Samantha Sy

Dr. Tremblay-McGaw

CTW II

9 February 2017

The Wildly Oppressive West

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson acquired the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon, allowing Americans to migrate westward in the nineteenth century. Mission Santa Clara de Asis had already been established by this point, but the campus we current students know today is not the same land that it was in 1777. Santa Clara, like most of today's America, had once been well populated by Native Americans, but this all changed with westward expansion. The popular legacies of westward expansion were simplified to represent the idea of American men venturing into unclaimed land, encouraged by the concept of Manifest Destiny; these brave men set out to start their new lives in pursuit of fortune by means of their individual efforts. While these legacies promote rugged individualism, a key trait of American culture, they ironically ignore the fact that most of these men were traveling with their wives and children, not as individuals. Additionally, these settlers were not entering unclaimed land, they were entering what was mostly Native American territory. The *Virgin Landscape: Representations of Women and the American West* exhibit in the de Saisset Museum of Santa Clara University explores different perspectives of women in relation to their environments – whether it be their literal environments, as in the land itself, or the events taking place at the time – by displaying photographs of women, by women, or about women. The exhibit includes the work of twenty-three artists and will be on display at the de Saisset Museum until March 19, 2017.

One of the photographs in the exhibit is Edward S. Curtis' 1924 piece, *The Burden-Basket – Coast Pomo*. It displays a sepia tone image of a Native American woman standing outside, wearing a plaid long-sleeve shirt tucked into a long high-waisted skirt. Her body is angled away from the camera, but her face is turned toward it. Her arm in the front is down, holding some sort of long stick-like tool; her other arm is behind her, possibly holding her back or resting on her hip. A cone-shaped basket is held up by a thick strap around her head and rests on her back. This basket is called a burden basket. Native American women used them to hold their things when working; when they went home, they would physically leave their burdens at the entrance. The part of the photograph that drew my attention was her face. Looking directly into the camera, she looks scared and sad; her mouth is turned slightly downward, and the beginnings of her eyebrows are raised. "Why is she sad?" I asked myself. The woman is a member of the Pomo tribe, a group native to Northern California (de Saisset Museum). This was part of the land that had been taken over by the United States' westward expansion in the nineteenth century. Perhaps her burden is more than just the heavy contents of her basket. Some of her burdens are probably caused by the fact that the Pomo tribe lost their own territory and are now physically and culturally surrounded by white people. She is not sad because she is struggling with her work. She is sad because she is struggling to keep her native culture, an integral part of her identity. She sees Curtis, a white man from Wisconsin, and she looks scared. Not all of the burdens she is carrying can be left at the door when she comes home. Some of these burdens will be carried by her and her descendants for the rest of their lives.

Despite their important role in westward expansion, women remained socially inferior to men in America. In response, *Virgin Landscape* exhibit sheds light on the women that lived in the shadows. In a room of mostly black and white prints in the exhibit, a colorful photo of a

woman in pink drew my attention. This photo was *Ms. Clingfree*, a self-portrait by Judy Dater from 1982. Dater is standing in front of a black curtain parted down the middle with an emerald green fabric behind it. She appears to be playing a maid, as her arms are full with supplies, including an iron, a duster, a dust pan, a broom, a box of Cheer detergent, and a box of ClingFree dryer sheets. Instead of a typical maid uniform, Dater has a hot pink top with a low neck and thin straps; her short white skirt reveals most, if not all, of her legs. Both the top and skirt appear asymmetrical on her body. While completely unnecessary for the work of a maid, Dater wears separate sleeves on her lower arms and a visor over her curled black hair that match the rest of her outfit. Her shoes, however, are red and worn, clashing with the pink. Additionally, her face is overdone with makeup, displayed by her bold red lip color and an indigo-like eyeshadow. Her straight face looks directly into the camera with her mouth in a line, implying that she is upset or annoyed, while her eyes look sad and almost disappointed. I, too, would feel all of these emotions if I were in a society that expected me as a woman to work hard while also appearing sexually attractive – oh, wait. Just like most women in real life, Dater is struggling to satisfy all of society's expectations. A woman's professional life has been and might always will be connected to her appearance. The release of *Ms. Clingfree* also followed the rise of mainstream feminism in the 1970s. Unlike personal titles like "Mrs." or "Miss," the title "Ms." is used for women without implying a specific marital status. This nod to the feminist movement is combined with "Clingfree," a company known for their dryer sheets. In doing so, Dater suggests that the advancements of feminism have done little to change society's expectations of women. "Ms. Clingfree" and her struggles were relevant in 1982 and remain relevant 35 years later.

While the media often highlights the patriotic, masculine, individualistic, and romanticized aspects of westward expansion, *Virgin Landscape* highlights the oppression of

women and native people that took place. These photographs allow the audience to look at the nineteenth century in a new light by exploring how women were represented in the American West. Pieces like *The Burden Basket* examine the effect of westward expansion on the land and its native people, and pieces like *Ms. Clingfree* analyze women's roles and expectations in the American West. I highly recommend this exhibit to all, especially to other students beginning to enter the world, seeking to make history. Especially in times like these, it is important to be reminded of the legacies of the past and, more importantly, for us to consider what legacies we will leave for the future.