

In a sense they (Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac) were the last pioneers, and anyone who has attempted to follow in their footsteps has succeeded only in finding a pale copy of what they saw, heavily mediated by knowledge of their works as well as overrun by what passes for progress- a kind of homogenization.<sup>1</sup>

-Luc Sante

I am not a pioneer. I am only a witness in the time in which my heart pumps blood through these veins and arteries, just like Kerouac and Frank, flesh and blood, an imperfect human trying to make sense of the world around me. I had the good fortune to find some good maps. There were trails, footprints, scents and "...photographs: the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement."<sup>2</sup>

Many people have done difficult and honest work before me, hard work, beautiful work. I have Frank, Kerouac, Lee Friedlander, and W. Eugene Smith and they had Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Arthur Rothstein, who had Alexander Gardner, Timothy O'Sullivan, and George Barnard. Whose road was less real? Whose work had not been heavily mediated, studied, respected? When was the United States the bold, shining original? Was it the original lived by Gardner, a road that waged genocide against the native people of this land? Was it the original road traveled by Barnard trailing Sherman's scorched earth campaign? Was the parched road of dust driven by Lange and Rothstein the original? How can Sante claim that Frank and Kerouac were pioneers, trailblazers of the last original road? Are we completely homogenized now? The integration is complete. No one is marginalized. No one is left out in the cold anymore.

Homogenize, "to make more uniform throughout in texture, mixture, quality, etc., by breaking down and blending the particles."<sup>3</sup> Isn't that the original that the United States claims to be, the great melting pot of the world, the country of immigrants who can become not just citizens, but Americans? Fuck Luc Sante. Let him sit on the couch condemning those of us who beat the streets of our inheritance. I take his slight for title and wear it with pride.

*The Pale Copy* is a map leading you to the work of others, leading you to books, to photographs and words; taking you to abandoned steel mills and furniture factories, through crumbling castles of industry and golden fields of wheat, from frozen docks to desert strongholds, into bars and burned homes, across bridges and down streets where blood was shed; physical and emotional places that have contemporary and historical significance in the creation of the cultural DNA that makes us the United States of America.

On the A train into Manhattan, a tingle of electricity ran down my spine while I was thinking of Robert Frank's *The Americans*, and his attention to symbols: the automobile, the flag, the cross, the road, juke boxes... This led to thoughts of Thomas

Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and the muted post horn, symbol of the underground post office, of underground communication. I am a reader of iconography too. I understand the literature of signs and symbols. *The Pale Copy* is a book of code. It is a manual parsed with the symbols of subliminal language.

*A Little Taste* is the introduction to this body of work. It is an overview of the map, the pulled back perspective. This volume introduces you to the places, people and themes visited in *The Pale Copy*. I am wary of being too explicit and too literal in any description of my use of metaphor, but I will reveal the way in which I use symbols, text, title, and juxtaposition to create layers of meaning.

Some of the symbols that *The Pale Copy* uses are the flag, the cross, the star, and the empty chair. The repetition of these icons creates connections between images and establishes a vocabulary. *A Little Taste* begins with the image of Joe Lewis' fist coming at you. The American flag snaps in the background. The next image is a demolished residential building in Detroit titled, *Block Busting*. The inclusion of the flag in the imagery of the fist of a black man and the smashed shell left behind by white flight forces us to contemplate ownership. It makes this an American issue. Images of the flag are repeated throughout the volume.

The cross is first seen in the image titled, *The Depot*. It is a picture shot from a dilapidated stairway in Detroit's old train station. Repetition connects this image to the picture of a blood red cross on the gate of Walter Reed Memorial Hospital in Bethesda. The star on the gravestone of Power in Arlington National Cemetery is linked to the very same star emblazoned on Wall St. The empty chair in the burned ruins of a home in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans is seen again in Pittsburgh and Hoquiam, and again as a collection of chairs covered in plastic in the State Legislature of Colorado. A lexicon has been laid out. There is an alphabet, vocabulary, and syntax that are creating an etymology of symbols.

