

*Book Review*

## The Lens Looks Back

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*Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*

by Lauret Savoy

Counterpoint Press, 2016

240 pp., \$16.95, paper

*Imagine Wanting Only This*

by Kristen Radtke

Pantheon Books, 2017

288 pp., \$29.95, cloth

*Intimate: An American Family Photo Album*

by Paisley Rekdal

Tupelo Press, 2012

300 pp., \$19.95, paper

A woman walks along the lakefront, a few blocks from my apartment in Chicago. I watch her from where I am sitting against a concrete embankment, on one of those blue-green afternoons, blurry sailboats riding the horizon. The woman is wearing just a hot-pink bathing suit and plastic beach slippers, and this level of undress is in itself unusual, here on the paved waterfront that is more city park than beach.

I watch her as a neighbor, as I watch, with love, all my neighbors. I watch her as a writer, as I watch whatever and whoever crosses my path. This moment is not exceptional. But here is where I stop and question. I once believed my watching was a passive act. *I am a camera with my shutter open*, as Christopher

Isherwood wrote, referring to his life as an outsider in Weimar-era Berlin. Nonfiction for me has always been about observation as much as remembering. And yet now I have to ask, who am I in this exchange, at this moment of early Trump-era Chicago, my birthplace city? Who or what is my subject, and what is the relationship between us? I can't say more about what I see without first acknowledging how aware I have become of watching as intention, inseparable from the life I bring to the looking.

So, before I go back to the woman at the lakefront (and before I ask you to consider who you, by default, see when I say the words *woman* and *bathing suit*—what sort of woman, what sort of bathing suit, and what sort of relationship between you and women in bathing suits), first I suggest that this question about looking may be the central nonfiction question of our time. As practitioners of the essay arts, artists of actuality—in other words, as world observers and social documentarians—what are our positions in relation to our subjects? Where do we stand as architects of representation and as lyric detectives whose work it is to reveal both surface and infrastructure? Nonfiction writers have long argued about whether or not we have any “contract with the reader,” but if we do, it may well be to employ the hybridity of our between-the-genres position to challenge assumptions and bring what's hidden into view.

Regarding then the woman in the pink swimsuit—what are the ways I might perceive her?

Place, perception, and position are complex matters in Lauret Savoy's 2015 American Book Award-winning *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*, a book that unearths the racist infrastructure of American places.

As a young girl Savoy felt a strong pull toward American environmental writing, and was certain of a relationship between the body she inhabited and the landscapes that made up her first impressions of self. Yet from the start she experienced a disconnect. How did her mixed-race ancestry fit into this discussion? The classic American environmental writers led her to understand the falsity of lines between humans and land, but how might they consider her

body, and the bodies of her multi-hued family, when theorizing on the ethics of place?

The body is the first point of contact when we think about who we are in relation to what we have to write about. In Savoy's case, her body is of African, Indigenous, and European ancestry, as well as California-born. Though her family moves to the American East Coast when she is seven, the West Coast landscape impressed itself on her, so much so that she spends her life craving return.

If a child's character and perceptual habits form by the age of five or six, then I perceived by sharp light and shadows. If a child bonds with places explored at this tender age, and those bonds anchor her, then I chose textures and tones of dryness over humidity, expanses that embraced distance over both skyscraper and temperate forests (11).

But when she travels back as an adult, her journey is not only a native's return but also the assay of an earth scientist skilled at tracing geological origins and the questioning of an essayist attuned to colonial backstory. All of her memories and excavations are fraught. When her family, on the drive east toward their next home in Washington, DC, stops to visit the great American National Parks, those emblematic locations of the American story, Savoy recalls shopping for postcards, images of home to keep close as she is wrenched away from what she already considers her West, a homeland made of sunrises, groves, canyons, rivers, and rock. She is too young still to comprehend racism, so doesn't understand that her sense of possession is not universally visible.

