Audrey Goodman, *A Planetary Lens: The Photo-Poetics of Western Women’s Writing*

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REFERENCES

1 Landscape studies are largely a matter of understanding the tropes of the visual production of place. The picturesque, the sublime, a prescribed point of view that could imply that looking at the world (or writing about it) could be an act of ownership or conquest. To see these tropes in action, one need only walk through a gallery of landscape paintings or read pre-nineteenth-century descriptions of outdoor places. Historically, the act of seeing or describing the landscape required a conceptual removal from the actual place of the land so that it could be delimited, easier to understand, turned into an actual or mental picture, and thereby mythologized and controlled.

2 Photography, like painting, continues to deliver the prescribed notions of place from over a century ago. In the United States and its western regions, understanding place became an act of creation and then repetition of that created memory. Meaning followed meaning as landscape photographers utilized the visual language of historical landscapes to frame place as part of the long traditions of Western Culture. Instead of the aristocratic landowners of the nineteenth century who owned and controlled the view, the photographed landscapes of the U.S. West signified an intrepid, colonizing journey, a grand narrative of place making where, according to the colonizers’
This lofty story of landscape history is the prequel to Audrey Goodman’s *A Planetary Lens: The Photo-Poetics of Western Women’s Writing* in which she argues “that women writers have used photographs to revise and reimagine landscape, identity, and history in the U.S. West,” and that the images combine with storytelling in the form of the photo-book, to bring “the contested and precarious nature of ‘home’ in the U.S. West into critical focus” (3-4). Indeed, she provides her reader with a compelling alternative to landscape’s tired history and instead “brings together critical engagement with the shifting status and meaning of the photographic image, the material history of the photo-book, feminist theories of place and region, and Native articulations of land and vision” (14-15). In keeping with the theme of the planetary, the six chapters provide a constellation of studies that argue for the wholesale disruption of the traditional story of the landscape, offering a revision of place creation in the West. The “many scales of spatial awareness” (3) that she presents in this book demonstrate how women writers and photographers, through text, image, and photo-books, can focus on local knowledge to elucidate place and cultural understanding.

Goodman frames “local embodied knowledge” as a form of regionality (10). The aesthetics of regionality implies that these women were making photographs from a point of view that could never be repeated as male, grand narrative landscape views could be, because the location was intimate and unique without a prescribed viewing point that lent itself to a collective colonizing identity. The “regional,” like the “landscape,” has its own deeply constructed history and can relate to the sociopolitical, economic, or cultural. In Goodman’s usage, being regional means being in and of a place, of having what Kathleen Stewart has called “affective attachment,” that intense and often intangible sense of belonging, which relies on emotional subjectivity and falls into the broader ideas of affect theory. Attachment to a place is a widely felt phenomenon, but one that is inevitably determined culturally and even in individual psychology.

Chapter one is an introduction to the people who have written about and created landscape photographs and who have challenged the deep conventions that still dominate popular understanding of place. Goodman points to those who have provided new ways of addressing the history of the U.S. West in order to situate herself in a body of scholarship, such as Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, Larry McMurtry, J.B. Jackson, Lucy Lippard, Liz Wells, Kate Morris, and other art historians, authors, feminist scholars and critics, literary theorists, landscape historians, artists, and photographers who have already begun to redefine how we can understand western places. The rest of the chapters sample the “photo-poetics” of western women, ranging from the historical to the contemporary, the obvious to the unexpected.

White women photographers and their photo-books created in twentieth-century California is an expected second chapter. Goodman’s strength as a scholar is that she is able to utilize methodologies that consider photographs through stories and stories through photographs, and integrate a wealth of topics into her argument, which also includes portraiture, poetry, and books in addition to prose and photographs. Chapter three, “Joan Didion’s White Albums: Notes and Snapshots from a ‘Native’ Daughter,” for instance, provides a wonderful reading of the author’s use of photography as a literary device for memory and intergenerational narrative to “perpetuate California’s ‘pioneer
story’’ (106). While that idea is important, the most interesting and powerful use of photography to realign our understanding of western place making emerges from the work of Indigenous women.

7 Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, and other writers and photographers such as Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Lee H. Marmon, Simon Ortiz, and Stephen Strom, and others offer insight into the well-known cultural baggage of photography, and more importantly, creative, frank, and stunning new approaches to photography and writing about photography that set historical knowledge on its head. Harjo notes about Stephen Strom’s landscape images that “photographs are not separate from the land, or larger than it. Rather they gracefully and respectfully exist inside it” (182-183). Theirs is a cultural understanding that emerges not from the tropes of place photography that still drive the nation, but from the transgressive history of the camera, visualization of trauma, and the individual and collective experience of indigenous peoples.

8 Goodman shows us that the history of photography in the United States is more than one narrative. In addition to the tropes based on a history of artistic constructs that were brought to North America with the colonizers, a newer history of image subversion by Indigenous artists, writers, historians, and cultural interrogators reveals those constructs. Goodman writes, “Native writers have been contesting both the archival record and the discourse of photography by reframing selected images, sharing their own interpretations of the situation and posture depicted in a portrait, telling their extended family or community histories and taking cameras into their own hands” (147). A Planetary Lens is a wide-ranging book that forces the reader to consider new ways of thinking about place and the American West. Without diminishing the Indigenous voices who have been doing this important decolonizing work, Goodman pushes against the stubbornly entrenched historical ways of seeing.

9 Absence and presence in photographs of indigenous people have been explored in various texts for over twenty years. In her 1998 seminal essay “The Occupation of Indigenous Space as Photograph,” for example, Iroquois/Tuscarora artist Jolene Rickard contended that “the absence, or what is not shown is of equal interest,” arguing that what is missing (and therefore present) in the colonizing photographs of the West is an Indigenous reality (57). Gerald Vizenor’s related ideas about indigenous “presence” in colonizing photographic projects point to the way that the “history” of these photographs of Indigenous individuals “mask practices of genocide, policies of relocation, and forced assimilation” (Vizenor 165; Goodman 145). These important texts have tried to disrupt the tropes of place but the popular perception of the West still relies on a relational engagement with the past, where entrenched myths endure (Stahn). Goodman tries to achieve many things in this book, but her ability to call attention to the physical, written, and representational presence of Indigenous women created by those women in the spaces of the West is her most profound achievement.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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