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Sensory Attunements:
Working with the Past in the Little Cities of Black Diamonds

Every attunement is a tuning up to something, a labor that arrives already weighted with what it’s living through.
—Kathleen Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements”

The Little Cities of Black Diamonds area of Appalachian Ohio was settled largely by coal miners and their families after the American Civil War. Drawn by the possibility of work, miners built lives and solidarities supported by an industry that largely abandoned the region by the beginning of the twentieth century. The inequality and structures of indebtedness that sustained mining communities also fostered the seeds of a labor movement; the latter is now celebrated by civic revitalization efforts in the few remaining towns, where the built environment is partially in ruins and the populations have dwindled (Tribe 1988). Today, despite a lack of formal employment opportunities and relatively high poverty rates, much work is being done with the region’s past of resource extraction, labor, and urbanism. This work takes shape in things such as festival production, building renovation, archival investigations, and environmental remediation—manifestations of care for the welfare of a place whose rich past is shaped
by exploitation. An engagement with historical material, this work is nevertheless in and of the present, an immanent practice and process that draws on the past as a resource, reworking it in the service of aspirations for towns imagined as newly vital and vibrant places (Munn 2004; Trouillot 1995).

The region is materially significant for helping build a modern nation through coal, a fossil fuel at once fundamental to labor history and a primary driver of climate change. Yet while many aspects of the region can be analyzed in terms of broader structural narratives of capitalism, modernity, and urban growth and decline, these tend to occlude the quality and texture of events in the present. Discussions of cities and regions where work has disappeared or labor regimes have changed often carry a tenor of nostalgia in which the conditions of the past are considered preferable to those of the present, whether in terms of the availability of work, the welfare provisions afforded by Keynesianism, or the size and vitality of urban spaces (Conlogue 2013; Cowie and Heathcott 2003; Edensor 2005; Hell and Schöne 2010; Oswalt 2005). Calls for revitalization dominate narratives about the future of such places (see, e.g., Dewar and Thomas 2012; Langner and Endlicher 2007; Ryan 2013; Wachter and Zeuli 2013), and few consider what remains in a space of decline, precarity, or abandonment (Apel 2015; Dawdy 2010; Scott 2014; Stoler 2008; van der Hoorn 2009; Yablon 2009). Taking decline and decay seriously as aspects of life, place, economy, and cities puts pressure on modernist notions of growth, expansion, and improvement. Moreover, paying attention to qualities of life in the present—and, most crucially, the kinds of work people are doing—affords an understanding of the contemporary condition in a space of decline.

Here I explore the substance, quality, and texture of the present in a place where abandoned infrastructures of mining that bind the underground with what is above ground shape, but do not prescribe, the imaginaries of possible futures (Anand 2012; Larkin 2013; Peterson 2013). The present, I argue, is a moment of sensory attunement that figures temporal continuities and discontinuities with the past and the future. Attunement is an orienting toward, a feeling-ness that does not necessarily have specific content and is generally nondiscursive (Rickert 2013; Stewart 2011). As “‘the way of our being there with one another’” (Martin Heidegger, quoted in Rickert 2013: 9), sensory attunements organize sociabilities within and across temporalities present, past, and future. Departing from theories of the senses that emphasize their cultural codings (Classen 1993; Howes 2003, 2009; Howes and Classen 2013), I emphasize sensation as embodied, as something that “occurs without having to rely on a recognizable shape,
Paying attention to embodiment affords an awareness of the ways sensation does work without necessarily signifying anything beyond itself (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Thrift 2008). This, in itself, is a form of care, a commitment to the welfare of place and people in the present and into an as yet unknown future. Opening with a discussion of the Moonshine Festival in New Straitsville, Ohio, I consider how heat attunes people toward one another as well as toward a past of mining and its aftermaths. Simply acknowledging sensation as shared organizes a collective, such that attuning toward one another is in itself a form of care. Grounding care in sensory attunement, this section provides the conceptual basis for what follows. I then examine how renovation of the built environment—a project driven by love of place—sustains a materiality of embodiment across affective registers. In the final section I trace the embodied circulation of a miner’s stance as it becomes a common figuration across the region, binding residents through their understanding, and experiences, of labor’s transformations.

In and of the present, sensation reveals temporal gaps in the context of material continuities. Even as festivals commemorate the labor of resource extraction, the bodies of pageant winners are not coextensive with those of miners. Renovation of the built environment and aspirations for a tourist economy draw together an affective present with wider economic forces that may or may not happily converge. And as a stance and its associated stories attune people toward a past of labor struggles, historical reenactments reveal gaps between present and past.

In bringing together two strands of materialism—one invested in phenomenal dimensions of human/nonhuman relations, the other a Marxian mode of analysis articulated most directly by Lewis Mumford—I aim to open a space for a more expansive consideration of how life in the present is meaningful in ways that are sometimes outside the logic of capital. At the same time, I take seriously the region’s historic and ongoing contribution to modern life on spatial and temporal scales that imbricate it in global historical conditions. I emphasize the divergence between these modes of analysis such that one does not necessarily subsume the other and to suggest that, while they often converge, they do somewhat different work for the discussion at hand, affording movement between specific textures and qualities, on the one hand, and multiscalar and temporal dynamics, on the other (Brenner 2013; Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011; Farías and Bender...
In the Little Cities of Black Diamonds, sensory attunements are marked—but not determined—by the experience of living with the consequences of a century of loss and decline, a past of resource extraction that continues to resonate in and across bodies, buildings, hills, streams, and atmosphere.