Only after all others have gone does the woman behind the counter extend her hand. Six cards. Sixty cents. When the girl reaches up with three quarters the woman avoids the small hand to take the coins. Cash register clinks shut. The woman turns away. The girl starts to ask but stops as the woman faces her. At seven she doesn't know yet contempt or refusal and runs far into the pinewoods behind the store. That night, with all her home-cards covering the motel bed, she wonders if each bright place is enough (15–16).

When she returns to these formative places many years later, an adult traveling alone, she means to test her sense of belonging by reinhabiting the landscape and uncovering its geologic and familial stories—asking the same American questions any of us might. How did we get here? Who am I made of? She understands how weather and erosion create the famous cliffs and basins, but what of her family? She is compelled to know, but finds geology easier to navigate than ancestry.

I descend from Africans who came in chains and Africans who may never have known bondage. From European colonists who would try to make a new start in a world new to them. As well as from Native peoples who were displaced by those colonists from homelands that had defined their essential being. . . . Forebears had likely navigated a tangled *mélange* of land relations: inclusion and exclusion, ownership and tenancy, investment and dispossession. Some ancestors knew land intimately as home, others worked it as enslaved laborers for its yield. What senses of belonging were possible when one couldn't guarantee a life in place? Or when "freed" in a land where racialized thinking bounded such freedom (20–21)?

In her quest to find remnants of family rooted in place, she becomes lost in absence. This is the absence of records but also the absence of care, because embedded in every layer is history diminishing her body and seeking to eradicate her existence, and this is where *Trace* is extraordinary. What she does find is the melding of landscape and language that embeds racism into the very fabric of the American self-portrait, where every thread that acknowledges her presence at the same time catalogs her dispossession.

This knowledge, Savoy admits, is a hard but necessary knowing, which is precisely what nonfiction ought to reveal, especially nonfiction that seeks to show us what we might not otherwise see.

My greatest fear as a young girl was that I wasn't meant to exist. Yet one idea stood firm:  
The American land preceded hate. My child-sense of its antiquity became as much a refuge

as any place, whether the Devil's Punchbowl or a canyon called Grand. Still, silences embedded in a family, and in a society, couldn't be replaced even by sounds so reliable: of water spilling down rock, of a thunderstorm rolling into far distance, or of branches sifting wind . . . to re-member is to discover patterns in fragments. As an Earth historian, I once sought the relics of deep time. To be an honest woman I must trace other residues of hardness (29–30).

The hardness Savoy seeks to trace is each new knoll named with the n-word, every “ethical” national history that leaves out slavery, every renaming of Indigenous people by the Europeans who drove them from ancestral lands. These revelations are what contemporary activists mean when they demand we look at the ways racism is not simply a collage of retrograde attitudes and piecemeal injustices, but rather a formative American ethic, embedded into everything we know about ourselves.

*Trace* is not an easy read. The prose at times is dense and the references might be, for some readers, overly reliant on a prior knowledge of mid-twentieth-century American environmental writing, particularly that of Aldo Leopold and other authors of land ethics texts that led to the formation of the national parks, as well as our contemporary sense of environmentalism. This is nonfiction that builds as much on research as it does on memory. But every reference-bound passage meets a moment of presence that personalizes the hard, bright thinking of this work. This hybrid mix of science writing, memoir, and personal essay has the power to lead us to think differently, in more accurate combinations of influence. If read with attention, the book has the power to reframe our American story.

Before I describe the Chicago woman in the bathing suit, let's consider what we mean by *woman*, *bathing suit*, *beach bodies*, *women walking*, *waterfront path*, *an afternoon in the park*, *beachgoers of the American city*. Not simple definitions, but assumptions, classifications, expectations. First, who among us can look at a human body and avoid the subject of gender? If we can't not see the markers

of femininity—clothing markers, anatomical markers—then can we sidestep the influence of the ways women’s bodies are read? How do I read a woman’s body through my own woman’s body? Would I walk down the beach in a swimsuit, whether a Lake Michigan beach a short walk from my home, or a beach somewhere far away from Chicago, in Florida say, or California, or even some famous beach in Eastern Europe? Would I still expose my middle-aged body to the gaze of strangers? Or to change angle, how do women’s exposed bodies read to the pack of teenage boys I also see on the beachfront today, shirts off, baggy shorts grazing their knees, shouting insults to one another? Do they see the same woman I see, and, if so, what do they think women’s bodies are for?

