHEAD."

Picture the porches piled high with couches, chairs, plastic water jugs. The yards filled with broken toys, washing machines, scrap metal and salvaged wood, cars and trucks on blocks or belly-up being dismembered piece by piece. All the living room walls crowded with signs of absent presence: the pictures of kin who have left and the dead in their coffins, the paintings of the bleeding Sacred Heart of Jesus with the beautiful longing eyes. All the mantels and tabletops covered with what nots and shrines. The newspaper clippings of deaths and strikes. The children's drawings and trophies. The heart-shaped Valentine's Day chocolates boxes saved every year for twenty years and mounted on bedroom



4. Church sign, Rhodell. Photograph © Harriette Hartigan, Artemis.



5. Sylvia Hess's phone table with photographs of Riley taken by Em Herzstein. Photograph © Harriette Hartigan, Artemis.

walls. All the velveteen tapestries of J. L. Lewis, John F. Kennedy, and Elvis

Imagine how an encompassed and contested way of life can grow immanent, how it might be scripted right into the matter of things, how objects and bodies could become images that twist and turn in the strands of desire and rise like moons on the horizon. Imagine how "meaning" can coalesce in the tactility of a cryptic object. How representation might not represent its "objects" with the closure of information gleaned, code decoded, or explanation dis-covered but might become instead a literal, graphic mimesis that re-presents in order to re-member and provoke. Imagine how people search for an otherness lurking in appearances. How they find excesses that encode not "a meaning" per se but the very surplus of meaningfulness vibrating in a remembered cultural landscape filled with contingency and accident, dread and depression, trauma and loss, and all these dreams of escape and return. Imagine the desire to amass such a place around you, to dig yourself into it, to occupy it . . .

A Space of Critique

If, following Marcus and Fischer (1986), I take anthropology to be—at least potentially—a form of cultural critique, the question is what kind of critique and where to begin? What is the "object" of such a critique? I have begun to describe this place—these hills—as a nervous system (Taussig 1992) in which "culture" is a wild, politicized oscillation between one thing and another and the very image of "system" itself slips out of the grasp of all those quick assumptions that associate it with things like order, unity, (ancient, timeless) tradition, coherence, and singularity. This is a "system" that is not either/or but both/and both global and local, both tactile and imaginary, both set and fleeting, both one thing and another. It is a system in which moments of cultural naturalization and denaturalization are fundamentally interlocked (Culler 1975), a place where centripetal and centrifugal forces (Bakhtin 1981) form a unity of opposed forces (Gates 1988). It depends at once on a radical condensation or intensification of meaning in text and performance and on the persistence of gaps in code and concept that elicit a continuous search for meaning.

The first question for cultural critique is how to picture a place like this—a place like so many others that find themselves in a like position—where there is both a constant proliferation of expressive signs in all their density, texture, and force and a constant naturalization of "the world as it is" as signs are written into the very nature of things. A place where it is the quality and feeling of forms—their intensity, their density, texture,

and force—that constitute the local "culture" as a feeling-full mediation. Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1991) describe it as a schizophrenic tension that produces force and proliferates forms. It is a radically dialogic structure emergent in practice (Bakhtin 1981) and yet a thoroughly texted form in which meanings reverberate through intertextual reference (Kristeva 1976, 1980). Barthes (1957, 1974, 1975, 1982) tracked the infinite particularity of its interpretive moves, while Benjamin (1969, 1977), perhaps more than any other theorist, realized the dramatic complexity of its cultural politics.

The question, then, is how to dwell in such a "system" long enough to track its moves and cultural politics. How to picture its constitutive "structures of feeling" (Williams 1973, 1977), its "force" (R. Rosaldo 1984, 1989), its texted politics of desire (Chambers 1984, 1991; White 1981). How can we take it as an object except through the mediating forms it itself produces—in this case, mimesis, narrative, allegory, the insistence on particularity, ruin, and remembrance, the process of being caught up in discourses and signs and carried into states of the nerves and the dizzy and studyin' on thangs.

How is it possible to imagine such a "system" except by first arresting that all too well-known form of transcendent critique that holds tension, density, and texture at bay in favor of the generalization, the exegesis, the finalizable system that makes sense of things in a recognizable frame of types and causes and elements? Holding all that at bay, what, then, would be the "object" of cultural critique and who would be its "subject," agent, author? What, then, might happen to (and in) the space of critique itself? Or at least what might we be able to imagine?

"Subjects" and "Objects" in the Space of an Immanent Critique

Take the life of objects themselves. If I had fifty thousand words to describe the life of watched and remembered things in these hills, I would use them, as James Agee did in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), to heap detail upon detail so that we might at least imagine an escape from the "you are there" realism of ethnographic description into a surreal space of intensification. Like Agee, I could describe the rooms and rafters, the cracks in the walls, the damp underneath of the houses where dogs and fleas and other creatures lie, the furniture, the contents of drawers, the smell of coal soot ground into the floors over years and covering the walls with a thin greasy layer, a second-story bedroom ceiling open to the sky where the roof has fallen in, the way gauzy curtains are drawn across the windows so that everything outside can be seen without



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"new ethnography," too, could make a space for such inevitable failures rather than rush to contain them in a discipline of correctives and asides that dreams, once again, the old dream of the perfect text in new textual solutions such as author positionings, formally dialogic presentations, ironic distance, and self-reflection. Without such a space for imagining the inevitable failures of representation, new claims of textual solutions to the political problems of subject and object, meaning, difference, and cause take on the gray tint of a new positivism.