Text within the images is used in a variety of ways. It labels objects. I use it to draw attention. I apply metaphor with it. I play with the possibility of interpretation. Sometimes it provides the only connection to the picture it is paired with. Sometimes the text is funny, and sometimes it is heartbreakingly sad. Text is political. I find irony in text. I find text beautiful. I use text to pass on reference. I use text to pay respect, honoring reverence. I use text as a challenge.

Title is used to steer the reader toward something important that might not be seen without a little bit of direction. A photo of a chain link fence at sunset is titled, *Executive Order 9066*. This connects that particular fence to the internment of the Japanese by Franklin D. Roosevelt. This connection is reinforced by the following image of FDR's monument in DC containing the words "Fear Itself". A photograph of blood in the snow is titled, *Flower in the Desert*. This guides the viewer to Eugene Richards' photo essay of the same name. This locates the blood in Chicago. This blood is not ambiguous anymore. It is specific. This blood is now connected to history. The title, *An American Exodus* was used the same way. The photograph of the covered wagon trailer on the cover of Dorothea Lange's book is linked to *The Pale Copy's* image of an Airstream on

blocks behind barbed wire. A historical connection now links these symbols of dislocation.

Juxtaposition can be broken down into the pairing of the images facing each other, and the sequencing of the pairs that create the meter and tempo of the poem. When pairing two images in a spread, I consider formal elements like compositional balance and the use of color. These elements reinforce the communication of ideas between the two pictures, a communication that would be absent if the images were isolated. The pair of photographs of the headstone with the name of Power on it, and the bronze M16 are connected by the color green. The line of the rolling cemetery hill dotted with grave markers connects across the page to the pathway behind the soldiers. The angle of the M16 points back to Power. Geometry reinforces a message.

The reasons behind the sequencing of the pairs vary. The link can be something graphic and obscure like the backlit doorway of an abandoned furniture factory in Lexington to the home in Oregon flying the Gadsen flag with its door ajar. The connection these doors make anchor more subtle political ideas. Sometimes it is text that connects the pairs as in the image of the train car with the word "cotton" to the following image of rusting chains. Place and metaphor are also used to connect the pairs and to create the rhythm of the poem.

*The Pale Copy* uses a language of signs and symbols to communicate ideas. Text, title, and juxtaposition are then employed to create a sequence of images that reinforce them.

My education has been so unwitting I can't quite tell which thoughts come from me and which from my books, but that's how I've stayed attuned to myself and the world around me for the past thirty-five years.<sup>4</sup>

-Bohumil Hrabal

At the end of Bush II's 2<sup>nd</sup> term, I was reading books by Czechs writing in a time of totalitarian control. I was printing and editing the *Piekna Polszczizna* exhibition for show in Europe. The insight of those living under such an overt dictatorship lent the perspective necessary to reveal similar aspects of a subtler one. The writings of Bohumil Hrabal, Ivan Klima, Milan Kundera, Karl Capek and Vaclav Havel influenced the psychological and mental climate in which I was editing and constructing the exhibition. I use books to create atmosphere and temperature, and then I take the time that is necessary to steep images and ideas to produce work.

The seeds for *The Pale Copy* were initially sown by the images and words of some of the photographers working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). At the time that these individuals were making work for the FSA, the United States was trying to claw itself out of the Great Depression. The feelings of connection established by massive layoffs and the beginning of the Great Recession sparked an interest to create my own FSA project. I began doing research in the late fall of 2009. I read the

autobiographies of Gordon Parks. I followed those books with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by Walker Evans and James Agee. I pored through the photographs collected by the FSA's director, Roy Stryker. I roamed the stacks of McHenry Library and pulled books from the University of California's inter-library loan system. When you look at the bibliography, you will see that I did not confine myself to the FSA, but ranged out in my search for information produced by people who combed this country questing with questions.

I was compelled to write down places in my journal that I wanted to visit and record with my camera. I began creating my map: Chicago for Jack Delano's color night photographs of the rail yards and Eugene Richards' *A Flower in the Desert*, Pittsburgh for W. Eugene Smith's *Dream Street*, Moundville for James Agee and Walker Evans, Detroit for Robert Frank who had followed Evans and Charles Sheeler, Harlem and DC for Gordon Parks, New Orleans for Lee Friedlander, Denver for Jack Kerouac, *The Road West* for Dorothea Lange... The map continues to grow. The road itself informs me. It hints at trails covered with leaves not quite cold, and reveals fingerprints on old glasses and "fragments of cloth"<sup>2</sup> snagged on brambles.

