

Savoy, Lauret. 2015. *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*.

Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.

“One journey seeded all that followed” (Savoy 2015, 5). This opening sentence to *Trace: Memory, History, Race and the American Landscape* by Lauret Savoy sets the tone for the entire work. Savoy opens her book with the story of a memory of a childhood trip to the Grand Canyon as the first journey that would spark an exploration of memory, race, history, and land in America in her life. Starting with this childhood memory, Savoy confronts preconceived ideas about American history by going directly to source material. She explores what is left out of the retelling of history and who gets left behind in those retellings.

As I reviewed the list of book choices, I specifically sought a book written by a female author of color. As an information professional, I want to read widely from the perspectives of people whose lives and experiences have been different than my own. I found Lauret Savoy’s *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape* and wanted to read more about these salient topics. At this particular moment in American history and politics, reflections on history and race seem increasingly relevant and important.

Memory. History. Race. The American Landscape. For Lauret Savoy, an environmental studies professor at Mount Holyoke University, these themes she explores in *Trace* are inextricably intertwined with her own personal history. Her parents faced discrimination and challenges in many different areas of America, much of which she discovers in her research about their lives. As Savoy researched the history of her family, she simultaneously discovered more about the history of race in America, how that history has been remembered, and its effects on her and her family.

*Trace* is deeply and intensely personal because of Savoy's inclusion of her own experiences and family history. This approach focuses the global topics discussed in the book back to a local and individual level. For example, instead of simply discussing the facts about the Army's segregation of African-American nurses during World War II in Western American Army bases, Savoy shares her mother's experience of being an African-American nurse in that setting (Savoy 2015, "Migrating in a Bordered Land.") This approach forces the reader to dive deeper into what could easily be esoteric and distant ideas and reckon with their practical applications.

*Trace* does not read like a traditional academic work. The book is scholarly and thoroughly sourced and researched, yet its form and structure tend to the lyrical and poetic. To support this structure, instead of using numbered notes, the references in the End Notes section are sorted by essay and then in order by topic presented in that essay. For example, under the essay "Properties of Desire" one note reads, "On the number of enslaved persons in the upcountry tripling between 1790 and 1810: Rachel Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760-1808* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 253)." (Savoy 2015, 203). This style allows the narrative to flow unencumbered by numbers and notes while still clearly sourcing facts and statements.

Each essay in *Trace* follows a similar loose structure. Savoy introduces a book, document, or story representative of the book's main themes and discusses its contents and her experience with that item. Next, she revisits the facts and history behind the item, exploring how large pieces of history had been left out of the presented narrative. Beyond that exploration of history, every topic is connected to the geology and ecology of the land related to the topic.

Each major theme is not treated to its own dedicated section: instead, commentary on memory, history, race, and the American landscape is woven throughout each essay.

Savoy travels America in search of family history and American history by way of both actual visits and research. In the essay “Provenance Notes,” she highlights part of her journey to Oklahoma specifically to discover information about ancestors who had lived there. She writes, “I couldn’t remember being in Oklahoma before; maybe familial memory remained. My mother’s cousin had told me years before that kin might have come here, that they were Black Cherokee or Creek” (Savoy 2015, 23).

Her search takes her to cities like Boley in Okfuskee County, which was once hailed by Booker T. Washington in the early 20th century as “the most enterprising, and in many ways the most interesting of the Negro towns in the United States” (Savoy 2015, 26). Much has changed since then, as Boley now only has a population of about a thousand people. She doesn’t discover certain information ancestors in places like Boley or Okfuskee or Langston, but she did observe the changes in the towns and the land of Oklahoma. She struggles with the idea of displacement of people and how that leads to gaps in memory and history, saying, “Bridging the distance between history and the particularities of family seemed an impossible task given the erosive and estranging power displacement could wield” (Savoy 2015, 28).

“Provenance Notes” is essential reading for information professionals based in Oklahoma, especially for those like me who do not have extensive knowledge of the history of Native Americans or African-Americans in Oklahoma. Savoy’s exploration of the land and the history of people in Oklahoma, especially as a place of displacement, is crucial to a full understanding of the area. In just a handful of pages, Savoy provides an entrance into parts of

Oklahoma history that are not typically remembered or studied by those to whom that history is not personal (Savoy 2015, 15-30).

Beyond Oklahoma, Savoy digs into many example of instances in which history has been distorted by those who wrote the history, especially when recording the stories and places of any minority group. The essay “Properties of Desire” explores the history of a plantation in South Carolina where Savoy and a friend attended a living history presentation. That presentation focused on the Revolutionary War, and when Savoy pressed the guide about slavery at the plantation after that time period, no information was given. As Savoy says, “History as told to us [in the presentation] ended in 1805” (Savoy 2015, 91).

This experience at the plantation led Savoy to go deeper into this plantation’s past through census and other historical records to learn what was being left out of the story. What she finds about the terrors of slavery and oppression after 1805 is a searing reminder of how darker parts of history are pushed aside or ignored in order to tell a more pleasing story. She questions how to respond to these and other examples of misappropriations of memory, race, and history in America. Savoy challenges the American reader:

It is hard to engage painful elements of America’s past and be self-reflective, particularly if one must confront deeply ingrained beliefs and ideas that have shaped or made comfortable, one’s sense of self or place. Or if one seeks to shed a sense of inherited shame or pain in order to step away from stories of group victimization. But the legacy of slavery, and the racism it fed and reinforced, remains a malignant symbiosis. It feeds who we Americans think we are, as citizens and as communities. It still festers as

untended wounds, quite open and disfiguring to some, hidden from view to others (Savoy 2015, 113).

This challenge is essential for the information professional to consider. Revisiting painful history is unpleasant and uncomfortable, yet it is a necessary task for those committed to sharing accurate information.

*Trace* is not a book that can be read lightly. In barely 200 pages, Savoy lays bare some of the gaping wounds in American racial history and memory. She brings to light unpleasant truths and challenges the reader to think critically about ideas and stories that deserve closer scrutiny. Her work also reminds the reader of the value and necessity of investigating source materials when available instead of relying solely on presented information. Through *Trace*, Savoy makes clear the power of connecting grand themes to a personal, earthy level in order to make those themes more accessible.

This review barely scratches the surface of the insights *Trace* has to offer the information professional. My review copy is covered in more than 30 tabs noting lines, stories and ideas that I found pertinent, fascinating, and revelatory: far too many ideas than can be included here.

*Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape* offers information professionals an opportunity to be challenged by the facts of American history and the fascinating research by Lauret Savoy. As she closes the book, “Home indeed lies among the ruins and shards that surround us all” (Savoy 2015, 186).

Reviewed by Sarah Davis