

Learning to See:  
A Material-Ontological Critique of Photography

by

Fields Ford

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Environmental Humanities.

Whitman College  
2019

*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Fields Ford has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Environmental Humanities.

---

Emily Jones

Whitman College  
May 08, 2019

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
A Brief Introduction.....	1
First, Geography: Space, Place, and the Photograph.....	3
A More Photographic Geography.....	11
Something to See: An Example of Photographic Space and Place.....	17
New Theory, Old Things: Exploring Materialist Thought.....	24
A Brief Interlude.....	30
Soth, Again.....	42
Beyond Objects: Things as Environment.....	48
On Sontag: Material Teleology and Photographic Danger.....	57
The End and Beginning.....	76
Appendix C.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Bibliography.....	81

## **Acknowledgements**

Though it would be frankly impossible for me to thank all who have supported me in and contributed to this project, I'd like to offer my sincere gratitude to all those people and things in my world who made this thesis possible. However, I think I also need to acknowledge a handful of very particular people who have helped me unsparingly for the last four years and longer.

First, I extend a hearty thanks to my parents, Beth Pride and Steve, without whom I would not be here at Whitman and who have supported me in any and all of my endeavors. I owe my gratitude also to my professors; thank you Emily Jones, for pushing me to think “outside” the box and to be careful with my words; thank you Don Snow for teaching me how to write and for your staunch advice; thank you Nicole Pietrantoni for your patient instruction; and, lastly, thank you Charly Bloomquist for your endless encouragement, enthusiasm, and jokes.

I must also thank a long list of friends and family who are too many to name, but let it suffice to say that I could not have done this without you; I appreciate your unending support. To all of those mentioned above and any whom I may have missed, I extend my sincere gratitude; I could not have done this without you, thank you.

## A Brief Introduction

This thesis is both representative of a complex development of thought that I've explored over the past two years and my photographic encounters with the material world in the past three years. This entanglement, what I would refer to as an ecology of critical thinking and personal growth, stems from a central research question; though this question doesn't address *every* complexity and nuance and detail of the thesis itself, it was for me, and certainly remains for any reader, a place to start. What I've asked is loosely as follows: how do photographs, such a quintessential and ubiquitous feature of our modern world, influence our perception of and interactions with that same world? And more specifically, how do photographs and the photographic act both *affect* and *effect* our experience of geography—of space and place—as well as our attention and relationship to the ecology of things that surrounds us, to our co-existent material worlds?

To attempt and answer these questions, I pursue several avenues, namely theories both geographical and materialist—with a focus on notions of space, place, and nonhuman agencies as well as critical writing on photography; actual, published photographs, specifically of the documentary genre; and my own narrative—my personal relationship to and use of photography. In exploring these avenues, I aim to create a sort of ecology of thought that mirrors the ecology, visual and material, within which we human beings exist.

It's worth noting here that this is a project in two parts. This text is an extensive critical and theoretical inquiry into the ontology of the photograph while its companion is a collection of photographs I've made over the last three years that were, and remain,

relevant to this inquiry. Though both pieces ought to have the capacity to stand on their own and in their own right as complete texts, they are best read in connection to and conversation with one another, as participants in the visual and material ecology of our world. This text is my theory, and the other, the collection of my actual *work*, actual photographs, is my praxis. I cannot guarantee that any of those images will be available to the reader of this text. However, my intent here is not to encourage the reader to analyze *my* photographs, even though they are, for me, an example of how the image informs our perceptions of the material world (spatial, agential, and otherwise). Rather, I hope this thesis encourages readers to more cautiously consider how the image influences *their* world, given that those worlds are so saturated with photographs, whether they be published in photo books, printed in newspapers, hung on walls both public and private, tucked away in wallets, or any and everywhere else. In defining a new ontology of the photograph, one that accepts the great agential sway it holds over our lives, I sincerely hope to encourage a careful and thoughtful intervention into the visual ecology that surrounds and includes us, an intervention that implicates a more cautious use of the photograph and may ultimately bring us closer to our material worlds, to our environment.

## **First, Geography: Space, Place, and the Photograph**

To understand the photograph is to develop a sense of geography across scales, on levels both grand and miniscule. This is for several reasons, the first being that so many photographs depict what we may call space; there exist countless images of the dimensions in which we live, some of the more obvious that come to mind being buildings and landscapes, interiors and exteriors. Furthermore, when printed, the photograph has its own geography, taking up space on the page, inked onto a piece of paper and firmly situated in *that* dimension. Firmly, however, might be an overstatement; though the photograph is both a depiction of geography and a small, two-dimensional geography in its own right, these two scales of space are no doubt in conversation with one another, flowing in and out of their respective realms. The space of the print is never flat, for it is not only a depiction of real things in the world, but also a real thing itself. The dimension depicted in the image, then, is at least partially affected, if not defined, by the space that image occupies in and on the print, and so also the opposite: how we experience space in the material world can (and maybe should be) influenced by photographs that we encounter. Given the complex implications of this back-and-forth relationship, it is absolutely necessary to define the geography in which we exist, especially since geography is never binary; it is always shifting between and within itself, never fixed, always fluid. To that end, I'll be utilizing the terms space and place—not as a dichotomy, but simply for clarity—drawing from the work of geographical theorists in an attempt to best understand how we conceive of the world around us and the world of the photograph.

Most documentary photographers deal unflinchingly with concepts of space and place. Perhaps I say this is because of my own obsession with personal geographies, with locating myself in the complex cosmos of the lived human experience. Yet, I feel that to see, for example, Alec Soth's tender depictions of life along the Mississippi River is to grapple with both visual, existential, and other conceptions of space and place.

Before diving into this struggle, it is essential to understand what such broad and vague suggestions as "space" and "place" even mean. Though these terms may seem rather straightforward to the reader, I would argue that providing exact definitions of space and place will not only allow us a firm, foundational lexicon but also offer interpretations of the three-dimensional world that are better suited for an exploration of the two-dimensional *photograph's* geography. To assist with this task, I turn to the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, a Chinese-American geographer and theorist esteemed in his field. In his work *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Tuan establishes definitions of both space and place that offer a convenient scope within which to work, especially when investigating such a vast and varied field as photography.

Though Tuan's definitions of space and place are nebulous, he nonetheless articulates very clearly the relationship between the two. Tuan argues that the two concepts are codependent (and arguably co-constitutive, entangled with one another in their genesis) writing that,

The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 6.

Given this codependence, one may imagine that space and place are inverse, or at the very least, analogous. Space is the open, the abstract, while place is secure and familiar. Yet, the two are more similar than they perhaps seem; Tuan recognizes that they are not mutually exclusive, but instead entangled in the same mesh of experience. Place, the more specific of the two, actually develops from abstract space; Tuan clarifies: “In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. ‘Space’ is more abstract than ‘place.’ What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”<sup>2</sup> Given this, one can imagine space and place as fluid and interchangeable. Most importantly, however, Tuan imagines these ideas as immaterial; neither space nor place is an exact geographic location, although specific geographies may contribute to notions of space and place. By immaterial I suggest that geography is simply not confined to only the material world as we immediately encounter it. Notions of space and place are not only informed by, but also exist in our collective and singular minds or cultural artifacts. Understanding this becomes particularly important as we realize that our lives are spent moving through an amalgamation of geography, through spaces and places both material and otherwise that inform *and* produce our relationship with the material world.

---

It was a park in the city of San Francisco that seemed to me to be my first encounter with space entirely unadulterated by any of my previous conceptions or life experiences (at least of which I was immediately cognizant). In the spring of 2016, I felt

---

<sup>2</sup> Tuan, 6.

lost. I had returned to a college campus in Walla Walla, Washington, for the spring semester of my sophomore year—a good two thousand miles away from my former home in Tennessee. I had just finished a fall semester traveling around the intermountain American West, spent absorbing all I could learn about the precariousness of that landscape—that geography—and its citizens. Before this time, my geographical center, my locus of being, had been split between two states, one in the South, and one in the West, but then it was suddenly nowhere.

It was with that dissonant, displaced feeling in the spring of 2016 that I found myself lost in the West (arguably for the second time), adrift in what Tuan might refer to as abstract space, without place. During a two-week break from the spring semester, I chose not to go home but to go out, into something experienced but still unknown—a space that was not quite yet a place. Though those two weeks were more or less a vacation, I felt as if I was searching for something amidst the scrub of the desert Southwest and in the nooks and crannies of Californian cities. I did not look to a map to find this something, at least not at first; rather, I looked through a lens. During those two weeks, the camera and the print became, for me, tools of contextualization. Though I was lost in the abstract space that Tuan has since defined for me, to photograph felt like an act of placemaking, a desperate attempt to understand where and how I had come to be.

The concept of immaterial place allows one to imagine valued space outside of the immediately experienced material world. That is, it enables one to value spaces that are not traditional geographies—like coordinates on a map. When I imagine this possibility, I turn immediately to the material image. The documentary photograph, in its close confrontations with space and place, feels inherently and inextricably tied to those

same concepts. I specifically reference the material image—the printed photograph—because the experience of viewing such work has the ability to produce physical place on the page itself. I like to imagine that not only do documentary photographs depict place in space, but through their printing, they create it; the space on the printed page, I believe, can itself accrue value and become place, just as three-dimensional space does.

When I imagine a sort of unorthodox geography, one of the photography of space that is transmuted into place, I return in my mind to San Francisco. During those aforementioned two weeks, I spent some time in the Bay Area, as I was driving up the coast with two friends, C. and L. Though C. and I were making our way back to Washington State, L. lived outside the East Bay, so we stopped there to drop her off at home. The first day we got to the Bay, after driving from Joshua Tree National Park to Los Angeles and then up the coast, we stopped in San Francisco before hopping over to L.'s house. Looking for a respite from driving, we left the car on a side street and headed to a bakery, our plan being to have a picnic in Mission Dolores Park. We made our way to the bakery, Tartine, which was of course unfamiliar to me but well-known to L., who had spent a good amount of time there with her family (I would later learn that what I perceived to be a hole-in-the-wall was actually famous enough to merit its own Wikipedia page). After securing a loaf of sourdough, we made a quick stop at the smallest grocery store I've ever seen—a far cry from the Piggly Wiggly chain of my home region—before heading back towards the park. It was March, and the air was cool and crisp, just enough so to take away some feeling from my fingers. We sat on the hill in Dolores Park, tearing off chunks of bread and slicing cheese, eating slowly and speaking softly. In front of us lay some assemblage of space and place new and strange to me, of

countless buildings and human beings moving in and out of their own geographies, going about their routines, or perhaps not. We all seemed so strange there, living and moving under the weak sun and in the cool atmosphere.

To my left was a man sitting on his backpack, wearing only a T-shirt, while I had on a warm sweater. A tallboy can stood beside him, and a cigarette shook in his fingers. He traded between drinking, dragging in smoke, and uttering an uncontrollable cough. Just as I was, he seemed to be surveying the field, the vast entanglement of people and edifice before him.

I took out my camera, a little titanium brick, and with the briefest mechanical whirr, took a picture. It would be weeks before I saw it, suspended on transparent film, sitting on a light table in the dark.

I have two prints of this image. One was a proof I printed, the other a final product, made for a project I completed a month or two after that moment in San Francisco. The image as print has, for me, taken on more significance than I ever expected it would. At the time, I reached for my camera in an attempt to understand or confront the assemblage of space and people before me. It felt almost desperate, as though it was a last resort in my attempt to locate myself in the world and also my actual Self. In the moment of its conception, the image was undoubtedly functioning in the realm of space and not of place. Only as a print, viewed in retrospect, does the image transfer into the realm of place. Its details—the cigarette in the hand, the blind man strolling in white shoes—remind me not only of where but also of who I was and how I came to be. Though the image is of space in Dolores Park, those details demand that I spend time with the image in order to better understand it. In looking back, in examining

the print, I remember myself as the photographer but simultaneously feel closer to the man on the hill or the man in white sneakers, trying to understand a complex configuration of space and place represented by the assemblage before them. In a sense, I was grasping for the same sense of place that was held by others around me, and the camera was the panacea to my ailment. This is a dangerous notion, but in the moment, it felt like all I could do. I look at the image now and realize it is about learning to see and learning to *be*, and so the print takes on a new value, one that it couldn't hold when I clicked the shutter in March 2017—the image now centers me in those abstract memories, creates a place on the page and in my memory for my mind and my past self, but I still wonder how, and just how real that place is.

