

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA GRADUATE COLLEGE

WILLIN' TO BE MOVIN'? CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC EXAMINATIONS OF FEMALE
MOBILITY IN THE AMERICAN WEST

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WILLIN' TO BE MOVIN'? CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC EXAMINATIONS OF FEMALE
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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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ABSTRACT

For many, “a man on a horse” is the iconic image of mobility in the American West. This dissertation topples this icon to emphasize that the movements of women in Western America have and continue to be more important than this macho image. Specifically, for this project, I analyze sixteen, female-identifying artists who have made work that examines the history of female mobility in the American West of the past, present, and future. Their artwork deals with literal movements, including border crossings, forced relocations of Native peoples, and tourism in the Southwest, as well as metaphorical upwards movements. Throughout my analyses, I both work with and decenter the standards of “traditional” Western American art history to examine not only paintings, photography, and sculptures, but also “crafts,” performances, and other forms not typically viewed as “fine art.” This research does not simply present a counter-narrative to the exclusionary myths continuing to dominate the field of art of the American West, but rather, proposes a structural reorganization that can revitalize the area of study. In examining feminist artists from a wide range of identities, this dissertation analyzes how collective memory changes and asks if “outsiders” can bring about accepted shifts in what the American popular imagination has memorialized as the American West. Historically, scholars and male artists have centered women’s trajectories in Western America around their male counterparts’ whims and obscured how their successes and hardships shaped their personal and group identities. By using contemporary artwork to reveal women’s overlooked histories in Western America, this dissertation challenges these past tendencies to emphasize that that mobility—specifically, the movements of women—has and continues to be an integral aspect of the American West’s formation and character.

*And I've been from Tucson to Tucumcari
Tehachapi to Tonopah
Driven every kind of rig that's ever been made
Driven the backroads to I wouldn't get weighed*

*And if you give me weed, whites, and wine
And you show me a sign
And I'll be willin' to be movin'*

—Linda Ronstadt, “Willin’” (1974)

INTRODUCTION

THE “GOOD OL’ BOYS CLUB” NO LONGER: EVALUATING THE NEED FOR CONTEMPORARY, FEMINIST APPROACHES TO ART OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Walking through California’s Coachella Valley during its 2023 Desert X exhibition, one might have stumbled across a scene both expected and surprising situated within the desert landscape.¹ Nestled among the sandy dunes, a large bronze sculpture loomed in the distance. While, at first glance, the artwork may have appeared to be yet another of the many bronze equestrian statues that have populated Western American art history for decades, a closer inspection would have revealed that the artist turned this iconic form on its absent head. Titled *Pioneer* and made by the Harlem-born, African American artist Tschabalala Self (b. 1990), the bronze depicts a headless, neck-less, shoulder-less, and armless woman with her legs spread wide as she rides a bulky horse (Figure 1).² The woman’s hands rest delicately on her thighs, akin to birds perched on a branch, with a few inches of wrist stretching skyward. The body parts that the woman does possess look to be covered in fabric, calling to mind the Classical tradition of draped, female sculptures. Yet, with more observation, it becomes clear that the woman is

¹ The title of this chapter is a reference to Kasey Musgrave’s 2015 song, “Good Ol’ Boys Club.” This dissertation is littered with musical references. While these reflect some of the musical stylings that I enjoy, these references are more nuanced than a catchy way to open a chapter or another excuse to reference k.d. lang or Linda Ronstadt. I find many parallels between art of the American West and country-western music. Both are often considered “hokey,” both are often siloed into their own spaces—“cowboy” museums versus the Country Music Awards. Beyond this, the accomplishments of women are overwhelmingly obscured both genres. Regarding what country-western music tends to get played on the radio, information studies scholar Jada Watson asserts that “[i]f you’re not a White, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied male, you’re not on air and you’re not on the radio and so you don’t exist within that space.” As a result, female artists receive, on average, only 11 percent of all airplay on country stations in the U.S. and Canada (Jennifer Gerson and Jasmine Mithani, “The radio divide: How airplay reinforces the gender gap in country music,” *The 19th*, published March 14, 2023, <https://19thnews.org/2023/03/country-music-radio-gender-gap-women-artists/>). Furthermore, women of color and LGBTQIA+ artists earn less than one percent of airplay (Jessica Nicholson, “Country Radio Still Playing the Same Old Song When It Comes to [Not] Playing Female Artists, Study Finds,” *Billboard*, published May 24, 2023). Thus, the title of this project and the musical references opening each chapter also function to draw needed attention to female, Western American musical artists who deserve more “airtime” along with their counterparts in the visual arts.

² Dodie Kazanjian, “Artist Tschabalala Self Upends Our Perception of the Female Form,” *Vogue*, published April 13, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/tschabalala-self-studio-visit>. Specifically, *Pioneer* was located at 33.940884, -116.483980, San Geronio Street and Bubbling Wells Road, Desert Hot Springs, California (“Tschabalala Self: *Pioneer*,” Desert X 2023, published 2023, <https://desertx.org/dx/dx-23/tschabalala-self/>).

completely naked. Rather than represent draping, the texture across the woman's skin is that of a normal, non-idealized female body with pubic hair, cellulite, folds, and sags.

The pioneer's steed, a blocky looking horse, appears to buckle under the burden of its Lady Godiva-esque rider and has begun to turn an oxidized, green hue. Similar to its rider, its own flesh is rippled and non-idealized. Instead of presenting as the mythic "trusty steed," Self's horse looks to be in the process of collapsing. Contrasting its energetic, headless rider, the horse's eyes bulge as its head dips towards the sandy ground. Without a head, the identity of Self's pioneer is purposefully unclear. Rather than represent a particular person or type of pioneer, as bronze statues of the American West often do, Self's anonymous woman stands in for the migrant women of color who traveled and settled the West in a manner not idealized by the archetypal, white, "Pioneer Mother" monuments dominating conceptions of Western American women.

Self's *Pioneer* does not look as if she is in the process of taking a triumphant ride out to the "unsettled" West, as most bronzes of the American West appear. Instead, the headless rider and her exhausted, collapsing steed are frozen in indeterminable time; whether they are at the end of the journey, the middle, or its beginning is as unclear as how she lost her appendages. *Pioneer's* setting in the sandy, scrubby American desert challenges the long associations of Western America with both the landscapes of the Great Plains and Intermountain Region and with the past. As elaborated upon in *The Invention of the American Desert: Art, Land, and the Politics of Environment*, edited by Lyle Massey and James Nisbet, the American desert presents a perfect and vast screen onto which to project a simulacrum and often conveys a sense of timelessness—qualities which Self utilizes explicitly for her bronze.³ For Desert X visitors, not

³ Lyle Massey and James Nisbet, "Introduction," in *The Invention of the American Desert: Art, Land, and the Politics of Environment*, ed. by Lyle Massey and James Nisbet (University of California Press, 2021), 7.

only is it unclear just whom, exactly, *Pioneer* is supposed to represent, it is similarly murky from which time period Self's woman comes. Is it the American West of the past—as with archetypical bronze Western American monuments—the present, or the future?

Self's reexamination and purposeful subversion of the tropes, canonized media, and historical inspirations of artwork of the American West is just one of the many ways examined in this dissertation in which contemporary, female artists of the American West are working to disrupt the genre of Western American art. While, over the past century and a half, the histories and artwork of the American West have prioritized, mythologized, and valorized the acts and images of Euro-American men, the diverse, female artists of this project reflect “outsider” conceptions of the American West in their work that draws attention to overlooked and obscured histories of moving women in the mythic area. Discussing Self's *Pioneer*, Desert X 2023 organizers noted that, “[t]he desert often references both the beginning and the end. *Pioneer* similarly represents the lost, expelled and forgotten Indigenous, Native, and African women whose bodies and labor allowed for American expansion and growth.”⁴ These female bodies, movements, and labor have typically been excluded from the lineage of bronze sculptures of the American West, which reflects both the mythic quality of the territory as well as its integration into white Americans' sense of identity.

Scholar Susan Bernardin argues, “[t]he intention (and implications) of western monuments has always been met with resistance and refusal by the peoples and communities excluded or excised from belonging in a whitewashed U.S. West.”⁵ A kind of bronze counter-monument, then, *Pioneer* “is meant to be a monument for those who are lost or forgotten” but

⁴ “Tschabalala Self: *Pioneer*,” Desert X 2023.

⁵ Susan Bernardin, “Monumental Reckonings and Impossible Placeholders” in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and the American West*, ed. Susan Bernardin (Routledge, 2022), 2.

also “meant to speak about their descendants who are still here.”⁶ Self considers *Pioneer* to be “beyond a monument, it’s meant to be slightly more of a mirage” in “a context that’s somewhat devoid of any kind of cultural signifier of this present time.”⁷ The desert setting and the sculpture’s focus on not only the present, but also the future, also contrast strongly the historically-tethered genre of art of the American West and its corresponding scholarship, which are overwhelmingly focused on nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny mythos.

For many, “a man on a horse,” not Self’s headless, female rider, is the iconic image of mobility in the American West. This dissertation topples this macho icon to emphasize that the movements of women to and through Western America, including those honored by *Pioneer*, have and continue to be more important than this patriarchal trope.⁸ Specifically, for this project, I analyze artwork by contemporary, female-identifying artists that documents female mobility in the American West of the past, present, and future—as Self’s *Pioneer* does—organized by the “push” and “pull” factors that compel their movements. In doing so, I argue that female-identifying Western American artists work to demystify a national myth as they present hyperlocal histories. As this project will stress, the field of art of the American West has much to gain by paying attention to artwork by contemporary artists and those from historically underrepresented or marginalized groups rather than the canonized “greats” still dominating scholarship. Continued investigations into nineteenth-century realism, Manifest Destiny propaganda, and reinterpretations of cowboy imagery are failing to hold the field of art of the American West together; a strong divide exists between those interested in “the West” (white

⁶ “Tschabalala Self: *Pioneer*,” Desert X 2023.

⁷ “Tschabalala Self: *Pioneer*,” Desert X 2023.

⁸ For this project, I am referring specifically to the United States. I will also use “American West,” its shortened form “the West,” and “Western America” interchangeably to refer to the territory in the United States that includes the Great Plains and area to its west.

conquerors) and those dedicated to “the rest” (diverse groups of people of color). An alternative that circumvents this division entirely, rather than trying to span it, is needed. This dissertation provides such alternative through its centering of mobility as a facet of immeasurable relevance in the West.

With its limited focus and current emphasis on the same white, male artists, the field of art of the American West presents as conservative and nationalistic, and as such, has failed to represent a wide breadth of the American population. Returning to the same artists over and over again has been at the expense of talented contemporary artists who examine issues, identities, and places increasingly relevant in the twenty-first century. The way that the field of art of the American West has been established has neglected topics both interesting and vital to grasping a larger understanding of identity formation in the West. The need for art historical scholarship dealing explicitly with mobility in Western America is staunchly apparent, as well, as the movements of peoples to and through the territory become increasingly contested and fraught in the twenty-first century. This dissertation strives to rectify this gap, and in the process, open art of the American West up to a more diverse, representative future.

Centering this project around contemporary, female-identified artists investigating female mobility in the American West such as Self draws much needed attention to lesser-known Western American artists while also demonstrating to readers that the American West has been and will continue to be relevant and accessible to their own lived experiences. Presently, for many Americans—especially those from historically underrepresented or marginalized groups—the American West appears to be a mythic territory far in the past rather than a specific geographic area of the present and future. The diverse, female-identifying artists in this dissertation are in a unique position to emphasize to these Americans not only that the American

West has and continues to be relevant to their lives, but also that mobility is a fundamental feature of the area and its inhabitants' identity formations. Artwork, in particular, has the potential to give an elusive concept, mobility, a temporary fixity. By freezing and then visualizing moments in time, the artwork examined in this dissertation enables readers to slow down and pay attention in a way that is inaccessible to many through textual research alone; shown primarily in publicly-accessible spaces, whether that be in museums, outdoors, or in admission-free galleries, the contemporary work that I analyze has an increased availability to the public when compared to library- or archivally-bound primary and secondary sources. Overall, rather than simply presenting a counter-narrative to the exclusionary myths continuing to dominate the area of study, this project proposes a structural reorganization that can revitalize the field of art of the American West.

MOBILITY AS A UNIFYING THREAD

Despite the American West's staunch association with settlement, mobility is a central and important facet of the territory—one that unites the diverse, contemporary, female-identifying artists of the American West in this dissertation. Shifting the predominant conception of the American West as a place of settlement to a place of unending movements, especially by women, emphasizes that the territory has always been and will continue to be a place of flux; neither the myth of the West nor characterizations of those who have inhabited the area should be as fixed as they have become. As this project stresses, women have been intimately involved in this inflow and outflow of ideas and people. Moving away from the idea that Western America was solely a place of settlement allows for more nuanced conceptualizations of the types of women who have and will continue to populate and shape its various landscapes—

conceptualizations that are more diverse and reflective of lived realities than “Prairie Madonna” or “Pioneer Mother.”

As climate change develops and immigration to the States surges, mobility’s continued relevance in the contemporary West is readily apparent and will become even more pressing as time progresses. The artists examined here emphasize that these movements to the States have implications specific and unique to female members of diasporic groups. To analyze their artwork and the histories that they engage, I prioritize historian Neil Campbell’s argument for a transnational understanding of the American West, one that considers the territory as working within a larger global mobility of ideas and people.⁹ The artists in this dissertation seek actively to reimagine, challenge, and interrogate how moving women across the globe have historically been represented and how they can now represent themselves in the twenty-first century. With this work, they channel their personal experiences into creative forms that can both reveal hyperlocal histories and relate to the lives of mobile women abroad.

Although women’s westward movements have long been key in the development of Western America, they have also been more restricted than how the public broadly conceptualizes western mobility. While the concept of mobility is not thought about commonly when considering expressions of gender, it has long been a fundamental feature of Western America. Beyond the general public’s fascination with the hypermasculine cowboy culture, movement to and through the American West in the name of Manifest Destiny has progressed the advancement of settler colonialism, a decidedly gendered and patriarchal process, in the U.S.¹⁰ In

⁹ Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 25.

¹⁰ Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 8, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/stable/43860665>.

popular imaginings of the American West, the revered “man on a horse”—often in the form of a John Wayne cowboy-hero or brave frontiersman striking out for uncharted territory—can mount his trusty steed and move with relative ease through the West. Throughout his journey, though it may be tiresome and throw obstacles his way, the macho rider reaches his end destination with a strong sense of self and, typically, is greeted with a welcoming set of open arms (or two).

Yet, as the artists of this dissertation will demonstrate, this has rarely been the case for the women who have been pushed and pulled to and through Western America throughout the past several centuries. Their journeys westward have often been influenced by outside forces such as racism, sexism, and most often, a combination of the two. As this dissertation will establish, these outside forces can be organized into those which push women westward and those which pull them to Western America. Some of these push/pull forces have also affected the real-life men moving to and through the mythic territory; working as a cowboy for a cattle company hardly entails complete freedom of movement, and Exodusters were not just women, for instance. However, as outlined previously and revisited throughout the rest of this project, the archetype of mobility in the American West—the icon that the American population conjures when thinking about moving bodies in the West—is rarely affected by these influences. In contrast, women’s movements westward have been constantly perceived by others, a simple yet constricting fact that alters fundamentally their paths through the mythic landscape in both large and imperceptible ways. For some, their westward migration results in a stronger sense of self and opportunities for a better life, but for others, it might have been in the service of unwelcome masters or compounded the loss of identity that propelled their movements. Regardless, their mobilities have rarely been as simple as the idolized “man on the horse” makes moving to and

through the territory out to be. As the artwork examined in this dissertation reflects, instead of a given, the mobility of women in the American West is negotiated.

While the literal movements of women through the American West include border crossings, forced relocations of Native American peoples, immigration from Asian countries, tourism in the Southwest, and everyday travel, these movements are also tied often to the search for metaphorical social and upwards mobilities for the women who enact them. Analyzing artistic examinations of women's mobility in the American West enables me to connect a plethora of female experiences—historical and contemporary, metaphorical and literal—without falling into essentializations about an inherent “womanness.” Despite the number of artists centering their work around the concept of mobility, mobility studies and human geographies have yet to have their visual turn. Frequently divorcing real-life women from the movements that they are analyzing, these fields tend to rely on quantitative data instead of recognizing how discussions of personal, hyperlocal histories can be utilized as case studies for larger analyses of moving women. Rather than considering art that deals with female mobility in Western America seriously, scholars have not paid artwork the attention that it deserves as primary and secondary documentation of significant, overlooked histories in the American West. This is despite the fact that, as this project stresses, investigating contemporary, female art of the American West through its intersection with various mobilities questions who has had the agency and personal circumstance to transform physical space.

This dissertation emphasizes that the artists examined can provide answers to these questions by looking to the past to predict the future through their creative work. As scholar Genevieve Carpio notes, utilizing “a mobility perspective” can bring “to the cultural and ethnic studies table a focus on the ways actors move through space and how such acts potentially

disrupt racial and place-based meanings through their bodies.”¹¹ In analyzing feminist artists from a wide range of identities and their artwork focused on westering female bodies, this dissertation analyzes how collective memory changes and if female “outsider” artists can bring about accepted shifts in what the American popular imagination has memorialized as the American West.

METHODOLOGIES

For this dissertation, I eschew any discussion of a unifying “womanness” that connects the artists examined and, instead, engage seriously with intersectional feminist theory, settler colonial studies, memory studies, and issues to do with meaning, content, and subject matter. Additionally, I interviewed the artists that I examine whenever possible and have centered their words in my analyses.¹² In the past, art historians have believed that cultural producers have needed help expressing ideas about themselves and their work. In contrast to this history, I treat artists as knowledgeable producers of important discourse about Western American art and histories.

The concept of intersectionality and its importance was articulated the most explicitly by Kimberlé Crenshaw when she argued that, because of the layered nature of identities, discrimination is not “unidirectional” and varies based on a multitude of identity characteristics.¹³ One of these identity characteristics is class, which, while not an overt focus of my analyses of artists, is an undercurrent that connects the women studied in this project. All the

¹¹ Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (University of California Press, 2019), 14.

¹² If I was not able to interview an artist personally, I have foregrounded their thoughts from interviews conducted by others.

¹³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 149, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/>.

artwork examined in this dissertation represents histories associated with lower-to-middle class women, and I would hesitate to label any of the artists discussed as upper class. While literal cowboys in the late nineteenth century performed hard labor in service of their duties, the mythical man on a horse does not often toil on his quests in the Wild West. In contrast to this and in the promotion of a greater consideration of intersectionality when discussing moving women in Western America, this dissertation puts discussions of labor back into the equation when considering the actual reality of mobility in the American West.

As my literature review section will, in part, reflect, feminist theory has not always recognized the intersectional, layered nature of women's identities. This is especially true in "multicultural" approaches to examining female history in the American West. While scholars Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller call for a "new, ethnically broader and more varied image of women in the West" in 1980, later academics such as Antonia I. Castañeda and Margaret D. Jacobs point out that such an "uncritical" approach "leaches out all the structural inequities and unbalanced power relations that were inherent to such encounters,"¹⁴ As Crenshaw asserts and this dissertation aims to combat, "the failure to explore fully the interplay of race, class, and gender has cost the field the ability to provide a broad and truly complex analysis of women's lives and of social organization."¹⁵ This lack of intersectionality has impacted negatively studies of women in the West, which have a history of centering the white experience while obscuring Euro-American women's role in promoting settler colonization. This dissertation strives to

¹⁴ Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (1980): 174, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i287044>; Antonia I. Castañeda, "Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History: The Discourse, Politics, and Decolonization of History," *Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 4 (1992): 509, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3641046>; Margaret D. Jacobs, "Getting Out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women's History," *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (2010): 596, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2010.79.4.585>.

¹⁵ Maxine Baca Zinn, et al., "The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies," in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. by Gloria Anzaldúa (Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), 33.

challenge that unfortunate legacy directly. Additional intersectional feminist or gender studies scholars that I engage with for this project include Judith Butler, the Combahee River Collective, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Anna Ball, Susan Bernardin, and Gloria Anzaldúa.

In their discussions of settler colonialism and feminist theory, Native Hawaiian theorist Maile Arvin, Aleut Community of St. Paul Island scholar Eve Tuck, and Klamath Tribes professor Angie Morrill utilize Native feminist theories to explore how the United States is a settler colonial nation in which settler colonialism has and continues to be a gendered process.¹⁶ With my interests in the intersections of mobility, gender, and race in the American West, I draw from their work significantly throughout this dissertation. As Tuck, Morrill, and Arvin emphasize, in the United States, the structure of settler colonization remains in place and continues to effect Native American peoples significantly.¹⁷ Therefore, I do not employ a postcolonial or colonial approach to my study, with the former being misleading, as colonialism continues in various forms to this day, and the latter not being specific enough to studies concerning the United States. Rather, I aim to actively contribute to the critique of settler colonialism in the U.S. with this project.

Emphasizing how calls for intersectionality without recognition of specific group differences can do more harm than good, Tuck, Arvin, and Morrill argue that “the prevalence of liberal multicultural discourses today effectively work to maintain settler colonialism because they make it easy to assume that all minorities and ethnic groups are...working toward inclusion and equality, each in its own similar and parallel way.”¹⁸ These blanket generalizations have been and continue to be made by white feminist scholars. Rather than including “token” artists of

¹⁶ Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism,” 8.

¹⁷ Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism,” 9.

¹⁸ Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism,” 10.

color, sexuality, class, age, religion, or able-bodiedness in my dissertation, I engage critically with the identity characteristics that set them apart to demonstrate how these factors have influenced their lives in a manner not felt by white, upper class, heteronormative artists. As Crenshaw, Tuck, Arvin, and Morrill allude to, it does not “count” for much at all to include a token artist without doing so or to apply only white, second-wave theories to their work.

From the field of memory studies, I am interested most specifically in the concepts of “collected memory,” “postmemory,” “counter-memory,” and “absent presence,” as I believe that the artists that I examine in this dissertation engage with one or all at once in their artwork invoking history. Thus, I draw significantly from the work of memory scholars such as Marita Sturken, James E. Young, Andreas Huyssen, Marianne Hirsch, and Avril Maddrell for this project. In the 1990s, scholars began to recognize that conflicting memories, dependent upon the rememberer’s background and life experiences, often comprise what had been referred to “vaguely” and unilaterally as “collective memory.”¹⁹ As such, Young argues for the adoption of “collected memory” to reflect these disparate origins. By switching from the use of “collective memory” to an understanding of “collected memory,” one recognizes that “we never really shared each other’s actual memory of past or even recent events,” including, I argue, the myth of the West.²⁰ An offshoot or by-product of several facets of memory, including collected and cultural, the concept of “postmemory” was both conceptualized by Hirsch in the late twentieth century. At its base level, postmemory is the remembrance of events, objects, or people not experienced firsthand.²¹ Although it is less directly connected to the past than individual or

¹⁹ Andreas Huyssen, *Memory Art in the Contemporary World: Confronting Violence in the Global South* (Lund Humphries, 2022), 9.

²⁰ James E. Young, *The Stages of Memory on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Space Between* (University Massachusetts Press, 2016), 15.

²¹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

collected memory, Hirsch argues that postmemory is helpful when describing second generational memories of cultural and collective trauma, which is examined by all the artists in this dissertation, whether explicitly or implicitly.²²

In contrast to the generalized notion of collective memory, the concept of “counter-memory” emphasizes the perspectives of those potentially left out from or obscured by dominant groups’ collected memories—including the artists of this project. Scholar Caroline Chung Simpson identifies counter-memory as alternative processes of memorializing the past that are essential to the progressive regeneration of national history and identity.²³ Not only do the artists examined here flesh out counter-memories of the American West to challenge and reshape national histories, they explore the counter-memories that formed their personal identities, as well. Lastly, defined by Maddrell as reflecting “the apparent contradictory binding together of things absent with the present; whatever or whomever is so strongly missed, their very absence is *tangible*,” “absent presences” are pervasive throughout the various artworks that will be discussed in dissertation, yet the concept lacks the scholarly attention of others such as postmemory.²⁴ While this concept has been applied extensively within European studies of bereavement, I believe that it is strongly applicable to the artwork studied here, which tends to center around the omission of women’s lived experiences from the history of the American West.

Drawing from intersectional feminist theory, settler colonial studies, and memory studies enables me to make compelling and cross applicable arguments about the artwork that I examine in this dissertation. Combined and underlying my project’s arguments and investigations, the

²² Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

²³ Caroline Chung Simpson, *An absent presence: Japanese Americans in postwar American culture, 1945-1960* (Duke University Press, 2001), 14.

²⁴ Avril Maddrell, “Living with the deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence,” *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 4 (2013): 504, 505, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40179556>.

ideas promoted by intersectional feminist, settler colonial, and memory theorists have ensured that I have recognized constantly the differences across the artists and communities studied, even as I unite them under the umbrella of women's mobility. Their challenges to the United States' white heteropatriarchy and its promoted collective memories center in my analyses of artwork and have prompted me to look for larger picture issues rather than get caught in the weeds of iconography. Engaging with these theories and concepts has caused me to pay close attention to issues of meaning, context, and their interrelations in my analyses of mobility-centered, female-created art of the American West.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout this dissertation, I endeavor to counter the longstanding commitment to focusing on the accomplishments of white, male artists of the past and their representations of iconic male mobility demonstrated by the genre of art of the American West and its accompanying scholarship. Historically, discussions of the American West and its artwork by male creators have stripped women of their agency and relegated them as either "gentle tamers," "soiled doves," or collateral damage in the advancement of Western American expansion. Scholars and artists have centered women's movements and trajectories around their male counterparts' whims and obscured how their successes and hardships in the West shaped their personal and group identities. Starting in the early nineteenth century, scholars accepted art of the American West for its "faithful transcript of nature" rather than its "interpretive and aesthetic merits."²⁵ This remained the case until the mid-twentieth century when Harold McCracken wrote

²⁵ Martha A. Sandweiss, "Views and Reviews: Western Art and Western History," in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. by William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 188; Brian W. Dippie, "'CHOP! CHOP!': Progress in the Presentation of Western Visual History," *The Historian* 66, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 493, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i24441208>; B. Byron Price, *The*

the first important biography of Frederic Remington, *Frederic Remington: Artist of the Old West* (1947), and Robert Taft published *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1850-1900* (1953), the most scholarly text dedicated to Western American art to that date. Concurrently, with the creation of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, “museums began to regard western art as something other than historical analogue” in the 1960s.²⁶

Yet, until the 1980s, scholars continued to consider art of the American West as “narrative and illustrative and therefore not worthy of serious investigation.” This began to change in 1986 when William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann published their text, *The West of the Imagination*, which is considered to be the first historical overview of past and present Western American art.²⁷ With their assertion that “art of the American West is...a vital part of the corpus of American art,” the Goetzmanns staked art of the American’s West claim as a subject worthy of scholarly consideration.²⁸ However, the text centers itself around the contributions of white, male artists with one final section, “Other Voices, Other Wests,” dedicated to covering a plethora of cultural “Others.” As a whole, compared to broader American art history and expansive European art history, art of the American West is still relatively young and has been understudied. Scholar Peter Hassrick emphasized this by writing, “western art is often regarded as an exaltation of yokels—that stuff of yippee-yi-yo. It is usually...exiled to the dusty attic of American art.”²⁹ This appears to remain the case to this day.

Sons of Charlie Russell: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Cowboy Artists of America, ed. by Bruce Greene, & Martin Grelle (Cowboy Artists of America Joe Beeler Foundation, 2015), 5.

²⁶ Peter H. Hassrick, “Western Art Museums: A Question of Style or Content,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42, no. 3 (1992): 38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i406298>. The Amon Carter is located in Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁷ Price, *The Sons of Charlie Russell*, 92.

²⁸ William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), x.

²⁹ Hassrick, “Western Art Museums,” 39.

In the late twentieth century, an interest in and forceful conveyance of a “New Western History” arose, a movement often labeled as “revisionist” because of its interests in promoting multicultural, imaged “Wests” rather than the nationalistic, white, singular “West” of the past. By the 1990s, revisionist scholarship had introduced for serious consideration the idea that, rather than being a specific geographic location, the American West was an imagined concept perpetuated by state apparatuses as a method of unifying white Americans around a nostalgic ideal. As it emphasizes the ideological apparatuses underpinning past and current creations of the West, this scholarship has had lasting implications for both the genre of Western American art history as well as considerations of America’s national identity. Important revisionist scholarship includes Patricia Limerick Nelson’s *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987), Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992), and Richard White’s “*It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own:*” *A New History of the American West* (1991). As the titles of these texts illustrate, revisionist scholars of the late twentieth century were focused generally on affirming the validity of the field of Western American history while challenging the myths of the West and the frontier. Because all three authors prove dedicated to rereading rather than restructuring the canonical history of the American West, the voices of people of color and women are, generally, missing.

While New Western History pushed the field to examine artists other than landscape artists of the late nineteenth century and cowboy artists of the early-to-mid twentieth, the exhibitions created and scholarship published since then reveal that such a break with the white, male “greats” has not yet occurred. In scholarship of the American West labeled broadly as revisionist, authors have generally paid little attention to artwork—unless it was illustrative of

the myth of the West that they were combatting—and even less attention to contemporary art of the West. This includes the seminal 1991 Smithsonian exhibit, *The West as America:*

Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920. In the extensive exhibition catalogue, scholars delve into a more troubling history of Western expansion, as documented in artwork, than is often considered. Yet, both the exhibition and its catalogue omit any serious discussions of women, cultural “Others” aside from Native peoples, or artists after 1920.³⁰ As this dissertation exemplifies, however, contemporary female artists of the American West of varying backgrounds have and will continue to challenge the myth of the West in ways both similar to and different from their male predecessors.

Increasingly, scholarship and exhibits such as the Smithsonian’s *Many Wests: Artists Shape an American Ideal* (2021-2024) look to highlight the diversity present in the West through artwork that is specifically *not* made by Frederic Remington, Maynard Dixon, or their followers. *Many Wests* examined queer, female, and/or non-Western modern and contemporary artists offering “a broader and more inclusive view” of the West.³¹ The same goal was shared by the Des Moines Art Center’s 2019 show, *Monument Valley*, which aimed to re-examine “the mythology and the prevailing stereotypes” of the West through the work of contemporary artists.³² Exhibits such as *Many Wests* and *Monument Valley* feature a multicultural approach aimed at pumping needed diversity into the field. Yet, this approach, which often promotes the idea that all marginalized groups share some inherent characteristic, obscures differences in experiences between communities and fails to create meaningful dialogue between them.

³⁰ Of the 86 artists illustrated in the catalogue, only two are women: Sallie Cover and Margaretta Favorite Brown, both Caucasian.

³¹ “Many Wests: Artists Shape an American Ideal,” Smithsonian Museum of American Art, published 2021, <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/many-wests>.

³² Jeff Fleming, “Foreword and Acknowledgements,” in *Monument Valley*, ed. by Laura Burkhalter (Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 7.

This swing from exclusion towards overly broad multiculturalism is reflected by the trajectory of historical scholarship about women in the American West, as well. A brief review of literature dedicated to investigating the presence of women in the American West reveals that the scholarship has developed considerably since the time of Turner's frontier thesis. However, ideas presented in the early-to-mid twentieth century linger, and, as with art historical scholarship, the area of study has not yet resolved whether or not "multiculturalism" is something to strive for or an essentializing buzzword to avoid. Routinely pointed to as the first major scholarly consideration of women in the American West, Dee Brown's *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (1958) questions who the "western woman" was.³³ To answer this, Brown divides his text into sections dedicated to reductive archetypes of western women: "gentle tamers," "hell-raisers," "sunbonneted helpmates," and "bad women." Reflecting the general state of Western American history at the time, women of color do not factor into his discussion.

In the 1980s, following the rise of the Women's Movement and other social justice movements such as the Civil Rights and American Indian Movements, scholars began to prod at Brown's conception of western women. Primarily, these scholars were women. Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, for example, attempt "to place the concept of the 'gentle tamers' in its larger historiographical context, to examine the ways in which women in the West have been viewed by historians, and to explore new possibilities for analysis" in their 1980 article, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West."³⁴ They conclude their text by arguing for a "new, ethnically broader and more varied image of women in the West" to challenge "that older view" perpetuated by scholars such as Brown.³⁵

³³ Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 11.

³⁴ Jensen and Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited," 173.

³⁵ Jensen and Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited," 174.

By 2010, scholar Margaret Jacobs asserts that the “multicultural approach” argued for by Miller and Jensen was “unarguably an important corrective and a step in the right direction” for the study of women in the American West but also “obscured certain power dynamics and inadvertently helped to shape and reinforce a colonial narrative of western women’s history.”³⁶ Noting that by assembling “women of various cultural backgrounds in the West in an ahistoricized, depoliticized space,” such an approach “leaches out all the structural inequities and unbalanced power relations that were inherent to such encounters.”³⁷ Scholars of color, however, pointed out this concept earlier than Jacobs. For instance, Antonia I. Castañeda’s 1992 article, “Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History: The Discourse, Politics, and Decolonization of History” emphasizes the issues with Jensen and Miller’s multicultural approach, mainly that “women’s gender experiences and definitions were as diverse as the cultures from which they came.”³⁸ Thus, although “The Gentle Tamers Revisited” purported to center “*all* women as historical subjects,” it “kept middle-class white women as the subject and the normative group for description, analysis, interpretation, and comparison.”³⁹

By 2011, Jacobs concludes that “the field of western women’s and gender history has made little impact on the larger field of western history.”⁴⁰ In large part, one could point to the misguided attempts at multiculturalism and failure to recognize white women’s complicity in settler-colonizing the West as reasons for this lack of impact. Just over a decade after Jacobs’ article, however, *The Routledge Companion to Gender and the American West* (2022), edited by Susan Bernardin, was published. In this large anthology, over two dozen authors present texts

³⁶ Jacobs, “Getting Out of a Rut,” 594.

³⁷ Jacobs, “Getting Out of a Rut,” 596.

³⁸ Castañeda, “Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History,” 513.

³⁹ Castañeda, “Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History,” 514.

⁴⁰ Margaret Jacobs, “Western History: What’s Gender Got to Do With It?” *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2011): 298, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/westhistquar.42.issue-3>.

that challenge preexisting narratives of the American West while utilizing interdisciplinary and gender-oriented approaches.⁴¹ The anthology's dedication to intersectional feminist theory and avoidance of the pitfalls of multicultural approaches are not just stated. Rather, they are displayed across the chapters by the citing of numerous female and scholars of color and refusal to make overwhelming generalizations about womanhood. Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million and Kimberlé Crenshaw, in particular, are cited often.

Instead of presenting nuanced connections between multifaceted communities, as my dissertation will do, multiculturally-focused scholarship and exhibitions about women and artists in the American West such as *Many Wests* and "Gentle Tamers Revisited" lack larger scholarly arguments than that the American West was diverse. My project tips further the larger discourse within the field towards recognizing diversity within the West, but instead of representing this artwork and figures as "the rest" of "the West and the rest," it foregrounds them at the center of understanding how the American West was traversed, settled, and visited by complex groups of women. Additionally, the absence of an exhibition catalogue for *Many Wests* and brief nature of *Monument Valley*'s minimizes their overall impact within the field. Sustained art historical inquiry that moves beyond a simple multicultural approach is necessary. My dissertation strives to fill this gap by presenting a lengthy, layered text dedicated to highlighting the work of diverse female artists connected, but not completely totalized, by themes of mobility. By analyzing artwork made by artists whose communities have traditionally been excluded from discussions and art of the American West, my project aims to make the area, its histories, and its representations meaningful to those who might find the West to be solely white men's territory.

⁴¹ Bernardin, "Monumental Reckonings and Impossible Placeholders," 4.

While the broad field of American art history has recognized increasingly the scholarly importance of art of the American West, the artwork still garners little attention within the larger contemporary art world. This is despite, as my dissertation emphasizes, art of the American West's applicability to the experiences of diverse groups of people as well as gender and other identity studies. Migration, as an overarching theme, is a pressing contemporary concern, yet contemporary art historical scholarship is focused overwhelmingly on drawing global connections. These texts argue for "worldwide shift[s]" to decentralize discussions from Europe or the United States.⁴² With global approaches, however, authors fail to make in-depth connections across the cultures that they examine. Furthermore, scholars do not consider how larger trends play out in smaller geographic regions with their own histories, including the American West, as this dissertation does.⁴³ These discussions often pinpoint the late twentieth century as the starting point for contemporary art, and as such, resist making historical connections dating prior to mid-twentieth-century modernism.⁴⁴

However, the scholarship that is available about contemporary art of the American West tends to rely too heavily on historical tethers; when attention is paid specifically to contemporary artists of the West in academic, gallery, or museum literature, it focuses often on how their work builds on the legacies of the "greats," specifically, Remington, Russell, Dixon, and other artists

⁴² Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Prentice Hall, 2011), inside cover.

⁴³ William L. Fox's *Mapping the Empty: Eight Artists and Nevada* (University of Nevada Press, 1999) is an underwhelming exception to this rule. For globally oriented approaches to contemporary art history, see: Natalie Rudd, *Contemporary Art* (Thames and Hudson, 2023); *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Jonathan Harris (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); and Tony Godfrey, *The Story of Contemporary Art* (MIT Press, 2020). For group-focused approaches to contemporary art history, see: Kate Morris, *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art* (University of Washington Press, 2019); Lex Morgan Lancaster, *Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2022); Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner, *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making* (ANU Press, 2014); Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art* (Thames and Hudson, 2020); and *Oh, Canada: Contemporary Art from North North America*, ed. Denise Markonish (MIT Press, 2012).

⁴⁴ See: *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. by Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) and Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art since 1980* (Damiani, 2009), for example.

of their ilk.⁴⁵ This is especially true considering a large portion of contemporary Western American art scholarship spotlights the Cowboy Artists of America (CAA), formed in 1965.⁴⁶ This contemporary art of the American West scholarship offers little to no criticism of the group's white demographics and, instead, celebrates the organization's sense of community formed around the myth of the West.⁴⁷

Even scholarship and museum exhibitions seemingly dedicated to introducing contemporary voices into the field still fail to break ties to these "greats," and because of this, the little scholarship available about art of the West and gender still centers its discussions around the same men on horses.⁴⁸ For example, Mindy Besaw's 2015 dissertation "Re-Framing the American West: Contemporary Artists Engage History," one of the very few and earliest dissertations focused on contemporary Western American artwork, limits its discussion to contemporary artists that engage specifically with historical artists such as Russell, Remington, Moran, and Bierstadt.⁴⁹ While she asserts that "previous interpretations of the West" embraced "a commonly accepted and narrow view that virtually eliminated women, people of color, and Native Americans from the conversation," with the near omission of women and artists of color

⁴⁵ For instance, see: Marian Wardle and Sarah E. Boehmne's *Branding the American West: Paintings and Films, 1900-1950* (2016), Kate Elliott's *Framing First Contact: From Catlin to Russell* (2020), and James R. Swensen's *Picturing Migrants: The Grapes of Wrath and New Deal Documentary Photography* (2015)—all published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

⁴⁶ Price, *The Sons of Charlie Russell*, 3. For example, see: Michael Duty and Suzanne Deats's *Western Traditions: Contemporary Artists of the American West* (2005), Don Dedra's *Visions West: The Story of the Cowboy Artists of America* (1983), and Peggy and Harold Samuel's *Contemporary Western Art* (1985). With their commitment to "figurative and representational style," the CAA, formed in 1965, strives to continue the "visual frontier pioneered by Frederic Remington, Charles M. Russell, and other artists," (Price, *The Sons of Charlie Russell*, 3).

⁴⁷ In contrast, J. Gray Sweeney's "Racism, Nationalism, and Nostalgia in Cowboy Art" (1992) confronts directly the field's lingering preoccupation with cowboy artists such as Remington and Russell but stops short of examining contemporary artists who challenge the same narratives that he challenges in the text.

⁴⁸ For example, see the C.M. Russell Museum's exhibition *Charles M. Russell: The Women in His Life and Art* (2018), which attempts to re-work Russell as a "feminist" rather than laude the work of the women in his life, including his wife, Nancy.

⁴⁹ Mindy Besaw, "Re-Framing the American West: Contemporary Artists Engage History" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2015), iii. Kent Monkman (Cree) is the one non-white artist discussed.

from her text, Besaw works from within this narrow view that she condemns.⁵⁰ It is necessary, however, to recognize that Besaw's dissertation does important work as one of, if not the very, first dissertations to focus on contemporary artists of the American West. I aim to build upon her scholarship to open this discussion further to include women and artists of color engaging not only with the past, but also the present and future of the American West.

Currently, nostalgia and retromania structure the field as it stands. My dissertation strives to reframe understandings of the field of art of the American West to reveal how discussions of contemporary artists of diverse backgrounds can yield interpretations that extend past the base argument for "multicultural" Wests instead of "the" West. In doing so, my project aims to reconfigure art of the American West as a developing, contemporary, and future-oriented field of study. Scholarship that denies the West as contemporary and diverse limits the significance of the art of the American West and its applicability to many groups' lived experiences. Investigating women's mobility will push the field forward rather than in circles, as repeated analyses of men's movements in the West has and continues to do. By focusing on contemporary feminist artistic interventions in the field of art of the American West, I hope to address a gap in the scholarship that has ignored how feminist artists have reshaped the field—beyond a simple feminist interpretation of the cowboy artwork mentioned previously. Yet, even a "simple" feminist interpretation, one that should have happened in the 1970s, has yet to be done. While I recognize that no revisionism can ever be complete and focusing on one narrow thread to reinsert over others might reasonably seem arbitrary, my dissertation provides closer analyses of topics generally left unconsidered by previous scholarship.

⁵⁰ Besaw, "Re-Framing the American West," 56.

STRUCTURING THE DISSERTATION: PUSH/PULL

For this dissertation, I have examined sixteen female-identified artists who have made artwork, spanning a wide variety of media, that examines the concept of female mobility in the American West. I have organized the artists based on motivation for the mobilities that they depict. These include religious, political, economic, societal, touristic, explorative, and mundane motivations. These motivations and the artists that I have assigned to them are broken into two sections, “Push” and “Pull.”⁵¹ One can conceptualize moving to the American West from elsewhere and experiencing shifts in geographic and cultural landscapes in terms of crossing a threshold into an alternative reality. In this dissertation, as one woman “pushes” or is “pushed” through that portal, another can be seen on the other side “pulling” it open to reveal metaphorical and physical facets of the landscapes long overlooked. “Push” and “pull,” while distinct actions, can feed often into one another yet are linked inextricably as opposites. Dividing the artists and their corresponding mobilities in this manner established clear parameters for their groupings while conceding that overlap or connections between motivations can occur.

The force associated with “push,” an action that requires deliberate effort expended, aligns itself with women who have felt compelled to move to and through the American West

⁵¹ A “push-pull” model has a history within larger discussions of migration as “push factors describe the reasons that individuals might emigrate from their homes,” and “pull factors describe the reasons that an individual might settle in a particular country,” (Mario Bruzzone, “Understanding Migration: Why ‘Push Factors’ and ‘Pull Factors’ Do Not Explain Very Much,” U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, published December 7, 2020, <https://refugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/7.27.20-Policy-Brief.pdf>). I did not consult this larger history when coming up with the organization for my dissertation, however; after extensive deliberation on how to organize my project, the concepts of “push” and “pull” revealed themselves to fit well with the movements of women in the American West. Additionally, while these past models tend to focus exclusively on global immigration and emigration, my model focuses specifically on movements to and within the West. The “pulls” that I discuss are not pulls to another country, either, but mundane/spectacular pulls to move within one’s own environment. In short, I recognize that the model that I have come up with has a larger precedent within the field of migration research, but because I developed my organization independently of such models, my organization is unique to a specific group (women in the American West), avoids any discussions of “equal” motivations for movement, and does not attempt to make generalizations across diverse communities without discussing group differences—all faults that migration researchers find with past push-pull models of migration (Bruzzone, “Understanding Migration.”).

because of economic hardship, racism, and governmental policies at home. While these women were pushed by negative forces to the West as a means of survival, this is not a challenge to their agency. On the contrary, women have been pushed westward have exhibited grit, tenacity, and ingenuity as they forged their ways to and through the West to establish new homes and lifeways for themselves and their families. This section centers primarily on “big movements” of cohesive groups within the American West, and the artwork that I examine reflects the lived experiences and group differences among domestic and international immigrant women.

Chapter One, “‘I Know Where I’m Going:’ Domestic Immigration to the Western States,” focuses on domestic immigrants in Western America and features the work of Shyanne Dickey, Tschabalala Self, Pamela J. Peters (Diné), Angela Ellsworth, and Kelly Reichardt. Portraits by Dickey of her family members analyze the legacy of female Exodusters, Black migrants pushed to Kansas in the late nineteenth century searching for economic and societal freedoms that the South had denied them. The collaged and painted backgrounds of the portraits relate often to the Exoduster’s larger history, one that has been omitted frequently in texts about the American West, texts that also tend to downplay the resiliency and successes of female homesteaders of any race. In this chapter, I also return briefly to Self’s *Pioneer* in a discussion of Pioneer Mother Monument’s legacy and Black, female homesteaders. I follow this discussion of westering Black women with an examination of Diné (Navajo) artist Peters’ exploration of Native migrants to Los Angeles as part of the Indian Relocation Act in the mid-twentieth century. With a film that utilizes contemporary Native actors to restage a mid-century movie about this migration, Peters draws from her own family history of urban relocation and how these movements affected the women in her life. While not often thought of by the general public as archetypal pioneer women, Latter-day Saint (LDS) women felt a push westward by religious persecution and the

want to keep their families and communities together. Ellsworth delves into the trials and consequences of Mormon women's movements in the American West, including the fraught circumstances of early plural marriages and the anonymity clouding LDS female pioneers' stories, in her work analyzed in this chapter. Also rooted in historical accounts, Reichardt's 2010 film *Meek's Cutoff* challenges directly the male-dominated Western movie genre to focus on the perspectives of white female immigrants in an ill-fated wagon train. By emphasizing the women's lack of agency, Reichardt presents a counternarrative to Western films and mythic tales of female migration westward to emphasize women's loss of identity during the process of moving to Western America for a better life.

Chapter Two, "'We'll Come Back Again and Again and Again:' International Immigration to and from the American West," focuses on the motivations and movements of female international immigrants to Western America and includes artwork by Hung Liu, Margarita Cabrera, and Anh-Thuý Nguyễn. Trained in the Socialist Realist style, Liu (1948-2021) created artwork that drew from both her immigrant experience and her time in the American West to create "photo-based images that combined the political and the personal."⁵² Whether looking at her own mobility or that of women in the West before her, Liu's artwork routinely examines the pushes leading to immigration and how crossing boundaries impacts identity formation for immigrant women in Western America. Born in Monterrey, Mexico, Cabrera taps into several pertinent issues surrounding *la frontera*—the movement of women, the development of economic opportunities, and "resistance strategies of survival"—with collaborative artwork made with migrants from Central America.⁵³ Finally, Vietnam-born artist

⁵² Holland Cotter, "Hung Liu, Artist Who Blended East and West, Is Dead at 73," *The New York Times*, published August 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/22/arts/hung-liu-artist-dead.html>.

⁵³ Margarita Cabrera, "Space in Between," MargaritaCabrera.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.margaritacabrera.com/portafolio/space-in-between/>.

Nguyễn produces artwork focused often on her experiences as part of the Vietnamese diaspora and movements throughout Western America, including a 2017 video features Nguyễn dragging a straw bag across the iconic dunes of New Mexico's White Sands National Park. Not only does Nguyễn's autobiographical work deal with issues of identity after immigration, including when one regrets the "push" that forced them from home, the artwork also comments on the mark that women can(not) leave in the American West.

In tandem or contrast to "Push" is the dissertation's final section, "Pull." The women pulled to the American West have done so at a pace and in a manner that does not reflect the urgency or need of their contemporaries in "Push." Instead, while there is still agency implied with "pull," I associate the action with the lure of the American West and the women who moved to and through there because of the appeal of the "unknown," trade, tourism, recreation, and community. The artwork within this section focuses more specifically on individuals and their actions, rather than the mass-migrations of large communities in "Push." As the art reflects, women pulled to move to or through Western America have done so across both large and small distances, within their own communities or as tourists throughout the West.

Chapter Three, "'High Time for a Detour': Cars, Voyeurism, and the Female Body in the American West," centers on seemingly mundane movements by women through Western America, specifically those associated with car culture, and includes the work of Laurel Nakadate, Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo), Liz Cohen, and Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke). Tapping into issues of voyeurism, the female body, and cruising the American West, Nakadate poses with a dog, Yellowstone geysers, a cowboy hat, pine trees, and other iconic symbols of the West in her photographs from the early 2000s. The black fingerprints marring the prints reflect explicitly Nakadate's "longing for the American West" and connect to her Japanese

family's history in Western America.⁵⁴ Interested in lowrider culture, Santa Claran artist Simpson created her own vehicle from a 1985 El Camino and decorated it in a manner inspired by the famed San Ildefonso potter, Maria Martinez, to make a type of "roving canvas" that transports her body, culture, and objects across New Mexico.⁵⁵ With this work, Simpson emphasizes how "cars build identity and create empowerment in disenfranchised peoples," including Indigenous women.⁵⁶ Born to Colombian parents in Phoenix, Arizona, Cohen also focuses on lowrider culture, cruising the Southwest, and presentations of the female body in selections of her photographic work which showcases the lowrider that she made from an East German Trabant and American El Camino. Traveling throughout the Southwest, Cohen's lowrider work taps into the "low and slow" nature of the vehicles and their accompanying culture to challenge "the eroticization of the automobile industry" and "the role of women's bodies in that space."⁵⁷ Lastly, in contrast to the cross-western movements of Cohen, Simpson, and Nakadate, Apsáalooke (Crow) artist Red Star's photographic series and installation work source material from her Apsáalooke community in Montana to solidify mobility in Western America as vital to her and her community's identities.

Finally, Chapter Four, "'You Can Have Your Space, Cowgirl:,' Exploration, Spectacle, and the West of the Future," examines western mobility in service or in search of spectacle and analyzes art probing at both the tourist industry of the West and the possible alternative reality

⁵⁴ "Laurel Nakadate presents Lucky Tiger *2009," Perfection of Perplexion, published January 7, 2011, <https://perfectionofperplexion.wordpress.com/2011/01/07/laurel-nakadate-presents-lucky-tiger-2009/>; Adam Berner, "Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate," *Musée Magazine*, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://museemagazine.com/features/2019/4/19/tiger-tiger-burning-bright-laurel-nakadate>; Michaela Dwyer, "Laurel Nakadate on Grief, Bodily Autonomy, and Stories We Tell Ourselves," *Indy Week*, published January 1, 2023, <https://indyweek.com/culture/art/photographer-laurel-nakadate-interview/>."

⁵⁵ "Maria," RoseBSimpson.com, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.rosebsimpson.com/maria>.

⁵⁶ "Rose B. Simpson," Minneapolis Institute of Art, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://new.artsmia.org/hearts-of-our-people-native-women-artists/hearts-of-our-people-native-voices/rose-simpson>.

⁵⁷ "Liz Cohen (b. 1973)," Salon 94, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://salon94.com/artists/liz-cohen/>.

offered by the region. To do so, I study artwork by Katie Hargrave, Meredith Laura Lynn, Martine Gutierrez, and April Bey, all of whom analyze the icons of Western American identity inherent in the western spectacle. The interesting byproduct of female mobility, Hargrave and Lynn's collaborative installation work investigates the gendered aspects of exploration in the American West, in which only white men are encouraged to take up the "call of the wild" and track "unchartered" territory, to the detriment of the environment.⁵⁸ In contrast, born in California and of Indigenous Guatemalan descent, Gutierrez challenges "the construction of binaries through the blurring of their borders" and the voyeurism accompanying female tourists in photographic work set in the iconic Monument Valley.⁵⁹ Finally, engaging with the American West of the future—or alternative universe—Bey features blue- and pink-hued Black cowgirls posing on horses or fences in her paintings to emphasize the potential for escape from contemporary oppression that the Wild West offers.

I recognize that my list of motivations for western female mobility is not comprehensive, and as such, there are rationales for moving that I cannot examine completely or even fail to mention. These include more contemporary motivations for women moving westward, including for education, to take care of ailing family members, and to simply start over by oneself. Furthermore, I do not expect that the artists that I examine speak totally for the experiences of all members of the groups that they represent, and I acknowledge that each bring aspects of their personal lives and backgrounds to their work. I similarly recognize that binaries are rarely as cut and dry as they appear, and that one could argue that some motivations fall in both or in opposition of my "Push" and "Pull" organization. However, it is my hope that this organization

⁵⁸ Katie Hargrave, "Gasden Museum of Art 'Mirror Muir: The Cumberland Mountains,'" KatieHargrave.com, published March 2022, <https://www.katiehargrave.com/gadsden-mirror-muir>.

⁵⁹ "Martine Gutierrez," Ryan Lee Gallery, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://ryanleegallery.com/artists/martine-gutierrez/>.

and the motivations examined within will act as a starting point for further conversations about mobility, art, and identity formation in the American West.

PART ONE: “PUSH”

CHAPTER ONE

“I KNOW WHERE I’M GOING:” DOMESTIC IMMIGRATION TO THE WESTERN STATES

In her 1996 single “One Way Ticket (Because I Can),” from her debut album *Blue*, country music singer-songwriter LeAnne Rimes sings about the hopes and fears that she possesses as she heads out on a “westbound train” in search of opportunity.⁶⁰ She croons, “[s]tanding on the border/Looking out into the great unknown/I can feel my heart beatin’ faster as I step out on my own.” While her nerves about striking out alone are apparent, so is the optimism that she harbors as she heads West: “[t]here’s a new horizon/And the promise of favorable wind/I’m heading out tonight, travelin’ light/I’m gonna start all over again.”⁶¹ For many women pushed westward, the American West has held the same promise for freedom and beginning again that Rimes details in her single. For most, however, this freedom has remained just out of reach as they moved to and through the iconic territory in its pursuit. Others have had their labor and bodies exploited to achieve freedom for others, but not themselves. Whether or not true freedom was achieved, American women have been pushed westward for centuries and will continue to be pushed by economic, religious, societal, and other factors for years to come. As the artists spotlighted in this chapter—Shyanne Dickey, Tschabalala Self, Pamela J. Peters (Diné), Angela Ellsworth, and Kelly Reichardt—illustrate, regardless of the elements that have pushed them, domestic female migrants to the American West have had their identities formed, tested, and solidified as they have navigated and settled in the mythic territory.