Agee, in his own impassioned and imperfect effort to imagine something of the density and texture of tenant farm life, roamed indiscriminately and promiscuously between modes of writing from the romantic to the skeptical, from the confessional to the encyclopedic, from the biographical to the sociological without fixing on any one mode or building an edifice to enclose them all together. Nothing worked and yet an almost palpable "view" of sorts emerged from the effort of writing and imagination—a view that lay firmly caught in the writing and drew force as a contingent effect of that writing. This is something like what we might imagine as the performance of a nervous cultural "system" itself, and it leads to the same partial and engaged attachment to re-membered things.

You could say that it is a kind of applied grammatology (Ulmer 1985) that plumbs poesis for its politics and ends not in an abstract free play of signifiers but in a treatment of signs as graphic performances. Like Benjamin (1977), Agee dreamed of an immanent critique that could follow along in the wake of an "Other" cultural poesis mimicking its forms until the writing reached a point of subtle disorientation where critical text and cultural poesis draw together (Nägele 1988:20). This would be a cultural critique that is not so much a decoding as an engagement, not so much a hermeneutical interpretation as a crafted mimesis or re-presentation (Auerbach 1953; Barthes 1986b; Tyler 1986; Ulmer 1985) in the same way that an "interpretation" of a piece of music or a play is not an exegesis but a performance. It is a reading akin to what Barthes called the blissful reading of a text: "you cannot speak 'on' such a text, you can only speak 'in' it, in its fashion, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm [it]" (Barthes 1975:22).

Like montage or collage, it operates through a poetics of and by citation that can only "grasp" its "object" by following its interpretive moves into their tense and varied effects. In it, the power to comment becomes fragmentary with a built-in incompletion and abruptness of statement. It operates like a series of captions (Benjamin 1977), drawing attention to culturally texted "objects." Its effort is to hold attention on them in all their texture and particularity long enough to delay the rush to quick explanation and harmonizing synthesis that scans past them on a track of its own. Critique becomes a search through the traces of a cultural real for

Agee's utopic dream of a "chain of truths [that] did actually weave itself and run through" (1941:240).

If there is a cultural politics to style, the style of immanent critique in anthropology might stand as a provocation to a "decontaminated" modernist critique (K. Stewart 1991) that demanded a self-conscious, selfcontrolled distance between observer and observed. Modernist critique, built on a relativist apparatus in which all frames and concepts could be seen as "culture bound" and dependent on "context" and "perspective," fixed "culture" as an object of analysis that was whole, bounded, and discrete. While it enjoined the anthropologist to specify, and guard against, his or her own ethnocentrism, it also charged him or her with the task of illuminating a total field of data under observation (Strathern 1987b). The anthropologist, empowered to move between cultures and translate their differences, had only to document contextual gaps in meaning, manipulating familiar concepts to convey alien ones; what "we" mean by exchange is not what "they" mean, what is bizarre to Us is to Them-in an "Other" context-familiar and ordinary (Strathern 1987b:258-59). The constant, ritual decontamination of the anthropologist's own ethnocentrism through self-conscious relativism and systematic data collection legitimated the anthropologist's critical role as model builder (and model world citizen). This is a utopic dream of another kind in keeping with the ideology of a bourgeois subject capable of selfdiscipline and distanced, discriminating judgment (Lowe 1982; Bourdieu 1984; Stallybrass and White 1986; Frykman and Löfgren 1987).

Now, of course, critiques abound of the essentializing moves of modernist theory to fix a culture in place and time, to "picture" it in an overview, to name it "in a word," or to reduce it to an allegory of anthropological theories. Correctives include a renewed search for context and history, the recognition of transnational cultural production and precise cultural practices, and theories of culture that highlight internal contestation and intercultural hybridity, cultural invention and imagined community, and an ironic self-consciousness embedded even in the processes of "following traditions." Feminist critiques of theories of discrete "subjects" and "objects" have been extended into critiques of the nature of culture, and experiments in feminist ethnography have become perhaps the most exciting and productive strand of the "new ethnography." Subaltern, postcolonial, and minority studies have pushed cultural theory beyond relativism to track how actual cultural constructions are produced in difference. Discourse-centered approaches to culture have extended theories of symbolic meaning into questions of the meaning of form, the public life of signs, and the pragmatics of signs in social use.9 Performance theory has documented the rhetorical and emergent nature of culture. 10 And dialogic, reflexive, and deconstructive approaches to

writing culture have demonstrated the inevitable link between poetics and politics.¹¹

Yet in the wake of myriad critiques, there is always the temptation to seek the perfect ethnographic text, to fix the problem of cultural politics in a presumed textual solution. Part of the task of a "new ethnography" as I see it is to give pause and to call for something of the intense cultural-politics of any space of critique. It means throwing up a roadblock to the very daydreams of progress that would seek facile explanation and final solutions to the problem of alterity and cultural translation. It means using cultural critique to open up something like Agee's passionately ambiguous space to fashion emergent insights that culture is dialogic, hybrid, contested, situated, and imagined into techniques of imagining and re-presenting the complex interpretive moves that constitute a cultural real. It means fashioning something like Benjamin's dialectical image—an image that arrests the progress of ideology with a defamiliarizing shock of disjuncture and leaves us in a space of tense confabulation (Buck-Morss 1989).