---

Though Yi-Fu Tuan does not specifically argue for the placemaking of printed photography, the idea rests upon his definition of space and place as immaterial. Their abstraction allows them to be translated onto material that is not strictly a landscape—see, for example, the printed page. Tuan does, in fact, reference the relationship between art and place. Criticizing the lack of understanding regarding people's experience of space and place, Tuan offers an exception, noting that “it is possible to articulate subtle human experiences. Artists have tried—often with success.”<sup>3</sup> The subtle experience of geography can only exist in art *because* Tuan has made possible a sense of immaterial space and place, a sense that is not rooted only in land. Art, then, becomes a potential vessel for better understanding the relationship between humans, space, and place (and, I

---

<sup>3</sup> Tuan, 7.

would add, for creating new experiences of space and place themselves) precisely because of its ability to bridge the gap between human experience and human thought.

Part of understanding how the printed photograph can create a new place on the page is understanding how valued place itself grows from abstract space. Place's construction, according to Tuan, is vague and nebulous, it "can be defined in a variety of ways," though he does offer one example: "place is whatever stable object catches our attention. As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest. Each pause is time enough to create an image of places that looms large momentarily in our view."<sup>4</sup> If place is established in this particular way—through a sense of pause created by details in the world (though Tuan is sure to note several other manners in which place grows)—then it involves a strongly visual element; objects in space are noticed, and by commanding the viewer's attention, become valued. Tuan's discussion of visual placemaking, however, exists in the third dimension; the question remains, then: how is place made on the printed page?

---

---

<sup>4</sup> Tuan, 161.

## A More Photographic Geography

Though Yi-Fu Tuan's theories about space and place help to show us that our human conception of geography is informed not only by how the matter in the world is spatially organized, but also by how we think about that organization (that is to say that space and place are both material *and* immaterial), translating these notions to the printed photograph, a feature of our spatial world but very much existing mostly in the second dimension, remains tricky. Tuan shows us that geography can be abstract and move beyond the three-dimensional, yet his work does not directly apply to the photograph (after all, he is a geographer, not an art critic). To understand how space and place function in and are represented by the photograph, a more specific reading of critical theory is required, or at least helpful; Tuan is a good place to start, but to better understand how geography is related to the photograph, it would be prudent to put Tuan's theory in conversation with others' critical thinking about photography—prudent to work toward a more ecological mode of thought.

To attempt and answer this query of the photograph's geography, I turn to Roland Barthes, a theorist who deals with the nature of photography. To begin with Barthes, it is necessary to understand his project. He is perhaps most well-known for his work *Camera Lucida*, in which he investigates the nature of the image and its effects on both artist and viewer. Barthes offers the reader a very clear thesis of this investigation, writing: "I was overcome by an 'ontological' desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was 'in itself,' by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of

images.”<sup>5</sup> Barthes’ investigation is one of ontology, of the photograph’s nature of being; however, before delving too deeply into this rabbit hole, it may be first valuable to do as I did with Tuan and carefully define Barthes’ vocabulary. In doing so, we can not only analyze photography with the utmost theoretical exactitude but also uncover the basic structure of the photograph and therefore better understand how Barthes’ lexicon allows a translation of Tuan’s geographies onto the photograph itself.

Barthes establishes a rule for what he describes as the existence of the photograph (for him, as the viewer). This existence is dependent on the co-existence of two discontinuous elements in an image.<sup>6</sup> Barthes first notices these elements in a single image, but upon further investigation encounters them frequently enough that he attempts to define them. The first element in the existing image is what Barthes names as a “classical body of information,” a generalized field of human interest that he calls the *studium*.<sup>7</sup> The *studium* is evidence of the image as a general artifact and arouses general interest in the viewer, but without acting directly upon her.

Also significant is Barthes’ second element. Barthes describes the two as heterogenous—though they together produce the existence of the photograph—because they are at odds within the image; the second element interrupts the *studium*, the general field of the image. Barthes argues that “it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me [the viewer].”<sup>8</sup> This experience is for the viewer like a small wound, a sharp grabbing of the attention juxtaposed against the more banal *studium*. It is almost a sort of visual punctuation—Barthes, again turning to Latin,

---

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, 26.

calls this element the *punctum*, because “the photographs...are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*.”<sup>9</sup> For Barthes, then, these two elements of the image, at once contradicting one another and working as one, comprise the image’s existence.

If we wish to translate the geography of the material world onto the image in order to understand how the image may become a material geography itself, then we must understand Barthes’ *studium* and *punctum* in terms of space and place. With this translation, then, the *studium*, the generally understood field of information in the image exists as Tuan’s sort of general space.<sup>10</sup> Though understood, this field is abstract and lacks punctuating details. In the sense that the *studium* is knowledge of the average, it is abstract, just as Tuan’s space is abstract and generally unvalued.<sup>11</sup> With the *studium* as a function of imaged space, then, the *punctum* becomes a catalyst of imaged place.

To understand how the second element, the *punctum*, creates place in the image, however, we must return to Tuan’s explanation of how space becomes valued place. Recall that this process is, just as the existence of the image, dependent on two elements. The first of these elements is an interruption—remember, that according to Tuan, “place is whatever stable object catches our attention.”<sup>12</sup> Place begins with a detail, a sort of arresting of the senses. The *punctum* may thus become a concept for beginning understand the image as an actual place, a locus of meaning. This element is a detail that visually pierces the mind and allows the viewer, or as Barthes calls her, the spectator, to

---

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, 26–27.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 161.

value the image differently.<sup>13</sup> This valuing cannot occur, however, without the *punctum*—Barthes critiques what he names the unary image for failing to produce an interest.<sup>14</sup> The unary image is banal, plain visual field, with no intention of arresting or even interesting the viewer. The *punctum*, however, counteracts this. Barthes explains: “In this habitually unary space, occasionally (but alas all too rarely) a ‘detail’ attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This ‘detail’ is the *punctum*.”<sup>15</sup> The *punctum*, then, becomes a method through which the spectator can endow an image with value, thus helping to transform the space of the *studium* into place.

The other element of this transformation into place is a temporal one. Tuan recognizes that the valuation of space as a movement toward a sense of place can be engendered by the interruption of an object; he also acknowledges that this valuation is inherently temporal, noting that “as we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest. Each pause is time enough to create an image of place that looms large momentarily in our view.”<sup>16</sup> To understand how this temporal element of place translates to place’s presence in the material photograph, then, we must understand how Barthes’ *punctum* is related to a sense of time. According to Barthes, the evidential photograph, the one that is of both *studium* and *punctum*, the one that exists, demands time. He muses: “If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing, during the whole time I remain with it. Look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about

---

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Barthes, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 161.

the thing or the person it represents.”<sup>17</sup> Captured by the image, Barthes must allow it time. As he, the spectator, gives time to the photograph, so the photograph (which has demanded his attention via the *punctum*) accrues value, which is given freely by the spectator. The example he follows throughout his essay is what he refers to as the Winter Garden photograph, an image of his mother as a child. That image becomes valuable for Barthes as he investigates it throughout the text (despite never revealing it to the reader), and in its demand of his time and ability to interrupt his senses through its evidential details, creates a new sense of place for the author. This place, this valued space, exists only within and because of the image itself. Most interesting about Barthes’ experience of photographic place, however, is his agency, or lack thereof, in establishing it. Though he is the spectator and allows the image the value that it demands, there remains an uncanny sense throughout his analysis that his is not the power at play. Barthes recognizes this sense of the uncanny and knows that his relationship to the image is an unusual one, noting that “the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”<sup>18</sup> This notion of the spectator as other turns out to be rooted in what one could call the material agency of the image, in its very physical existence, but (much) more on this later. For now, reading Tuan and Barthes together reveals how the material image becomes a sort of place, but to understand just how this place is created while also positing the spectator as other, we must dig deeper into the photograph as an actor or agent.

---

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Barthes, 12.



## Something to See: An Example of Photographic Space and Place

With Tuan and Barthes, I've mostly been analyzing and theorizing and what not. Let us not forget, however, that photographs are *material things*. As such, the best way to illustrate my argument may be literally to illustrate it. As I mentioned before, documentary photographers deal unflinchingly with space and place—and, I would argue, help to produce their existence on the material pages of their books.

The first photographer to come to my mind when I consider space and place is Alec Soth. Hailing from Minnesota, Soth is a modern master of documentary photography, being a member of Magnum Photos (a renowned fine art cooperative) and having published several very successful photo books. He is perhaps best-known for his book *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, which chronicles the artist's time spent traveling along the Mississippi River and documenting riparian life from both a geographical and humanist documentary perspective.<sup>19</sup>

I wish I could see like Alec Soth does. Though this may make me sound like an overenthusiastic, teenaged fan, his eye for detail and composition seem almost unparalleled. And, as a documentarian, Soth's images deal essentially with spaces and places and the various characters that inhabit them. In the case of *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, these geographies and the people within and of them happen to lie along the largest river in the United States. This particular subject matter carries no small amount

---

<sup>19</sup> Soth, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*.

of mythical weight, which Soth is not afraid to throw around. He is, in fact, famous for his narrative chops and ability to create a sense of visual lyricism out of extraordinarily disparate and dismal scenes. Though Soth's sequencing and storytelling cannot be entirely ignored in an analysis of his work, I find it more prudent to deal directly with the images and the geographies they depict, in order to better understand the material existence of the image, rather than the intentions behind it—for the materiality of the photograph is not a result of the photographer's intentions but rather of the actual material things in the world which it depicts.

Before diving into the materiality of these images, however, it is important to recognize Soth's methods, as they are certain to inform not just the intention of the images but also how they function on the pages of a book. To start, I've chosen to explore *Sleeping by the Mississippi* for several reasons: partly because it is arguably the most accessible of Soth's works (at least to anyone with a library card); because it may be one of Soth's more frankly documentary projects (as opposed to some of his more fictitious books with carefully constructed narratives); but primarily because it deals extensively with notions of space and place—and particularly with those notions as they relate to a geography that deeply interests me: rural America.

Besides *Sleeping by the Mississippi's* documentary nature and geographic themes, the actual techniques Soth uses to photograph are also significant. Soth works mostly with an 8x10 field camera, shooting color negative film. Though nowadays some may argue that the decision to shoot film is either an intentionally anachronistic process or participation in the neo-kitsch of modern photography, neither of those suggestions applies to *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, which was published in 2004—well before digital

cameras could quite rival the optical precision of their analog counterparts. Within the broad spectrum of film photography, however, Soth's choice to utilize 8x10 materials is significant both in the process of shooting and in the results. Cameras like the one Soth uses require a long time to both set up and operate. Furthermore, film of that size can only be shot one or two sheets (negatives) at a time. Soth's method takes time and is carefully planned, as revealed by his meticulous compositions and intimacy with his subjects, both human and otherwise. This process places Soth in the documentary genre but also makes his work distinct; I read his documentary work as, yes, documents of people and things he encounters, but also as a more lyrical exploration of these encounters rather than mere, candid reportage; in a sense, Soth's work is a sort of *poesis*, a revealing production of something he and we could not see before.

It is the deep sense of time in Soth's photographs that lends his work a strong sense of place. Read in the context of a theoretical conversation between Tuan and Barthes that argues for photography as an act of placemaking, Soth's photographs take on new meaning. Through a close reading of his images through this lens, the reader (or viewer) can not only recognize Soth's production of geographies but also begin to create her own on the pages of *Sleeping by the Mississippi*. I am personally drawn to several images in the book that exemplify this process, at least as I experience it myself. Though one may suggest that personal experience or anecdotal evidence have no place in critical analysis, I argue that, given that both photography and geography are highly subjective, using the image's personal impact on me as the viewer is the most appropriate way to proceed, as it provides an excellent example of photography and geography's confluence.

One of those images in *Sleeping by the Mississippi* that especially arrests my attention is “Fort Jefferson Memorial Cross, Wickliffe, Kentucky.”<sup>20</sup> This particular image is of four men dressed in orange prison scrubs, holding tools, and staring at the camera. To their left is an old, rust-red car, and to their right is the sweep of a gravel road terminating in a large parking area. Splitting the group of men (three on the left, one on the right), is an absurdly massive white cross, with a small American flag waving quietly underneath it. In the background is the faint Mississippi, obscured by an even grey of fog and clouds.

