

Land and Imagination

Sleeping along the coast of California lies a rolling body of mountains and valleys, threaded and stretched between the dark redwoods of the Klamath river, and the fog-blanket of the San Francisco Bay. At this time, the hills pulse the green of a spring come too early; the coyote brush dotted amongst the sorrel and deer-nibbled willow and shoots of wild rye grass. There is a crescent of land here, revealed by the unfolding of plates come together and upwards, which has called for these few thoughts on land ethic to be written. It awaits, even now, drawing imagination out from within, and ever-beckoning towards the gifts we are to offer the world. Still, it remains unclear whether we choose the land we live, or if it chooses us. Or perhaps it's some deeper covenant, holding us each to a hidden truth by which we may learn to live our lives. This land I speak of has many truths; some are meant for us, some for those before, and more still for those yet to come. These truths don't tend towards prettiness, but towards beauty. Often painful to learn, though with the faith of a patience as generous as the springs pouring themselves down the steep banks and ravines, into the salmon-runs below. So that standing at the top of the rise, with the ocean at our back, there in the distance emerges a hint of the Earth's great secret. A touch of the mantle, come risen and cutting through the Earth's crust, now crested and resting, become a great mountain across the valley. Somehow a messenger of the Earth's dark psyche, entrusted to the birds and the rain and the ritual of sunlight.

Eco-feminist Donna Haraway writes that "right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge" (2015). In the world today, where time is pressed thin between a militarized global economy and the erasure of those who would live otherwise, perhaps the best thing we can do here now is to simply cultivate refuge. And so herein lies the first questions the land has for us—what is refuge, how do we cultivate it by the way we live in a place, and do we

have, within the soil of our hearts, the will to grant it freely? It is possible, that within the practice of these questions, the land may let itself be known to us.

If we are to truly love this land, then we must stretch our bodies along the great absences of those who once lived here. So I wander, hands pressed together, down the gully shrouded in ferns and clover, to the dark places where once stood great redwood giants. I linger here, among ghosts, tender-footed and longing I spread my hands over their roots made compost in the duff. Over these stumps, stands the departure of wisdom, for whom I am left to lay curled in the crook of upturned remnants, eyes closed and dreaming; we must wait many lifetimes for these ones to grow big again.

Down below the ridge, tucked away in the shadows, we find the old homestead, dust held suspended in the canning rooms, settling even still, between the fig and the mulberry trees. The first white men to come here built this cabin in 1849, at the peak of rounding up the people of this place, the Kashaya Pomo. So the acorns of the Tanoak fall now, with no one but the woodpeckers and the boar to receive them. And still, the Gualala river is named for them, old and subtle languages stalk along the forest edges, descendants work the gas-pumps and lumber-yards. The land would have us see its people when we come here, driving through and not around the reservation—just two miles to the west—bearing witness and being witnessed, beholding the roles and the point in the story where we all find ourselves.

There come moments though, when I open my eyes to the pre-dawn of the ridge—the marine-layer white and heavy in the river valley below us—and looking to those who sleep around me, I lose sense of where in the story we really are. In these secret hours, time plays like a dog, chasing his own tail for the sake of inertia. I work my way through recent history, remembering the land is no longer made claim by Mexico, the vast rancherias of cattle and settlements have come and gone. The Russians have come and gone from this land as well,

taking with them the Sea Otters of the Pacific coast. I remind myself of this that I might be located again, and yet the short drive to the coast would reveal Fort Ross, the southernmost Russian colony, still standing much as it did in 1812. And if I were to stop at any farm or vineyard along the way, Mexican field-hands would be there working, watching me from under the tilt of sun-bleached baseball caps.

People insist on calling this place America now, I remind myself of that too. They don't call it North America, which would surrender too much acknowledgement to the fact that a South and a Central America also exist nearby. Rather, this place is just called America—which may just as well be the name of a place as it is the practice of consuming oneself, again and again, generation after generation. But in these moments of predawn, when the skinny moon is suspended out over the horizon line, I'm granted the permission that America isn't quite a real place, but is rather the collectively-imagined occupation of something enormous and hidden. In this place, when I truly look out over the land, I can't find America, for it is not the land, nor is it the landlord. America sits on top of the land, aching and with eyes closed, as the tenant of a house that it will never understand, nor even really see. I am told, again and again though, that America is real, and so when I wake up again in the morning, maybe it will be.

I was told that America was real when I decided to be here, and signed my name to the land. The realtor and the bank yelled America. The scribble of the pen sang America. So we celebrated and dreamt into this place, and listened for its dreams in return. But we have not come here by dreams alone; an entire economy has signed the deed just below our names, for we've agreed to play the very game by which this land has been changed forever: to convert water and soil into profit. Though we seek to enable the will to heal the land and ourselves, it comes by the ruling of capital. So can we uphold, in the movement of our bodies and minds, the dignity and the depths of this land, that we not be swept away by the seduction of wealth? The