Despite the variety in motivations for and backgrounds of American women moving to the American West, the prevailing image of domestic female immigration in Western America is

⁶⁰ The title of this chapter is a reference to the 1987 song, “I Know Where I’m Going” by The Judds.

⁶¹ “LeAnne Rimes—One Way Ticket (Because I Can) Lyrics,” Genius.com, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://genius.com/Leann-rimes-one-way-ticket-because-i-can-lyrics>.

that of the nineteenth-century, white, pioneer woman—also known as the “Prairie Madonna” or “Pioneer Woman.” Secondary to this is the “Migrant Mother” figure stemming from the early twentieth-century Dust Bowl. I will delve more into the background of Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery later in this chapter when this project returns to Self’s *Pioneer* bronze. For now, it is worth noting that the Pioneer Mother and Prairie Madonna leitmotif in artwork—imagery that portrayed the ideal westering woman as docile, domestic, and dedicated to her husband and lineage—was exceedingly popular from the late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries. In fact, historian Cynthia Culver Prescott notes that “[s]o firmly did the canon of Pioneer Mother iconography become established in the late 1920s that any proposed variation sparked protest.”⁶² This archetypal imagery of the moving woman in the American West as a white, Christian “frozen goddess” rose to popularity during a time when many feared that the American family was in crisis as white women began to gain voting and other rights.⁶³ The monuments and artwork depicting Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Mothers not only shaped pioneer monuments created after the imagery’s rise, but also molded “American popular imagination about rural women more broadly for generations to come.”⁶⁴

In contrast to the idealized whiteness of Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery, American photographer Dorothea Lange’s 1936 photograph of Florence Owens Thompson, *Migrant Mother* (Figure 2), emphasizes the struggles that domestic, female migrants to the West were forced to navigate. However, akin to Madonna/Mother imagery, Lange’s *Migrant Mother* also dominates the popular imagination; when one attempts to picture what westering women

⁶² Cynthia Culver Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 50.

⁶³ Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier* (University of Kansas Press, 1988), 10; Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments*, 51. It is worth noting that Western states led the nation in enfranchising women, however (Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments*, 53).

⁶⁴ Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments*, 53.

look like, frequently, white pioneer women or Lange's iconic image come to mind. Both archetypes emphasize motherhood as the primary purpose of westering women. Lange's photograph has been influential on contemporary, female artists of the American West such as Hung Liu (1948-2021), whose life and work is discussed in-depth in the next chapter. In Liu's *Migrant Mother* from her *American Exodus* series (2015), she reproduces Lange's *Migrant Mother* explicitly (Figure 3).⁶⁵ In the painting, a downcast, grayscale woman clutches a small child to her breast as she sits within a monochromatic setting layered with vertical drips of thinned paint. The woman's form seems to blend into and drip along with her modest background. Shattering further any illusions of naturalism, to the left of the woman's head, Liu has painted a bright pink square containing a fist grasping a bouquet of flowers. Oblivious to the floating flora beside her, the woman wears a grave expression and hunches over in her seat. With a pinched brow and downcast gaze, she holds her child tightly as she contemplates their future.

Despite the painting's abstraction, the worn-down figure in Liu's *Migrant Mother* is clearly the same woman, Thompson, that Lange captured in her Dust Bowl-era photographs.⁶⁶ Beyond the photograph that Liu references, Lange created six additional images of Thompson and her children at a migrant camp in Nipomo, California, while working for the Farm Security Administration.⁶⁷ Because Lange took the photograph as part of a federal program, the

⁶⁵ Holland Cotter, "Hung Liu, Artist Who Blended East and West, Is Dead at 73," *The New York Times*, published August 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/22/arts/hung-liu-artist-dead.html>. The "scenes of rural Dust Bowl destitution" in Lange's photographs reminded Liu of the destitution that she witnessed and recorded during the Cultural Revolution. She stated that "I also identify personally with Ms. Lange's photographs since I am myself an immigrant from China and was also caught up in wars, famines, and revolutions there, often forcing my family to migrate elsewhere (Hung Liu, "American Exodus," HungLiu.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <http://www.hungliu.com/american-exodus.html>).

⁶⁶ The subtitle of Liu's painting, *American Exodus*, is also an explicit reference to the book, *An American Exodus*, in which Lange published her Dust Bowl photographs. This text and its photographs depict only white and Black Dust Bowl migrants, excising a large portion of migrants of color from the historical record (Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* [University of California Press, 2019], 162, 163).

⁶⁷ Sarah Meister, "Piecing Together Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*," *MoMA Magazine*, published February 6, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/233>. During the Dust Bowl, throughout the 1930s, between three- and four hundred thousand citizens from Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma migrated to California. The

photograph is publicly accessible and “has been used in many ways, including as a postage stamp, a 1,000-piece puzzle and on trinkets, T-shirts, posters and postcards.”⁶⁸ Writing about the image’s legacy, journalist Geoffrey Dunn notes that, as “[n]o other image in the American archive resonates with the emotional urgency and tragic poignancy” of *Migrant Mother*, “Lange’s somber portrait has achieved near mythical status, symbolizing, if not defining, an entire era in our nation’s history.”⁶⁹

However, as with Prairie Madonna/Pioneer Mother imagery, Lange’s photograph whitewashes and anonymizes the history of American women pushed to the West. While photographing Thompson, whose name was not associated with the image until several decades later, Lange “was uncharacteristically remiss in ascertaining information about her subject,” and what “little she did record was largely misleading and factually incorrect.”⁷⁰ Born in 1903 in Indian Territory, Thompson was “a full-blooded Native American” of Cherokee descent “whose family had been displaced from tribal lands.”⁷¹ At the time of Lange’s photograph, Thompson had been living in California for several years after migrating to the state with her first husband and children. After being widowed, Thompson married again, and the years following “were ones of constant movement, migration and despair,” a despair that Lange captures in her photograph.⁷² None of this information was included in Lange’s notes about her photographs of Thompson, an omission that questions how the image’s reception would have differed if the

visibility of their migration “served as a public reminder of the dislocations and the uncertainty the Great Depression had caused,” (Sarah D. Wald, “From Farmer to Farmworker: Representing the Dust Bowl Migration,” in *The Nature of California: Race, Citizenship, and Farming since the Dust Bowl* [University of Washington Press, 2016], 52).

⁶⁸ James Estrin, “Unraveling the Mysteries of Dorothea Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother,’” *The New York Times*, published November 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/lens/dorothea-lange-migrant-mother.html>.

⁶⁹ Geoffrey Dunn, “Photographic License,” *San Jose Metro*, published January 19, 1995, https://www.newtimeslo.com/archive/2003-12-03/archives/cov_stories_2002/cov_01172002.html.

⁷⁰ Dunn, “Photographic License.”

⁷¹ Dunn, “Photographic License.”

⁷² Dunn, “Photographic License.” The family “followed the crops throughout California and occasionally into Arizona.”

public knew of her Native ancestry.⁷³ In 1978, angered with the “permanent *Grapes of Wrath* stereotype” that Lange’s photograph stamped on her life, Thompson herself wrote into the *Modesto Bee* newspaper to stake her claim as the image’s subject and express how “she felt exploited because she was never compensated for the image.”⁷⁴

Thompson’s movements throughout the American West reflect a much longer legacy of Indigenous movement to and through Western America. While the artists in this chapter document the histories of westering women after contact, the movement and mobility of Indigenous peoples was present in the West long before Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Mothers showed up with their wagons. The whitewashing of westering women that exists in past, prominent scholarship about women in the American West and in artwork about these women, including *Migrant Mother*, reflects Western Shoshone historian Ned Blackhawk’s argument that “clear and informed analyses of our nation’s [I]ndigenous peoples” continue to be “missing from most narratives of American history.”⁷⁵ This dissertation, as a whole, works towards the inclusion of Native American women in discussions of past, contemporary, and future moving women in the American West. In doing so, it advances historians Andrae Marak and Gary Van Valen’s assertion that “Indigenous history can no longer be depicted as local and isolated; rather, scholars must simultaneously show the importance of the local and involvement in the wider world.”⁷⁶

In the photographic *Migrant Mother*, a moving woman—Lange—documents another woman through the American West—Thompson. In her painting *Migrant Mother*, an additional

⁷³ Meister, “Piecing Together Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*.”

⁷⁴ Dunn, “Photographic License;” Estrin, “Unraveling the Mysteries of Dorothea Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother.’”

⁷⁵ Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2-3.

⁷⁶ Andrae Marak and Gary Van Valen, *Transnational Indians in the North American West*, ed. Clarissa Confer, Andrae Marak, and Laura Tuennerman (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 11.

moving woman—Liu—also taps into this legacy. As part of Lange’s larger FSA photographic project, the *Migrant Mother* image contributes to whitewashing Dust Bowl migrants, akin to the whitewashing done by Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery. Both migrant and prairie/pioneer women archetypes also center motherhood as the primary purpose of women pushed to the American West and emphasize how their movements were tethered to familial responsibility. Yet, Lange and Liu’s *Migrant Mother* artwork also reveals how movements through Western America prompted by failed partnerships with the land do not always lead to a better life; English and Environmental Studies scholar Sarah D. Wald notes that “[t]he mobility depicted in Dust Bowl migration narratives” such as Lange and Liu’s, “challenged popular representations of the nation’s onward march toward a better and brighter future.”⁷⁷

Throughout this chapter, the artists examined continue to challenge preconceptions of movements through the American West. Specifically, with their artwork, these women counter past Prairie/Pioneer/Migrant representations of female, domestic migrants to the West whose movements are as unhindered as the iconic “man on a horse” to emphasize the diversity in backgrounds, motivations, and successes that American women have had and continue to have moving to the mythic territory. Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery stresses the “frontier woman’s” supposed passivity and gentility, whereas Lange’s *Migrant Mother* photograph emphasizes that, in the American West, “*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”⁷⁸ With their artwork, Dickey, Self, Peters, Ellsworth, and Reichardt reclaim the agency of women pushed to the American West and elaborate upon their identities so that they do not center solely around motherhood or passivity.

⁷⁷ Wald, “From Farmer to Farmworker,” 52.

⁷⁸ Corlann Gee Bush, “The Way We Weren’t: Images of Women and Men in Cowboy Art,” in *The Women’s West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 21, 24. Emphasis in original.

Instead, the artists emphasize the endurance, adaptability, and resourcefulness that has been tested, strengthened, or broken as past, present, and future American women have moved to and through the West. Rather than “appearing” or watching “themselves being looked at,” these women have worked to play active roles in their movements and identity formations.

SHYANNE DICKEY

With her artwork focused on her female family members’ farming in Kansas, Shyanne Dickey flips the assertion that “men *act* and women *appear*” in the West firmly on its head. Her artwork not only counteracts assumptions that settlement in the American West has been predominantly white, but it also reminds viewers that Black mobility to Western America predates the Great Migrations of the twentieth century. Born in Tucson, Arizona, in 1996, Dickey is a woman who has moved extensively through the American West, despite her young age.⁷⁹ Her places of residence have included Arizona, Washington, Utah, Kansas, and now, Stillwater, Oklahoma, where she graduated with a Studio Arts degree from Oklahoma State University.⁸⁰ Dickey is not alone in these movements, however; she describes her loved ones as “a family who travels.”⁸¹ This tendency towards mobility in the American West that Dickey’s family exhibits extends back centuries and is a strong theme in Dickey’s artwork. Specifically, in two-dimensional mixed-media works such as *Land Sold* (Figure 4), *Exodusters* (Figure 5), and *The Load* (Figure 6), she references and celebrates the legacy of female Exodusters—Black Southerners pushed to Kansas in the late nineteenth century—within her lineage and how the results of their movements continue to impact the farming women within her family today. To do

⁷⁹ Shyanne Dickey, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, October 14, 2022.

⁸⁰ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

⁸¹ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

so, she draws extensively from familial and institutional archival material to show the layered identities of these moving women, literally and metaphorically.

Across her body of work, Dickey “make[s] artwork that explores [her] cultural and personal influences, honors strong women and matrilineal heritages, and celebrates Black identity.”⁸² In large part, the biracial Dickey strives to create work that does so because of the glaring omission of Black representation from both the art and farming worlds. She notes that, when the general public conceives of the American West, they think of a “white man on a horse” or a “white farmer.” Furthermore, when Dickey’s grandmother took her to American art museums when she was younger, Dickey recalls observing how white the spaces were and asking, “what if there was a Black cowboy or a Black woman farmer?” While she thought the paintings that she saw “were beautiful,” she longed to “see myself or my mother on those walls.”⁸³ With her artistic practice, Dickey strives to “really change that” as “representation is so important, but it’s lacking in a lot of areas.”⁸⁴ With work such as *Land Sold*, *Exodusters*, and *The Load*, Dickey seeks to extend that increased representation to the teaching of history. She asserts that “it’s not fair for someone to hold that standard of what’s important in history and what’s not important in history.” In particular, with her artwork, Dickey aims to increase recognition of the Exoduster movement as well as the legacy of Black female farmers in the American West, as these histories should not be “just thrown off because it’s considered not *that* important.”⁸⁵

While Dickey is correct in her assertion that Black history and artistic representation is often excluded or minimized in larger discussions of the American West, this is not to say that

⁸² Helen Oppen, “*Shyanne Dickey & Edward Grady: Rising*,” Oppen Fine Art, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.helenopper.com/rising>.

⁸³ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

⁸⁴ Shyanne Dickey, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, February 5, 2024.

⁸⁵ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022. Emphasis added.

there is not a long, established history of Black exploration, labor, and occupation of the mythic territory. Literature and American studies scholar Michael K. Johnson notes that “African Americans have been present at every frontier and have been active participants in transforming [Western] frontier settlements into thriving communities,” starting with “the earliest incursions into the Americas by Spanish explorers to the California Gold Rush and the Oklahoma land rush.”⁸⁶ However, the American general population often fails to consider the “Black West” when conceptualizing African American history.⁸⁷ In his early and formative text on African American history in the West, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (1998), historian Quintard Taylor asserts that “we still know woefully little about large areas of African American past” in the territory, despite “all that has been written on the [B]lack West.”⁸⁸ This lack of knowledge extends to artwork depicting Black women moving to and through Western America, a canonical gap that Dickey’s work strives to fill.

Taylor identifies “the central paradigm in the history of African Americans in the American West” as whether or not the territory fulfilled its promise of “both political freedom and economic opportunity” to the Black peoples who occupied and worked its land.⁸⁹ Overall, although Black migrants such as Dickey’s Exoduster relatives were pushed westward in the hopes of escaping the structural racism of the South, parity was not offered for all in the West. Women’s historian Glenda Riley notes that, despite Black peoples’ stake in westward migration, white settlers in the American West often viewed them “like Indians and Mexicans, as an alien

⁸⁶ Michael K. Johnson, *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 4.

⁸⁷ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (Norton, 1998), 19.

⁸⁸ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 23.

⁸⁹ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 17.

influence.”⁹⁰ Furthermore, discriminatory laws “moved westward with the pioneer’s wagons,” as “[t]he intrepid pioneers who crossed the western plains carried the virus of racism with them.”⁹¹ Currently, beyond a general omission of Black history from discussions of Western America, Taylor observes that “the [B]lack cowboy, buffalo soldier, and ‘motherly but single’ elderly [B]lack female pioneer who found their place in the West” have emerged as mythic tropes dominating recent discussions of the Black West.⁹² As Taylor emphasizes and Dickey’s artwork illustrates, however, one should push back against any stereotype of the Black westerner as one who lacks connections to community, family, and home.⁹³ In work such as *Land Sold*, *Exodusters*, and *The Load*, Dickey challenges this solitary archetype to emphasize the history of mass migration by Black women in the West, in general, and the importance of this legacy to her family, in particular.

THE “GREAT EXODUS” AND UTOPIAN POTENTIAL OF KANSAS

Created in 2020, Dickey’s *Exodusters* depicts an older, Black woman painted over a dynamic background thrumming with vignettes showing the movements of various Black communities from the American South to the American West. Donning a dark purple gown, the central woman stares straight at the viewer with her hands clasped. Through swathes of the woman’s dress, one can see the bustle of activity taking place behind her. In the bottom register of the painting, smaller Black figures rendered in muted, dark tones guide schooners, horses, and oxen. Towards the top register of the painting, those figures have begun to tend the land

⁹⁰ Glenda Riley, “American Daughters: Black Women in the West,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 38, no. 2 (1988): 16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i406396>.

⁹¹ Riley, “American Daughters,” 17; William L. Katz, *The Black West* (Doubleday, 1971), 284.

⁹² Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 22.

⁹³ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 22.

surrounding them and take on the bright colors that were stripped from their depiction lower in the composition. Various structures, from simple houses to large manors, dot the landscape. However, with their darkened windows, the abodes appear to be unoccupied—a detail that emphasizes that the focus of the composition is on movement rather than settlement. Across the top of the canvas, “EXODUSTERS” has been printed twice, first in large block letters, and then, in smaller, overlapping block letters beneath. As a whole, the scene presents a narrative of Black migration to and through the American West—starting with migrants’ arrival in the country due to the slave trade and ending with the settlement of the central figure, Eliza Bradshaw. Dickey’s five-times great-grandmother, Bradshaw migrated to Kansas from the American South as part of the Exoduster movement. Both Bradshaw and Exoduster history have been two inspirations to which Dickey routinely returns throughout her practice.⁹⁴

In 1870s and 1880s, approximately forty to sixty thousand Black migrants arrived in Kansas, mostly from the South, as part of the “Great Exodus.”⁹⁵ Throughout the 1870s alone, over thirteen thousand Black Exodusters, four thousand of whom were formerly enslaved in Mississippi and Louisiana, settled in the territory.⁹⁶ Because of death or return migration to the South, the precise number of Black migrants to Kansas during this time is difficult to ascertain, with some estimations nearing eighty thousand.⁹⁷ Regardless, during the late 1800s, thousands of Black individuals fled to Plains and Midwest states, often Kansas, along the Missouri River and alternative routes “to escape the evils of sharecropping, tenant farming, and anti-Black

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Gosney, “Senior celebrates family’s history of Black women farmers through award-winning artwork,” Oklahoma State University News and Media, published February 24, 2021, https://news.okstate.edu/articles/arts-sciences/2021/dickey_artwork.html.

⁹⁵ Randall Bennett Woods, “The First Frontier: Kansas and the Great Exodus,” in *A Black Odyssey: John Lewis Waller and the Promise of American Life, 1878-1900* (University Press of Kansas, 2021), 19. Specifically, the “Great Exodus” is defined as the migration that occurred from 1878 or 1879 to 1881.

⁹⁶ Tonia M. Compton, “Challenging Imperial Expectations: Black and White Female Homesteaders In Kansas,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2013): 58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i23533550>.

⁹⁷ Woods, “The First Frontier,” 25.

sentiment.”⁹⁸ In particular, for most Exodusters, St. Louis and the Mississippi River acted as the gateway to Kansas.⁹⁹ Their migration is now regarded as “one of the significant population movements of the nineteenth century.”¹⁰⁰

The Exodusters’ flight was commonly prompted by what is now called “the Kansas Fever myth,” the idea that, after the Civil War, freedpeople in the South would face re-enslavement if they did not leave immediately. In this way, the myth “threatened damnation while it proffered salvation.”¹⁰¹ Historian Randall Bennett Woods asserts that many Exodusters migrated to Kansas because in the 1870s and 1880s because they were “reacting to a utopian image” of the territory, one that offered an “ideal social setting” where they “would be allowed to grow and achieve, to realize, at last, their potential as human beings.”¹⁰² A region with seemingly vast economic development potential, Kansas, as the western state nearest the South where African Americans could homestead, also offered Exodusters supposed access to seemingly infinite, undeveloped farmland.¹⁰³ Because of this, the state “loomed large in the minds of many African American southerners,” including Dickey’s female ancestors, as the ideal state in which to settle. The sheer number of Black migrants in Kansas during the late nineteenth century prompted the state’s governor, John St. John, to create the Kansas Freedmen’s Relief Association, or KFRA, to “aid destitute freedmen, refugees, and emigrants.” This aid included resettling Exodusters in less populous, rural Kansan communities.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Riley, “American Daughters,” 20.

⁹⁹ Nell Irvin Painter, “Millenarian Aspects of the Exodus to Kansas of 1879,” *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 333, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i292516>.

¹⁰⁰ Woods, “The First Frontier,” 19.

¹⁰¹ Painter, “Millenarian Aspects of the Exodus to Kansas of 1879,” 335.

¹⁰² Woods, “The First Frontier,” 40.

¹⁰³ Woods, “The First Frontier,” 40; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 136.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 138.

Emphasizing the bidirectionality of western migration, while a good number of Exodusters chose, ultimately, to leave Kansas, many stayed and were successful in their endeavors—including Eliza Bradshaw.¹⁰⁵ Black women, in general, were key in any success that Exoduster homesteaders achieved in the state, with its frequently inhospitable land and policies against people of color. Historian Tonia M. Compton asserts that, when studying the intersection of gender and homesteading in the American West, history of Black homesteaders such as Dickey’s relatives is significant because “these women defied both gender and racial expectations.”¹⁰⁶ Despite these, Black women, “as the most invisible female population in the [settlement] project, slipped through the tangled discussions about women and property.” Because these women’s race prohibited them “from being considered appropriate models of civilized behavior and proper gender relations” in Western America, there has been little serious consideration of their roles as property owners.¹⁰⁷ However, as Dickey’s work emphasizes, following their movements, Black women in Kansas have and continue to have an instrumental role in the successful start and continuation of homesteading.

The Bradshaws settled in Hodgeman County, Kansas, in the late 1800s, “where they were the first Black farmers to reside” and remain to this day.¹⁰⁸ *Exodusters* reflects and celebrates the fact that Eliza Bradshaw was able to own land “in a place where she wasn’t expected to be successful” and where she experienced “a lot of heartache and tribulations.” As Dickey maintains and *Exodusters* memorializes, Bradshaw “was able to maintain her strength and stability through her family and through her faith.” This strength and stability have enabled Bradshaw’s land to be

¹⁰⁵ Woods, “The First Frontier,” 25.

¹⁰⁶ Compton, “Challenging Imperial Expectations,” 57.

¹⁰⁷ Compton, “Challenging Imperial Expectations,” 50.

¹⁰⁸ Gosney, “Senior celebrates family’s history.” Specifically, Dickey’s family settled in Jetmore.

passed down within Dickey's family to its current steward, Dickey's mother.¹⁰⁹ Dickey's family is adamant that "God has blessed" her "to be able to speak to people about something that's not been talked about." She notes that, with her artwork, she wants to convey that "[w]e weren't just slaves. We became successful. We overcame. It's powerful to consider that we are now owners of the land that we were once slaves to."¹¹⁰ This message comes across clearly in portraits depicting Dickey's mother, including *Land Sold* and *The Load*.

FROM CHILDHOOD PORTRAITS TO TRACTOR ADS: DICKEY AND THE ARCHIVE

In *Land Sold* (2021), a Black woman in a long, dark coat, black hat, black boots, and black-rimmed glasses stands in a golden field. The warm-toned hue of the field surrounding her mirrors the gold accents ornamenting her black coat and contrasts with the bright blue sky behind her. With hands on her hips, she gazes off into the distance. As one looks closer at the painting, the layered photographs populating the sky behind and the land around the woman begin to come forward. Ghostly images, one can see the land and sky through them—a formal detail that connects their subject matter physically with the landscape. Of the gray-toned images used, a photograph of a young girl is repeated over and over. Knowing that the woman in the black coat is Dickey's mother, Lisa, and that the repeated image is Lisa as a small child makes the connection between Dickey's mother and the land upon which she stands undeniable.¹¹¹ In this portrait, Lisa's past is enmeshed literally with the landscape. This is the land that formed the young girl of the photographs into who she is today, a proud farmer who works the land that has been an integral part of her childhood and family history.

¹⁰⁹ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

¹¹⁰ Gosney, "Senior celebrates family's history."

¹¹¹ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

Created the year prior to *Land Sold*, Dickey's *The Load* (2020) features a Black woman in a pink shirt, blue overalls, and green and yellow work gloves painted over a collage of black and white photographs and archival material. A large wooden beam, the load that she physically carries, rests on her right shoulder and obscures her face so that only part of an eye and an ear can be seen. Through the woman's body, primarily her overalls and arms, one can glimpse traces of the images over which she has been painted. For instance, in the bottom right of the composition, Dickey has pasted an 1877 poster encouraging "colored people" to go to Kansas.¹¹² Along with images of Exoduster migrants who underwent this migration and Dickey's own family members, similar posters and leaflets advertising Kansas as a place of settlement for Black Americans pepper the background collage. The collaged archival material upon which the woman has been painted form her being both literally and metaphorically; one cannot look at her without seeing the posters, advertisements, and images that make up Dickey's family's heritage and history of moving to and through the American West. Just off the woman's left elbow, on the far-right side of the composition, is an image of Eliza Bradshaw. This photograph is the reference used for Bradshaw's portrait in *Exodusters* and connects the woman—again, Lisa Dickey—to her family's Exoduster legacy, a metaphorical load that she carries with her.¹¹³

Scattered within the background collage of *The Load* are advertisements for farming equipment and companies such as John Deere, whose iconic yellow and green trademarked colors are mirrored by the woman's work gloves. It is important for Dickey to connect her mother literally to the tradition of American farming within this portrait because Black women have and continue to be excluded from popular conceptions of American farmers and the spaces in which they gather. She asserts that the legacy of Black farmers is "a history that has not been

¹¹² See this poster created by Nicodemus Town Company in 1877: <https://www.kshs.org/km/items/view/702>.

¹¹³ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

talked about, a history that is hidden in deep American soil.” For Dickey’s family, their family’s farming legacy begins with Bradshaw, whom they “credit as the patriarch of our family’s success.”¹¹⁴ Across time, the women such as Bradshaw and Dickey’s mother Lisa are the ones in their family who own the land, and Lisa farms to a greater extent than the men in the family.¹¹⁵ While Dickey notes that, when the general public thinks of farmland, “we think of a white male farmer and the land being passed down to his oldest son,” in her family’s case, the land was passed to Dickey’s mother, who is the seventh child of twelve and the second oldest girl. Dickey’s sister and her husband are currently teaching their own children the farming tradition in the hopes of keeping this legacy alive.¹¹⁶

With work such as *Land Sold* and *The Load*, Dickey challenges “the American structure towards whitewashing [B]lack farmers” to emphasize that Black farmers—specifically, Black female farmers—“can be part of this movement that has been around for centuries.”¹¹⁷ To this day, Dickey’s mother is rejected in farming spaces such as auctions because of her race and gender. Dickey hopes that her artwork can combat this rejection by gaining recognition outside the American West. In doing so, she aims to emphasize to viewers across the country not only that farmers “can be Black, that individual can be a woman, and can be educated,” but also that Black Americans are “not servants anymore. We’re not slaves. We can come into the auction and be our own owners and our own masters of our own fate.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ “Art created by OKState Students,” Oklahoma State University Student Arts Alliance, accessed September 1, 2023, https://lcl.okstate.edu/alliedarts/featured_artist.html.

¹¹⁵ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, February 5, 2024. It is worth noting that, while Bradshaw is a maternal relative of Dickey’s, her paternal grandmother also grew up farming in Iowa.

¹¹⁶ Gosney, “Senior celebrates family’s history.”

¹¹⁷ “Art created by OKState Students,” Oklahoma State University Student Arts Alliance; Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, February 5, 2024.

¹¹⁸ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022; Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, February 5, 2024.

Complimenting the institutional archival material included in the compositions, the personal photographs that Dickey utilizes in *Exodusters*, *Land Sold*, and *The Load* relate both literally and metaphorically to the movements of women in her family. Race, diaspora, and visual justice scholar Thy Phu asserts that family photographs such as the images that Dickey includes in her portraits of familial matriarchs allow viewers to follow stories of migration as they consist of what “one has managed to preserve and carry along from one home to another, along a trail of forced migration and multiple displacements.”¹¹⁹ The reoccurrence of Bradshaw’s portrait in *Land Sold* emphasizes how key preservation is to Dickey’s practice; she is dedicated to memorializing her maternal family members’ movements and accomplishments. While the general public might know little about the plight of *Exodusters*, Dickey’s inclusion of Bradshaw’s portrait and other archival material from the Great Exodus in her work connects her family undeniability to the migrants’ legacy. As Marianne Hirsch details in her 1997 influential text, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, family photographs provide a material connection to the past at the same time that they authenticate the reality of it.¹²⁰ As evident in Dickey’s artwork, photographs also provide a family’s primary means of representation and self-knowledge, means by which family memories are perpetuated.¹²¹

To source the photographs that she uses in works such as *Exodusters*, *Land Sold*, and *The Load*, Dickey draws from family and governmental archives. She notes that she is able “to do a lot of research” by combing through her family’s photo albums and photographing images of interest to her that she finds.¹²² Most of her family members have photographs of ancestors, specifically matriarchs, in their homes, as, to Dickey’s family, it is important to “remember them

¹¹⁹ Thy Phu, *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* (Duke University Press, 2021), 151, 160.

¹²⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 6.

¹²¹ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 6, 7.

¹²² Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

and honor them.”¹²³ To find images of her mother such as those in *Land Sold* and *The Load*, Dickey searched through the same family photo albums as well as her mother’s yearbooks. To locate the archival Exoduster and farming material that Dickey includes in her paintings, she utilizes both Google and the Library of Congress.¹²⁴ Though the Exoduster legacy is on her material side of the family, Dickey’s father also points her in the direction of potential sources for her practice.¹²⁵

While Dickey is interested specifically in drawing attention to the Exoduster movement, her use of archival photographs of female relatives counters what Riley has identified as the “near-invisibility in western history” of Black women. This invisibility has occurred because “archivists [have] neglected to collect these women’s source materials, most historians [have] disregarded their stories,” or, as in Florence Owens Thompson’s case, photographers have anonymized them.¹²⁶ With works such as *Exodusters*, *Land Sold*, and *The Load*, Dickey counters actively this “near-invisibility” to literally bring to the foreground the stories of her female relatives. The images that she uses in the paintings are tangible, important aspects of her heritage. Along with the family folklore, land records, and genealogies also present in Dickey’s paintings, the photographs are pivotal to how Dickey constructs and reinforces her heritage as the descendent of Black moving women in the American West.¹²⁷

MOVE, SETTLE, PERSEVERE

¹²³ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, February 5, 2024.

¹²⁴ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

¹²⁵ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, February 5, 2024.

¹²⁶ Glenda Riley, “African American Women in Western History: Past and Present,” in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*, ed. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 22.

¹²⁷ Justin Hosbey, “‘I Looked With All The Eyes I Had’: Black Women’s Vision And The Stakes Of Heritage In Nicodemus, Kansas,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 45, no. 3/4 (2016): 330, 334, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i26384075>.

Overall, in *Exodusters*, *Land Sold*, and *The Load*, Dickey emphasizes how her maternal relatives pushed westward have been able to draw strength from and center their identities around the land that they have tended for generations. Some viewers of her work have asked her why she does not portray the men in her family. To them, she replies that the men “don’t own the land,” nor do they “work it.” Instead, it is the women of Dickey’s family that are the farmers, a fact that contradicts common conceptions of American farmers as white men.¹²⁸ In her paintings, Dickey celebrates this record of Black women working the Kansan land within her family to draw needed attention to both the history of Exodusters as well as non-archetypical examples of farmers. This record is only possible because of the successes of her five-times great-grandmother, Eliza Bradshaw, who was pushed westward in search of the freedom that the American West supposedly offered.

Speaking about what Bradshaw’s legacy means to her, Dickey emphasizes the trials that her ancestor had to endure to be successful in Western America included drought, winter, the soil, and “the land not being very good.”¹²⁹ Bradshaw’s husband’s death and the shifting of responsibility for the land onto Bradshaw also complicated the matter.¹³⁰ Yet, while the “conditions were not in [her] favor,” Bradshaw persevered, and her land was passed down through the generations to Dickey’s mother Lisa.¹³¹ As Dickey asserts, Bradshaw “was able to establish her value in a society that often times overlooked women as weak and unworthy.”¹³² The continued presence of Dickey’s family in Hodgeman County is significant as many all-Black towns in Kansas “have died off.” To Dickey, her family’s enduring stake in Kansas, including her

¹²⁸ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, February 5, 2024.

¹²⁹ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, February 5, 2024.

¹³⁰ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

¹³¹ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, February 5, 2024.

¹³² “Art created by OKState Students,” Oklahoma State University Student Arts Alliance.

mother's successes as a farmer, emphasize that Bradshaw's "legacy, her dream, and her hard work was not in vain."¹³³

TSCHABALALA SELF

While Dickey identifies and celebrates specific women of color who have moved to and labored in the American West, Tschabalala Self obliterates any sense of individuality in her 2023 *Pioneer* bronze. This anonymity is purposeful. It serves to increase the work's generalizability to past, present, and future generations—rather than function as a byproduct of failing diligence, as with Lange's *Migrant Mother* image. Known for her "singular style," Self, who earned degrees from both Bard College and Yale, investigates "ideas surrounding the [B]lack body" in her printmaking, painting, and sculpture.¹³⁴ She notes that "[c]ollective fantasies surround the Black body, and have created a cultural niche in which exists our contemporary understanding of Black femininity. My practice is dedicated to naming this phenomenon."¹³⁵ With her artwork, including *Pioneer*, Self strives to "redirect misconceptions propagated within and projected upon the Black body." To do so, her work is created "not to show, explain, or perform, but rather 'to be.'" It is in this "being" that Self believes "their presence is acknowledged and their significance felt."¹³⁶ With *Pioneer*, it is the presence and significance of women of color and the labor that they had to perform in order for others to settle Western America that should be felt, acknowledged, and remembered when viewing the bronze.¹³⁷

¹³³ Dickey, interviewed by Murphy, October 14, 2022.

¹³⁴ Tschabalala Self, "Information," TschabalalaSelf.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://tschabalalaself.com/#information>; Robin Pogrebin, "With New Show, Tschabalala Self Explores Black American Identity," *The New York Times*, published November 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/02/arts/design/tschabalala-self-black-identity.html>.

¹³⁵ Tschabalala Self, "Information."

¹³⁶ Tschabalala Self, "Information."

¹³⁷ "Tschabalala Self: *Pioneer*," Desert X 2023, published 2023, <https://desertx.org/dx/dx-23/tschabalala-self>.

Although Self's artistic practice does not grapple often with Western American themes, her family's legacy is rooted in the mythic West. Specifically, according to family legend, Self's great-grandfather was a Texas Ranger who "changed his name to Self after he was freed from slavery" and traveled by horse from Texas to Louisiana.¹³⁸ Although Self notes that this story lacks validity, as "there were no [B]lack Texas Rangers then," the fact remains that, while she grew up in Harlem, Self's sense of self is rooted, in part, in the American West.¹³⁹ Self asserts that she is "proud to be black—proud that my ancestors survived." To her, being a Black person alive in America today "means someone had to survive that trip on the boat. Someone survived every year in captivity. They survived Jim Crow."¹⁴⁰ With *Pioneer*, Self celebrates the survival of women of color who were pushed to the American West to labor while recognizing the presence of their descendants. In doing so, in combination with the sculpture's location in the timeless desert, Self propels the American West out of the past and into the present, if not the future.

While Self is clear that *Pioneer* refers to the labor and survival of women of color in the American West generally, due to her artistic practice's overwhelming focus on Black bodies, it is worth elaborating further upon the significance of Black women's bodies in the settlement of Western America. Historians Shirley Ann Wilson Moore and Taylor assert that, "since the period of initial Spanish contact with the [I]ndigenous peoples of northern New Spain" in the sixteenth century, women with African ancestry have been present in the West.¹⁴¹ Yet, Riley notes that few

¹³⁸ Dodie Kazanjian, "Artist Tschabalala Self Upends Our Perception of the Female Form," *Vogue*, published April 13, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/tschabalala-self-studio-visit>; ¹³⁸ Pogrebin, "With New Show, Tschabalala Self Explores Black American Identity."

¹³⁹ Kazanjian, "Artist Tschabalala Self Upends Our Perception of the Female Form."

¹⁴⁰ Kazanjian, "Artist Tschabalala Self Upends Our Perception of the Female Form."

¹⁴¹ Shirley Ann Wilson Moore and Quintard Taylor, "The West of African American Women, 1600-2000," in *African American Women Confront the West: 1600-2000*, ed. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 4. Specifically, they notes that the Juan de Oñate expedition through present day New Mexico in 1598 "included Francisco de Sosa Penalosa, who brought to the area 'three female negro slaves, one mulatto slave, and other men and women servants.'"

“observers of the American West had thought that the strong, conquering Saint in the Sunbonnet or the delicate, dewy-eyed Madonna of the Prairie might occasionally be dark-complexioned rather than fair.”¹⁴² Overwhelmingly, this conceptual omission is due to the fact that, in the New World, the Black female form “appears as a metaphor for terra nullius, the plantation (or the planting of settlements), unfettered access to property, and the unending reproduction of bodies and land.”¹⁴³ Instead of seeing Black westering women as promoting Anglo cultural ideals, then, Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies scholar Tiffany King Lethabo argues that, “[w]hen the Settler surveys the Black female body, the Settler can imagine their land, territory, property and spatial coordinates expanding.”¹⁴⁴ With her missing head and prominent reproductive organs, Self’s *Pioneer* reflects Lethabo’s concept explicitly; the westering woman that Self presents has been reduced to breasts, a pubic mound, and a failing steer—mere resources—in her journey westward.

Rather than celebrate settlement in Western America, Self’s *Pioneer* recognizes what scholars of multicultural Wests today recognize, “the ways racialized labor has been used to advance or resist white settler control of the region,” and commemorates the women of color who were pushed westward during that process.¹⁴⁵ As part of that racialized labor, it is important to note that the women of color that *Pioneer* memorializes are implicated in settler colonialism as both “agents and objects of history.” Historian Albert L. Hurtado argues that, while white settlers subordinated Black, Asian, and Hispanic peoples in the American West, these people of color are also implicated in dispossessing, subordinating, and replacing Native American

¹⁴² Riley, “American Daughters,” 14.

¹⁴³ Tiffany King Lethabo, “In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space, and Settler Colonial Landscapes” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2013), 23.

¹⁴⁴ Lethabo, “In the Clearing,” 23.

¹⁴⁵ Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 11.

peoples.¹⁴⁶ The ambiguity in the form of Self's *Pioneer* reflects, in part, this complicated past. Instead of celebrating wholly the legacy of westering women of color, as imagery of white westering women from the nineteenth and twentieth century often does, the bronze's frenetic, tired, abstracted form hints at a thorny, multifaceted history that defies naturalistic representation.

HOW THE WEST WAS BRONZE

In form and subject matter, Self's *Pioneer* goes against the grain of both the well-established, dated genre of Western bronzes as well as archetypical pioneer imagery. While many have believed Western American artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century created "faithful documents recording the west" as they experienced it, as art historian J. Gray Sweeney notes, "nothing could be further from the truth."¹⁴⁷ Instead, work by these artists such as Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell "tell false and stereotyped stories" centered around white subjects rendered in naturalistic styles. Rather than painting or sculpting the lived realities of the West and including pioneers or cowboys of color as subjects, these artists painted "the romantic West, the West of myth and legend, the West the way the culture want[ed] to have been."¹⁴⁸ In doing so, English scholar Corlann Gee Bush argues, they both molded and reinforced the myth of the West as "Hisland." In addition, Western American monuments and paintings reflect often their wealthy donors' or patrons' romantic recollections of the past and help shaped the American

¹⁴⁶ Albert L. Hurtado, "Settler Women and Frontier Women: The Unsettling Past of Western Women's History." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 3 (2001): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i366833>.

¹⁴⁷ J. Gray Sweeney, "Racism, Nationalism, and Nostalgia in Cowboy Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 1 (1992): 69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i259063>.

¹⁴⁸ Bush, "The Way We Weren't," 21.

memory of the western frontier, in large part by absolving white guilt and forgetting strategically the violence necessary to implement settler colonialism in the territory.¹⁴⁹

If they factored into these scenes and monuments at all, women were portrayed as white, docile civilizing agents—Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Mothers—sent to support their male counterparts in settling the American West.¹⁵⁰ In the face of this enduring legacy, the anonymity and carnality of Self’s *Pioneer* is shocking. From the 1840s through the 1930s, Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery rose to its greatest prominence, with William Henry Dethlef Koerner’s 1921 *Madonna of the Prairie* serving as archetype and preeminent model for the portrayal of westering women (Figure 7). As in Koerner’s painting, which was reproduced heavily in print media, the Prairie Madonna served as a “passive, delicate, youthful symbol of Christian Anglo culture,” often appearing “in the domestic shelter of the covered wagon, nurturing her children.”¹⁵¹ Because the foremost goals of Prairie Madonna artworks were to encourage Euro-American expansion westward and solidify white, Christian values, it is logical that artists would turn to Madonna and Child imagery to promote the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny.¹⁵² Art historian Annette Stott argues further that “[i]dentifying westering women with the mother of the savior of the world” not only “reinforced the message that the western enterprise had the blessing of God,” but also “that woman’s role was to bring the double salvation of Christianity and Anglo-American civilization to the western plains.”¹⁵³ As a whole, Prairie Madonna imagery successfully promoted the federal government’s settler colonizing

¹⁴⁹ Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments*, 19, 20, 42.

¹⁵⁰ Bush, “The Way We Weren’t,” 19.

¹⁵¹ Annette Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women: Images of Emigrant Women in the Art of the Old West,” *Prospects* 21 (1996): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0361233300006566>.

¹⁵² Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women,” 299, 301.

¹⁵³ Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women,” 301.

policies in the West, as the U.S. government “considered the family unit a more effective and more permanent means of holding western land than military action.”¹⁵⁴

This idea is illustrative of the concept of “manifest domesticity,” a type of “imperial domesticity” that reflects the “spatial and political interdependence of home and empire.”¹⁵⁵ Specifically, American studies scholar Amy Kaplan argues that “‘Manifest Domesticity’ turns an imperial nation into a home by producing and colonizing specters of the foreign that lurk inside and outside its ever-shifting borders.”¹⁵⁶ The type of white female settler of western frontiers memorialized in Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery subscribed typically racist, settler-colonial beliefs prevalent among Euro-American culture in the 1800s and early 1900s.¹⁵⁷ In particular, Riley argues that these white female migrants “carried with them the gendered conviction that they had a duty to help ‘deprived’ and ‘primitive’ [N]ative peoples by bringing them ‘up’ to the level of their own culture and civilizations.”¹⁵⁸ Because of this, white westering women sided often with the Euro-American patriarchy to affirm the process of settler colonialism—and the violence that accompanies it—rather than criticize it.¹⁵⁹ At home and on their farms, white mothers protected and modeled Euro-American ideals to their children and any “Others” present daily—hence, the Bibles and guns that Pioneer Mothers frequently carry with them as they guide their white offspring through settling the American West.¹⁶⁰

By the mid-twentieth century, the figure of the Pioneer Mother overtook the Prairie Madonna in the production of Western American artwork. This transition reflects the supposed

¹⁵⁴ Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women,” 302.

¹⁵⁵ Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 31, 25.

¹⁵⁶ Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture*, 50.

¹⁵⁷ Glenda Riley, *Taking Land, Breaking Land: Women Colonizing the American West and Kenya, 1840-1940* (University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 12.

¹⁵⁸ Riley, *Taking Land, Breaking Land*, 12.

¹⁵⁹ Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” 331.

¹⁶⁰ Riley, *Taking Land, Breaking Land*, 14.

closure of the frontier; Stott notes that, while the Prairie Madonna “had encouraged the emigration of Anglo-American families and cultures,” the Pioneer Mother figure “stood as a monument to the achievement of that goal.” While artists depicted often Prairie Madonnas as youthful, passive, and delicate, they portrayed Pioneer Mothers as older, stronger, and more active in the Manifest Domesticity process. Bryant Baker’s 1930 bronze monument, *Pioneer Woman*, in Ponca City, Oklahoma, reflects this shift (Figure 8); rather than simpering in a covered wagon, Baker’s Pioneer Mother strives forward with her son, whom she leads by the hand, as she carries a bundle and a Bible. As Baker’s monument suggests, Stott argues that Pioneer Mother imagery “served to highlight the ‘progress’ of western culture from the hardships of settlement days to the stability of the post-frontier era.”¹⁶¹ As a whole, Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery both reenforced “the romanticized heterosexual gender binary” present in Euro-American culture and served provide reasoning and motivation for settler-colonial conquest.¹⁶²

Across the board, the whitewashing of Western American subjects in art of the American West has been and continues to be to appease “white urban patrons” of cowboy artists—patrons who sought images of Western America that would provoke nostalgia and a sense of accomplishment. To create these images, Stott asserts that “artists simply left the [B]lack wagon trains, Exodusters, [B]lack cowboys, buffalo soldiers, and [B]lack western towns out of the picture, literally.”¹⁶³ In particular, excluding Black pioneers from their Western American paintings and sculptures ensured that “the issue of free versus slave populations did not arise and

¹⁶¹ Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women,” 316.

¹⁶² Susan Bernardin, “Monumental Reckonings and Impossible Placeholders” in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and the American West*, ed. Susan Bernardin (Routledge, 2022), 3.

¹⁶³ Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women,” 307.

no competition for the eventual domination of Anglo culture was intimated.”¹⁶⁴ Instead, the use of the docile, white Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery helped reassure potential settlers in the East that “the West would fit into the United States without altering America’s image of itself too drastically” and without upsetting set race relations or gender roles.¹⁶⁵ If the figure of a Black woman appeared in Western American art, her representation was, frequently, an offensive caricature such as the 1881 Currier and Ives print, *Mule Train on an Upgrade* by Thomas Worth (Figure 9).¹⁶⁶ These “visual and ideological benchmarks” that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists such as Worth, Remington, Baker, and Russell established have been perpetuated by contemporary Western American art organizations, specifically the Cowboy Artists of America, who emulate “the subject matter and formal construction of the historic artwork.”¹⁶⁷ In doing so, they also perpetuate the erasure of women of color from the settlement process, an erasure that Self seeks to correct with *Pioneer*.

DISRUPTING, UNSETTLING, REMEMBERING

In the introduction for *The Routledge Companion to Gender and the American West*, literary and American studies scholar Susan Bernardin asserts that “[t]he intention (and implications) of western monuments” such as Baker’s *Pioneer Woman* “has always been met with resistance and refusal by the peoples and communities excluded or excised from belonging in a whitewashed U.S. West.”¹⁶⁸ With her bronze monument for Desert X, Self creates a visual marker of this resistance, a marker that acknowledges the labor of women of color pushed to

¹⁶⁴ Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women,” 309.

¹⁶⁵ Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women,” 310.

¹⁶⁶ Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women,” 309.

¹⁶⁷ Mindy Besaw, “Re-Framing the American West: Contemporary Artists Engage History” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2015), 23.

¹⁶⁸ Bernardin, “Monumental Reckonings and Impossible Placeholders,” 2.

traverse and settle Western America. Throughout her artistic practice, Self renders Black bodies, including her pioneer's, "that verge on the grotesque and can conjure intense sexual images—vulvas, cartoonishly large bottoms, the occasional penis." In doing so, she strives to make viewers uncomfortable with the sexuality that is on display. She notes that, "if you're dealing with women of color and their sexuality, it compounds all those anxieties."¹⁶⁹ In contrast to idealized Classical sculptures and Pioneer Mother monuments of the past, Self's *Pioneer* possesses clearly rendered nipples and a swath of thick pubic hair. Her legs are hyperextended out over the sides of her blocky steed as she performs as she balances on its back. Rather than provide reassurance, then, as Pioneer Mother and Prairie Madonna imagery of the past did, Self's *Pioneer* looks to push boundaries, call attention to past wrongs, and, overall, unsettle. Instead of encouraging westward expansion or promoting conservative gender ideals, Self's *Pioneer* presents a westering woman of color whose truncated body takes the form of a yoke across an exhausted steed. With such formal choice, she emphasizes how being pushed westward was a burden rather than an opportunity for freedom for the women forced to labor for others in the mythic territory.

Memory and monuments scholar James E. Young argues that, "once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden."¹⁷⁰ Bronze monuments dedicated to the supposed histories of women in the American West overwhelmingly take the form of Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother monuments, a category of Western American bronzes whose formation and perpetuation, following Young's

¹⁶⁹ Kazanjian, "Artist Tschabalala Self Upends Our Perception of the Female Form." Self states that she "figured out how to build my sculptures by watching plastic-surgery shows on TV," a fact that is reflected explicitly by *Pioneer*'s unnaturalistic form.

¹⁷⁰ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (Yale University Press, 1994), 5.

logic, divorce the public from their obligation to seek out and remember the histories of other women in the area. Contemporary monuments such as Self's, Young asserts, attempt "to assign a singular architectonic form to unify disparate and competing memories."¹⁷¹ Unlike Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother monuments, which create naturalistic portraits of women, the un-specificity and anonymity of Self's *Pioneer* navigates successfully the challenge that Young identifies; only the breasts and pubic area of *Pioneer* indicate that the rider is a woman, and thus, the figure's generalizability to numerous, disparate populations of women in the American West is high, even without Self's assertion about whom the figure should call to mind. Overall, Self's *Pioneer* shifts the unbalanced historical record's focus away from white westering women to recognize the labor of women of color pushed westward during settlement. In doing so, she visualizes Riley's argument that "only by analyzing the history of all types of western women can their history and the history of the West itself ever be understood."¹⁷²

PAMELA J. PETERS

While Dickey's paintings about Black women farmers in Western America are intensely personal, and Self's bronze dedicated to the labor of women of color during the settlement of the West is decidedly anonymous, Diné artist Pamela J. Peters' film about the urban relocation of Native peoples in the mid-twentieth century strikes a middle ground. Peters' work does pull from her family's history of movement in the American West, as Dickey's does, but the film focuses more broadly on the overarching legacy of the Voluntary Relocation Program in Los Angeles than her or her parents' movements to urban centers. In this way, the work aligns more with

¹⁷¹ Young, *The Stages of Memory*, 14.

¹⁷² Riley, "American Daughters," 27.

Self's *Pioneer*. Instead of a monument of bronze, however, Peters' film stakes a digital permanency for the history that she examines.

Born in Shiprock, New Mexico, on the Navajo Nation reservation in 1970, Peters is a “multimedia documentarian.”¹⁷³ A resident of Los Angeles, California, for the past thirty years, Peters is a moving woman who has bounced between her LA home and the Navajo Nation reservation with a frequency that, if you succeed in finding her “sitting in one place,” you should “consider yourself lucky.”¹⁷⁴ While her practice spans several media, work by Peters—whose Diné (Navajo) clan is Táchii'nii, or Red Running into the Water People clan—often centers around photography, which has interested her since she was a child.¹⁷⁵ When she was young, she notes that she would play with an old camera as a toy and would stage friends in dramatic tableaux, even if she did not have the film to photograph them.¹⁷⁶ Collaboration with the people that she wants to document continues to be important to Peters, who states that she does not like to call her sitters “subjects,” but rather, “participants,” “because they’re participating. We’re working together.”¹⁷⁷ This emphasis on collaboration is also readily apparent in Peter’s films, including *Legacy of Exiled NDNz* (Figure 10), which she began in 2011 and reflects her interest in what she labels “Indigenous Realism.”¹⁷⁸

Contrary to carelessness with which Lange treated Owens’ indigeneity, in this work, Peters vigilantly identifies and celebrates her Native subjects’ identities. Asserting that she “kind of coined the term,” Peters defines Indigenous Realism as artwork that “often situates

¹⁷³ Pamela J. Peters, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, February 28, 2024; Pamela J. Peters, “About Photographer,” TachiiniiPhotography.com, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://tachiiniiphotography.com/>.

¹⁷⁴ Chuck Thompson, “Pamela J. Peters,” *Cowboys and Indians*, published February 20, 2019, <https://www.cowboysindians.com/2019/02/pamela-j-peters/>.

¹⁷⁵ Peters, “About Photographer;” Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

¹⁷⁶ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

¹⁷⁷ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024. Peters notes that “NDNz” is “a Native pop culture way of writing *Indians*” that she first saw in a street mural on the Navajo reservation (Thompson, “Pamela J. Peters”).

contemporary Native narratives in a nostalgic historical environment that allows history to be retold through the participation of Native Americans in a modern context.”¹⁷⁹ With Indigenous Realist work such as *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, which grapples with the Voluntary Urban Relocation Program of the mid-twentieth century, Peters aims to capture “the lives and the complexities of contemporary American Indians” in a manner that “pushes viewers to critically analyze the psychological and historical structures of Native Americans in mass media.”¹⁸⁰ Across her practice, Peters states that she “want[s] to reboot the narrative we have been taught about ‘Indians’ in films and the education system” to “redefine the perception of how ‘Native Americans/American Indians’ are seen today.”¹⁸¹ More specifically, however, Indigenous Realism is a direct response to the theme of Neorealism in Euro-American, mid-twentieth-century films. This work, including the 1961 movie *The Exiles*, directed by Kent Mackenzie—which Peters references explicitly in her *Legacy*—focused on the people and stories of “everyday” communities, including the working class and poor.¹⁸² In *The Exiles*’ case, Mackenzie focused on a day in the life of a group of young Native American men and women who had relocated from their reservation communities to Los Angeles. After viewing *The Exiles*, Peters knew that she wanted to remix Mackenzie’s film with participants who are “people” telling their own stories rather than “actors.”¹⁸³ Her resulting project, *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, recounts the often-observed history of Native migration from reservations to large cities in the mid-twentieth century, a history that includes Peters’ relatives’ migrations and her own subsequent movements.