To begin with, this image is astoundingly proficient in a technical sense. The exposure is exact, and the huge cross sits almost exactly on the right third of the frame, looming in the background. The gentle curve of gravel and the parked car (door open) balance the tension on both sides of the frame and enclose the four men in a perfect pocket of space. The two men with blue jackets are in the middle, bookended by men in orange shirts—it’s unclear as to whether or not Soth posed them this way, but regardless speaks to his sharp eye. All of these technicalities work together to produce a rather beautiful field of vision, a *studium*, to use Barthes’ term. It is out of this field and a closer reading of both text and image that the details emerge and allow value to accrue in the imaged space.

The technical aspects of the image, of course, owe their existence to Soth’s careful consideration of time. In order to make this photograph, he had to first find his subject(s)—the laborers, the cross—also convince them to be photographed, and then both compose and execute the shot. This slow temporal process allows the location to

---

<sup>20</sup> Soth.

accrue value for the photographer and endows the image with a sense of geographical power that would be unequaled if it were more of a snapshot, or less carefully created. In this way, one can read the image as a valued place for the artist, even though it is initially presented as a field of space (*studium*) on the pages of the book.

This knowledge of value accrued over time further encourages the spectator to spend time with the image, and further enables her to be arrested by the *punctum* and experience place on the material page.

In my personal reading of this image, I am immediately arrested by the large white cross in the background. The careful time Soth devoted to this composition partially aids in bringing the cross to my attention, but I prefer to think that my attention is arrested, or rather demanded, by the cross itself. Here, however, it's important to note that the *punctum* can be a highly subjective detail. Someone with a different socio-cultural background may read the image entirely differently; that notion, however, does not preclude the *punctum* from enabling placemaking.

Though a rather dominant detail, the cross in "Fort Jefferson" arrests me because it speaks to my personal geography. My hometown—Sewanee, Tennessee—was more or less founded by the Episcopal Church. Originally a coal mining town, when the coal under the southwestern corner of the Cumberland Plateau ran out, Sewanee was set to wither away into nothing. That is, until the Church bought the land with the express intent of starting a school in the area. Their institution eventually became Sewanee: The University of the South, a small liberal arts school with Episcopal roots and seemingly the only reason the town still exists.

With its geography stuck in a Christian past, Sewanee still has the feel of a church town. The university is home to a huge chapel, named All Saints, which dominates the campus. Its towering sandstone edifice and stained-glass windows are a material hallmark of the episcopal presence lying beneath an academic surface. At the end of Tennessee Avenue there is also a break in the trees along the slow slide of plateau into bluff into slope into valley. This viewpoint is well-known, and in the summer folks from on and off the mountain gather there to watch the sun set over the western hills. At this point, Tennessee Avenue forms a lazy loop to and back from the edge of the plateau, encircling a treeless, grassy area. In the middle of that grass patch sits the cross. I think it's technically named the Sewanee Memorial Cross, but everyone just calls it the cross. The thing is maybe a hundred feet tall, a huge, white, stucco fixture set upon a sandstone block foundation, looming over the bluff and the valley below. One can see the cross driving up from Cowan down in the valley, a little crucifix dotting the edge of the plateau. And at night large spotlights on the lawn bathe it in fluorescent, industrial light and the cross becomes a bright symbol of god-knows-what hanging over the dark evenings of the southern summer. And so the cross is both a symbol of my home and of the religious fervor quietly blanketing the South. Though Sewanee is kind of a spiritual anomaly (for the south), what with its Episcopalian roots, it exists nonetheless as a participant in that southern culture of faith that seems to permeate the very air down there; that is to say that there is a God in them hills, and He will remain there for quite some time.

Alec Soth's "Fort Jefferson Memorial Cross, Wickliffe, Kentucky," functions as both evidence of the photographer's creation of place *through* the experience of making

the image and of the photograph's ability to *reference* the personal geography of the viewer; though it is important to note that *I* bring my geography to the table, the actions of the image do not directly access it but rather are a material impetus acting on my memory. This image directly reminds me of home, of what it is to value a place through its semiotics, its symbols like the cross in Sewanee, while also demonstrating the implications of the photograph-as-object's ability to produce very real effects in our very real, human lives.

---

## New Theory, Old Things: Exploring Materialist Thought

So far in this text I've referenced the image's ability to do things, to *act*. Given the arts' focus on the artist, one may imagine that the photograph's move to action is a result or function of how the photographer has produced it. I would prefer, however, to shift the focus of this conversation to the agency *of the image*. To understand how the photograph functions in our worlds, we must acknowledge and attempt to understand how it acts outside any anthropogenic definition we assign it. To that end, I will, beginning in this chapter, delve into the field of what is known as materialist theory, exploring how actual, material things in the world act and affect and effect in ways which we so often fail to recognize.

The question then, is as follows: what exact value lies in reading photographs in this manner—of recognizing both their reference to and production of complex notions of place and their tangible impact on our personal geographies? To what end does the complete, material image—the assemblage of Barthes' *studium* and *punctum*—both affect and effect our lived human experience? To address this quandary, I turn to the work of Jane Bennett, political theorist and author of *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Though Bennett more broadly aims to illustrate how an understanding of the agency of everyday objects and their function together in groups may offer a more sensible and ecological political analysis of the modern world, her work also provides a sharp insight into how the photograph, the most everyday of objects in the modern world, acts outside of our distinctly anthropocentric and anthropogenic conception.

Key to understanding Bennett's work is the lexicon within which she operates and which she also invents. I will therefore do my utmost to offer definitions as her vocabulary develops both in her text and in my analysis; rather than offering a glossary, however, it feels most productive to do so as her terms are encountered *in situ*, so let me begin as Bennett does, with a statement of purpose, a thesis.

Bennett begins *Vibrant Matter* with a (very) brief reference to the exploration of theories of the material body in the late twentieth century. It is partially from this exploration that her work grows. She reminds us that “The initial insight was to reveal how cultural practices produce what is experienced as the ‘natural,’ but many theorists also insisted on the *material recalcitrance* of such cultural productions...cultural forms are themselves powerful, material assemblages with *resistant force*.”<sup>21</sup> Bennett is certainly interested in this resistance of the material; however, she also wishes to move beyond it, noting that she will “seek to highlight a positive, productive power” of things and “highlight the active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life”—and in doing so, “try to give a voice to thing-power.”<sup>22</sup> Bennett's notion of thing-power is certainly a slippery one. I would argue that she never defines it in terms we may expect from, say, Merriam and Webster; rather, the best understanding of thing-power comes from a reading of its use throughout Bennett's text and in reference to her other concepts. Thus, an understanding of thing-power is the result of co-operative knowing and seeing within the broader context of Bennett's work and is as such reflective of her entire project (more on this later).

---

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Bennett, 1, 2.

She does, however, reference some work analogous to her ideas, in an ongoing effort to guide the reader toward her slippery definition. Bennett explains that “The idea of thing-power bears a family resemblance to Spinoza’s conatus, as well as to what Henry David Thoreau called the Wild or that uncanny presence that met him in the Concord woods and atop Mount Ktaadn and also resided in/as that monster called the railroad and that alien called his Genius.”<sup>23</sup> Bennett’s aim with these references is to name a power outside of the human body, and perhaps even outside of the human mind, explaining that, according to Spinoza, “Conatus names a power present in *every* body.”<sup>24</sup> This power, writes Bennett, exists in a sort of other dimension, in what she deems an *out-side*.<sup>25</sup> Considering the photograph, I suggest that it is not only resistant, but also an object, or more appropriately, thing (given our aim to conceive of matter outside of an anthropocentric framework which “object” fails to escape), of the out-side; though it is a result of human acts, in its ability to reference and produce geographies it moves somewhat beyond human ownership and into a different dimension. Reading back into the Thoreauvian reference, one may also define these investigations—both Bennett’s and my own into photography—as distinctly environmental work. I use that term not to suggest that both Bennett and I are exclusively interested in environmentalism and saving the earth through traditionally “green” conservation or preservation (though those notions may be among our collective priorities), but rather to acknowledge that our environments and surroundings are complicated networks of out-side forces and geographies well beyond our immediate understanding. I would aver that Bennett is partially striving to

---

<sup>23</sup> Bennett, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Bennett, 2.

better understand what it means to be a human in a world of agential objects, and that my own interest in the photograph as vibrant matter and producer of geography is essentially an inquiry through which I can better understand the environment in which I exist.

To understand the locus of the image in Bennett's theoretical framework, though, it is necessary to alter the foundation of inquiry. Recognizing how the image functions as a notion of thing-power demands that we understand it not through anthropocentric ways of knowing, but rather an understanding of posthumanist ways of *being*. Bennett recognizes this necessity as it pertains to *any* investigation of thing-power, not just that of the image, declaring that she will "shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology, from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter)."<sup>26</sup> This claim not only moves Bennett into an exploration of how things exist, rather than what we know of them, but also grounds her argument in the existence of actual, material things.

Her project of developing a new ontology thus established, Bennett then moves towards defining the actual meaning of thing-power and its ramifications for the world as we know it. She offers this transition to the reader in the form of a story, a material example, which, she claims, "will highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other," and hopes "will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us, will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology."<sup>27</sup> In this sense,

---

<sup>26</sup> Bennett, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Bennett, 4.

she is examining not only the ontological nature of the things encountered in everyday life, but also the possibility of an ontological state in which one recognizes that nature of being. Thus, her exploration is twofold: an inquiry into both acting things and the possibility of living in a world, or culture, in which we recognize those things' actions. As for the story itself, Bennett recounts happening upon several things, "Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick," on the street, and delves unabashedly into the material effects of these actants on her self.<sup>28</sup> In demanding her attention, these objects, according to Bennett, exhibit their thing-power, the stuff "issued a call, even if [she] did not quite understand what it was saying."<sup>29</sup> Though she certainly applied some sort of anthropocentrism to those objects, recognizing them as litter or detritus, their acting upon her also revealed "a nameless awareness of [their] impossible singularity," and produced a tangible effect, where "*objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics."<sup>30</sup> Bennett's story illustrates that even as objects exist within human conception, so also they exist outside of it, escaping that dialectic and acting back upon us.

Before delving more seriously into Bennett's work, though, it may be valuable to apply her theory to photography itself, now that we may understand things as having agential, material power. *Vibrant Matter* is particularly resonant with my own experience with photography. In recent years, as my interest in both geography and the theoretical

---

<sup>28</sup> Bennett, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, 5.

aspects of photography has grown, so has my intentionality in cultivating photography as a way of being and seeing.

---

## A Brief Interlude

Though I certainly have an intellectual soft spot for Bennett and other materialist work, I must admit that such texts, and even my own explorations of them, are incredibly dense. Sometimes, the best way to explain complex ideas is to offer an example; so, here's a story, one about my own encounters with a very specific materiality in my world—a sort of “Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick” of my own.<sup>31</sup> It is my sincere hope that this anecdote may ground what I have to say about Bennett in reality, in the material world, at least a little bit, and maybe also begin to draw materialist theory still closer to the photographic realm.

I first read Bennett in the fall of 2017, but it wasn't until almost a year later, summer 2018, that thing-power played a more evident role in my life. That summer, I had just finished my junior year of college and was feeling a particularly staunch lack of motivation. Without any ambition to secure another standard internship or any career-oriented job, I resolved to do more or less nothing, and lived in the same town I go to school in, working for the college library and climbing gym.

That summer, though peppered with moments of fun here and there, felt resoundingly sad. Though in this instance I felt more secure in place—that place being Walla Walla, Washington—than I had in the past, I felt no sense of purpose, saw no end to my means. I don't know if this feeling is what made me see things differently, and I don't like to think about that possibility too much, but I do know that it was that summer

---

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, 4.

when I began to perceive the things around me more closely (I use the verb “see” as opposed to “look” because looking implies an action on my behalf, directed *toward* a thing, whereas if I see, I may be acted upon and remain perceptive to, rather than active against, that action).

The funny thing about a college campus in the summer is that it reverts to an almost unfinished state, as a sort of diamond in the rough (as if one could ever compare the meticulously sculpted institutions of higher education to a diamond). With the students and any wealthy parents gone between semesters, the spaces of the school become a work in progress. I would notice this any time I walked from my house, one block out in the neighborhoods, onto campus and see the facades and greens decorated with countless traffic cones, fences, and fading ribbons of yellow caution tape. Many of these little material markers served an obvious purpose, delineating dangerous areas below small demolition projects or spots where sidewalks were torn up or some giant ditch had been dug in the quad. Others, however, lived an existence that seemed pointless, like a group of homemade rebar bollards, spray-painted yellow, grouped aimlessly next to a sidewalk; there was also a cluster of orange traffic cones sitting on the street corner, marking or doing absolutely nothing, and two blue cones fallen in front of a perfectly fine wooden bench, as if to say *you can't sit here, but we don't know why*.