A Parade: Heat as Sensory Attunement

The shiny blue and pink satin dresses dazzle against the gray of the sidewalk and the wood of the building’s walls, revealed beneath the peeling white paint. The three pageant winners, one tall and thin, two short and stout, stand in the shade of the second-story porch, around the corner from Main Street in New Straitsville, Ohio, where the Moonshine Festival is under way. It is a glaringly hot day, and the street itself is empty, the crowd from earlier in the day already headed home, those remaining seeking shelter from the sun under another porch overhang, watching karaoke performers. I don’t remember what was sung, or whether the singers were strong or off-key, only that the sound amplified throughout the festival area, making it the attraction in the late afternoon heat.

New Straitsville’s annual Moonshine Festival commemorates the product for which the town became famous after the mine companies left around the turn of the twentieth century. During Prohibition, “Straitsville Special” was known across the country, its reputation reaching as far as southern California. The abandoned mines, remnants of the town’s reason for existence, provided the space, and cover, for moonshine production, with the steam of the stills mistaken for the smoke of smoldering coal fires. Started in 1884 during a labor dispute, fires moved through seams of coal inside the mines and beyond. Unable to put them out, the mine company owners abandoned the mines and the town. Making homes and schools uninhabitable, the spectacle of the fires generated a local tourist economy, while a Works Project Administration program to remove flammable material from the former mines provided jobs. One hundred and twenty years after it was started, the location of the fire is only apparent through surface effects: melted snow in the winter, steam visible in the cold air, or perhaps smoke (Peterson 2013). Occasionally, a flame licks up above ground. Residents say, “We were lucky a few years ago, when a flame shot up at the Moonshine Festival.”

At the festival, a sign directs visitors to a still. Turning a corner, one is drawn into the gaiety of carnival rides, dart-throwing games, and potential prizes of stuffed animals—unpopulated in the late afternoon heat. The still
is here, making moonshine; tucked away, it is only apparent by the heat emanating from an area closed off with chicken wire and by a damp and rank scent of fermentation. When experienced along with the heat of the day, the barrel is nearly too hot to stand next to.

The present is a moment of sensory attunement. Heat connects this day and its bright and shiny festivities with a past of mining and future states of labor, economy, and climate, in this region and beyond. Heat—energy that puts atoms into motion—is felt, linking temporal moments materially and metaphorically, through the circulation of energy and as a poetics of sense. Writing about thermodynamics in 1851, William Thomson (1851–52) explained that “heat is not a substance, but a dynamical form of mechanical effect. . . . Heat consists of a motion excited among the particles of bodies.” The modern science of heat is caught up in a history of technology fueled by coal. The scientific theory of thermodynamics was developed from study of the steam engine, which, powered by coal, was used to bring this resource out of the mines. Later the steam engine powered modes of transportation—rail and boat—that were crucial for facilitating a market for coal, making it worthwhile to put energy, and capital, into its extraction. Thus coal not only laid the material foundations of the modern built environment and transformation of everyday life; as the fuel to forge steel strong enough for rail lines and skyscraper girders, to power domestic light and heat, and to develop passenger transportation, it also gave rise to our very understanding of the nature of heat as energy, as motion, and as work.

The culminating event of the festival is a parade. Barefoot children eagerly await the candy that police and firefighters will throw from their vehicles. The president of the New Straitsville history group, with whom I had spent the day, had been talking about her son’s float for the town’s historical society: “a moonshine-powered rocket to space.” The parade, which opens with emergency service vehicles proclaiming their sonic capacities, features float after float of winners of regional festival pageants, the name of the festival spelled out on the base of each float: Moonshine Festival (three floats, carrying, respectively, royalty, last year’s royalty, and baby royalty); Fall Festival of Leaves, Bainbridge, Ohio; Dennison Railroad Festival; Murray City Miner’s Festival; Wellston Coal Festival; and Amanda Firefighters Festival. In the midst of this display, between the Wellston Coal Festival and the Amanda Firefighters Festival floats, the New Straitsville historical society’s float comes into sight, pulled by a rusty blue van with a handwritten sign on its side and bedecked with American flags. A white-haired man, shirtless, in overalls and a silver helmet, is playing guitar. Teens in everyday clothes throw candy.
A mottled gray-green and brown rocket runs the length of the float, angled up as if it might just clear the roof of the van pulling it. Assembled from cardboard and tape, black dots of spray paint suggest bolts holding uneven pieces of steel together. The tape connecting the back fin to the body of the rocket mimics a weld seam. Jugs and tubes carry the moonshine into the rocket and the riders. The only float to address the theme of the festival, it, like the others, pulls away from the history on which it draws with an anachronism that nevertheless situates the float in a suspended present that makes fuel out of coal’s aftermath to launch a (symbolically) future-looking object—all while playing on regional stereotypes, the contemporary condition of war, and pleasure in a masterful work of bricolage.