Looking is central to the subject of Kristen Radtke’s 2017 debut graphic memoir, *Imagine Wanting Only This*. The book, in one sense, is about what the artist sees when she encounters landscapes of ruin—both the ruin of abandoned places and that of her own life. As a young art student in Chicago, she encounters the post-industrial ruins of Gary, Indiana—the same site made visible in countless urban explorer Internet sites, art photography, and even television dramas such as the Netflix series *Sense8* that uses the same ruined Gary cathedral as the location for a central character’s chimerical self-immolation.

*Imagine Wanting Only This* is at its best when the hybrid inherent in graphic narratives is fully enunciated. In an early section of the book, the narrator and her boyfriend, then still college undergraduates, stand in the center of the demolished church in Gary, the wreckage framing the page, the humans tiny in the context of the landscape, the language at the center expounding on the images, the combination of picture and text taking the reader deeper into the observed moment.

Ivy overtook the corroding walls as it does in storybooks, covering the slated stone with spindles of earthy web. The tarnished pedals of a shattered organ lay in the corner, its broken keys like piles of pulled teeth (27).

In a graphic memoir, form works best to carry content when the language sends the reader back to the images and the images back to language, creating tension that leads us to pause long enough to allow the visual image to do its work, entering the reader's body in ways that language alone cannot, leading us to unexpected ways of knowing. In these moments, this book impacts in the manner of the essay films the author references later in the text, such as the work of Chris Marker. The essay film as an aesthetic might be the key (it was for me) to understand how to read this book, which tells a kind of story yet is neither fully narrative nor essayistic. The book reads like those essay films that juxtapose image with an engrossingly detached voice-over. Neither the pictures nor the language completes the connections. Moments accumulate but understanding doesn't deliver until the end.

Radtke's voice-over tells of sneaking into after-hour classrooms at her art school to screen Marker's film with a projector, while surrounded by windows full of the Chicago night skyline. This page is almost a throwaway—a setup that allows her to talk first about Marker's footage of Iceland and then her own trip to that island—but the rendering of her looking at projected images of Iceland's idyllic light and space while surrounded by high-rise windows lit with the dense urban night is impactful, especially when juxtaposed with her later travel to Iceland during the season of twenty-four-hour sun, to lecture on Marker's film. In Iceland, she experiences one of the few landscapes in the book that speak to desire as an alternative, and perhaps an antidote, to grief.

Iceland is near the end of the book, Gary, Indiana, near the start, and in the middle the narrator travels to the Philippines, Cambodia, Macau, and of course Detroit, one ruined site after another. Along the way she loses her lover, her sense of purpose, and even the relics she'd carried from that first indelible ruined cathedral, which, like the sites themselves, she may have had no right to possess, and for which she can't articulate her attraction. She explores memories of a beloved uncle who died too young—the same family member who taught her to look at the lights in the world—as well as the history of the Peshtigo Fire in Wisconsin. The Peshtigo tragedy occurred on the same day as the Great

Chicago Fire, at a location a half-hour's drive from what would someday be Radtke's childhood home, and is a story she admits is the only ruin saga on her itinerary of collapse that might be hers to tell.

One critique of human fascination with ruin art—or “ruin porn” as some call it—is that artists aestheticize the visual detritus of incalculable loss without providing lived context. Their looking takes possession without acknowledgement of what was lived here. That church in Gary, for instance, has a name. The City Methodist Church was once the home of the largest Methodist congregation in the Midwest. In *Sense8*, the filmmakers locate the church in Chicago and conflate the location with the infamous gang violence of the region, in effect (though that project is pure fiction) decontextualizing the old mill regions and further demonizing the actual south side of Chicago, where one could find abandoned churches, but none in so spectacular a state of disarray.