¹⁷⁹ Pamela J. Peters, “Native Artist Spotlight: Pamela J. Peters,” The Onward Project, Accessed January 23, 2024, <https://onwardproject.org/blog/native-artist-spotlight-pamela-j-peters>.

¹⁸⁰ Peters, “About Photographer;” Peters, “Native Artist Spotlight.”

¹⁸¹ Pamela J. Peters, “About The Artist,” PamelaJPeters.com, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://pamelajpeters.com/meet-the-artist/>.

¹⁸² Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

¹⁸³ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

THE BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIR'S VOLUNTARY RELOCATION PROGRAM

To understand the various histories in which *Legacy of Exiled NDNz* situates itself, it is first helpful to gain a broad understanding of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) Voluntary Relocation Program. Created during the Bureau of Indian Affairs' "Termination era," the 1940s through the 1960s, the BIA designed its Voluntary Relocation Program to supposedly provide "steady employment for adult Indian males, domestic lessons for adult Indian women, and public schooling for Indian children" in an effort to "finally 'emancipate' Indians from cultures they deemed inherently at odds with capitalism."¹⁸⁴ While the program, which began in 1952, outwardly stated such lofty aims, in actuality, it was seen as a resolution to what had been coined as the "Indian problem" in the U.S.¹⁸⁵ In particular, the program strove to relocate permanently "excess populations" of Native peoples living on reservations to urban locations "far enough away to prevent an easy return to reservations." In these urban areas, the work offered was year-round and low wage.¹⁸⁶ American and Gender and Sexuality studies scholar Laura Sachiko Fugikawa notes that "[u]rban relocation was seen as necessary to promote self-reliance and promote a modern life that did not include Native ways." Therefore, "[i]dealized self-sufficient, working-class nuclear families were promoted as the pathway to full citizenship." Propaganda for urban relocation urged Native peoples to end their supposed dependency on the U.S. government for education and health care and, instead, become self-reliant and "assume their roles as *full* citizens" through relocating.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Scholars refer to the program as the "Voluntary Urban Relocation Program" and the "Voluntary Relocation Program" interchangeably.

¹⁸⁵ Douglas K. Miller, *Indians on the Move: Native American Mobility and Urbanization in the Twentieth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 7.

¹⁸⁶ Laura Sachiko Fugikawa, "Shifting the Gaze: Gender and Resilience in 'The Exiles,'" *American Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (March 2015): 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40156817>.

¹⁸⁷ Fugikawa, "Shifting the Gaze," 10. Emphasis in original.

While some Native communities welcomed the Voluntary Relocation Program, others viewed and continue to view it as another iteration of the legacy of white conquest in the United States, as, once again, the U.S. government pushed Native peoples off their land.¹⁸⁸ Regardless, following the program's implementation, the migration of Native individuals and families from reservation areas to urban centers occurred across the country and was greatest to large metropolitan areas, including Seattle, New York, Chicago, and the San Francisco Bay area. In particular, a large portion of Voluntary Relocation migrants ended up in Los Angeles, which, by 1970, "was second only to the Navajo reservation as the largest concentration of American Indians in the country."¹⁸⁹ Specifically, the area within and surrounding LA's Bunker Hill neighborhood was a key site for Native relocation, and thus, a natural setting for Mackenzie's *The Exiles* and Peters' *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*.¹⁹⁰ Although the BIA's Voluntary Relocation Program promoted Native people's living in urban centers as a novel and productive idea, as historian Nicolas G. Rosenthal asserts, "American Indians have always lived in the towns and cities of North America to some extent."¹⁹¹

Peters' personal connection to the Voluntary Relocation Program is of great significance when examining her *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*; as part of the program, her parents were pushed to Oakland, California.¹⁹² Peters, herself, would later be pushed from the Navajo reservation to the Los Angeles area in search of education and professional opportunities. She recalls that, as young adults, her parents saw a poster in Window Rock, Arizona, advertising the program and the "good life" it could offer. Interested, Peters' parents interviewed with a caseworker at Shiprock

¹⁸⁸ Fugikawa, "Shifting the Gaze," 10.

¹⁸⁹ Nicolas G. Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁹⁰ Fugikawa, "Shifting the Gaze," 8.

¹⁹¹ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 12.

¹⁹² Thompson, "Pamela J. Peters."

Agency, who signed the couple up for the program, then put them on a bus to Gallup, New Mexico, then a train to Los Angeles.¹⁹³ Instead of staying in LA, however, the couple was “shipped up” to Oakland, where they were assigned housing above a dry cleaners, and Peters’ father did railroad work.¹⁹⁴ During their time in Oakland, which spanned from the late 1950s through the late 1960s, Peters’ parents remember the protests that occurred on behalf of the American Indian Movement (AIM), including the occupation of Alcatraz. While Peters’ mother “loved it in Oakland” and wished “she could have stayed up there,” due to tensions surrounding Peters’ father’s employment, the couple moved back to the Navajo reservation after a decade of living in urban California.¹⁹⁵ The legacy of Peters’ parents’ migration illustrates her personal investment in the Voluntary Relocation Program. However, it also reflects the BIA’s specific interest in relocating Diné individuals as a sort of test program before deciding that “it was promising to relocate Indians from economically collapsed reservations to urban areas” from across the country.¹⁹⁶ As a whole, *Legacy of Exiled NDNz* draws from and brings light to a more contemporary history of the U.S. government pushing Native peoples, including women, from their lands.

EXILES VERSUS EXILED: OVERLAP AND CONTRAST BETWEEN THE FILMS

A fourteen-minute documentary, *Legacy of Exiled NDNz* begins with historical photographs of Native peoples and features narration by Santee Dakota actor-activist John Trudell. As a slideshow of Edward Curtis photographs, including his iconic image taken at

¹⁹³ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

¹⁹⁴ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024; Thompson, “Pamela J. Peters.”

¹⁹⁵ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

¹⁹⁶ Donald Lee Fixico, *Indian Resilience and Rebuilding: Indigenous Nations in the Modern American West* (University of Arizona Press, 2013), 98.

Canyon de Chelly, plays, text relays the history of the reservation system in the States but is clear that “displacement from our Native homelands has not caused the Indian to disappear.”¹⁹⁷ After conveying this history, viewers are informed that “what follows is the authentic account of a group of American Indians who had migrated into Los Angeles, California” and that the film “reflects a life that is not true of all Urban Indians today, but typical of many.”¹⁹⁸ Interspersed with text providing background information on the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 and Mackenzie’s *The Exiles* are black-and-white shots of young, Native men and women in mid-twentieth-century clothing interacting at various LA locations (Figure 11). The participants speak over their scenes to discuss the Voluntary Relocation Program and share familial memories and legacies impacted by the program. Peters notes that, because the program was designed “to remove Indians from their tribal lands for the purpose of capital and community expansion,” she used “exiled” in the project’s title.¹⁹⁹

While *Legacy* “was made as a [t]ribute to the first generation of Relocate (Exiled) Indians” as a whole, the film’s content and Peters’ background emphasize the legacy of women’s participation in the Voluntary Urban Relocation Program.²⁰⁰ The young women involved in *Legacy* include Fairuz “Gladys” Dakam (Oglala Lakota), who moved to California from the Dakotas for her education; Courtney Alex (Diné), whose grandparents were relocated to Los Angeles in 1959 and who now attends University of California, Los Angeles; Heather Singer (Diné), whose family has been in LA since her grandmother was relocated as a young woman; and Vivian Garcia (Cherokee), who was raised in LA and whose grandmother came to the city

¹⁹⁷ *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, directed by Pamela J. Peters (2014; Los Angeles, CA: Red Wind Entertainment), limited release.

¹⁹⁸ *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, directed by Peters.

¹⁹⁹ Pamela J. Peters, “Native Angelenos: Filmmaker Pamela J. Peters Deconstructs Stereotypes,” PBS SoCal, published April 1, 2016, <https://www.pbssocal.org/shows/artbound/native-angelenos-filmmaker-pamela-j-peters-deconstructs-stereotypes>.

²⁰⁰ *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, directed by Peters.

from Oklahoma to “start a new life and have her children” as part of the Relocation Program. Emphasizing that migration is not a one-way flow, these young women—and Peters—would ultimately like to move back to their own reservations. However, all the participants in *Legacy* “have migrated from their reservations in the course of their lives or are the offspring of families that relocated from various tribal reservations through the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ (BIA) Relocation program.”²⁰¹ Speaking with Peters, the participants felt as if they were stepping into the shoes of those before them and noted that “[t]his is what my grandmother must have felt like coming to the city.”²⁰²

The same emphasis on the role of women during Urban Relocation and the impact of the program on their lives is featured in Mackenzie’s *The Exiles*, although this is not the explicit focus of the film. A series of events as a student studying American Indian Studies and Film and Television Studies at UCLA led Peters to Mackenzie’s film, which she is adamant that she is “recounting” in *Legacy*, not “remaking” or “reenacting.”²⁰³ Ultimately, Peters was frustrated with the Westerns that she was studying in her courses, films such as those featuring John Wayne that aimed to “embed colonization into our heads” and “erase our existence as Native people.”²⁰⁴ To combat this frustration, a professor suggested that Peters go to an upcoming screening of *The Exiles*, which had been restored after a middling release in the 1960s, at the Hammer Museum.²⁰⁵ Peters went, sat next to Cherokee actor West Studi, and attended the Q&A session afterwards. She notes that the film “literally jumpstarted” her heart, and it became clear to her that “this is

²⁰¹ Pamela J. Peters, “Legacy of Exiled Ndnz,” PamelaJPeters.com, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://pamelajpeters.com/legacy-of-exiled-ndnz/>.

²⁰² Thompson, “Pamela J. Peters.”

²⁰³ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

²⁰⁴ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

²⁰⁵ It is worth noting that *The Exiles* “virtually disappeared for 50 years” after its release in the 1960s before being restored and rereleased in the early 2000s (Catherine Russell, “The *Exiles*,” Library of Congress, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/exiles.pdf>).

exactly what I want to do. This is what I need to do. This is what I'm going to do."²⁰⁶ On the road to creating *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, Peters first had to both crowdfund and undertake additional research about the film's inspiration.

Writer, director, and producer of *The Exiles*, Kent Mackenzie was a graduate student in Film Production at the University of Southern California at the time that he created the film in 1961 and, subsequently, wrote a thesis documenting its production history.²⁰⁷ *The Exiles* follows twelve hours in the lives of three Native narrators, including Yvonne William Walker, the film's White River Apache lead, as they "drink, shop, sing, fight, and wander the spaces of Yaanga, the Gabrielino-Tongva village which is currently occupied by downtown Los Angeles."²⁰⁸ For the film's concept, Mackenzie was inspired by a 1956 story in *Harper's Magazine* titled "The Raid on the Reservation," which he described as "a discussion of the continuing shenanigans on the part of the white man to obtain Indian land."²⁰⁹ After further research, he narrowed his focus to "the plight" of young Native American men and women who were moving to cities from their reservations through the Voluntary Relocation Program and created *The Exiles*.²¹⁰

Limiting the scope of his project to center the lives of Native women and men living in the LA neighborhood of Bunker Hill, Mackenzie is often lauded for depicting "the lives of Native Americans as *part* of the popular culture of the 1950s." Rather than being shown stereotypically as "outside of time," the Native characters in his film are "depicted as being 'of' their time," as their lives "revolve around juke-boxes, fast cars, Brylcreem and girls in sweaters

²⁰⁶ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

²⁰⁷ Russell, "The *Exiles*;" Ho'esta Mo'e'hahne, "Animating the Indigenous, Colonial Affects, and 'Going Native' in the City: Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*," *Western American Literature* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 75, <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/36621/print>.

²⁰⁸ Fugikawa, "Shifting the Gaze," 13; Mo'e'hahne, "Animating the Indigenous," 75.

²⁰⁹ Ross Lipman, "Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*: Reinventing the Real of Cinema," in *Alternative Projects: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*, ed. David E. James and Adam Hyman (Indiana University Press, 2015), 164-165.

²¹⁰ Lipman, "Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*," 165.

and New Look skirts.”²¹¹ However, as with *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, *The Exiles* opens with Curtis’s photographs of Native peoples before transitioning to portraits of the film’s cast (Figure 12).²¹² In doing so, Southern Tsistsistas and Hinono’ei English scholar Ho’esta Mo’e’hahne argues that “Mackenzie begins by locating ‘proper’ Indigeneity in places and times other than the urban colonial West of Yaanga.”²¹³ They extend their criticism of the film further to assert that, for Mackenzie, “Indigenous life was defined by pointless incoherence” and “[a]uthentic Indigenous people were unable to articulate their subjectivity and required a white, male colonial gaze and interpellation to represent them.”²¹⁴ Other scholars such as Sachiko Fugikawa have recognized the shortcomings of *The Exiles*, which is complicit in conveying racialized stereotypes as “its content reinforces negative images about Native Americans (e.g., as a social problem, chronic abuse of alcohol, and dysfunctional relationships” but “occludes the reality of the cast members’ lives within a much longer history of dispossession by the U.S. government.”²¹⁵

More specifically, although the film recognizes indirectly the significant impact of the Voluntary Relocation Program on Native women with its focus on Walker, it does so in a manner that scholars such as Sachiko Fugikawa find problematic. *The Exiles*, which Sachiko Fugikawa describes as a “black-and-white docudrama,” opens by following the carefully made-up and visibly pregnant Walker as she navigates Grand Central Market in downtown LA (Figure 13).²¹⁶ They note that, as the film progresses, Mackenzie portrays Walker as affected deeply “by the discord between her dreams of the future,” supposedly closer in reach now that she and her

²¹¹ Russell, “The *Exiles*.” Emphasis added.

²¹² Mo’e’hahne, “Animating the Indigenous,” 84.

²¹³ Mo’e’hahne, “Animating the Indigenous,” 84.

²¹⁴ Mo’e’hahne, “Animating the Indigenous,” 76, 80.

²¹⁵ Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 2. It is significant, however, to recognize that the film is “one of the few twentieth-century films that features urban Native Americans,” (1).

²¹⁶ Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 1.

husband are in the urban center, and “the reality she faces every day in Los Angeles.”²¹⁷ While Mackenzie attempts to show Walker as a “modern” Native woman, *The Exiles* paints her mostly as a “suffering wife who desires normative things—home, children, and an attentive husband.”²¹⁸ This longing reflects the heteronormative gender ideals of Euro-American culture focused on the happy life that a home, a marriage, and a child can supposedly bring. Yet, this happiness seems far in the distance, as Mackenzie implies that the Native men in the film have “arrested development,” furthered by their “drinking, fighting, and dancing until the sun comes up.” Thus, in *The Exiles*, Native men such as Walker’s husband are “culpable for holding back ‘their’ women and thus shattering Native Americans’ chances for the American Dream.”²¹⁹ Complicating further the supposedly convenient and modern lives that the Voluntary Relocation Program offered Native women, interviews with and articles about Walker emphasize the “devastating loss” that resulted from her real-life “back-and-forth migration” between the city and her reservation.²²⁰ Yet, for Peters, the film illustrates the beauty and joy that could flourish alongside the pain and hardship caused by urban relocation.

SHORTCOMINGS AND SUCCESSES OF THE VOLUNTARY RELOCATION PROGRAM

The list of the of the Voluntary Relocation Program’s shortcomings is seemingly endless. Describing the program in the 1960s, Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday notes that it was “the most recent attempt by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to accelerate integration” by rewarding Native peoples for leaving their reservations in favor of cities.²²¹ While “attractive in theory,” the

²¹⁷ Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 4.

²¹⁸ Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 13.

²¹⁹ Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 13.

²²⁰ Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 3.

²²¹ N. Scott Momaday, “The Morality of Indian Hating,” *Ramparts Magazine* (Summer 1964): 38. Peters acknowledges that the program stripped Native peoples from their lands so that the U.S. government could control any resources such land offered as well as promoted assimilation. She also states that the program did not emphasize

consequences of relocation, for Momaday, included “the loss of tribal identity.” He asserts that, in the program, “the Indian becomes a white man by virtue of living in the presence of white men.”²²² Despite Momaday’s hesitations, which are illustrative of larger opinions of the Voluntary Relocation Program, from 1948 to the 1970s, around 155,000 Native women, men, and children moved to U.S. cities “on relocation.”²²³ Upon their arrival, many found their new city alienating and lonely, while others felt constrained by BIA oversight and shucked program rules.²²⁴ Elaborating upon this sense of isolation, Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee Creek, and Seminole historian Donald L. Fixico explains that “the relocated Indians were like newly arrived Europeans being continually processed at Ellis Island as they entered a cold sociocultural system that was more likely to reject than accept them.”²²⁵ Furthermore, the Voluntary Relocation Program dissuaded migrants from participating in “the kinds of activities that might have facilitated the maintenance of Indian identity in the city as part of its Americanization program.”²²⁶ As a result, for many relocated Native peoples, they found “incomplete existence in two worlds and security in neither,” and over twenty percent of program participants returned “disenchanted to the reservation.”²²⁷

This fluidity of migration between urban areas and reservations has been documented throughout the Termination era, however, and emphasizes the “social networks of connectivity that Indigenous migrants created during this period.” This contrasts strongly Mackenzie’s use of “exile,” which “implies that the Native people in the film have been dislocated from their

to migrants such as her parents that they would have to “compete with other ethnicities in urban communities for employment” and would not be guaranteed a job (Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024).

²²² Momaday, “The Morality of Indian Hating,” 38.

²²³ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 50.

²²⁴ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 51.

²²⁵ Fixico, *Indian Resilience and Rebuilding*, 98.

²²⁶ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 62.

²²⁷ Momaday, “The Morality of Indian Hating,” 38.

homelands, migrated to the city without any agency, and are unable to return.”²²⁸ Historian Douglas K. Miller asserts that one must “consider the historical implications” of this “reverse relocation from reimagined urban Indian Country to ancestral and rural Indian Country.” Foremost, this is because many of those who returned to their reservations did so not because they were unsuccessful in the city, but rather, because they viewed their potential futures back on tribal lands to be more promising.²²⁹

Native women looking to relocate, in particular, were subject to stipulations not placed upon Native men, and after migrating to a city, were denied opportunities given to their male counterparts. Beyond promoting assimilation, federal officials utilized the Voluntary Relocation Program to promote “nuclear, patriarchal families.”²³⁰ For instance, Rosenthal notes that single Native women who had children “were discouraged from participating in relocation...because they were perceived as deviating from the kinds of nuclear patriarchal families federal officials sought to promote.”²³¹ Overall, the BIA allocated Native women’s benefits “in relation to prevailing notions about their secondary positions within the American family.” In particular, the program allowed only single Native women or Native women married to a Native man to be relocated, but only single Native women could receive the vocational training that the program offered. The BIA denied many Native women who were married, including *The Exiles’* Walker, opportunities for vocational training and other relocation services offered to Native men “because officials regarded women as domestic caretakers dependent upon male breadwinners,” a stance opposite many matriarchal Native communities.²³²

²²⁸ Mo’e’hahne, “Animating the Indigenous,” 85.

²²⁹ Miller, *Indians on the Move*, 162.

²³⁰ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 55.

²³¹ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 55-56.

²³² Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 55.

For the Native women who were able to relocate to cities and meet the various local and federal requirements for vocational training, there were limited training and employment options, which reflected dominant conceptions about “the place of ethnic women in the workforce” at that time.²³³ Those women seeking better paying or more fulfilling employment opportunities than they were allotted, in an effort to break racial and gender boundaries, were frequently prevented by program officials from doing so.²³⁴ Overall, combined with the general hardships of relocation, as outlined by Momaday and Fixico, Native women who participated in the Voluntary Relocation Program faced almost insurmountable hurdles on their paths to establishing new lives for themselves in the city. In *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, all the female participants emphasize how they are in the LA area for higher education, a path not explored nor mentioned in Mackenzie’s *The Exiles*. While Mackenzie’s docudrama suggested realism by filming in locations around LA and featuring narration by the film’s actors, it also incorporated fictional, restaged situations that supposedly occurred often in downtown LA.²³⁵ Its realism is challenged further by the fact that, as Mo’e’hahne notes, “[n]o footage exists of the cast participating in regimes of colonial wage labor or education,” in contrast to the heavy discussion of education in *Legacy*.²³⁶

However, as reflected by the vein of positivity running through Peters’ *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, urban relocation was not necessarily an inherently isolating and repressive process. Instead, many relocated Native peoples were able to seek out the opportunities that they desired and, in the process, become “satisfied with their lives in the city, adding to the diversity and complexity of the urban Indian populations that had been building for decades.” Others, working contrary to federal and local officials’ intentions, “used relocation as a way to gain experience

²³³ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 56.

²³⁴ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 57.

²³⁵ Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 4.

²³⁶ Mo’e’hahne, “Animating the Indigenous,” 81-82.

that would serve them in the long run.”²³⁷ Furthermore, despite the BIA’s assimilative efforts, some relocated Native individuals joined organizations that supported their sense of self and tribal identities and created Native American communities in urban centers, which they then used to critique publicly the Voluntary Relocation Program or other BIA services.²³⁸ Peters notes that, in various interviews, Walker stated that she “loved” relocating to Los Angeles and the new experiences that the different environment afforded her. This aligned with Peters’ view of her own migration to LA, a relocation that forced her to learn “how to survive,” try new food, and meet new friends from other cultures—all new experiences that she also “loved.”²³⁹

With *Legacy*, Peters puts forth a strong assertion of what Seneca-descended scholar Michelle H. Raheja describes as “visual sovereignty” through Indigenous filmmaking. Raheja argues that, in Indigenous film, visual sovereignty functions as a method of “reimagining Native centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy,” which draw from the “powerful ideologies of mass media but do not rely solely on the texts and contexts of Western jurisprudence.”²⁴⁰ By reframing *The Exiles* closely, but updating its time period and uplifting the voices of Native women in her retelling of the film, Peters demonstrates how displays of visual sovereignty in Indigenous film reveal “the complexities of creating media for multiple audiences, critiquing filmic representations of Native Americans, at the same time that it participates in some of the conventions that have produced these representations.”²⁴¹ While Peters’ *Legacy* mirrors closely elements from Mackenzie’s *The Exiles*, her film functions as an act of self-

²³⁷ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 51.

²³⁸ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 51.

²³⁹ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

²⁴⁰ Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 197. For additional work on the concept of visual sovereignty, see Jolene Rickard’s Spring 2011 article, “Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors,” in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*.

²⁴¹ Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*, 200.

representation that undermines the latent stereotypes of Native peoples inherent in the white Mackenzie's work—a key feature of cinematic visual sovereignty.²⁴²

As a whole, then, rather than use *Legacy of Exiled NDNz* as a blatant critique of the antiquated views perpetuated in Mackenzie's *The Exiles*, Peters recounts the 1961 film in her 2014 project to emphasize the hope and beauty that she finds inherent in Mackenzie's film and Walker's story of migration. She states that she "loved 'The Exiles' because it gave a realistic portrayal of American Indians going through the U.S. Relocation Program."²⁴³ After her first viewing of the film, Peters met Walker and was moved immensely by her performance. While Walker was upset that the film portrayed her as "so sad," when she really "wasn't that sad," Peters "didn't see any sadness" and, instead, saw beauty.²⁴⁴ Peters notes that, for her, "Mackenzie's work was just so powerful because I'm part of that, I'm part of relocation." She lauds his representation of Native voices "at such a pinnacle time when our voices were not heard" and emphasizes how powerful the film was to her. Instead of being "dressed in headdresses," the Native actors in *The Exiles* had speaking roles and were located in the LA area, a fact that Peters found "fucking amazing" and left her "jumping up and down."²⁴⁵

Thus, for Peters, the maintenance of hope and identity throughout urban relocation is possible, despite the assertions of those such as Momaday who condemn the process. She asserts "I know who I am. I'm a Diné woman; I still maintain that in an urban environment."²⁴⁶ Because of her move to Los Angeles from the Navajo Nation's reservation, Peters gained a greater awareness of "the social impact of the negative, inaccurate and insulting images of stereotyped

²⁴² Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*, 194.

²⁴³ Peters, "Native Angelenos."

²⁴⁴ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

²⁴⁵ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

²⁴⁶ Thompson, "Pamela J. Peters." She qualifies this by noting that "the reservation is where your tradition and culture are maintained."

American Indians *still* seen in film, television, and sporting events.”²⁴⁷ Illustrated by *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, Peters strives to “counteract those racist, demeaning stereotypes with dignified images” that emphasize how Native Americans are citizens of contemporary society.²⁴⁸ It is understandable, then, how she was drawn to Mackenzie’s *The Exiles*; not only was Peters able to relate to “a lot of the stories that they were telling,” Mackenzie showcased Native peoples, especially women, as members of contemporary 1960s society.²⁴⁹ After viewing Mackenzie’s film, Peters knew that “[t]his is our story, and it’s still a story that’s happening today” and felt compelled to document “the reality of our life and our existence here in the city that nobody really know about” through *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*.²⁵⁰ *Legacy*, therefore, functions as a “technology of memory” which helps “construct the past and situate it in the present.”²⁵¹

Both Mackenzie’s and Peters’ film preserve “a rare visual archive of the urban Indian experience,” including how urban relocation throughout and following the Termination Era is “remembered and re-created within public memory.”²⁵² As illustrated by Peters’ own movements and her *Legacy of Exiled NDNz*, then, one can view the migration of Native peoples to urban centers as a “larger story of survival” or “survivance.”²⁵³ One should recognize how “Native people bent relocation to their own purposes and influenced its outcomes in unpredictable ways.” Instead of being solely degenerative, urban relocation could also be regenerative, and Native peoples who were relocated often discovered methods for negotiating the program that worked to their own advantage.²⁵⁴ Recognizing the agency of Natives who participated in Voluntary

²⁴⁷ Peters, “About The Artist.” Emphasis in original.

²⁴⁸ Peters, “About The Artist.”

²⁴⁹ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

²⁵⁰ Peters, interviewed by Murphy, February 28, 2024.

²⁵¹ Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 2.

²⁵² Fugikawa, “Shifting the Gaze,” 2.

²⁵³ Miller, *Indians on the Move*, 4.

²⁵⁴ Miller, *Indians on the Move*, 4; Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 65.

Relocation such as Peters' parents, then, reframes the process to emphasize how "Indians from reservations began to colonize American cities with assistance."²⁵⁵ Fixico notes how the use of "colonialism" often suggests "a greater authority oppressing another people and changing them," but, through urban relocation, Native peoples "recreated their identities and changed themselves as they navigated the urban cultural system."²⁵⁶ Miller asserts that "[t]elling a more complicated story" of urban relocation "is about locating human agency or rescuing urban Indians from victimhood...It is about a determination to tell this story without unwittingly reproducing the idea that Indigenous peoples do not belong in cosmopolitan urban spaces."²⁵⁷ In *Legacy*, with its emphasis on education, opportunity, and continuity, Peters does just that. She accomplishes what Miller describes as the challenge of "seeing urban Indians as practitioners of competing modes of modernity, mobility, ingenuity, and even anonymity, but not at the expense of Indigeneity."²⁵⁸

ANGELA ELLSWORTH

Akin to Peters, multi-media artist Angela Ellsworth is interested in challenging the pervasive narrative surrounding the forced migration of a group of women traditionally excluded from dominant society to the American West. Furthermore, as Peters believes staunchly in the hope and successes that could accompany the urban relocation of Native women, Ellsworth identifies and promotes the love that she imagines that Latter-day Saints women could find amongst each other after being pushed westward because of their beliefs. As with Dickey and Peters, Ellsworth has an intensely personal connection to the history of westering women that she is documenting. However, similar to Self, rather than recount this history faithfully,

²⁵⁵ Fixico, *Indian Resilience and Rebuilding*, 118.

²⁵⁶ Fixico, *Indian Resilience and Rebuilding*, 118.

²⁵⁷ Miller, *Indians on the Move*, 9.

²⁵⁸ Miller, *Indians on the Move*, 9.

Ellsworth remixes and reimagines their movements to emphasize the agency that she imagines women finding in Western America.

Born in 1964 in Palo Alto, California, into a family belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), Ellsworth grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah, surrounded by the Mormon faith.²⁵⁹ As with Dickey, Peters and Kelly Reichardt—whom we will turn to next—she has moved to and from the American West during her adult life. After leaving Salt Lake City, Ellsworth began her artistic studies at Hampshire College, where she earned bachelor’s degrees in painting and photography, before moving to New Jersey and receiving her MFA from Rutgers University.²⁶⁰ Now splitting her time between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Phoenix, Arizona, she is a professor of Studio Art at Arizona State University and has left the LDS Church.²⁶¹

Over several years, Ellsworth has built a career as a multidisciplinary artist examining issues of physical fitness, illness, social ritual, and religious tradition.²⁶² Specifically, Ellsworth, who identifies openly as queer and is married to writer-performer Tania Katan, states that she is “is interested in art merging with everyday life where public and private experiences collide in unexpected spaces.” To facilitate these collisions, akin to her movements to and from Western America, Ellsworth “traverses” between the media of sculpture, drawing, video, performance, and installation.²⁶³ In the 2014 video *Kicking up Dust* (Figure 14), part of her *Sister-Wives* performances, Ellsworth cements her personal and artistic fascination with LDS plural wives

²⁵⁹ Angela Ellsworth, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, January 29, 2024; Angela Ellsworth, “About,” AEllsworth.com, accessed August 30, 2022, <http://www.aellsworth.com/about-bio>. I will refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints throughout this paper by its full name, “LDS Church,” and “the Church.” “LDS” is an abbreviation of “Latter-day Saints.” “Mormonism” is also used in reference to the religion practiced by the LDS Church, and “Mormons” in reference to its followers.

²⁶⁰ Ellsworth, “About.”

²⁶¹ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024; Ellsworth, “About.”

²⁶² Ellsworth, “About.”

²⁶³ Ellsworth, “About.”

pushed westward as she records and reimagines them as agents of their own destinies, able to choose whom they love, following their movements to and through the American West.

FROM RURAL NEW YORK TO THE INTERMOUNTAIN WEST: A SHORT LDS CHURCH HISTORY

Before delving deeper into Ellsworth's *Kicking up Dust*, however, it is necessary to recount, in brief, the history of the LDS Church's formation. This information is key in understanding the power dynamics inherent in the religion that Ellsworth has identified, grappled with, and flipped for her *Sister-Wives* performances—dynamics that played out in the arena of plural marriages. Claiming in a revelation that God commanded him, “there shall be a record kept among you; and in it thou shall be called seer,” Joseph Smith organized formally The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 6, 1830, in New York.²⁶⁴ In the decade following the religion's formation, Smith established LDS communities in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois before his 1844 murder in Carthage, Illinois, following his revelation about and promotion of plural marriage.²⁶⁵

After Smith's death, Brigham Young became the second president of the LDS Church and controlled the group until his death in 1877. In 1847, facing outside pressures and persecution

²⁶⁴ Doctrine & Covenants (D&C) 21:1; Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign* (October 2015): 49, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol55/iss1/5>. The LDS Church describes the *Doctrine & Covenants* as “a book of scripture containing revelations from the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith and to a few other latter-day prophets,” (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/doctrine-and-covenants?lang=eng>). The same year that he founded the LDS Church, Smith finished dictating the Book of Mormon, a tome that acts as “[t]he most visible sign” of Smith's role as seer; he had to utilize both “the gift and power of God” and a set of seer stones to translate the golden plates forming the basis of the Book, revealed to him in 1823 by an angel named Moroni (Turley Jr., Jensen, and Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” 49).

²⁶⁵ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2017), xiv. In her MFA thesis, Ellsworth asserts that, by encouraging select LDS men to take on more than one wife for heavenly “bonus points,” Smith “converted taboo into law. Isn't it easier to change marriage laws than to contravene them?” (Angela Ellsworth, “The Pious or The Perverse? Two Women Within the Construct of Mormon Polygamy,” [MFA thesis, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1993], 12).

targeting the practice of polygamy, he “led the largest faction of Latter-day Saints to the Rocky Mountains,” where they settled in the Salt Lake Valley.²⁶⁶ During this migration and subsequent migrations westward, Mormon settler women wore often the style of prairie bonnet Ellsworth draws from in work such as her sculptural *Seer Bonnet* series, which she began in 2008. Until 1869, when the transcontinental railroad was completed, LDS converts “streamed across the rugged plains and over the mountains in covered wagons, pulling handcarts, or carrying their possessions on their backs.”²⁶⁷ In his record of LDS migration to the American West, historian Jason E. Pierce notes that, during the time, the LDS Church was “less a religion than a highly effective immigration scheme.”²⁶⁸ In 1856, for example, thousands of European converts to the LDS Church arrived in the States, most of them unable to fund their journeys to Utah. To remedy this, Young arranged for the immigrants to travel by rail to the Iowa City, Iowa, area, where they “formed into companies of about five hundred members, every five persons being assigned a sixty-pound handcart to carry their supplies.”²⁶⁹ Throughout the twelve-hundred mile journey, migrants averaged fifteen miles per day with their handcarts, which often experienced technical problems due to the frequency with which their axels wore out. Several of these handcarts were drawn entirely by women and girls, a fact that Ellsworth alludes to by occasionally displaying handcarts that she made with her *Seer Bonnets*.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Ulrich, *A House Full of Females*, xiv.

²⁶⁷ Susanna Morrill, “7 Women’s Popular Literature as Theological Discourse: A Mormon Case Study, 1880-1920,” in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 189.

²⁶⁸ Jason E. Pierce, “Unwelcome Saints: Whiteness, Mormons, and the Limits of Success,” in *Making the White Man’s West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West* (University Press of Colorado, 2016), 201.

²⁶⁹ Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 120.

²⁷⁰ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 120; Kathleen Vanesian, “Angela Ellsworth on Being Gay, the Mormon Church, and Her Increasing Artistic Success,” *Phoenix New Times*, published October 7, 2010, <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/arts/angela-ellsworth-on-being-gay-the-mormon-church-and-her-increasing-artistic-success-6445427?showFullText=true>.

LDS historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich asserts that, as Smith and Young “were powerful and charismatic leaders,” the history of the Church was and continues to typically be focused on its male prophets. Yet, like other religions, Mormonism “flourished because it attracted strong young women,” women who moved their families westward and established community ties across time and space.²⁷¹ Ellsworth’s work dedicated to the movements of plural wives, specifically *Kicking up Dust*, acts as imagined records of how those women could have found power within their communities and love amongst each other. Within the contemporary LDS Church, its mass-migration westwards “has taken on epic, mythic qualities” but often underplayed the role of women in its occurrence.²⁷² Furthermore, because polygamy has been “an embarrassing relic of the past for persons in the Mormon faith,” information about the practice was made inaccessible by the LDS Church in the past. Seizing rather than mourning historical omission, Ellsworth notes that “much is left to prurient imagination and conceivable myth.”²⁷³ It is because of this that Ellsworth, in work such as *Kicking up Dust*, is able to both tap into the historical legacy of westering LDS plural wives while reimagining the practice and the women’s movements as reflecting love and agency.

Due to central role that plural marriage plays in Ellsworth’s *Kicking up Dust*, it is worthwhile to delve further into the practice’s background. During the mid-to-late nineteenth century, plural marriage became “one of the ultimate concerns for some Mormons.” Before his death, Smith “received divine revelation about polygamous marriage” and, while he quietly married “dozens of women,” began to introduce gradually the idea members of his inner

²⁷¹ Ulrich, *A House Full of Females*, xiv, xv.

²⁷² Morrill, “7 Women’s Popular Literature as Theological Discourse,” 189.

²⁷³ Ellsworth, “The Pious or The Perverse?,” 9.

circle.²⁷⁴ Following Smith's assassination, the practice of polygamy became even more public under the leadership of Young. Smith—and Young after him—promoted plural marriage as a method of garnering celestial favor; historian Marie W. Dallam explains that, theologically, “the eternal destiny of Mormon men was linked to earthly acts of marriage and procreation, and polygamous marriage assured them heavenly exaltation of the highest order.” Stemming from this, polygamy also provided the men's plural wives, eternally sealed to them, with salvation.²⁷⁵ However, LDS acceptance of polygamy was not widespread nor widely accepted at the time of Smith's revelation or immediately after. Rather, in large part, Smith's death a little over a year following his revelation was due to “the dissatisfaction of some [his] followers with the new polygamous beliefs and practices.”²⁷⁶

Emphasizing that her stake in her work dealing with plural wives is more than one of simple interest, not only is Ellsworth a fourth-generation Mormon, her great-great grandfather, Lorenzo Snow was an LDS prophet, the Church's fifth president, and a polygamist married to twelve wives.²⁷⁷ Snow's sister and Ellsworth's great-great aunt, Eliza R. Snow is also widely celebrated within the Church for her faith-based work and role as the second general president of the Relief Society, an educational and philanthropic organization for Mormon women.²⁷⁸ Similar to her brother, Eliza Snow was also entangled in the history of polygamy as one of the plural

²⁷⁴ Marie W. Dallam, “Art, Religious Memory, and Mormon Polygamy,” *MAVCOR Journal* 5, no. 2 (2021): 1, 10.22332/mav.ess.2021.2.

²⁷⁵ Dallam, “Art, Religious Memory, and Mormon Polygamy,” 1.

²⁷⁶ Lawrence Foster, “Between Two Worlds: Plural Marriage and the Experience of Mormon Women in Illinois During the Early 1840s,” in *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons*, 123-169 (Syracuse University Press, 1991), 123.

²⁷⁷ Ellsworth, “The Pious or The Perverse?,” 28; Vanesian, “Angela Ellsworth on Being Gay.”

²⁷⁸ “Eliza R. Snow: Second General President of the Relief Society,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed September 30, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/callings/relief-society/relief-society-presidents/eliza-r-snow?lang=eng>.

wives of Smith—and Young, following Smith’s passing—as well as one of the earliest LDS settlers to move westward to Utah.²⁷⁹

Growing up, Ellsworth’s understanding of the faith was intertwined with her own family history in a way that allowed for little outside commentary. She admits that “[f]or 15 years, I never talked about how I was raised or where I was raised and moved along with my life, bypassing a huge chunk of my formative years.”²⁸⁰ After leaving Salt Lake City, she spent time in Florence in an attempt to “run from my history,” as “being raised Mormon...I just wanted to be as far away from that as possible. I just felt like it wasn’t me.” She had “to leave for a long, long time. Leave the country, leave the West, leave all of it.”²⁸¹ However, upon her return to the Western America, Ellsworth realized that “there is a story in this landscape that my ancestors have a connection to, and even though it’s the settlement-colonizing history, I can’t escape it.”²⁸² She notes that, “[l]ooking at this history now, I’ve started to move beyond the anger against the restricted and oppressive place that I felt within [the Mormon structure].”²⁸³ While Ellsworth asserted that “Mormonism was/is institutionalized slavery” in her MFA thesis, she now can imagine the potential for female power imbued in facets of the religion, including communities of plural wives.²⁸⁴ To do so, she excavated her own personal history to understand her queer identity as “an extension of the nonheteronormative communities established by my ancestors.”²⁸⁵ With her artwork investigating polygamy, including *Kicking up Dust*, Ellsworth

²⁷⁹ Dallam, “Art, Religious Memory, and Mormon Polygamy,” 13.

²⁸⁰ Vanesian, “Angela Ellsworth on Being Gay.”

²⁸¹ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

²⁸² Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

²⁸³ Vanesian, “Angela Ellsworth on Being Gay.”

²⁸⁴ Ellsworth, “The Pious or The Perverse?,” 15.

²⁸⁵ Angela Ellsworth, “Artist’s Statement: The Plural Wife Project,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 1 (2012): 48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.1.issue-1>.

aims to revise the practice as both female-centered and queer in the hopes of encouraging “the building of new communities of women.”²⁸⁶

Discussing her artwork examining polygamy, Ellsworth states that it “navigates issues of the body in relation to gender, sexuality, and cultural history of the Western United States through sculptural objects and performance.”²⁸⁷ More specifically, in the artwork, Ellsworth explores rejection and embrace, chaos and security, control and freedom—all themes that she has identified as accompanying polygamy.²⁸⁸ She states explicitly that she is “interested in the non-heteronormative relationships in both queer culture and in polygamy,” as “[t]hese are very contemporary issues.”²⁸⁹ Yet, Ellsworth is adamant that her “whole point of making this work is not about my rejection of the faith or my critique of the faith; it’s about revealing and bringing to a public attention the women within that construct.”²⁹⁰ In her conception of plural marriages, Ellsworth labels the communities of plural wives that pop up in the American West as “homosocial” and notes that, because of the illegality of polygamy, “are basically invisible.”²⁹¹ In performance work such as *Kicking Up Dust*, in particular, Ellsworth strives to reverse that invisibility to bring attention to the movements, autonomy, and power of LDS plural wives.

LINE DANCING, LONG BRAIDS, AND LONGING LOOKS: *KICKING UP DUST*

At the beginning of *Kicking up Dust*, a two minute and thirty-seven second long video, a group of women with long braids down their backs and conservative, pastel dresses pick their

²⁸⁶ Gayle Gullet and Susan E. Gray, “Introduction,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 1 (2012): xi, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.1.issue-1>.

²⁸⁷ Ellsworth, “Artist’s Statement: The Plural Wife Project,” 48.

²⁸⁸ Ellsworth, “Artist’s Statement: The Plural Wife Project,” 48; Dallam, “Art, Religious Memory, and Mormon Polygamy,” 13.

²⁸⁹ Vanesian, “Angela Ellsworth on Being Gay.”

²⁹⁰ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

²⁹¹ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

way through a shrubby mountainside as dynamic string music plays. This scene is followed by a shot of similarly dressed women gazing longingly out a window. Their eyes track the car that is reflected in the window's glass as it passes in front of their dwelling. In another shot, a different configuration of women pull themselves up to and peer over a tan cinderblock wall outside. Their faces reflect both wonder for and concern with what they discover on the other side, which remains unseen to the viewer. As the background music continues to play, close-cropped shots of the women's feet reveal the hiking boots that they don as they stomp and kick up the dust around them in a quasi-line dance. This shot later pans outwards to reveal a larger group of women dancing with each other in a sun-bleached yard. The green trees around them contrast with the dryness of the ground, which releases puffs of dust as they move.

During another portion of the video, a shot frames two of the women standing in an arid desert landscape against a blue, cloud-filled sky. As one fixes the other's collar, they gaze at each other with tenderness. Eventually, they kiss. While scenes such as this one might lead viewers to believe that the anachronistically dressed women are alone in the wild, the powerlines seen in the backgrounds of other shots contrasts with this sense of isolation in the wilderness to reveal that the women are not as separated from contemporary society as they might seem. Following several scenes of the women interacting with each other and the arid landscape throughout which they move, the performance ends as a female voice sings about and tallies a number of plural wives, culminating at "twelve wives," in the fading background music.

One of Ellsworth's *Sister-Wife* performances, *Kicking up Dust* was filmed in Ellsworth's "dirt covered backyard" in Phoenix and, originally, featured "a whole lot of footage" that she edited down for the final video of the performance.²⁹² The women are supposed to appear as if

²⁹² Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

they are “living off the grid” as they support each other, a concept that Ellsworth labels “a magical notion.” She notes that, as the practice of polygamy continued, despite governmental and official LDS Church condemnation, many practitioners moved “out of Utah into other fringy areas” or “off the grid places” in the Southwest, akin to the location that she portrays in *Kicking up Dust*.²⁹³ It is only following their move to Southwestern “fringy areas” to live self-sufficiently that the sister wives of Ellsworth’s performance can freely express themselves. Across the *Sister-Wife* series, which is comprised of site-specific performance, female-presenting performers such as those in *Kicking up Dust* “communicate desires, intentions, and obstacles to one another,” often in public locations.”²⁹⁴ Unlike work such as her *Seer Bonnets* series, which draws from the history of the “orthodox” LDS Church, for her *Sister-Wife* performances, Ellsworth delves into the history and contemporary reality of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), a group broken off from the LDS Church whose members still practice actively polygamy.

In 2008, Texas law enforcement raided an FLDS community called Yearning for Zion (YFZ) Ranch near Eldorado, Texas. During this raid, which followed the reporting of supposed sexual abuse of young girls at the compound, around four hundred children were separated from their families and “were taken away.”²⁹⁵ Learning about the events surrounding the YFZ Ranch, Ellsworth began to consider seriously “non-heteronormative ideas of family and what happens when part of the family is deemed illegal.” In the case of the YFZ Ranch and larger LDS history, Ellsworth was referring to plural wives. Yet, as an openly queer woman, she was also thinking

²⁹³ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

²⁹⁴ Ellsworth, “Artist’s Statement: The Plural Wife Project,” 48. Other venues for *Sister-Wife* performances include the Chicago Cultural Center, the seventeenth Biennale of Sydney, and Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe.

²⁹⁵ “Angela Ellsworth,” State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now, accessed September 5, 2023, <https://stateoftheart.crystalbridges.org/blog/project/angela-ellsworth/>. Ellsworth is clear that she does not condone any of the actions of the YFZ Ranch but was interested in the government’s interference with the community’s family structures (Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024).

about the (il)legality of gay marriage in the U.S. and states that “[i]t struck me that the federal government can come in and disrupt family like that.”²⁹⁶ She asserts that, as a queer woman who is legally married, she thought often that, “if the federal government can come in and just decide who you get to be with and who you don’t get to be with, that is a contemporary queer situation.” Following the raid on the YFZ Ranch, Ellsworth “really kicked into high gear in terms of the performances I was doing, and *Kicking up Dust* came out of that time.”²⁹⁷ The garb donned by the *Kicking up Dust* performers is meant to be “absolutely recognizable” as the pastel dresses designed by YFZ Ranch leader Warren Jeffs for women and girls to wear. In fact, for the *Sister-Wife* performances, Ellsworth purchased the dresses from women who were a part of the YFZ Ranch through email correspondence, which she signed as “Sister Angela.”²⁹⁸

In addition, Ellsworth also staged workshops for those who participated in performances such as *Kicking up Dust*. She notes that “I wanted the people wearing those dresses who are sometimes trans, sometimes queer, sometimes straight, sometimes seventy years old, sometimes fifteen years old, you know, a whole mix of people...they needed to understand what it meant that they were wearing those dresses.”²⁹⁹ To Ellsworth, it was neither fair nor logical for her to ask the performers—most of whom were former performance students of hers or others in the Phoenix area that she knew well—to put on FLDS dresses and perform certain gestures without delving into the history and Ellsworth’s reimagining of it surrounding the garb, “that seemingly passive, pastel, pretty, totally covered outfit.”³⁰⁰ The movements of the performers in *Kicking up Dust*, specifically, their line dancing, reflect Ellsworth’s belief that the sister wives needed to be

²⁹⁶ “Angela Ellsworth,” State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now.

²⁹⁷ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

²⁹⁸ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024. Ellsworth finds that this was “legitimate enough because I do have a sister wife.”

²⁹⁹ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

³⁰⁰ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024. The long braids and bouffant bangs donned by performers in *Sister-Wife* performances are also associated typically with the female hairstyles of the YFZ Ranch.

dancers who could communicate “by the sounds of their feet hitting the ground,” land specific to the arid American Southwest.³⁰¹ The music that they dance to in the performance features lyrics written by Ellsworth’s wife, sung by Ellsworth herself, to backing music by a band called Happy Dirt.³⁰²

THE FREEDOM TO MOVE AND TO LOVE IN THE WEST

As a whole, *Kicking up Dust* draws from FLDS history and contemporary events to reimagine a group of plural wives as a “lesbian community” finding longing, acceptance, and love as they traverse through and dance within the Southwest.³⁰³ Instead of experiencing crushing isolation, as numerous scholars of LDS plural marriage have assumed plural wives must have experienced, the women in *Kicking up Dust*, as they twirl and care for one another in the arid landscape, convey a sense of freedom and belonging. It is unclear from which time period the women come, a fact that relates strongly to past and contemporary LDS stances on polygamy; while polygamy became “illegal” in Utah in the late nineteenth century and was decried by the LDS Church, the practice continues to this day in fringe FLDS communities such as the Yearning for Zion Ranch. While LDS migrants, including women, might have been pushed westward because of polygamous beliefs, they were not successful in upkeeping legally the institution of plural marriage. In *Kicking up Dust*, Ellsworth draws from a contemporary incident “where the government was sort of deciding who could be with whom” to comment upon larger issues of nonheteronormative love and to imagine plural wives as finding belonging and security amongst each other after moving westward.³⁰⁴ In doing so, she envisions the women as “creating

³⁰¹ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

³⁰² Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

³⁰³ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

³⁰⁴ Ellsworth, interviewed by Murphy, January 29, 2024.

their own grid and having their own visionary and revelatory powers outside a patriarchal construct” as she puts “the queer in pioneer.”³⁰⁵

Although the specific details of polygamy’s conception within the Church have been documented widely, there have been continuous contested interpretations of what such practice truly entailed for its female participants.³⁰⁶ While the LDS Church acknowledges its polygamous past, little information is available on the psychological impacts of plural marriages on early plural wives, an ambiguity on which Ellsworth capitalizes for *Kicking up Dust*—a work that draws explicitly from the legacy of moving LDS women pushed westward. Scholars have considered this topic extensively and asked, as historian Mary Margaret Rosenbury does, “can polygamy serve an empowering function for women, as a basis for gendered community and social bonds? Or is polygamy decidedly oppressive for women?”³⁰⁷ Rather than leaning completely into one interpretation or the other, Ellsworth imagines the potential for beauty in plural marriages intertwined with the isolation that could accompany it. Her *Kicking up Dust* performance visualizes explicitly the autonomy and love that Ellsworth imagines present in plural wife communities—which is possible only following their push westward.

KELLY REICHARDT

Lastly, while the sun-bonneted women of Ellsworth’s *Sister-Wives* work appear to spring, fully formed, from the arid Southwest landscape, in Kelly Reichardt’s 2010 film *Meek’s Cutoff*, she documents tediously the journey westward of white settler women. More akin to Self’s *Pioneer*, then—albeit with fully formed heads—Reichardt’s film focuses solely on the intense

³⁰⁵ Angela Ellsworth, “Kicking Up Dust,” Vimeo.com, last modified 2014, <https://vimeo.com/85562199>.

³⁰⁶ Dallam, “Art, Religious Memory, and Mormon Polygamy,” 1; Foster, “Between Two Worlds,” 123.

³⁰⁷ Mary Margaret Rosenbury, “Pins, Felt, and Cloth: Performing Mormon Feminism” (master’s thesis, The University of Utah, 2014), 1.

labor required of women as they migrated westward. Whereas Dickey, Ellsworth, and Peters' representations of women pushed westward center on the end results of these movements, Self and Reichardt dedicate their work to revealing and emphasizing how tiresome, gritty, and unsuccessful these journeys to Western America could be for women.

Born in 1964 in Miami, director and film writer Reichardt has made a name for herself as a producer of slow, minimalist cinema.³⁰⁸ Reichardt earned her MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and attended the graduate program at the same time as two other artists in this dissertation, Laurel Nakadate and Liz Cohen, were at the school.³⁰⁹ Sitting “at the cusp of experimental and classical film traditions,” Reichardt’s films feature “autonomous creative practice and relatively low budgets,” characteristics that have linked the director with contemporary, international, and historical cinema trends.³¹⁰ Producer and American studies scholar Jason Michelitch describes Reichardt’s films as “simple stories, told at a deliberate pace, with ambiguous, open endings” but notes that it is “not so easy to describe everything that happens in a Kelly Reichardt film—the expressive complexity of her work is almost directly inversely proportionate to its narrative simplicity.”³¹¹ *Meek’s Cutoff* (Figure 15), which follows a small, doomed wagon train through the nineteenth century American West, is illustrative of Michelitch’s observations as well as the emphasis on movement seen throughout Reichardt’s practice. While film critic Elena Gorfinkel asserts that “Reichardt often works with the tropes of

³⁰⁸ Doreen St. Félix, “The States of Kelly Reichardt,” *The New Yorker*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-states-of-kelly-reichardt>. Reichardt declined to be interviewed for this project as she was “deep into another era and need[ed] to stay focused.” However, she did state that this dissertation “sounds great,” (Kelly Reichardt, email to Olivia E. Murphy, January 3, 2024).

³⁰⁹ Laurel Nakadate, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, January 31, 2024. Nakadate states that it “is interesting” that “three female artists working in the American West all went to the same weird little art school in Boston.”

³¹⁰ Elena Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift: Austerity, Dispossession and The Politics of Slow in Kelly Reichardt’s *Meek’s Cutoff*,” in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 123.

³¹¹ Jason Michelitch, “Thinking at Lightspeed: The Flickering Transformations of Kelly Reichardt’s Cinema,” *Cinéaste* 42, no. 1 (2016): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i26356774>.

a specifically American idiom—the road film,” an interest in literal movements, Michelitch states that Reichardt’s films also “dramatize complex movements of mind and motion through imaginative cinematic representations of mundane, world bound, and time-bound action.”³¹² One can view *Meek’s Cutoff* as a kind of nineteenth-century road film, one where the women present are, against their wishes, simply along for the ride and experience intense physical and psychological turmoil as a result of their movements.