Yet this float is not as disjunctive from the others as it at first seems. They, too, with their “royalty” wearing colorful dresses, and perfecting their royal waves as their faces gleam with sweat, present a present disconnected from the history indexed by the text on their floats. Some large, some small, some artificially tanned, all with mascara and well-groomed hair, the girls sit on the floats in the hot sun and smile and wave at the sparse spectators on the sidewalk. They are professionalized, on a pageant circuit, not necessarily residents of the towns they represent. And though their “embodied and performed acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge,” the ways in which they may be “transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next” (Taylor 2003: 21) is unclear, if not ruptured. Here the past is more of a “haunting” than a “being,” insofar as it is neither inhabited nor ascribed to. It is a memory put in service of current festivities, a mode of branding perhaps, even as the actual conditions of that past are remembered and reiterated across registers of representation. Yet there continues to be a straining across temporalities. The juxtaposition of these girls with these words is another moment of bricolage, a creation out of material at hand, which, here, is as much the past as the present. Despite their distancing mechanisms, the floats, and the festival, present moments of parataxis in which the viewer creates meaningful relationships between past and present. Like Francis Bacon’s triptychs, “there is a relationship of great intensity between the separate panels . . . , although this relationship has nothing narrative about it” (Deleuze 2003: 6). These girls’ bodies are not those of miners, or firefighters, or rail operators. Yet an image of miners’ bodies shimmers alongside theirs in the heat of the day.

A “sixth sense,” thermoception is the capacity to register feelings of heat and cold in the body (Howes 2009). Registered primarily in, on, and through the skin, our physical response to temperature relies on a relation-
ship between epidermis, brain, and other parts of the body that might respond by producing tears, shivers, or sweat. With thermoception, there is no objective divide between sensation and what is sensed. Following Tim Ingold’s (2011a: 244) explication of perception, thermoception “takes place in circuits that cross-cut the boundaries between brain, body and world.” In this way, thermoception differs from the commonly listed five senses, which generally presume an object seen, a sound heard, a scent smelled, a bite of food tasted, another person’s finger touching our skin.

Yet thermoception also puts pressure on these assumed divisions between the self and an exterior world of objective forms, indicating how, for instance, sound, like heat, is a form of energy that vibrates the body (and the tree). Heat thus complicates Gilles Deleuze’s (2003: 31, 32) assertion that the “intensive reality” of sensation is “in the body, and not in the air.” The ways in which heat is in or of the air do not create a division between air and body but bind both through and within energy. Heat is more akin to Deleuze’s claim that “sensation is vibration” (31). This vibration, however, is not of an isolated human body but of a body in air, along with other human and nonhuman actors. In this way heat achieves a “distribution of the sensible” (Panagia 2009; Rancière 2006), taking up people and minerals, animals and streams, reshaping and refiguring relationships over time. It imbues animate and inanimate bodies, connecting the “matter” of stone, air, and breath, drawing humans and objects together in collectivities that are “constantly changing, constantly re-arranging themselves” (McLean 2008: 306). In this region, coal, people, and heat are enmeshed in a “complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies” (Bennett 2010: 4) that cohere and re-cohere in divergent formations over time.

This day at the festival, we are all hot. I watch the parade with two women who run the New Straitsville Historical Society. We stand under the society building’s awning, which offers shade and some relief from the otherwise glaring sun. People feel heat and talk about heat. When a float goes by whose riders are wearing short dresses, the women mention that they must be cooler than the others, who, as we witnessed, shone with the patina of sweat. Heat thus imbues bodies, pavement, trucks, and grass, fostering a collectivity that is registered through commiseration, but more than this is felt. Sensation is and does; or, as Deleuze (2003: 31) writes, “At one and the same time I become in the sensation and something happens through the sensation.” This collective sensation is in itself a form of care, evident at minimum through a gesture of commiseration and sympathy. Without necessarily shifting toward a higher moral order or broader ethical stance, simply
acknowledging a common experience organizes a collective. While offering the potential for more directed registers of care, for sustained projects organized around the welfare of people and place, and for collectives that cohere beyond fleeting acknowledgments, as immanent modalities of care for one another, sensory attunements provide bases for collectives formed across time and place. At the festival, the individual sensation of heat is immediately and automatically a shared sensation that attunes people toward one another and toward a past registered in the form of buildings, hills, bodies, and fire.

A Town: Affective Attunements and Future Imaginaries

A few miles north of New Straitsville, in Shawnee, Ohio, second-story porches gracing Main Street facades harken to another era, when residents might have looked down on a thoroughfare busy with people shopping at the supermarket or the butcher or the candy store. These businesses are now gone, present as traces legible only for those whose memories guide them. The charm of what remains has put Shawnee at the center of current regional revitalization efforts organized by a loose affiliation of local nonprofits and historical societies.