I too am attracted to ruin and ruin art, and I admire the shimmering filmic quality of this book, particularly the stunning final twelve pages, but I am uncomfortable with Radtke's use of ruin as a stand-in for her narrator's grief and ennui. This discomfort is where the subject of the gaze is relevant. I grew up in a part of the Chicago area, the Calumet Region, that includes the complex devastation of Gary, a ruination deeply tied to the collapse of the American steel industry that created the rust-belt cities. In Gary, for instance, 30,000 jobs were lost in a blink of the eye when U.S. Steel cut its workforce. Consider the meaning of 30,000 families all at once losing their livelihood, the impact on a city, on a single steel town's cathedral congregation. Knowing this history does not take away from the excruciating beauty of post-industrial ruin, nor even from one young artist's recognition of her own devastation, but the story of how this landscape comes to be adds resonance, contour, and human narrative to what otherwise skirts artistic narcissism.

I was relieved to see Radtke bring the ruin porn debates into her text. I would have found the book unpalatable without this, though I was saddened when she exited this thread too quickly. Her catalog of the ways scholars and journalists have questioned human fascination with ruin is of interest, tossing



in notions such as *ruinophilia* and *ruin value*, and noting that some have judged ruin art as exploitative and voyeuristic, but she stops short of examining her own obsession through this lens, dismissing what some have called the perversity of ruin porn as critical denial of time and loss. She does develop her subject gorgeously along this thread, but missing is the simple fact that these ruined spaces belong to actual living people's tangible lived lives. Within an otherwise visually beautiful collage of locations in the second half of the book, Radtke writes:

Perhaps critics call images of Detroit “perverse” because they mirror a life we recognize. “Of course, this place is empty now,” we can think in front of Angkor Wat or the Acropolis. There are no uneasy questions of mortality before Mayan temples and Roman fortresses. The people drank lead, or they sacrificed each other, or they ground up poisonous flowers that brought the sun god down to them. They were a people nothing like us. They were a people who did not have what we have now. We forget that everything will become no longer ours (154–55).

I don't wish to deny Radtke's narrator the personal connection she finds in these ruins—a connection that moves me—and I do believe artists' honest connections to all manner of places not their own are valid; I have found similar affinities in spaces and lives far from my own home. Still, she misses a central point of connection by failing to note that what makes ruin porn perverse is the uninterrogated trespass of the outsider's gaze, particularly the gaze that sees shadows but not presence. Every abandoned place is somebody's home, even if they've fled—that's what she overlooked in Gary—and no home is limited to what is broken there. City Methodist Church, according to recent reports, is about to be transformed into a history-bound ruin garden that has potential to bring an economy back to a city whose citizens lost their foundation. Sanitized perhaps—I imagine the urban adventure explorers and danger-mongers think so—but also returned to something closer to its own agency. I won't suggest that any writer write a different book than they mean to write, yet I can imagine a few more researched pages in this book, juxtaposing what Gary was with

what it is now, perhaps extrapolating on the ways all our inarticulate losses are linked to systems (of power, of commerce, of abuse, of activism) that organize our worlds.

That Radtke has the skills to layer in the kind of intimate research that makes looking ethical is evident in her deep research and fully imagined narrative of the Peshtigo Fire, which she tantalizingly suggests is what kept northeast Wisconsin from developing into another Great Lakes metropolis like Chicago, as well as what led her own Wisconsin-made gaze to be grounded in a horizon of fireflies rather than skyscrapers.

One night in September, the cold came in from the west. The people pulled on their nightgowns, washed their children's faces, and locked their horses inside their fences. The cold and the hot began to fold, and the folding sucked the wind into funnels, whipped sawdust and twigs and timber around the town, flinging debris through open windows and the wind became fire or the wind pulled fire into itself, and the people of Peshtigo opened their doors and looked up (180).

