



CAMERA IN ITS BED OF WILD GRASSES

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Since its invention, the camera has always put us, as Susan Sontag notes in [*On Photography*](#), “into a certain relation to the world.” That exact relation eludes us still, as the camera’s veracity, propriety, and even sincerity continue to be debated long past the time when Sontag herself called them into question. Does the camera deny interconnectedness and appropriate the living world, thereby objectifying reality and turning it into unrelated fragments? Seen from another angle, does the camera, due to its ubiquity, democratize experience and “enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at”? She makes both claims.

Since Sontag’s time, the camera has found its way, via phone technology, into a good many pockets. An estimated eight billion mobile phones are in use across the globe, with simplified devices available to children as young as three. Those of us

who've been held captive as our lunch companion scrolls through an endless parade of pet photos can attest to what has indeed become an ever-expanding democratization of experience, along with an infinitely enlarged notion of what's worth looking at. As Sontag might argue, this easy access allows growing numbers of us to navigate a world flattened and objectified by our screens. Half a century after she issued her unsettling provocations, what implications might this have for our relationship to the world?

Sontag's questions arose at a time beset by different urgencies. Today the urgencies we face are both more dire and more unstable. Let's consider a contemporary image of houses being swept into the sea by fierce, encroaching tides—one of our planet's growing existential crises. This image could have been captured by a citizen journalist, awake to an expanded notion of what today is worth looking at and alarmed by its implications. The image could have been captured as a record of what in actuality is disappearing, of the daily losses being borne by a significant and growing percentage of the population. Or, and this is more likely given the number of images that bombard us every waking hour in a constant, irritating, ever-proliferating stream: the image—and the reality—could simply be lost among the hundreds of others that demand our attention. If

that image should, by chance, happen to survive, it will now be forced to compete with what some consider far more compelling scenarios, generated in mere seconds by the operators of artificial intelligence, some of whom deny reality by romanticizing it, while others create alternative realities intentionally designed to obscure, and even deny, the truth.

The camera, which, as Sontag reminds us, "came into its own as art" with industrialization, can be seen as both product and symbol of our times. Adding its multitude of flattened images to the flat screens that increasingly shape our view of reality, the camera, it can be argued, helps direct our attention and our gaze to secondary representations of our natural, living surroundings while discouraging us from fully engaging with the ambiguities and entanglements and multidimensional wonders of those very surroundings.

And this at a time when direct engagement with the suffering world is needed more than ever.

The question arises: Should we consider abandoning the camera entirely, or is it still a useful tool? The new worlds that many of us are working to imagine are, for the most part, still out of the camera's range. But as we struggle to imagine these alternative scenarios, might there be a place for the camera in taking our next necessary steps?

❖ II ❖

Recently, I've been apprenticing myself to the work of David Abram, a philosopher who, in his books [*The Spell of the Sensuous*](#) and [*Becoming Animal*](#), makes a persuasive case for new ways of perceiving the world. Like a camera's lens, the conceptual frameworks developed by the western philosophical tradition have shaped the way those of us who grew up with that tradition apprehend the world and our relationship to it. The hierarchical divisions that began with Aristotle's [*Great Chain of Being*](#) and that culminated in Descartes's radical disjunction between mechanical matter and the thinking mind provided a rationale still operative today for our reckless assault on the living earth. The presumption that human beings are a superior species with rights to dominion over the earth, as well as the concomitant idea that the natural world has lesser intrinsic value make possible the damaging insistence that we have the right to extract from this supposedly inert resource whatever we need. This set of ideas has disrupted our planet's ecological balance. It has also helped foster the loneliness and tragic disconnection from the living natural order that we're experiencing today.

We can continue, Abram says, assuming that the natural world is without animating spirit:

[b]ut by doing so, we seal ourselves into a numbing solitude—a loneliness already settling around us as the complex creativity of forests gives way to the numbered productivity of even-aged tree farms, as the diverse riffs of songbirds steadily fade from the soundscape, and the wild, syncopated chant of the frog chorus that once rocked the fields every spring dwindles down to the monotonous hum of a single street lamp... Surely we've cut ourselves off for long enough—time, now, to open our minds outward, returning to the biosphere—that wide intelligence we'd thought was ours alone (Abram, *Becoming Animal*).

Abram foregrounds the thinking of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the twentieth-century French phenomenologist who, in a revolutionary move, rejects Descartes's disembodied subject and identifies the conscious self with the sensing body embedded inextricably within the flesh of the breathing earth. Rather than standing as an observer outside the given world, we humans are in fact thoroughly immersed in and engaged with a wild, proliferating "fluid, breathing landscape" (Abram, *The*

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Spell of the Sensuous). Merleau-Ponty consistently uses the active voice to describe the things we perceive: they “beckon” to us, they “respond” to our interest, they “take possession of [our] senses” (Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*). Accustomed to objectifying our surroundings, we might feel uncomfortable with this animistic language, but once we begin truly inhabiting our sensing bodies, Abram claims, we find that “the entire material world itself seems to come awake” (Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*).

