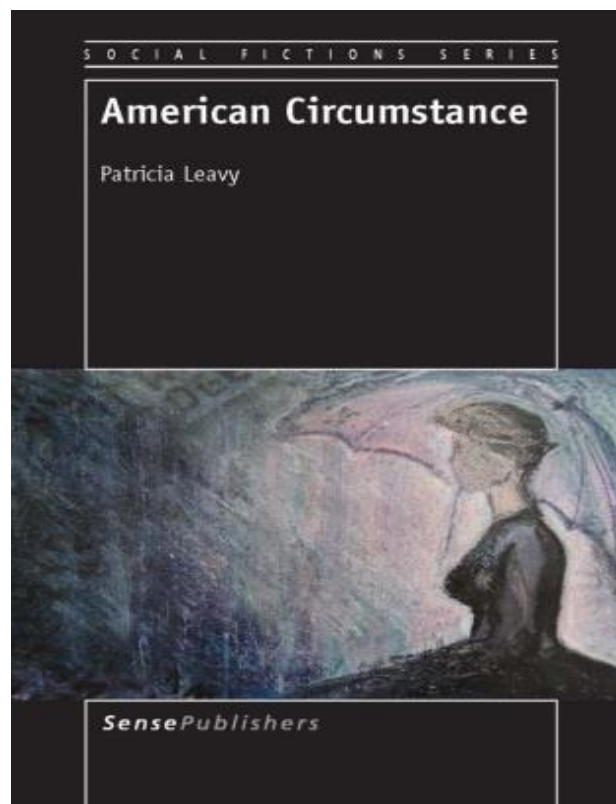


**Review of *American Circumstance***

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Leavy, P. (2013). *American circumstance*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

ISBN: 978-9462092853

Pages: 166

Patricia Leavy's arts-based research novel *American Circumstance* is part of a new social fictions series from Sense Publishers. In the Preface, Leavy (2013) states that for her, "*American Circumstance* is a pure a/r/tographical rendering—that which fully merges my artist-researcher-teacher identities" (p. xiii). The book is fictional, yet based on her autoethnographic observations "and more than a decade of teaching and sociological research about gender, class, race, identity, and relationships" (p. xiii). The three main characters of the book, Paige, Mollie, and Gwen, represent a microcosm of issues that American women of the upper class face, and how their problems compare and contrast to those of women in other parts of the world. Leavy shows that the lines between fiction and scholarship are beginning to merge, and that an academic can write an effective fictional account to represent the data of her sociological findings. As a researcher and creative writer who is interested in the concept of social fiction, I would have liked to have known more about Dr. Leavy's data collection methods, particularly because I am intrigued by autoethnography as a methodology. However, I appreciated her introducing herself as an a/r/tographer. I am familiar with this term from my arts-based inquiry course, and I too see my identities of artist, researcher, and teacher as interrelated and influential of my scholarship and my worldview.

Part I of the book introduces the reader to all three central characters, yet focuses on the backstory of Paige Michaels. Paige is an attractive, perfectionistic, and intelligent woman who does fundraising for WIN, an organization that provides aid to women who live in high-conflict areas of the world. In Part I, the reader sees Paige's life as a teenager. She lives a sheltered life with high-income parents in New England. However, her life changes forever when she starts tutoring Kayla, a.k.a. "Kay-Kay" Washington. Through this originally professional rapport, Paige is exposed to a part of her city that she was previously unfamiliar with and gains a new perspective about her privileges. Additionally, she meets Kayla's neighbor Jake, and their story evolves into an intense first-love romance. The story of an affluent girl who falls for a boy from the "wrong side of the tracks" is one we have heard or read before. However, Leavy writes it in an engaging

way that helps the reader to ask important questions about class issues in America and why we choose the people whom we eventually marry. Due to their class and background differences, Paige and Jake's relationship is ill fated, in spite of their intense connection to each other. When Paige goes to college at Columbia, she meets and eventually marries Spencer Bradley, a man whose family background and social class more closely align with hers. Years later, Paige and Jake reconnect at Paige's mother's funeral. Will their love reignite, in spite of their betrayal toward each other years before? Is Paige willing to give up her wealth and influence for this connection? This engaging story keeps the reader interested and wondering why women make the choices they do.

Part II focuses primarily on Mollie, a kindhearted woman who has recently moved to the upper east side of New York in hopes of living a glamorous life. Although Mollie's husband clearly loves her for who she is, Mollie struggles with her weight and is not always comfortable in her own body. She also worries she is not as wealthy, or as thin, as Paige and Gwen. Although she enjoys spending time with these two women, she constantly tries to buy the right outfits and to show up at the right events to impress the two women and their spouses. However, Mollie only knows Paige and Gwen on a surface level, initially. While they appear to have ideal lives, Mollie, along with the reader, learns that not everything that glitters is gold. Throughout her life, Paige struggled to make authentic connections to her own parents, and her marriage to Spencer has secrets and rocks in the river. Gwen's husband Redmond is rich and influential, but a business deal gone bad could leave the affluent couple with almost nothing. Eventually, Mollie learns to better appreciate her relationship with her husband and to feel comfortable in her own skin. A key part of the book, for me as a reader, is when she purchases her flats, in which she feels comfortable and also like her artistic self.

In Part III, the lives of the three women truly merge together. Gwen and Redmond face a crisis, which encourages Paige and Spencer to work as a team again, in their efforts to help their friends. Paige re-evaluates her life, past and present, and bestows words of wisdom on her daughter Chloe, who is soon

to make important decisions about college and romance. While Redmond and Spencer are out of town for business, the three women come together for a ladies' dinner, where they learn to put their guards down, at least to a degree. The end of the book presents a charity event for Paige's WIN organization, during which her important, but key past relationship with Kayla comes full circle. All three women appear with their spouses to dance and to appreciate Paige's efforts. Their lives are not perfect, and many issues still brew below the surface. However, the women have learned about open communication, appearance versus reality, and the importance of true friendships.

The characters in the book were intriguing, and I enjoyed the combination of dialogue and description. There were areas of the story of which I wanted to know more, including Spencer and Paige's relationship and why they chose each other, Paige's work with WIN, and Gwen as a character. In a relatively short piece of fiction, it can be hard to develop each character sufficiently. However, I found this novel very engaging and enjoyable to read. Even hours after I read many chapters, I was still thinking about the issues it raised related to social class and gender roles. This book, as the back cover notes, can be read for pure enjoyment and could also make for fruitful discussion in a sociology or women's studies courses. In particular, it raises important

questions about why women love who they do and why they have to put on an appearance of perfection.

For additional inspiration in my own social fictions writing, I am now reading *Low-Fat Love*, also written by Patricia Leavy (2011). This novel has received acclaim and attention and also raises important questions about why women make the romantic and career choices they do to the point of self-sacrifice. I am excited about the Sense Publishers' Social Fictions Series and eager to see what else it will produce. Both of these books show Leavy's ability to use her fiction writing talents to effectively tell the story of modern women while raising research questions about women's roles. *American Circumstance* is a strong contribution to arts-based research and a/r/tography.

As Irwin & Springgay (2008), note, "a/r/tography is a methodology of embodiment, of continuous engagement with the world: one that interrogates yet celebrates meaning. A/r/tography is a living practice, a life-creating experience examining our personal, political, and/or professional lives" (p.117). Hopefully, more a/r/tographers will produce strong creative writing based on their life experiences and research that is both inviting to a larger audience and invigorating to academic communities.

## References

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