Love of place—a deep attachment to the things that make up a region, a desire to be in this place and to both maintain and improve it—drives this work. Here attunement takes shape as an affective orientation or register; corporeal, it consists primarily of work with objects and the built environment, the past resonating into aspirations for the future in the form of bricks, steel, and wood (Massumi 2002; Mazzarella 2010; Muehlebach 2014). Following Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010: 1), “Affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.” As one man who recently moved back to Shawnee from New Jersey told a tour group, “I came home to live my passion”—namely, learning about and promoting the history of the town and the region. The work he does collecting historical artifacts, searching local archives for still undiscovered tidbits of information about people and events in Shawnee and nearby towns, helping organize festivals, and talking to tour groups comes out of a deep attachment to this town and the region. His artifacts are displayed in the store windows of two buildings he owns on Main Street, and he has designs on another, a quintes-
sentential “ruin” in which he sees a resupported structure, a fresh coat of paint, a youth hostel. He, like others here, gave up job security elsewhere to inhabit the place he loves, to dwell in its history, and to work toward its future.

Another man who has dedicated his adult life to cultivating the region’s history and developing its economy bought the Tecumseh Theater in the mid-1970s, rescuing it from a wrecking crew that was ready to buy it for $500 to sell the steel. Referred to as the “skyscraper of Shawnee,” its height was made possible by the steel girder. By the time the theater was built, the region’s contribution to building a modern nation was already established by rail and coal. The girder, rail, and coal are inextricably linked as material of and for modern capital. Rail, made possible by and the means of transportation for coal, was also, as Walter Benjamin (1999: 16) explains, “the first prefabricated iron component, the precursor of the girder” (see also Mumford [1934] 1963: 74–77; Schivelbusch 1992). The theater’s renovated ground floor, which for a time held a local public library branch, is now used for meetings, public presentations, and festival events. The second-floor theater remains unrenovated.

Recently, a coffee shop opened on the ground floor of the Tecumseh Theater. A chalkboard sign on the sidewalk advertised Wi-Fi and baked goods—the latter donated by volunteers who signed up for particular days of the week. Such mobilizing efforts are intended to bring awareness as well as financial support to the region. The coffee shop was one component of a larger project of civic tourism organized around the consumption of experience. By now a commonplace of neoliberal capital, such ventures account for the region’s social and natural histories in ways that are future-oriented at a moment that is already, in Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s (2011) words, “after the future.” The “future” tracked by such efforts concluded a century ago after a relatively brief mining boom following the Civil War and ending with the departure of most of the coal companies around the turn of the twentieth century. While the economy of some towns was sustained for decades by clay mining and brick making, most people in the region have been living with the aftermath of coal mining for generations: the absence of jobs, the disintegration of labor unions, the collapse of small cities that were built to house miners, acid mine runoff contaminating entire watersheds.

Aspirations for a renewed tourist economy draw on the “past as a resource.” Invoking the history of energy extraction that brought Europeans to the area, valuing the past in these terms draws together the movement of energy and the labor movement—two sets of interconnected circulatory dynamics that made the region what it was and is both in itself and in terms
of its wider significance. Miners who were part of a national, and international, labor movement chiseled coal out of the hills and shipped it off to larger cities, where it was used as an energy source for domestic heat and light, as well as for crafting the material necessary for modernity’s industry, transportation, and built environment.

Labor, though significant for a narrative of the past, is not at the center of revitalization efforts or visions of the future. Rather, these aspirations are focused on cities, buildings, and a general and dispersed notion of improved economic conditions for towns and for the region. Hence, though labor and urbanism were once hooked, they remain so largely through labor’s transformation into narrative rather than the substance and quality of work itself. Moreover, the region’s significance as a site for early labor organizing is emphasized over actual mining conditions (though the latter is not excluded, and circulates in significant ways, as addressed below). In this way a dynamic that transcends, rather than expresses, the labor conditions of the past is integrated into future-oriented aspirations. Narratives of labor attune to the natural and built environment of caves, mines, and buildings that were sites for late nineteenth-century labor organizing. On Main Street in Shawnee, tour groups are shown the L that has emerged within the P on a facade. The building’s use by the Knights of Labor, a predecessor to the United Mine Workers, is apparent through a palimpsest of what preceded its use by the fraternal Order of Knights of Pythias (Huyssen 2003).

Even as labor figures largely as narrative, an immense amount of work is being done that is directed toward a better future for a place and the people who live there. This includes work of collecting historic artifacts, perusing local archives, scanning and uploading relevant material to an online archive, planning and putting on festivals, applying for grants, writing and publishing accounts of aspects of the region’s history, raising funds and writing text for historic markers, cleaning streams, renovating (or simply “mothballing”) buildings, and running a store and now a coffee shop. Affec­tive, embodied, and material, this work is in and of the present. And though people are busy with these efforts every day, to an outsider’s eye there is sometimes little obvious change.

In the Little Cities of Black Diamonds the present often appears to be suspended between the “past as a resource” and future economic revitalization. This is the “stalled present” described by David Scott (2014: 6) in which a modernist notion of time unfolding—of the security of progress from past to present and future—has been “interrupted.” Lauren Berlant (2011: 6) calls this a “situation,” explaining that “animated suspension provides a way of
thinking about some conventions with which we develop a historical sense of the present affectively as immanence, emanation, atmosphere, or emergence.” Suspended time is filled with anticipation. During one of the first weeks the coffee shop was open, its organizers chatted inside, waiting for business. One in particular kept looking out the window. He would venture out to talk to people as they took pictures from their car windows. “People get scared away when I try to approach them,” he said. Though he found that “sometimes it’s OK if they’re on the sidewalk.” Another car drove by, and he observed that the people inside it didn’t even look at the chalkboard sign. The coffee shop was opened at the urging of the director of an organization engaged in creating and maintaining hiking trails, connecting them to a larger network in the state. He complained that he had nowhere to go during breaks or for lunch. An AmeriCorps volunteer ran it most mornings. A few weeks later he was proud to announce that four outsiders had come in that morning—confirmation that their efforts could succeed.