Perhaps my school was more in progress than others in summer, what with its commitment to a swanky new dorm and dining hall, but there regardless existed a sense of process and progress on its grounds, and despite my disdain for the institution, I was drawn to the myriad objects that signified that sense, a liminal space between beginning and end.

So, I began to photograph. In the evenings between shifts at the library and the gym, or on quiet weekends, I'd stroll in the warm evening light of summer's dusk, looking for orange cones or yellow plastic ribbon. The objects of process and progress, the funny symbols of a finished product becoming unfinished, demanded that I photograph them. I remember the 6x6cm medium format camera hanging heavy on my neck as I followed the signs around, shooting a torn piece of caution tape blowing across a sidewalk between two forlorn bollards, a set of double doors cordoned off for no reason, and more. Just as my life seemed to be a work in progress, so did my world, my environment. It was as if those things, those funny little warnings, were reminding me that I had more work, more building, to do, just as did everything around me did.

This experience, as I remember it, was distinctly cerebral—as if the things' effect on me was primarily emotional or intellectual. In the spirit of illuminating their material agencies, however, I think it's worth noting some of the more physical effects those things levied on their surroundings. Here, it's prudent to make an important distinction between material modes of action. In fact, all those little thingy symbols of process and progress dotting the school's landscape had the ability to both *affect* and *effect* my very real life. I'm partially drawing this vocabulary from a sort of sub-field of materialist theory known as *affective agency*; however, in order to keep this as straightforward as possible (I have, after all, already devoted a number of pages to Bennett, whose work is awfully complex), I'll borrow the term but use it according to my own experience with vibrant matter.

Allow me to start with the *effect* of vibrant matter, which I interpret to be the very real, physical results of acting things—for example, the cones and their compatriots

literally *effected*, made something happen, because they produced new material patterns in my life—they literally changed how and where I moved in a very familiar space. A few times I ran into some plastic fence posts arranged in a circle, circumscribed by yellow caution tape. Given their location, this assemblage of things had a very distinct ability to effect change. The college's campus, like many, has a large grassy quad between the main grouping of academic buildings. Always in a hurry, most students walk across it in a diagonal line, choosing to trek across the grass rather than circumvent it via the sidewalk. The most-traveled line runs from northeast to southwest, as evidenced by a more depressed stripe of grass beelining from one dorm to the library. Where this de facto path meets the sidewalk, a huge patch of dirt (or mud, depending on the season) develops every year. I'm always amazed at students' (and my own) determination to walk straight through this patch, day after day. During the summer, of course, there were no, or at least far fewer, students to tromp across the quad. Given that absence, I suppose the institution decided it would be a good time to repair that little dirt patch, hence, the circle of posts bound by caution tape.

And thus, the effect; given how accustomed I was to seeing people walk on and through that space, every time I passed by that configuration next to the sidewalk, it commanded my attention. The little structure at once reminded me of where I usually walk, while also saying *don't, you can't be here*. Though I rarely did walk across the quad that summer, the little assemblage of posts and tape directed my movement, caught my attention, changed my space and my place. All summer, the little construction markers did this to me, telling me to *watch out, be careful, see us*, always changing and informing where and how I moved through my world.

As for the ability to *affect*, I propose that the vibrant matter of our worlds can impact not only our physical existence, how we function as bodies or move through space, but also our *metaphysical* existence, altering how we feel and think. The cones and caution tape and whatnot all had distinctly material effects on my life, but they also had their own tangible affect; I would leave my house and walk to school and see something in progress, something unfinished, and then see myself in those things, prompted by material to feel something. Some might argue that I'm just projecting my own emotions on to the material world, and I don't think that's necessarily wrong. I may be guilty of doing just that, but a large part of me wants to think that's not the case, and that instead it was all those material things in the world that were little reminders and warnings making me *feel*, telling me that things are growing and being built and not-quite-done, just I am. See, I felt guilty for that summer, for being aimless and ambitionless and wasting my time working minimum-wage jobs just to have something to do. But the things in my world acted, made me feel a certain way, distracted me from despair. They were sad, and they were funny, but most of all they were *there*.

I'm of the opinion that *effect* and *affect* are apt terms for describing the myriad ways that the things in the world act upon us and each other and everything else, but let me also note that this vocabulary is by no means a strict binary; rather, these are just terms to try and give some vague definition to the near indescribable agency of our environments, when in fact that agency is not differentiated into categories but rather stems simply from *things*, from all that vibrant matter surrounding, and including, us.

Though my experience of thing-power may seem to some to be nothing but a young man's deranged experience of a melancholy summer, my work during those hot

months *was* informed by theory, as is my remembrance of it now. Upon first insight, one (myself included) might imagine that I was simply losing my mind, almost in conversation with the inanimate world. Upon reflection, however, and through more thought and careful reading, I now imagine that there was a reason for my attention to the things of process, the cones and tape and signs and symbols, a method to my apparent madness.

I've found that reason partially by reading Barthes through Jane Bennett's theoretical lens, by examining the *studium* and *punctum* with thing-power in mind. Placing these theories in conversation with one another helps reveal to me, and hopefully to the reader, just how the image functions as a material agent, as well as what the further implications of that function are.

In fact, translating Bennett's thoughts to the material photograph is surprisingly straightforward, even given how complex her work is. Returning to Barthes and reading him through her theory reveals an almost uncanny similarity between the two texts, at least in their recognition of the agential impact of things—Bennett with her more general things and Barthes with his photographs—almost as if the materialities he references were demanding through his text that their agency be acknowledged.

One can begin by noting that both Barthes' and Bennett's work share a similar goal: that of developing a novel ontology. Barthes' mission is to understand not what can be known about or through the image but rather the image's way of being, and he attempts to do so through an exploration of different ways of seeing; in the beginning of *Camera Lucida*, he expounds a thesis, declaring: "I was overcome by an 'ontological' desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was 'in itself,' by what essential

feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images...I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it had a 'genius' of its own."<sup>32</sup> It's clear from Barthes' essays that his valuation of the photograph, at least in some part, recognizes its material agency. His rhetoric most decidedly implies that the photograph is, in a sense, the subject, acting outwards toward the spectator and the world.

Following this materialist vein within Barthes, however, an important detail comes to light—this detail being that the photograph as a concept is tied to at least two, if not more, modes of material action. These modes are tangled up in the process of creating an image and exist both in the outside world and in the photograph itself as a print. Barthes observes that the photograph is both a result of the actions of things in the material world, of the out-side, and a participating actant itself. He writes of seeing images: "I see photographs everywhere, like everyone else, nowadays; they come from the world to me, without my asking; they are only 'images,' their mode of appearance is heterogeneous."<sup>33</sup> The photograph is a reaction to the effect of material, of thinginess, out there in world experienced.

Thinking of Barthes, I remember that I walked in the smoky haze of summer and I saw the light dancing on the tips of aged trees in the wind and I looked and I metered and I clicked the shutter.

Reading Barthes through a material lens also offers a connection between geography and vibrant materiality. It is through the *studium* and *punctum* that the photograph is constructed while also constructing and construing space and place. Barthes, however, also recognizes the *punctum* as both a reference to and participant in

---

<sup>32</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Barthes, 16.

the actions of out-side things. In terms of that reference, the *punctum* “says only that the photographer was there, or else, still more simply, that he could not *not* photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object.”<sup>34</sup> The *punctum*, then, becomes a bridge between the actants in the material world and the photograph-as-actant. That detail is at once both the thing demanding to be photographed and the aspect of the image that produces an effect in the spectator.

The *punctum* is especially important because it functions as a sort of bridge between the two modes of material agency in which the photograph is entangled. The photograph is both a documentation of and participant in the thinginess of the material world—a powerful agent in its own right. It both records the effects of things in our environments and effects its own will. A sense of entanglement is appropriate, as Barthes defines the photography as “co-natural” with the thing to which it refers.<sup>35</sup> Using the term referent to acknowledge those real things which the photograph depicts, Barthes explains: “I call ‘photographic referent’ not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.”<sup>36</sup> To some degree, the striking detail of the photograph is a document of the very real actions of the actual thing upon human lives. Photographing that thing affirms its very existence and its very action; according to Barthes, we “can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past.”<sup>37</sup> My own images of traffic cones show that they existed (and still exist in the image) while also recognizing their demand to be photographed.

---

<sup>34</sup> Barthes, 47.

<sup>35</sup> Barthes, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Barthes, 76.

<sup>37</sup> Barthes, 76.

Another key element of understanding the liminal space that photography occupies—between documentation and demonstration—is to recognize how the image functions as actual, material evidence of acting objects in the world. Barthes declares that “the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent.”<sup>38</sup> To some degree, this statement is true because of the physical nature of the photographic process. In capturing an image, a sort of translation occurs; photons of light driven from the sun at the center of our solar system strike things in the world and reflect off of them, bending into the ground glass lens of the camera and landing with force on a thin transparency coated in chemistry—an emulsion of silver halide. The energy of this light excites molecules on the film, allowing some to be developed away more easily than others, revealing a negative image left on the transparency after some time in the darkroom. In this sense, the negative produced is a literal translation of the reflecting action of things in the material world; the cones bounce the hazy summer sun onto my film, forever reminding me of both their ability to bend the light I see and to effect my own geography. As John Berger so eloquently states, in an essay excerpted from his collaboration with Jean Mohr, “the material relation between the image and what it represents...is an immediate and unconstructed one. And is indeed like a *trace*.”<sup>39</sup> As such, the photograph is a literal, physical manifestation of those things in the material world that have acted and are acting upon us each and every moment of our lives. Here it is worth noting that the trace is both material and temporal—photographs are often conceived of as records of the past. However, to fully investigate the photograph’s effect on our perceived chronologies

---

<sup>38</sup> Barthes, 80.

<sup>39</sup> Berger, *Another Way of Telling*, 93.

would require a novel's worth of both research and writing, so for now I will focus on its material effects on us as we encounter it in the *now*.

The action of the photograph in the present functions in another dimension, other than just a reference to materiality. Aside from being a physical trace of those material, agential things that are and shape our environments, the image is itself one of those things. Barthes further argues that this is the most significant aspect of the photograph, even more important than its quotation of the acting minutiae of the universe. He notes that "The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation."<sup>40</sup> Barthes' point in this declaration is twofold; he recognizes that the photograph is a representation of the object, or, as I read it, the agential thing in the world, while also asserting that the photograph moves beyond that notion and into the realm of material agency. The force of the image exceeds that of its ability to depict—it continues to produce effects on the viewer, or spectator, long after the moment in which it was captured.

According to Barthes, part of the photograph's agency lies in its ability to transcend time. Though the photograph as an object of memory is a concept undoubtedly rooted in the kitsch of both the art's impetus and its development into the modern, digital, age, we cannot discount the image's ability to act on our lives in a manner that is referential—not only directly to the material world but also to our past experience of it. That said, Barthes denies the image as a reference to memory, writing that "it actually

---

<sup>40</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 88–89.

blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.”<sup>41</sup> The image exerts its power in myriad ways, though its relationship to memory is a particularly potent one. Though it exists as a trace of the material world, the image can transform our perception of that experience. Barthes references, again, the Winter Garden photograph (that of his mother as a child), noting that the image has, in a sense, replaced his memories of his mother, substituting his lived experience for the actions of a printed piece of paper. This, of course, is one of the great dangers of photography. That said, Barthes’ experience is nonetheless of the photograph acting as a material agent. He explains that “The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it *fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed...”<sup>42</sup> Though Barthes adopts an undoubtedly wary tone—given the photograph’s propensity for violent action across space and time—his observation is also a testament to the image’s material agency.

Barthes offers further evidence as to the photograph’s material actions; though he never explicitly states the Winter Garden image’s effects on his actual mode of being, he does note that the experience of viewing a photograph is almost entirely out of our control and instead lies in the results of the actions of photographs. As he points out, “the Photograph has this power...of looking me *straight in the eye*.”<sup>43</sup> Barthes understands the reversal of subject and object inherent in the image, even if he is not explicitly concerned with materialist theory or Jane Bennett’s thing-power. According to Barthes, then, though the photograph is anthropogenic in nature, it is nonetheless an artifact of

---

<sup>41</sup> Barthes, 91.

<sup>42</sup> Barthes, 91.

<sup>43</sup> Barthes, 111.

material things acting on the photographer and, later, the viewer. As such, Barthes' theory seems deeply concerned with the photograph's vibrant materiality, even if he doesn't directly address or define thing-power as Bennett does.