In this section the prose, archival lists, firestorm maps, and a distant relative's speculative character portraits are exquisite. She moves into the end of the fire reconstruction with this: "Ninety minutes after the wind came, Wisconsin went quiet and dark and over a million acres remained black and empty when the sun rose. In the morning, it rained" (182–3). Yet this is not the end of the fire, because she goes on to link this tragedy with government scientists' study of the Peshtigo documents, intending to replicate the firestorm in World War II bombing campaigns. The connections Radtke makes in this section—layering archival materials and photographs with her own drawings—are emotionally devastating and brilliantly gathered, complexly illustrating what is possible when memory, research, and intuitive connections come together in hybrid forms.

Despite faltering here and there along the way, *Imagine Wanting Only This* earns its conclusion because it succeeds in expanding the concept of ruin beyond

the personal, into all our shared landscapes of time, space, and observation—because, as Radtke writes: “Who knows which pieces will matter.”

That the woman in the bathing suit sends me back to my own body is inevitable. I wish I could escape seeing the world through my own broken lens. I wish I could honestly inhabit omniscience the way fiction writers do, but the fact that nonfiction cannot exceed our knowing is part of what nonfiction artists create to address. What do I know about this walker? Not enough. But I can say I live in a neighborhood too far north for the tourists, with a large population of recent immigrants from the countries of former Yugoslavia, and many of the women I chat with on this shoreline have Eastern European accents. This is a Catholic city where the Cardinal is Croatian, like me the grandchild of a Croatian immigrant, and where the grocery store on my block sells Croatian candy. This woman passed me twice today, away to one end of the walkway and back to the sand beach where her walk began, and I failed to speak to her—but I speculate she is from one of those not-American countries where the aging female body is not so obsessively hidden. Yes, I have held back that the woman is not young, not a swimsuit model hottie. Is this what you thought when I said *woman* and *bathing suit*? She is in her 50s or older, not slender, not hiding. She is mature, with the ample body of what I remember of my own Slavic aunts, and she walks, neither fast nor slow, without missing a step, all of which, along with the pink swimsuit, is why I notice her. Or she could be a Swedish-American, one of the few Swede aunts left in Andersonville, a few blocks west of here, or one of the lesbians who moved to Andersonville and renamed the neighborhood “Girlstown” in the 1990s. Or maybe she rejects the word woman, for reasons of language, or identity. Perhaps this human being I watch has lived a life I know too little of to as yet comprehend—but this is my point. I am only able to see what I know to consider, and that is the limit of my lens.

The limits of the observing lens, and the intentions of the rendering lens, are the subject of Paisley Rekdal's gloriously hybrid 2011 book *Intimate: An American Family Photo Album*.

*Intimate* is a five-strand braid. One thread tells the story of the white photographer Edward E. Curtis, who spent much of his life creating images of Indigenous people of the early-twentieth-century American West. Another thread imagines the story of the photographer's Crow translator, Alexander Upshaw, and a third interrogates the author's own life as the daughter of a Norwegian-American itinerant academic who is obsessed with American Indian history and a Chinese American woman who is battling cancer. The fourth thread is a selection of poems, Rekdal's lyric response to the photographs, and the final thread is a mix of archival photographs and Curtis's famous images, most of which he posed to portray a pre-modern Indian tribal life that had already largely vanished.

One question is unavoidable. What is a mixed Asian-European-American poet doing making a book dominated by full- and two-page portraits of American Indians? This is a tricky enterprise in a moment in which cultural appropriation in visual and literary arts is increasingly under fire and some Indigenous artists argue, convincingly, that non-native artists have no right to tell native stories. I am sympathetic with these arguments, yet still believe we all need to take part in respectful and deeply researched cross-cultural inquiry. Rekdal's *Intimate* succeeds, in part, because it's so meticulously researched and felt, in part because as a writer of color herself, Rekdal accesses the material through related experience, but mostly because this book is not so much about American Indian bodies as it is an investigation of the lens through which these bodies were seen by Curtis (and through which Rekdal's own body was/is seen by herself and others), and are still seen by viewers today.