land would have us know this, and to prove our knowledge through the council we seek of it in the decisions we make. Perhaps the land would remind us to heed the words of Andreas Weber, “. . . that any economic activity at its base is not just an exchange of objects and money; it is a rich set of ongoing vows and relationships” (2013). The land wants to hear our vows, that we may make our own *Land Ethic*, to enlarge, as Aldo Leopold would, “. . . the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (1948). What if we also vowed to each other, and even to ourselves as part of that community? Can we hold, within the embrace of power, the heart of this place—now beating in our own chests—for we have each in our own way given ourselves to this place. And though we’ve been born of a culture that reveres the sensuality of land, but fails to grant it a voice in the determination of its own future, we stand here now, asking. And though hidden, or not so, within the bundles of our consciousness, we may always find reason that justifies financial gain over the wellness of community, we see now our own faces reflecting back to us through the ripples of the pond, nestled deep within the hills. The land would have us know this part of ourselves, that we may each hold the other to their truest center—and by the fierce glow of our partnership, come to recognize something that has been lost, or perhaps just misplaced.

Still, the question returns again and again as to what exactly it is that we are doing here, what it is we’ve come to create. Answers come and go just as quickly as notions of ‘self,’ for in these times of watching the cracks grow along the faces of dams, all we can do is try to learn how to fall apart gracefully. So I walk the hilltops of the land I grew up on—they waver beneath me, familiar and soft one moment, alien and furrowing the next. Just as well, I could spend my whole life attempting to see this land for who it really is, rather than the thing that I wish for it to be. It may be for the embodiment of this teaching that I’ve come into this relationship with a

land steep and wild, every step, a recommitment to gravity, an acknowledgement that my being here is everyday a choice, not a passive happening.

And yet, while I practice dissolving the net of projections that my desires would cast over this land, something else is dreamt up from underneath. There is somewhere, in the nakedness of presence, where the narrative of projection is eroded into silence, and the fabric of dreams begins. Laura Sewall's *Ecological Perception* describe this as “. . . a fluidity of minding which the magic of the visible world is revealed by relinquishing one's expectations and nurturing a freshness of vision” (1995). Within this cutting back of expectation, the space is cleared for something new to be cultivated, a new potentiality of experiencing the self as integral to the ensoulment of that which surrounds and encompasses the self. As Keith Basso writes in his book *Wisdom sits in place*, “when places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind, to the roving imagination, and where the mind may lead is anybody's guess” (1996). There becomes an exchange, a dialogue of inquiry into the other, which breathes animation into a place. Basso goes on to say that:

as places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed, and the movements of this process—inward toward facets of the self, outward toward aspects of the external world, alternately both together—cannot be known in advance

(1996)

If we grant this rationale as true, despite its logic being shared with few other people in the modern world, I would then venture to say that we do affect a place by the way we perceive it. That imagination does not belong to the individual, but to the commune of that which has been placed together in vitality, and so should be held as such a collaboration. Something more is generated when the process of imagination is held as reciprocal, when one can bare oneself vulnerable to that which a place dreams them to be. A dominance-centred society would have us

fear this beyond all else, this loss of control, and so takes a certain remembrance of trust beyond that which we are taught, to let oneself fall into what a place is asking for.

We often go, binoculars wrapped tightly around our necks, intending to see what there is to see of a place, and if we're lucky, will maybe catch fleeting sight of an elusive mammal, or the glimpse of a rare songbird. So I ask the question of what it might rather be, to go to a place simply in the allowance of letting oneself be seen? What beingness of place might then find the trust to slip out from under shadows? It is a certain kind of coaxing, both of the self and of the place that one resides, that evades the convenience of explanation. It is the willingness to let oneself dwell within a place. Basso says that "the concept of dwelling assigns importance to the forms of consciousness with which individuals perceive and apprehend geographical space" (1996). I believe this form of consciousness has much to do with how one manages to approach the otherness in a place, and as my teacher Colin Campbell would say, render oneself pervious to it. In doing so, we also render ourselves pervious to ourselves, to the parts of us that only live in response to the sensuous world around us. It is a similar response that philosopher Merleau-Ponty has to the work of Cézanne, where ". . . quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because our body welcomes them" (1993). Presence is an inter-creative process (or perhaps 'intra'-creative in the terminology of Karen Barad), by which we come to know ourselves by what we let touch us, and in turn, the places we inhabit come to know themselves through the way that we touch them (2007). In this way, the sensorial and the imaginal are bound together through the cohesion of our bodies. That which I see in the world is granted entry into me; the beauty of places I love inhabit me, the pain of those places shape my heart, and the beings of those places imagine me into the being that I get to be when I'm there.

So that back in the hills of the Coast Range, when I look out across the Gualala River Valley, and see a fragment of the inner-Earth, come up through the crust, something also rises in me, beholden to prayer. And when the Acorn Woodpeckers' ancestral granary in the snag of an oak is felled to clear sunlight for the cultivation of monetary crops, something also falls in me. And more so, when I am somehow granted ownership of that which can never be owned, then something is also owned in me, and something more true remains hidden. I am as Merleau-Ponty would say, "... caught in the fabric of the world ..." (1993). So as one who is caught, I give myself to the web that binds me, releasing my weight into, descending downwards as gravity wants of me, into that which is to be made real. Then perhaps, I will learn presence, and the stories of this place will come to be.

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