---

## Soth, Again

Again, I turn to Alec Soth as an example, for he not only confronts space and place in his images, but also the countless material things that exist in and create those dimensions—both those which we can see and those that are gone. Though one might argue that Soth’s work is primarily concerned with people and landscape, I suggest a reading of his photographs that is distinctly environmental; that is, one that considers how the image represents, or traces, all of those things out in the world that exist with and act upon the photographer. That said, to begin to understand how the photograph’s manifestation of agential things produces another sort of agency—that of the photograph itself—it may be easiest to first read images that are more obviously concerned with things and things alone (this is not to say that every photograph does not contain innumerable things, but rather that some images are focused on a thing or two alone—imagine, for example, if Bennett had photographed the dead rat).

To this end, I examine Soth’s image from *Sleeping by the Mississippi* titled “Cape Girardeau, Missouri.”<sup>44</sup> Visually, the image is rather straightforward—it is a picture of a wall, after all. The lower portion of this wall appears to be wood-grain vinyl paneling, some of it cracked in the corner. A black line of maybe also vinyl separates the lower half from the upper, which is covered in a bile-yellow wallpaper dotted with yellow-er impressions of stars and circles. The wall is peppered with nails and hooks, and the wood

---

<sup>44</sup> Soth, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*.

paneling with scraps of tape and paper, as if a good number of things, perhaps photographs, once hung there.

Only two distinct things, however, still hang in the scene. The first, most strikingly, is a single photograph attached to the black strip in the middle of the frame. It is a faded, or sepia-toned, postcard-sized print, maybe four by six, maybe an actual postcard, of an Ansel Adams photograph—one of his most famous, of the Teton range in Wyoming. Just to the left of this image is a scrap of what appears to be newsprint. The scrap could be a headline, and holds only one word, *folklore*, sandwiched between spare letters torn from the rest of the sentence.

This image is evidence of the photographer's subjection to material agency, as well as of the photograph's power to act—after all, the scene made its way into this text, and not by coincidence. Soth was obviously compelled to photograph by a photograph itself, and likely also by what was *not* there, what material could have been. The Adams postcard was a sort of real-life *punctum*, a thing that could not *not* be photographed, as Barthes might suggest. It is fitting, too, that Soth should photograph this scene, for it implies that the thing, the postcard, was acting in its capacity as a work of art, communicating to the photographer the possibilities of an image in print.

“Cape Girardeau, Missouri” functions in two dimensions. The first, as mentioned previously, is as evidence of the photographer's subjection to the actions of a thing in the material world—in this case, the postcard. The second, however, is as a material, agential thing itself. This image has power even beyond that of demonstrating Soth's experience of vibrant matter. “Cape Girardeau” transcends a representation of the postcard; because

it, as a trace of the material world, authenticates the thinginess of the object, the agency of the postcard is almost transmuted onto the photograph.

To some degree, this transference can be acknowledged by reading what it is that the photograph tells us. Usually, one might argue that any reading of an image is partially the result of what the spectator brings to it in terms of context or baggage, whether that information be cultural, emotional, technical, or otherwise. “Cape Girardeau, Missouri,” for example, is filled with references that are distinctly anthropocentric. To some degree, this is a photograph *about photography*. In depicting the postcard, Soth is both referencing the history of photography (Ansel Adams is one of great photographers of the past) and commenting on the role of the image as an aesthetic object or decoration. By placing the postcard in the center of the frame, the objects’ power is literally front and center. Here, however, it is worth noting that “Cape Girardeau” is best able to communicate this notion because it is printed, because it exists in a material book in the material world. To follow Barthes, the authentication of the postcard is a function of the fact that Soth’s photograph is also a print. I can say this with no small degree of certainty because Soth has also published this image immaterially—a good number of images from *Sleeping by the Mississippi* are available to view on his website.<sup>45</sup> The difference between seeing “Cape Girardeau” on the screen and on the page is striking; of some importance is scale—depending on the technology used to access the world wide web, the photograph may appear much too small or much too large, while in *Sleeping by the Mississippi* Soth has selected a size that fits comfortably on the page while also revealing the intimate details of the photograph, like *folklore*, or residual scraps of tape. Furthermore, the image

---

<sup>45</sup> “Alec Soth | Sleeping by the Mississippi.”

on the screen is oddly flat—its color feels off and it loses the sense of depth that the print allows, even encourages. The screen reflects my gaze, while the print invites me to see *into* the photograph, to fall into the frame and into the material world Soth has authenticated. This dissonance of experience—between glass and paper—suggest to me that the material agency of the photograph is limited by its digital publication, perhaps even denied; for a photograph to act to its full extent, it must be tangible, must exist as its own thing and not be mediated by another such as the laptop computer or the smartphone, powerful material agents in their own right.

Yet there is more that this photograph, “Cape Girardeau, Missouri,” has to tell us. This telling is due in part to the multiple, thingy details in the image and the relationship between them. The scrap of *folklore* and the postcard are implicated in a conversation with one another, a conversation also somewhat mediated by the *space* on the wall, where other things, maybe images, once hung. “Cape Girardeau” draws a connection between photography as an aesthetic object, the western frontier and its sublime sense of space, and a sort of mythology tying them together. This image was also taken in Missouri, a state caught between the Southeast and the West, and a far cry from the wide-open space of big sky country. The image, then, moves beyond the subject, further creating a commentary on the nature of living in one place and longing for another. “Cape Girardeau, Missouri” is also about the feeling of being stuck somewhere like the South with no hope of ever escaping and the reprieve offered by myths of other spaces and other places, like the folklore of the western frontier. This sentiment, however, is more complex than one might expect (though one ought to expect some degree of visual and thematic complexity from a photographer as talented as Soth). The postcard, yes, is a

thing that acts on Soth and also on the viewer while suggesting a sense of longing, or perhaps just the slightest hope. Yet, what is *not* there, or what *was* there, also acts as part of the scene, showing a history of broken dreams (if anything, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* is about dreams, old and new, broken and mended, lost and found). And because this photograph is beautiful, Soth may be romanticizing this sentiment and its connection to mythology and even the sort of strange stoicism of being stuck; however, his attention to the age of the scene—the old traces on the wall, the scraps of a magazine, the cracking vinyl and drywall—also suggests that mythology and dreams are outdated and outmoded. Reading the image in these ways, through careful attention to the things, there and not, depicted, as well as the image-as-thing, helps reveal how the documentary photograph is distinctly material and materialist in nature.

Critics of my project might argue that this reading of the photograph is only possible because of my anthropogenic information; that is, my knowledge of photography and its history, as well as the history of America's relationship to its (former) "frontier." I would actually agree that my human experience allows me to *understand* what the photograph is saying, but I would also aver that I can only apply my knowledge to the image because the printed photograph gives me the pieces of the puzzle— "Cape Girardeau" is, in a sense, *telling* me what to see and what to think. This is a bold claim, I know that. But let us remember that my reading was only possible because of the relationship between the details of Soth's image. Though, for the sake of simplicity and the example, I've chosen to analyze a photograph focused on a singular thing, my reading of it shows that the image functions only as a result of all those *other* things which comprise it and create it—in this case, the snippet of headline, the postcard, and the

dilapidated wall. In this sense, it is the things in concert that encourage me to apply my knowledge to the image. This notion implies that the power of things lies not exactly in their individuality, but rather in their cohabitation within an environment. To truly understand the photograph's material agency, its vibrant being, we must understand just *how* it is that things exist in a sort of ecosystem, both in the world and in the image.

---

## Beyond Objects: Things as Environment

To understand the photograph as a material agent, it is also imperative to understand that materials never act alone. It would be naïve to think that we can only imagine one thing acting alone and at one moment in our worlds so full of vibrant matter, just as it may be naïve to imagine that an image like “Cape Girardeau, Missouri,” acts only of its own accord and not between and beside all of the images in *Sleeping by the Mississippi* or with whatever is on the reader’s coffee table or hanging on her wall or in her mind. Understanding material agency demands a greater understanding of an ecology of things, and if we are to understand the photograph as such an agent then we must also recognize how it acts with and within that ecology.

To that end, I turn back to Jane Bennett, who uses the term *assemblage* to explore how things work with and against one another through their actions in chapter two of *Vibrant Matter*. The chapter, aptly titled “The Agency of Assemblages,”<sup>46</sup> is concerned mainly with the idea of thing-power in aggregate; that is, with the relationships between all material agents that exist in an environment. Bennett begins with some self-critique, noting the inherent drawbacks of the term thing-power before attempting to develop a vocabulary that moves beyond it. She cites two distinct disadvantages to her own term, the first being that thing-power “tends to overstate the thinginess or fixed stability of materiality.”<sup>47</sup> She continues, noting that the “second, related disadvantage of *thing-power* is its latent individualism, by which I mean the way in which the figure of ‘thing’

---

<sup>46</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Bennett, 20.

lends itself to an atomistic rather than a congregational understanding of agency.”<sup>48</sup>

These pitfalls of the term thing-power are also visible when we apply Bennett’s theory to the photograph. My one gripe with Barthes, for example, is that his *studium* and *punctum* seem to be at odds with one another, with the visual field sitting still and the detail pulling the spectator’s attention. It is my goal to present the photograph as a thing within which details and non-details work collectively through action and inaction to produce a material effect. Furthermore, if we see the photograph as only authenticating the materiality of one thing it represents, we are missing the point. The photograph as authentication of thinginess and a powerful thing itself depends on the collective agency of both the entire scene the photographer encounters, and all of the things in and on the page of the printed image as well as beyond it, in the viewer’s surroundings.

It follows, then, that the concept of the photograph as a material agent is strongly ecological; this thought grows from Bennett, who posits thing-power as a distinctly collective notion. In her effort to redefine its semantic limitations, she explores its congregational nature, noting that “an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.”<sup>49</sup> This profoundly collaborative sense of material agency does not, however, exclude humans, at least according to Bennett. As she explains, “A lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonyms but as vital materialities.”<sup>50</sup> This notion is essential to understanding the

---

<sup>48</sup> Bennett, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Bennett, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Bennett, 21.

photograph as material agent, for it removes the things authenticated in the image from the shackles of object-hood while also reaffirming the human presence in the practice of photography, without making it the subject; that is, the human individual is no longer the actor but is acted upon. As an aside, this notion of humans as vital materiality follows from Bennett's first chapter, as she notes that "human power is itself a kind of thing-power," due to the acting, vital materialities that comprise our very being.

Removing the human-as-subject yet still including the human-as-thing from Bennett's argument is particularly important for applying her theory to photography, given the consistent emphasis placed on Barthes' operator and her intentions in any discussion of the art and its implications. This re-placement of the human in a nonhuman ecology of acting beings offers, according to Bennett, a better opportunity to understand the effects of those things' agencies. Bennett's aim of exploring collective action draws from other philosophy (she often references Spinoza) while also giving a more ecological lilt to her argument. What she does take from Spinoza is a sense of collective, enmeshed material action; Bennett explains that "bodies enhance their power *in or as a heterogeneous assemblage*. What this suggests for the concept of *agency* is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts."<sup>51</sup> Agency thus becomes distributed (note: *not* by humans) across different ways of being, to all things in the material world. This understanding of collective, coexisting action moves beyond thing-power and into a realm of multiplicity. Thus, Bennett requires a new term for "the

---

<sup>51</sup> Bennett, 23.

kind of relation obtaining between the parts of a volatile but somehow functioning whole.”<sup>52</sup> Her word of choice is *assemblage*, which she defines as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within.”<sup>53</sup> The assemblage, then, is not necessarily a collaborative entity in the sense that all things in an assemblage work in concert. Rather, those things simply “work,” sometimes toward the same end and sometimes against one another.

As for the photograph, one might say that the tension between the visual elements of an image could be a result of those things working and of their appearance as authentic in the image, pushing slightly against one another to produce a distinctive effect or affect. In “Cape Girardeau,” for example, the corner of the wall on the right side of the frame works against the scrap of paper stating *folklore*, creating a sort of bubble of visual space for the Ansel Adams postcard to occupy. In a sense, though the assemblage may contain interior tensions, it can still function cohesively.