The "new ethnography" that I try to imagine here would take a cue from the tactile, imaginary, nervous, and contested modes of critique of the subjects we study not in order to decide what these interpretive modes "mean" in the end but to begin to deploy them in a cultural politics. Its effort would be to displace not just the signs or products of essentialism (generalizations, reifications) but the very desires that motivate academic essentialism itself—the desire for decontaminated "meaning," the need to require that visual and verbal constructs yield meaning down to their last detail, the effort to get the gist, to gather objects of analysis into an order of things. It would mean an effort to dwell in the uncertain space of error or gap not just to police the errors and crimes of representation but to imagine the ontology and epistemology of precise cultural practices including our own modes of exegesis and explanation. It would mean displacing the rigid discipline of "subject" and "object" that sets Us apart and leaves Them inert and without agency. It would mean displacing the premature urge to classify, code, contextualize, and name long enough to imagine something of the texture and density of spaces of desire that proliferate in Othered places.

The Space of Story

Picture "culture" in the coal camps, then, not as a finished text to be read or as a transparent "object" that can be abstracted into a fixed representation but as a texted interpretive space in itself—a space produced in the slippage, or gap, between sign and referent, event and meaning, and gath-

ered into performed forms and tactile reminders. Picture the wild proliferations of a cultural space in all the restless coming and going, all the dismembering and *re-membering* of things, people's eccentricities amassed over the years, the automatic scanning for *signs*, the continuous imagining of the "real" through the mediation of stories of things that happen.

Then picture me, the ethnographer, trying to re-present the shifting memories and desires of a haunting absent presence, to capture a "system" that has the fragmentary, contested qualities of the discursive process itself, to track "culture" through the tense confabulation of social and discursive practices in use (Scott 1988).

Picture me, in the length of an afternoon, grilling Sylvie Hess for an accurate outline of her kinship lines as she grew steadily more confused, reeling off names and connections that didn't mesh and spinning off wild digressions of stories until she arrived at the repeated roadblocks of double and triple relations ("Well, I believe he was her uncle, and her cousin and then he was her stepdaddy . . ."). Picture how the effort to reckon kin ends in the aggravated disclaimer—"Oh, I don't have no *ideal*, Katie, hit's a mess is all, everbody 'round here's related to everbody else is all."

Picture me in the length of another afternoon grilling Riley Hess for an accurate outline of his work history in the mines so that I could help him document his eligibility for black lung benefits. Sifting through a suitcase full of old pay stubs and papers, I tried to reconstruct the requisite twenty years of mining out of his fragmented documentation of a work history of fits and starts and migrations back and forth from one camp to another and from the hills to Detroit and Arizona and back. Riley, sitting with me, grew nervous and digressed from my futile attempts at chronology into stories of dramatic encounters, hilarious failures, and bitterly hard times. I remember the baffled look on his face. And I remember that his stories grew progressively more graphic and imaginary until they had wrenched us (or at least him) into a narrative space that is at once more situated and contingent and yet opens an interpretive, expressive space—a space, in short, in which there is more room to maneuver (Chambers 1991). Picture how, in story, world is mediated by word, fact moves into the realm of interpretation to be plumbed for significance, how act moves to action and agency, how the landscape becomes a space in-filled with paths of action and imagination, danger and vulnerability.

I bet you didn't know there's hills underground, same as above, a hill's got a inside same way its got a outside. They're two sided.

And this one time, buddy, I started out and I was pullin' two hundred and ten cars and ever' one of 'm loaded up over the top.

I always checked my brakes but I reckon they were wet because they weren't no good a' tall and I didn't know a thang about it.

And at the bottom of one a them hills there's a right smart twist where the track takes a turn.

And it's a low ceilin' and no room on the sides but just for the train to git through.

You have to feel your way through.

You kin lose your head if you stick it out like that Reed boy got kilt.

You gotta keep your head and feel your way through.

Well we started down and we was goin' perty good, y' know.

And I tried the brakes and honey they weren't nothin' there.

Well I told the brakeman, buddy, we're a runnin' away.

I said, find yourself a place and jump off if you can because I knowed we was gonna come off.

Well the brakeman, he was on t'other side and he found hisself a place and he jumped. There wasn't no place on my side and I knowed it.

Well I called the dispatcher and I told him, I said, buddy I'm a runnin' away and I got down inside the engine and let it go.

We hit that ceilin',

and buddy,

there's coal and steel a flyin'.

We went right into that hill and they said twenty-eight cars come in after us and they hadda time of it.

They hadda take that thang out a there a piece at a time

where they said it done melted together.

They hadda tear that engine apart to git me outta that thang.

Well, they wanted me to go to the hospital and they had the ambulance a waitin' at the mouth and the lights a flashin' but I said huh uh, NO-OOO, now I've had enough,

and I got up and went home.

But I never did work no more motorman job no more after that.

Picture the simultaneous frustrations and seductions for me, the American ethnographer, faced with the incessant narrative aporias of an out-of-the-way place. Imagine yourself standing not on the cleared ground of realist ethnographic description but in an intensely occupied and imagined space, fashioning an "object" of analysis out of filled spaces with the power to deflect and transform desire, to dramatize and fabulate, to situate and surround. Imagine yourself caught in the middle of things, tracking movements already in motion and the traces of *re-membered* impacts, searching for a culture that acts like a force field pushing you forward and lies ahead, drawing you on.