Tours, organized primarily by the state historical society and local colleges, are a principal way of bringing people to the area, invoking interest and capturing a consumer group that might shop at their boutique general store. Despite the energy they require, those who give of their time do so out of a love of place and a hope for the future, not for financial compensation. On an early summer day I joined a group of local public school teachers participating in a summer program at a regional college for the Shawnee portion of their tour. We trapse up the stairs to the theater after being warned of their precariousness. Turning at the former box office window we stand in an expansive space—a stage on one side, a balcony on the other. The walls are gray lathe, stripped of plaster. Windows on two sides cast a diffuse light across the dusty, gray-brown surfaces. The tour’s leader continues with his story about the region’s past and its connection to the present, a story he began on the sidewalk outside the store across the street. Describing how three rival railroads came to the region in search of coal, he says, “As if by magic overnight, towns shot up everywhere. As soon as the railroad got there, towns were formed.” While many were company towns, Shawnee was incorporated and had its own government. When coal companies left, they often took the houses they had built for miners and their families, loading them on flatbeds and shipping them away by rail. Towns like Moonville and Santoy went from having populations of several thousand people to disappearing from the map entirely.

The Moonville tunnel, through which trains used to run, is off an unmarked trail in the Zaleski State Forest. As I stand before it, there is no
trace of the rail line that once ran through it or the town that, as an area resident tells us, “used to be over there. At least that’s what people say. I wasn’t here then.” Santoy is unique in having lost its “village” status. The 1930 census reported it as having had the largest population decline in the country over the previous decade. Today there is only Santoy Road, where one can find Santoy Holiness Chapel. Around the bend, brick foundations lie as ruins amid the fallen leaves. The inside wall of the jail proclaims: “Brian –n– Susan 4–ever, 4–life, 4–man + wife.” Some towns are underwater. At a dinner in Shawnee I heard someone say there are “seven covered bridges” under Burr Oak Lake, a nearby lake that was created for recreational use. Now evident through traces that a history of mining, labor, and infrastructure has etched in the landscape, these cities remain crucibles of urban pasts and futures.

At a moment when love of place binds a history of labor with small cities, an urban past resonates into the present, casting a kind of “cruel optimism” onto hopes for the future. As Berlant (2011: 2) suggests, “Optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving.” How to describe a fantasy of a future of renovated buildings and a middle-class future for some, the work for which is caught up in the economics of inequality and precarity: competition for grants, reliance on federal funds, people who may or may not come and who, in the end, could displace those who currently live there? The imagined future is organized around consumption. The actual work entailed—its quality and its relation to a wider notion of well-being that might include health care, housing, food, or an environment free of toxins—is infrequently, if ever, discussed. In a documentary made about the region, a resident of New Straitsville observes that she would “like to be able to get a cappuccino in Shawnee.” The labor conditions of a barista—something that might have mattered for a miner-organizer—do not figure in her account (Lewis 2007).

Still, while the notion of “cruel optimism” is suggestive for structural dimensions of “economies of abandonment” (Povinelli 2011) such as this, it does not adequately account for the experience and qualities of dynamics in this region, in the engagements and encounters, and most especially in the textures of attachments to place, matter, and people. The logic of “cruel optimism” remains within that of capital, insofar as the demise of the “good life” is grounded in conditions of economic precarity. In other words, the promise of a good life is not met when capital fails to deliver the necessary structures of possibility, at which point it seems there is nothing left. “Cruel optimism” does not claim a perspective outside of capital. In this region, however, the
form and substance of life that remains in the context of decline shapes the present as a moment of dwelling in, attuned to the region’s past but not of it, and not yearning for a return. It is a place that seems to reflect the work of destructive plasticity, which “sculpts by annihilating precisely at the point where the repertory of viable forms has reached exhaustion and has nothing left to propose” (Malabou 2012: 54). The ways that life is challenging materially are structured primarily not by new conditions of impossibility but rather by a long and well-known history of economic inequality, around work that is already generations past. Thus rather than glossing contours and qualities of the present with a structural lens, we might instead follow Kathleen Stewart (2011: 445) in paying attention to “how forces come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments” and to how “people dwelling in them become attuned to the sense of something coming into existence or something waning, sagging, dissipating, enduring, or resonating with what is lost or promising.”

The present of the region is a place of contradictions and complex alliances. As a corner of Appalachia, its stereotypes threaten to cloud any attempt at an account of the place in general. Stewart (1996: 97–112), writing of another part of Appalachia, recounts the past of the area through a series of accounts that begin “I could tell you . . .” in order to inscribe events into history, to rewrite a master narrative through the “cultural poetics of ruins, places, arresting images, and just talk” (106). Demographics that convey the deep poverty of the area occlude lived social relations, suggesting once again the inadequacy of structural accounts. Instead, something general about the place is captured by events and interactions I observed, or heard about, in these towns, where care for the well-being of a place and of one another shapes the present in ways that exceed numbers.