In films such as *Meek’s Cutoff*, Reichardt features “the beckoning horizon of wide-open north-western landscapes and their tarnished promises of freedom, autonomy, and self-reliance.”³¹³ As she deploys “austerity as an aesthetic,” Reichardt creates films that, as Gorfinkel describes, “frequently perambulate and get lost with the wanders, mountain men, drifters and the socially displaced and marginalised at their centre.”³¹⁴ In the case of *Meek’s Cutoff*, Reichardt focuses primarily on three white, pioneer women who have, for undisclosed reasons, been pushed westward with their families to Oregon. Many of Reichardt’s films, including *Meek’s Cutoff*, emphasize how these journeys are “circuitous or arrested” and how the wanderers possess an “inability to progress within the harsh demands of an exhausting, social, material world.” Building upon the already present slow cinema tendencies in Reichardt’s work, including sparse dialogue and long shots, her films focus often on “the observation of everyday and laborious processes” as well as “solitary characters or situations of estrangement.”³¹⁵ Across the board, *Meek’s Cutoff* is illustrative of Reichardt’s larger cinematic and directorial tendencies and stresses the isolation and loss of agency experienced by pioneer women forced westward with ignorant men who purported to know what they were doing.

³¹² Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 123; Michelitch, “Thinking at Lightspeed,” 5.

³¹³ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 123.

³¹⁴ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 123.

³¹⁵ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 124.

HISTORY VERSUS CINEMA: MEEK'S CUTOFF

Featuring a script by Jon Raymond, a writer who collaborates frequently with Reichardt, *Meek's Cutoff* was filmed throughout the deserts around Burns, Oregon.³¹⁶ For Reichardt, the film was her first with a “seven-figure budget” and her first made on a thirty-five millimeter camera.³¹⁷ As Raymond was researching local historical names for a Bend, Oregon, development company, he came across “the true story of ‘The Terrible Trail,’” upon which he based the script for *Meek's Cutoff*.³¹⁸ Discussing the cinematic legacy from which *Meek's Cutoff* derives, Gorfinkel notes that “slow art cinema’s legacy” includes “archiving both profilmic weariness in performing bodies and in producing extrafilmic fatigue in the spectator.” Therefore, it should not be surprising that, in *Meek's Cutoff*, fatigue plays a central role. The film restages, on a smaller scale, the difficult westward expedition that Stephen Meek, a white guide-for-hire, led families on in 1845. Aiming to settle in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, the domestic migrants allowed Meek to take them off the Oregon Trail and lead them across mountainous and desert landscapes.³¹⁹ As *Meek's Cutoff* illustrates, the results were near disastrous.

Writing for the *Oregon Historical Quarterly* in 1934, Lawrence A. McNary notes that, beginning in the mid-1840s, “the course of the Oregon trail from the Missouri River to the Columbia was generally established and known,” but, after Oregon’s Grande Ronde Valley and Blue Mountains, this regularity fell away.³²⁰ The “pioneer hazards and vicissitudes” that one

³¹⁶ Matthew Holtmeier and Chelsea Wessels, “Filmmaking-in-Place: Peripheral Production and Ecofeminist Aesthetics in Eden and Meek’s Cutoff,” *Afterimage* 48, no. 1 (2021): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2021.48.1.80>; E. Dawn Hall, “Expectations: *Meek's Cutoff*,” in *Refocus: The Films of Kelly Reichardt* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 89; Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift.”

³¹⁷ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 124.

³¹⁸ Hall, “Expectations: *Meek's Cutoff*,” 87.

³¹⁹ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 126.

³²⁰ Lawrence A. McNary, “Route of Meek Cut-off, 1845,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1934): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i20610844>.

could experience on the Trail included “stream and mountain crossings, Indian depredations and life taking, and the dreaded fevers.”³²¹ It is unsurprising, then, that families would seek a shortcut to decrease the possibility of experiencing these hardships. While *Meek’s Cutoff* focuses on only three families and emphasizes the perspectives of the women associated with them, in actuality, the historical Stephen Meek led hundreds bound for Oregon on “what he claimed was a quicker, alternative route that avoided the perilous Blue Mountains.”³²² Around two hundred wagons joined him and, as a result, experienced “high mountain passes, burning sands without water, pursuing stream beds with water reaching high on the wagons, finding placer gold, crossing swift waters in wagon boxes, [and] much sickness” before a rescue party brought salvation.³²³ Instead of a shortcut, then, Meek’s detour increased the original journey by 400 miles and 40 days.³²⁴ While some claim that Meek abandoned the wagon train and his “young bride” after getting lost, which caused between 20 and 40 deaths, McNary argues that “so little known as to facts that legend seems to predominate.”³²⁵ Regardless, the results of Meek’s detour have caused it to be labeled one of “the worst disaster[s] to befall the pioneers who set out for California or Oregon.”³²⁶

Throughout *Meek’s Cutoff*, the reasons that the three families are traveling westward with Meek are unclear. However, what is known is that the families’ water supplies are dwindling as they wander across the Oregon desert. As the Tetherows, Whites, and Gatelys trudge after a coarse Meek, it becomes increasingly evident that their guide has gotten them lost. The men of

³²¹ McNary, “Route of Meek Cut-off, 1845,” 1.

³²² Andrew Patrick Nelson, “Wagon Mistress,” in *Women in the Western*, ed. Sue Matheson (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 290-291.

³²³ McNary, “Route of Meek Cut-off, 1845,” 1.

³²⁴ Nelson, “Wagon Mistress,” 291.

³²⁵ Hall, “Expectations: *Meek’s Cutoff*,” 87; Nelson, “Wagon Mistress,” 291; McNary, “Route of Meek Cut-off, 1845,” 2.

³²⁶ Hall, “Expectations: *Meek’s Cutoff*,” 87.

the families struggle with how they should continue as the women are excluded from any discussions of their fates.³²⁷ Far from the archetypical Western film that emphasizes the freedom that the American West supposedly offers, then, *Meek's Cutoff* stresses that, for women, this autonomy was often denied. Instead of including their wives in discussions of how they should proceed, the men in *Meek's Cutoff* relegate the women as marginal to the central action, an action that, in the film, displaces “a privileged sense of narrative action altogether.”³²⁸ Gorfinkel observes that, throughout *Meek's Cutoff*, one can see Reichardt’s “interest in omission, restriction, and limited, rigorously structured perspectives” through her medium and long shots as well as “her use of a 1.33:1 (4:3) aspect ratio, instead of the customary 1.85:1.”³²⁹ Mirroring the visual impediment of the bonnets that pioneer women, including those in *Meek's Cutoff*, wore on their journeys westward, the result of this ratio limits what viewers can see clearly in a scene. While watching the film, one rarely glimpses the entirety of the women’s faces. Instead, the bonnets of Emily, Glory, and Millie dominate how the women are presented—especially at the beginning of *Meek's Cutoff*—and work to obscure their individuality (Figure 16).

As is common in Reichardt’s body of work, *Meek's Cutoff* features a relatively quiet soundscape. English scholar E. Dawn Hall observes that this emphasizes “the oppressive atmosphere” accompanying the women’s journey. She states that “the pioneer’s squeaky wagon wheel represents their plight,” as every time the viewer hears the creaks, “they know the trancelike march is beginning again.” Furthermore, Hall argues that the film’s “cello melody accompanied by the hollow flute sound symbolizes the characters’ unvoiced questions.”³³⁰ Much is left unsaid throughout *Meek's Cutoff*. In fact, there is no spoken dialogue until seven minutes

³²⁷ Holtmeier and Wessels, “Filmmaking-in-Place,” 67.

³²⁸ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 127.

³²⁹ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 128.

³³⁰ Hall, “Expectations: *Meek's Cutoff*,” 90.

into the film.³³¹ Instead, Reichardt highlights the labor of the women as they are repeatedly “sidelined with domestic tasks, even as they are aware of the precarious situation created by Meek’s arrogance,” including gathering firewood and setting up camp. The camera stays predominantly with Emily, Glory, and Millie, a choice that mutes the conversations of the men and makes them impossible for the women and viewers to hear.³³² In one of the stand-out scenes of *Meek’s Cutoff*, the women are left to their labor as their husbands discuss their plans for survival with Meek. Because the focuses solely on the women, one can barely make out the men’s voices and are left as in the dark about their plans as their wives are. Michelitch notes that many labels this scene “as a feminist statement about the exclusion of women from society,” which, he concedes, “on one level, it clearly is.”³³³

However, this is not to say that the women of *Meek’s Cutoff* are incapable of displaying some agency in the face of this exclusion. Rather, Emily Tetherow, played by Michelle Williams, reveals herself to be “the most progressive force in the film,” especially in contrast to Meek’s racism and fearmongering.³³⁴ Cinema scholar Leonard Quart observes that it is Emily’s perspective that appears to carry “the weight of Reichardt’s point of view.” Because Emily has access to a gun, she is able to assert her own opinions—despite the fact that “[t]he women are given no role in the decision-making process.” While the husbands cannot come to a resounding decision regarding their fates, Emily “is the most outspoken critic of Meek for leading them astray, and she refuses to be patronized by him.”³³⁵ As her husband and the other men waver over their path forward, Emily does—as Reichardt describes—“what has to be done” throughout the

³³¹ Hall, “Expectations: *Meek’s Cutoff*,” 96.

³³² Holtmeier and Wessels, “Filmmaking-in-Place,” 68.

³³³ Michelitch, “Thinking at Lightspeed,” 7.

³³⁴ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 133.

³³⁵ Leonard Quart, “The Way West: A Feminist Perspective: An Interview with Kelly Reichardt,” *Cinéaste* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 40.

film.³³⁶ In this way, similar to Self's *Pioneer*, *Meek's Cutoff* emphasizes the way that the environment and women's bodies have been "treated as extractable resources" in the American West.³³⁷

Part of Emily's labor includes her caring—which might be too strong of a word for it—for the Cayuse man that the group captures along their aimless journey (Figure 17). While Meek wants to execute the man, whose name viewers never learn, Emily advocates for his survival. This is not out of compassion. Rather, Emily views him as a resource that can lead to their own salvations and cares for him only to establish a debt; she states explicitly, "I want him to owe me something," and thus, creates "a capitalist logic of debt as the essential social bond or condition of their relationality." She takes it upon herself to also give the man "civilizing lessons," which includes explaining the purpose of a needle, a "pin for sewing."³³⁸ Although, after her wagon rolls down a hill and is demolished, Emily does give the Cayuse man her sewing kit—the object central to her relationship with him—it is out of resignation, not fondness. As a whole, with its focus on Emily and her actions, *Meek's Cutoff* stresses the significance of women's labor and the men's inefficacy on the pioneers' journey. In doing so, Reichardt "revises the relationship between place and patriarchal capitalism so often celebrated by Westerns to center women's labor as the necessary action of survival."³³⁹

FROM DREAMERS TO HARDENED LABORERS

³³⁶ Quart, "The Way West," 41.

³³⁷ Holtmeier and Wessels, "Filmmaking-in-Place," 54.

³³⁸ Gorfinkel, "Exhausted Drift," 133. Emily repairs the man's moccasin to help create the debt that he supposedly owes her.

³³⁹ Holtmeier and Wessels, "Filmmaking-in-Place," 71.

Across the board, *Meek's Cutoff* counters a multitude of the tenets of Western cinema. These include, foremost, the unstated, predominant focus on male protagonists in the films. As Reichardt states, "Westerns are so macho and masculine."³⁴⁰ However, as Sue Matheson emphasizes in the introduction of *Women in the Western*, without a woman, a Western does not work.³⁴¹ Film and Media studies scholars Matthew Holtmeier and Chelsea Wessels note that, by shifting away from "the panoramic landscape shots of the classical Western," *Meek's Cutoff* allows for "gendered engagement" that redirects viewers "away from the supposedly 'male' action" to focus on "the real action of survival," the ceaseless work of the women.³⁴² This work is undertaken as the men of the party waver on what should be done. They question if "the braggart Meek simply made a mistake he is unwilling to admit to" or if he has "purposely misled the settlers as part of a conspiracy to stem American emigration." Uncertain, Emily, Glory, and Millie's husbands decide to give him more time to prove himself.³⁴³ Meek's proven ineffectiveness and the husbands' indecision contrast strongly "the typically male drive to conquer the frontier" on display often in Western cinema.³⁴⁴ In doing so, *Meek's Cutoff* stresses the "false mythology of Manifest Destiny and the Western genre's celebration of male progression across the frontier."³⁴⁵ Rather than see the settlers to safety by the end of the film, Reichardt denies viewers the satisfactory happy ending provided frequently by Westerns. Instead, she emphasizes how hardened women pushed westward can become on their journeys.

While the specific outcomes of the historical Meek's Cutoff journey are overshadowed by myth, Reichardt drew from very real settler women's diaries to form Emily, Glory, and Millie's

³⁴⁰ Nelson, "Wagon Mistress," 293.

³⁴¹ Sue Matheson, "Introduction," in *Women in the Western*, ed. Sue Matheson (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 1.

³⁴² Holtmeier and Wessels, "Filmmaking-in-Place," 54.

³⁴³ Nelson, "Wagon Mistress," 291.

³⁴⁴ Holtmeier and Wessels, "Filmmaking-in-Place," 67.

³⁴⁵ Holtmeier and Wessels, "Filmmaking-in-Place," 71.

characters in *Meek's Cutoff*.³⁴⁶ During the time that she spent researching for the film, Reichardt came across these personal records and realized “how little of [the women’s] point of view was ever on screen.”³⁴⁷ The diaries that she read emphasized the transformations that settler women underwent as they were pushed westward; the records highlight “how exhaustion winnowed the real emigrants’ capacity for descriptive detail.”³⁴⁸ Reichardt notes that the journals “begin with big ideas and grand dreams when they start out, but as they go, the trip turns into a stripped-down, barebones list of chores.”³⁴⁹ Throughout *Meek's Cutoff*, viewers learn nothing of Emily’s dreams at the beginning of her journey and intimately of the labor that she must do for the group to continue to survive. Furthermore, Emily loses all sentimentality in favor of cold practicality as the group trudges along. In one scene, while she looks for items to jettison to ease the burden of the wagon on their steer, Emily pulls out a clock that her husband reminds her “was my mother’s.” Emily acknowledges this, and then, throws it out the back of the wagon once her husband’s head is turned.

Despite Emily’s best efforts, the landscape proves inhospitable to the settler colonizers, and, ultimately, she and her husband lose their wagon and most of their possessions in a crash. While Reichardt dips into the tropes surrounding the myth of the West, *Meek's Cutoff* emphasizes how her settlers fail to “establish any kind of dominance over the landscape,” a key tenet of Manifest Destiny.³⁵⁰ At the beginning of the film, Meek declares confidently that, if Emily and the others might “want for riches someday” after reaching Oregon, all they need to do is “just plunge your hands into the ground!” Time and time again on their journey, Emily—along with

³⁴⁶ Nelson, “Wagon Mistress,” 291.

³⁴⁷ Nelson, “Wagon Mistress,” 291.

³⁴⁸ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 132.

³⁴⁹ Nelson, “Wagon Mistress,” 291-292.

³⁵⁰ Holtmeier and Wessels, “Filmmaking-in-Place,” 67.

Glory and Millie—plunge their hands into their wagons, the never-ending dust, and, seldomly, their dwindling water supply in the hopes that they can survive just long enough to reach their end destination. Rather than come up with riches, they are left grasping for hope as despair begins to overwhelm them. The film ends without any sort of resolution after the wagon party finds a tree growing in the desert. As the men discuss which way to continue, the Cayuse man that they have been holding captive begins to walk alone across the arid landscape. This end scene reminds viewers of what has been inherent throughout the film—dispossession.³⁵¹ Emily and the others are attempting to settle on land that is not theirs, and, despite Reichardt's reimagining of the Western genre, reflect the real historical, racialized tensions of the nineteenth century.³⁵² Ultimately, the unclarity of *Meek's Cutoff's* ending reinforces what Gorfinkel identifies as “the film's emphasis on movement without advancement.”³⁵³ While Emily and the other women have been pushed westward in search of a better life, this dream appears increasingly out of reach as their journey reduces them to hard, desperate women.

CONCLUSION

In her 1988 text, *The Female Frontier*, Riley notes that, for many, “the term *frontierswomen* is definitive and crisp.” As Prairie Madonna and Pioneer Mother imagery has immortalized, the term calls to mind “a slender, pale skinned woman wearing a long-skirted dress and sunbonnet.” While one hand presses a Bible to her breast or carries a rifle, the other “clasps the tiny fingers of a child.” Overall, the image of a domestic, female migrant to the American West is one of “wife, mother, helpmate, and intrepid pioneer personified.”³⁵⁴ The

³⁵¹ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 134.

³⁵² Hall, “Expectations: *Meek's Cutoff*,” 100.

³⁵³ Gorfinkel, “Exhausted Drift,” 127.

³⁵⁴ Riley, *The Female Frontier*, 14.

motivations for why an American woman would migrate westward “to relocate on frontiers geographically and culturally worlds apart from their own homes” have been similarly reduced so that the “customary answer has been that women followed men to frontiers.” After all, Riley asks, “what could be more appealing and romantic—or typically female—than allowing men and relationships to shape one’s life?”³⁵⁵ However, as the histories of westering women revealed, memorialized, and celebrated by the artists in this chapter reveal, domestic, female migrants to the American West have and continue to be a diverse group whose motivations for migration are as expansive as their differing backgrounds.

It may be tempting to give into the entrenched Prairie Madonna/Pioneer Mother and Migrant Mother imagery or ignore it completely when considering female migrants to the American West. If so much of the little time that scholars have spent analyzing female mobility in Western America is spent on domestic immigration, would it not serve this dissertation better to focus solely on the types of westering women that this scholarship overlooks? I do not believe so. Instead, I follow Hurtado’s assertion that, as “[t]he history of women is key to understanding the evolution of the western region in the last several centuries,” one must understand women’s history “in all of its particularity, conflict, and complexity.” This project attempts to analyze this history in what Hurtado describes as “an evenhanded way” by including the viewpoints of women “who were often at odds with each other and whose aims were often in conflict with twenty-first-century ideas about rights and justice.”³⁵⁶

While Dickey and Peters work explicitly to change past conceptions of domestic, female immigrants to Western America, in part, Self, Ellsworth, and Reichardt rely on a general knowledge of these archetypes so that their subversion of them is as successful and surprising as

³⁵⁵ Riley, *Taking Land, Breaking Land*, 31.

³⁵⁶ Hurtado, “Settler Women and Frontier Women,” 5.

it is. This dissertation must acknowledge and analyze artwork about domestic, female migrants—including the Madonna/Mother imagery from which Self, Ellsworth, and Reichardt draw—when considering the larger histories of female mobilities in the American West. To not do so would “simply replace old male-dominated stereotypes with new ones,” leading to little changing “in our thinking about western history.”³⁵⁷ Instead, analyzing numerous histories of female mobility in the American West, including seemingly archetypical westering women and those long overlooked, “lengthens the time frame of westering history” so that it “can expand forward, as well as backwards.”³⁵⁸

As a whole, with their artwork documenting women pushed to Western America from within the States, Dickey, Self, Peters, Ellsworth, and Reichardt emphasize that these women are as diverse as the reasons that pushed them to move. The various histories of westering women that they acknowledge and memorialize reveal how, despite the assurance of “a new horizon” in the West that Rimes longs for in her single, the American West can be as exploitative and draining as it is promising. This is despite the whitewashed, optimistic archetypes of westering women that have long dominated the general public’s conception of “frontierswomen,” an idea rooted firmly in the nineteenth century. As the artists of this chapter show, the legacy of domestic, female migration to the West resonates to this day; women have been and will continue to be pushed to the American West by societal, economic, religious, and other factors for decades to come. Regardless of what pushed them, the identities of these moving women will continuously be formed, tested, and solidified as they make their ways to and through the mythic territory. Instead of iconic, idealized mothers, women who migrated to the West from within the

³⁵⁷ Susan Armitage, “Through Women’s Eyes: A New View of the West,” in *The Women’s West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 9.

³⁵⁸ Armitage, “Through Women’s Eyes,” 15.

States were and continue to be “real women who led real lives, people we could meet and talk to and share concerns with, not condescendingly pity or look up to in childlike awe.”³⁵⁹

³⁵⁹ Armitage, “Through Women’s Eyes,” 14.

CHAPTER TWO

“WE’LL COME BACK AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN:” INTERNATIONAL IMMIGRATION TO AND FROM THE AMERICAN WEST

In their 2019 eponymous single, “Highwomen,” the all-female country group The Highwomen sing of four women who perished in their travels to or through the American West in search of freedom or justice.³⁶⁰ Emphasizing what this chapter will demonstrate, that many women have been and will continue to be pushed to Western America from abroad, the song begins with the perspective of a woman fleeing from Honduras after “they killed the Sandinistas.” After following “a coyote through the dust of Mexico,” the woman—a mother who left her country to do “what I had to do” for her children—dies. The song then cycles through the perspectives of a healer, a freedom rider, and a preacher before concluding that, although the women are “[s]inging stories still untold,” they will “come back again and again and again/And again and again.”³⁶¹ In the song, the fact that the one woman who was an international, rather than a domestic, migrant to the American West does not actually get to live in the territory is significant; the struggles that she faced in her plight reflect a much larger history anti-international immigrant sentiments in the West.

Since the implementation and subsequent takeover of white settler colonialism in Western America, settlers have created and enforced legislation to restrict the immigration of “non-desirables,” almost always people of color, from abroad to the territory. This is despite their own history as international immigrants in North America dating back to the time of contact. This

³⁶⁰ The Highwomen’s members include Brandi Carlile, Maren Morris, Amanda Shires, and Nola. The group was created in response to the lack of airtime dedicated to female country artists and as an homage to the male country supergroup, The Highwaymen, which included Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings, and Johnny Cash (Lars Gotric, “Hear The Highwomen’s New Statement Song, ‘Highwomen,’” *NPR*, published August 13, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/13/750829469/hear-the-highwomens-new-statement-song-highwomen>).

³⁶¹ “Highwomen Lyrics,” Genius.com, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://genius.com/The-highwomen-highwomen-lyrics>.

legislature and hostile reception have especially affected negatively female immigrants pushed to the American West in search of upwards mobility and stability; not only are these migrants villainized by white settlers because they are “foreign,” they are also discriminated against for being women. However, as the artists in this chapter, Hung Liu, Margarita Cabrera, and Anh-Thúy Nguyễn, highlight, these moving women are not affected by this discrimination in the same way. Rather, different structures in the American West have impacted their reception in the States and formation of their diasporic identities in a variety of manners. Regardless, historian Albert L. Hurtado asserts that, throughout American history, “[s]ome Anglos desire to exclude newcomers on the basis of racial, ethnic, and linguistic considerations.”³⁶² Ethnic studies scholar Genevieve Carpio supports this notion further by arguing that “[w]hite status has been a prerequisite for most forms of U.S. national belonging, and its stability as a category is contingent upon the exclusion of those considered nonwhite.”³⁶³

In large part, the primary way that whiteness has operated in the American West has been by “managing the mobility of others.” Carpio elaborates that, “[f]or nonwhites, racialization is experienced as the multiple ways their mobility and immobility is coerced through systems of power.”³⁶⁴ Specifically, as transforming the territory “into the white man’s West would require work,” those in power in the West looked to encourage “the right people” and discourage “those considered wrong” from moving to the area through governmental measures. In doing so, they worked to create a refuge for Euro-Americans.³⁶⁵ This is especially true during periods of

³⁶² Albert L. Hurtado, “Settler Women and Frontier Women: The Unsettling Past of Western Women’s History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 3 (2001): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i366833>.

³⁶³ Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (University of California Press, 2019), 10.

³⁶⁴ Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 10.

³⁶⁵ Jason E. Pierce, “The Politics of Whiteness and Western Expansion, 1848–80,” in *Making the White Man’s West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West* (University Press of Colorado, 2016), 123.

conflict and economic uncertainty when “nativism captures much of the public consciousness, and legal change is the ultimate result.”³⁶⁶

In this chapter, the artwork by Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn draws from their personal experiences as it illuminates larger histories and hardships of international women pushed to the American West. In doing so, the artists emphasize the legacy of international female immigration to Western America and dissect how these movements have influenced their own diasporic identity formations. Contributing to the uncertainty running through their senses of self, all three artists have traveled from the American West back to their home countries several times. In doing so, they not only emphasize that the flow of moving women to the American West from abroad is multidirectional, but also the losses that accompany splitting one’s time and allegiance between countries. With their artwork detailing these concepts, Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn reflect recent feminist scholarship focused on forced migration. In her discussion of the “moving woman,” postcolonial studies scholar Anna Ball argues that, in the twenty-first century, women are increasingly mobile “in response to the gendered, racial and political disenfranchisements that have threatened women’s sanctuary within and beyond their homeland.”³⁶⁷ In response to this forced movement, women such as Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn “have sought to channel their moving experiences into creative forms that have, in turn, prompted others to emotive response and critical debate in the sociocultural sphere.”³⁶⁸ Even if one comes from vastly different backgrounds than the three artists featured in this chapter, the sense of isolation, danger, and longing that their work about moving women in Western America conveys is intensely palpable.

³⁶⁶ Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 86.

³⁶⁷ Anna Ball, *Forced Migration in the Feminist Imagination: Transcultural Movements* (Routledge, 2021), 1.

³⁶⁸ Ball, *Forced Migration in the Feminist Imagination*, 1.

As immigration to the States, primarily the West, increases over the course of the twenty-first century, historian Neil Campbell argues that the area's "in- and out-flowing dialogic and diasporic histories and traditions should be given renewed importance in the transnational comprehension of the West as part of a larger global mobility of people and ideas."³⁶⁹ The work of Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn draws from these past and contemporary diasporic histories in the American West. In doing so, it emphasizes that, although many have traveled to and through the West in search of an authentic, single "homespace" in which they can plant their roots, for women pushed to the West from abroad, no such stability can often be found.³⁷⁰

HUNG LIU

Demonstrating that mobility in Western American is rarely unidirectional, especially for diasporic women, the work of Chinese American artist Hung Liu is also illustrative of longstanding anti-Asian and anti-immigrant sentiments in the American West. As portraits by Liu reflect, these sentiments have especially impacted Asian women. Born in Changchun, China, on February 17, 1948, Liu came of age under the Maoist regime and lived through the mass famine resulting from Mao's "Great Leap Forward."³⁷¹ Because of the education observed in her family's background, in 1968, she was sent to the Chinese countryside for "re-education" and worked in wheat and rice fields daily for four years. During this time, she also drew and photographed local farming families—documentation that she retained throughout her life.³⁷² Following this period, as a graduate student at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art, Liu

³⁶⁹ Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 25.

³⁷⁰ Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*, 27.

³⁷¹ "Bio," HungLiu.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <http://www.hungliu.com/bio.html>; Jeff Kelley, "Timeline," HungLiu.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <http://www.hungliu.com/timeline.html>.

³⁷² Kelley, "Timeline."

trained in the Socialist Realist style as a mural painter. In 1984, Liu immigrated to California, where she studied with Allan Kaprow at the University of California, San Diego.³⁷³ Beginning in 1985, however, Liu began to travel around the Western states with her future second husband, Jeff Kelley, and, eventually, lived and taught in Texas and California. At the time of her death in August 2021, Liu was Professor Emerita at Mills College at Northeastern University in Oakland, California.³⁷⁴

In works such as the 2005 *Mandarin Ducks* (Figure 18) and the 1989 *Resident Alien* (Figure 19), Liu draws parallels between her experiences in Maoist China and the twentieth-century American West to document “prostitutes, refugees, street performers, soldiers, laborers, and prisoners, among others,” including herself. Throughout her career, Liu became known for her paintings referencing and challenging the “documentary authority of historical Chinese photographs.” To her, painting historical and contemporary photographs was a “reflective process” that emphasized the constructed nature of supposedly documentary images.³⁷⁵ Rather than create faithful imitations of the photographs, as paintings such as *Mandarin Ducks* emphasize, Liu’s reproductions are abstracted compositions featuring bold washes of bright and grayscale colors that drip and meld into one another. Liu’s estate places a large significance on her brushstrokes, “the washes and drips” that “dissolve the documentary images.” With this looseness, Liu’s brushwork suggests “the passage of memory into history, while working to uncover the cultural and personal narratives fixed—but often concealed—in the photographic instant.”³⁷⁶ As Liu washes her subjects such as the woman from *Mandarin Ducks* “in veils of dripping linseed oil,” she destroys the image while preserving it to create a form of “weeping

³⁷³ “Bio,” HungLiu.com.

³⁷⁴ Kelley, “Timeline;” “Bio,” HungLiu.com.

³⁷⁵ “Bio,” HungLiu.com.

³⁷⁶ “Bio,” HungLiu.com.

realism that surrenders to the erosion of memory and the passage of time.” In doing so, she “summons the ghosts of history to the present.”³⁷⁷ In the case of *Mandarin Ducks* and *Resident Alien*, these ghosts include the long, exclusionary history of Chinese immigration in the American West—a history has especially impacted women pulled to the West from China in search of upwards mobility.

“IMMORAL CHINESE WOMEN” AND THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT

Refuting the freedom of movement promoted by the “man on the horse” archetype, in discussing Chinese immigration to the American West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Taiwanese historian Joan S. Wang asserts that “Chinese, along with other Asians were actively excluded from participating in an expanding American society as the ideology of Manifest Destiny pushed the society ever westward.”³⁷⁸ These exclusions took place in both legislative and social forums. Exclusionary legal acts restricting Chinese immigration to the States included the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the Asiatic Barred Zone Act (1917), and the Asian Exclusion Act (1924).³⁷⁹ In particular, the Chinese Exclusion Act restricted the immigration of “laborers,” and in the West, was coupled with the California Alien Land Law of 1913, which prohibited immigrants of Asian descent from owning property. These acts were in place until the ending of the “National Origins quota system” with the Immigration and Nationality Act (1965). As a result, Asian Americans in the West have been, repeatedly, marked as “alien” and “other” through these legal exclusions as well as internment, political

³⁷⁷ “Bio,” HungLiu.com.

³⁷⁸ Joan S. Wang, “The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism: The Relationship between Chinese and Japanese in the American West, 1880s-1920s,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 2 (2008): 29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40543330>.

³⁷⁹ Heike Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” in *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (Transcript Verlag, 2014), 332.

disenfranchisement, and labor exploitation.³⁸⁰ In work such as *Mandarin Ducks* and *Resident Alien*, Liu explores the exclusionary policies forming Chinese American histories in Western America and the unbreakable feelings of “otherness” resulting from them.

In *Mandarin Ducks*, Liu examines the societal views and exclusionary legal actions taken against early Chinese immigrant women, in particular, that shaped their lives in the American West. Following the 1875 Page Act, which banned Chinese women’s immigration to the States “on the suspicion of prostitution,” subsequent immigration laws essentially forbade Chinese women from migrating to the U.S. through the early twentieth century.³⁸¹ These policies were motivated by the “stereotype that all Chinese women were prostitutes whose presence would corrupt the morals of the nation’s youth,” a concept that Castañeda traces back to the mid-nineteenth century.³⁸² The Page Act, in large part, was formatted to stop “immoral Chinese women” from arriving in the States. Furthermore, exclusionary laws in 1903, 1907, and 1917 “were designed to deport alleged prostitutes, which included all Chinese women,” and because of these, any Chinese woman, regardless of her class, was subject to harassment. Castañeda notes that “the government’s targeted exclusion of Chinese women” prevented effectively the formation of Chinese families “and thus kept a full-fledged Chinese/Chinese American society (or societies) from establishing itself in the United States during the nineteenth century.”³⁸³ However, as Liu’s *Mandarin Ducks* reflects, Chinese women, often enduring excruciating hardships, still managed to make their ways to and through the American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

³⁸⁰ Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” 332.

³⁸¹ Wang, “The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism,” 33.

³⁸² Antonia I. Castañeda, “Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History: The Discourse, Politics, and Decolonization of History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 4 (1992): 529, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3641046>.

³⁸³ Castañeda, “Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History,” 530.

DOCUMENTING “IDAHO’S LEGENDARY PIONEER”

In Liu’s *Mandarin Ducks*, a woman of Asian descent stands in the middle of the composition as she rests her right hand on a stack of books. With a direct gaze, she dons a conservative Euro-American dress in a deep maroon color and has her hair pulled back in a tight, low bun. Due to the attention to detail that Liu has paid while rendering the woman’s visage, it is clear that this is a portrait of a specific individual. In contrast to the woman’s naturalistic appearance, the background surrounding her is comprised of streaks of fluid paint. Two ducks, painted in a stylized way reminiscent of traditional Chinese painting, swim out from behind the woman and pass in front of her as they travel among water and stargazer lilies. Other vegetation blooms from the painting’s edges. Combined with the flora and fauna present, the abstracted brushstrokes and expressive washes of paint swirling in the painting’s background give the sense of moving water. Grounded in the middle of the composition, the woman appears caught in the ebb and flow of this running water, perhaps in a burgeoning whirlpool. Looking neither overtly concerned nor happy about her situation, the woman dons a placid expression. Rather than interacting with the birds and plants around her, the woman does not seem to notice the creatures. Instead, the flora and fauna are superimposed upon her form, as if they were facets of her past come to the forefront of her current state. As a whole, Liu’s painting is as layered and complex as the woman’s identity and reflects a contact zone where Eastern and Western influences meet in a whirling, dynamic confrontation.

Describing his late wife’s work, Kelley notes that, on her large canvases, “Liu depicts women and children as refugees from war and social upheaval...she offers her fleeing subjects the solace of their own heritage by including motifs—birds and flowers, Buddhist iconography—

from traditional Chinese painting.”³⁸⁴ Specifically, in *Mandarin Ducks*, the woman fleeing social upheaval is Polly Bemis, a Chinese woman who was sold by her parents in China and smuggled to the States in the 1870s. While Bemis’s life “could have been a life of subjugation,” in Liu’s painting, the artist celebrates her legacy.³⁸⁵ Discussing the origins of the work, Liu states that she was sent “a lot of literature and visual materials” by the Sun Valley Center for the Arts in Ketchum, Idaho. Out of that material, one photograph, in particular, of Bemis caught her attention.³⁸⁶ As most of the photographs captured Bemis as an older woman, “always wearing her apron, in her garden and with chickens,” the young Bemis portrayed in her wedding portrait stood out. It is from this photograph that Liu draws for Bemis’s portrait in *Mandarin Ducks*. After learning more about Bemis, Liu notes that “I liked this woman who stood up for herself, and I did a series of paintings of her.”³⁸⁷

There is no doubt that Polly Bemis was pushed to the American West from China under unsavory terms before finding agency and living a seemingly fulfilling life in Idaho. However, almost all other details about “Idaho’s legendary Polly Bemis” have been overexaggerated, and subsequently, scholars have questioned their authenticity.³⁸⁸ Born in northern China in 1853, Bemis had her feet bound as a young girl.³⁸⁹ Supposedly, her birth name was Lalu Nathoy, a nomenclature that has led some scholars to argue that she was truly from Mongolia.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁴ Kelley, “Timeline.”

³⁸⁵ Angelica Aboulhosn, “These Artists Are Redefining the American West,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, published August 14, 2023, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/these-artists-are-redefining-the-american-west-180982708/>.

³⁸⁶ Joann Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” *American Art* 25, no. 2 (2011): 97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/661999>.

³⁸⁷ Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 97.

³⁸⁸ Ruthanne Lum McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis: China’s Daughter, Idaho’s Legendary Pioneer,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24, no. 1 (2003): 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i366837>. For a fictional biography of Bemis, see McCunn’s 1981 novel, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, which was, in 1991, adapted into Nancy Kelly’s film of the same name.

³⁸⁹ McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis,” 77.

³⁹⁰ McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis,” 93. Specifically, the name has origins in the Daur community, a “minority in Mongolia that is related culturally and linguistically to the Mongols and Tungus-Manchu speaking peoples.”

Regardless, at some point, her family experienced hardship, and her father “was forced to sell her to bandits in exchange for enough seed to plant another crop.” Bemis departed China, possibly through Shanghai, and was smuggled into the United States. One version of her story has her landing in San Francisco, another in Portland.³⁹¹ Nevertheless, Bemis eventually traveled up the Columbia River until she reached Lewiston, Idaho, and then, was moved by pack trail to Warrens, Idaho, where she arrived in July of 1872.³⁹² Upon her arrival, she was given the name “Polly.”³⁹³

The popular version of Bemis’s life purports that a Chinese man named Hong King, who ran a gambling-house-slash-saloon-slash-dance-hall in Warrens, had purchased Bemis.³⁹⁴ There has been debate on whether or not Bemis labored as a sex worker once she had arrived in Idaho, but historian Priscilla Wegars asserts that “there is no evidence for that assumption.”³⁹⁵ While Bemis biographer Ruthanne Lum McCunn argues that she was clearly brought from China to perform sex work for various men, Wegars counters that “Polly’s owner undoubtedly purchased her as his concubine.”³⁹⁶ Nonetheless, before the mid-1880s, Bemis “managed to extricate herself from her Chinese owner” and avoid deportation through her marriage to the white Charles Bemis.³⁹⁷ Following her seemingly happy marriage to Charles in 1894, Bemis received her certificate of residence in 1896 and operated a mining claim with her husband for several years before his death.³⁹⁸

³⁹¹ McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis,” 77.

³⁹² McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis,” 78.

³⁹³ McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis,” 79.

³⁹⁴ McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis,” 79.

³⁹⁵ Priscilla Wegars, “Polly Bemus,” Asian American Comparative Collection, accessed April 16, 2024, <https://uidaho.edu/class/anthrolab/collections/aacc/research/bemis>.

³⁹⁶ McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis,” 79; Wegars, “Polly Bemus.”

³⁹⁷ Wegars, “Polly Bemus.”

³⁹⁸ McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis,” 82; Wegars, “Polly Bemus.”

Writing about Bemis, Wegars notes that “it is important that we both celebrate the known facts about her and allow the stereotypical, undocumented legends to die out.”³⁹⁹ Yet, it is precisely these legends that Liu draws from and uplifts in *Mandarin Ducks*. In the face of exclusionary policies and overt racism against Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, Bemis managed to overcome a predetermined life of hardship and achieve both success and communal acceptance within the American West. Liu alludes to this happiness directly with the painting’s title and inclusion of a male and female mandarin duck swimming around Bemis; in Chinese culture, mandarin ducks are viewed as symbols of romantic love—as many believe the creatures mate for life—and fraternal love.⁴⁰⁰ However, in representing her own immigration from China to the States, Liu reflects a more stark view of the reception and fate of moving Chinese women in the American West.

“HOW IS AN ALIEN ALSO A RESIDENT?”

Liu’s monumental-sized *Resident Alien* painting reproduces an identification card from the “U.S. Department of Justice—Immigration and Naturalization Service.” Painted in large, black block letters across the top of the mural is the phrase, “RESIDENT ALIEN.” Beneath this title is a woman’s portrait, fingerprint, name, signature, and the seal of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The woman, who is modeled off Liu but whose name is listed as “Fortune Cookie,” is of Asian descent and wears a dark colored shirt with her hair pulled back at the nape. Rather than gaze at the viewer, she appears to look directly at the blue-hued seal to the right of her. Within the seal, the woman’s supposed date of birth—February 7, 1984—is listed

³⁹⁹ Wegars, “Polly Bemus.”

⁴⁰⁰ Wee Kek Koon, “How mandarin ducks became a Chinese symbol of love,” *South China Morning Post*, published December 1, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3111303/how-mandarin-ducks-became-chinese-symbol-love>.

along with her “Alien Number,” “POE,” and “class.” Based on the completion date for the painting—1988—this would make the woman only four years old. Perhaps, then, the date of birth corresponds to her arrival in the United States and subsequent “rebirth” as an American.

A relatively simple composition, the most detailed portion of *Resident Alien* is the Department of Justice’s seal in the center, a seal that is painted flatly and covers partially the naturalistic portrait of Fortune Cookie. Emphasizing the humanity of the woman, on the far right of the card, Fortune Cookie’s fingerprint is contained within an outlined box. While the print features the typical whorls associated with fingerprints, it is fractured and sports a cross-like crack across its form. It is conceivable that print’s fissure relates to the fractured sense of self experienced by immigrants; although they are unique individuals with complex lives, in the American immigration system, this individuality is discarded, and migrants are often reduced to a stereotyped name and a series of numbers, as Fortune Cookie is in *Resident Alien*.

Resident Alien is one painting from a series that Liu created for the Capp Street Project in San Francisco in the late 1980s. These paintings, which include works “concerned with the history of Chinese immigration to California, beginning with the Gold Rush in 1849 and continuing through her own ‘resident alien’ status,” garnered significant attention for Liu and marked her as “an artist whose subject was the fluid politics of identity.”⁴⁰¹ As the Capp Street Project’s artist-in-resident, Liu was prompted to examine Chinese immigration to the state by the presence of San Francisco’s Chinatowns, one of the biggest Chinese communities in the country.⁴⁰² Emphasizing the impact of the mural-sized painting, noted art critic Holland Cotter observes that *Resident Alien* is Liu’s most widely reproduced work. The painting, specifically, is of Liu’s own green card, but her birth year of 1948 has been flipped to 1984 to reflect the year

⁴⁰¹ “Resident Alien,” HungLiu.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <http://www.hungliu.com/resident-alien.html>.

⁴⁰² Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 88-89.

that she immigrated to the States.⁴⁰³ Discussing the work, Liu asserted that “the painting is oxymoronic. You are supposed to carry your ID in your wallet. My painting made the image large, like a billboard.”⁴⁰⁴ Rather than obscure or minimize her immigrant background, then, Liu blows up the evidence of her migration for all to examine. Given the exclusionary legal policies restricting Chinese immigration to the States, this bold exclamation of Liu’s immigrant identity flies in the face of the discrimination that prevented Chinese women from moving to and through the American West mere decades earlier.

While there is not an excess of language used in the painting, what is there is significant. Liu changed her name to “Cookie, Fortune” because the fortune cookie and its erroneous association with Chinese identity was something that “fascinated” her; she notes that the fortune cookie “was invented by a Japanese man near Golden Gate Park; it has nothing to do with the Chinese at all” but has become an emblem of the culture in the States.⁴⁰⁵ Furthermore, the term “resident alien” was also compelling to her. She questions, “[w]hat is alien? How is an alien also a resident?” When Liu arrived in the U.S. in 1984, Sigourney Weaver’s *Alien* movies were rising in popularity. These films prompted Liu to consider how “an alien is from outer space,” so “resident alien,” just like a billboard-sized immigration card, “is also an oxymoron.”⁴⁰⁶ By 1991, Liu became an American citizen and was able to return to China for the first time following her move to California.⁴⁰⁷ The status as “resident alien” was a facet of her identity that she was never able to move away from, however, and would be a pervasive theme or point of investigation for the rest of her life.

⁴⁰³ Holland Cotter, “Hung Liu, Artist Who Blended East and West, Is Dead at 73,” *The New York Times*, published August 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/22/arts/hung-liu-artist-dead.html>.

⁴⁰⁴ Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 89.

⁴⁰⁵ Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 89.

⁴⁰⁶ Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 89.

⁴⁰⁷ Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 78.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Liu would identify with the work of Dorothea Lange—a moving woman herself—at the end of her career.⁴⁰⁸ The shift from Chinese subject matter to broader American subjects occurred around 2015. The “displaced individuals and wandering families of the American Dustbowl” captured by Lange’s images appealed to Liu because of the “overarching struggle and underlying humanity” that they conveyed.⁴⁰⁹ In large part, these photographs of desperate Americans paralleled the displacement, revolution, and tumult in China that Liu observed and endured during Mao’s era of “epic revolution.” Just as she and female Chinese immigrants before her—including Polly Bemis—traveled to the “promised land” of California in search of better lives, so too did Dustbowl migrants.⁴¹⁰ All experienced discrimination because of their origins, with the former’s discrimination continuing to this day. With her paintings of nineteenth and twentieth century female Chinese migrants, however, Liu counters a longstanding belief resulting from the eurocentrism of Turner’s frontier thesis; her work helps correct “a tacit assumption that underlies many representations of the West, namely, that one arrives there from the east.” Specifically, Turner’s thesis conveyed that white men settled North America in this East-to-West manner.⁴¹¹ Yet, as Paul argues, North America was also settled from West-to-East by immigrants, including those from China—when allowed into the country.⁴¹² Despite this, white Americans “relegated both Chinese and Japanese immigrants to a subordinate position” during the settlement of the West in the name of Manifest Destiny.⁴¹³ However, the hardships and successes by Chinese women in the West—as examined in

⁴⁰⁸ Born in 1895, Dorothea Lange embarked on a “world tour” in 1918 before traveling throughout California during the Great Depression and the American West during the World War II (“Dorothea Lange,” Getty Museum Collection, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/103KES>).

⁴⁰⁹ “Bio,” HungLiu.com.

⁴¹⁰ “Bio,” HungLiu.com.

⁴¹¹ Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” 332.

⁴¹² Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” 332.

⁴¹³ Wang, “The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism,” 43.

Mandarin Ducks and *Resident Alien*—rebut forcefully this position by illuminating how a “history of Asian immigration to America provides a view from the West on the West as East.”⁴¹⁴

NEVER A “BLUE-BLOODED AMERICAN”

In *Race, Rights, and the Asian Experience*, legal scholar Angelo N. Ancheta asserts that, for a majority of Asian Americans, “the immigrant experience is a personal experience” because “[t]wo out of every three Asian Americans is an immigrant, and the parents or grandparents of most Asian Americans born in the United States were immigrants as well.”⁴¹⁵ As Liu’s artwork and life reflects, “[p]ublic policies that threaten the rights of immigrants or that threaten to restrict immigration—particularly the immigration of family members—are not just political statements.” Instead, they “are policies that affect people’s lives in a personal way.”⁴¹⁶ For Liu, this meant that her identity as a Chinese American was never fixed or resolved in a satisfactory manner, as reflected by *Resident Alien*. Discussing her life in 2011, she stated that “I feel I can never be a blue-blooded American.” Instead, Liu believed that her immigration status had changed from “resident alien” to “‘becoming American,’ like all the first-generation immigrants.” Liu defines “becoming American” as “learning everything new,” and that, “as an immigrant in the United States, even though I have a home and studio here, and even though I have a career here...I was constantly learning more.”⁴¹⁷

The personal way that immigration policies have affected Chinese Americans also sparked and then sustained Liu’s interests in westering Chinese women such as Polly Bemis. As a moving, Chinese woman in the American West herself, Liu felt torn between her home country

⁴¹⁴ Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” 332.

⁴¹⁵ Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, 85.

⁴¹⁶ Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, 85.

⁴¹⁷ Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 103.

and the adopted country to which she was pushed. Although she left the American West and visited China regularly, beginning in the 1990s, Liu observed that she “miss[ed] a lot of details not being there.”⁴¹⁸ She elaborated that she, sometimes, felt as if she wanted to immigrate back to China, “at least emotionally and in spirit.” Yet, she knew that, even if she returned to her home country, she could “never be the same, as though I had never left China.”⁴¹⁹ Past legal policies, with their long-lasting ramifications for Asian Americans still felt today, lumped migrants from Asian countries together with discriminatory laws. Liu was grouped into this overly generalized category of Asian immigrant, as reflected by *Resident Alien*. Yet, the painting emphasizes also how she was not comfortable with that categorization, nor with the label of American citizen. Instead, with her depictions of mobile women such as Bemis or herself, Liu interrogates the moving nature of her own identity as a woman caught between her Chinese heritage and newer American nationality.

MARGARITA CABRERA

In her artwork centered around the movements of international immigrant women to Western America, in contrast to Liu and Nguyễn—whose work we will turn to momentarily—Margarita Cabrera does not place her emphasis on the human form. This is not to say that Cabrera’s work such as her *Space in Between* project (Figure 20), begun in 2010, does not reflect the people that inspire her sculptures. On the contrary, examples from *Space in Between* document the lives of their inspirations intimately. Taking the form of desert flora embroidered with heart wrenching border-crossing stories, these soft-sculpture examples reorient expectations

⁴¹⁸ Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 102, 103.

⁴¹⁹ Moser, “Interview: A Conversation with Hung Liu,” 103.

about both the genre of art of the American West and archetypes of Western American mobility to focus on migrant crossings of *la frontera*.

Born in Monterrey, Mexico, in 1973, Cabrera immigrated to Salt Lake City, Utah, at the age of ten before later moving with her family to El Paso, Texas.⁴²⁰ After high school, during which Cabrera “began to develop an awareness of immigrant and border-region social issues,” she earned her BFA as well as her MFA from New York’s Hunter College.⁴²¹ Her awareness of border-region and immigrant social issues has continuously been heightened in the time following her tenure at Hunter College through experiences such as touring *maquiladoras*, “the transnational factories employing northern Mexicans just south of the Rio Grande” and her *Space in Between* project.⁴²² Currently, Cabrera is an associate professor in Arizona State University’s School of Art as well as a member of ASU’s Chicano/Latino Faculty and Staff Association.⁴²³

In her artistic practice, Cabrera draws heavily from her personal movements between Mexico and the States and finds inspiration “in the colorful realm of Mexican popular arts and crafts, a world she was exposed to as a child when she visited relatives in her native country.”⁴²⁴ For projects such as *Space in Between*, which focuses on handmade objects, Cabrera harkens to the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, with its opposition “to the dehumanization of the industrial revolution by restoring an appreciation for the aesthetic traditions of cottage

⁴²⁰ “Margarita Cabrera,” Talley Dunn Gallery, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://talleydunn.com/project/margarita-cabrera/>; ⁴²⁰ Michael Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio,” *TexasMonthly*, published April 2019, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/margarita-cabreras-monumental-arbol-de-la-vida-grows-in-san-antonio/>; Margarita Cabrera, “About,” MargaritaCabrera.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.margaritacabrera.com/sample-page/>.

⁴²¹ Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio;” Cabrera, “About.”

⁴²² Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio.”

⁴²³ “Margarita Cabrera,” Arizona State University, accessed September 5, 2023, <https://search.asu.edu/profile/3042231>.

⁴²⁴ Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio.”

industry.”⁴²⁵ Specifically, Cabrera states that hers is a sculptural practice which “centers on social-political community issues including cultural identity, migration, violence, inclusivity, labor, and empowerment.”⁴²⁶ While making a name for herself as a solo artist, Cabrera has also worked on a variety of collaborative projects, including *Space in Between*, “at the intersection of contemporary art practices, indigenous Mexican folk art and craft traditions, and U.S.-Mexico relations.”⁴²⁷ At the same time that these collaborative projects help preserve and study “endangered cultural and craft traditions” such as Otomí embroidery, they also serve “as active investigations into the creation of just working conditions and the protection of immigrant rights.”⁴²⁸ As a whole, Cabrera’s artwork reflects the larger concept and conditions of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands as well as the women, including Cabrera herself, who attempt to move across this space.

SOFT SCULPTURES, HARD NARRATIVES: CABRERA’S *SPACE IN BETWEEN* PROJECT

At first glance, *Saguaro* (Rosa Maria Soto) a 2016 example from Cabrera’s *Space in Between* project (Figure 21) appears to be a multiarmed cactus littered with colorful decorations emerging from a pale terracotta pot. Upon closer inspection, one notices that, instead of sporting needles, the arms of the cactus are made from a soft, wrinkled, green fabric. The bright decorations covering some of their segments are, in fact, embroidered images and words. The softness of the medium used to create the body of the cactus contrasts strongly with the sharpness of the plant that the sculpture mirrors with its form. Furthermore, the soft-bodied cactus is at textural odds with its hard, ceramic vessel. Placed in a white gallery space for its

⁴²⁵ Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio.”

⁴²⁶ Cabrera, “About.”

⁴²⁷ Cabrera, “About.”

⁴²⁸ Cabrera, “About.”

installation photograph, the potted cactus gives no indication to its scale; the sculpture could be life sized, miniature, or looming large in the exhibition space. When viewed in-situ at the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles, however, the fabric plant looms close to five feet in height, potentially the height of its female namesake.

On the central trunk of the cactus, one can make out a red school bus with white beams of light extending from its front. Connecting the vehicle to the winding, tan path picked out at the top of the plant, a black-and-white road guides the bus on its journey. The vehicle moves away from a small set of buildings following the curve of the cactus, towards its back. Stitched in red, white, and green, the diminutive houses are positioned under the label of “MEXICO.” To the upper right of the red school bus, a small, white window frames the face of a downcast girl with brown hair, blue clothes, and a frowning red mouth. Following the tan path circling the “head” of the saguaro, one’s gaze is led to a set of vertical black lines. Combined with the “U.S. Border Patrol” patch beneath them, it is clear that these stitches allude to the U.S.-Mexico border wall. Taken as a whole, the vignettes picked out on *Saguaro* (Rosa Maria Soto) hint at a woman’s migration to the United States and the storm of feelings encompassing this journey.

Rather than produce the sculptures for *Space in Between* alone, Cabrera worked with immigrant communities in Texas, which included women moving from Central America, to create the fabric flora.⁴²⁹ She notes that her focus on collaboration has developed over the past few years and that the artwork that is created as result of this collaboration “serve[s] as cultural and historical artifacts that value and document the experiences, struggles, and achievements of those who have found their way, often through migration and exceptional sacrifice, to new

⁴²⁹ Margarita Cabrera, “Space in Between,” MargaritaCabrera.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.margaritacabrera.com/portafolio/space-in-between/>.

places.”⁴³⁰ The first iteration of *Space in Between* took place in Houston, in early 2010, at a gallery called Box 13 ArtSpace.⁴³¹ To connect with her immigrant collaborators, Cabrera worked with Houston Interfaith Worker Justice Center, a non-profit now called Fe y Justicia Worker Center.⁴³² The sculptures that they created, which Cabrera describes as “sculptural replicas of desert plants indigenous to the Southwestern United States,” were made during workshops that the artist arranged.⁴³³

Understanding the history of the borderlands in the American Southwest is important when considering Cabrera’s work as it illustrates how the state is both a delimiter and motivator for women’s mobility. In describing the attributes of borders, political scientist I. William Zartman observed that they “run across land but through people.” While, on maps, borders might “appear as fine as one-dimensional lines,” in real life, they have various dimensions.⁴³⁴ With her work such as her *Space in Between* project, Cabrera brings life and depth to the people and issues intertwined with borderlands history in the American Southwest. Generally, scholars define borderlands such as the one encompassing the U.S.-Mexico border as “inhabited territories located on the margins of a power center, or between power centers.” Rather than being static entities, however, borderlands are constantly in movement, “from here to there and within the here and there of the moment.”⁴³⁵ Historians David Stea, Jamie Zech, and Melissa Gray elaborate that border regions, borders, and borderlands are all “enigmatic places where people, ideas, and identities cross and recross, or, alternatively, are forbidden from crossing, leading to a

⁴³⁰ Cabrera, “Space in Between.”