Imagine yourself caught in the space of story that opens when plans are interrupted by the accidental and the progress of time gives way to a graphic rumination through spaces of danger and desire, trial and transformation, self-extension and return. Imagine the constant effort to seize

the fundamental as text, the daily struggle to lift up the "ground" of meaning in narrative poesis (E. Taylor 1992a). Imagine culture itself as an act of poesis—a creation that works through an act of mediation (Genette 1979; Todorov 1981). Then imagine how, in a place like this—a place, we might say, that literally "finds itself" and dwells in something like a space on the side of the road—the poetic mediation of meaning in forms could become an end in itself, how an "Other" world could emerge in the form of local ways of talkin' and ways of doin' people.

Narrative can be seen as the ordering of events in a particular spatiotemporal orientation or worldview (Bakhtin 1981; Ricoeur 1981, 1984). It can be seen as an act of emplotment—a grasping together, language that is "woven" (Ricoeur 1984)—or as the structure of a quest composed of functions and modes of resolution (Propp 1968) or as the search for moral and ideological closure in the face of a tension between desire and the law of things (White 1981). It can be taken as a speech form in performance that fashions "meaning" into the complex social and political act of a narrator relating events to an audience (Bauman 1977, 1986; Maclean 1988) or as a lexicon of speech genres that order social life (Bakhtin 1986) or as a series of linguistic transformations that add tone, mood, and voice to simple expository speech and so place action in a landscape of consciousness (Todorov 1981). It can be taken as a mode of ideological foreclosure—the space of a master narrative (Jameson 1981)—or as an expressive form with a built-in evaluative, metanarrative register (Babcock 1977). It can be seen as a forceful claim to the "truth" and the "original" (E. Bruner and Gorfain 1984; Said 1986) or as a tense, polyphonic fabulation of positions, voices, and registers (Barthes 1974; Bakhtin 1981, 1984) or as an intertextual structure of meaning launched in prior tellings and possible retellings (Kristeva 1980; Smith 1981). It can be taken as a relation of authority and desire between narrator and audience (Tompkins 1980; Jauss 1982; Chambers 1984, 1991) and the reported speech of characters in the story (Hurston 1935; Gates 1988) or as a form of mimesis that places speakers and actors in the middle of things as events unfold and fashions the world into a surround of traces and tactile impacts (LeGuin 1981; Taussig 1991). It can be read as a poetics of contingency, uncertainty, and partiality elevated to the level of epistemological principle (E. Bruner 1985; J. Bruner 1986; R. Rosaldo 1989; B. Tedlock 1992). It can be read as the imprint of the desire to leave a trace, to bear witness (LeGuin 1981), or as a space of desire in itself that produces both the "real" and interpretive "spaces" for the deflection and conversion of desire (Chambers 1984, 1991; S. Stewart 1984).

But whatever its presumed motives or traceable effects, and whether it takes a relatively authoritative, monologic form or a more open, dialogic form, narrative is first and foremost a mediating form through which "meaning" must pass Stories, in other words, are productive. They catch

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up cultural conventions, relations of authority, and fundamental spatiotemporal orientations in the dense sociality of words and images in use and produce a constant mediation of the "real" in a proliferation of signs. They mark the space of a searching or scanning, the space of the sheer creativity of "making something of thangs," the sense of a surplus of meaning, the space of a positioned subject. The question of narrative in culture, then, is not so much the question of the meaning of any particular story or narrative structure but the question of the meaning of narrative itself—of narrativizing the world (Chambers 1984, 1991).

Picture me waiting over the length of another afternoon for Riley Hess to come to visit so that I could record his stories. When he finally arrived three hours late, the question "How are you?" opened immediately into a story of the time he had of it gettin' up that ol' road.

Honey I started up.

Come on past Creed Walker's, past Sonny Lilly's

come on,

and I come to the place down by Fred's where the creek branches out Barker's ridge.

and buddy, that old Chevy truck, hit tuk to smokin' and great big ole flames like a demon grabbed a holt of it, I'm a tellin' you.

Buddy I jumped out a that thang and I hated to look.

Like ta skeered me to death.

And it did too.

Well, I throwed open the hood,

Oh Lord!

And I looked at that thang, and I looked agin', honey it weren't nothin' but the radiator hose done blowed.

Course I knowed it was bad.

And I went down Beckley, b'lieve it was last week.

Yessir, b'lieve it was last Wednesday I went in there and I got me a piece a hose at Priddy's and put it back a th' seat.

Hah.

Well, I went to git that radiator hose out from back the seat and sure 'nough there it was.

All right.

An' I said, said, well I'll have to git me some water and I didn't have nothin' to hold it, you know.

So I said well I'll just go down the creek and git me some water while this here cools hitself.

Cause, now, hit was hot.

Although there were houses nearby—Sonny Lilly's mommy's place is right there, side the road—he went down to the creek and roamed the banks scanning through trashed objects until he found himself lost in

reverie of his childhood on the creek and caught in an imaginary land-scape. The chewed remains of a Styrofoam cup set off an imagined reverie of an old alcoholic who must have lived at that place on the creek for years and no one had ever seen him. He must have chewed at the cup out of loneliness and "where he didn't have no food." Then Riley took the little piece of cup and walked back and forth between the creek and the truck over and over again—"must a been a hundred times"—until he had the radiator full to the brim again. Then he came on to my place, armed with his story: "And how are you today?"