This is a place where class differences are worked out around buildings; currently worn of paint with vines curling out windows, they are alternately viewed as integral to the town’s potential revitalization or as intended for the destructive claw of a backhoe. Where difference (or prejudice) is registered through name-calling (“white trash”) and physical assault on gay men, in which witnesses of the latter readily come forward to support the victim. Where a yard of no longer running cars is “what my father always had,” though the neighbors have insisted on a fence.

This is a place where residents are haunted by a national imaginary of Appalachia that persists as stereotype, some self-conscious of its potential appearance while others seem unaware of its lingering presence. Where one person quips that he has to “black my tooth up” when a journalist comes to the present of the region as a moment of dwelling in, attuned to the region’s past but not of it, and not yearning for a return. It is a place that seems to reflect the work of destructive plasticity, which “sculpts by annihilating precisely at the point where the repertory of viable forms has reached exhaustion and has nothing left to propose” (Malabou 2012: 54). The ways that life is challenging materially are structured primarily not by new conditions of impossibility but rather by a long and well-known history of economic inequality, around work that is already generations past. Thus rather than glossing contours and qualities of the present with a structural lens, we might instead follow Kathleen Stewart (2011: 445) in paying attention to “how forces come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments” and to how “people dwelling in them become attuned to the sense of something coming into existence or something waning, sagging, dissipating, enduring, or resonating with what is lost or promising.”

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This is a place where class differences are worked out around buildings; currently worn of paint with vines curling out windows, they are alternately viewed as integral to the town’s potential revitalization or as intended for the destructive claw of a backhoe. Where difference (or prejudice) is registered through name-calling (“white trash”) and physical assault on gay men, in which witnesses of the latter readily come forward to support the victim. Where a yard of no longer running cars is “what my father always had,” though the neighbors have insisted on a fence.

This is a place where residents are haunted by a national imaginary of Appalachia that persists as stereotype, some self-conscious of its potential appearance while others seem unaware of its lingering presence. Where one person quips that he has to “black my tooth up” when a journalist comes to
town and another weighs the cost of a tooth and a car. Where a car’s upholstery is soaked with water before being taken to the dump and sold as scrap metal by weight. Where people who can’t afford to heat their homes with gas—though they used to have a direct line from the ground in exchange for providing the gas company surface access—house, out of generosity, a family of five, unrelated to them, three kids under age four, parents in their early twenties.

Stereotyped representations in photojournalism essays by area college students cast local youth as suspended in the present, without a future given the lack of jobs. One of these young men left the local university before finishing in order to help his parents after his father’s stroke. He had been in a class I taught, sitting in the back dressed in black and chains, his T-shirts advertising heavy metal bands, memorable for his astute comments. These photos also capture, though do not focus on, the masterful work of a bricoleur who ran the heat of a wood stove through his home’s central air vents when the gas was turned off.

This is a place where college-educated men move home to care for aging parents, for the mentally ill, or for buildings. Where some stay, working for county services and running summer work programs for teens who might be eating “crackers and ketchup” for dinner. There are those committed to the region and those who don’t imagine leaving, those who left and returned and never imagined this as their future, those who have left and will not return. This is not representative but tells something of a few people living here, who live in ways that exceed structural conditions, that confirm and confound stereotypes, and that overflow the possibilities offered by income and status.

A Stance: Embodying Temporal Gaps

Next to the Tecumseh Theater is a park. Until recently the area served as a parking lot for a bar, housed in what used to be a bank, as evidenced by the inscription on its stone facade. Transforming the parking lot into a park was an effort not only of beautification but of civic education. Some in town were apparently unhappy about this turn, and during the first weeks that seedlings were planted a few were torn up. Late one night someone drove a truck through the gravel and over a few of the plants. Outrage gave way to forgiveness when it turned out it was an accident on the part of a woman who was drunk. The centerpiece of the park is a nearly life-size statue of a miner, who stands half crouched, one knee on the ground, the other partially bent as he hefts a pickax over his shoulder. The miner’s surface—a continuity of cloth-
ing, revealed skin, and ax—manifests the work of its original sculpting, with imprints of the sculptor’s hands visible in the cast clay.

The sculpture resonates with another presentation, or performance, of a “miner.” On another hot summer day, a teen, shirtless and dirty from a day digging, measuring, and sifting as part of an archaeological project behind a historic building in Somerset, Ohio, threw a shovel over his shoulder. “You look like a miner,” the jobs program director said. Earlier I had been told that Somerset was not a mining community. Wealthier than cities to its south, its economy was based in agriculture. Yet mining haunts the regional imaginary, a visual referent readily invoked. The teen’s embodied signification is not a continuity of past into present or an example of repertoire (Taylor 2003); rather, it reveals disjunctures between the past and the present in a region where work disappeared. There is little nostalgia for the work of mining, nor is there a desire to return to it. When labor conditions register they do so as forms of struggle, in which conditions of labor are conveyed through their bodily effects—the handshakes and coded knocks of early labor organizing, the deaths caused by the worst mine disaster in the country, the crouched stance of the miner.