⁴³¹ Cabrera, “Space in Between,” Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio.”

⁴³² Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio.”

⁴³³ Cabrera, “Space in Between.”

⁴³⁴ I. William Zartman, “Introduction: Identity, Movement, and Response,” in *Understanding Life in the Borderlands: Boundaries in Depth and in Motion*, ed. I. William Zartman (University of Georgia Press, 2010), 1.

⁴³⁵ Zartman, “Introduction,” 2, 9.

dynamic whereby certain amounts as transience and transmigration...exit.”⁴³⁶ Therefore, one should view a border region as more than a geographical territory. As Cabrera’s artwork reflects, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is a rich area that encompasses “the meeting of peoples, the relationships among people and institutions in their respective nation states, multiple languages, and two social and political systems.”⁴³⁷

Specifically, scholars such as Zartman label the United States-Mexico border as “grey.” This label reflects the movement and intermixing present along and across the border, as grey models of borders are models of “integration, producing an intermediate population and culture composed of a combination of traits and people from two sides.” While a political border exists between the countries, it is “permeable, making cultures permeated too.”⁴³⁸ The “most active international divide in the world,” the U.S.-Mexico border is, approximately, two thousand miles long.⁴³⁹ Contrary to what conservative media outlets might purport, movement across the border is bidirectional, as “a tide of Mexicans crossing on a daily basis to work, shop, and visit relatives in the United States is matched by an equally large tide of U.S. tourists.”⁴⁴⁰ Instead of labeling the border as grey, however, Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa describes the divide as *una herida abierta*, an open wound, “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—border culture.”⁴⁴¹ With its focus on the policing of the U.S.-Mexico border,

⁴³⁶ David Stea, Jamie Zech, and Melissa Gray, “Change and Non-change in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA,” in *Understanding Life in the Borderlands: Boundaries in Depth and in Motion*, ed. I. William Zartman (University of Georgia Press, 2010), 108.

⁴³⁷ Harriett Romo and Raquel R. Márquez, “Who’s Who across the U.S.-Mexico Border: Identities in Transition,” in *Understanding Life in the Borderlands: Boundaries in Depth and in Motion*, ed. I. William Zartman (University of Georgia Press, 2010), 218.

⁴³⁸ Zartman, “Introduction,” 7.

⁴³⁹ Stea, Zech, and Gray, “Change and Non-change in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA,” 130.

⁴⁴⁰ Stea, Zech, and Gray, “Change and Non-change in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA,” 118.

⁴⁴¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

Cabrera's *Space in Between* project, which draws from Anzaldúa's scholarship, reflects this "open wound" explicitly.

For the sculptures, Cabrera's collaborators embroidered, in the iconic style of Indigenous Mexican Otomí peoples, text and images relating to their own migration stories onto the plants, which were created from United States Border Patrol uniforms that had been discarded.⁴⁴² Over forty "pillowy interpretations of plants native to the arid Southwest" resulted and included sculpturers of saguaros, yucca trees, agave, prickly pear, and other plants.⁴⁴³ With their detailed embroidery, the sculptures also interrogate ideas of social construction versus nature and, with the specific materials comprising their forms, force viewers "to confront contentious topics."⁴⁴⁴ The choice of containers for the sculptures are intentional; Cabrera identifies the vessels as "traditional Mexican terra cotta pots."⁴⁴⁵ For the title of the project, *Space in Between*, Cabrera drew inspiration from the term, *nepantla*, which she states, "in the Nahuatl Aztec language, references the 'space in the middle' as it refers to marginalized cultures and resistance strategies of survival."⁴⁴⁶ Specifically, Cabrera cites Anzaldúa's conceptualization of *nepantla*, one that "views *nepantla* as a reference to living in the borderlands or crossroads, and the process of creating alternative spaces in which to live, function or create."⁴⁴⁷ Less hostile than viewing the borderlands as "an open wound," then, *nepantla* is reflected explicitly by the sculptures from *Space in Between*; the act of moving men and women in the borderlands creating artwork

⁴⁴² "Margarita Cabrera: Blurring Borders," the McNay, published 2022, <https://www.mcnayart.org/exhibition/blurring-borders/>.

⁴⁴³ Cabrera, "Space in Between."

⁴⁴⁴ Cabrera, "Space in Between;" "Margarita Cabrera," Jane Lombard Gallery, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.janelombardgallery.com/margarita-cabrera>.

⁴⁴⁵ Cabrera, "Space in Between."

⁴⁴⁶ Cabrera, "Space in Between."

⁴⁴⁷ Cabrera, "Space in Between."

denotes inherently *nepantla* at work, and the embroidery illustrating the migrants' movements and sacrifices reinforces the intricacy of the concept.

The U.S.-Mexico border has divided Tohono O'odham, or Papago, peoples in yet another restriction on Indigenous movements put in place by settler colonialism in the American West.⁴⁴⁸ While the Tohono O'odham communities on either side of the arbitrary border "are completely intertwined and interrelated," the policing of the United States-Mexico border has hindered their movements across the dividing line to "visit family and participate in culturally essential ceremonies."⁴⁴⁹ Expressing his outrage at the building of the border wall through the Tohono O'odham Nation's reservation, Vice Chairman for the tribe, Verlon M. Jose, asks, "[i]f someone came into your house and built a wall in your living room, tell me, how would you feel about that? This is our home."⁴⁵⁰ Indigenous resistance to the implementation of settler colonialism in the borderlands region, however, spans back to the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the early sixteenth century and Spain's subsequent colonization of Western America.⁴⁵¹ Archaeologist Kathleen Deagan argues that "Spain's imperial expansion into the 16th century America" was not only a "colonization effort," but also a "religious crusade" and a "social experiment."⁴⁵² Much of the borderlands and American Southwest's history is characterized by both Indigenous revolt and Spanish exploitation, including the successful 1680 Pueblo Revolt led by Po' Pay (or Popé), a

⁴⁴⁸ Stea, Zech, and Gray, "Change and Non-change in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA," 107.

⁴⁴⁹ Stea, Zech, and Gray, "Change and Non-change in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA," 108. For information about the Tohono O'odham Nation's stance against the border wall, see: <http://www.tonation-nsn.gov/nowall/>.

⁴⁵⁰ Fernanda Santos, "Border Wall Would Cleave Tribe, and Its Connection to Ancestral Land," *The New York Times*, published February 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/us/border-wall-tribe.html#:~:text=Then%20there%20are%20the%2062,States%20and%20Mexico%2C%20members%20say.>

⁴⁵¹ "Northern Borderlands," The University of Texas at Austin Exhibits, accessed September 11, 2024, <https://exhibits.lib.utexas.edu/spotlight/a-new-spain/feature/northern-borderlands>.

⁴⁵² Kathleen Deagan, "Colonial Origins and Colonial Transformations in Spanish America," *Historical Archaeology* 37, no. 4 (2003): 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25617091>.

Tewa leader from Ohkay Owingeh.⁴⁵³ While the Spanish “reconquered northern New Mexico” twelve years after this revolt, Indigenous Americans and Mexicans in the borderlands region of “New Spain” still “did not readily concede” to the demands of the Spanish, despite the fact that those who continued resistance “were considered appropriate candidates for enslavement and despoliation.”⁴⁵⁴ Following the signing of the Treaty of Córdoba in 1821, which officially recognized the Mexican Empire’s independence, the borderlands region quickly reentered turmoil during the Mexican-American War in 1846.⁴⁵⁵

The United States-Mexico border has not been impermeable, nor has it been fixed in its location. The current border results from a series of conflicts and “purchases” such as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848, as well as the subsequent Gadsden Purchase in 1853. Sociologists Harriett Romo and Raquel R. Márquez emphasize that changes along the U.S.-Mexico border throughout the past two centuries reflect the “arbitrariness and shifting nature of a border.”⁴⁵⁶ This arbitrariness has had serious consequences for the Indigenous peoples whose homelands the border divides; Anzaldúa asserts that, in forming the U.S.-Mexico border, “[t]he Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it.”⁴⁵⁷ Works from Cabrera’s *Space in Between* project illuminate the viewpoints and lived experiences of those moving through the contested and highly policed U.S.-Mexico borderlands, including migrants who are descended from Indigenous groups on both sides of the border and Spanish colonizers.

⁴⁵³ “Northern Borderlands,” The University of Texas at Austin Exhibits.

⁴⁵⁴ “Northern Borderlands,” The University of Texas at Austin Exhibits; Deagan, “Colonial Origins and Colonial Transformations in Spanish America,” 4.

⁴⁵⁵ Virginia Guedea, “The Process of Mexican Independence,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (2000): 130, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2652439>.

⁴⁵⁶ Romo and Márquez, “Who’s Who across the U.S.-Mexico Border,” 217.

⁴⁵⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 3.

PROTAGONISTS IN THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE: THE U.S. BORDER PATROL

Referencing forms native to the Southwest, the fabric yucca, cactus, agave, and other plants making up *Space in Between* are those that migrants see often on “the most frequently traveled route of immigration into the United States.”⁴⁵⁸ Since the creation of an ever-growing wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, the increased policing of the borderlands has forced undocumented migrants to put their lives on the line by crossing into the States through barren regions without water populated by the types of plants seen in *Space in Between*.⁴⁵⁹ Specifically, since the mid-1990s, over five thousand Mexican migrants who crossed into the United States have perished in southern Arizona’s Sonora desert. As Stea, Zech, and Gray note, this number is “more than the total number of deaths at the same point in the Iraq war.”⁴⁶⁰ Thus, by referencing the ecosystem in which countless migrants have perished, the plants created for *Space in Between* reference inherently the danger of mobility in the borderlands. This danger stands in stark contrast to the ease with which archetypical western men navigate the American Southwest in both artistic representations and the general public’s recollections of the mythic area.

While the sculptural flora reflects explicitly its makers’ backgrounds and journeys to the States, with their soft, green fabric bodies, the forms also “refer to the role of border patrol officers as protagonists in the American landscape.”⁴⁶¹ The inclusion of Border Patrol patches such as that in *Rosa Maria Soto* solidify this connection explicitly. A brief history of Central American migration to the U.S. reveals how complicated American perceptions of migrants have been over the past century before the current, contentious culmination. Increased migration to the

⁴⁵⁸ Cabrera, “Space in Between.”

⁴⁵⁹ Stea, Zech, and Gray, “Change and Non-change in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA,” 122.

⁴⁶⁰ Stea, Zech, and Gray, “Change and Non-change in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA,” 122.

⁴⁶¹ Cabrera, “Space in Between.”

States from Central and South America through this Southwestern landscape in the early twentieth century led to the creation of the U.S. Border Patrol, in 1924, to manage illegal immigration.⁴⁶² During the 1930s, “national concerns with Mexican immigration” would continue to heighten, and the U.S. government forced, approximately, half a million Mexican immigrants to leave the country during the Great Depression.⁴⁶³ However, responding to the labor shortages provoked by conscription, during World War II, 1942’s Emergency Farmer Labor Agreement, or *Bracero* program, encouraged actively migration to the States from Mexico.⁴⁶⁴ This vigorous encouragement would be reversed strongly in the decades following the Immigration and Naturalization Act (1965), and, since the 1980s, the States have been “an increasingly hostile place for those who want to seek a new life, especially those from Latin America” such as Cabrera and her *Space in Between* collaborators.⁴⁶⁵

Specifically, in the twenty-first century, United States policies have criminalized and punished illegal migration from Central America to an extreme not seen in the previous century. Following the September 11th terrorist attacks, the U.S. government passed the PATRIOT Act, a measure that allows immigration agencies “to deport anyone deemed a security threat without hearing.” Subsequently, the expansion of the border wall and governmental creation of ICE, the migration enforcement agency, “have made life more difficult both for migrants attempting to cross the border, and those wishing to remain in the US.”⁴⁶⁶ Feminist migration scholar Allison Wolf identifies recent United States actions against Central American migrants as reflective of

⁴⁶² Stea, Zech, and Gray, “Change and Non-change in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA,” 111.

⁴⁶³ Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 141; Catherine Whittaker, Eveline Dürr, Jonathan Alderman, and Carolin Luiprecht, *Watchful Lives in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (De Gruyter, 2023), 22.

⁴⁶⁴ Whittaker, Dürr, Alderman, and Luiprecht, *Watchful Lives in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, 22.

⁴⁶⁵ Allison Wolf, *Just Immigration in the Americas: A Feminist Account* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 63, 2.

⁴⁶⁶ Whittaker, Dürr, Alderman, and Luiprecht, *Watchful Lives in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, 23. For example, in 2019 alone, over 1.6 billion dollars were set aside to build additional border walls in the Rio Grande Valley Sector of Texas (Wolf, *Just Immigration in the Americas*, 2).

the larger, settler colonial want to make the country a white, homogenized nation. She notes that, “[t]he first step...is to dehumanize ‘illegal’ immigrants by turning them into a threatening other,” a view perpetuated by conservative politics in the 2010s and 2020s. However, Wolf asserts that, because “we still need the ‘illegal’ immigrant body to labor for us...we cannot *actually* expel them.”⁴⁶⁷

FEMALE MIGRANTS’ DES/RE/TERRITORIALIZATION

Cabrera’s practice, in general, and facets of *Space in Between*, in particular, reflect the increased hardships that female migrants face, when compared to their male counterparts, during and after their immigration to the States. Literary scholar Mabel Moraña notes that, because “*difference* (in sexuality, age, gender, and race) intensifies [migrants’] vulnerability during the challenging processes of des/re/territorialization,” children and women “constitute ‘the weakest link’ in migratory movements.”⁴⁶⁸ During her own process of des/re/territorialization, as a young child moving from Mexico City to Utah, Cabrera remembers “her initial immigrant experience” as “a period of isolation.”⁴⁶⁹ In her influential 1987 text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa identifies isolation as just one of the bevy of challenges that female Central American migrants must face. Following the dangers met on her migration journey, including potential sexual violence perpetrated by her *coyote* or smuggler, migrant women are “prey to a sense of physical helplessness” once in the States.⁴⁷⁰ Anzaldúa observes that, as refugees, migrant women such as those who participated in the *Space in Between* workshops leave “the

⁴⁶⁷ Wolf, *Just Immigration in the Americas*, 70. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶⁸ Mabel Moraña, “Introduction,” in *Liquid Borders: Migration as Resistance*, ed. Mabel Moraña (Routledge, 2021), 6. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶⁹ Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio.”

⁴⁷⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 12.

familiar and safe homeland [sic] to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain.”⁴⁷¹ Once in the U.S., illegal female immigrants “cannot call on county or state health or economic resources because she does not know English and she fears deportation.”⁴⁷² Yet, “[s]he can’t go home. She’s sold her house, her furniture, borrowed from friends in order to pay the *coyote* who charges her four or five thousand dollars.” As a result, despite the physical dangers of migration supposedly being behind her—dangers recorded on examples from *Space in Between*—illegal migrant women from Central American do not feel safe once they have arrived in the U.S.⁴⁷³

While the “illegal” female migrant experiences intense fear during and after her migration to the States, once in the country, she is also feared by the white majority. Wolf elaborates that the female migrant, supposedly, “threatens civilized order and its norms of family and sexuality by being promiscuous and willing to abandon her family in her native country.” Because of this, “she must be put in her place of subordination through sexual violence (by white men) and degrading exploitative work conditions.”⁴⁷⁴ Refusing migrant women access to health care and reproductive services as well as constantly threatening them with deportation leads to relentless fear, which “make[s] them ripe for exploitation and more vulnerable to abuse.” Wolf notes that, “[i]n this way, increased deportation efforts maintain specifically gendered violence.”⁴⁷⁵ Specifically gendered actions against migrant women extends to the family separation policy in the States, which Wolf describes as “a systemic effort to deter Central American migrants specifically from coming to the United States by making the process so awful that folks will deem it better to stay in their home nations than to come to the United States.”⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 12-13.

⁴⁷² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 12.

⁴⁷³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 12.

⁴⁷⁴ Wolf, *Just Immigration in the Americas*, 77-78.

⁴⁷⁵ Wolf, *Just Immigration*, 78.

⁴⁷⁶ Wolf, *Just Immigration in the Americas*, 102-103.

This Department of Homeland Security policy, enacted thirteen days following President Donald J. Trump's first inauguration, separated migrant women and their children as they crossed into the U.S. as a method of deterring “*mothers* from migrating to the United States with their children.”⁴⁷⁷

As a whole, the U.S. policies against and increasingly negative conceptions of undocumented migrants as “illegal” allow society to “expel then from civil society and thus the human species.”⁴⁷⁸ This is especially true of migrant women who experienced specifically gendered actions against their mobility both during and after their journeys to the States, including the frowning female figure included in *Rosa Maria Soto*. With the *Space in Between* project, Cabrera counters actively this tendency to dehumanize Central American migrants by creating artwork that features explicitly their own, specific journeys of migration. Picked out in embroidery, these unique stories reflect the hardships that the movements have brought for the migrants with whom Cabrera collaborated, including migrant women. Thus, the *Space in Between* project reflects the ideas of borderlands art historian Ila Nicole Sheren, who asserts that “the border becomes a truly generative site, one that, in its very thickness, creates a space for alternative modes of thinking, for dismantling of power structures.”⁴⁷⁹

TRYING TO SWIM IN AN “ALIEN” ELEMENT

In the preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa observes that “[l]iving on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to

⁴⁷⁷ Wolf, *Just Immigration in the Americas*, 85. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁷⁸ Wolf, *Just Immigration in the Americas*, 76.

⁴⁷⁹ Ila Nicole Sheren, “Border art for a border ecology,” in *Liquid Borders: Migration as Resistance*, ed. Mabel Moraña (Routledge, 2021), 124.

swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element.”⁴⁸⁰ For those who live in the borderlands, including Cabrera and her *Space in Between* collaborators, one is often compelled to situate themselves “in relation to vague and constantly moving boundaries.” Rather than an impenetrable division, the U.S.-Mexico border is “gray” or “an open wound,” depending on the scholar. As such, in the borderlands, “people are separated and classified, but also constantly cross the borders that are made to keep them apart.”⁴⁸¹ Encouraging separate identities to develop, borders also act upon the groups that they divide.⁴⁸²

For Mexican immigrants, including Cabrera and many of her *Space in Between* collaborators, several facets factor into their identity construction once in the States: time of migration, citizenship status, labor force participation, English fluency, occupation, generation, previous experiences in the U.S., gender, and more. All these elements influence how migrants view not only themselves, but also others, and are reflected on the Southwestern plants from *Space in Between*.⁴⁸³ Romo and Márquez note that, as immigrants attempt to integrate into new communities in the States, they “struggle with these factors.” For migrant parents, “[t]hey must grapple with generational effects such as whether their children will hold onto their ethnic identity, language, cultural values, and other markers of identity.”⁴⁸⁴ Furthermore, the presence of Spanish ancestors in Mexican migrants’ family histories can complicate further their senses of self. Historian Joseph A. Rodríguez notes that Mexican Americans who identify as Chicano often reject their Spanish ancestry as they view “the Spanish as white, European colonizers who had victimized the *mestizo* and Indian people of the Southwest.”⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, preface.

⁴⁸¹ Whittaker, Dürr, Alderman, and Luiprecht, *Watchful Lives in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, 21.

⁴⁸² Zartman, “Introduction,” 4.

⁴⁸³ Romo and Márquez, “Who’s Who across the U.S.-Mexico Border,” 219.

⁴⁸⁴ Romo and Márquez, “Who’s Who across the U.S.-Mexico Border,” 219.

⁴⁸⁵ Joseph A. Rodríguez, “Becoming Latinos: Mexican Americans, Chicanos, and the Spanish Myth in the Urban Southwest,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1998): 166-167, <https://doi.org/10.2307/971328>.

In the borderlands, this national identity combines with others through power relations, gender, and social class to make the U.S.-Mexico borderlands “a more nuanced, complex, and even contradictory space than most literature portrays.”⁴⁸⁶ The use of Otomí embroidery in the workshops for the *Space in Between* project reflects this complexity and was a deliberate move on Cabrera’s part to foster knowledge of indigenous Mexican traditions among workshop participants. She notes that her workshops “represent an attempt to maintain an ethnic connection with vital cultural Mexican craft traditions,” specifically, embroidery and sewing techniques from Los Tenangos, Hidalgo, Mexico.⁴⁸⁷ To Cabrera, it was important that workshop participants—a large portion of whom were of Mexican descent—learn about Otomí embroidery, an artform indigenous to their home country. She states that “I always introduce histories from the beginning so we can learn about who we are and where we come from. Then, of course, we get inspiration to innovate as people share their knowledge in creating something new together.”⁴⁸⁸ To relay their own border-crossing experiences on the *Space in Between* plants, workshop collaborators either reclaimed or appropriated the embroidery techniques to represent their stories.⁴⁸⁹ One stitched scene on a plant from *Space in Between* “pays tribute to the embroiderer’s mother, who died before the artist could cross back over the border to visit her in Mexico.” Another depicts “the dramatic trials of a group of migrants who used a steel beam to puncture a hole in a closed container truck where oxygen was running out.”⁴⁹⁰

Regardless of their specific details, the stitched narratives included in *Space in Between* emphasize the interconnection of cultures, identity, and movement as migrants are pushed to

⁴⁸⁶ Romo and Márquez, “Who’s Who across the U.S.-Mexico Border: Identities in Transition,” 234.

⁴⁸⁷ Cabrera, “Space in Between.”

⁴⁸⁸ Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio.”

⁴⁸⁹ Cabrera, “Space in Between.”

⁴⁹⁰ Agresta, “Margarita Cabrera’s Monumental ‘Arbol de la Vida’ Grows in San Antonio.”

leave their homelands and journey to the U.S. Today, Romo and Márquez assert that “Mexican nationals can become American citizens without giving up their Mexican national identity.”⁴⁹¹ However, as the lives and work of Liu and Nguyễn—whom we will turn to next—also reflect, inhabiting this space between homelands and new home complicates already fraught senses of self. Rodríguez argues that “immigration from Mexico constantly pushed and pulled Mexican Americans in two directions: on the one hand, it affirmed their Mexican identity, on the other, it confirmed how Americanized they had become.”⁴⁹² With *Space in Between*, Cabrera draws from her own background as a moving woman to create poignant, physical manifestations of migrant stories, including that of Rosa Maria Soto in *Saguaro*. The resulting sculptural flora reflects the emotional and physical turmoil of border crossings and humanize a group of people that have continuously been dehumanized by immigration policies and contemptuous opinions in the United States.

ANH-THUÝ NGUYỄN

Akin to Liu, Anh-Thuý Nguyễn draws from personal experience in her artwork focused on diasporic women in the American West. Similarly, Nguyễn utilizes in the human form in her work, which examines the marks that immigrant women can and cannot leave in Western America. However, as with Cabrera, Nguyễn challenges the accepted media of “traditional” Western American art by creating starkly beautiful videos. Instead of capturing the triumphant “man on horse” making his way through the mythic territory, Nguyễn’s work, along with Cabrera’s, documents the physical and mental hardships that moving women face as they attempt to migrant to and integrate themselves within the American West.

⁴⁹¹ Romo and Márquez, “Who’s Who across the U.S.-Mexico Border,” 234.

⁴⁹² Rodríguez, “Becoming Latinos,” 171.

Currently based in Tucson, Arizona, Vietnam-born artist Nguyễn (b. 1983) immigrated to the United States when she was twenty-two years old. At the time, Nguyễn was pushed from her home country—which she now returns to with some frequency—to advance her education.⁴⁹³ Once in the States, she earned a BFA in Photography from the University of Arizona and an MFA in Photograph/Video from Southern Methodist University. These degrees complement her BA in Economic Geography from the University of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.⁴⁹⁴ Now, Nguyễn is the head of the photography program at Pima Community College in Tucson.⁴⁹⁵ Reflecting her background as part of the Vietnamese diaspora, through a variety of media, Nguyễn's artwork investigates migration and her own experiences as a moving woman.⁴⁹⁶

When Nguyễn left Vietnam, she had neither a fully developed personal identity nor a complete understanding of the concept of home, a state examined in artwork such as her 2017 video *Thuy & Sand* (Figure 22).⁴⁹⁷ Following her arrival in the States, Nguyễn was introduced to art of the American West for the first time and became “inspired by it.”⁴⁹⁸ Today, her practice includes photographic, performance, and video work that references her Vietnamese heritage and “ask[s] questions about what happens to us when we’re forced to remake ourselves.”⁴⁹⁹ Nguyễn states that the general themes of her work “focus on the idea of cultural identity, personal politics, cultural difference through the use of symbolic meanings that are embedded with my

⁴⁹³ Thao Votang, “Anh-Thuy Nguyen,” *Southwest Contemporary*, published, August 26, 2022, <https://southwestcontemporary.com/anh-thuy-nguyen/>; Panhandle PBS, “The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thuy Nguyen interview,” YouTube, December 8, 2017, video, 25:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2u36H8xM5U&t=15s>.

⁴⁹⁴ Anh-Thuy Nguyễn, “Bio,” Anh-Thuy Nguyen.com, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.anh-thuynguyen.com/>.

⁴⁹⁵ Nguyễn, “Bio.”

⁴⁹⁶ Votang, “Anh-Thuy Nguyen.” I recognize that Vietnam is also known as Việt Nam and Indochina (Joanna Markbreiter, “Developing Images: Writing Photographs into the Vietnamese-American Diaspora,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 12, no. 4 [2017]: 71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26377971>).

⁴⁹⁷ Tucson Museum of Art, “Anh-Thuy Nguyen,” YouTube, June 12, 2020, video, 00:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yvS5-GInFs>.

⁴⁹⁸ Panhandle PBS, “The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thuy Nguyen interview.”

⁴⁹⁹ Votang, “Anh-Thuy Nguyen.”

home family and traditions.” Within this, she weaves her “personal journey as an outsider, an immigrant, a daughter, a female, a wife, a mother” to “create projects that explore and exhibit the experience.”⁵⁰⁰ While Nguyễn’s work is intensely personal, it is helpful to have an understanding of the history of the Vietnamese diaspora and their complicated movements within the United States to grasp the larger framework in which she works.

“VIETNAM IS A COUNTRY, AND NOT A WAR:” VIETNAMESE DIASPORA IN THE U.S.

Before the imposition of American imperialism from 1955 through 1975, Vietnam “endured the turmoil of war for centuries.” This includes against the Chinese from 111 BCE to 938 CE and against French colonizers from 1887 to 1954.⁵⁰¹ Following eight years of “open conflict,” in January of 1973, former U.S. President Richard Nixon announced that American military involvement in Vietnam was over. Just two years later, marking the start of the reign of Communism in the country, the South Vietnam capital of Saigon—now, Ho Chi Minh City—had already fallen to North Vietnamese forces.⁵⁰² The Vietnam War is considered “the only war that the United States had lost.” Furthermore, as it was one of the twentieth century’s most visible conflicts, it “marked a watershed in visual history” because the poignant images generated during the war affected its outcome.⁵⁰³ Due to its visual history, the Vietnam War was and often continues to be the point of reference for anything associated with Vietnam for many Americans.⁵⁰⁴ Photographs of Vietnam refugees, or “boat people,” after the conflict introduced

⁵⁰⁰ Votang, “Anh-Thuy Nguyen.”

⁵⁰¹ Thy Phu, *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* (Duke University Press, 2021), 16. It is during the Vietnam War that Vietnam was first partitioned into North and South Vietnam (91).

⁵⁰² Markbreiter, “Developing Images,” 64.

⁵⁰³ Yên Lê Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in U.S. Scholarship,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 410, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410>; Phu, *Warring Visions*, 5, 7. In large part, this is because it was the first war to be televised daily (Phu, *Warring Visions*, 6).

⁵⁰⁴ Lan T. Chu, “From Reaction to Action: Re-Conceptualizing the Vietnamese American Diasporic Experience,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016): 37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26377905>.

U.S. citizens to Vietnamese peoples for the first time—if they were not well acquainted with the graphic photographs from Vietnam during the war.⁵⁰⁵ Nguyễn’s own sister and brother immigrated to the States after the Vietnam War, and Nguyễn states that much of her work pays “homage to the experience of boat people like my sister or my brother because that’s part of my history.”⁵⁰⁶

However, ethnic studies scholar Yên Lê Espiritu asserts that “Vietnam is a country, and not a War, and that Vietnamese lives do not begin and end with ‘the Vietnam War.’”⁵⁰⁷ She argues further that “Vietnam exists only as a spectacle for the West” because the West represents Vietnamese peoples most often “as pathetic and passive victims.” Due to this, Vietnamese Studies scholars have promoted moving the field “beyond the parameter of the war in order to study Vietnamese in all their complexities.”⁵⁰⁸ While Nguyễn’s father served in the South Vietnamese military during the conflict, the Vietnam War is not the focus of work such as *Thuy & Sand*, which reveals and investigates all of Nguyễn’s complexities as a female member of the Vietnamese diaspora.⁵⁰⁹

Prior to 1945, only a small number of Vietnamese, perhaps several hundred, had traveled to the United States.⁵¹⁰ Following the Vietnam War, however, over two million Vietnamese were pushed from their homelands to begin new lives in Australia, Canada, and the U.S.⁵¹¹ Historian

⁵⁰⁵ Markbreiter, “Developing Images,” 66.

⁵⁰⁶ Anh-Thúy Nguyễn, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵⁰⁷ Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 411.

⁵⁰⁸ Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 420.

⁵⁰⁹ Panhandle PBS, “The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thúy Nguyễn interview.” She notes that her father did not talk about the Vietnam War as she grew up.

⁵¹⁰ Charles Keith, “The First Vietnamese in America,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 34, no. 1 (2019): 51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26594524>. Likely the earliest detailed account of a Vietnamese person traveling to the States is Bùi Thanh Vân’s 1929 account of his journey around the world (53).

⁵¹¹ Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, “‘We Return in Order to Take Leave’: Memory and the Return Journeys of Vietnamese Women,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2008): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40038698>.

Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen notes that this was “one of the largest and most visible mass migrations of the late twentieth century” and that the scale of that diaspora “was unprecedented in Vietnamese history.”⁵¹² Almost half the survivors of the Vietnam War, including Nguyễn’s siblings, settled in the States following their mass exodus.⁵¹³ In doing so, nascent Vietnamese diasporic communities “gingerly planted themselves on the soil of Vietnam’s most recent aggressor.”⁵¹⁴

Following the arrival of Vietnamese immigrants, numerous studies have imposed “a generalized narrative of immigration on Vietnamese refugees, thereby reducing the specificities of their flight to a conventional story of ethnic assimilation.”⁵¹⁵ This “assimilation narrative” labels Vietnamese immigrants as “docile subjects who enthusiastically and uncritically embrace and live the ‘American Dream.’”⁵¹⁶ Furthermore, the narrative concludes that, even when Vietnamese immigrants were “barely eking out a living” in the States, they were still “better off” in the U.S. than if they had stayed in their home country.⁵¹⁷ In work such as *Thuy & Sand*, Nguyễn counters this assimilation narrative and its presumptions as she navigates wanting to leave the States and return to Vietnam but not being able to do so. For Nguyễn, the so-called American Dream has not come to fruition. Her want to return to her homeland reflects the ideas of sociologist Mytoan Nguyen-Akbar, who argues that “migration is not merely a one-way flow of migrants from poor to rich countries.”⁵¹⁸ While one hears frequently about immigrants coming

⁵¹² Huynh Chau Nguyen, “‘We Return in Order to Take Leave,’” 3.

⁵¹³ Markbreiter, “Developing Images,” 64.

⁵¹⁴ Markbreiter, “Developing Images,” 64.

⁵¹⁵ Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 413. In fact, Espiritu argues that the Vietnamese in the U.S. are now an “overdocumented” population, in comparison to other U.S. immigrant groups (410).

⁵¹⁶ Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 413.

⁵¹⁷ Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 414.

⁵¹⁸ Mytoan Nguyen-Akbar, “Finding the American Dream Abroad? Narratives of Return Among 1.5 and Second Generation Vietnamese American Skilled Migrants in Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016): 96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26377905>.

to the U.S. in search of upwards mobility, “return migrants” such as Nguyễn counter these assumptions.⁵¹⁹ Chau Nguyen notes that Vietnamese migrants’ return journeys to their homeland are “often emotional and fraught.”⁵²⁰ For women like Nguyễn, this journey allows female migrants to “reassess and modify their conception of home and homeland,” a reassessing and modification well underway in *Thuy & Sand*.⁵²¹

LEAVE NO TRACE: THUY & SAND

A one-channel HD video with sound, *Thuy & Sand* runs for just over seven minutes.⁵²² To begin, the video opens with a wide-angled shot that emphasizes the blueness of the sky against the vast paleness of gypsum sand dunes. Far off in the distance, one can see a woman—Nguyễn—reclining on a mound of sand with a faint trail of footsteps leading to her location. The following shot shows her digging with her hands in the pale gypsum. As the wind blows her hair in her face and her white garments swirl around her, Nguyễn scoops up handfuls of sand and tosses them in her woven fiber bag.⁵²³ Throughout the video, as Nguyễn makes her way across the washed-out landscape, one can hear only her softly thudding footsteps, the quiet winds, and the whisper of shifting gypsum. Periodically, she appears suddenly from behind or below the monochromatic dunes. Throughout the video, scenes highlight either the clouds floating across the blue sky or the large mountains rising in the distance as Nguyễn makes her way across the sand (Figure 23).

⁵¹⁹ Nguyen-Akbar, “Finding the American Dream Abroad?,” 106. Anglo migration in the nineteenth century mirrors this trend in late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century migration, as immigrants frequently planned “to return to their homelands,” (Hurtado, “Settler Women and Frontier Women,” 4).

⁵²⁰ Huynh Chau Nguyen, ““We Return in Order to Take Leave,”” 3-4.

⁵²¹ Huynh Chau Nguyen, ““We Return in Order to Take Leave,”” 3.

⁵²² Anh-Thuý Nguyễn, “Thuy & Sand,” Anh-ThuyNguyen.com, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.anh-thuynguyen.com/thuy-sand>.

⁵²³ This bag is displayed when Nguyễn does installations of *Thuy & Sand* (Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024).

Every so often, Nguyễn stops and takes sand from the woven bag, which she drags behind her. After removing the sand, she pats it back into place on the dune upon which she walks. Despite her intervention, the dune remains overwhelmingly unchanged (Figure 24). Making it clear that her sand-filled bag is a burden to drag, Nguyễn intermittently lets out a grunt of exertion as she ferries it across the sand. To the viewer, it is decidedly unclear what Nguyễn's aim is in *Thuy & Sand*. In one shot, she struggles to crest a dune and has to pause momentarily before continuing with her trek; no person or destination can be seen as she makes her way through the ethereal landscape. Viewers rarely see Nguyễn's face, which is curtained by a swathe of her dark hair that contrasts her pale gypsum surroundings. Adding to her anonymity, the bag that Nguyễn drags erases her footsteps as soon as she makes them; the bag and the blocky trail that it leaves in its wake call to mind a censor's pen obliterating the record of Nguyễn's presence in the landscape. Almost convincing the viewer that they have been blinded by the pale sand as they watch Nguyễn's solitary journey across the dunes, a bright whiteness fills the screen between each scene. As a whole, *Thuy & Sand* generates feelings of helplessness and isolation as Nguyễn struggles to cross the sandy Southwestern landscape.⁵²⁴

Thuy & Sand is part of Nguyễn's larger *Thuy &* series, which features a "semi-autobiographical character named Thuy," who Nguyễn has respond to different situations as she documents them with her camera.⁵²⁵ Over a decade ago, Thuy "emerged from" Nguyễn to help her "process losing access to her culture while she was stuck in America."⁵²⁶ Specifically, because of Nguyễn's international student visa at the time, she was unable to return to Vietnam;

⁵²⁴ As someone who has hiked five miles through the dunes of White Sands National Park (thanks, Daniel), I can attest to how difficult Nguyễn's path through the sand must have been.

⁵²⁵ Womxn in Windows, "Womxn Work—Anh-Thuy Nguyen," YouTube. March 18, 2022, video, 1:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb7gl4_VzVg.

⁵²⁶ Parker Yamasaki, "Where To From Here: A Review of Anh-Thuy Nguyen's 'Thuy &' at Robert F. DeCaprio Gallery," New City Art, published February 22, 2023, <https://art.newcity.com/2023/02/22/where-to-from-here-a-review-of-anh-thuy-nguyens-thuy-at-robert-f-decaprio-gallery/>.

she knew that, if she returned to her homeland during this time, they would not give her another visa to come back to the States.⁵²⁷ As a result, she asserts that she “had to stay for a very long time, seven years, without coming back.” During this time, she experienced crushing isolation as she trained as an artist.⁵²⁸ The white garments that Nguyễn wears, an *áo dài*, has overt nationalistic Vietnamese overtones and reflects her resistance to assimilating fully into American culture. Specifically, cinema scholar Lan Duong notes that the *áo dài* “is a figuration for the nation [Vietnam], a piece of clothing for women that is cathected with affect, pride, and nationalism.” Because of the symbolic importance of the *áo dài* for Vietnamese women, she argues further that “choosing to wear an *áo dài* is a political act for diasporic women” such as Nguyễn.⁵²⁹ Although Vietnamese women choose often to wear an *áo dài* as a method of reflecting their identity through sartorial display, in *Thuy & Sand*, Nguyễn’s identity is unsettled by her containment in New Mexico’s White Sands National Park.⁵³⁰

When asked about the setting for *Thuy & Sand*, Nguyễn observed that White Sands reminded her of the ocean and her youth spent growing up in a Vietnamese beach town.⁵³¹ Similar to the ocean, to Nguyễn, White Sands is “so calm. It’s so pristine. It’s so clean.” However, White Sands has also “consumed so much death and sadness and pain” like large bodies of water.⁵³² In particular, the undulating, wave-like quality of the dunefields calls to mind for Nguyễn Vietnamese “boat people” such as her brother and sister who had to navigate the

⁵²⁷ Yamasaki, “Where To From Here,” Anh-Thuy Nguyen, “Thuy &,” Anh-ThuyNguyen.com, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.anh-thuynguyen.com/thuy-and>.

⁵²⁸ Panhandle PBS, “The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thuy Nguyen interview.”

⁵²⁹ Lan Duong, “Traitors and Translators: Reframing Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*,” *Discourse* 31, no. 3 (2009): 210, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40067541>.

⁵³⁰ Duong, “Traitors and Translators,” 210. White Sands was still a monument at the time that Nguyễn filmed *Thuy & Sand* in 2013 and released the project in 2017.

⁵³¹ Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵³² Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

“big, vast ocean” and face “dying in that pathway to get to freedom.”⁵³³ Historically, while there have been various reasons for people dying in White Sands, Nguyễn notes that, over the past century, people have perished in the park “because it’s so big, vast, and they got lost in that beauty.” As a whole, then, a primary interest for Nguyễn in White Sands is the idea that “these very gorgeous spaces, so appealing, can be so violent, but in a very gentle way.”⁵³⁴

Describing *Thuy & Sand*, arts writer Thao Votang argues that Nguyễn’s inability to return to Vietnam during this period of her life parallels “how the gypsum that makes up White Sands was entrapped, exposed, and ground down to the dunes we admire today.”⁵³⁵ As she treads across the sand in her video, Nguyễn’s woven bag leaves a small trail across the dunes. Once she fills one hole that she has left, additional holes are made in a “constant endless effort” that “represents the inevitable cycle of life: creation and destruction.”⁵³⁶ This cycle of life is played out often, dramatically, in the ocean. While Nguyễn’s mark making “is so tiny as to be irreversible,” it “leave[s] a mark regardless.”⁵³⁷ Discussing the significance of the bag, Nguyễn asserts that “the bag is supposed to be like a vessel, or burden, a memory, or secret, or knowledge that I, as an immigrant, carry.”⁵³⁸ The bag, a woven container found commonly in Vietnam, functions as a vessel of Nguyễn’s identity, one that constantly has its contents removed and then replaced in an endless cycle of uncertainty.

For *Thuy & Sand*, it was importance to Nguyễn to use her body. She notes that “[m]y body is an object to kind of trigger the conversation that I have within myself.”⁵³⁹ The use of her body in this manner contradicts what she identifies as the prevailing method of representing

⁵³³ Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵³⁴ Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵³⁵ Votang, “Anh-Thuy Nguyen.”

⁵³⁶ Nguyễn, “Thuy & Sand.”

⁵³⁷ Yamasaki, “Where To From Here.”

⁵³⁸ Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵³⁹ Panhandle PBS, “The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thuy Nguyen interview.”

women throughout art history; she asserts that, “females have been looked at as, like, an object. Like, a sexual object or pleasure or desire, and that’s how the image of women have been constructed.”⁵⁴⁰ Contrasting this legacy, in work such as *Thuy & Sand*, Nguyễn inserts her body into the space “as an object to reflect it back onto their own and feel safe about that reflection looking back into themselves.”⁵⁴¹

Across *Thuy &* work, including *Thuy & Sand*, Nguyễn notes that Thuy “ventures into the space between two cultures and the resulting conflict that arises from the impossibility of complete assimilation in a new land and the difficulty of returning and reintegrating in one’s own culture.”⁵⁴² In the video, Nguyễn—through her character, Thuy—struggles with her cultural and physical existence between places.⁵⁴³ For Nguyễn, “choice does not equal freedom.” Therefore, for *Thuy & Sand*, she states that she “tried to communicate the fact that I felt like I’m an alien.”⁵⁴⁴ This feeling of surreal displacement is exacerbated in *Thuy & Sand*, in which the otherworldly landscape of White Sands National Park serves as more than just an interesting backdrop for the work.

“SNOW WHITE LAND IN A SUMMER BROIL:” WHITE SANDS NATIONAL PARK

Throughout Western American history, the desert has been both undervalued and feared; English scholar Stephanie LeMenager argues that the arid landscape has never been amenable to the idealized ahistory and culturally unified nation for which Manifest Destiny advocates.⁵⁴⁵ This

⁵⁴⁰ Panhandle PBS, “The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thuy Nguyen interview.”

⁵⁴¹ Panhandle PBS, “The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thuy Nguyen interview.”

⁵⁴² Nguyễn, “Thuy &.”

⁵⁴³ Yamasaki, “Where To From Here.”

⁵⁴⁴ Yamasaki, “Where To From Here;” Panhandle PBS, “The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thuy Nguyen interview.”

⁵⁴⁵ Stephanie LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 23, 24.

includes the dunefields of White Sands National Park, which has existed for seven to ten thousand years, outside Alamogordo, New Mexico.⁵⁴⁶ Located within the Tularosa Basin, the national park contains the world's largest gypsum dunes.⁵⁴⁷ Describing the park's landscape, journalist Karen Coates observes that White Sands' "glimmering dunes" form "a panorama of snow-white land in a summer broil." Despite the area's prehistory, today, there are no trees in White Sands, and the fauna present is limited to "a few solitary invasive species that suck all moisture from the dunes."⁵⁴⁸

While the landscape of White Sands National Park has an objectively ethereal and unique quality to it, it took several attempts to integrate the dunefields into the National Parks System. In large part, this delay in preservation was due to the "multiple commercial interests" wanting to mine the gypsum dunes.⁵⁴⁹ Starting in 1870, scientific research was conducted within the area, and by the 1920s, locals began to understand the cultural and aesthetic profitability of the dunefields.⁵⁵⁰ Their advocacy led to the creation of White Sands National Monument on April 29, 1934. It took until December of 2019, however, before it was transfigured into White Sands National Park, the sixty-second national park in the National Park System.⁵⁵¹

However, the local interest in conserving the dunefields of White Sands does not mean that the area has not been subjected to destructive activities throughout the twentieth century to present day. In fact, to the north of the park is "the U.S. Army's largest land-based open-air testing site," White Sands Missile Range.⁵⁵² The Missile Range's first iteration was White Sands

⁵⁴⁶ "White Sands National Park History," National Park Service, last modified September 3, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/whsa/learn/historyculture/white-sands-national-park-history.htm>.

⁵⁴⁷ Karen Coates, "Ghost Tracks of White Sands," *Archaeology* 74, no. 6 (2021): 42, <https://archaeology.org/issues/november-december-2021/features/new-mexico-ice-age-footprints/>.

⁵⁴⁸ Coates, "Ghost Tracks of White Sands," 44.

⁵⁴⁹ "White Sands National Park History," National Park Service.

⁵⁵⁰ "White Sands National Park History," National Park Service.

⁵⁵¹ "White Sands National Park History," National Park Service.

⁵⁵² Coates, "Ghost Tracks of White Sands," 44.

Proving Grounds, which was established during World War II following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. On the National Park Service’s website, the White Sands entry acknowledges that the Range was “one of the key locations of the Manhattan Project,” as the Trinity test site is located just sixty-five miles north of White Sands.⁵⁵³ To this day, missile testing is still undertaken at White Sands Missile Range. Because of this, the national park is periodically closed “for visitor safety.”⁵⁵⁴ Furthermore, as “missile debris” can “fall into the dunefield and get buried before it can be removed,” the NPS asks visitors to “not touch any such items.”⁵⁵⁵ In 1942, months after the Pearl Harbor attack, the U.S. government created Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range—now known as Holloman Air Force Base—near the park, as well. On the NPS website, the White Sands entry notes that, following this, “soldiers were even allowed to practice tank maneuvers inside the monument’s boundary.”⁵⁵⁶ Holloman Air Force Base states that it “supports national security objectives by deploying worldwide to support peacetime and wartime contingencies.”⁵⁵⁷ This includes “a proud history of service in World War II, Korea, Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia and NATO-led Operation Allied Force.”⁵⁵⁸

While Espiritu’s assertion that “Vietnamese lives do not begin and end with ‘the Vietnam War’” is undeniably correct, it is significant to note that Nguyễn staged *Thuy & Sand* in a national park with an ongoing military lineage tied inextricably to violence in Asian countries, including Vietnam.⁵⁵⁹ The setting of *Thuy & Sand* in a national park also reflects Nguyễn’s

⁵⁵³ “White Sands Missile Range,” National Park Service, last modified September 12, 2016, <https://www.nps.gov/whsa/learn/historyculture/white-sands-missile-range.htm>.

⁵⁵⁴ “Operating Hours & Seasons,” National Park Service, last modified January 18, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/whsa/planyourvisit/hours.htm>.

⁵⁵⁵ “Leave No Trace,” National Park Service, last modified December 31, 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/whsa/planyourvisit/leave-no-trace.htm>.

⁵⁵⁶ “White Sands National Park History,” National Park Service.

⁵⁵⁷ “About Us,” Holloman Air Force Base, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://www.holloman.af.mil/About-Us/>.

⁵⁵⁸ “About Us,” Holloman Air Force Base.

⁵⁵⁹ Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 411.

interest in the nationalism and contradictions inherent in these spaces. She notes that, while the U.S. has tried to keep these spaces “pristine,” there has been “so much bloodshed” to retain them, as that “land is still the land of Native Americans.”⁵⁶⁰ The existence of the White Sands Missile Range and Holloman Air Force Base on the outskirts of White Sands also plays into this contradiction for Nguyễn. While the country views national parks as a “beautiful national treasure,” she points out the hypocrisy in having institutions dealing with radioactivity and death “not so far away” from the spaces being preserved.⁵⁶¹ To both call attention to these contradictions and challenge the settler colonialism intrinsic to the protected landscapes, Nguyễn chose deliberately to make a work featuring her “female immigrant body to puncture into these national parks and national monuments, which [are] embedded with the idea of nationalism.”⁵⁶²

MARKS THAT DIASPORIC WOMEN CAN(NOT) LEAVE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

The consequences of the violence and nationalism surrounding White Sands that Nguyễn calls out remain unseen in the park; this legacy is wiped clean, akin to the footprints that are routinely buried in White Sands’ shifting dunes. In an article about the historical footprints found in White Sands, Coates notes that the park’s location is “adjacent to the site of a dry ancient lakebed where scientists have discovered human and animal trackways dating to between 15,500 and 10,000 years ago.”⁵⁶³ Specifically, these prints are found “scattered across Lake Otero” and reflect much about life at the time, including the fact that humans were “coexisting and interacting with extinct ice age animals.”⁵⁶⁴ For eighty years, researchers were aware of only a

⁵⁶⁰ Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵⁶¹ Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵⁶² Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵⁶³ Coates, “Ghost Tracks of White Sands,” 43.

⁵⁶⁴ “Fossilized Footprints,” National Parks Service, last modified February 4, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/whsa/learn/nature/fossilized-footprints.htm>.

small grouping of fossilized prints in the national park. Yet, recently, this number has exploded to the hundreds of thousands, a number that is “the world’s largest collection of fossilized Ice Age footprints.”⁵⁶⁵ Today, in the White Sands Visitor Center, there is a diorama to illustrate this history (Figure 25).

Emphasizing the legacy of moving women in the area, these include the prints of a historical woman who walked for almost a mile along the lakebed with a toddler on her hip.⁵⁶⁶ Discovered in 2018, after the completion of *Thuy & Sand*, the existence of these female footsteps gives Nguyễn “goosebumps.”⁵⁶⁷ Will the footprints that Nguyễn obscured last as long as these? It seems unlikely as “weather conditions have to be just right in order to discern the [historical] tracks—too wet or too dry, and nothing is visible.” Once wind “erodes the fine surface that covers the footprints,” they are exposed momentarily before the sand quickly obscures them again. Because of this, the ancient footprints found in White Sands are referred to often as “ghost tracks.”⁵⁶⁸ In *Thuy & Sand*, Nguyễn is in limbo, caught between pressures to assimilate to U.S. culture and the reality that, moving forward, she can never truly understand her home again. The ghost tracks that she leaves and attempts to obscure will have been blown away by the wind soon after she left them, and because of the current topography of White Sands, will never be preserved like those of the women walking the same path thousands of years previously. When visiting White Sands National Park, the NPS urges visitors to “[t]ake only pictures, leave only footprints, and kill only time.”⁵⁶⁹ In *Thuy & Sand*, Nguyễn does all three to emphasize the marks that diasporic women can and cannot leave in the American West.

⁵⁶⁵ “Fossilized Footprints,” National Parks Service; Coates, “Ghost Tracks of White Sands,” 44.

⁵⁶⁶ “Fossilized Footprints,” National Parks Service.

⁵⁶⁷ “Fossilized Footprints,” National Parks Service; Nguyễn, interviewed by Murphy, April 29, 2024.

⁵⁶⁸ Coates, “Ghost Tracks of White Sands,” 46.

⁵⁶⁹ “Leave No Trace,” National Park Service.

Writing about Nguyễn's work, arts writer Parker Yamasaki notes that, in projects such as *Thuy & Sand*, Nguyễn "show[s] a person with a choice of two cultures—struggling and constricted, rather than free."⁵⁷⁰ Despite her time in the States, Nguyễn is adamant that "I am a Vietnamese first and an American second."⁵⁷¹ Over time, she realized that "it's not just about me anymore. It's a conversation about being a female. Being a Vietnamese female. Being a Vietnamese female artist. And then, Vietnamese-American female artist. And then, being a female immigrant."⁵⁷² Nguyễn's artwork grapples with "the balance of cultural difference, trauma surrounding immigration, language accessibility and mastery, and the stereotype of the model minority."⁵⁷³ Correspondingly, the content of work such as *Thuy & Sand* reflects the ideas of anthropologist Ashley Carruthers, who argues that "to choose the 'real' homeland over the mythic space of desire is to surrender one's diasporic identity and become either an 'ethnic minority' who has accepted the trajectory of gradual assimilation, or a 'transnational' subject who experiences both host and homeland as simultaneous realities."⁵⁷⁴ Moving between the States and Vietnam, Nguyễn falls into the latter. Yet, as seen in *Thuy & Sand*, transnationalism does not provide a solid ground upon which to situate one's sense of self. Rather, it is, "indeed, a contradictory process that entails both tremendous gains and irrecoverable losses."⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷⁰ Yamasaki, "Where To From Here."

⁵⁷¹ Womxn in Windows, "Womxn Work—Anh-Thuy Nguyen."

⁵⁷² Panhandle PBS, "The Season: AMoA, Ep. 3: Complete Anh-Thuy Nguyen interview." It is worthwhile to note that the use of a hyphenated "Vietnamese-American" can prove contentious, as "[c]ontemporary practitioners have yet to reach a consensus over this minute grammatical distinction, though all agree that it has significant implications for the diaspora's ability to decide its own identity." The hyphen can be seen "as a contronymic [*sic*] cleaving of the two worlds, simultaneously bringing them together and separating them apart," (Markbreiter, "Developing Images," 71).

⁵⁷³ "Meet Anh-Thuy Nguyen | artist, educator," Shoutout Arizona, published May 31, 2022, <https://shoutoutarizona.com/meet-anh-thuy-nguyen-artist-educator/>.

⁵⁷⁴ Ashley Carruthers, "The Trauma of Synchronization: The Temporal Location of the Homeland in the Vietnamese Diaspora," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2008): 78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40038698>.

⁵⁷⁵ Lan Anh Hoang, "Moral Dilemmas Of Transnational Migration: Vietnamese Women in Taiwan," *Gender and Society* 30, no. 6 (2016): 905, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40179154>.