This co-operation, even if not necessarily cooperative (in the sense that things work *together*), is also evident in the photographic process at a molecular level. Though the photograph begins with the impetus of *things* in the world and a photographer to picture them, a lot of action happens between the click of the shutter and the eventual, resultant print. Much of this action occurs only if one shoots film; though shooting film may have been co-opted by modern hipsters looking for a trendy hashtag to add to their Instagram posts (see: #shootfilm, #analogphotography, #filmisnotdead, and others), I choose to use the medium for reasons material, aesthetic, and otherwise. Furthermore,

---

<sup>52</sup> Bennett, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Bennett, 23–24.

Alec Soth—the main visual exemplar in this thesis—also shoots primarily on film of various sizes. For these reasons and others, I find it prudent to focus on the analog process in order to best understand how assemblages are at work in between the photographic action and the photographic print.

As I mentioned before, photographs are made when photons of light land on a thin sheet of transparency coated with an emulsion, made mostly of silver halide crystals—undoubtedly a process dependent on co-action between a number of things, namely the chemicals and light itself, an assemblage in their own right. Let me note, though, that the assemblage *still includes* the photographer and things demanding to be photographed, as well as anything else present in the environment; however, for the sake of illustrating the very material actions of vibrant matter *outside* of human conception, I think it's worthy to focus on a scale that escapes immediate human perception, in this case, the microscopic scale of chemical interaction and exchange. After the click of the shutter, the strike of light onto film, the photo-chemical assemblage only grows as the materials move to the darkroom. There, things get much more exciting; the film is wound carefully onto a spool in total darkness and placed in a light-tight tank, ready for processing. Then, the tank is filled and emptied with water before it drowns in developer, a base chemical that, almost magically, clears the transparency of any silver halide not exposed to light—this developer, in a matter of minutes, removes probably millions of molecules of emulsion in a violently beautiful act entirely hidden to the human eye. Next, another wash with water, and in goes the fixer, a strong acid that through equally violent action stops the developer from removing more material, literally “fixing” the image in place on the transparency and permanently defending it from the photons that constantly

and infinitely bombard any material exposed to light. After some further washing and maybe another chemical bath (depending on the process), the film emerges, transformed, now a series of negative images suspended seemingly inside the transparency, ready to be again struck, but not changed, by light to produce a print, or ready to be digitally scanned and transferred to infinitesimal ones and zeros before being shot out onto paper by little nozzles full of expensive inks.

Though this process is seemingly driven by the photographer who is rolling the film and pouring the chemistry and moving all of the things around, paying attention to agency on the *molecular* level reveals that the photograph is really the result of cooperative action by pure *material*. In this sense, the process, too, is an assemblage that includes the human, but as Bennett has shown us, does not prioritize her. Also central to Bennett's definition of assemblage is the aforementioned notion that assemblages can function cohesively, *with* one another, but not necessarily toward any *goal* or with any *intention*. If we return to the process, for example, all of the molecules of chemistry may work with and against one another to produce the negative, but an excess of photons at the moment the shutter was so quickly opened and closed may have resulted in not a beautifully exposed image, but a rather frank, black square on the film. Bennett explains this acting-together, noting that "Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency *of* the assemblage."<sup>54</sup> Bennett, however, complicates this idea a little bit, just as the materials of a photographic assemblage do themselves. She argues that the agency of an assemblage is not a result of the assemblage being one thing. Rather, the assemblage

---

<sup>54</sup> Bennett, 24.

can act in concert but not as an aggregate; it is always acting in the sense that its constituents act, but they do not do so as a singular entity. She clarifies, explaining that “There is no agency proper to assemblages, only the effervescence of the agency of individuals acting alone or in concert with each other.”<sup>55</sup> In the case of the photograph, then, the resultant images exists not because of the scene acting as one entity but because of the innumerable things at play affecting the photographer and effecting the image, including the material in the scene, the camera itself, the photographer, the film, the chemistry, light from the sun at the center of our solar system, and likely much more.

Reading the photograph as an authentication of material assemblages, however, still leaves a door open for questioning the role of the photographer herself in this act. In the art world, no small amount of emphasis is placed upon the artist and her intentions. This focus on the individual has become somewhat more pronounced as camera technology has both progressed mechanically and become more accessible. Nowadays, pretty much anyone with a cell phone can snap away to their heart’s content, and the image becomes evidence that they, the individual, were *there* in that moment. With the hyper-individualization of photography, then, how can we move beyond the intentions of the operator to better understand how material things help to produce the photograph?

Fortunately, Bennett has an answer for us; she complicates the actions of things within an assemblage by examining notions ancillary to that of agency. Specifically, she explores how efficacy, trajectory, and causality function as subsets or asides to the general agency of things.<sup>56</sup> It is in her analysis of efficacy that Bennett begins to untangle the problem of intentionality. She begins by defining events that happen as a sort of

---

<sup>55</sup> Bennett, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Bennett, 31.

swarm of action from all different agents, a definition that “does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect.”<sup>57</sup> Instead, an effect is a result of actants in an assemblage working simultaneously, constantly producing effects and being affected themselves—thus, the swarm of activity. Reading the agency of assemblages through the notion of efficacy allows us to move beyond human intentionality, for “To figure the generative source of effects as a swarm is to see human intentions as always in competition and confederation with many other strivings.”<sup>58</sup> The important distinction that Bennett makes here is that human intention is *not* excluded from the assemblage; rather, Bennett simply de-prioritizes anthropogenic action, deconstructing an ontological hierarchy that champions the human as the end-all, be-all agent. This notion of efficacy within agency enables us to consider the photograph as a result of acting assemblages because it reimagines the intention of the artist, actually reframing it within the assemblage itself, for “This understanding of agency does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes.”<sup>59</sup> Applying this thought to photography reminds us that, though the operator clicks the shutter, the resulting image exists only because of the vibrant actions of the myriad entanglement of things surrounding and including the photographer. Though this notion may be corrupted by the overwhelming ability to produce images in the modern age, it is distinctly photographic at its core. As Barthes reminds us, “the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”<sup>60</sup> Photography becomes an act of seeing and authenticating the actions of material things in the world while also generating

---

<sup>57</sup> Bennett, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Bennett, 32.

<sup>59</sup> Bennett, 32.

<sup>60</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

actual, material agents on the printed page. The driving force in the assemblage that is the photographic experience is not the operator, the artist with camera, but the details that interrupt, the *punctum*, the things at the center of it all, which for me may be cones and for Soth, perhaps, an Ansel Adams postcard on some wall in Missouri.

---

## On Sontag: Material Teleology and Photographic Danger

I've said a lot about the nature of the photograph as it functions as an agent of and in the material world and as it relates to notions or constructions of both space and place. However, a rather important question remains: *why?* And perhaps another: *why not?* I believe that to photograph is to encounter the material world and open oneself up to not only a different perception of its actions but also to *being* the object of such actions. I daresay, however, that I am likely one of few, if any, who think this way; critics of my project may suggest that a materialist view of photography is too abstract or “far-out” to comprehend, or that the actions of the operator, the photographer, override any of those in the material world. In this chapter, I aim to show—by examining one of the seminal critical works about images, Susan Sontag's *On Photography*—that the photograph is *inherently* material, and that this materiality may reveal a sort of purpose of the image. However, I also wish to nod my head to any such critics, for to photograph is dangerous, and if we are not careful in our use of this very unusual tool, we may cause more harm than good to not only our world, but also ourselves. Here, I explore how a tension between human and nonhuman agents in Sontag's critique reveals a number of dangers inherent to the photographic practice, while also offering a story of how I, as photographer, have fallen trap to those same dangers. I also aim to demonstrate that Sontag's critique implicitly recognizes the encounter with vibrant matter inherent in any photograph, as well as that the photograph is itself a vibrantly material agent. Such recognition not only solidifies the concept of a material, agential photograph but even offers guiding principles for how to photograph more carefully and more ecologically.

To try and establish a sort of teleology of the photograph, a clear declaration of its purpose and effect, I turn to Susan Sontag. To read critically at all about photographs is to read Sontag—her collection of essays, *On Photography*, is perhaps one of the best-known documents concerning the nature of the art to be published in the last fifty years. Sontag’s project in this work is to understand what it means to photograph and what implications, both beneficial and pernicious, of that act exist. I am most interested in her work, however, because of its implicit tension. Just as in Barthes, much of Sontag’s writing has a distinctively materialist undercurrent, as if the photograph and its agential nature were demanding to be acknowledged in this critical work. Yet Sontag uses most of her writing to challenge the photographic image, to critique its power and better understand any potential malpractice. This sort of critical reflection is essential reading to anyone committed to the production and reading of images—such as myself—but I am mainly interested in *On Photography* because I believe that, through following the veins of materialism in Sontag’s structure and syntax, we can develop a new understanding of the value in both photographing and seeing the world photographically.

The tension between the individual human agent and the material agent in *On Photography* is continuously apparent. On the first page of the work, Sontag writes that “photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe,” while also noting that “the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images.”<sup>61</sup> This most basic thesis about the photograph’s function is a prime example of the aforementioned tension; in two sentences, Sontag presents the photograph

---

<sup>61</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 3.

as an actant that informs our way of seeing while *also* noting that the photograph's central purpose is to give us humans a sense of control over the world through the production and consumption of images. This tension is only one of many examples of an ongoing struggle between materialism and humanism in Sontag's work; I would argue, however, that a close reading of materialist traces in *On Photography* ultimately presents the photograph as a concept and thing most valuable because of its potential effects *outside* of our anthropogenic conceptions.

Much of the materialism present in Sontag's writing does, in fact, echo both Barthes and Bennett, and specifically regards the photograph as both a feature and a representation of our material surroundings. She notes that "Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern."<sup>62</sup> This notion frames Sontag's work as specifically environmental in the sense that it concerns our nonhuman surroundings, and she is sure to declare photographs a feature of such surroundings. As Barthes does, Sontag further references the photograph as an actual trace of the world, noting that "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire."<sup>63</sup> Though viewing the photograph as a material trace of the world carries certain implications about its relationship to time and memory, most important in Sontag's observation is simply the notion that the photograph is, in fact, a material thing. If, also, we consider the general environment to be a function of material assemblages, then we may further consider the human—and especially the photographic operator—to be a willing piece and participant of such an environment. Sontag, too,

---

<sup>62</sup> Sontag, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Sontag, 4.

recognizes this phenomenon, noting the sense of enmeshment joining the photographer and the world. Sontag cites essayist Paul Rosenfeld (writing about photographer Alfred Stieglitz), who explained that ““The photographer has cast the artist’s net wider into the material world than any man before him or alongside him,” then, in her own words, claiming that “Photography is a kind of overstatement, a heroic copulation with the material world.”<sup>64</sup> According to Sontag, then, the act of photographing is an intentional relationship with and to the material world. However, her use of the term *copulation*, in its corporeality, implies a strong agency of the human body, and of course it does, for Sontag is unfailingly preoccupied with the relationship between human power and image.

That said, Sontag’s analysis of the photograph is also cognizant of the fallacy of human intention. If anything, she adheres to Bennett’s notion of agential efficacy, at once recognizing and deprioritizing the role of human intention in the act of photographing; she explains that “Unlike the fine-art objects of pre-democratic eras, photographs don’t seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist. Rather, they owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject.”<sup>65</sup> Because Sontag has implied—through referencing the same sense of efficacy that Bennett extols—that the photographer functions as an equal actant within an assemblage, I would further aver that photographs exist because of a cooperation not between photographer and subject, but between photographer and material *thing*.

Sontag is also, however, quick to criticize photography; throughout her essays, she bounces back and forth between extolling the art’s virtues and excoriating its more pernicious implications. As for the dangers of photography, Sontag is primarily

---

<sup>64</sup> Sontag, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Sontag, 53.

concerned with the camera's ability to both appropriate the world (and its citizens) and radically alter the relationship between said world and photographer. I argue that reading Sontag in the context of materialists like Bennett reveals a value in her work reflective of the value in photography; however, it remains essential to read Sontag in her own right, in order to complicate this inquiry into the nature of the material photograph a little further. Coincidentally (or perhaps not), Sontag is concerned with much of the same subject matter as I am—much of her critique of photography is centered around the act itself and the image's effect on personal geography, as well as the relationship between operator and material world.

I'll begin with what, in *On Photography*, Susan Sontag brings to bear on the subject of image and geography—given that I began my own academic journey in a similar place. To begin with Sontag, it's important to note that much of her analysis of photography, though she is ultimately concerned with its materiality, is distinctly epistemic; she is critiquing the photograph as a method of *knowing* the world rather than *being* in or with it. Sontag writes that “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.”<sup>66</sup> Here, Sontag places photography distinctly in the realm of knowing, the realm of the individual operator. This placement assigns the operator no small amount of agency, situating her at the top in a hierarchy of worldly power. If we consider documentary photography to be profoundly environmental—that is, concerning the operator's material surroundings—then Sontag's analysis allows the

---

<sup>66</sup> Sontag, 4.

photographer to appropriate not just the *thing* photographed, but the numerous *things* that make up an environment (say, an assemblage).