I use the works of those who traveled the road before me to create routes to the physical places that became the alphabet of an etymology. *The Pale Copy* is not an imitation. I am not defacing the photographs and words that were left behind. These works drove me to have my own experiences and my own interpretations. They made me want to be a witness.

A comparison of the physical layout of *The Pale Copy*, and Walker Evans' *American Photographs* and Robert Frank's *The Americans* reveals similarities. While I had intimate knowledge of these two books, I did not design *The Pale Copy* with this information in mind. I made conscious aesthetic decisions based on my own visual style and how I wanted my work to be read. I did not set out to mimic Evans and Frank.

Like *American Photographs* and *The Americans*, *The Pale Copy* is a visual poem. It is not a literal document. The distraction of text has been withheld from the pages of the body of the book although "...the reader would probably prefer to have a few of the aids to easy enlightenment such as captions, and possible footnotes with the pictures."<sup>5</sup> The absence of text allows the reader the freedom to make more personal interpretations and puts the focus on the information contained within the image and that image's sequential relationship to other images. The viewer has access to textual clues at the end of the book. Like Frank, I want you to go back and look again, "When people look at my pictures I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read a line of a poem twice."<sup>6</sup>

I chose to pair images on facing pages unlike Evans and Frank who isolated each image by placing it on the right hand page and by leaving the left facing page blank. I found that the juxtaposition of two images on facing pages created a dialogue between them and increased their power to convey meaning. This design is spare enough that the power of the individual image is not muddied and lost.

While black was used for the covers of both *The Americans* and *American Pictures*, which used the cloth that covered bibles and hymnals<sup>7</sup>, both Frank and Evans surrounded their photographs with white backgrounds. The sparseness of this design worked well with their black and white photographs and the way in which they wanted their work to be read. I have a different aesthetic. The majority of the images in *The Pale Copy* are in color, and I have always liked to see rich color coming out of deep blacks. A black background carries the weight required to compliment the heavy style in which I print as well as the way that I use red, black and negative space.

The dimensions of all three of these books and the number of photographs and pages contained within them are similar, but not identical. Decisions regarding physical size were made based on the formats in which the photographs were shot and the amount of space necessary to complete each poem. While there are similarities in form, each book is a unique expression that gives a nod to the influence of its predecessor.

*The Pale Copy* requires participation. One needs to have curiosity to get something out of this project. The reader must do some work; a bit of heavy lifting is required. This is not a passive communication of information. This is not television. I am trying to lead individuals to paths that beg further exploration. Go see for yourself. Go read the words. Go eat the food. Go breathe the air. Go talk to the people and listen. Allow yourself the joy of a small, wrinkled old man squeezing your arm with a gnarled hand as he smiles and tells you, "No, I don't want to do an interview, but I love Americans. They're beautiful even when they're bad. That's why I became a citizen. I'll see you in heaven. We'll have coffee. We'll have coffee and a little piece of cake."<sup>8</sup>

## Notes:

1) Sante, Luc, "Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac". Greenough, Sarah, and Stuart Alexander. *Looking in: Robert Frank's the Americans*. Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, 2009. Print.

2) Agee, James. Agee, James and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1941. Print.

3) Webster, Noah. *New World Dictionary of the American Language*. Cleveland: World Pub. Co, 1962. Print.

4) Hrabal, Bohumil. *Too Loud a Solitude*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990. Print.

5) Unsigned review, "American Photographs". Papageorge, Tod. *Walker Evans and Robert Frank, an Essay on Influence*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery, 1981. Print.

6) Frank, Robert. Greenough, Sarah, and Stuart Alexander. *Looking in: Robert Frank's the Americans*. Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, 2009. Print.

7) Papageorge, Tod. *Walker Evans and Robert Frank, an Essay on Influence*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery, 1981. Print.

8) Unidentified, 52<sup>nd</sup> St. and 9<sup>th</sup> Ave., New York, NY: 2010