While Nguyễn immigrated to the U.S. well after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, one could still view her work as reflecting the stark realities of being a refugee. Espiritu asserts that “refugee” is not “a legal classification but an idea,” one that “continues to circumscribe American understanding of the Vietnamese, even when Vietnamese in the United States now constitute multiple migrant categories, from political exiles to immigrants to transmigrants” such as Nguyễn.⁵⁷⁶ Specifically, ethnic studies scholar Long T. Bui describes those who center their artwork around exile “despite not being refugees themselves,” including Nguyễn, as part of the “post-war/postmemory generation.”⁵⁷⁷ As artists, those part of the post-war/postmemory generation create work that function as political projects “found in the artistic domain.” These creatives such as Nguyễn view “art as providing a different kind of history lesson, one that asks U.S. to mull over those who have been ignored in space and time, but whose frames of postmemory endure as a permanent reminder that refugee-ness is not a temporary condition of being.”⁵⁷⁸ While many women have moved to and through the American West to solidify their sense of identity, Nguyễn’s *Thuy & Sand* emphasizes that, frequently, these movements for diasporic women complicate already fraught senses of self after being pushed westward.

CONCLUSION

Despite historical and contemporary efforts to curb the influx of international immigrants to the United States—specifically, the American West—migration will continue to rise as geopolitical crises across the world increase in coming years.⁵⁷⁹ This is in the face of prevailing

⁵⁷⁶ Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 410-411.

⁵⁷⁷ Long Bui, “The Refugee Repertoire: Performing and Staging the Postmemories of Violence,” *MELUS* 41, no. 3 (2016): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlw034>.

⁵⁷⁸ Bui, “The Refugee Repertoire,” 116.

⁵⁷⁹ For more information on the increase in migration to the U.S. due to climate change, see: Jake Bittle, *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration* (Simon & Schuster, 2023).

settler-colonial mindsets and nativist legislation that has envisioned Western America as a “refugee for whites” and created a villainized archetype of the “migrant” as a male criminal.⁵⁸⁰ Carpio summarizes several centuries of attempted population control following contact by stating that “[w]hite status has been a prerequisite for most forms of U.S. national belonging, and its stability as a category is contingent upon the exclusion of those considered nonwhite.”⁵⁸¹ Historical and present-day limitation on women’s mobility in the American West “has served as a tool of control and oppression” because “it is hard to maintain patriarchal control over women if they have unfettered freedom of movement through space.”⁵⁸² The artists examined in this chapter, Hung Liu, Margarita Cabrera, and Anh-Thuý Nguyễn, all immigrated to the American West—whether as a child or young adult—in search of upwards mobility, education, or for familial reasons. They are neither male nor criminals. Their artwork delves into the lasting implications of being pushed to the West for female migrants and features their own movements as well as the historical mobilities of women from their communities. Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn, who are all artists of color, unpack some of the histories of international immigrant women moving to and through the West to emphasize how these movements often result in feelings of isolation and fractured senses of self.

American studies scholar Alexandra Ganser summarizes what the work of Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn reflects, that “it is important not to see mobility as *inherently* empowering and immobility as a disadvantage.”⁵⁸³ Their artwork emphasizes how “forced uprooting, relocation, and resettlement,” along with wartime traumas and cultural and language differences, make

⁵⁸⁰ Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, 86.

⁵⁸¹ Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 10.

⁵⁸² Alexandra Ganser, *Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000* (Rodopi, 2009), 74; Mona Domosh and Joni Saeger, *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* (Guilford Press, 2001), 115-116.

⁵⁸³ Ganser, *Roads of Her Own*, 74.

integrating into American society particularly complex and challenging for moving women pushed to Western America from abroad.⁵⁸⁴ The movements of Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn to and from the American West stress that movements to the mythic territory are multidirectional, not unidirectional. It is this ability to visit their homelands that destabilizes already fraught senses of self following their immigration to the States. Huynh Chau Nguyen asserts that, for many women, return journeys “share a sense of grief and loss, as well as the regret engendered by lives lived away from close kin.”⁵⁸⁵ These journeys force women to “reassess and modify their conception of home and homeland” and often “highlights their past trauma as well as the fact that they have constructed new lives and identities elsewhere.”⁵⁸⁶ As Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn’s work illustrates, the result is a feeling of in-betweenness, of neither being fully American nor fully who they were when they left their homes.

While feminist scholars have long acknowledged the inseparability of mobility and gender, two factors that affect each other in both subtle and profound ways, there has been relatively little scholarly attention paid to the movements of women globally.⁵⁸⁷ Specifically, Ball notes that there has been an “absence of any sufficiently developed interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, or gender-conscious framework of analysis” of the “moving woman” in the twenty-first century. Because of this, “the dialogues between women’s forced migration, transnational feminist mobilization [*sic*], and feminocentric cultural creativity” have been left unrepresented and untraced.⁵⁸⁸ By focusing on the artistic production stemming from the movements of Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn to and from the American West, this chapter works to remedy this

⁵⁸⁴ Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, 135.

⁵⁸⁵ Huynh Chau Nguyen, ““We Return in Order to Take Leave,”” 5.

⁵⁸⁶ Huynh Chau Nguyen, ““We Return in Order to Take Leave,”” 8, 26.

⁵⁸⁷ Susan Hanson, “Gender and Mobility: New Approaches for Informing Sustainability,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2010): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690903498225>; Ball, *Forced Migration in the Feminist Imagination*, 1.

⁵⁸⁸ Ball, *Forced Migration in the Feminist Imagination*, 1.

omission. Their artwork, along with the other artists included in this project, represents what Ball has identified as a “transcultural feminist consciousness,” one that seeks actively to reimagine, challenge, and interrogate “the terms in which moving women are represented and in which they are able to represent themselves.”⁵⁸⁹

As a whole, the histories—personal or group—of women in the West that Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn draw from illuminate the legacy of international female migration to the American West. Their artwork gives physical form to these histories of (restricted) movements and emphasizes the difficulty in stable identity formation faced by migrant women in Western America. “Moving women” themselves, Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn show that, although the popular imagination often thinks of settlement as a fundamental feature of the American West, for diasporic women, it is exceedingly difficult to put down roots or navigate with the ease of the iconic “man on a horse.” Drawing from their own life experiences, the artists challenge “commonplace assumptions about the necessity of objective distance for research rigor” to present artwork that functions as important secondary documentation of women’s histories in Western America.⁵⁹⁰ As Phu notes, “the personal provides a critically incisive lens into social processes, countering the abstraction of these processes.”⁵⁹¹ Liu, Cabrera, and Nguyễn’s intensely personal work stresses how, as immigration to the American West continues to rise due to climate change, contemporary moving women of color face restrictions on their mobility that parallel those imposed upon the historical women before them. Yet, as The Highwomen sing in their eponymous track, international women pushed to the American West “still remain/And we’ll come back again and again and again.”⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁹ Ball, *Forced Migration in the Feminist Imagination*, 5.

⁵⁹⁰ Phu, *Warring Visions*, 149.

⁵⁹¹ Phu, *Warring Visions*, 149.

⁵⁹² “Highwomen Lyrics,” Genius.com.

PART TWO: “PULL”

CHAPTER THREE

“HIGH TIME FOR A DETOUR:” CARS, VOYEURISM, AND THE FEMALE BODY IN THE AMERICAN WEST

Since the mid-twentieth century, cars and their accompanying road trips have become ubiquitous throughout the American West.⁵⁹³ Dozens of songs recount traveling by vehicle on the iconic Route 66 or espouse the value of being “on the road again” in Western America.⁵⁹⁴ In the early twentieth century, the increased construction of roads throughout the American West and the increased production of affordable cars through Henry Ford’s assembly line helped revolutionize Western tourism and center it around the car.⁵⁹⁵ Historian Hal K. Rothman observes that “[w]heels gave choices” that “allowed travelers to move beyond the corridor that steel rails created” in the West.⁵⁹⁶ As the ownership of cars became more accessible to middle-class families, “the cultural dimensions of tourism” shifted to reflect “the more common tastes of ordinary people, often oriented toward recreation.”⁵⁹⁷

Before the proliferation of the automobile and increased infrastructure through the American West, cars were seen as a form of “antimodern technology” that allowed “driver and passengers to escape the noisy, crowded city into the ‘frontier.’”⁵⁹⁸ In due course, the car gained its “pioneer status” and supplanted the train, which had supplanted the pioneer wagon, as the primary vehicle for the spread of settler colonization in Western America.⁵⁹⁹ In American popular

⁵⁹³ The title of this chapter is a reference to k.d. lang’s 1987 song, “High Time for a Detour.”

⁵⁹⁴ For instance, see “On the Road Again” by Texas native, Willie Nelson or Bobby Troup’s “(Get Your Kicks) Route 66.”

⁵⁹⁵ Hal Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-century American West* (University Press of Kansas, 1998), 143.

⁵⁹⁶ Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*, 143.

⁵⁹⁷ Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*, 147-148.

⁵⁹⁸ Andrew S. Gross, “Cars, Postcards, and Patriotism: Tourism and National Politics in the United States, 1893-1929.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 40, no. 1 (2005): 80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25474163>.

⁵⁹⁹ David M. Wrobel, “Introduction: Tourists, Tourism, and the Toured Upon,” in *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West*, ed. David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long (University of Kansas Press, 2001), 8.

culture, the cliché of the road as both a means of escape and a symbol of freedom was established quickly and grasped tightly by white Americans who flocked to the American West in their vehicles to explore what the territory supposedly had to offer them.⁶⁰⁰ Once settled in the West, settlers found that the automobile made eased their movements throughout the territory, which increased their retention rates. For those not looking to stay—i.e. tourists—the development of the automobile and Western American infrastructure made it simpler than ever to load up their cars and “See America First.”⁶⁰¹ Rothman argues that cars “gave choices that even the most affluent railroad tourists could not purchase.”⁶⁰² The proceeding chapter will delve further into tourism in the American West, but it is worth noting here the significant role that white tourism has played into the proliferation of settler colonialism. Scholar Susanne Rhoades Neel notes that, “by obliterating [I]ndigenous land uses and converting [N]ative cultures into exoticized objects for tourist consumption,” Western tourism obscures the multicultural nature of the region and transforms it “into the artifice of ‘American’ space.”⁶⁰³ Cars have played a noteworthy role in this censorship and transformation.

Rather than being mounted upon his trusty steed, then, by the time of Ford’s assembly line revolution in the early 1900s, the iconic “man on a horse” had transformed into a “man in a Model T” as the archetype of mobility in the American West. In popular conceptions of the Western American road trip, many envision a man at the wheel, perhaps with a female companion as their willing passenger. As the artists in this chapter—Laurel Nakadate, Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo), Liz Cohen, and Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke)—reflect, however,

⁶⁰⁰ Gross, “Cars, Postcards, and Patriotism,” 79.

⁶⁰¹ Kirby Lambert, “The Lure of the Parks,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 46, no. 1 (1996): 49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i406190>.

⁶⁰² Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 143.

⁶⁰³ Susan Rhoades Neel, “Tourism and the American West: New Departures,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 4 (1996): 517, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i287107>.

women have long been pulled independently to move through the West and their communities located within the region in cars that they drive themselves, if not build. This sentiment is reflected in Canadian country music star Shania Twain's 2002 single, "In My Car (I'll Be The Driver)." In the tune, while Twain cedes control over daily decisions to her male partner, she asserts strongly that "in my car, I'll be the driver/In my car, I'm in control/In my car, I come alive and/In my car, I am the driver/Watch me now."⁶⁰⁴ Yet, the common association of men with vehicles before considering women as drivers ties into a gendered history of cars in the States, one that echoes the car "has been at least as much about defining social relations as it has been about transporting people and goods."⁶⁰⁵

While historians have considered carefully the "growth of American 'automobility'" throughout the twentieth century across the country, in general, and in the West, in particular, they failed to pay the same attention to the car's association with women. Social historian Margaret Walsh argues that, in doing so, scholars "have assumed that the motor car was a masculine vehicle in terms of both its technology and use."⁶⁰⁶ She elaborates that, in the early twentieth century, "[t]he motor car was perceived to be a piece of masculine machinery which was difficult and dirty to drive and was beyond the capability and fastidiousness of women to operate."⁶⁰⁷ The exclusion of women from car culture extends to many facets, including exclusion from "automobility and safety engineering, design, sales, repair, policy making, and commentary to taxi driving, industry executive positions, racing, road construction, and until

⁶⁰⁴ "Shania Twain—In My Car (I'll Be the Driver) Lyrics," Genius.com, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://genius.com/Shania-twain-in-my-car-ill-be-the-driver-lyrics>.

⁶⁰⁵ Sarah S. Jain, "Violent Submission: Gendered Automobility," *Cultural Critique*, no. 61 (2005): 188, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i405064>.

⁶⁰⁶ Margaret Walsh, "Gendering Mobility: Women, Work and Automobility in the United States," *History* 93, no. 3 (2008): 376, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-229X.2008.00430.x>.

⁶⁰⁷ Walsh, "Gendering Mobility," 380.

recently, urban planning.”⁶⁰⁸ Yet, as the artists in this chapter emphasize, by the end of the twentieth century, women in the United States were as equally likely to drive a car as men, and women now “drive, polish, and brag about their cars with the same intensity as do men.”⁶⁰⁹ However, traversing space is gendered, and women’s engagements with cars today are not simple “paper copies” of their male counterparts.⁶¹⁰

Beginning with the increased accessibility of automobiles for the middle class, when it has been marketed towards to women, the car “has been presented as both the symbol and the means of women’s liberation. Anyone could turn a crank, or by the 1920s just a key, could take off on her own.”⁶¹¹ Echoing this idea, an advertisement for the Model T in 1915 promised “[f]reedom for the woman who owns a Ford: To own a Ford is to be free to venture into new and untried places. It is to answer every challenge of Nature’s charms, safely, surely, and without fatigue.”⁶¹² However, reproductive rights scholar Carol Sanger argues that, most often, “the exciting promise of driving, owning, or riding a car comes to a crashing but often unmarked halt when played out in the context of women’s lives.”⁶¹³ American studies scholar Andrew S. Gross echoes this sentiment as he cautions us to “avoid the reductive formula that equates freedom with personal mobility.” Although it is apparent that cars have “afforded at least some women an unprecedented amount of freedom,” these benefits have extended primarily to those of the middle-to-upper classes who were the targets of marketing efforts because they could afford

⁶⁰⁸ Jain, “Violent Submission,” 198.

⁶⁰⁹ Walsh, “Gendering Mobility,” 376; Carol Sanger, “Girls and the Getaway: Cars, Culture, and the Predicament of Gendered Space,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 144, no. 2 (1995): 751, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i273510>. It is important to acknowledge that such assertions uphold often unhelpful gender binaries.

⁶¹⁰ Jain, “Violent Submission,” 195; Georgine Clarsen, “Gender and Mobility: Historizing the terms,” in *Mobility in History: The State of the Art in the History of Transport, Traffic, and Mobility*, ed. Gijs Mom, Gordon Pirie, and Laurent Tissot (Editions Alphil – Presses universitaires suisses, 2009), 240.

⁶¹¹ Sanger, “Girls and the Getaway,” 708.

⁶¹² Sanger, “Girls and the Getaway,” 712.

⁶¹³ Sanger, “Girls and the Getaway,” 708.

cars.⁶¹⁴ Again, even with the rapid accessibility of cars for women, female automobility still has restrictions placed upon it that the iconic “man on a horse” does not.

None of the four artists discussed in this chapter identify primarily as white. All are women who have made artwork dealing with female automobility in the American West and its accompanying freedom of expression. These artists challenge explicitly the male history of automobility in the area as well as the standard association of long format, touristic road trips with the mythic territory. As their artwork expresses, these women cruise through communities on trips that are as revealing as the touristic journeys that they also might undertake. Their artwork centered around the car unpacks how automobility, a term that describes “the spatial and social relationships generated by the automobile,” can reflect details about their own unique identities as women pulled to move through the American West.⁶¹⁵ While scholars such as Gross have cautioned us to avoid equating personal mobility and freedom, the work of Nakadate, Simpson, Cohen, and Red Star taps into their communities’ backgrounds in the mythic West to do just that. As they undertake seemingly mundane movements through Western America, the women are involved intimately in the processing and displaying of identity through their utilization of cars. Their work demands, as Twain croons, “[w]atch me now.”⁶¹⁶

LAUREL NAKADATE

The solicitation and manipulation of voyeurism accompanying moving women and their cars in the American West is explicit in the work of Japanese American performance artist, photographer, and filmmaker Laurel Nakadate. In her photographs, Nakadate interrogates the

⁶¹⁴ Gross, “Cars, Postcards, and Patriotism,” 85.

⁶¹⁵ Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (University of California Press, 2019), 142.

⁶¹⁶ “Shania Twain—In My Car (I’ll Be the Driver) Lyrics,” Genius.com.

various forms of desire accompanying movements westward as well as how individuals from specific communities have and have not been allowed to represent themselves in Western America. Born in Austin, Texas, in 1975, and raised in Ames, Iowa, Nakadate has spent most of her adult life on the East Coast, despite making artwork such as her *Lucky Tiger* series that deals explicitly with moving through the American West.⁶¹⁷ After earning her BFA from Tufts University and The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (SMFA), following an undergraduate stint at the University of Iowa, Nakadate went on to earn an MFA in photography from Yale University.⁶¹⁸ Concurrent with Nakadate's time at SMFA, two artists from this dissertation, Liz Cohen and Kelly Reichardt, also attended the school. Nakadate identifies the photographer and faculty member, Bill Burke as the link between all three women and notes that this overlap is important "because Bill's work has journeyed through the American West, and Bill has thought a lot about documentary in the American West." She argues that the influence of his mentorship is, in part, reflected in the three women's photographic and cinematic work taking place in Western America.⁶¹⁹

Nakadate's family history also contributes strongly to her interests in the American West. Growing up in central Iowa, Nakadate found the "incredible freedom of having a very safe childhood with endless room for creativity and make-believe" in "the middle of nowhere."⁶²⁰ Furthermore, Nakadate's parents "are great storytellers," and she identifies their home as one

⁶¹⁷ "Laurel Nakadate," The School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://smfa.tufts.edu/directory/laurel-nakadate>; Laurel Nakadate, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶¹⁸ "Laurel Nakadate," The School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University.

⁶¹⁹ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024. Nakadate observes that such overlap is "funny" because "three female artists working in the American west all went to the same weird little art school in Boston."

⁶²⁰ Regan McMahon, "Artist Laurel Nakadate at crossroads of sex, power," *SFGATE*, published February 18, 2011, <https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Artist-Laurel-Nakadate-at-crossroads-of-sex-power-2475514.php>. As a fellow Iowan, I can attest that not much is going on in that part of the state.

“where stories were really valued and important.”⁶²¹ As a professor of American literature at Iowa State University in Ames, Nakadate’s father exposed her “to people who really believe that art is really valuable and really important,” including Maya Angelou. Because of this, Nakadate “never had to defend the importance of art making.”⁶²² The support and creative freedom that Nakadate experienced as a child led to her artistic experimentation as an adult with work such as her 2009 *Lucky Tiger* series (Figure 26), which grapples with, in part, the legacy of Japanese immigrants in the American West—including her relatives.

EXCLUSIONARY JAPANESE POLICIES IN WESTERN AMERICA

In contrast to Chinese immigration to the States, which had begun by the time that Japan opened to the West in 1854, there was not any significant Japanese immigration to the U.S. until the late 1800s.⁶²³ First generation Japanese immigrants are referred to as *issei* and, following “in the steps of previous waves of Chinese immigrants,” found initial employment on farms and the railroads and in mines and canneries.⁶²⁴ By the time Turner declared the frontier closed in 1893, there were, approximately, two thousand Japanese immigrants living in the States.⁶²⁵ This number increased over the next few decades in the face of “a nativist outlook toward the Asian groups” displayed by hostile white Americans.⁶²⁶ By 1908, an agreement between Japan and the U.S. stymied temporarily Japanese immigration, and by 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-

⁶²¹ McMahon, “Artist Laurel Nakadate at crossroads of sex, power.”

⁶²² Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶²³ Yasuo Okada, “The Japanese Image of the American West,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1988): 141, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i239708>.

⁶²⁴ Joan S. Wang, “The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism: The Relationship between Chinese and Japanese in the American West, 1880s-1920s,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 2 (2008): 30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40543330>.

⁶²⁵ Okada, “The Japanese Image of the American West,” 142.

⁶²⁶ Okada, “The Japanese Image of the American West,” 142; Wang, “The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism,” 28, 29.

Reed Immigration Act, which, akin to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, halted the flow of Japanese immigrants.⁶²⁷

While the Johnson-Reed Act was revised in 1952, this came after the internment of Japanese Americans in the American West during World War II. Following the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government labeled the, approximately, 120,000 Japanese Americans in the country—80,000 of whom were U.S. citizens—as national security threats and relocated them forcibly from the Pacific coast to “War Relocation Centers” inland.⁶²⁸ In doing so, law scholar Angelo N. Ancheta argues that the U.S. government demonstrated that “the placement of national security interests above civil rights can subordinate any person, including an American citizen, on the basis of race,” a common occurrence in the country.⁶²⁹ Beyond the internment camps’ physical location in Western America, the U.S. government’s rhetoric to describe the War Relocation Centers also drew from the myth of the West. Historian Heike Paul observes that “Japanese American internment was couched by the U.S. government in terms of exploration, individualism, and mobility” and was described using the “language of America’s frontier myth.” In particular, the government referred to the internment camps as the “frontier” or “colonies” for Japanese Americans, whom they referred to as “pioneers” or “colonists.”⁶³⁰ In doing so, Heike argues that this “euphemistic rhetoric” whitewashed and justified the forced relocation and imprisonment of Japanese Americans by “forcing concentration camps into the frontier myth.”⁶³¹

⁶²⁷ Wang, “The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism,” 28.

⁶²⁸ Heike Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” in *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (Transcript Verlag, 2014), 332.

⁶²⁹ Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 87.

⁶³⁰ Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” 333.

⁶³¹ Paul, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” 333.

Nakadate's own relatives were part of this forced inclusion in the frontier myth through internment during World War II. Specifically, her paternal grandparents and her father were detained at the Minidoka War Relocation Center outside Hunt, Idaho. She observes that "[t]he American Dream was not the American Dream for them," despite this "imaginary American Dream" being the factor that pulled her grandparents to the country.⁶³² Following their internment, those grandparents had to move into low-income housing "because they had lost everything during the war." Learning about this familial history as an adult prompted Nakadate to start "thinking a lot about the American West at that time" as well as "the landscape of the concentration camp that they were in."⁶³³ She notes that, previously, she had "been under the dream that all of us are under when we're growing up of the cowboys in the American West. And it's also beautiful, and there's sunsets." Now, she recognizes that these perceptions are "the history of an outdated textbook from, like, 1968" and has found herself "wanting to be in the American West as a person who could be free there," as she is in her *Lucky Tiger* series. This expression of freedom is especially significant for Nakadate as, in her family, she is "the first generation to not be incarcerated by the U.S. government for the crime of being Japanese American."⁶³⁴

Nakadate's interests in Japanese American history in Western America and representations of Japanese Americans extend back further from her grandparents' and father's internment in Idaho to the legacy of Japanese picture brides in her family. After high school, Nakadate discovered a set of family photographs that included images of her great-grandmother, who was "a traditional picture bride." Nakadate notes that the picture bride system was a way of

⁶³² Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶³³ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶³⁴ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

working around the Asian Exclusion Acts and that her great-grandmother “was chosen from a book of photographs of women [from Japan] who were willing to come to America to marry a stranger. Or to marry a stranger in order to come to America.” At this time, in the early twentieth century, marriage was “the only way that these women would be able to come to America.”⁶³⁵ Specifically, while the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908 stop additional immigration by Japanese laborers, it allowed workers already in the States to bring in their wives and families. This, in combination with the fact that marrying in absentia was legal in Japan, led to “the phenomenon of the picture bride.”⁶³⁶

Historian Wayne Patterson describes a “picture marriage” as occurring through “the exchange of photographs between the prospective bride and groom through an intermediary.” After both agree to the marriage and pay the correct fees, the bride travels to the groom in the States and is married to a man that she knows only through a photograph.⁶³⁷ In Nakadate’s great-grandmother’s case, she was married “literally” on a boat and arrived in a “country they didn’t know, a country that didn’t want them.”⁶³⁸ Nakadate was “really moved” by the photographs of her great-grandmother, which prompted her to think about “what it means to be a woman in which the only thing you have to offer is marriage.”⁶³⁹ Migration and gender studies scholar Suzanne Sinke argues that migration and marriage “have always affected one another.”⁶⁴⁰ Around the turn of the century, “tales of riches” in North American spread around Japanese women and men, tales that took “advantage of Japanese women’s adoration of the country” to

⁶³⁵ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶³⁶ Suzanne Sinke, “Migration for Labor, Migration for Love: Marriage and Family Formation across Borders,” *OAH Magazine of History* 14, no. 1 (1999): 18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163323>.

⁶³⁷ Wayne Patterson, “The Picture-Bride System,” in *The Ilse: First-Generation Korean Immigrants in Hawaii, 1903-1973* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 80.

⁶³⁸ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶³⁹ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁴⁰ Sinke, “Migration for Labor, Migration for Love,” 20.

“persuade women to migrate without telling them what was intended for them at their destination.”⁶⁴¹ Frequently, Japanese picture brides owed loans and passage to husbands or masters when they arrived in the U.S. and, as because of this, “for those who wished to end their relations with these men, redeeming debts was the surest way to gain freedom.”⁶⁴² Often, working as barmaids or sex workers was the method to resolve these debts.⁶⁴³ Images from Nakadate’s *Lucky Tiger* series tap into this legacy of moving Japanese women, photographs of female Japanese bodies, and the trials of searching for freedom in the American West.

“IT’S A GIRL, MY LORD, IN A FLATBED FORD” (KIND OF): NAKADATE’S *LUCKY TIGER* SERIES

In Nakadate’s *Lucky Tiger* #4 (Figure 27), a woman in a cowboy hat, bright blue Superman t-shirt, light pink underwear, and flipflops poses with a black and white dog in front of a blue Dodge pickup truck. Dressed in an outfit wholly impractical for the wooded setting, the woman—Nakadate—stands with her shoulders back and knees slightly bent as her dog rests its head against her legs. Though facing the camera, Nakadate looks towards the ground. The skimpy nature of her outfit clashes with the solid predictability of her cowboy hat, Dodge truck, and Wyoming license plates—all symbol associated with cowboy culture. Nakadate is positioned directly next to the image of a cowboy on a bucking bronco on the Wyoming front plate, perhaps to emphasize the many differences between the hypermasculine archetype and the hyperfeminine woman claiming some of his characteristics. A shadow intrudes upon the scene from the left side

⁶⁴¹ Kazuhiro Oharazeki, “Listening to the Voices of ‘Other’ Women in Japanese North America: Japanese Prostitutes and Barmaids in the American West, 1887-1920,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32, no. 4 (2013): 9, 10; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.32.4.issue-4>.

⁶⁴² Oharazeki, “Listening to the Voices of ‘Other’ Women in Japanese North America,” 14.

⁶⁴³ Oharazeki, “Listening to the Voices of ‘Other’ Women in Japanese North America,” 10.

of the photograph to hint that, although Nakadate is the only figure shown in the image, another person might also be present. Across the composition, several dark smudges mar the surface of the photograph. Congregated in the upper left and lower right corners, the smudges are distinct enough to ascertain that they are inked fingerprints. While the ghost of prints pass over Nakadate's thighs and her left shoulder, the marks are assembled mostly over the natural landscape surrounding her.

Similarly, in *Lucky Tiger #169* (Figure 28), Nakadate, dressed in a string bikini and cowboy boots, completes a backbend with her right leg extended upwards on a wooden viewing platform within Yellowstone National Park. Any vehicle that brought her into the park such as the blue Dodge has been abandoned well off-frame. Silhouetted by the setting sun, Nakadate turns her head towards the viewer as her long, dark hair brushes the platform's sun-streaked wooden planks. The warm light cast by the sun catches on the geyser behind her and silhouettes the wooden landscape surrounding the scene. Although one can see four benches behind Nakadate on the platform, no spectators are present to view either the erupting geyser or the scantily-clad woman executing gymnastics before it. The empty benches have no backs, and thus, no "correct" orientation; they simultaneously face both the water feature behind Nakadate and the artist's contortionist display. The photograph, then, prompts the question, which is the more compelling spectacle? Again, here, Nakadate consumes and remixed iconic signifiers of the American West—cowboy boots, Yellowstone National Park, and its much-documented geysers.

Lucky Tiger #169 references both Nakadate's family history in the West as well as the lineage of photography in national parks, photographs used often to promote the National Park System's natural beauty and potential for exploration. By simply taking a photograph within Yellowstone's borders, Nakadate cannot extricate herself from the artistic lineage of white, male

photographers in the park—a lineage that, as with the inked fingerprints encroaching on her contorted form in *Lucky Tiger* #169, she cannot escape. Along with #4, blue-black smudges mar the surface of Nakadate’s photograph. They congregate along the bright sky and dip down to obscure the surfaces of the benches. While the marks mar mostly the landscape behind Nakadate, they also brush over the surface of her thighs and outstretched cowboy boot. Combined, the empty benches and blurred fingerprints point to a sort of phantom voyeur for Nakadate’s spectacle; a person—in this case, a man—who is not physically present in the scene but, nevertheless, leaves his marks all over the iconic western landscape and Nakadate’s body.

When she began the *Lucky Tiger* series in 2009, it was important to Nakadate to create “physical documentation, made from within the performance, to exist after the performance ended.”⁶⁴⁴ For *Lucky Tiger*, this physical documentation takes the form of the four-by-six-inch photographs circulated and marked by fingerprints. Specifically, these fingerprints belong to men that Nakadate found online through Craigslist or at truck stops. After meeting them, she rolled their fingers in an ink pad and handed over the printed *Lucky Tiger* images for them to hold in an exchange that mirrors those of picture bride marriages; woman is photographed, man judges her based on her appearance. Nakadate describes this as the “passing-of-the-images-around-while-fingerprinted part of the performance” and notes that this occurred in a variety of settings while the men discussed what they observed in each photograph.⁶⁴⁵

Reflecting a larger interest in voyeurism, Nakadate was riveted by where the men would leave their fingerprints on the photographs.⁶⁴⁶ She asserts that “I found it endlessly fascinating to

⁶⁴⁴ Adam Berner, “Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate,” *Musée Magazine*, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://museemagazine.com/features/2019/4/19/tiger-tiger-burning-bright-laurel-nakadate>.

⁶⁴⁵ Berner, “Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate.”

⁶⁴⁶ Lemon Wilder, “Artist Attack! Laurel Nakadate Knows What She’s Getting Herself Into,” *Autostraddle*, published February 8, 2012, <https://www.autostraddle.com/artist-attack-laurel-nakadate-knows-what-shes-getting-herself-into-131413/>. Supposedly, one such man pointed to the tiger on Nakadate’s bikini in one image and stated, “[t]hat’s a lucky tiger,” leading to the title of the series.

observe where and how the men touched the images. We're always told not to touch the face of photographs."⁶⁴⁷ By leaving behind visual evidence of their handling of the photographs, these men "implicate themselves in a physical act of scrutiny."⁶⁴⁸ Nakadate states that "I'm so happy everyone leaves fingerprints on things whether they like it or not," as fingerprints are "your best and worst friend and you were born with them and you can't get away from them without a lot of pain and sandpaper."⁶⁴⁹ In the case of the *Lucky Tiger* series, the images reflect the long lineage of men leaving their prints all over the American West—and women's bodies—since contact.

LONGING FOR "DARKNESS AND STARS"

The movements of Nakadate through the American West that are captured in her *Lucky Tiger* series reflect a larger interest in mobility that she explores in her artistic practice. She notes that, following graduate school, "everything" that she created "was traveling, and crisscrossing, America and being in the American West." Therefore, the truck seen in *Lucky Tiger* images is not solely a prop, but rather, an important facilitator of the project's success.⁶⁵⁰ While people often question her decision to move and work in that space, she asserts that it is because her "body was allowed to be free in that space."⁶⁵¹ This is despite popular conceptions of the American West that omit the presence of non-white individuals from the history of the mythic territory. This feeling of freedom in the West also flies in the face of the U.S. government who, Nakadate states,

⁶⁴⁷ Berner, "Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate."

⁶⁴⁸ "Laurel Nakadate presents Lucky Tiger *2009," Perfection of Perplexion, published January 7, 2011, <https://perfectionofperplexion.wordpress.com/2011/01/07/laurel-nakadate-presents-lucky-tiger-2009/>.

⁶⁴⁹ Jesse Nathan, "Bravery, Panties, and Devil's Tower: The Rumpus Interview with Laurel Nakadate," The Rumpus, published April 8, 2009, <https://therumpus.net/2009/04/08/bravery-panties-and-devils-tower-the-rumpus-interview-with-laurel-nakadate/>.

⁶⁵⁰ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024. Nakadate states that she would sleep in the vehicles that she was driving during this project, as well.

⁶⁵¹ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

“thought everyone in my family should be incarcerated.”⁶⁵² She argues that her reasoning for traveling through Western America is sound as “[s]o many people have traveled out to the American West with less of a plan” and “fewer reasons than that.” Thus, images from the *Lucky Tiger* series visualize the investigating and researching that Nakadate undertook in the American West, as, for her, researching means “putting my body in a place and seeing what would happen.”⁶⁵³

It is significant to note that Nakadate has stated her *Lucky Tiger* photographs are intentionally “bad,” falling “closer to the category of vernacular photography of a girl in a bikini than to high art photography.”⁶⁵⁴ The primary reason that *Lucky Tiger* images can be read as vernacular is because they capture the overall “off-the-cuff” nature of the project.⁶⁵⁵ For *Lucky Tiger*, Nakadate states that she “leaned heavily on this idea that the chance encounters and last-minute reveals would be the beautiful things.”⁶⁵⁶ However, this is not to say that the locations were not predetermined; Nakadate asserts that she wanted to “go to highly trafficked tourist destinations” such as Yellowstone because she “wanted to witness how tourists behaved in those spaces.”⁶⁵⁷ While the actions that Nakadate undertook at these locations, including the backbend of *Lucky Tiger* #169, were spontaneous, she knew that she wanted disrupt the fantasy of the tourists around here who “were under the spell of the idea of the American West.”⁶⁵⁸ Nakadate also sought out “less trafficked spaces in order to have sort of quieter moments” such as that documented in *Lucky Tiger* #4 to document her own “dramatic interactions in those spaces.”⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵² Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁵³ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁵⁴ Berner, “Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate.”

⁶⁵⁵ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁵⁶ Berner, “Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate.”

⁶⁵⁷ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁵⁸ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁵⁹ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

Previous writings on Nakadate's *Lucky Tiger* series have emphasized the "cheesecake" nature of Nakadate's photographs of her "sexual adventure" as "a Lolita updated for our times."⁶⁶⁰ By focusing solely on her sexuality in these scenes, these writers overlook the significance of the series' location in Western America and divorce cleanly the photographs from Nakadate's background. Furthermore, these reductive statements ignore Nakadate's own stated interest in exploring the "gendered power dynamics within the context of cowboy culture."⁶⁶¹ In discussing the origins of the *Lucky Tiger* series, Nakadate notes that "Asian American history, the American West, incarceration, girls' culture, mixed-race identity" all "swirled into the space in the American West," so that it became self-evident that the photographs should be taken in the mythic space.⁶⁶² Describing the setting of her images further, Nakadate states that the landscapes "are the images of cowboy movies, fantasy Western dreamlands" that "play into the over-the-top pin-up calendar, girlfriend-in-a-landscape, road-trip feeling."⁶⁶³ All artwork produced by Nakadate deals with longing, in some regard. In *Lucky Tiger* images, this longing is for "darkness and stars...longing for the American West."⁶⁶⁴ While writings that oversimplify Nakadate as a modern-day Lolita in *Lucky Tiger* images focus their attention on just one facet of the images over all others, they do reflect Nakadate's wish to explore the ways that women in the mythic West "are often portrayed as objects of desire rather than as agents of their own direction."⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶⁰ "Laurel Nakadate presents Lucky Tiger *2009," Perfection of Perplexion; William A. Ewing, "Artist: Laurel Nakadate," Saatchi Gallery, accessed August 31, 2023, https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/laurel_nakadate. I would like to note that, by definition, Nakadate's adult age in these photographs prohibits any comparison to a "Lolita."

⁶⁶¹ Nora Burnett Adams, "From Fact to Myth and Back Again: The Cowboy and Contemporary Art," in *Cowboy* (Rizzoli Electa, 2023), 24.

⁶⁶² Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁶³ Berner, "Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate."

⁶⁶⁴ Berner, "Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate."

⁶⁶⁵ Adams, "From Fact to Myth and Back Again," 25.

This is not to say that these authors are wholly incorrect in their identifying of the sexualized nature of the *Lucky Tiger* images. In fact, throughout her artistic practice, Nakadate has acted often as “a provocateur” and explored the relationship between power and sex by placing herself frequently in videos and photographs where she is “partially clothed or sexily dressed.”⁶⁶⁶ She has yet “to have come up with a conclusion” about the theme of power and sex and states that “artists are always trying to mine material that they don’t necessarily have the answers for.”⁶⁶⁷ While any definitive conclusion about sex and power might not be present in *Lucky Tiger* images, it is clear that, for Nakadate, her sexuality in the photographs is less about presenting as “a Lolita” and more about the freedom of expression tied inherently to it. Discussing photographs from the *Lucky Tiger* series, Nakadate notes that she was thinking about “women’s lives being controlled by men, about what women can bring to the table, and what they get to keep, and what they don’t keep out of that.”⁶⁶⁸ Although she might appear to follow the trope of “this image of the young, naïve girl”—hence the Lolita comparisons—Nakadate is clear that this young woman “is more knowing than we think.”⁶⁶⁹ As a result, work such as *Lucky Tiger #4* is “absolutely feminist.”⁶⁷⁰ While “[r]igid customs and nineteenth-century modesty in dress made overland travel difficult for the fairer sex” in the American West of the past, Nakadate’s *Lucky Tiger* photographs emphasize how a lack of clothing similarly complicates one’s journey—for better or worse—through the territory.⁶⁷¹

In the same articles that overemphasize the sexuality and underplay the agency inherent in *Lucky Tiger* images, authors fail to grasp the significance of Nakadate’s loneliness in the

⁶⁶⁶ McMahon, “Artist Laurel Nakadate at crossroads of sex, power.”

⁶⁶⁷ McMahon, “Artist Laurel Nakadate at crossroads of sex, power.”

⁶⁶⁸ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁶⁹ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁷⁰ Berner, “Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: Interview with Laurel Nakadate.”

⁶⁷¹ Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 17.

landscapes. Nor do they delve into how, for Nakadate, photography functions as a vehicle for identity formation and exploration. When asked, Nakadate stated that, in early work such as *Lucky Tiger #169*, she “was trying to represent the vulnerability of the body” or “how vulnerable people might perceive my body to be based on how they perceive my identity.”⁶⁷² Being dressed solely in a bikini or in her underwear in western locations such as Yellowstone emphasized this vulnerability, as “a single person standing alone in the landscape looks really different than a family of seven posing in front of Rushmore, you know?”⁶⁷³ This vulnerability is coupled with a feeling of independence, as well.

Standing alone, unrestrained in the American West calls back to Nakadate’s assertion that she is the first generation in her family to not be incarcerated by the United States government for being Japanese. She states that, for the series, she was “thinking about the way Asian American people are viewed in photographs and how we historically have not been able to document ourselves.”⁶⁷⁴ Nakadate’s grandparents and father were not allowed to photograph themselves while interned “because cameras were illegal for Japanese Americans during World War II.”⁶⁷⁵ Therefore, it was important for Nakadate, as a mixed-race individual, to document herself through her photography and “be able to tell this story about myself.”⁶⁷⁶ Because of her physical appearance, people seldom guess Nakadate’s heritage correctly. She notes that, “if they want to see me as white, they will see me as white. If they want to see me as Asian, they will see me as Asian. People see me as Native or Indigenous.”⁶⁷⁷ As a whole, the *Lucky Tiger* series is about how “you have to go out on your own to figure out who you are” and, ultimately, was a

⁶⁷² Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁷³ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁷⁴ Michaela Dwyer, “Laurel Nakadate on Grief, Bodily Autonomy, and Stories We Tell Ourselves,” *Indy Week*, published January 1, 2023, <https://indyweek.com/culture/art/photographer-laurel-nakadate-interview/>.

⁶⁷⁵ Dwyer, “Laurel Nakadate on Grief, Bodily Autonomy, and Stories We Tell Ourselves.”

⁶⁷⁶ Dwyer, “Laurel Nakadate on Grief, Bodily Autonomy, and Stories We Tell Ourselves.”

⁶⁷⁷ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

“conversation” that Nakadate had with herself about her “own identity, belonging, and not belonging.”⁶⁷⁸ Thus, *Lucky Tiger* images celebrate the freedom of spirit and expression that Nakadate is able to find driving through Western America as they “tell a story about a body that is rarely represented in the American West in ways that are not completely dictated by men.”⁶⁷⁹ Nakadate is not done with the mythic territory, however; she states that, in regard to the American West, “there’s definitely more to say.”⁶⁸⁰

ROSE B. SIMPSON

Throughout this chapter, the artists examined are divided in their formal interests. While Nakadate features her own body prominently in her images—as Liz Cohen, whom I will analyze momentarily, does—she did not construct the vehicle that she uses to traverse Western America. In this way, she differs significantly from both Cohen and Rose Bean Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo). The emphasis on the vehicles used to cruise through the American West in the work of both Simpson and Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke), the last artist examined in this section, does not negate their personal significance to the artists. Rather, as Simpson’s black-on-black lowrider demonstrates, these vehicles can function as vessels of identity for all the artists. While the trusty steed of the iconic “man on a horse” gets relatively little attention in discussions of their rider’s mobility, for the artists of this chapter—and Simpson, in particular—their vehicles are inextricably tied to their personal histories and identity formations.

⁶⁷⁸ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁷⁹ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

⁶⁸⁰ Nakadate, interviewed by Murphy, January 31, 2024.

Born in 1983, Simpson grew up with her maternal side of the family in Kha’p’o Owingeh—or Santa Clara Pueblo—in New Mexico.⁶⁸¹ Before attending the Santa Fe Indian School for high school, Simpson was home-schooled by her mother, famed Santa Claran ceramist Roxanne Swentzell.⁶⁸² After her time in Santa Fe, Simpson completed her undergraduate studies at both the University of New Mexico as well as the Institute of American Indian Arts, where she would return in 2015 to earn an MFA in Creative Non-Fiction after receiving an MFA in Ceramics from the Rhode Island School of Design. In addition to her degrees in the fine arts, Simpson also attended Northern New Mexico College to study Automotive Science.⁶⁸³ Combined, Simpson’s familial legacy, along with her visual, written, and automotive arts studies, has enabled her to create artwork that spans performance, sculpture, installation, fashion, metalworking, car designing, and music.⁶⁸⁴ Specifically, Simpson, who works in Española while living in Santa Clara Pueblo with her small daughter, is part of a lineage of ceramic artists spanning generations.⁶⁸⁵ Beyond her mother, many of Simpson’s Santa Clara Puebloan relatives such as Susan Folwell, Jody Folwell, Rose Naranjo, Michael Naranjo, and Nora Naranjo Morse all are accomplished ceramicists drawing from the strongly established practice of working with clay in Santa Clara Pueblo.⁶⁸⁶ With work such as her 2014 lowrider,

⁶⁸¹ “Counterculture: Rose B. Simpson and Monique Tyndall in conversation,” Williams College Museum of Art, last modified June 19, 2022, <https://artmuseum.williams.edu/event/counterculture-rose-b-simpson-and-monique-tyndall-in-conversation/>; Porter Swentzell, Yve Chavez, and Jonathan Batkin, *LIT: The Work of Rose B. Simpson* (Santa Fe: The Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, 2018), 27.

⁶⁸² Jori Finkel, “Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay,” *The New York Times*, published June 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/16/arts/design/rose-b-simpson-clay-sculpture.html>.

⁶⁸³ Rose B. Simpson, “Who I Am,” RoseBSimpson.com, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.rosebsimpson.com/about>.

⁶⁸⁴ Simpson, “Who I Am.”

⁶⁸⁵ Finkel, “Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay;” “Rose B. Simpson: Legacies,” Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, accessed September 16, 2022, <https://www.icaboston.org/exhibitions/rose-b-simpson-legacies>.

⁶⁸⁶ Chadd Scott, “Send Off Summer With An Arts Binge Across Massachusetts,” *Forbes*, published August 25, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chaddscott/2022/08/25/send-off-summer-with-an-arts-binge-across-massachusetts/>.

Maria (Figure 29), however, Simpson draws from this familial history with ceramics as she challenges outsider expectations of how Santa Claran artwork “should” appear.

“LOW AND SLOW,” “MEAN AND CLEAN:” A BRIEF LOWRIDER HISTORY

Understanding, in brief, the history of lowriders emphasizes how Simpson’s *Maria* both deviates and follows the conventions of the modified vehicles; while Simpson draws from her background as a Santa Claran woman for *Maria*, the fact that the vehicle acts as a vehicle for her identity is fitting with how lowriders have traditionally functioned for Mexican American communities. In its most basic conception, a lowrider is a car that has been modified so that it is, typically, low to the ground and displays a flair not usually exhibited by everyday vehicles. More specifically, lowrider vehicles “are classic American muscle cars that have been retrofitted with hydraulic systems allowing drivers to raise and lower them at will, and retro-style wire wheels that shimmer as they turn.”⁶⁸⁷ The origins of lowriders harkens back to communities of Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles in the 1940s who customized their vehicles with intricate designs or modifications.⁶⁸⁸ By the 1960s, in California, the term “lowrider” was coined and, subsequently, lowriding has developed into a significant facet of Mexican American culture in California and the Southwest. In part, this popularity was fueled by the proliferation of the California-based periodical, *Lowrider Magazine*, which started distributing in the 1970s.⁶⁸⁹

Instead of focusing on speed or precision, lowrider builders and owners have emphasized the modified vehicles’ “badness.” As anthropologist Brenda Bright explains, “[l]owriders are

⁶⁸⁷ Sarah Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson’s *Maria*,” American Craft Council, published June 19, 2018, <https://www.craftcouncil.org/post/power-object-rose-b-simpsons-maria>.

⁶⁸⁸ Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson’s *Maria*.”

⁶⁸⁹ Brenda Bright, “‘Heart like a Car:’ Hispano/Chicano Culture in Northern New Mexico,” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 4 (1998): 587, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/stable/645856>.

beautiful *bad* cars of every make and model, designed to ride ‘low and slow’ and to appear ‘mean and clean.’”⁶⁹⁰ Contrary to the norm, badness is both pleasurable and desirable in this context and “is the product of social tensions.”⁶⁹¹ Owners drive their “beautiful, luxurious roadway spectacles very slowly” in order to literally take over the road and force “other drivers to ‘deal with’ their slow, deliberate driving style.”⁶⁹² As lowriders such as *Maria* are designed to cruise rather than speed, the vehicles challenge the conception of looking “visibly harried” as a sign of indispensability and success in the United States.⁶⁹³ In this regard, lowriders “offer a sly rebuke to the frenzied pace of and performative aspects of American capitalism.”⁶⁹⁴ As lowrider work by Simpson and Colombian-American artist Liz Cohen also emphasizes, the vehicles present a form of “alternative automobility” and desire “to claim space and assert identity.”⁶⁹⁵ Lowriders such as Simpson’s *Maria* act as “roving canvases,” what curator Sarah Archer labels as “the automotive equivalent of a delicious meal that lasts for hours on end.”⁶⁹⁶ This meal has substance, as the lowrider’s connection to and conveyance of identity emphasizes.

In the Los Angeles metropolitan area, automobility and racial formation have been tied inherently together for those of Mexican descent. In examining the automobility of Mexican Americans, Carpio argues that the automobile acts “as both a material tool for movement between points A and B, and as a symbolic system through which personhood was given meaning.” Yet, despite the equation of driving with U.S. nationhood, drivers of Mexican descent have been “increasingly excluded from an emerging form of national membership, one based on

⁶⁹⁰ Bright, “‘Heart like a Car,’” 583. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁹¹ Bright, “‘Heart like a Car,’” 583.

⁶⁹² Bright, “‘Heart like a Car,’” 583.

⁶⁹³ Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson’s *Maria*.”

⁶⁹⁴ Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson’s *Maria*.”

⁶⁹⁵ David Z. Morris, “Cars with the Boom: Identity and Territory in American Postwar Automobile Sound,” *Technology and Culture* 55, no. 2 (2014): 336, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i24468466>.

⁶⁹⁶ Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson’s *Maria*.”

the shared social contract of driving.”⁶⁹⁷ The creation and legacy of lowriders has challenged this exclusion to promote the vehicles as conveyers of Chicano and/or Mexican American identity. The import of lowriders has extended beyond California, however. Specifically, Bright notes that, in Northern New Mexico, Mexican Americans have taken “the car, a general feature of American culture, and customize[d] it into a lowrider, one of several politicized Chicano cultural forms adopted in the area in the wake of the Chicano movement.”⁶⁹⁸ Therefore, lowriders can be considered illustrative of “the creation of simultaneously local and extralocal ethnopolitical identity.”⁶⁹⁹ Española, New Mexico, in particular—where Simpson works—is known as “the Lowrider Capital of the World.”⁷⁰⁰ As illustrated by the proliferation of lowriders in Española, the modified vehicles not only convey the desires and experiences of their makers, they also “provide alternative communities and potential identities.”⁷⁰¹ Simpson’s *Maria* harnesses these ideas while asserting its builder and driver’s Santa Claran identity.

“AS CLOSE AS I’VE COME TO MAKING TRADITIONAL POTTERY:” SIMPSON’S *MARIA*

A matte black Chevy, Simpson’s *Maria* appears, at first glance, to be a standard El Camino lowrider. The clearly rendered designs on the vehicle’s body are comprised mostly of geometric arrangements that seemingly lack any figural reference. With tinted black windows, it is impossible to glance within the vehicle to see what type of person its driver is, but it is clear from the car’s intricate designs—which contrast strongly the matte body of the El Camino with their glossy finish—that the owner of this car wants the vehicle to be seen. The light catches and

⁶⁹⁷ Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 143.

⁶⁹⁸ Bright, “Heart like a Car,” 583. It is key to note that not all Mexican Americans identify as Chicano.

⁶⁹⁹ Bright, “Heart like a Car,” 585.

⁷⁰⁰ Finkel, “Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay;” “Rose B. Simpson: Legacies,” Institute of Contemporary Art Boston.

⁷⁰¹ Bright, “Heart like a Car,” 586.

highlights portions of the lowrider to emphasize the smoothness of its exterior and, in all likelihood, smoothness of its ride.

Created in 2014 from a modified 1985 Chevy El Camino, Simpson's *Maria* features designs that draw from iconic black-on-black Tewa pottery popularized by San Ildefonso artist, Maria Martinez, the namesake of *Maria*.⁷⁰² While, formally, Simpson's *Maria* is linked strongly to Martinez's legacy, the vehicle also references Martinez's own automobility; Yankton Dakota scholar Philip J. Deloria notes that Martinez purchased a car, which some argue that she decorated with her pottery designs—akin to Simpson's *Maria*—using earnings from a “craft performance” that she undertook at the 1915 World's Fair in San Diego.⁷⁰³ Simpson discovered her El Camino for sale on the side of a road and, drawing from her education and practical experience, completed the lowrider's bodywork and customization herself.⁷⁰⁴ Specifically, *Maria* developed “from a series of responses to inspirational moments, questions, introspections, observations, and life experiences.” As much of Simpson's artistic practice conveys, these life experiences are fundamentally “uniquely Santa Claran Pueblo, Indigenous female experiences.”⁷⁰⁵

While Simpson hopes to pass along her familial artistic legacy to her daughter and teach her “how to creatively engage with the world,” she acknowledges that her artistic practice often does not appear to follow Santa Claran ceramic traditions; she notes that *Maria* is “as close as

⁷⁰² “Maria,” RoseBSimpson.com, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.rosebsimpson.com/maria>.

⁷⁰³ Philip Joseph Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (University Press of Kansas, 2004), 148.

⁷⁰⁴ “Maria,” RoseBSimpson.com; “Rose B. Simpson,” Minneapolis Institute of Art, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://new.artsmia.org/hearts-of-our-people-native-women-artists/hearts-of-our-people-native-voices/rose-simpson>. Simpson studied in the Automotive Science program at Northern New Mexico College for three years (Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson's *Maria*”).

⁷⁰⁵ Dyani White Hawk and Rose B. Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin' Hard: A Conversation with Rose Simpson,” in *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, ed. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves (Minneapolis Institute of Art in association with the University of Washington Press, 2019), 84.

I've come to making traditional pottery."⁷⁰⁶ Although Simpson's art appears formally atypical when compared to traditional Santa Clara pottery, she engages with Santa Clara Pueblo artistic principles and epistemologies, which she obscures purposefully, throughout her practice. Noting that "Native peoples have been subject to so many stereotypes" and "have seen through history how spiritual work just gets eaten up, spit out, exploited," Simpson is careful to avoid overt references to Santa Clara spirituality and emphasizes that her work is not, generally, for her community.⁷⁰⁷ Rather, in conversation with *First American Art Magazine*, Simpson revealed that she "is not creating for a Native audience," and much of her work is "intended to be in conversation with the Other," those "who don't understand what we're navigating."⁷⁰⁸ Maria's connection to the larger histories of lowriders, women, and cars, however, provides some access points for viewers to understand generally the work, even if they are uninformed about Santa Clara lifeways and legacies.

Coming of age in the Santa Clara Pueblo-Española area, Simpson has always had an affinity for cars. She notes that, "I would see these spectacular works of art, and I remember as a kid being like, 'When I grow up, I'm going to have a custom car.'"⁷⁰⁹ For Simpson, the "sense of accomplishment" that accompanied building or owning a lowrider was also attractive due, in part, from what she identifies as "a lot of postcolonial stress disorder, and disenfranchisement."⁷¹⁰ Escape was a method that Simpson utilized to survive the manifestations of postcolonial stress disorder—a method facilitated by mobility and cars; Simpson bought her

⁷⁰⁶ Simpson, "Who I Am;" Finkel, "Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay."