This appropriative agency has a profound effect on the artist's experience of geography. As Yi-Fu Tuan and Roland Barthes have shown us, the act of photographing allows the operator to develop a sense of place because of the time required to make an image, as well as because of the time the resultant image demands of the viewer. This chronological extension allows the artist to let value accrue *through* both the act of photographing and the final image, providing her a sense of place in formerly abstract space. However, if we assume the artist, or operator, to be only an individual agent in some spacious assemblage, then this act becomes predatory; Sontag observes that photographs "help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure. Thus, photography develops in tandem with one of the most characteristic of modern activities: tourism."<sup>67</sup> I, functioning as the operator, am certainly guilty of this appropriation of space—in Dolores Park, for example, my discomfort in the unfamiliar space of the city, of seemingly infinite urban infrastructure, made me turn to the image in order to process where I was and how I had come to be there. I previously mentioned that looking at the print of Dolores Park in retrospect has given it new value. When I see that image on the page, in the context of this project, I feel perceptually open to its material agency, especially to its *affect*, and I recognize that it offers me a new geography, a sense of accrued value, of place, in its actions and authentication of the vibrant matter I encountered when my finger first began to press down on that small black shutter button.

---

<sup>67</sup> Sontag, 9.

When I reflect on who I was at that time, however, I realize something else. My intentions in that moment were not pure. Yes, I was grasping for place through the camera, when all I had was space. But I was doing so as an individual, as a singular photographing operator, and I was alienated from the assemblage of people and buildings and trees and grass and white sneakers and every *thing* else. My intention was to find place, but as a human agent all I succeeded in doing was distancing myself from what was around me, taking a wide-angle view to the world. This alienation grows from the camera, but also from an underlying insecurity, with the operator (me) unable to *see* the things around him, see *in* his world rather than look *at* it. One of the more pernicious features of this situation is that the individual photographs with the *intention* of making place but can only succeed in visually appropriating space; this is particularly dangerous because so many of the spaces we encounter are actually places deeply valued by other people. If I photograph as the individual, apart from any assemblage of things before and around me, I cannot care for what might be another's place, I cannot care for the park on the hill as, say, a man chain-smoking next to me does. This notion—an inability to value space—also has serious chronological implications. As Sontag notes, “Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on.”<sup>68</sup> The camera, then, becomes a device through which we can mediate our experience of the material world, resulting in “a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events.”<sup>69</sup> In Dolores Park, I was insecure, off-balance, and the camera was my crutch. With photography as a

---

<sup>68</sup> Sontag, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Sontag, 11.

method of mediating our experience of space, the operator becomes more observer than participant, always looking and never seeing.

This voyeurism is undoubtedly one of the more dangerous aspects of photography. Sontag's careful use of the word chronic alludes to the temporal nature of this danger. The repeated use of photography as a tool for qualifying and then quantifying space into a discrete experience degrades the photographer's relation to the material world exponentially. This is partially due to the notion that a photograph is a discrete, bounded object, a "thin slice of space as well as time," the result being that "The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery."<sup>70</sup> The operator, then—if she functions alone, as an individual picture-snapping agent, appropriates her reality, extracting from it a singular object that actually *fails* to situate her in space, but rather reframes the experience in the abstract, shrinking the discomfort of the unfamiliar material world into a discomfiting, material image. If we take the photographer to be this individual, then the image fails to achieve its intended purpose, of contextualizing the operator within the unfamiliar congregation of things that form her environment—instead, "the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own."<sup>71</sup> Thus, if the photographer is seen as the individual agent, the appropriator of the material world, she not only distances herself from that world but also from herself. As Barthes has shown us before, "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity."<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Sontag, 22, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Sontag, 57.

<sup>72</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

Previously, drawing on Bennett, I've taken this to mean that to photograph from a materialist ontology reveals that the photographer is othered as not an outsider but *from herself* as an equal participant in the assemblages of the material world. For Sontag, however, photographing as an individual agent others the operator because her photographs fail to fully appropriate the world for her understanding—and this failure ultimately fractures her sense of reality and thus allows, even facilitates, her dissociation from herself.

Here, it is worth noting that much of Sontag's critique of the image in *On Photography* presumes the operator, the photographer, to be an individual acting alone *upon*, not *within*, the world. As opposed to a more entangled relationship with her environment, the photographer in Sontag's critique is at odds with the material world, and for that operator, "Photography is seen as an acute manifestation of the individualized 'I,' the homeless private self astray in an overwhelming world—mastering reality by a fast visual anthologizing of it."<sup>73</sup> Sontag's critique, it seems, is not necessarily of photography as an act or practice, but rather of the individual photographer who is afraid of the material world, who cannot or will not find her place in a vast and complex environment. The result of this fear is an attempt at distancing the self from the world. Sontag explains that "Photography, which has so many narcissistic uses, is also a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world; and the two uses are complementary."<sup>74</sup> With the operator as individual agent, then, photography becomes inward-looking, rather than outward-seeing, at once cementing the photographer as the perceived appropriator of the world and distancing her from that same world itself.

---

<sup>73</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 119.

<sup>74</sup> Sontag, 167.

---

Though I aspire to make photographs that are evidential of my experience and entanglement with the material world, I, too, am guilty of what Sontag decries, of trying to appropriate my world and in doing so only alienating myself from it. This is a story about that guilt; there is of course, much more to tell than what I have to say here, much more that has to do with who I am and how my mother raised me, that has to do with how one feels connected to place and time, especially in a land so spiritually and historically laden as the American South, as where I am from. I've spent a good amount of my time delving into that much "more," but here is neither the time nor place for that. For in the moment I'll share, with my mother at the farm, I was not her southern son or in touch with some myth of time and blood and soil; I was the man with a camera, a big black box, and instead I took the photograph, and maybe something else, too.

During the winter break from school, during the slow slide from 2018 into 2019, I went home. I usually only go back to Tennessee once a year these days, and always around the holidays. This year was no different. At the time, I tried to photograph what I perceive to be my home: a small-ish house on the Cumberland Plateau and some old family land in northern Alabama. This project was, at the time, just an embryonic inkling itching at the back of my mind. I had read some Sontag, but not enough, and not much else.

I remember one day in particular. We drove down to good old Courtland, Alabama, where my Mama grew up. My aunt, her sister, lives there now with her two little kids (they're pretty much still babies) on the small farm where my grandparents

raised Beth Pride, who then raised me. It was great to see my cousins; I met the little one, newborn Canaan, for the first time, and my aunt was so kind as to give my sister and me cast iron pans as belated Christmas gifts. Truly Southern Love.

Before we headed back northeast to Tennessee, I asked my parents to drive out on the red dirt road to see some of the land that feels like my history. We stopped by the cow pasture, and I got out my clunky medium format camera to snap some pictures. We then turned around and made our way back to the gravel driveway. Before we turned right onto County Road 150, to head back toward Courtland and Decatur and Huntsville and then eventually Sewanee, my mother, Beth Pride, Mama, asked if I would photograph her favorite tree on the land, a stout old oak standing between the fence of another pasture and the driveway. She was wearing an orange vest and had her short-ish hair tied back in a ponytail, like always. As I tried to photograph the tree (I found it to be quite difficult), my mother, who was standing in the corn stubble a short way downslope from me, starting to talk about the farm. I don't remember exactly what she said, but she spoke of growing up on that land and how she'd always wanted to farm it, and how her life hadn't quite allowed her to do that. She didn't have regrets, it seemed, but she wondered what could have been.

And suddenly, she was crying. I did not remember the last time I had seen my mother cry.

And I photographed, used my big black box to snap three or so frames of her visage stark against the grey sky of winter in the South. Only after did I hug her. I felt guilty in that moment—I think I wanted to photograph something about what it means to love a place with one's whole heart, a feeling I didn't quite have myself—but it only

made me feel more distant from any sentiment like that and appropriative of the scene at hand, as if I had violated some sacred bond between mother, child and soil. I like to imagine I made a good photograph (I still haven't seen it), but for all I know the only thing I accomplished was a backwards slide into Sontag's danger of the photographing individual, a tourist in his mother's reality, and even his own.

---

Though Susan Sontag's analysis of photography seems to be somewhat doom-and-gloom in nature, the critique she offers in *On Photography* is not entirely one-sided; Sontag provides us with an almost dualistic interpretation of photography's nature of being. Though she is preoccupied with the dangers of photography when practiced by an individual, human operator—specifically its ability to alienate the artist from both self and world—Sontag is also sure to acknowledge the benefits of photography as a potential means for better understanding our environment. As I mentioned previously, there is a consistent tension in Sontag's work between the agency of the photographer and the power of the photograph itself. This tension is best captured by her musings on the role of the individual; just as she noted that “Photography is seen as an acute manifestation of the individualized ‘I,’” so she also claims that “photography is seen as a means of finding a place in the world (still experienced as overwhelming, alien) by being able to relate to it with detachment—bypassing the interfering, insolent claims of the self.”<sup>75</sup> Seeming almost contradictory to the previously acknowledged pitfalls, this assertion implies that photography may also be a powerful tool of placemaking—just as reading Tuan and

---

<sup>75</sup> Sontag, 119.

Barthes together has suggested—that also has the ability to decenter the individual as a prime agent in the photographic experience. In this contradiction, Sontag seems to be offering the reader, and potentially the photographer, a choice: to photograph as an individual above the world or as an individual of the world, to look or to see. She explains that

What talented photographers do cannot of course be characterized either as simply predatory or as simply, and essentially, benevolent. Photography is the paradigm of an inherently equivocal connection between self and world—its version of the ideology of realism sometimes dictating an effacement of the self in relation to the world, sometimes authorizing an aggressive relation to the world which celebrates the self.<sup>76</sup>

Tension thus established, Sontag also notes that “One side or the other of the connection is always being rediscovered and championed.”<sup>77</sup> The dangers of photography as a celebration of the individual self already illuminated, I choose to follow the notion of photography as a strange entanglement of self and environment that decentralizes the individual, removing her from a position of power over the material world. Much of Sontag’s work is like an eerie echo of, or presage to, new materialist theory like Bennett. Reading *On Photography* with Bennett’s thing-power and assemblages in mind, then, I aim to uncover the value of photography in Sontag’s work and to better understand how and why we should understand the art as a union of self and world that prioritizes neither of those things.

Part of the materialist undercurrent in *On Photography* lies in Sontag’s careful use of the verb “to see.” Specifically, she references a sense of seeing in photographs, just as Barthes does. He reminds us that the photograph *reveals* itself to the photographer—

---

<sup>76</sup> Sontag, 123.

<sup>77</sup> Sontag, 123.

“they come from the world to me, without my asking”—and is thus evidential of the material agencies of the thing or assemblage being photographed.<sup>78</sup> Sontag makes a similar claim, also implicating the photograph as evidence; she explains that “To take a good photograph, runs the common claim, one must already see it. That is, the image must exist in the photographer’s mind at or before the moment when the negative is exposed.”<sup>79</sup> To see then, as we may take it from Barthes and Sontag, is to both acknowledge and be acted upon by the material world. Sontag, however, takes the notion further, not just defining what it is to see but also implying that such a method has a certain, intrinsic value. She explains that “Photographic seeing meant an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects as too ordinary. Photographers were supposed to do more than just see the world as it is, including its already acclaimed marvels; they were to create interest, by new visual decisions.”<sup>80</sup> Of course, Sontag here uses language that centers the human as the agent in this photographic act; however, if we remember our goal to efface the self and, as Bennett does, value instead the material agencies at play in a world of powerful things, Sontag’s photographic seeing then becomes a result of things within assemblages *showing* us their beauty or their value. Traffic cones may be ordinary, not of any interest, but their effects upon me—both physical and intangible—have shown otherwise. For Sontag, actually, photography’s thesis is, in a sense, distinctly material; it is her “heroic copulation with the material world,” and attempts to represent “Everyday life apotheosized, and the kind of beauty that only the camera reveals—a corner of material reality that the eye doesn’t see at all or

---

<sup>78</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 16.

<sup>79</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 117.

<sup>80</sup> Sontag, 89.

can't normally isolate," and thus "shows us reality as we had *not* seen it before."<sup>81</sup> Part of the photograph's agentic ability then, lies in its power to show and reveal that which was at first unseen.