Both portrayals of miners reflect a shift in the nature of labor that grounds the conditions of the region. With the sculpture the work of mining, labor migration from as far as Wales and Hungary, and early labor organizing are refigured in the service of a neoliberal economy—a singular miner on display in a park that is part of revitalization efforts organized around civic tourism. The teen was working in a summer jobs program run by Perry County Jobs and Family Services for low-income, at-risk youth. They make $8 an hour and work twenty-eight hours a week. The previous week they had restored the town’s cemetery, learning about gravestone symbolism. This week they were learning archaeological techniques. The town’s mayor invests in historic research and preservation with support from state and federal grants with the aim of attracting tourists. These “miners” dwell in intertwined economies of tourism—or aspirations thereof—and forms of public aid. The former are a hallmark of neoliberalism. Yet the latter, public aid in the form of federal and state grants to cities and nonprofits as well as public work programs, complicate matters. Both reflect the complexity of the role of the state in negotiating proper forms of aid that not only will assist the needy but also will produce proper working subjects, whether laborers or those who can show that they are deserving of entitlements.4

The miner’s stance represented by the sculpture circulates in stories connecting present with past and animating the landscape with a no longer
existing social life. At a local historical society, the director takes on the position of the miner, pretending to wield a pickax, as we talk about the sounds of mining, or, more specifically, what miners might have heard as they worked in an acoustic space of low ceilings and walls of coal and clay. During a cemetery tour, the guide explains that it was clear that men chasing a reported murderer when he escaped from jail were miners because they crouched down as they ran. Wanting him because he knew the names of those who had started the mine fire, they hanged him from a tree in the cemetery and buried him in a shallow grave at its back edge.

Later in this same cemetery I watch a reenactment of the life of Christopher Evans, a labor organizer who came to New Straitsville in the late nineteenth century and helped found the United Mine Workers of America. He is buried in the New Straitsville cemetery. The New Straitsville history group wants to have a commemorative sculpture made of Evans, like the one in Shawnee, to put in a garden it is planning. At its monthly meeting members discuss this. “He’s the best-known person from here; none of the rest of us got an obituary on the front page of the New York Times.”

A playful disconnect underlies the earnestness of the performance—a gap creating distance between the first-person narrative of historical events and the narrated past, between the man wearing a black suit and old-fashioned bow tie and the tombstone bearing the name “Christopher Evans” that he stands beside. This becomes especially apparent as he nears the end of his life. “In 1908, in my seventies,” he says, and we understand that the personal is eclipsing his role in the general labor history that has been the focus up to now. Suspension of disbelief is strained to its limit when he says, “And in 1924 I passed.” He continues, speaking from the grave while standing next to it, saying,

I look back at my life and say, what did I accomplish, what was it for? Wonderful family, stood up for something I believed in from my earliest days until the very end. People need unions. Together we can do things we cannot do alone. [The] union is the center of my existence. If we do not have unions workers will suffer and owners will control and take advantage. I hope that since my passing in 1924 we have gone forward on that issue.

Rebecca Schneider (2011: 9–10) describes “reenactment as an activity that nets us all . . . in a knotty and porous relationship to time. It is about the temporal tangle, about the temporal leak, and about the many questions that attend time’s returns.” This experience of being “netted” in a confusion of temporalities is especially clear during question and answer sessions follow-
ing such performances. Then audience members ask the character, not the performer, to comment on the period in which he or she lived. Off script, the character invariably replies with a knowing insight that is only possible from a perspective of historical hindsight, while speaking as if in the past. I want, however, to shift from Schneider’s emphasis on time as material, mobile, or agentive, conveyed by an insistence that “then and now punctuate each other” and a reading of historical reenactment as an “attempt to literally touch time” (2). Rather, the ways these performances are in and of the present are conveyed through a process of calibrating intertextual gaps (Briggs and Bauman 1992). The intertextual work of making the present appear to be the past is achieved through costume, bodily stance, and speaking in the first person about both personal and public events. Yet the work of minimizing gaps is continually undone through statements of grand historic significance or in speaking from the grave; in moments of temporal confusion when the fourth wall is broken and it is not quite clear who or what is past and who or what is present; and in the fact of the performance itself, in which a single person is talking, alone, to a group watching. Then it becomes clear that historic reenactment maximizes gaps, drawing on the past through minimal performative tropes as a resource for present purposes. Thus stance, costume, and narrative attune performers and audience toward a past that is nevertheless continually distanced from the present.

Conclusion

At Robinson’s Cave, where secret organizing for the Knights of Labor took place, we are told that miners sat crouched in the natural amphitheater listening to labor organizers. The natural acoustics of the space made it such that miners could hear a speaker clearly as well as sounds from the street below but could not themselves be heard from New Straitsville’s Main Street. Listening at Robinson’s Cave, we tune in to acoustics, to birds and water, to stories of miners, sensorially attuned toward a past through sounds that are in and of the present. Sound, like heat, is felt. Also a form of energy, sound is the shimmering movement of molecules and of matter that might be air or stone.