It was only much later that I came to recognize such stories of people finding themselves caught on the literal and metaphorical "side of the road" as a conventional opening to what they called *just talk*—talk that rises to the surface to overwhelm the merely referential with a rush of poetic forms and the living phantasms of a sociality embedded in remembered drama. Imagine such a space on the side of the road.

Imagine being so caught up in the space of story that action follows fabulation, as when Riley took up the Styrotoam cup, already laden with an imagined history of use, and trekked back and forth, back and forth between the creek and the radiator enacting a tactical digression from the failed progress of a trip up the road. Imagine how the insertion of fabulation into action and the mythic into the real is not just an isolated experience but an already-texted relation told and retold in the myriad stories of the places in these here hills. Like the story, for instance, about the two old men, both practiced liars, who had argued back and forth for years over whether a copperhead bite could kill a man. Finally one day one of them was bitten while out roaming the hills. As his leg swelled to grotesque proportions, he trekked a long path over the hills to his friend's house rather than get someone to take him to the hospital in town because he wanted to see the look on his friend's face. No one telling this story ever mentions whether the old man lived or died because that is not the point. The point, rather, is to dwell on the pull of storied claims on people and the power of fabulation itself to draw them into eccentricity so there's no telling what they might do.

Imagine that the space of narrativity—the constant practice of narrativizing the real—has itself become both the locus and the object of a local epistemology. Note, for instance, how the moments of the plot of Riley's story enact the moments of narrativity itself: the fastening on to the mystery of the accidental (being stopped in his tracks), the intense dramatization and personification of things and events (the demonic fire), the call to dramatic action from a space in the midst of things (flinging open the hood as the truck is about to explode), the demonstration of how in the face of events a realist frame can be overwhelmed by the fabulous (the routine preparation of buying a new hose becomes an omen), the dwelling in the wild "space on the side of the road" where anything can hap-



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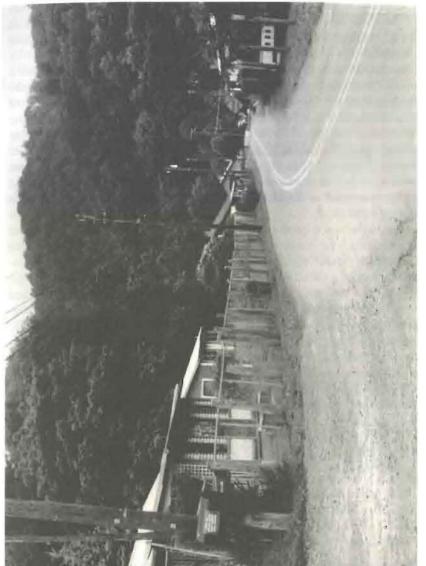
pen, the scanning for *signs* and the revelation of things that *just come* (the childhood memories set off by *places* on the creek, the fabulation of the meaning of the cup), the ruminative drifting from story to story, the piling up of stories on the landscape.

Note, too, how dialogic performance and dialogic exchanges within the story stretch the meaning of narrated events into the complex sociality of narrativity itself: Riley the narrator talks to Riley the hero, Riley the hero finds himself listening to found objects that speak, Riley the child speaks to Riley the old man, the past speaks to the present, Riley relates the story to me by way of introduction to our *talk* about stories. He constructs his story, even at the very moment of his experience of its events, for a range of implied audiences: the ethnographer and friend who has been waiting, and wondering, throughout the duration of events, his wife Sylvie who has lived through many mishaps with him and who would be worried if she knew he had not yet made it to my place, his old *lying* buddy Ralph who, as Riley knows from the past, will listen to the story only to respond with a story that aims to "do" Riley "one better."

Picture a world, then, in which events are always mediated by story and in which the story of finding oneself on the side of the road is a conventional opening that posits, among other things, that things happen, that places mark the space of lingering impacts and unseen forces, that the world speaks to people who find themselves caught in it. Picture how in the expansive scan of narrative space connections between things are always partial (Strathern 1991); there is always something more to say, always an uncaptured excess that provokes further questions, new associations that just come, and fresh gaps in understanding. Rather than complete or "exemplify" a thought, narratives produce a further searching. Imagine how, in a cultural space that finds itself in a space on the side of the road, stories run rampant and become the cultural center, how they have the power to fashion an "Other" world in contradistinction to the "realist" world of routines, plans, and progress, how they become the storehouse for local ways of talkin' and ways of doin' people in sharp, polemical distinction from the feared and despised ways of the cities.

The Space on the Side of the Road

Picture the space on the side of the road. How the space of story situates meaning and event in a dense discursive landscape of encounter as the narrator encounters the accidental event and finds herself roaming in a graphic scene in which objects speak to her and meaning, memory, and motive seem to adhere to storied things to become a force encountered. Picture how the authority to narrate comes of having been somehow



7. Josephine. Photograph © Harriette Hartigan, Artemis.

marked by events, in mind if not in body, and how the listeners, too, place themselves in the scene of story and follow along in its track so that they too can be somehow marked with its impression. Picture the dense sociality of mutual impact. Picture narrative's tense dialectic of mimetically re-presented impressions and discursively fashioned verbal art, how, as they say in the hills, stories "just come" and yet they are "nothin' but just talk is all."