---

Just as Barthes and Bennett do in concert, Sontag posits the photograph as not only evidence of material agencies in the world, but also as a material thing in its own right. She, like Barthes, notes that the printed photograph is a literal transmutation of material from the world onto a negative then projected onto paper, writing that "a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."<sup>82</sup> Functioning as a material trace, and also because "a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened," the image bears a certain weight on the past.<sup>83</sup> Yet, because it is distinctly material, the photograph also comes to bear on the present, too. One example from my own experience would be the photograph of my mother. In the appropriative moment, I took a trace of the material world, stenciled a sort of veneer from the very real things in front of me, including my mother, whom I love dearly. Though I fell into Sontag's trap, was a sort of tourist in the material world, the moment still held an air of effect. Things in the world effected my actions—some assemblage of my mother and the land behind her and perfectly grey winter-in-the-South

---

<sup>81</sup> Sontag, 30, 90, 119.

<sup>82</sup> Sontag, 154.

<sup>83</sup> Sontag, 5.

skies. The actions of material things are always present, even if the photographer, through his own error, is not.

However, I did not see that image for almost four months after the moment I so fatefully clicked the shutter. My reticence toward developing what I feel was undoubtedly a dangerous image offers a valuable example for understanding the myriad powers of the photograph, for it includes notions of affect, effect, and what is *not* there.

I would argue that the whole time that little negative went undeveloped, it was *acting*. Just as scraps of tape and where photographs might have been exert their power over Alec Soth in “Cape Girardeau, Missouri,” so did that negative as it sat rolled tightly on a shelf in my room, thousands of miles away from my mother’s old home in Alabama. Just as there exists a *what could have been* in Soth’s image, so too did the negative hold a presence of the *not there*. This action, a sort of potential energy stored up in miniscule molecules suspended on transparency, is undoubtedly in the realm of affective agency. As I was writing and thinking about that potential image, its action produced distinct emotions in my psyche: I was guilty for having appropriated that tender, southern moment, and at once also frightened—scared that the image I had taken (in more ways than one) was no good, was not worth falling into a trap.

Except I saw the image. I finally had a lab in Kansas develop it (I unfortunately do not have the capacity to develop my own color film). And when I saw it, I felt a great confluence of affect and effect; I sat there on my bed in the afternoon light and opened the envelope, pulled out the little square proof prints. And there was my mother, in the middle of the frame, held in the fragile space of two prints—one, with her looking stoic, the other, breaking into tears, her lips just fallen into a tremble. But this time, staring at

the squares on my bed, it was I who cried, not her. In that moment I was subject to the image's affect and effect. I felt a deep sentiment for my mother and for Alabama, which affected me to the point of *effecting* my tears, as in some grand culmination of the initial effect felt on that farm in the south and the affect of the image-in-limbo that came together in an assemblage of time and space to tell and show me that *photographs have power*. This power, this agential nature of the image in *all forms*, is evident *throughout* the life of the photograph, from the moment of its impetus to the results of its material being—the print.

Sontag recognizes this deep chronology of the photograph, first acknowledging its evidential power in ancient times. Briefly citing E.H. Gombrich, she continues to observe that “in primitive societies, the thing and its image were simply two different, that is, physically distinct, manifestations of the same energy or spirit. Hence, the supposed efficacy of images in propitiating and gaining control over powerful presences. Those powers, those presences were present in *them*.”<sup>84</sup> Sontag, material agency and trace-nature of the image referenced, then makes an important distinction between the nature of this thing-power before and during the modern age. In that reference, she equates the image with the thing it represents only in the *past*. Much of Sontag's critique of photography seems aimed at the *modern* photographer, the one who is narcissistic and alienated from self and world. In a sense, the entanglement between thing and image has been degraded; Sontag argues that “to equate image with mere appearance—to presume that the image is absolutely distinct from the object depicted—is part of that process of desacralization which separates us irrevocably from the world of sacred times and places

---

<sup>84</sup> Sontag, 155.

in which an image was taken to participate in the reality of the object depicted.”<sup>85</sup> Sontag is offering us a sense of the photograph as sacred thing; in its ability to both reference the material, agential world and function as an agent itself, the photograph almost transcends reality.

The photograph as material thing is able to transcend reality because it lives on as vibrant matter; the photograph not only verifies the collective action of assemblages in the world but also, in doing so, acts upon us, photographers and viewers. Sontag validates this, noting that “Our irrepressible feeling that the photographic process is something magical has a genuine basis,” because “a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject.”<sup>86</sup> Sontag, however, offers the notion that this sacred existence, like all of photography, holds a respective danger. She is of the opinion that recognizing the photograph as both verifying and being materiality allows one to gain control over the thing photographed. I would aver, however, that within a materialist context, the photograph is more an acknowledgment of the actions of vibrant matter, saying *see, this thing acted upon the photographer in this way, and it could do the same, or different, to you*. Perhaps the dissonance between our interpretations is due to a dissonance in the actual photographic process. Sontag reminds us that photography is up for interpretation, that “Picture-taking has been interpreted in two entirely different ways: either as a lucid and precise act of knowing, of conscious intelligence, or as a pre-intellectual, intuitive mode of encounter.”<sup>87</sup> I would prefer, however, to eschew this dualistic mode of thinking. I instead understand the photograph

---

<sup>85</sup> Sontag, 155.

<sup>86</sup> Sontag, 155.

<sup>87</sup> Sontag, 116.

to function as both of the methods Sontag offers; if we maintain our materialist mindset, we can understand photography as both epistemology and ontology—as a way of knowing and a way of being with the world. Photography functions as such because it is a process of being *acted upon* by environmental things that then *reveal knowledge* to us; it is both participation in and learning of our material surroundings.

---

## The End and Beginning

Susan Sontag is, at least read with a foundation of materialist theory and geography, the sort of keystone to this project, the point at the apex of an arch of research and thought and experience and feeling, locking it all into place, showing that photography is a process of mutual action enmeshed in concepts of geography that reveal to us that our worlds are alive and vibrant and constantly *in motion*, constantly *acting*. Sontag has helped me answer the *why* of the ontological photographic question, but I think I have yet to answer why asking that question is even valuable.

To answer, I return to Bennett, who offers us an understanding of the value of a materialist perspective alone—no images explicitly included. Much of Bennett’s goal has to do with increasing one’s perception of the material world, something photography has the rather unique ability to accomplish with relative ease—photographic seeing is almost a shortcut to better understanding materiality, though it is a *dangerous one*.

If, however, we return to Bennett’s encounter with detritus on the street, we can begin to realize the value of a change in perspective. In relating her encounter, Bennett explains that “The hope is that the story will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us, will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology.”<sup>88</sup> Her story is, in a sense, a tale of co-mingling with the material world, of “the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other,” of understanding just

---

<sup>88</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

how we *are* with all other vibrant things in the world, and what that understanding can provide for us.<sup>89</sup> That provision, according to Bennett, is simply an improvement in the quality of a life, achieved through an improvement in our relation to the material world. She explains that “We are now in a better position to name that other way to promote human health and happiness: *to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed.*”<sup>90</sup> To raise such status, we must become receptive and responsive to the vibrant action of all things that comprise our environment, maybe through telling stories like Bennett’s, maybe through the careful creation of photographs; regardless, as Bennett reminds us, “The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it.”<sup>91</sup> One goal of this thesis is to illustrate how photography can enable this perceptual openness, how the act of photographing helps us to *see* and *be* differently—Bennett suggests that “Vital materialists will...try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them”—and I believe that the photograph and the photographic process enable this lingering.<sup>92</sup> And ideally, when we linger in the image and its materiality, when we co-mingle with our worlds, the “sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically.”<sup>93</sup> If, however, we employ photography as a method of enabling this sense and a new, resultant relation to the material world, it is

---

<sup>89</sup> Bennett, 4.

<sup>90</sup> Bennett, 12.

<sup>91</sup> Bennett, 14.

<sup>92</sup> Bennett, 17.

<sup>93</sup> Bennett, 17–18.

of the utmost importance that we remember Sontag's warning; that is, we must imagine a way of photography that avoids prioritizing the individual human as a primary agent in the world.

Though, as we have noted, not primarily concerned with explicitly materialist thought, Susan Sontag nonetheless offers a suggestion on how to utilize photography as a responsible method of relating to the material world. Explicitly referencing the thinginess of the photograph, she explains:

the force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality—for turning *it* into a shadow. Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.<sup>94</sup>

If we take Sontag's suggestion to heart, then we might move to see Bennett's theory and the act of photography as working collaboratively, as a sort of theoretical and agential assemblage in their own right. Photographs have the distinct ability to exist as a bridge between worlds; they are at once reference to and authentication of actants, of vibrant matter, yet also participate as those same actants themselves. They both reference and form our experience of space and place, and are a powerful tool for contextualizing, without prioritizing, ourselves in a vast and frightening world. Understanding this ontology of the photography is especially important in an age when the medium has been, essentially, corrupted. This is not exactly news. During my research for this project, a professor very kindly loaned me a photobook—*Welcome to Camp America*, by Debi Cornwall. The volume is a documentary exploration of the interiority of Guantanamo

---

<sup>94</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 180.

Bay, one of America's most notorious and controversial detainment centers. The images in this work are striking—and undoubtedly acted upon me agentially—yet what I found most compelling (at least vis-à-vis this project) was an essay tucked into the back of the book. The piece was “The Agony and the Artifice,” by Fred Ritchin, and though it mainly concerns Cornwall's work and the political milieu that encouraged it, Ritchin also briefly brings to bear an important observation about the modern state of the image. He explains that

in an era in which billions of images are uploaded daily with no equivalent of a front page to focus attention, in an environment of a generalized skepticism about media, the credibility of the photograph founders. Now it is perceived as more of a signifier of opinion than of the facts, and any evidence it purports to show is often immediately contested and disparaged.<sup>95</sup>

Though Ritchin is obviously more concerned with the photograph's ability to describe what is “true”—that is, its more reportorial function—he nonetheless offers an important insight into how the image has been corrupted by methods of dissemination other than material, such as digital publishing. Though investigating the nature of the digital image, rather than the material one, would require an entirely different thesis-length inquiry, I find it worth noting that Ritchin is concerned about the nature of photography in the modern age. His concerns lead him to an essential question: “In this environment of too many images accomplishing too little, are there any alternative strategies that allow a greater understanding and encourage a constructive response?”<sup>96</sup> I suppose that the point of this whole project is to provide an alternative strategy. This thesis, however, is not necessarily a call to *photographic* action. If a reader does not already photograph, I don't recommend starting, but would rather encourage her to cultivate an attentive perception

---

<sup>95</sup> Cornwall, *Welcome to Camp America*.

<sup>96</sup> Cornwall.

of the world in ways less appropriative and more appropriate to our human situation as things in the world, rather than people above it.

If one does photograph, though, then the aim of this thesis is to encourage him or her to do so more intentionally, with a greater degree of care, using images to better connect to the surrounding, material world and participate in the great ecology of things that is this earth and all the spaces and places we move through.

With a close reading of Sontag and Barthes through a deeply materialist lens as my foundation, I posit a practice of photography that is ameliorative of its own modern condition; that is, a practice that recognizes and participates in the vibrant materials of our own environment without prioritizing “I,” the photographer—a practice distinctly ecological in nature that should foster a better understanding as to how we humans exist in the world, both spatially and materially. This practice, this use of photography, is about *learning to see*—it is a change in perspective—and I think the ultimate goal is *to put down the camera*, so that we may perceive and participate in our world without mediation, so that we may connect directly and vibrantly with our environment—grow, essentially, closer to our world. I hope that we may recognize the spaces and places and actions of all things around us, human and not, and look upon them with more care, lovingly.

## Bibliography

“Alec Soth | Sleeping by the Mississippi.” Accessed March 2, 2019.  
<https://alecsoth.com/photography/projects/sleeping-by-the-mississippi>.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. 1st American ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.  
<http://www.dawsonera.com/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S9780822391623>.

Berger, John. *Another Way of Telling*. 1st American ed. New York: Pantheon, 1982.

Cornwall, Debi. *Welcome to Camp America: Inside G[Uantánam]o Bay*. Santa Fe, NM: Radius Books, 2017.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. 1st Anchor books ed. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.

Soth, Alec. *Sleeping by the Mississippi*. First edition. Göttingen: Steidl, 2004.

Tuan, Yi-fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.