⁷⁰⁷ Finkel, "Rose B. Simpson Thinks in Clay."

⁷⁰⁸ Chadd Scott, "Rose B. Simpson: Legacies," *First American Art Magazine*, published September 11, 2022, <https://firstamericanartmagazine.com/simpson-legacies/>.

⁷⁰⁹ Kira Wakeam, "How Rose Simpson's lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters," PBS NewsHour, published December 23, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/how-rose-simpsons-lowrider-is-an-homage-to-pueblo-potters>.

⁷¹⁰ Wakeam, "How Rose Simpson's lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters."

first car, a Jeep Cherokee, when she was twelve.⁷¹¹ The Jeep broke down frequently, and Simpson completed all repairs on her own because she “needed it to run.” For her, automobility helped facilitate escape and survivance; Simpson states that “[m]y car became my freedom, and it became my safety, and it became a true comrade in my survival.”⁷¹² She notes that “I wanted to *feel*, I wanted to *wear* the car, and be *in* it, and *become* it, because I project myself onto vehicles,” including *Maria* years later.⁷¹³

Simpson’s search for empowerment was an additional, major impetus for the creation of *Maria*.⁷¹⁴ The lowrider world, specifically, and car world, generally, have centered around men, with women cast to the margins.⁷¹⁵ During her Automotive Science program, Simpson was the sole woman enrolled; she comments that, “[r]egardless of your cultural background, you’re the only women there.”⁷¹⁶ This exclusion of women from the arena of cars was not the norm for Simpson as she grew up in her Santa Clara community, however. She notes that, in part, the reason that she attended the Automotive Science program was “because I am a Pueblo woman. It was my mom under the car fixing the starter...It was my mom who owned the tractor. And that’s how I was shown that it’s possible, and that it’s cultural.”⁷¹⁷ While Simpson asserts that, in the car world, “women are usually only draped over a fender,” her “experience with women, as a daughter of a Native woman, as someone in the family of Indigenous women who are incredibly empowered, is that we’re behind the wheel, man, we’re not draped over no fender.”⁷¹⁸ While this assertion does contain some value judgements about car models, its overall emphasis highlights

⁷¹¹ Wakeam, “How Rose Simpson’s lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters.”

⁷¹² Wakeam, “How Rose Simpson’s lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters.”

⁷¹³ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 84. Emphasis in original.

⁷¹⁴ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 84.

⁷¹⁵ Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson’s *Maria*.”

⁷¹⁶ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 84.

⁷¹⁷ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 84.

⁷¹⁸ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 84.

how women from Santa Clara Pueblo utilize automobility as a vehicle for empowerment.

Throughout the American Southwest, lowriding is considered a male pastime, one that facilitates cruising for women. By building and driving her own lowrider, Simpson “wittily appropriates the typically male pursuit while honoring the legacy of Maria Martinez” to stress that “cars build identity and create empowerment in disenfranchised peoples.”⁷¹⁹

NOT YOUR AVERAGE POT: CARS AS VESSELS OF IDENTITY

For Simpson, cars such as *Maria* should be considered vessels. Whether carrying people, objects, or identities, they transport often-heavy loads on their journeys. The spark of inspiration that led to the design of *Maria* occurred on a day when Simpson was harvesting crops with her mother. Simpson observed that the low profile of the El Camino, which they utilized to gather squash, corn, and beans from their garden, “made it possible to work directly over the back of the bed.”⁷²⁰ At that time, she realized suddenly that “the car *is* a kind of pot.”⁷²¹ The conceptualization of vehicles as containers fits within a longer legacy of vessel production in Santa Clara Pueblo. Simpson notes that, “[a] long time ago, we would actually make a pot, and carry it on our head. We would use it for the things we need.”⁷²² She argues further that pots such as the ones created by Martinez “are no longer in daily functional use for many Pueblo people.”⁷²³ While members of the Santa Clara Pueblo, including many of Simpson’s relatives, still make and sell pots, Simpson asserts that, “nowadays, we have these cars, and we use them, and it’s still for the same purpose of nourishing our families.”⁷²⁴ The rounded corners and

⁷¹⁹ “Rose B. Simpson,” Minneapolis Institute of Art.

⁷²⁰ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 84; Wakeam, “How Rose Simpson’s lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters.”

⁷²¹ Wakeam, “How Rose Simpson’s lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters.” Emphasis in original.

⁷²² Wakeam, “How Rose Simpson’s lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters.”

⁷²³ Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson’s *Maria*.”

⁷²⁴ Wakeam, “How Rose Simpson’s lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters.”

smooth surfaces of *Maria* further any comparisons to pot, as well as the fact that the car is drivable and carries Simpson, who notes that “our bodies are vessels.”⁷²⁵

In particular, *Maria* is overwhelmingly a vessel of identity. Rather than reflect a singular history, the vehicle carries many, including Chicano, Santa Claran, women’s, Simpson’s, and car histories in the Southwest. The resulting vehicle has a presence seemingly larger than its physical size; Simpson asserts that the El Camino “took up a lot of space, because she’s a queen.”⁷²⁶ Such a proclamation extends to Maria Martinez, herself, whom Simpson labels as “the matriarch.” She argues that, although Martinez’s husband, Julian, painted the vessels that Martinez created, “it wasn’t his name that was being sold. She was the business person [*sic*] and the person in charge. She exemplifies empowerment in Native women, and specifically Pueblo women.”⁷²⁷ To Simpson, it makes sense to use a vehicle as a tribute to such an accomplished Indigenous woman; she states that, with the creation of *Maria*, “I am paying homage to the back-and-forth ties of history and preservation and customization and recycling and inspiration and cultural integrity.”⁷²⁸

Maria functions as a vessel of proud, female, Santa Claran identity for Simpson as well as a vessel for her movements in the Southwest. While the origins of lowriders are rooted in Chicano history, Simpson’s lowrider reflects and “honors...in high regard” her own unique identity.⁷²⁹ As with Chicano lowriders, which “are designed to be given significant public display, not to be locked away in a garage or private viewing room, or less yet, a museum,” Simpson’s *Maria* travels both within and outside institutional spaces.⁷³⁰ In the spring of 2013, at

⁷²⁵ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 84.

⁷²⁶ Wakeam, “How Rose Simpson’s lowrider is an homage to Pueblo potters.”

⁷²⁷ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 84.

⁷²⁸ Archer, “Power Object: Rose B. Simpson’s *Maria*.”

⁷²⁹ White Hawk and Simpson, “*Maria*, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin’ Hard,” 85.

⁷³⁰ David William Foster, “Lowriders & The Ostentation of Chicano Masculinity: Art Meza,” in *Picturing the Barrio: Ten Chicano Photographers* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 121.

the same time that Simpson was enrolled in her Automotive Science program, she was also an Artist in Residence at the Denver Art Museum. As an artist-in-residence, she created “post-apocalyptic [I]ndigenous warrior accoutrements out of leather, metal, found objects, and ceramic components.”⁷³¹ After completing *Maria* and with the help of her community, family, and the museum, the vehicle was transported northwards to Denver, where Simpson “drove the car up the street and to the entrance of the museum flanked by a squad of post-apocalyptic Indigenous warriors, people of [I]ndigenous and queer identities.”⁷³² Throughout the drive, Simpson played the sound of a heartbeat through the one-thousand-watt speaker system of the El Camino before exiting the vehicle and leading the procession into the museum.

Over the past decade, Simpson has continued to show *Maria* at similar events. It is important to note that the El Camino is not preserved and stored away, never to be seen by the public again, as museum objects often are. Rather, it retains its freedom to move throughout the Southwest as well as to and from museums such as the Philbrook Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 2020.⁷³³ As a whole, Simpson argues that *Maria* extends past solely aesthetic expectations of lowriders to “challenge the stereotyping of [I]ndigenous identities, deconstruct gender roles, transform the relationship of objectification of women in car culture, and consider the re-application of relational aesthetics.”⁷³⁴ The lowrider emphasizes how, for westering women, vehicles have functioned as more than just “trusty steeds.”

LIZ COHEN

⁷³¹ Rose B. Simpson, “Performance with Maria the El Camino,” RoseBSimpson.com, accessed April 9, 2024, <https://www.rosebsimpson.com/performance>.

⁷³² Simpson, “Performance with Maria the El Camino.”

⁷³³ Simpson, “Performance with Maria the El Camino.” I am happy to report that I saw *Maria* displayed in the gardens at the Philbrook as part of the *Hearts of Our People* exhibition.

⁷³⁴ Simpson, “Performance with Maria the El Camino.”

In the artwork that supports the myth of the West, viewers rarely challenge the place of the iconic “man on a horse.” He is portrayed as competent, confident, and at home on his steed as he makes his way through Western America. However, as the artists of this chapter, in general, and Liz Cohen, in particular, demonstrate, the place of women in the automobile world has routinely been contested. As Simpson points out, when included in this world, women are often “draped” passively across the hoods of other men’s vehicles in an equation of fast cars with sex appeal. With her performance and photographic work, however, Cohen subverts this association by not only building her own lowrider—as Simpson did—but also posing as a bikini model alongside it. In doing so, she stakes the claim for a more complicated understanding of female automobility than what has been held in the past.

Born in Phoenix in 1973 and currently living in the city, Cohen is a photographer and performance artist of Colombian descent.⁷³⁵ In addition to her artistic practice, which focuses predominantly “on the intersections of immigration, industry, labor, and women’s representation in popular media,” Cohen is an associate professor at Arizona State University, where she teaches studio art.⁷³⁶ For more than ten years, she has investigated the issues of hybridity, migration, and gender that interest her through participation in and documentation of lowrider culture. Specifically, in works from her series *Bodywork* and *On the River Road* (Figures 30 & 31), Cohen taps into issues of voyeurism, acculturation, and moving female bodies in the American Southwest as she navigates her place in the world. While she acknowledges that being a woman in the Southwest has impacted her practice, Cohen does not identify explicitly as an artist of the American West. Reflecting common conceptions of Western American art as in the

⁷³⁵ Liz Cohen, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷³⁶ “Liz Cohen (b. 1973),” Salon 94, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://salon94.com/artists/liz-cohen/>; “Gráfica América,” Museum of Latin American Art, accessed September 5, 2023, <https://molaa.org/grafica-america-liz-cohen>.

past and the work of white men, she asserts that this is due to art of the American West's traditional omissions of Latinx histories as well as the fact that she is "not interested in cowboys."⁷³⁷ Regardless, Cohen's creation of an ultra-hybrid lowrider, her photographs posing alongside it as a car model, and her driving the vehicle throughout West Texas in *Bodywork and On the River Road* all emphasize the necessity of including her artwork and its related histories within discussions of Western American art.

BODYWORK: A TRIAD OF SEX, CARS, AND THE FEMALE BODY

In *Hood* (2006), an example from Cohen's *Bodywork* project, a woman lounges across the front of a modified truck in an industrial setting (Figure 32). Dramatic, green-tinted lighting illuminates the garage space and spotlights both the vehicle and the woman posed, unsurprisingly, on its hood. Dressed in a metallic blue one-piece and silver heels, the woman—Cohen—stares directly at the viewer as she poses with her long, dark hair tossed over one shoulder. Although there is a sense of artificiality inherent in the image, in large part due to its lighting and lack of other figures or cars present in the garage, Cohen appears alert but relaxed as she drapes herself across the hood of the truck. The hardness in her stare challenges the viewer to question her presence in the space, which is full of contradictions. The truck, called a Trabantomino by Cohen, presents a classification problem to viewers; while the front half of the vehicle calls to mind old-fashioned, mid-century trucks, its tires and back half, with its exposed inner mechanics and iconic El Camino tail, clashes with its solid front. Similarly, Cohen herself seemingly clashes with the vehicle that she has created. Although her pose and attire links back to a long lineage of car models used to advertise vehicles in a flashy manner, one doubts that

⁷³⁷ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

these models would have ever been used to sell such a utilitarian vehicle as the Trabant, which comprises the Trabantimino's front half. The dings and scuffs littering the vehicle's surface also contrasts with the glamour of Cohen's presentation. Questions, then, of what is for sale and why arise.

In *Hood*, Cohen takes on three conflicting roles with the creation of the image: mechanic (a stereotypically masculine role), car model (a stereotypically hypersexualized, feminine role), and photographer (a stereotypically voyeuristic role). Combined, she questions both gender roles in the automobile industry and the female agency that can be created or obscured through voyeurism. In the photograph, Cohen is not physically driving her Trabantimino. Yet, it is clear that she is "behind the wheel" of the scene. Sexuality and agency exist hand-in-hand, and there is no suggestion that Cohen is sacrificing either by posing in a provocative manner in front of the vehicle that she built.

Bodywork is one of Cohen's best-known bodies of work and features the Trabantimino, the hybrid lowrider that she created from a "dilapidated" East German Trabant and an American El Camino.⁷³⁸ While building the vehicle, Cohen simultaneously transformed her own body to take on the persona of a bikini model for car shows.⁷³⁹ In doing so, she confronts "American cultural norms as they pertain to the eroticization of the automobile industry" in addition to "the challenging role of women's bodies in that space."⁷⁴⁰ Beyond these challenges, *Bodywork*, with its Frankenstein-like, amalgam vehicle, also examines the hybridity present in Cohen's own identity. Photographs from the project investigate Cohen's "in-betweenness as a first-generation

⁷³⁸ "Liz Cohen (b. 1973)," Salon 94.

⁷³⁹ "Liz Cohen (b. 1973)," Salon 94.

⁷⁴⁰ "Liz Cohen (b. 1973)," Salon 94.

Latina and a child of the Cold War.”⁷⁴¹ More specifically, images from *Bodywork* also document the period of time that Cohen spent at bodyworks shops in Oakland, California, and Scottsdale, Arizona, creating the Trabantimino.⁷⁴² Just as the photographs of a skimpily-clad Cohen next to an East German-meets-Americana car might be surprising, to many, so was Cohen’s involvement in building the vehicle. She notes that, “I knew I was the last person anyone would think to build a car” and that, growing up, “there was no tinkering in the garage. It wasn’t something I did or was exposed to.”⁷⁴³

While Cohen’s role as a mechanic might have been and continue to be unexpected to some, her role as a bikini model next to the vehicle comes as less as a surprise. Sanger asserts that “imagining the car as a place of independence and solitude for women becomes more complicated when we consider connections between cars and sex. The car itself—long, sleek, and powerful—has long been associated with sexuality.”⁷⁴⁴ She argues further that using women to sell cars is a familiar method, as the “tedious practice of draping women across car hoods at auto shows and the prominence of long-legged young women in car ads...remain successful marketing techniques.”⁷⁴⁵ Jain supports this claim by noting that, for decades, women have been “ubiquitously draped over hoods and sprawled in passenger seats in car ads and shows.” She questions, “[w]hat kinds of displacements and identifications take place here?”⁷⁴⁶ Many, including Sanger, would argue that the associations between, women, sex, and cars are uniformly negative and exploitative. While this argument has historical merit and, in many cases, is

⁷⁴¹ Liz Cohen, “Bodywork,” LizCohenStudio.com, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.lizcohenstudio.com/body-work>.

⁷⁴² Cohen, “Bodywork.”

⁷⁴³ Sarah Rose Sharp, “A Ride With Liz Cohen,” *Hyperallergic*, published March 27, 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/810699/a-ride-with-liz-cohen/>.

⁷⁴⁴ Sanger, “Girls and the Getaway,” 710.

⁷⁴⁵ Sanger, “Girls and the Getaway,” 709.

⁷⁴⁶ Jain, “Violent Submission,” 196-197.

unequivocally true, in *Bodywork*, Cohen challenges this generalization to harness the power and agency inherent in the triad of sex, cars, and women.

“NEGOTIATIONS AND CONCESSIONS:” COHEN’S TRABANTIMINO

Merging two disparate forms and ideologies, Cohen’s Trabantimino “serves as a document of a series of negotiations and concessions between its two sources.”⁷⁴⁷ While the El Camino represents the “American high capitalist systems of production,” the Trabant is illustrative of the “late Socialist economy of the former East Germany.”⁷⁴⁸ Cohen purchased the latter from Berlin in 2002 and brought it back to the States to transform it into an El Camino and remake the vehicle as “a fringe member of American custom car culture.” Manufactured in East Germany from 1959 through 1991, the Trabant, to Cohen, “embodie[s] the East German values of utility, simplicity, and resourcefulness” and, because of this, is “the utopian East German car.”⁷⁴⁹ If the Trabant represents the ideals of East Germany, the El Camino is its American utopian counterpart. Cohen notes that the El Camino was also manufactured throughout the Cold War era and was purported to be a “one stop shopping car—it had the speed of a muscle car, the comfort of a sedan, the utility of a pickup truck.”⁷⁵⁰ However, as with the Trabant, which was “stinky and slow” and not easily accessible to East Germans, the El Camino also “exposed the pitfalls of what is lost in translation from big idea to tangible product.” Instead of a one stop shopping car, the El Camino “didn’t do any of the things it set out to do well,” as a full load in its

⁷⁴⁷ Chad Alligood, “Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor,” in *Liz Cohen: On the River Road: From Presidio to Terlingua* (David Klein Gallery, 2012), 1.

⁷⁴⁸ Alligood, “Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor,” 1.

⁷⁴⁹ Liz Cohen, “Trabantimino,” LizCohenStudio.com, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.lizcohenstudio.com/trabantimino>. She notes that, since fiberglass was not available during production, the car’s panels “were made with waste products mixed with resin—in the beginning shredded wool military uniforms and later paper waste.”⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁵⁰ Cohen, “Trabantimino.”

flatbed could crack its frame.⁷⁵¹ Representing a collision of Germany-meets-Southwest, the Trabantimino taps into a longer legacy of German appropriations of Western American cultures. Yet, Cohen flips that legacy on its head by taking in and remixing an object of German cultural heritage to become Southwestern.⁷⁵² By combining two supposedly utopian—but actually underperforming vehicles—she questions not only the legacy of lowriders in the U.S. but also the potentials that arise when mixing two seemingly disparate sources.

Writing about the Trabantimino, curator Chad Alligood asserts that the vehicle, “like the lowrider culture to which it pays homage, seems to revel in its flashiness, extending and retracting on its hydraulic haunches—practically grinning through the chrome of its grill.”⁷⁵³ On a surface level, it is fair to say that the Trabantimino is all flash, no substance. It can drive only thirty to forty miles before Cohen needs to refuel it, and because of this, she must travel with an additional car carrying gas canisters on journeys longer than that milage, including the one she undertook for *On the River Road*.⁷⁵⁴ These problems with the vehicle connect its hybrid form to the unfulfilled potentials of two supposedly utopian cars from which it draws. Furthermore, despite Cohen’s assertions that the Trabantimino occupies a unique space, the vehicle is linked clearly to the history of lowriding, which she identifies as “an immigrant subculture that blossomed during the same Cold War time period that the Trabant and the El Camino were manufactured.”⁷⁵⁵

Cohen is clear that, while the car is a hybrid of two distinct vehicles, the Trabantimino began as a Trabant, which she transformed *into* an El Camino by the inclusion of “hydraulics in

⁷⁵¹ Cohen, “Trabantimino.”

⁷⁵² Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024. Cohen likes this interpretation of the Trabantimino.

⁷⁵³ Alligood, “Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor,” 1.

⁷⁵⁴ Alligood, “Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor,” 1.

⁷⁵⁵ Cohen, “Trabantimino.”

its expanding chassis.” This hydraulic technology is used often in lowriders, and expansions to the Trabant’s wheel-base and rear match those of a 1973 Chevrolet El Camino, as well.⁷⁵⁶ Yet, Cohen is also adamant that the Trabantimino can never truly be an El Camino, nor can it be “a Trabant anymore either.”⁷⁵⁷ This state of in-betweenness relates directly to the international immigrant artists in the previous chapter as well as Cohen’s own complicated sense of self as a Latina artist with a multicultural background.

A substantial reason that Cohen is drawn to the legacy of lowriding is its history of blending cultures and influences in promotion of a unique Latinx identity. She notes that what she “love[s] about lowriding is that it started off as a culture of defiance.” Instead of working towards precision and “hot rod speed,” as with the Trabantimino, lowriders are “meant to go low, slow, and clown or call attention.” Correspondingly, they have functioned as a “display of creativity by a marginalized [L]atino culture in East Los Angeles and around the southwest.”⁷⁵⁸ Arts writer Sarah Rose Sharp asserts that “Cohen’s interest in fringe culture and outsider-vs-insider experience comes from her transnational roots.”⁷⁵⁹ Specifically, Cohen’s family’s “short history” in the Southwest extends back to 1971, when her parents immigrated from Colombia to Phoenix, where she would later be born, following a visa lottery.⁷⁶⁰ Furthermore, Cohen’s learned Spanish before English and traveled often from the Southwest to visit family in Colombia and Panama as a child. Noting that Cohen’s mother was from a Catholic family and her father from an Orthodox Syrian Jewish family, Sharp comments that “Cohen’s inheritance was a heady mixture of influences and culture clash.”⁷⁶¹ This culture clash is reflected explicitly

⁷⁵⁶ Cohen, “Trabantimino.”

⁷⁵⁷ Cohen, “Trabantimino.”

⁷⁵⁸ Cohen, “Trabantimino.”

⁷⁵⁹ Sharp, “A Ride With Liz Cohen.”

⁷⁶⁰ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁶¹ Sharp, “A Ride With Liz Cohen.”

by the bulky-yet-flashy Trabantimino. Cohen states that “having a Jewish last name, and having parents that are immigrants, and identifying as Latina, I mean, I’ve always felt kind of outsider, too. Like, outsider-insider.” As with the Trabantimino, which is neither fully Trabant nor El Camino, she asserts that “whatever group I’m in, I’m not really one hundred percent the thing.”⁷⁶²

Cohen’s feelings of “outsider-insider” extends, in part, to bodyworks communities in which she built her Trabantimino. She acknowledges that, “unless someone’s working in the office,” she was the only woman working on a car in those spaces and that “[i]t’s definitely very gendered.” Yet, Cohen is clear that she was accepted in the garages in which she worked and photographed and that the *Bodyworks* project “couldn’t even have happened without the generosity of people there.”⁷⁶³ However, this is not to say that she was allowed to work without some interference; Cohen asserts that “I would say I was hazed at Elmwood Body Works [in Scottsdale]. Love those guys.”⁷⁶⁴ This hazing was on the mild side. For example, Cohen’s mentor at the shop, Bill, gave her a set of hand tools to strip her Trabant by hand, which she did. No one offered her the easier and more utilized compressed air tools for this involved labor, and because of this, Cohen believes that she “earned my credit.”⁷⁶⁵

While building her Trabantimino, Cohen also transformed herself into “the image of bikini models that were a hand-in-glove feature of custom car culture” in the hopes of accompanying her lowrider to Southwestern car shows.⁷⁶⁶ While car models are an accepted and expected component of car shows, Cohen’s refashioning herself into such a woman was not.

⁷⁶² Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁶³ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁶⁴ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁶⁵ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁶⁶ Sharp, “A Ride With Liz Cohen.”

Contributing to the preexisting feeling of outsider-insider as someone not expected to work on cars, Cohen notes that “I had short hair and hairy legs and armpits...I was not the person you thought would become a bikini model.”⁷⁶⁷ Overall, the *Bodyworks* project prompted Cohen to ask several questions concerning outsider-insider identity, including “[c]ould I become a real member of custom car culture? Can I really become a low rider? Can I become a bikini model?” Even though she felt that affirmative answers to these questions were “farfetched,” Cohen believed that, “with enough labor,” it was possible.⁷⁶⁸

VOYEURISM AND *ON THE RIVER ROAD*

In *Bodyworks* photographs such as *Hood*, Cohen examines how “the voyeurism that’s inherent in photography could shift over the course of a project” and how she “really became a part of what I was looking at.”⁷⁶⁹ This interest in seeing and being seen is pervasive throughout Cohen’s entire body of work, including *On the River Road*. She notes that “I’m a photo person. Voyeurism is my game [laughs].”⁷⁷⁰ To Cohen, voyeurism is “integral to the critical issues in photography,” including “lived experience inside-outside.”⁷⁷¹ For projects such as *Bodyworks* and *On the River Road*, the images that Cohen creates emphasize her idea that “there’s something important about looking at things that are different from ourselves, and analyzing them, and seeing how we might fit within them.” This is because, sometimes, “we really want to fit. We deserve to fit. We don’t fit, and sometimes, it’s appropriate to have that desire and to want to be a part of something.”⁷⁷² In photographs from both series, Cohen is front and center in

⁷⁶⁷ Sharp, “A Ride With Liz Cohen.”

⁷⁶⁸ Sharp, “A Ride With Liz Cohen.”

⁷⁶⁹ “Liz Cohen (b. 1973),” Salon 94.

⁷⁷⁰ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁷¹ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁷² Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

the compositions to emphasize “the central role of her body in the production of both what’s on display and the identity that arises from those visual signs.”⁷⁷³ This idea centers around Cohen’s history as a moving woman of the American Southwest, a history reflected explicitly in images from *On the River Road*.

In *Lowrider Builder and Child* (2012) from *On the River Road* (Figure 33), a woman—Cohen—reclines on a blanket spread on the sandy ground before a pale-yellow modified car. As the sun sets behind the mountains at her back, she breastfeeds her small child while making direct eye contact with the viewer. Her black one-piece matches the pair of dark-colored pumps kicked off on the blanket before her as well as her infant’s black t-shirt and the black bandana tying back her hair. The gray, white, and black stripes of the *serape* upon which she reclines also correspond with her and her child’s attire. The setting sun catches and illuminates the chrome details of the vehicle behind the pair. Its extended body, which reveals the vehicle’s gleaming inner mechanics, contrasts with the traditional and dated-looking cab comprising the front half of the vehicle. As a whole, the car, a composite lowrider, appears out of place with its natural surroundings. These include the sandy and grassy riverbank illuminated by golden light where the vehicle is parked as well as the mother feeding her infant before it. While a thin road stretches off into the setting sun on the far right of the composition, no other travelers or vehicles can be seen. The “River Road,” as the photograph’s title alludes to, runs along a winding river whose levels have fallen significantly.

Breastfeeding before a river, Cohen—the lowrider builder of the work’s title—taps into various art historical lineages with her photograph: that of the reclining female nude, that of the Virgin and Child, and those equating women and the land as nourishing and life-providing

⁷⁷³ Alligood, “Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor,” 2.

resources. The fact that she is feeding her child complicates or subverts the lineage of the reclining female nude, however; while women such as those by nineteenth-century artist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres are rendered as docile, nude objects to be observed and admired, Cohen actively stares down the viewer as she breastfeeds her child to defy this passivity. Furthermore, Cohen's photograph challenges deliberately the voyeurism associated with women on the move, in which the women become sights to see as much as any tourist destinations along the way. While set up like a deliberate tableau for a viewer to stumble upon and take in, Cohen's image emphasizes the looking perpetrated by the lowrider builder herself, who gazes self-assuredly out at the viewer as she feeds her child.

For *On the River Road*, Cohen drove her Trabantimino along the Rio Grande in Texas.⁷⁷⁴ The drive came to be because of Cohen's inclusion in an exhibition at Ballroom Marfa in Marfa, Texas, just a few hours away from the Mexican border and Big Bend National Park. One of the creators of Ballroom Marfa, Fairfax Dorn asked Cohen if there was anything that she would like to do when in the area, and Cohen requested that they undertake a test drive of the Trabantimino and have a photoshoot during its journey. Dorn agreed, and Cohen drove the Trabantimino to the Mexican border as well as to Terlingua, Texas, on the River Road. At the time, Cohen's son—who is seen in *Lowrider Builder and Child*—was only two months old, so the test drive was a celebration not only of finishing or “giving birth” to the car, but also a celebration of the birth of Cohen's son.⁷⁷⁵

The resulting images reflect Cohen's struggle to “figure out myself as an artist, a new mother,” a struggle seemingly resolved during her journey through the Southwest.⁷⁷⁶

⁷⁷⁴ Liz Cohen, “On the River Road,” LizCohenStudio.com, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.lizcohenstudio.com/on-the-river-road>.

⁷⁷⁵ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁷⁶ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

Additionally, with the drive's proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border, the project acknowledges the constructed nature of such borders and the interchange of culture across them. Cohen notes that, as lowrider culture and the Trabantimino reflect, "there's always been movement" across borders. While, often, "it's harder to move across," she asserts that "there's always been movement and exchange."⁷⁷⁷ In most images from *On the River Road*, Cohen is dressed scantily, akin to a car model, and posed alongside the Trabantimino. In a few of those photographs, the compositions span the U.S.-Mexico border to capture both countries. One would not inherently know that these images show both Mexico and Texas, as the landscape photographed is completely uniform. It is this creation of arbitrary boundaries and the movements that can occur across them—a topic examined extensively with Cabrera's work in the preceding chapter—that was "important" for Cohen in *On the River Road*.

Beyond its focuses on borders and moving women in the Southwest, *On the River Road* highlights Cohen's interests in the expenditure of labor and reveals the possibilities inherent in hard work. Alligood notes that, in images from the series, Cohen ostensibly controls "the means of production." By "directing and conceiving the photograph, the car, her identity, the family—and enacting her own labor to produce them," in photographs such as *Lowrider Builder and Child*, Cohen discovers "creative possibility in the concept of physical work."⁷⁷⁸ Cohen's scene partner in the photographs, the Trabantimino displays the care the Cohen took in its production; Alligood describes the vehicle as "proudly gleaming in the waning Texas sun" and "a sculptural feat in its own right forged by the artist's own hands."⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁷ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁷⁸ Alligood, "Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor," 1.

⁷⁷⁹ Alligood, "Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor," 1.

The prominence of the Trabantimino in the images, as well as the inclusion of her son and husband in others, allows Cohen “to draw structural parallels between the significant and ongoing physical labor of producing such an object and the other labors on display here: maternal, familial, and photographic.”⁷⁸⁰ However, Cohen’s labor is not the only work on display throughout *On the River Road*; the photographs result from the collaborative effort of Cohen’s bodywork mentors, child, husband, and the seven crew members that accompanied her on her Texas drives.⁷⁸¹ The location of the photographs along the U.S.-Mexico border also calls to mind inevitably U.S. exploitation of Mexican labor over the past century. As a whole, works from *On the River Road* tap into issues of voyeurism, borders, and the female body to emphasize that moving women can control the “means of production” of their own identities, in part through the expenditure of labor.

BLENDING CARS, BLURRING BORDERS, BECOMING A MODEL

In photographs from her *Bodyworks* and *On the River Road* series, Cohen captures unexpected “outsider-insider” relationships. While no one would have expected Cohen, with her particular background, to build her own lowrider or turn into its traveling bikini model, she does both—each its own monumental achievement. Works such as *Hood* and *Lowrider Builder and Child* challenge the consumption of female bodies through gaze and feature Cohen looking defiantly back at those who take her in. Beyond this, the photographs of the Trabantimino on the move link explicitly back to lowrider history in the Southwest and the legacy of the cars as vehicles of identity. In doing so, the series work towards Cohen’s goals for the genre of art of the

⁷⁸⁰ Alligood, “Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor,” 2.

⁷⁸¹ Alligood, “Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor,” 2. Cohen notes that her husband is her “fabrication partner for the child,” (Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024).

American West. One of these goals is to promote “integrated narratives,” those “where a lot of voices are heard instead of just one hyper-masculine voice,” which she believes is what is “in the popular imagination when you say ‘art of the American West.’”⁷⁸²

By situating herself as the subject of works from *Bodywork* and *On the River Road*, Cohen challenges explicitly hyper-masculine conceptions of Western American art as well as stereotypes about Latin women. Carpio notes that, in many fictionalized accounts, “Latina drivers are consistently framed as ‘bad women,’” those who “reject patriarchal structures and the limited social roles of virgin, mother, or whore.”⁷⁸³ In *Bodywork* and *On the River Road*, Cohen encompasses all three roles to investigate and challenge conceptions of outsider-insider knowledge. In doing so, she aligns with Carpio’s argument that, although “these transgressions are used to paint women as deviant,” one can view Latina drivers such as Cohen “as mobile agents whose lives defy the norms of both white domesticity and Latina womanhood.”⁷⁸⁴ For Cohen, this defiance is purposeful; she notes that, coming of age in the 1990s, she often bumped up “against a very prescribed version of feminism,” a version whose totality she questions.⁷⁸⁵ Cohen argues that, in the U.S., “we’ve become so strict in our interpretations of people and things, and I’ve always thought that’s dangerous.”⁷⁸⁶ Challenging this strictness in interpretations is, at their core, the overwhelming focus of both *Bodywork* and *On the River Road*. With this work, Cohen reflects her idea that the American West is “a special part of the country where we have so many exchanges of culture.”⁷⁸⁷

⁷⁸² Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁸³ Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 178.

⁷⁸⁴ Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 178.

⁷⁸⁵ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁸⁶ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁸⁷ Cohen, interviewed by Murphy, January 19, 2024.

WENDY RED STAR

Lastly, we turn to Apsáalooke artist Wendy Red Star. As with Simpson, in examples from Red Star's body of work, she emphasizes the importance of automobility to her Indigenous American community. Unlike the other artists in this chapter who focus on depicting or facilitating automobility, however, one photographic series by Red Star is solely the interesting byproduct of movement by car. While Nakadate and Cohen present images of themselves navigating the American West—akin to the images of the iconic “man on a horse” that focus on his riding—Red Star's work centers around what is seen as one drives through a western community. She is not the view, nor did she build the vehicles that either facilitate or are the focus of her photographic work. In this way, Red Star places the focus overwhelmingly on her community and its long legacy as keen navigators of automobility.

Born in 1981 in Billings, Montana, Red Star grew up on the Crow Indian Reservation in south-central Montana and is an enrolled member of the Crow Tribe of Montana.⁷⁸⁸ Being surrounded by and participating in the Apsáalooke—or Crow—culture during her time on the reservation was formative for Red Star, who has an Apsáalooke father and a white mother. She notes that, “I grew up knowing that I was Crow, and that was just normal. When something's normal to you, you don't really ask a lot of questions. You're just living and being it.”⁷⁸⁹ Following high school, Red Star enrolled at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana, before establishing herself as a well-known and well-respected contemporary artist.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁸ Patrick D'Arcy, “A new Native narrative: Wendy Red Star's work is a learning journey through untold Native history,” Emerson Collective, published November 18, 2022, <https://www.emersoncollective.com/articles/a-new-native-narrative-wendy-red-stars-work-is-a-learning-journey-through-untold-native-history>; Wendy Red Star and Chelsea Malone, “Conversation: Chelsea Malone,” in *Bíilukaa* (Radius Books, 2023), 126.

⁷⁸⁹ D'Arcy, “A new Native narrative.”

⁷⁹⁰ D'Arcy, “A new Native narrative.”

Currently residing in Portland, Oregon, Red Star creates artwork that spans media but is centered around Indigenous experiences and epistemologies. Her practice often confronts “misconceptions around Native identity from a distinctly feminist, Indigenous perspective” through humor, archival research, and images from her own life.⁷⁹¹ Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson asserts that Red Star’s photography, in particular, is “a pivotal component in her cross-disciplinary work,” one that challenges the problematic legacy of white photographers taking images of Native peoples “to recuperate formerly silenced narratives and voices.”⁷⁹² In work such as *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* (2011) and *A Float for the Future* (2021), Red Star centers “moments of defiant Apsáalooke self-representation” through her use of photographs in combination with each other or sculptural elements to make connections between past and present, community and individual (Figures 34 & 35).⁷⁹³ Discussing her practice, Red Star asserts that genealogy and kinship factor strongly into her artwork and that she is “part of my great-great-grandma, my great-great-grandfather, my dad, my daughter. We’re all parts or copies of those people or traits that are embedded in us. Thinking about all those ancestors lined up behind you is fascinating to me.”⁷⁹⁴

A prolific traveler, Red Star searches for Apsáalooke belongings and ancestral connections in both local museums as well as national archives “as she explores how her own body interacts with places both real and imagined.”⁷⁹⁵ Seeking out these objects functions as a way of connecting Red Star to her community’s histories and as a method of grounding herself. Bryan-Wilson notes that Red Star’s interactions with Apsáalooke materials outside her

⁷⁹¹ Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Wendy Red Star: Crow Hands, Crow Objects,” *Aperture*, no. 240 (2020): 130, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27078378>.

⁷⁹² Bryan-Wilson, “Wendy Red Star: Crow Hands, Crow Objects,” 130.

⁷⁹³ Bryan-Wilson, “Wendy Red Star: Crow Hands, Crow Objects,” 130.

⁷⁹⁴ Amanda Tobin and Levi Prombaum, “Red Star Care Syllabus,” published October 2020, <https://www.caresyllabus.org/red-star-care-syllabus-interview>.

⁷⁹⁵ Bryan-Wilson, “Wendy Red Star: Crow Hands, Crow Objects,” 130.

community “have been a crucial artistic and emotional resource for her.”⁷⁹⁶ These interactions lead to the creation of what Red Star labels as “visual research and output” and reflects her interests in studying history. For her, creating artwork offers more room for experimentation than traditional teaching methods of history and is her “clearest form of communication.”⁷⁹⁷ Such clear communication of her tribe’s historical and contemporary movements in the American West—and the lasting legacies of these movements—are reflected explicitly in *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* and *A Float for the Future*.

Before delving into the specifics of Red Star’s two photographic series focused on the Crow reservation, it is important to reiterate a few concepts that run throughout this project: the arbitrariness of borders and long legacy of Native mobility preceding, coinciding with, and following contact. In *Transnational Indians in the North American West*, scholars Andrae Marak and Gary Van Valen note that, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the American West, allegiances and boundaries shifted constantly. Boundaries, including those of reservations, could be social, political, or economic and were imposed by settler colonial powers.⁷⁹⁸ Specifically, the United States government both “restricted Indigenous landholding and created borders around [N]atives’ remaining lands.”⁷⁹⁹ This creation of borders juxtaposes harshly the longstanding movements of Indigenous peoples throughout Western America and helped advance the progress of the settler colonial heteropatriarchy in the States. Marak and Van Valen argue that, across the North American West, “boundaries sometimes matter and sometimes do not. The concept of a North American Western region itself crosses international borders.”⁸⁰⁰

⁷⁹⁶ Bryan-Wilson, “Wendy Red Star: Crow Hands, Crow Objects,” 133.

⁷⁹⁷ Tobin and Prombaum, “Red Star Care Syllabus.”

⁷⁹⁸ Andrae Marak and Gary Van Valen, *Transnational Indians in the North American West*, ed. Clarissa Confer, Andrae Marak, and Laura Tuennerman (Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 4.

⁷⁹⁹ Marak and Van Valen, *Transnational Indians in the North American West*, 6.

⁸⁰⁰ Marak and Van Valen, *Transnational Indians in the North American West*, 10.

While this is, perhaps, an oversimplification, there is a definitive element of truth to their claim: borders in the American West have not often constrained completely the movements of Native peoples.⁸⁰¹ With their utilization or examination of Apsáalooke automobility, Red Star's *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* and *A Float for the Future* reflect this idea explicitly.

“CROW COUNTRY, KEEP IT BEAUTIFUL:” EXAMPLES FROM *MY HOME IS WHERE MY TIPI SITS*

One example from Red Star's *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* series features a grid-like arrangement of photographs of informational signs against lush, green landscapes (Figure 36). The signs include those for specific locations such as “Pryor High School,” “First Crow Indian Baptist Church,” “Lodge Grass Head Start Program,” and “Chief Plenty Coups State Park.” Delineating boundaries and pointing to further community development, other signage includes “Welcome to Crow Country,” “Entering Crow Indian Lands, Non Tribal Members Restricted to Paved Roads,” “Crow Country, Keep it Beautiful, Don't Litter,” and “Project Funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.” Surprisingly, the buildings, boundaries, or projects that the signs advertise for are not actually visible in the images; one can see only the rich landscapes surrounding them. In stark contrast to stereotypical “poverty porn” images that only document rundown or underdeveloped areas of reservations, Red Star's photographs in *My Home* highlight the programs and initiatives that her tribe has in place to advance their community's development. While it is understood that movement around Red Star's reservation was necessary to take the photographs, the series' title also references the Crow tribe's larger histories of mobility.

⁸⁰¹ Marak and Van Valen, *Transnational Indians in the North American West*, 11.

As an undergraduate student at Montana State, Red Star attended Native American Studies courses in which she learned about the creation of the reservation and allotment systems. This knowledge prompted her to learn more about the Crow community and their historical relationships with the U.S. government.⁸⁰² Specifically, during this research, Red Star came across an Apsáalooke chief born in the late eighteenth century named Sits in the Middle of the Land. She notes that he “was the first chief that was asked to find the boundaries of our territory” for the U.S. government.⁸⁰³ The title of Red Star’s *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* series draws directly from his 1868 response, “[m]y home is where my tipi sits,” and his subsequent mapping out of more than thirty-eight million acres, upon which “he rested each of the four poles on different seasonal camping sites.”⁸⁰⁴ To Red Star, Chief Sits in the Middle of the Land’s response “highlights the contrast between Western notions of property and land ownership and the inherently nomadic lifestyle of the Crow people.” Red Star emphasizes this contrast in *My Home* “by presenting the markers of the Crow lifestyle, rather than a map or boundary” as a method of cataloguing reservation life.⁸⁰⁵

Red Star’s photographic documentation of her Apsáalooke community reflects, in part, her interests in the legacy of photography within her community and the work of the white photographers who have toured the reservation. From 1900 to 1912, over twelve photographers visited the Crow Reservation, a marked increase from the three photographers per decade from 1870 to the turn of the century and from 1910 to the beginning of World War II. Literature scholar Shamoon Zamir argues that the influx of photographers reflects the fact that Apsáalooke

⁸⁰² D’Arcy, “A new Native narrative.”

⁸⁰³ D’Arcy, “A new Native narrative.”

⁸⁰⁴ Wendy Red Star, “My Home Is Where My Tipi Sits,” WendyRedStar.com, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.wendyredstar.com/myhomeiswheremytipisits>; D’Arcy, “A new Native narrative.”

⁸⁰⁵ Red Star, “My Home Is Where My Tipi Sits.” In addition to taxonomies of signs, Red Star creates photographic groupings of churches, sweat lodges, governmental housing, and “rez” cars in the series.

peoples were “seen by many as the stereotypical Native subjects for representation” and were “[f]riendly to the U.S. government throughout the turbulent period of the so-called Plains Indian Wars.”⁸⁰⁶ In particular, the photographs of Apsáalooke life on the Crow Reservation that the white photographer Richard Throssel took have fascinated Red Star more than the work of other outsider photographers. From 1902 to 1911, Throssel lived on the Crow Reservation as he worked first as a clerk for the Crow Agency offices and then as an Indian Service field photographer.⁸⁰⁷ Prior to his move to Billings, Throssel “took personal photographs of regular life on the reservation” as well as intimate events that he gained access to by developing trust with those in the community.⁸⁰⁸ Red Star notes that she “love[s]” Throssel’s work because of how much the Apsáalooke community trusted him and the “extraordinary, so powerful and dignified” portraits of women that he took.⁸⁰⁹

The significance of the photographic legacy of the Apsáalooke tribe is reflected explicitly by Red Star’s *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits*, a series that offers a visual exploration of identity and the structures that have helped form it. This usage of photography to examine Native identity has a long history that extends beyond white images of Native peoples; Comanche writer Paul Chaat Smith asserts that Native Americans “have been using photography for our own ends as long as we’ve been flying, which is to say as long as there have been cameras and airplanes.”⁸¹⁰ Red Star’s mixed heritage has been a facet of her identity that has increased in complication over the course of her life. She notes that she “specifically remember[s] being called a half-breed”

⁸⁰⁶ Shamoon Zamir, “The Crow and Photography,” in *The Gift of the Face: Portraiture and Time in Edward S. Curtis’s The North American Indian* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 157.

⁸⁰⁷ Zamir, “The Crow and Photography,” 140, 141.

⁸⁰⁸ Zamir, “The Crow and Photography,” 140, 141; Wendy Red Star and Emily Moazami, “People of the Earth: Wendy Red Star in Conversation with Emily Moazami,” *Aperture*, no. 240 (2020): 29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e27078355>.

⁸⁰⁹ Red Star and Moazami, “People of the Earth,” 30.

⁸¹⁰ Paul Chaat Smith, “Every Picture Tells a Story,” in *Partial Recall: Photographs of Native North Americans*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (The New Press, 1992), 97.

while growing up on the Crow Reservation but “never thought that that was a bad thing.”⁸¹¹ However, once she began college, she experienced discrimination and became self-conscious of her community. She stresses that, until attending Montana State, she “didn’t even know that I lived on a reservation.”⁸¹² It is precisely that reservation, its structures, and its reflection of larger Apsáalooke histories that Red Star documents with *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits*, a photographic series created from Red Star’s own movements throughout her home.

Art historian Christopher Green asserts that *My Home*’s three-by-three grid arrangement of photographs is “indebted” to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, two modern German artists who documented, in black and white, industrial buildings in the U.S. and Europe (Figure 37). As with the Bechers, Red Star’s arrangement of images of signage and structures from the Crow Indian Reservation emphasizes their “aesthetic status” and evokes taxonomic structures.⁸¹³ Yet, the Bechers’ work presents a “distanced, ethnographic tone” and reflects “dominant modernist and colonial strands of classification.”⁸¹⁴ In contrast, Red Star’s gridded, close-up images are infused with vibrant color and cultural meaning to “send the message that her community’s landscape is best documented by someone from the inside.”⁸¹⁵ Calling to mind the tone of the FX series *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023), created by Seminole filmmaker Sterlin Harjo and Māori actor Taika Waititi, Red Star’s *My Home* “create[s] a portrait of life on the rez that counters

⁸¹¹ Wendy Red Star, Molly Malone, and Wallace Red Star, “Conversation: Wallace Red Star and Molly Malone, Part 1,” in *Bīilukaa* (Radius Books, 2023), 59.

⁸¹² Red Star, Malone, and Red Star, “Conversation,” 65.

⁸¹³ Christopher Green, “‘My Home is Where My Tipi Sits’ (2011),” *The Brooklyn Rail*, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/07/1by1/My-Home-is-Where-My-Tipi-Sits-2011#>.

⁸¹⁴ Lauren Moya Ford, “Wendy Red Star’s Empowered Vision of Crow History,” *Hyperallergic*, published April 21, 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/717699/wendy-red-star-empowered-vision-of-crow-history/>; Green, “‘My Home is Where My Tipi Sits’ (2011).”

⁸¹⁵ Ford, “Wendy Red Star’s Empowered Vision of Crow History;” Green, “‘My Home is Where My Tipi Sits’ (2011).”

romanticization with a touch of grounded humor” to challenge stereotypes of Native peoples “buried deep in the American visual subconscious.”⁸¹⁶

NATIVE AMERICAN AUTOMOBILITY

Rather than detached documentations of the Crow Indian Reservation’s infrastructure, then, Red Star’s *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* presents “loving portraits” of reservation elements. Red Star’s “portraits of place,” which Green conceptualizes as images illustrating her “personal relations with Apsáalooke territory, her home reservation, and broader notions of landscape and belonging,” reveal an “intimacy of knowing” missing from the work of white photographers of Native spaces such as Throssel.⁸¹⁷ Combined, the grided images of *My Tipi* examine “the mundane objects of rural life” while demystifying romantic stereotypes of Native peoples.⁸¹⁸ In his influential text, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004), Deloria notes that these stereotypes include the expectations that “Indians are primitive, unaccustomed to...modern technology...Indians live in the hinterlands.”⁸¹⁹ It is unsurprising, then, to learn that, for most Americans, Walter Ferguson’s iconic 1904 image of Ndendahe Apache leader Geronimo and three companions in an automobile was a “historical event” that represents the “unexpected juxtaposition of Indians and cars,” (Figure 38).⁸²⁰ However, as Deloria argues, Native peoples have embraced locally the automobile and “blurred together Indian pasts, presents, and futures as they sallied back and forth across the boundary markers of gender, class, and primitivism.”⁸²¹

⁸¹⁶ Green, “‘My Home is Where My Tipi Sits’ (2011).”

⁸¹⁷ Green, “‘My Home is Where My Tipi Sits’ (2011).”

⁸¹⁸ “Wendy Red Star: My Home Is Where My Tipi Sits (Crow Country),” Missoula Art Museum, published 2011, <https://missoulaartmuseum.org/exhibits/wendy-red-star-my-home-is-where-my-tipi-sits-crow-country>.

⁸¹⁹ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 4.

⁸²⁰ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 136.

⁸²¹ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 14.

Red Star contributes to that blurring with *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits*, a series that not only utilized photographic and automobile technologies to produce its images, but also counters longstanding assumptions about reservation life. As this chapter emphasizes, cars have been one of America's "most evocative symbols." Deloria explains that "[m]obility, speed, power, progress: these things matter, and Americans of every race, class, gender, and origin have found ways to express them in automotive terms."⁸²² While the automobile was often "mobilized as a marker of social progress and racial difference," he underscores that automobility was a mutually shared experience among many groups.⁸²³ Beyond transporting individuals "from point A to point B," as the work of Nakadate, Cohen, Simpson, and Red Star stresses, "automobiles express a driver's sense of self and of the nature of his or her power."⁸²⁴ As such, cars have "served as a form of empowerment" and made "Indians, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, workers, and all manners of women just a little more threatening."⁸²⁵

One way that Native individuals have historically utilized automobility was not only traveling within reservations, as Red Star does in *My Home*, but also traveling between reservation lands and other Native communities. At the turn of the twentieth century, most non-Native Americans believed Native peoples to be "corralled on isolated and impoverished reservations, missed out on modernity—indeed, almost dropped out of history itself."⁸²⁶ Unsurprisingly, this was not the case. In his discussion of cars and the reservation system, Deloria notes that, during this time, especially in the American West, reservations "remained landscapes characterized by great distances." Automobility enabled Native peoples to both "take

⁸²² Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 138.

⁸²³ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 14.

⁸²⁴ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 138.

⁸²⁵ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 146.

⁸²⁶ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 6.

possession of the landscape” and make “reservations into distinctly tribal spaces,” spaces that Red Star documents decades later in *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits*.⁸²⁷ The long distance and intertribal travel that automobiles facilitated also led to the creation of new pan-Indian expressions, as cars “offered transportation for the frequent visits and gatherings so often part of Native life.”⁸²⁸ Beyond conveyors of people, automobiles also could function as “mobile housing” on the Plains in a reprisal of “the older functions of both horse and tipi.”⁸²⁹

As a whole, Deloria summarizes the importance of cars to Native peoples at the turn of the twentieth century by stating that the “*auto* and the *mobility* that made up the word *automobile* pointed exactly to the ways in which mobility has helped Indian people preserve and reimagine their own *autonomy* in the face of the reservation system.”⁸³⁰ This is especially true on the Crow Indian Reservation at this time as eighty percent of proceeds from allotment sales were used to purchase luxury goods and cars.⁸³¹ Yet, due to their significance in fostering Native autonomy, automobiles should not be considered luxury purchases. Rather, Deloria emphasizes that, for Native communities, buying a car and using it to travel “may have been a more sensible way to make meaningful life than to take a horse-drawn plow to the soil.”⁸³² The significance of cars within reservation life underlying Red Star’s *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* is reflected more explicitly in her installation created a decade later, *A Float for the Future*.

A FLOAT FOR THE FUTURE: REMIXING THE CROW FAIR PARADE

⁸²⁷ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 153.

⁸²⁸ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 153, 154.

⁸²⁹ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 154.

⁸³⁰ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 153. Emphasis in original.

⁸³¹ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 151.

⁸³² Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 152.

An installation photograph of *A Float for the Future* shows a child-sized, silver pickup truck donning a feather headdress on a display platform in front of a wall of framed collages and a wall with a decorative, geometric mural. The form of the vehicle, the size of which calls to mind a drivable children's toy, is mirrored by the automobiles featured in the collages displayed behind it. Small figures in elaborate garb and various arrangements—including in or on vehicles—against bright backgrounds can be seen in these works. The bright colors used in these figurative collages are reflected by the large mural on the next wall, which features geometric, primary-colored arrangements of shapes associated commonly with Indigenous women's art of the Great Plains. Specifically, the mural mirrors the form and decoration of parfleches, rawhide containers used by Plains tribes for travel. Collectively, the installation's elements combine both historical and modern technology in the form of automobiles, parfleche decorations, and Crow regalia to create a larger picture about the inherent mobility of Apsáalooke peoples. As Red Star's work emphasizes, this mobility not only includes moving across space, but also through time and society.

For *A Float for the Future*, Red Star draws from the iconography of the Crow Fair Parade to create an altered world celebrating both past and present.⁸³³ Held in August in Montana every year, the Crow Fair was first established in 1904 by a white Indian agent residing on the Crow Indian Reservation, Samuel G. Reynolds.⁸³⁴ Based off the popular format of the county fair, an event where "local people would bring their harvest and cattle, their prize animals and crafts," Reynolds incorporated elements from Apsáalooke culture to encourage community participation.

⁸³³ Wendy Red Star, "A Float For the Future," WendyRedStar.com, published 2021, <https://www.wendyredstar.com/a-float-for-the-future>.

⁸³⁴ Wendy Red Star, "Wendy Red Star: A Float for the Future," *ArtReview*, published June 27, 2022, <https://artreview.com/wendy-red-star-a-float-for-the-future/>.