I think of the essay I want to write. There is a photo of Alexander Upshaw, too, among Curtis's photos. I flip the pages trying to find him. I hold my father's book in my hands. Something blank and invented, something fabulous and real. I look and look at the photographs.

The photos look back at me (x).

The line *the photos look back at me* is where Rekdal sets up the book's journey, and she never relinquishes that charge. Always, we are aware that the images are not merely documents but creations of an artistic gaze that sentimentalizes and limits, and therefore reinscribes damage. Always, we are aware that Curtis' assistant, Upshaw, a man damaged by forced assimilation and the father of mixed-race children (at least in Rekdal's drawing of him), is caught in Curtis' thrall, even as he reaches toward small liberations. Always, we see the author turning and re-turning the lens, never resting on easy understanding. For instance, though the photographer's process troubles her, particularly that he never photographs mixed-race families, she finds the photographs, when seen in person, to be stunning renderings, the gold tones exquisite. She is disturbed by her adoration of these images and doesn't know how to resolve these extremes.

These interwoven fragments progress, surprisingly, in a classic memoir arc—the connections between parts pleasingly coherent—the narrator slowly connecting the dots and coming to awareness.

My father's anger troubled my sense of being half-Chinese. . . . What I didn't realize was that my refusal to speak about being mixed was not a negation of race at all but a silent place-holder into which others could insert what they needed to perceive (142–3).

This memoir snippet is followed by a section of fictionalized biography. While Upshaw stays loyal to Curtis' increasingly failing work, the assistant's white wife, left at home with children, writes her husband, begging for his return. "Who are you married to—myself or this project?" (144). A few pages later we read Rekdal's analysis of the photographer: "[I]t is not enough to say that he destroyed himself with the work he loved nor that he continued to love the work that destroyed him. After a time, perhaps he had no feeling for what he did—only purpose, which can feel like love" (151).

It's the tension between these interlocking passages and photographs that

gives this project the sense of a journeying that all three of these books have in common. Savoy travels to childhood places to fill in spaces of missingness, Radtke searches for purpose in damaged spaces, and Rekdal dissects the image-maker's role (her own and that of the documentarians) in making the myths of the American West. What, then, does Rekdal see when the lens looks back?

[M]y mother used to shoo me away from the bathroom mirror, scolding me for staring too long at my reflection. Forget beauty, she warned. You look into our faces and we see what you revere. We learn through your gaze what will eventually be taken (172).

This learning is the reason to interrogate not just what we see but how we see, in the service of subjects that will never cease to upend us. Our looking must both pin down understanding and let our subjects go. Is this enough to keep a project such as *Intimate* from relying on oppressive voyeurism? This is a question that must remain constant on all our writing tables. I can't speak to the many ways Native American readers, already too wearied by more than a century of disjointed representation, might experience this work, but to my reading, Rekdal bridges unsurmountable boundaries of culture, time, and experience because she is consistently willing to admit to the constraints of her own gaze and allows all her subjects the right to object.

Of course, Curtis and Upshaw, my father and mother, are captives of mine. What do I know of their lives outside of the vaguest summaries? Stories that I have, deliberately or inadvertently, gotten both wrong and right? To make the narrative seamless and, in its connections, beautiful. In this I am no better, and no worse, than the photographer (237).

So, what does she see, my Old Girl from Dubrovnik who goes walking? This day, when she walks to the lake, she passes wearing little but her pink tank suit, and I smile but I am not important to her afternoon. But let's say my stare annoys her, as any stare might bother me. Let's say she looks back. Does she note my hair, messy in the lake wind? My tattoos of blossoms and rivers she

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might enjoy, or might find unsightly? If she is an immigrant, she probably sees me as sloppily American. She will not be able to make out my migrations. She might simply see me as a person who wears too many clothes to the beach. What she sees is an unanswerable question because we can't see ourselves any more fully than we see each other, but that's why we can't stop looking. This honest and ethical attempt to perceive rightly is what keeps the art of nonfiction alive.