Imagine how narrator and audience find themselves in the space of a doubled, haunting epistemology that comes of speaking from within the object spoken of. How they find themselves both subject and object of story, both inside and outside storied events, simultaneously seduced and watchful, firmly placed in the immanence of remembered scenes and unfolding events ver always cognizant of the culturally marked skill of "makin' somethin' of thangs." Picture the dialectic at a standstill, frozen in the time and space of a traveler stopped dead in his tracks and caught in a rumination that displaces the image of the progress of a truck traveling down the road.

Picture the space on the side of the road as a scenic re-presentation of the force of a lyric image with the power to give pause to the straight line of a narrative ordering of events from beginning to end and to place people in a fecund ground of wide-ranging associations and re-memberings. Imagine how an interpretive space, a cultural epistemology, can be culled into a lyric image that gives pause, how it is these lyric images—this imaginary space—that seem to matter most, how this low point in action could become the high point of cultural practice: the place from which big meanings emerge. Imagine how finding oneself on the side of the road L could become an epistemological stance.

Picture Clownie Meadows arriving at the stand in Odd one day when several of us were standing around talking. At a pause in the talk Madie Plumly asked him how he was "gettin' along." I was, as usual, taken aback by the quick assumption of a story line without even the briefest abstract characterization of the self (as in "I'm fine" or "They've got us working seven days a week" or "I've been down with the flu").

Well, I started down the road,

oh must a been last Thursday I'd say it was.

Well it was the day we had all that rain and the rain comin' down, buddy, I'm a tellin' you.

There were several comments from the others about "that rain that day."

An hit was right there out yonder at that big ole red barn down past Miss Walker's and there's a stand a pine right there.

And that old Ford truck a mine, hit tuk to shakin' and a carryin' on, buddy.

Then the audience set off a series of digressions from the story line as if to participate in the construction of a scene on the side of the road. Jethro Graham wanted to know if he meant the place by the Harmons', and Clownie said no it was down past that "to where them Birdsong boys was a drankin' and a carryin' on that time." Madie, who had heard the story about the drankin' and carryin' on wanted to know just exactly where that was because poor old Miss Graham, living all alone out there, "like to died" of fright and "hit ain't right." Someone else guessed it "must a been up close to that old broke down shack a Harley's grandaddy, wan't it?" and Clownie said no, he didn't b'lieve it was. Bud Mc-Kinney told the man, "You know where he's a talkin' 'bout. Hit's where them little girls went out and died in the woods and couldn't nobody find 'm," and Clownie said well it might be, but now he couldn't say for sure because he never saw them girls.

From there the story went on. When Clownie pulled off the road, and the rain still comin' down, here comes Sonny Smith leading his cow back up the road.

Said, "Sonny whyn't you fix your fence?"

Said, "that way that cow cain't git out and you ain't runnin' up and down the road like some old fool."

"Well," he said, "I just might do."

He said, "Well, Clownie," said, "looks like you got you some trouble."

Said, "I got me some tools up the house," said, "le' me take this cow up there and I'll be back."

"Well," I said, "all right, Sonny, if you want to and I'll just wait here." I don't reckon I was a goin' nowhere, do you?

Again, the audience gave pause. Someone from the back of the store said, "No sir, I don't reckon you was a goin' nowhere," and I heard an echo from somewhere in the back: "He ain't goin' nowhere, is he." Then, as Clownie took up his story line again, Sonny came back with his tools and again there was a series of digressions into joking comments about how Sonny thinks he has the biggest "toolbox" in the county and maybe even in the world.

So Sonny says, "Buddy, I b'lieve it might be the carburetor."

Now understand me, the man ain't yet looked under the hood.

BUD: Ain't looked under the hood.

CLOWNIE: No sir, buddy, he ain't looked under the hood and I ain't looked under the hood.

And we just went to work, and us in the downpourin' of the rain, And we tuk apart ever' piece a that old truck, put it on the road,

tuk it out, put it down, tuk it out, put it down. And we did too.

He described the dismantling operation step by step in an almost singsong preaching style, the only other sound in the store now the rain falling on the roof and the occasional "yeah boy" or "ah hah."

Well, we got that ole truck tuk apart perty good.

And we's just about down to the tires, buddy, and here come that little ole Graham girl in from school,

said, "Well, Clownie," said, "looks like Sonny sold you a bad tire don't it." [Sonny runs a tire salvage and sales business out of his house.]

And I looked at that thang and I looked agin and I'm a tellin' you that tire, hit was as flat as my foot

an' just a settin' under that pore old truck like a pancake on the wrong side th' pan.

Tire trouble all the time and do you know we didn't never once't look at that tire?

I said, "Lord have mercy, let me git on home 'fore somethin' happens." And I mean I went home.

Sure did, buddy.

I left that thang in the mud and went home.

I ain't stud'in' it.

And this is the first I been out.

Buddy, I'm a tellin' vou.

Then Madie took up the conjured space on the side of the road in a story of a childhood experience "at that same place." She had been walking to the school bus pickup and got about a mile from her house when she felt a ghostly presence and could not pass. The sky darkened, the breeze disappeared, all ordinary sound and movement stopped. She stood for a very long time in a state of *remembrance*. Then she heard her grandfather's voice coming from out of a stand of hickory, and as she watched he slowly materialized. He was crying. He spoke to her of how he missed his grandchildren, how his wife had not kissed him good-bye when he died. Madie told him she missed him too, and then, as he was fading, she thought she heard her mother calling to her from some place way off and she, like Clownie, turned and went home.

