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Analysis of Kathleen Stuart's *A Space by the Side of the Road*

In her book, *A Space by the Side of the Road*, Kathleen Stuart thrusts her readers into the “space by the side of the road,” that is the broken down West Virginian coal camps, nestled in the heights of the Appalachian Mountains. Stuart does not just theorize or objectify the people that she is studying, but through her book, she lets you feel the long grass against your ankles, and the fear and mystery and faith that flows through the towns she visits, conveying the message that to understand a community one must experience the place that it resides in. Stuart gives voice to “empty,” often neglected or forgotten spaces (being the hollers of West Virginia) through her use and structural embodiment, of multivocality, and “authenticity.”

Stuart is adamant about presenting the culture that she is studying as complex and something that, “cannot be gotten “right”” (Stuart 6), and one of the ways that she illustrates this concept is through her emphasis on the multivocality of the West Virginian hollers. Multivocality, as defined by Margaret Rodman in her article, “Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality”, is “polysemic places that bespeak people’s practices, their history, their conflicts, their accomplishments” (Low 214). To get people to truly see the people that she works with, Stuart must first get us to respect them, to throw off the demeaning veil through which most view the people of West Virginian hollers as “simple folk,” or “hicks.” Stuart does just that, and fills her book with vivid details of places where everyday life within the hollers collides with the past, creating complex layers of emotion and meaning within the people who experience them. Throughout her book Stuart describes moving through towns, where the men and women that she talks with point out places where a little girl was hit by a car and died or a patch of grass where a boy was electrocuted because of a neglectful parent. An old woman even describes a stump outside her window where her favorite sheep was slaughtered by some dogs. Stuart wants her readers to see how much is going on in a place that on the surface, seems to be stagnant and backward. Structurally,

Stuart lets her readers feel the thick layers of narrative and multivocality through her almost exhaustive lists of description of setting, and her use of parallel structure when she starts off almost every paragraph with either, “picture this,” or “imagine.”

Half of what multivocality is, is the focus on voice and discerning details about the voices that are speaking, and what they are saying. Stuart allows the voices of places and people to speak freely, taking clear and unhindered accounts of what she has witnessed. For example, Stuart retells and then interprets the narrative of Riley Hess, saying, “Imagine being so caught up in the space of story that action follows fabrication, as when Riley took up the Styrofoam cup, already laden with an imagined history of use... enacting a tactical digression from the failed progress of a trip up the road” (Stuart 31). Stuart does not demean Riley for being late to the meeting with her, or say that he’s crazy for envisioning a whole narrative about a Styrofoam cup on the side of the road, she lets the multivocality of the everyday places and found items that reside there, mean more. The sheer number of narratives that Stuart quotes throughout her book, often in the form of the conversation that she had them in, speaks to the level of multivocality that the places and spaces surrounding the holler towns contain. Stuart illustrates that the people of the hollers physical community, mindset, everything, is built around this complex and reaching structure of narratives, and that those narratives can be sparked by roadside sights, anywhere. Furthermore, Stuart asks us to, “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” (Stuart 32). Stuart, through her use of images and recounted narratives, demonstrates such a degree of multivocality, that the people of the town are often sent crashing into their past, and given omens of their futures. Stuart describes the “side of the road,” as “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 in cultural practice: the place from which big meanings emerge” (Stuart 34). Cresswell, in his chapter on “Defining Place”, states that,

“place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world” (Cresswell 11). For the people of the hollers, storytelling is not just a past time, but a way of life, where one wouldn’t be able to function in the community without being able to see the “signs.” The stories, the lessons of the past, memories imbued and written in a broken down truck, or a particular part of a stream, all speak to the people who know where and how to look- a visual language that only those who are “of the world,” (Class 09/28).

Stuart is able to successfully give voice to the people who reside in the “space on the side of the road” through her establishment of authenticity in the both the way that she presents the people she is studying and the literary techniques she uses when writing about them. Authenticity is defined by Cresswell as “a genuine and sincere attitude,” (Cresswell 44) and through such an attitude, Stuart is able to connect with the people of the hollers, showing her honest curiosity and respect for them. Stuart recognizes that true authenticity can only come from allowing oneself to be immersed in the surrounding culture. For example, Stuart states that, “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, “things happened” and more often than not I was forced to rely on memory” (Stuart 7). Stuart’s book is mostly comprised of narratives told by the people of the hollers- their memories, spiritual reasonings, and tactile encounters with the space around them- and Stuart creates a great sense of authenticity by taking these narratives and presenting them as texts to be interpreted. Stuart respects and understands the community that she is working with, and is able to see facts where “others” or people from the city, only see fiction and a backwards world. The fact that Stuart has chosen to present her research in the form of a book, shows that she recognizes the importance of voice and narratives-whether spoken or written. Stuart is able to take her research one step further, by showing her great understanding of literary and lyric devices and forms, such as her representations of conversations in the similar form of a script from a play. The places where people from the town are quoted could even be said to resemble poems, where the line breaks remind one of natural conversational pauses, and certain words or phrases are given emphasis and

symbolism by being bolded or italicized. Stuart doesn't just retell the stories, leaving them plain and bare on the page, she surrounds them with sensory details, and her own narrative voice, along with weaving in pieces of anthropological theory, mirroring the complexity found in the space of the community.

What I found to be very interesting and adding to the sense of authenticity of the text, was the way that, toward the end of her book, Stuart would mix her own technical and theoretical musings with "holler slang." For example, when explaining the "ideals of kinship," (Stuart 189), Stuart melds her own technical description of what is happening with holler ideology, saying, "The difference between a Mills and a Graham is instantiated in a mysterious affinity of blood: the Mills are lazy, the Grahams always did run their mouths, the Bowenses take fits of fightin' and layin' out of a night" (Stuart 189). Stuart effectively communicates the fact that differences in blood are less literal as perceived, just like the community's ideals of gender, where women are both respected and said to have a certain "place" and expectations of how they should behave. Stuart values the community that she is studying, and makes parallels between their definition of "just talk," to complicated ways of seeing and communicating with one's surroundings. Through Stuart's trust and respect of the place that she finds herself in, a clear sense of authenticity can be gathered.

Through her use of authenticity and multivocality, Stuart is able to give voice to the forgotten spaces and the supposed, "empty" places that consist of an "other" America that many view as alien, despite the fact that it is in our own backyard. Stuart establishes a strong sense of authenticity in her book, by giving vivid and lyric details of the surrounding places, painting clear mental pictures and allowing her readers to become as immersed as she was. Stuart's deep understanding of narrative form allows her to perfectly frame the conversations and quotes that she has recorded- where the dialogue takes on the form of a poem to be interpreted and held at a higher value for all of the narrative detail it contains. Stuart uses multivocality to define the place that she has studied. Stuart emphasizes the importance of accurate voice, when describing and trying to convey the complexity of place that can only be heard if you listen.

Overall, from Stuart's capturing and detailed descriptions and interpretations of the people of the hollers, I have gained a strong sense of a space so filled with memories, narratives and real people, it's as if I've been to visit, and "set and just talk" with them myself.

Works Cited:

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