Indeed, what is *perception* if not the experience of this gregarious, communicative power of things, wherein even ostensibly “inert” objects radiate out of themselves, conveying their shapes, hues, and rhythms to other beings and to us, influencing and

informing our breathing bodies though we stand far apart from those things (Abram, *Becoming Animal*)?

In moving, poetic language, Abram describes our relationship with the living world as, in turns, a unique, wordless dance, an improvised duet, an ongoing reciprocity, an interdependence, a commingling, a kinship.

A kinship. In concert with the Indigenous voices that give those of us trained in the western, European tradition a greater understanding of what it means to be “native to place,” Abram too is calling us to establish a new, or renewed, relationship with the living world. The mindful attentiveness that arises out of this understanding could, he believes, expand to become the basis for an environmental ethic, a set of precepts that “would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature” (Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*). We would be learning, he believes, through each unique, improvised interaction with the more-than-human entities that surround us, what it means to be human.

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❖ III ❖

Questions about the camera still drive this narrative but, to finally address them, I need first to make room for a deeper meditation that extends Abram's thinking from right perception to right action. Every essay in Robin Wall Kimmerer's generous book, [*Braiding Sweetgrass*](#), calls us to engage in extended meditation. But the one I want to focus on here is "In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place." Like Abram, Kimmerer asks us in this remarkable essay to turn away from the colonialist mindset that perceives the living world as our plaything, our rightful land-claim, our gold mine, and enter into "the deep reciprocity that renews the world." This reciprocity is made possible, Kimmerer says, by our willingness to become indigenous to place: to live on the Earth as if we were staying, to thoroughly embed ourselves, with responsibility and gratitude, in the land that supports our life.

Kimmerer takes us back to beginnings, to First Man, who was called Nanabozho by the Anishinaabe, and to his Original Instructions. Newly arrived in a world already populated by all its more-than-human, living entities, Nanabozho is told by Creator to walk through this world with attention to every step. His role as the newest arrival is not to control the world in arrogance but to learn in humility how to be human, how to establish right relationship with

his relatives. And since we humans build relationship with the natural world through naming, this becomes First Man's task and responsibility: "to learn the names of all the beings."

I want to pause here to imagine the deep, generative silence that must surround First Man as he stands before each sensible thing, in turn, and asks what this being will be called. He does not pull names from a high-domed hat or read them from a script. Instead, he sends his questions into that silence and opens himself to whatever comes back to him. He asks, and he listens. And in that way, out of respect and gratitude, he learns each being's true name.

Kimmerer describes her own experience of walking the land in present time, taking to heart this Original Instruction, working on seeing the trees around her as though for the first time, and naming them "with a Nanabozho mind." So the Sitka spruce becomes for her "*strong arms covered in moss*" and the western red cedar "*branch like a wing*."

She ends her essay with another naming. Here the focus is on Second Man (perhaps better: Second Person), the Euro-American, immigrant to these shores and bearer of a history whose arrogance left in its wake huge swaths of destruction across the continent. A plant, the common plantain, followed the immigrants' path from east to

west, carrying for Native peoples the taint of that arrogance. But quietly, unobtrusively, the plantain became—like so many native plants—a good teacher, revealing its many healing gifts and becoming, after many years of behaving like a generous neighbor, "naturalized to place." The plantain, called by Native peoples White Man's Footsteps, offers lessons in how to walk according to the Original Instructions—so close to the ground that, according to the ancient words, "each step is a greeting to Mother Earth."

❖ IV ❖

After years of distraction, we are learning to walk closer to the ground. We take our instructions seriously. This time, they come with a camera (though the fine print says its use is optional). We say: *we'll see*, and mean it.

Out of the welter of sensations, something beckons to us. We look again. Yes, something is calling us to come closer. In the deep, generative silence, we stand before this sensible thing and ask what she will be called. In the early spring one tells us: *little blue compass pointing in six directions*; in late fall another says: *end of summer field dancer*. Through these namings, we are coming home.

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know the answer. Some beings are gregarious, others shy. Out of respect, we always ask. Out of gratitude, we always offer thanks.

The camera, in our hands, can fall in love again—or perhaps for the first time—with the sensible world.

Cezanne is said to have reported that Mount Sainte Victoire "painted itself" through him for decades.*

Paint or camera or words: medium of choice. Each can become, with our devotion, not a substitute for experience but a means of allowing the living earth to celebrate itself.

This, then, can become our practice. ❖

* The source of this quote is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1945 essay, "Le doute de Cezanne."