Madie recalled her story by a free association with "that same place," although the descriptive details are different; Clownie's place is right down past Miss Walker's at a place where there is a big ol' red barn and a stand of pine, while Madie's place is an isolated spot with a stand of

hickory. That is, her association is with the scene of a person caught in a space on the side of the road—a "place" that comes into view when something happens to interrupt the ordinary flow of events and leaves the narrator surrounded by a scene that palpitates with vulnerability. Uncertainty and challenge, painful memory and self-parody, eccentric characters and unearthly voices all point to a world in which there is more to things than what meets the eye and people are marked by events and drawn out of themselves. These are stories that dwell on what Benjamin (1969b) called the self-forgetfulness of the storyteller. They are opening stories that place the speaker in relation to others and the world and demonstrate an authority to speak as one who has "been there" and been impacted or changed.

When Clownie walked into the stand to find the rest of us standing around watching for news and amusement, he found his footing with a self-parodying, universalizing story about human blindness or *foolishness* and the lengths to which people will carry things once something happens to set them off. The audience participated in the intensification of a narrative space through the repetition of phrases for emphasis, the spinning digressions into multiple, diverging associations of *places*, the shared parody of Sonny and his "toolbox," and the general attitude that this was all *just talk*—a "story" infiltrating "experience" to the core.

Madie's story then followed the lines of performance and fabrication into a mystical condensation of the space of story itself—the image of the scene on the side of the road where meanings or messages lie immanent in things and the narrator/protagonist finds herself in an "Other" world. Here a cultural epistemology is not only implicit in the content of narrated events but is also given in the ideology of form itself (Jameson 1981).

These are stories about how "things happen" in life, and the action of the story itself moves forward only through, and by means of, an interruption (Kristeva 1982; de Lauretis 1984) and condenses in the lyrical image of the scene on the side of the road—a narrative space opened against the naturalized flow of the everyday. The lyric aporia points to an "Other" world caught up in the sheer creativity of narrative and grown overstuffed with semiotic significance so that the world seems to speak itself and speak itself as story (White 1981; E. Taylor 1992a). The story grows all-encompassing, linking people, places, and things together metonymically as its parts. The sky darkens, the breeze disappears, all ordinary sound and movement stop, the rain falls unrelentingly. Objects grow animated and speak: the truck "tuk to shakin' and a carryin' on," smashed beer bottles remember the Birdsongs' drunken spree and Miss Graham's fright, truck parts lie scattered in the mud as signs of disarray and contingency, a stand of hickories gives off a ghostly presence. Places

on the side of the road stand as icons of things that happen and the people they happen to—the place where the little girls got lost in the woods and died, the big old red barn, the old broke down shack that had been Harley's grandaddy's, the hickory stand where the ghost of Madie's grandfather slowly materializes around his voice.

It seems to me that it is this moment of slippage and condensation more than anything else that is the "point" of stories here. Somewhere in the course of any visit talk will slow and slip into a place from which the world seems, at once, to have fallen away and to have grown more pressing. You could say that this is the "low point" in which people find themselves at home in a place got down. You could say that it is a point of poetic condensation or decomposition in which a naturalized cultural order can be dis-membered and re-membered in the space of desire. You could say that it places narrator and audience inside a narrative tradition in such a way that when they move outside again they are no longer who they were. I am sure, at any rate, that it is a moment that motivates a further proliferation of stories and that in this fecund indeterminacy of a narrativized life the world grows at once more tactile and more fabulous.

The "space on the side of the road" stands as a graphic model to think with. It narrativizes social and moral orders and makes a text not just an object of knowledge but the very place where the social code is continually dissolved and reconstructed. It becomes a space in which people literally "find themselves" caught in space and time and watching to see what happens, and yet it also makes them irreducible subjects encountering a world. It places the storyteller on the same plane with the story and produces not meanings per se but points of view, voices, and tropes. It implies both the contingency of subject positions and the reversibility of things, the ability to turn time back on itself and to reinscribe events in distinct voices. In such a space, culture itself can be seen as nothing more,

and nothing less, than "what people say."

One day half a dozen strangers waiting for a new batch of chili dogs at the Rhodell volunteer fire department bake sale started in with talk about the weather—talk that quickly spiraled into idioms of roads and bodies, dangers and sicknesses. Then Miss Lavender slowed the talk with a story that focused on the lyrical image of her trying to paint her porch, which had been "ruint" by rain. Every time she brought the bucket of paint out to paint the porch, it would start to rain again and would not quit until she had taken the paint back inside. Then it would stop and she'd carry the paint back out and it would start up again and she'd carry the paint back in again, grumbling to herself:

Why don't it quit?

If it wouldn't rain right up on the porch I wouldn't have to paint it, It don't rain on nobody else's porch,

I got better things to do than carry paint back and forth and wait on the rain. Buddy, I'm a tellin' you, I been so busy carryin' the paint back and forth I ain't had time to paint.

The others then spiraled off into talk of the bizarre and the uncanny in stories of storms where lightning traveled over the tops of the mountains in a string of flashes that went on for miles, ghosts that were seen in one flash and gone in the next, trees split just exactly down the middle and one half shriveled and died and the other half lived and bore a strange new fruit. Finally, by way of closing, they gave a litany of things "people say."