Sound attunes us to one another and to a past that takes shape and dissolves, reshaped through another story, resensed on another day when snow chills us through our boots and icicles are still frozen solid. We listen to the voice of our guide as it fills the knoll in front of the cave, sensing echoes of a labor leader’s voice. The story’s content draws us in to the region and its past, an attunement that is especially effective when achieved affectively.
One woman has a particular knack for this. A consummate storyteller, her lifelong love of history is sustained in her tireless research and care for the New Straitsville and Little Cities of Black Diamonds Archives. She explains:

I love the stories. And for some reason I remember them. Sometimes I’ll read something and I’ll connect it with something else. Or some old-timer will tell me a story. Sometimes a sentence or two will tell me about a story in the past. There’s an account I read one time of a woman who was interviewed during the 1884–85 strike that said she would lie down with her child to die by the side of the stream rather than let her husband work for less money than they could live on. The passion that’s in that statement is part of the story. The fact that there were women out there saying, “No, my husband is not going to scab. He’s going to stay on strike until we win this battle.” A lot of people don’t always see all the things that would have to be done to make that possible. It doesn’t have to be exact to get the feeling of the woman, as long as you can kind of make them see what she’s saying, and feeling.

In affectively attuning toward the woman who would have lain down by a stream and died, her child with her, because life was not sustainable on the wages her husband earned, we do not reenter that past. Nor does the past come in to the present—a present of perhaps similar economic conditions that nevertheless lacks even a vocabulary of strike and scab and battle, let alone an ethics of sacrifice born out of desperation.

The present that attunes us toward a past of struggle over labor conditions is akin to what Catherine Malabou (2012: 6) calls “pathological plasticity, a plasticity that does not repair, a plasticity without recompense or scar, one that cuts the thread of life in two or more segments that no longer meet. . . . These types of beings impose a new form on their old form, without mediation or transition or glue or accountability, today versus yesterday.” Another form emerges after what Malabou refers to as “the accident,” and what we might here call decline—an uneven process of degeneration and ruination in a space of abandonment. This form is a nonessentialized ontology, a “negative possibility” that is “a power that forms” (75). In the Little Cities of Black Diamonds microregion, the quality of the present is neither singular nor wholly determined by its past. Life as lived exceeds essentializing narratives of both regional stereotype and materialist accounts that would bypass present conditions. And though for Malabou the transformation is complete upon full negation, when “the possibility that makes existence impossible” emerges, when the belief in the future, “the structure of the promise,” is destroyed (88), in this region the break or rupture or reformation marking a
relationship between past and present is not total. People continue to be attuned toward a future, belief in its potentiality materialized through care for the well-being of place and people. Even if improved economic conditions are delayed, everyday life is made rich through work that is guided by an ethical stance toward a place: to not abandon it, to tend to it, to witness small moments in which it flourishes. The tenacity of staying in a place understood as abandoned and of taking care of a history marked by precarity makes life meaningful in ways that are not fully subject to logics of capital.

As modern subjects, we continue to be forward-looking. But prediction is uncertain. As Berardi (2011: 25) writes, “We don’t believe in the future in the same way. Of course, we know that a time after the present is going to come, but we don’t expect that it will fulfill the promises of the present.” The present is caught up in a dance between past and future, bound up with the former while reaching toward the latter, with whatever levels of anxiety or hope. This present is palpable—felt. Bodies entangled with matter are conductive mediums, sensorially attuned to a past of work that turned men’s faces black and a future in which a coal fire evoking the passion of early labor struggles continues to burn. Today carbon from coal burned over two centuries resides in the atmosphere, bringing past into present and an unforecastable, yet likely warmer, future.

Notes

1 Appearing as “ruins,” traces and palimpsests of another way of living in this region figure as the material for future imaginaries. Here, as in imperial contexts, ruins serve “as epicenters of renewed claims, as history in a spirited voice, as sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected political projects” (Stoler 2008: 198). As with the landscape of mining and labor in southeast Ohio, “to think with ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artifacts of empire as dead matter . . . than to attend to their reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present” (196).

2 Mining, while caught up in the broader transformation of work in the context of industrialization, also has temporalities, histories, and modalities of labor conditions that are specific. In the case of resource extraction, the loss of work has as much to do with the depletion of underground deposits as it does with technological and industrial shifts. Hence the geographies of mining’s afterlives are less cotermous historically than, for instance, those of rust belt cities. With some mining areas abandoned generations ago, the subsequent processes and experiences of livelihoods and life as lived have been largely overlooked in more recent discussions that situate the decline of industrial labor in a shift toward post-Fordism and flexible production. A productive approach to the global histories of resource extraction and its aftermaths might be generated from the anthropology of mining (Cleary 1990; Ferguson 1999; Hoffman 2012; Nash 1993; Powdermaker 1962; Smith 2011).
Despite the claim that there is no risk of yuppies coming in here, as opposed, someone said, “to the Blackstone River Valley” of Massachusetts and Rhode Island, farmers around Somerset are putting their land in trusts so that people coming from Columbus to buy property do not transform the landscape from agricultural pastoral into suburban developments.

Another version of this dynamic appears in the work of turning towns into forest in the early part of the twentieth century. As the documentary film A Forest Returns: The Success Story of Ohio’s Only National Forest (Andrews 2005) conveys, the process of creating the forest in a landscape of small mining towns entailed the federal government buying the properties of families on aid who were still living in the region after mine companies left and work disappeared and hiring people to plant trees as part of a works program; hence one form of aid provides rights to a place, albeit temporarily, while another does not.

References