Rose: Well, you know, I got me a walnut tree right up agin' my place an' they say trees carry lightnin'.

DREAMA: Oh yeah, hit will, too.

KRYSTAL: But now they say if you tell a lie, lightnin' will strike you.

LILLY: Well. That might be, I don't know, but they used to say if a baby girl is born in a lightnin' storm, why, she'll have her a forked tongue an' if hits a boy, why, he'll talk out of the both sides of his mouth at once.

DREAMA: Well . . . They used to say a lot a thangs.

LILLY: Oh, Lord, you know they did! Still do.

Rose: Ain't that the truth, now.

An Ethnographic Space

My own ethnographic space, here, like the space on the side of the road, grows dense and is given to excess. It takes as its "objects" of analysis the "Other's" mediations, following in the wake of modes of engagement, encounter, and agency and the texting of sociality in speech genres, positioned voices, and performative styles that bear the weight of cultural identity. In the effort to track something of the texture, density, and force of a local cultural real through its mediating forms and their social uses, it tears itself between evocation and representation, mimesis and interpretation. Faced with the daunting task of cultural translation, it interrupts itself to rail, as Agee did, against the theoretical and ideological foreclosures that disallow the needed room to maneuver. Then it doubles back on itself to pick up the track of the "Other's" moves.

Contingent on the re-presentation of local social and discursive practices, it grows unrelentingly discursive in the effort to lead with the "Other's" stories, to clear a space in which they might have not the last word but an Other word pointing to an Other world. It catches itself up in the dream of an Othered place and grows partial in both senses motivated and polemically charged and yet always incomplete, con40 CHAPTER 1

tingent, subject to interruption and displacement. It finds itself sifting through signs and piling up details to "study on thangs"; it dis-members and re-members things, gathers things into the states of intensification people call "big meanings," launches rhetorical strategies to make a point only to be reminded of the forcefully discontinuous effects of the local cultural real, drifts off into its own concerns and associations only to be reminded of everything that is still undisclosed or, worse, displaced or obscured by its own line of argument. It dreams of translating the "Other's" world only to be reminded of its own complicity in practices of othering.

The effect is an ethnographic/theoretical discourse that shifts nervously back and forth between story and exegesis. At times it performs a sharp disjuncture between discourses—mine and theirs—and enacts the politics of the dialogic, or diacritical, contest between them. At other times it attempts a hybridization as if the two discourses could be simultaneously evoked, and their effects performed, in one heterogeneous text.

At times it uses the free indirect discourse that both retains the grammatical signals of the observer and cultural critic and emulates some of the phonetic, semantic, and syntactic structures of the "Other's" reported speech (Gates 1988).

Its effort is not to find an answer to the problem of cultural re-presentation but to deflect the very search for quick solutions long enough to remember that culture itself is a mode of questioning carried out in local ways. Its own voice, then, remains double-voiced, its "thought makes its way through a labyrinth of voices, semi-voices, other people's words, other people's gestures . . . [it] juxtaposes orientations and amid them constructs [its] own orientation" (Bakhtin 1984:95). Its task is, of necessity, an ideological one—partial in both senses—so that what unfolds before it "is not a world of objects, illuminated and ordered by [a] monologic thought, but a world of consciousnesses mutually illuminating one another, a world of yoked-together semantic human orientations" (Bakhtin 1984:97). Whatever its plans and ideals, it finds itself caught in something like a space on the side of the road, scurrying back and forth looking at one moment for illumination and at the next for cover.

2

Mimetic Excess in an Occupied Place

An "Other" America

Driving back from California to Texas after a year at the Center for Cultural Studies in Santa Cruz, Danny and I stayed on the Hopi and Navajo reservations and I was reminded of the camps in West Virginia. Part of the resemblance was in those places here too, not unlike all those "trashy" pockets of life across the American cultural landscape from backwoods Maine to "Okie" California—the places piled high with collections of used-up things still in use, the chairs outside where people just set, the distant smell of food cooking across the expanse of barking dogs. But the reservations, like the hills, also have the quality of a place-in-itself squeezed into the wide expanses of an American no-man's-land. There is the quality of a doubly occupied place—a place that was taken over and surrounded by an occupying force and then resettled to occupy THIS place HERE with a force of its own. These are the kind of places where the matter has already been settled that this is a place apart—an "Other America" defined within and against an encompassing surround and become an inhabitable space of desire.

Judging from the look of things, I could imagine that on the reservations, as in the hills, polarized strategies of walking the line and living beyond the pale live side by side and can shift nervously back and torth from moment to moment in a productive schizophrenia of desire: there are the neatly ordered houses and the wilder places that seem, as Agee (1941) would say, to have abandoned themselves to the currents of existence; there are the Christians and the Sinners, the still moments of just settin' and the times of wild excess, all the cases of the nerves and the dizzy, the moments of heroic self-assertion and the abject faint of a life got down. Here, too, it seemed as if family and place were all-important, and I imagined that the porch lights left on all night here, too, signaled both a welcome to visitors and a warning to intruders. Here, too, a swath of open space around a house seemed to leave it both unprotected and in a position to see what approaches. I imagined the same watching out of the corner of the eye, the unrelenting chronicling of daily events, the vulnerability to sudden contingencies, the gaps in "the real" tended in an offhand, distracted way as you might rip at tufts of grass as you walk through the graveyard of things that say "this place is occupied."