One element was the parade that occurs each morning to symbolize “the movement to a new camp and recalling [of] a time when the Apsáalooke were able to move across the Plains.”⁸³⁵

Red Star uses images, many of which show moving women sitting on top parade cars, from past Crow Fair Parades in the collages for *A Float for the Future*. Emphasizing the importance of automobility within the community, these parade cars are decorated in ornate fabrics that mirror the intricacy of the regalia donned by some of the women and men accompanying them. These fabrics echo the materials of the shawls, quilts, and dresses made by Crow women, including Red Star’s grandmother, that can be seen adorning the parade vehicles in Red Star’s collages (Figure 39).⁸³⁶ Specifically, Red Star notes that much of Crow regalia is made from wool, “which is hot and itchy,” so many wear “softer satin fabrics beneath.” These are the fabrics comprising the backgrounds of *A Float*’s collages.⁸³⁷ Furthermore, the miniature pickup truck accompanying the collages is formed from papier-mâché and is moderately decorated for the Crow Fair Parade. The bonnet that the truck dons mirrors one made by Clive Francis Dust, Sr., a man “known in Wendy’s family and the Apsáalooke community for his creativity as a cultural keeper” that is included in one of the installation’s collages. Red Star asserts that showing both the “outer regalia and the clothes underneath” in *A Float* function as a method of “acknowledging the identity of Apsáalooke people, not just in terms of how we celebrate publicly, but also...it’s a window into what’s normally hidden or less visible.”⁸³⁸

The importance of visibility is reflected throughout Red Star’s collages for *A Float* and larger Crow traditions. She states that, even though Apsáalooke individuals are not encouraged to brag about themselves in their culture, in *A Float for the Future*, every automobile “represents a

⁸³⁵ Red Star, “Wendy Red Star: A Float for the Future.”

⁸³⁶ Red Star, “Wendy Red Star: A Float for the Future.”

⁸³⁷ Red Star, “Wendy Red Star: A Float for the Future.”

⁸³⁸ Red Star, “Wendy Red Star: A Float for the Future.”

family and there are clues within every float that tell you about who this family is, like maps of identity.” While one should not promote oneself, “your family or your clan can do that for you.”⁸³⁹ As a whole, *A Float for the Future* reflects the joy that Red Star has experienced at Crow Fairs and the pride with which parade vehicles have been dressed. As an adult, she recognizes that “these parade vehicles are really indicative of the resilience of our culture; they’ve become a symbol of subverting that attempt to make the Apsáalooke assimilate, as well as a challenge to the ‘American’ identity that’s so bound up with car culture here.”⁸⁴⁰ Thus, in *A Float for the Future*, Red Star links explicitly the connection between automobility in the Great Plains and the preservation and promotion of Apsáalooke culture, especially the work and legacies of Crow women. In doing so, she answers the question, “how do we move forward?”⁸⁴¹

In Red Star’s *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* and *A Float for the Future*, the importance of vehicles as conveyers of identity is stressed, whether explicitly or implicitly. While no cars can be seen in *My Home*’s images, it is understood inherently a vehicle would have been needed to traverse and photograph the Crow Indian Reservation to that extent. This travel and reliance on a car reflect the importance of automobility to Great Plains tribes, as vehicles have enabled Native peoples to move to tribal gatherings and through reservations since the turn of the century. The adoption of cars by communities such as the Apsáalooke also challenges stereotypes about Native peoples and their supposed lack of modernity, as outlined by Deloria. The significance of vehicles and automobility is represented more explicitly in *A Float for the Future*, with its various representations of Crow Parade vehicles. In every collage, these vehicles are decorated with banners, flags, clothing, and other items to become literal conveyers of culture.

⁸³⁹ Red Star, “Wendy Red Star: A Float for the Future.”

⁸⁴⁰ Red Star, “Wendy Red Star: A Float for the Future.”

⁸⁴¹ Red Star, “A Float For the Future.”

Connecting women explicitly to automobility, many of the vehicle's decorations are objects or artwork made by Apsáalooke women. Across both series by Red Star, it becomes readily apparent that, in the face of the harsh challenges of the reservation system and into the twenty-first century, Crow people have utilized automobility as a method of facilitating, preserving, and promoting Apsáalooke cultural heritage and traditional knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In the twenty-first century, women create and drive their cars in a manner that equals, if not exceeds, male automobility. This is despite the historical tendency to exclude women from discussions of American automobility, including the engineering of automobiles, in the twentieth century.⁸⁴² However, as the artists in this chapter reflect, women's interactions with their cars are “not simply paper copies of men's,” but rather, illuminate issues of identity and the “bodily experiences of femininity.”⁸⁴³ In particular, the work of Laurel Nakadate, Rose B. Simpson, Liz Cohen, and Wendy Red Star illustrates the significance of car culture to women driving through the mythic landscapes and everyday communities of the American West. With their movements, which connect to the overarching, twentieth-century dominance of car culture in the West, in general, and the mobilities of their own communities, in particular, the artists emphasize how their cars act as vehicles for their complex personal and communal identities.

Throughout this chapter, Nakadate, Simpson, Cohen, and Red Star claim, build, and utilize cars for their unhurried movements in the American West. Philosopher Gillian Rose asserts that the “everyday” movements of women—including those documented by the artists of this chapter—are not unremarkable. Rather, even in “the seemingly banal and trivial elements of

⁸⁴² Walsh, “Gendering Mobility,” 376.

⁸⁴³ Jain, “Violent Submission,” 195; Clarsen, “Gender and Mobility: Historizing the terms,” 240.

the everyday” are connections to “the power structures which limit and confine women.”⁸⁴⁴ For women, cars have never offered the bodily freedom that they have for men. In particular, Sanger asserts that, “[d]espite the advertised glamour and the promise of freedom and fun, women’s use of cars carries unexpected (or at least unadvertised) problems.” She elaborates that “cars are dangerous places by virtue of their physical characteristics—cramped, immobilizing, portable space—and by virtue of the cultural connection between cars and sex.”⁸⁴⁵ All the artists in this section work to destabilize this association. Simpson and Cohen combat actively this legacy of danger by creating their cars with their own hands to suit their specific aesthetic and conceptual needs. Furthermore, with their western movements facilitated by their vehicles, Nakadate and Red Star eschew any fears of danger while driving in the spacious American West to explore or reclaim their families’ legacies in the mythic area.

The car type that these women are building, the lowrider, is a form unique to the American West, and the pickup truck that some are driving is archetypically associated with the area, as well. These vehicles’ drivers have important personal and group ties to the area, and the communities that they are documenting or recalling in their work also have unique roots in Western America. The efficacy of Nakadate, Simpson, Cohen, or Red Star’s artwork discussed in this chapter would not be as strong if one of these links were missing; their cars act as vehicles of their multicultural identities, identities that have been shaped significantly, both recently and in the past, by the American West and its car culture. Take one of these facets away—say, Cohen built her own Prius and drove it through West Texas, or Nakadate drove a borrowed pickup through upstate Maine—and the result is much different. The vehicle becomes merely a tool for

⁸⁴⁴ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographic Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 17.

⁸⁴⁵ Sanger, “Girls and the Getaway,” 750.

creating a project rather than an active agent in the artwork, or the landscape through which the vehicle is driven has little to offer its driver on a personal level other than attractive views. Thus, one must take all three elements into consideration when studying the artists' work or risk misunderstanding the art on a fundamental level.

There has been little serious scholarship studying contemporary female automobility in the American West. Yet, as Nakadate, Simpson, Cohen, and Red Star demonstrate, the car has proved indispensable for women drawn to document their communities in or explore how their identities have been formed by driving through Western America. It is undeniable that cars have acted as vehicles of settler colonization in Western America. This artists in this chapter do not negate this history. Rather, they present a contemporary thread to intertwine with this legacy: cars have acted and will continue to act as vehicles of multicultural, feminine identity in the American West. Rather than reflect the dangers of cars to women, then, the work of Nakadate, Simpson, Cohen, and Red Star reflect the significance of "the mythical 'open road'" to women in the American West. From a cultural geographies approach, the open road in literature functions as a space for women "in which powerful regimes of gender, cultural and social difference are destabilized."⁸⁴⁶ As exemplified by Nakadate, Simpson, Cohen, and Red Star's artwork, the same conceptualization can be applied to the visual arts; all four artists grapple with and, then, manifests visually the results of the destabilization of difference with their work dealing with automobility. Their artwork emphasizes how the road can be conceived of as a "space of transition, clashing mobilities, and heterogenous encounters—a contact zone in the broad understanding of the term."⁸⁴⁷ From these contact zones, experienced by Nakadate, Simpson,

⁸⁴⁶ Alexandra Ganser, *Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000* (Rodopi, 2009), 14.

⁸⁴⁷ Ganser, *Roads of Her Own*, 58.

Cohen, and Red Star through their vehicles in the West, the artists form distinct cultural identities as they combat larger, exclusionary Western American histories and artwork.

CHAPTER FOUR

“YOU CAN HAVE YOUR SPACE, COWGIRL:” EXPLORATION, SPECTACLE, AND THE WEST OF THE FUTURE

Finally, we turn to artwork examining women pulled to the American West in search or in service of spectacle.⁸⁴⁸ Their movements have often been motivated by the lure of the myth of the West, whether it is to see what that myth purports to exist in Western America or to help perpetuate that myth for others. In the all-female, country music band The Chicks’ 1998 hit, “Wide Open Spaces,” the group reflects this as they sing of a young woman heading out West in search of “new faces” and “high stakes.” They ask, “[w]ho doesn’t know what I’m talking about?/Who’s never left home? Who’s never struck out?/To find a dream and a life of their own/A place in the clouds, a foundation of stone.”⁸⁴⁹ The history of tourism in the American West emphasizes that, over the past two centuries, many Americans have turned to the West in search of the entertainment and supposed authenticity in “wide open spaces” offered by the mythic territory. In doing so, they have played (un)witting parts in the promotion of settler colonialism; a major component of Manifest Destiny in Western America has been the exploration of supposedly uncharted frontiers for recreation. While the definition of “tourist” is often summarized as “someone who travels to experience unfamiliar surroundings,” scholars such as Susan Rhoades Neel assert that tourism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries helped create “an ethnicity of whiteness, thus helping to recast the West as Euro-American.”⁸⁵⁰ She argues further that tourism comprises “a form of cultural conquest” and as such, is one

⁸⁴⁸ This chapter’s title is a reference to Kasey Musgrave’s 2018 song, “Space Cowboy.”

⁸⁴⁹ The Chicks, “Wide Open Spaces,” track 2 on *Wide Open Spaces*, Monument, 1998, compact disc.

⁸⁵⁰ David M. Wrobel, “Introduction: Tourists, Tourism, and the Toured Upon,” in *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West*, ed. David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long (University of Kansas Press, 2001), 16; Susan Rhoades Neel, “Tourism and the American West: New Departures,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 4 (1996): 517, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i287107>.

component of what historian Patricia Nelson Limerick has conceptualized as the “legacy of conquest” in the United States.⁸⁵¹ The four artists in this chapter all challenge, both explicitly and implicitly, this legacy of conquest through their work centered around western spectacle.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historian Dee Brown contends that “[o]ne of the recurrent phrases on almost every lip during America’s period of western expansion was ‘seeing the elephant.’”⁸⁵² While the phrase has had various meanings, at its core, seeing the elephant entailed “going west with one’s eyes wide open, expecting to find marvels and wondrous fortunes.”⁸⁵³ As art historian Lucy R. Lippard notes, the search for the novel is still an inherent component of American exploration and tourism, as “we see travel as escape, getting away, going somewhere ‘else’—often inhabited by ‘others’ whose dissimilarities will be exaggerated and exoticized.”⁸⁵⁴ Yet, as with any searches for authenticity, explorers looking to see the elephant have been often left disappointed and “monstrously defrauded in the end.”⁸⁵⁵ As the artwork examined in this chapter will emphasize, as well, many have been excluded from considerations of tourism and exploration; Neel argues that tourism is often privileged “as something white people do and people of color do not,” and Lippard observes that “[i]mmigrants and the internally displaced are rarely asked how they see their surroundings.”⁸⁵⁶

The American popular imagination also does not often call women to mind when thinking of those who explore Western American spaces. Yet, Brown notes that women “no less than men expected to see the elephant when they started westward, and often wrote back home, both wryly and proudly, that they had done so.”⁸⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in the same text that he makes

⁸⁵¹ Neel, “Tourism and the American West,” 521, 517.

⁸⁵² Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 110.

⁸⁵³ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 110. One of the ultimate “elephants” to see was Native peoples.

⁸⁵⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place* (The New Press, 1999), 2.

⁸⁵⁵ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 110.

⁸⁵⁶ Neel, “Tourism and the American West,” 521; Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 2-3.

⁸⁵⁷ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 110.

this assertion, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (1958), Brown fails to include “explorer” in the four archetypes of women in the American West that he identifies—“gentle tamers,” “sunbonneted helpmates,” “hell-raisers,” and “bad women.”⁸⁵⁸ In contrast, scores of white men have made names for themselves after being lured by the spectacle of the American West. This group includes the likes of John C. Frémont, John Wayne, John Muir, and Edward Abbey, all of whom have been memorialized and idolized, despite their controversial pasts, for their daring natures and commitment to preserving the western wilderness. However, as the artwork examined in this chapter by Katie Hargrave and Meredith Laura Lynn, Martine Gutierrez, and April Bey emphasizes, women have and will continue to be significant explorers and performers of the American West of the past, present, and future.

This is not to say that, as with the iconic “man on a horse,” female exploration and performance in the West has been unbridled. Rather, through their artwork, Hargrave, Lynn, Gutierrez, and Bey reveal the voyeurism accompanying constantly women’s movements throughout the American West and the barriers that this observation erects. In part, their work also debunks the myth of the West by emphasizing that the search for a “true” or “authentic” West will always be unrealized as it does not exist in a singular form. Of this dissertation’s four chapters, this section—both formally and thematically—is the least cohesive. Instead of a downside, I view this miscellany as a boon. The variety present in this chapter emphasizes a larger argument threaded throughout this project, that the future of Western American (art) history is not unidirectional. There is no one, set path forward for the field. Discussions of Western American mobilities have yet to acknowledge or analyze seriously artwork that documents, reflects, or is the result of the touristic movements and exploration of contemporary

⁸⁵⁸ Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, “The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West,” *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (1980): 179, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i287044>.

women. This chapter aims to remedy this omission. Using “movement to see or be seen in the service of spectacle” as the grouping characteristic for Hargrave, Lynn, Gutierrez, and Bey’s work allows me to connect seemingly disparate artwork that, in reality, all questions how issues of identity formation and authenticity are performed in the American West.

KATIE HARGRAVE AND MEREDITH LAURA LYNN

With their installation work centered around the National Park System in in Utah, Katie Hargrave and Meredith Laura Lynn delve into the spectacle associated with preserved wildernesses and the men who have been lauded for conserving or exploring them. Their mixed-media artwork, which draws from their own travels to “see the elephant” in the West, reflects the tensions surrounding issues of accessibility and preservation in national parks and how these landscapes have become both iconic and commercialized. Born in 1985 in Chicago and 1984 in Boston, respectively, Hargrave and Lynn met at the University of Iowa during their MFA programs before they began collaborating seriously together in 2018.⁸⁵⁹ Prior to earning her MFA from Iowa, Hargrave, who now resides in Chattanooga, Tennessee, earned an MA from Brandeis University and a BFA from the University of Illinois.⁸⁶⁰ An associate professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Hargrave notes that she often uses “found objects” and references to “existing forms” in her practice, which takes place both in and outside of gallery spaces to unravel “the intention of the ‘real’ reference.”⁸⁶¹ A curator at the Museum of Fine Arts at Florida State University, where she also teaches as an assistant professor, Lynn earned a BFA from

⁸⁵⁹ Katie Hargrave and Meredith Laura Lynn, interviewed by Olivia E. Murphy, January 22, 2024; “Katie Hargrave + Meredith Laura Lynn / Over Look/Under Foot,” Granary Arts, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.granaryarts.org/katie-hargrave-meredith-laura-lynn-over-look-under-foot>.

⁸⁶⁰ Katie Hargrave, “About,” KatieHargrave.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.katiehargrave.com/about>.

⁸⁶¹ Hargrave, “About.”

Cornell University and an MA and MFA from the University of Iowa. Residing currently in Tallahassee, Lynn's scholarly and creative projects investigate "the impacts of climate change and land management and ownership."⁸⁶² As collaborators, Hargrave and Lynn's individual interests are combined and reflected explicitly in their joint work about Western American expansion, including their 2020 installation *Over Look / Under Foot* (Figure 40), which aims to "unpack the complex narratives that unfold around so-called public land."⁸⁶³

Hargrave and Lynn's collaboration is both rooted and interested in the concept of Western American mobility; Lynn notes that traveling and "moving through space and the landscape is actually something that is enabled" because of their work together.⁸⁶⁴ In 2018, following a residency that both of them participated in for an organization called Signal Fire based in Portland, Oregon, Hargrave and Lynn began to collaborate seriously together on artistic projects.⁸⁶⁵ Hargrave states that the residency, specifically, "was about developing artists who were advocates for so-called 'public land.'"⁸⁶⁶ As Hargrave and Lynn traveled through the West together to and from the residency, they both realized that they shared "really similar ways of wanting to spend time," including RV culture, reading road signs, and "paying attention to the way that people are using campgrounds" in states such as Wyoming and Utah.⁸⁶⁷ Out of this road trip, which also included stops at cultural and historic places as well as national parks, Hargrave and Lynn developed "some initial collaborative projects," from which "things just kinda

⁸⁶² Meredith Laura Lynn, "About," MeredithLauraLynn.com, accessed July 23, 2023, <https://www.meredithlauralynn.com/about.html>.

⁸⁶³ Lynn, "About."

⁸⁶⁴ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024. Lynn emphasizes that "women and people of color are in more precarious positions when they're on so-called 'public land,' so working together also makes them "feel more comfortable doing a kind of travel that we might not be able to do on our own."

⁸⁶⁵ Kate Mothes, "Pitching Nature: Meredith Laura Lynn and Katie Hargrave examine the histories and industries that shape our experiences in the outdoors," *Dovetail*, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://dovetailmag.com/meredith-laura-lynn-katie-hargrave/>.

⁸⁶⁶ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁸⁶⁷ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

snowballed from there.”⁸⁶⁸ Their subsequent collaborations such as *Over Look / Under Foot* “tug at the seams that hold a beloved façade together” as they question how “Americans shamelessly uphold mythologies and willfully tune out honest narratives.”⁸⁶⁹

THE EXCLUSIONARY NATURE OF WESTERN EXPLORATION AND THE NPS⁸⁷⁰

One beloved mythology that Hargrave and Lynn challenge with *Over Look / Under Foot* is that of the National Park Service (NPS), which they identify as inherently settler colonial and overtly exclusionary in their work. In the nineteenth century, the supposed “healing power of wilderness” motivated the idea for the National Park Service in the United States. Venturing “out there” in nature was seen to supposedly “recharge our batteries” and transform oneself.⁸⁷¹ Established in 1916, the National Park Service sought to “save the western landscape’s most spectacular aspects—the highest mountains, the deepest canyons, and the most dramatic waterfalls” so that it “would remain unspoiled yet publicly accessible for future generations.”⁸⁷² Facilitating this public access, however, proved difficult in early NPS days as the first national parks were situated in the American West, and a majority of the U.S. population lived in the East. One early solution to this problem was to promote the use of the transcontinental railroad lines established in 1869 to visit the parks.⁸⁷³

⁸⁶⁸ Mothes, “Pitching Nature.”

⁸⁶⁹ Veronica Kavass, “The Time Has Come: *Over Look/Under Foot*” gallery guide essay (The New Gallery, 2020), 2.

⁸⁷⁰ At the time that I finish writing this dissertation, the National Park Service is being radically dismantled by decreased funding, layoffs, and other prohibitive measures put in place by President Donald Trump’s second administration. Emphasizing the inherent facility belying the concept of “so-called public lands,” the accessibility in national parks that Hargrave and Lynn both seek out and challenge is facing complete erasure. Interpreting *Over Look / Under Foot* in the face of the currently unfolding events of Spring 2025 is beyond the scope of this dissertation but is an important project that I aim to tackle imminently.

⁸⁷¹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (The New Press, 1997), 129.

⁸⁷² Kirby Lambert, “The Lure of the Parks,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 46, no. 1 (1996): 49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i406190>. Naturally, this meant displacing and barring from entry the Native communities that lived in such areas.

⁸⁷³ Lambert, “The Lure of the Parks,” 44.

Following World War I, the increasing popularity of car travel facilitated the end of the “railroad domination of western tourism,” and in the 1910s and 1920s, the “See America First” campaign encouraged Americans to keep their tourism at home and use their vehicles to visit American wonders, including national parks.⁸⁷⁴ Automobiles offered less restrictive and more affordable means of travel, and thus, “ultimately opened western reserves to middle-class Americans as never before.”⁸⁷⁵ Naturalist John Muir—the explicit subject of Hargrave and Lynn’s 2022 project, *Mirror Muir* (Figure 41)—and his Sierra Club embraced the use of cars in national parks as a method of promoting economic growth.⁸⁷⁶ The accessibility concerns exhibited by the NPS were not entirely purehearted, however, as officials “knew that they had to sell the parks” in order to keep the NPS afloat.⁸⁷⁷

Geographers Joe Weber and Selima Sultana note that “[i]t has been said that the national parks are ‘America’s Best idea,’ as they are ‘Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best.’”⁸⁷⁸ The sites that the National Parks Service maintains include those of “incomparable beauty” and “unparalleled historical significance to Americans.”⁸⁷⁹ However, as Hargrave and Lynn examine in *Over Look / Under Foot*, the National Parks System has been fundamentally elitist and discriminatory since Yellowstone was established as the first national park in 1872.⁸⁸⁰ Weber and Sultana argue that, because the formation of early western national

⁸⁷⁴ Lambert, “The Lure of the Parks,” 50, 49.

⁸⁷⁵ Lambert, “The Lure of the Parks,” 50.

⁸⁷⁶ David Louter, “Glaciers and Gasoline: The Making of a Windshield Wilderness, 1900-1915,” in *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West*, ed. David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long (University of Kansas Press, 2001), 257.

⁸⁷⁷ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West,” in *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West*, ed. David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long (University of Kansas Press, 2001), 48-49.

⁸⁷⁸ Joe Weber and Selima Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks? Visitation and the Accessibility of ‘America’s Best Idea,’” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 3 (2013): 438, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2012.689240>.

⁸⁷⁹ Weber and Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?,” 438.

⁸⁸⁰ Weber and Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?,” 444.

parks such as Yosemite and Yellowstone required the displacement of Native peoples from their homelands, the very idea of wilderness promoted by the NPS “was viewed as ‘white.’”⁸⁸¹ Furthermore, for the over one-hundred-plus years that national parks have existed in the United States, exploring the sites “has been and remains overwhelming a practice of the white population.”⁸⁸² A 2011 NPS survey found that the percentage of U.S. residents who could list a national park that they had visited in the two prior years “were disproportionately white and non-Hispanic.”⁸⁸³

Recently, concerns about the lack of diversity among national park visitors has resulted in a strong push “from within and without the National Park Service” for greater inclusivity within the National Park System.⁸⁸⁴ Prior common assertions that the National Park Service “reflect[s] the central values of American culture and that public land is open to all” have increasingly been questioned as much of the population fails to visit national parks.⁸⁸⁵ While scholars have developed several theoretical perspectives concerning “the lack of minority participation in outdoor recreation activities such as visiting national parks,” including assimilation, marginality, subcultural or ethnic, and discrimination hypotheses, it is clear that the fact that the NPS is rooted fundamentally in white-centric policies and practices contributes to its current exclusionary nature.⁸⁸⁶ It is this exclusionary nature of the National Park System and bigotry of many of its iconic proponents that Hargrave and Lynn examine critically in work such as *Over Look / Under Foot*.

⁸⁸¹ Weber and Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?,” 445.

⁸⁸² Weber and Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?,” 438.

⁸⁸³ Laura Burd Schiavo, “‘White People Like Hiking:’ Some Implications of NPS Narratives of Relevance and Diversity,” *The Public Historian* 38, no. 4 (2016): 207, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26420925>.

⁸⁸⁴ Schiavo, “‘White People Like Hiking,’” 206.

⁸⁸⁵ Weber and Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?,” 438.

⁸⁸⁶ Weber and Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?,” 443.

The inherent discrimination of the National Park Service has extended to its views and reception of women in the national parks. Hargrave and Lynn's *Over Look / Under Foot* is a direct challenge to the enduring legacy of excluding feminine participation in the spectacle of parks exploration and visitation. While Weber and Sultana acknowledge that gender should factor into discussions of tourism and its demographics, they assert that "there seems to be even less research on gender and national parks than on race or ethnicity."⁸⁸⁷ Although there has been some study of the role that women have played in forming, running, and laboring in national parks, there has been little examination of women as national parks visitors.⁸⁸⁸ American studies scholar Laura Burd Schiavo cautions against relying on these demographic statistics wholeheartedly, however. She argues that simplistic assessments on who utilizes the National Park System "fail to acknowledge the complexity of identity" and often "are too simplistic given all we know about intersectionality."⁸⁸⁹ Regardless, with examples from *Over Look / Under Foot*, Hargrave and Lynn mark their interests in Utah's national parks to reclaim women's historic exclusion from these spaces.

"YOU CAN'T SEEN ANYTHING FROM A CAR:" OVER LOOK / UNDER FOOT

For their work *Arches*, from *Over Look / Under Foot*, Hargrave and Lynn erected a silk tent covered with collaged images from Arches National Park in Utah (Figure 42). On one panel of the tent, the park's iconic Delicate Arch can be seen as tourists, often taking their own photographs of Arches' famous geological structures, populate the tent's other various panels. On another section, the outline of a tent appears to glow. The angles and facets of Arches' geological

⁸⁸⁷ Weber and Sultana, "Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?," 458.

⁸⁸⁸ Weber and Sultana, "Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?," 458.

⁸⁸⁹ Schiavo, "White People Like Hiking," 208, 226.

monuments mirror the angles and facets of the silk tent in a manner that creates a visual parallel between the images and their container. Behind the tent, a blown-up photograph showing the silk structure in the very landscape that it references has been installed. In the in-situ photograph, the earthy tans and rich reds of Arches' rocky outcroppings represented on the silk tent mirror the dirt and NPS buildings comprising its surroundings. Situated within Arches National Park's boundaries in the photograph, the tent adopts a type of quasi-camouflage where its collaged images of the natural environment enable it to blend in in various locations across the park. The clear road running alongside the tent in the in-situ photograph as well as the Park Service building next to it represent, in large part, the often-controversial moves towards accessibility that the NPS has made within their sites.

For *Over Look / Under Foot*, Hargrave and Lynn utilized materials such as coolers, postcards, and the tent of *Arches* "as sculptural bases" manipulated by photographic images to investigate "so-called public lands."⁸⁹⁰ Throughout the spring of 2020, Hargrave and Lynn visited all of Utah's national parks and created works during and after their journey. The series resulting from these travels and exploration, *Over Look / Under Foot*, explores "how these sites have been mediated by infrastructure" and "the complexities of a relationship to landscape that is heavily mediated by vehicles, cameras, and our own nostalgia."⁸⁹¹ Individual works within the series such as *Arches* comment upon "the way the very tools that help humans understand American 'wilderness' simultaneously help them destroy it."⁸⁹² Utah, in particular, has a complex and contentious history of roads mediating access to public lands while also stripping

⁸⁹⁰ Katie Hargrave, "Collaboration between Meredith Laura Lynn & Katie Hargrave," KatieHargrave.com, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.katiehargrave.com/meredithlauralynn>.

⁸⁹¹ "Katie Hargrave + Meredith Laura Lynn / Over Look/Under Foot," Granary Arts.

⁸⁹² Kavass, "The Time Has Come: *Over Look/Under Foot*," 1.

them of their protective designations as wilderness—aside from national parks.⁸⁹³ It is these various tensions surrounding access and mobility that *Over Look / Under Foot* reflects as it asks gallery visitors themselves to be mobile; the arrangement of the installation direct viewers to walk not just around the perimeters of the gallery space, but throughout its entirety as they navigate around various three-dimensional works. In doing so, the viewer also becomes implicated in discussions of mobility in Utah’s national parks.

A byproduct of the artists’ interests in RV culture, for their visits to Arches, Canyonland, Capitol Reef, Bryce Canyon, and Zion National Parks, Hargrave and Lynn transformed a teardrop camper into a camera obscura, which they towed behind them on their journey.⁸⁹⁴ They note that, as “RVs can recreate the comfort and access of home,” they have become ubiquitous in “the middle of spaces the federal government has set aside to be preserved as wild.”⁸⁹⁵ Cameras, on the other hand, can isolate moments or memories, “letting all other surrounding moments fall away ‘like sheer cliffs.’”⁸⁹⁶ While an RV might not appear out of place in a national park, Hargrave and Lynn emphasize that utilizing the camper as a camera came with limitations. Lynn notes that, to complete its transformation, the pair had to black out the camper’s windows. The sight of a camper driving around with blacked out windows is, as she asserts, “kind of weird.”⁸⁹⁷ As Hargrave used the camera to make images inside the camper, Lynn was “outside play acting at a reason to be stopped, because, often, we’re stopped in a place where you’re not really

⁸⁹³ For more information, see the “Utah Wilderness Act” included in Utah Code: https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title63L/Chapter7/C63L-7_2014040320140513.pdf; the 1964 federal “Wilderness Act:” <https://suwa.org/the-story-of-americas-red-rock-wilderness-act/>; and the efforts of the Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC) to document proposed wilderness areas in Utah, culminating in their “Wilderness at the Edge” proposal: https://secure.suwa.org/site/SPageServer/?jsessionid=00000000.app20103a?NONCE_TOKEN=BE5DB0C9A6A7AD36AD1ABF268865D385&pagename=WATE_about.

⁸⁹⁴ Meredith Laura Lynn, “Over Look/Under Foot,” MerdithLauraLynn.com, accessed July 23, 2023, <https://www.meredithlauralynn.com/over-lookunder-foot.html>.

⁸⁹⁵ Lynn, “Over Look/Under Foot.”

⁸⁹⁶ Kavass, “The Time Has Come: *Over Look/Under Foot*,” 3.

⁸⁹⁷ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

supposed to be.”⁸⁹⁸ Frequently, this playacting took the form of eating a granola bar or looking at a map.

While, in the series, Hargrave and Lynn were interested in how national parks goers have interacted with the land, they were not interested in how those park goers would interact with them as they made their art.⁸⁹⁹ Both Hargrave and Lynn emphasize that their gender and age helped limit these interactions, which were difficult to avoid completely as the duo were literally “under foot” as they created work in areas populated significantly by tourists. Lynn observes that, while making *Over Look / Under Foot*, being a woman was “useful” because “you can kind of be a little invisible at times” and “people don’t assume that you’re doing something creepy.”⁹⁰⁰ Hargrave elaborates further than, “in contrast to the way a lot of people talk about women being looked at in the landscape, because we are approaching middle age...we’re kind of invisible in the landscape.”⁹⁰¹ As such, the pair felt motivated to experiment in ways that they might not have been comfortable with in the past or working alone because they believe that they are “an unseen category” that allows them “to take bigger risks, to some extent.”⁹⁰² I will delve further into the voyeurism accompanying tourists from marginalized groups in this chapter’s section on Martine Gutierrez, but it is worth noting for now the privilege inherent in this statement; it is unlikely that national park visitors of color could drive around in a blacked-out camper without raising some suspicion.

For the tent featured in *Arches*, however, Hargrave and Lynn did not use their camera obscura, but rather, gathered open-access tourist images of the national park, which they printed

⁸⁹⁸ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁸⁹⁹ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024. Lynn notes that she tried to appear as “a regular tourist doing regular tourist stuff.”

⁹⁰⁰ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁹⁰¹ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁹⁰² Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

onto silk and assembled into a tent.⁹⁰³ In Arches National Park, the artists set the tent up at the Devil’s Garden campground, the only “developed” campsite in the park. Until recently, visitors had to bring in their own water to Arches. Eventually, this led to visitors having difficulties with the composting toilets available, so NPS installed running water and built bathrooms at several locations in the park. It is in front of one of these new bathrooms at Devil’s Garden where Hargrave and Lynn set up their tent and photographed it. Unseen in the gallery installation photograph, the duo also videoed tourists taking photographs, footage they projected onto the side of the tent, to question “the difference between our portrayals of public land and the actual experience of it.”⁹⁰⁴

The other works included in *Over Look / Under Foot* similarly question public experiences in Utah’s national parks as well as the extent that the increasing number of visitors modifies the parks’ landscapes. For *Canyonlands*, Hargrave and Lynn parked their camper-camera at each of the seven outlooks available from a paved road in Canyonlands National Park “to photograph the view that many other vehicles were seeing” and question the view’s worthiness as a point of interest. By limiting their journey to that that they could make with their vehicle, Hargrave and Lynn challenged the radical environmentalist Edward Abbey’s assertion that “you can’t see anything from a car” in the wilderness.⁹⁰⁵ Similarly, to create the video for *Capitol Reef*, Hargrave and Lynn drove along an eight-mile scene drive through Capitol Reef National Park as they captured images with their camera obscura. In contrast, *Zion* features collages of the park made from archival postcards of Zion National Park upon which the roads

⁹⁰³ Lynn, “Over Look/Under Foot.”

⁹⁰⁴ Lynn, “Over Look/Under Foot.”

⁹⁰⁵ Katie Hargrave, “Canyonlands Overlook,” KatieHargrave.com, accessed January 16, 2024, <https://www.katiehargrave.com/canyonlands-overlook>. Dr. Kathleen Brosnan, an environmental historian, has advised me that many environmentalists would “bristle” at Abbey’s being grouped with them and that “radical environmentalist” would be a more appropriate classification.

through the site have been highlighted with reflective glass beads and road markings have been applied. Hargrave and Lynn note that attention to roads through Zion is growing as the NPS has “an increasing focus on managing driving traffic through the park.”⁹⁰⁶ Lastly, for *Bryce Canyon*, Hargrave and Lynn filmed in the visitor center and its parking lot at Bryce Canyon National Park. Then, they paired their footage with “found footage of other tourists’ visits to the park” to create one video that they projected “in shapes associated with road travel” onto a white tent.⁹⁰⁷

While their focus in *Over Look / Under Foot* is the overbearing whiteness of NPS spaces, Hargrave and Lynn are careful to recognize the Indigenous peoples of Utah, including Ute, Southern Paiute, and Puebloan peoples, who have cared for these sites in their practice. As they assert, “[w]hile these sites are under the control of the National Parks system, it is [I]ndigenous peoples who continue to put necessary pressure on the U.S. government to preserve these spaces.”⁹⁰⁸ As with much of the art examined in this dissertation, however, the history of Indigenous American movements and ecological stewardship in Western America is an important, yet largely unacknowledged thread throughout *Over Look / Under Foot*.

While Hargrave and Lynn recognize their positions as settler colonizers on Indigenous land and have been “heavily influenced by Indigenous scholarship and Indigenous approaches to discussing land conservation and land management,” for *Over Look / Under Foot*, their explicit discussion of the Indigenous peoples of Utah is limited to presenting them as an absent presence.⁹⁰⁹ The project asks viewers to consider broadly who is missing from so-called public lands rather than condemn the National Park System explicitly for their displacement of Native

⁹⁰⁶ Katie Hargrave, “Zion Postcards,” KatieHargrave.com, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.katiehargrave.com/zion-postcards>.

⁹⁰⁷ Lynn, “Over Look/Under Foot.”

⁹⁰⁸ “Katie Hargrave + Meredith Laura Lynn / Over Look/Under Foot,” Granary Arts.

⁹⁰⁹ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

American peoples or recognizing how Native stewardship and activism for these lands continues to this day beyond a land acknowledgement statement. Navajo, Hopi, Paiute, (Las Vegas Tribe and Maopa Band), Sincangu Lakota, Ute (Southern, Mountain, White Mesa, and the Tribe of Uintah and Ouray), and Zuni peoples have had enduring, complex relationships with the landscapes of Arches National Park long before the arrival of settler colonizers.⁹¹⁰ These relationships should be centered when considering who has been allowed access to these spaces and who has been excluded.

EDWARD ABBEY: ADVOCATE OR “SUCH A JERK?”

With their method of travel through Utah’s national parks as well as the imagery that works from *Over Look / Under Foot* utilize, Hargrave and Lynn challenge the legacy of famed, male outdoorsmen—specifically, Edward Abbey and his polarizing ideas about accessibility and the National Park System. In his 1968 text *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, Abbey bemoans the use of automobiles in national parks and proclaims that one “can’t see anything from a car.” As Hargrave and Lynn note, this statement contains a “value judgement.”⁹¹¹ To the duo, Abbey and other male conservationists such as Muir “equate a certain connection to nature with spirituality, purity, and a unique kind of enlightenment.” Yet, this type of outdoors experience “deliberately excludes most park goers,” especially those from underrepresented or marginalized groups.⁹¹² Because of the views expressed in *Desert Solitaire*, Hargrave labels Abbey “such a jerk” and his 1968 text “such an ablest book.” In the text, Abbey details his ideal

⁹¹⁰ “History & Culture – Arches National Park Utah,” National Park Service, accessed November 14, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/arch/learn/historyculture/index.htm#:~:text=Arches%20National%20Park%20acknowledges%20the,Reservation%2C%20Ute%20Mountain%20Ute%20Tribe%2C>.

⁹¹¹ Lynn, “Over Look/Under Foot.”

⁹¹² Lynn, “Over Look/Under Foot,” MerdithLauraLynn.com.

vision of the National Park System, one that excludes the elderly and the young from visiting due to their perceived infirmities.⁹¹³ As Hargrave explains, for Abbey, “if you can’t access it, then it’s not for you.”⁹¹⁴ It is Abbey’s feeling “like he should have control of the landscape” that proves “really fascinating” to Hargrave and Lynn. *Over Look / Under Foot*, as a whole, reflects the pairs interest in “looking at gender and looking at the ways in which white men feel an entitlement to the landscape, in a way that is different if you’re a woman or person of color.”⁹¹⁵

Limerick asserts that, without doubt, “Edward Abbey was industrial tourism’s most persistent and audible critic.”⁹¹⁶ Many conservationists such as Abbey shared the “common perception of automobiles in the [national] parks as something akin to the serpent in Eden.”⁹¹⁷ For Abbey, the introduction of automobiles and increased infrastructure in Arches National Park was a “cloud on my horizon...It’s name is progress.”⁹¹⁸ Yet, scholars such as David Louter argue that the appearance of cars in the national parks helped create “a new principle of preservation in which it was possible to commune with nature.”⁹¹⁹ The introduction of automobiles in national parks increased the sites’ accessibility to much of the population, and due to this, many Americans would primarily “interpret the park landscape from a road and through a windshield” in the twentieth century, as Hargrave and Lynn do in *Over Look / Under Foot*.⁹²⁰

As with many male conservationists or naturalists routinely lauded, Abbey was full of contradictions. Limerick notes that, through his prolific, “vigorous and appealing writing” about

⁹¹³ Specifically, see “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and The National Parks” in *Desert Solitaire*.

⁹¹⁴ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁹¹⁵ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁹¹⁶ Limerick, “Seeing and Being Seen,” 48. Susan Sessions Rugh defines industrial tourism as “the marketing of tourism as a commodity to be sold for mass consumption,” (Susan Sessions Rugh, “Branding Utah: Industrial Tourism in the Postwar American West,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 [2006]: 446, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25443412>).

⁹¹⁷ Louter, “Glaciers and Gasoline,” 224.

⁹¹⁸ Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (Ballantine Books, 1968), 51.

⁹¹⁹ Louter, “Glaciers and Gasoline,” 249.

⁹²⁰ Louter, “Glaciers and Gasoline,” 249.

the landscapes of the Southwest, Abbey helped increase tourism to the Four Corners area, “putting a little-known area squarely at the center of the reading public’s attention.” This is especially true of his text *Desert Solitaire* in which he simultaneously laments the influx of tourists to Arches and espouses appealingly the beauty of the wilderness around him. Limerick elaborates further that “Abbey was equally important for denouncing tourism and for recruiting more tourists.”⁹²¹ In Hargrave and Lynn’s *Arches*, the clear road running alongside the tent in the in-situ photograph as well as the NPS building beside it represent all that Abbey feared with industrial tourism and touristic explorations of the Southwest. It is worth noting that, as with Muir, Abbey was not quite the survivalist and savior of wilderness that he purported to be. In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey details the camper that he stayed in during his tenure in Arches, which was outfitted with electricity, as well as the NPS pickup truck that he had at his disposal. He discusses the water system put in place for his use and the generator that he would utilize occasionally.⁹²² In the same text, in different vignettes, Abbey speaks about a brush fire that he caused in Utah as well as a tire that he threw into the Grand Canyon for entertainment.⁹²³ With their *Over Look / Under Foot* work such as *Arches*, Hargrave and Lynn delve into the contradictions of both the development of national parks as well as the intricacies and biases of the supposedly “great” men who have been lauded as advocates of these wildernesses.

A CRITIQUE FROM WITHIN

With work such as *Arches* from *Over Look / Under Foot*, Hargrave and Lynn challenge the conception of national parks as inherently democratic. The resulting implication of this idea

⁹²¹ Limerick, “Seeing and Being Seen,” 48.

⁹²² See “The First Morning” in *Desert Solitaire*.

⁹²³ Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 236, 246.

is that to not visit the parks “is to be un-American,” which lands squarely on the shoulders of people from historically underrepresented or marginalized groups.⁹²⁴ Despite the increased infrastructure in the national parks, as documented in *Over Look / Under Foot*, national park visitors remain overwhelmingly white. Lynn and Hargrave hope that their work focused on Utah’s national parks encourages viewers to contemplate the complexities of these spaces and understand that “the National Park Service is complicated, the history of the National Park Service is complicated. It does a lot of good, but there’s also a destructive history and a settler colonial history there.”⁹²⁵ As Schiavo asserts, if “Americans want to continue to claim national parks as the ‘best idea America ever had’...then there remains a necessary question of why racial and ethnic minorities are severely underrepresented as visitors in the national park system.”⁹²⁶

Throughout *Over Look / Under Foot*, Hargrave and Lynn demonstrate their interests in the ways that the National Park System “has altered the landscape of these sites to make them more accessible to tourists.”⁹²⁷ The series also manifests the tensions between settler colonialism, public lands, and capitalism, which Lynn asserts “collide in Utah in ways that are more obvious and, maybe, more specific than in other places.”⁹²⁸ The pair is adamant that Manifest Destiny is a capitalist idea. As settler colonizers utilized photography and landscape painting to encourage westward expansion, Hargrave argues, they decided to “settle and conquer and steal everything that we can from those landscapes, even down to the views.”⁹²⁹ Continuing this legacy, the government has encouraged “[w]ealthy, predominately white tourists to ‘explore’ so-called public lands through U.S. land use policy and the outdoor industry,” including the national

⁹²⁴ Schiavo, “‘White People Like Hiking,’” 224.

⁹²⁵ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024

⁹²⁶ Weber and Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?,” 438.

⁹²⁷ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁹²⁸ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁹²⁹ Mothes, “Pitching Nature.”

parks.⁹³⁰ Hargrave and Lynn acknowledge that “explore” is used as a neutral term that does not recognize the “possible negative impacts of ballooning usage on fragile landscapes rich in cultural relevance,” and because of this, they are “wary” of “exploration” and locate their work within that wariness.⁹³¹ The pair also recognizes that they are also participating in tourism for *Over Look / Under Foot*, which utilizes technologies that existed in different forms in the nineteenth century and “enabled the project of settler colonialism or the project of capitalism.” Not shying away from these tensions, the pair state that they are “interested in implicating ourselves and placing ourselves directly within that conversation” in works such as *Arches*.⁹³²

For *Over Look / Under Foot*, Hargrave and Lynn traveled through and made artwork in settler-dominated spaces that have historically been exclusionary to women and people of color. Rather than act as passive viewers in these paces, the pair got “under foot” as they utilized their camper-camera to document the landscapes and tents to reflect them back to parks visitors. The resulting work, including *Arches*, formally contains no overt critiques of these spaces or the men who have lauded them. One must delve into the intricacies of the NPS and male exploration in Western America to fully grasp the work’s implications. With *Over Look / Under Foot*, Hargrave and Lynn emphasize that exploration in the American West has centered the supposed achievements of racist, sexist, and, ultimately, unremarkable men who have become false idols championed by conservationists and preservationists. Canim Lake Band Tsq’escen activist Julian Brave NoiseCat elaborates upon this notion by asserting that the “founding fathers of environmentalism ranged from garden variety racists to eugenicists.” Because of this, “the origins of environmentalism are closer in spirit to the safari or trophy hunt than the march or sit-

⁹³⁰ Hargrave, “Collaboration between Meredith Laura Lynn & Katie Hargrave.”

⁹³¹ Hargrave, “Collaboration between Meredith Laura Lynn & Katie Hargrave.”

⁹³² Mothes, “Pitching Nature.”

in.”⁹³³ The artists assert resoundingly that they hope their work will “lead to a viewer thinking a little bit more critically or asking more questions” such as, what really have been the aims of settler conservationists? They prompt, “[w]hen we talk about things like public land, who is the public that’s being served by it? When we talk about land conservation, who is the land being conserved for and who has historically conserved the land?”⁹³⁴

Exploring the context of *Over Look / Under Foot* provides answers to these questions, and in the process, establishes Hargrave and Lynn as formative explorers of the West and its intricacies in their own right. As their work shows, women increasingly have the authority to dismantle the problematic legacies of male explorers such as Abbey. The artist duo also implicates themselves and their audiences in conversations discussing both “the ways in which we’re implicated in the history of land conservation” and how we can “engage in those histories through the way in which we use those spaces.”⁹³⁵ Many of these histories include the record of women in environmental preservation, a history long overlooked in favor of the accomplishments of their male counterparts. In her 1998 text, *National Parks and the Woman’s Voice: A History*, historian and naturalist Polly Welts Kaufman notes that, “from the shorelines of the Great Lakes to the Santa Monica Mountains,” women have actively protected landscapes and “pioneered in the preservation of historic places, saving many sites that became part of the National Park System.”⁹³⁶ This inherently includes Indigenous women, whose record environmental preservation in America long predates the arrival of European settler colonizers.

⁹³³ Julian Brave NoiseCat, “The Environmental Movement Needs to Reckon with Its Racist History,” *Vice*, published September 13, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjwvn8/the-environmental-movement-needs-to-reckon-with-its-racist-history>.

⁹³⁴ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁹³⁵ Hargrave and Lynn, interviewed by Murphy, January 22, 2024.

⁹³⁶ Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman’s Voice: A History* (University of New Mexico Press, 1998), xiv.

While little data has been compiled about women visitors and the national parks, an omission that implies that women have had little interest in “the Great Outdoors,” Kaufman argues that, since the late nineteenth century, women “with independent spirits” have been eager “to experience nature’s grandeur in America’s wonderlands.”⁹³⁷ This includes artists such as Hargrave and Lynn who were “anxious to share their experiences in print or on canvas,” or, in the contemporary duo’s case, on silk tents.⁹³⁸ Although many of these early female explorers were “expected to be accompanied by men,” Hargrave and Lynn defy this past expectation to venture out into national parks on their own.⁹³⁹ To do so, the duo drew strength from each other’s presence and the inspirations compelling their artwork. While Lynn is clear that the pair are not interested in performing a supposedly “authentic” version of western exploration—as the idea of authenticity implies a capitalist or nationalist moral judgement—they are motivated to shed light on its troubled and exclusionary past.⁹⁴⁰

MARTINE GUTIERREZ

While Hargrave and Lynn remain conspicuously absent from their scenes interrogating the National Park System in Utah, in her photographic work set in Monument Valley, Martine Gutierrez is not just present in the mythic setting, she is doubled. By toying with the boundary between real and artificial, Gutierrez amplifies the questions asked by Hargrave and Lynn: is

⁹³⁷ Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice*, 3. For instance, the explorer John C. Frémont’s wife, Jessie Benton Frémont crossed Panama in 1849, a journey that required a two-day “nightmare” mule trek to Panama City as well as traveling in dugout canoes and sleeping on the floors of huts (Glenda Riley, *Taking Land, Breaking Land: Women Colonizing the American West and Kenya, 1840-1940* [University of New Mexico Press, 2003], 61). Furthermore, Jeanne Carr is considered both the “first serious woman botanist at Yosemite” as well as John Muir’s mentor who “botanized, camped, and hiked for three months in Yosemite’s high country” with Muir and several other men in 1873 (Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice*, 7).

⁹³⁸ Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice*, 3.

⁹³⁹ Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice*, 3.

⁹⁴⁰ Mothes, “Pitching Nature.”

there an “authentic” West out there, and if so, to whom is it available? In her photographs, Gutierrez shows—as Hargrave, Lynn, and Bey, whom I will turn to next, demonstrate—what is gained and what is at stake when one ventures off the beaten track. For Gutierrez, this includes the unshakable gaze that touristic women encounter on their journeys in search of spectacle in the American West.

Born in 1989 in Berkeley, California, but living currently in New York City, Gutierrez questions the fluidity of boundaries in her life and artistic practice.⁹⁴¹ With a father of Mayan-Guatemalan heritage and a mother from the United States, Gutierrez, who earned her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2012, notes that she grew up a “very femme boy” in her interracial family.⁹⁴² While some of her first questions as a child were, “[a]m I a woman? What does being a woman mean?,” she has since identified as a nonbinary transwoman but asserts that she will likely “never stop asking myself” those questions.⁹⁴³ Gutierrez’s artistic practice, which spans the visual to the musical arts, explores the tentatively and artificially constructed nature of boundaries such as gender constructs and authenticity to reflect how she has “always navigated the world in a very gender fluid way.”⁹⁴⁴

“MY SIZE MARTINE:” GUTIERREZ’S *GIRL FRIENDS*

Gutierrez’s interests in deconstructing the boundaries of identity and authenticity are represented explicitly in her photographic work, including her *Girl Friends* and *Line Up* series

⁹⁴¹ “Martine Gutierrez,” Ryan Lee Gallery, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://ryanleegallery.com/artists/martine-gutierrez/>. Ryan Lee Gallery, which represents Gutierrez, uses she/her pronouns for the artist as well as all recent publicity about her.

⁹⁴² “Martine Gutierrez,” Ryan Lee Gallery; Hilarie M. Sheets, “Shape-Shifting Woman Plays All the Parts,” *The New York Times*, published August 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/13/arts/design/Martine-Gutierrez-bus-shelter-photos.html>.

⁹⁴³ Sheets, “Shape-Shifting Woman Plays All the Parts.”

⁹⁴⁴ Sheets, “Shape-Shifting Woman Plays All the Parts.”

from 2014. For both bodies of work, she created intricately detailed tableaux in which she and mannequins, who had been modified to mirror her own appearance, appear “as archetypes of beauty” in “intimate hyper-feminine groupings.” In photographs such as *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)* (Figures 43 & 44), Gutierrez’s painstaking attention to detail results in “illusions” that critic Hilarie M. Sheets describes as “so seamless, it’s easy to mistake what is ‘real’ and what is artifice.”⁹⁴⁵ The *Girl Friends* series, in particular, questions the dynamics of “intimate female relationships” in scenes shot either on location or against fabricated sets.⁹⁴⁶ In the *Anita & Marie* images, these dynamics play out between Gutierrez and her mannequin-twin, who is dressed and posed to mirror Gutierrez’s own appearance and cause viewers to question who the “real” woman in the scene might be. The use of mannequins in work such as *Girl Friends* and *Line Up* reflect, in part, Gutierrez’s interest in dolls and role-playing that she expressed as a child. Sheets notes that, when she was young, Gutierrez “was obsessed with Barbies, particularly princess dolls,” and that her mother helped her create “a life-size version of the popular three-foot-tall My Size Barbie that they called My Size Martine.”⁹⁴⁷ In *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*, Gutierrez and a more contemporary version of “My Size Martine” wander through the Southwest as they explore not only their relationship to each other, but also the mythic landscape through which they pass.

In contrast to the color work from her *Line Up* series, *Girl Friends* is comprised of black-and-white images of Gutierrez and her mannequin staged dramatically in “larger-than-life settings.” In these scenes, Gutierrez and her My Size Martine take on the persona of old-

⁹⁴⁵ Sheets, “Shape-Shifting Woman Plays All the Parts.”

⁹⁴⁶ “Martine Gutierrez,” Art+Culture Project, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://artandculture.com/art/photograph/girlfriends-anita-marie/>.

⁹⁴⁷ Sheets, “Shape-Shifting Woman Plays All the Parts.”

Hollywood starlets in a deliberate nod to the influential feminist artist Cindy Sherman's iconic *Untitled Film Stills* series (1977-1980).⁹⁴⁸ Comprised of seventy black-and-white images, Sherman's *Film Stills* feature the artist, much like Gutierrez in *Girl Friends*, "posed in the guises of various generic female film characters, among them, ingénue, working girl, vamp, and lonely housewife" in an effort to call to mind mid-century Hollywood films.⁹⁴⁹ With these photographs, Sherman strove to critique stereotyped imagery of women, archetypes which Gutierrez explodes in *Girl Friends* while mirroring Sherman's "film noir-style cinematic angles," changing hairstyles, and elaborate costumes.⁹⁵⁰ Beyond echoing the style of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, Gutierrez's *Girl Friends* similarly present highly constructed but open-ended narratives which tempt viewers to project their own thoughts about the women onto the scenes.⁹⁵¹

In *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*, two women with long, dark hair and white blouses tucked into pale-colored trousers stand in the middle of a winding road. Behind them, the iconic geological formations of Monument Valley rise from the horizon line to loom over the road that dips down and runs between them. With blank expressions, the women link arms and hold out their left hands with their thumbs extended as if to hitchhike. From their right hands, broad sun hats dangle. Though no other cars can be seen on the road, and the women appear completely alone in the vast landscape, their neutral expressions convey a sense of surreal calm rather than distress at their situation. It is unclear how the two women ended up traversing Monument Valley on their own—no broken-down car or tired horse can be identified as the root of their problems.

⁹⁴⁸ "Martine Gutierrez and Three New Acquisitions," Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, published June 21, 2021, <https://crystalbridges.org/blog/martine-gutierrez-and-three-new-acquisitions/>.

⁹⁴⁹ "Cindy Sherman: *Untitled Film Still #43*," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56969>.

⁹⁵⁰ "Cindy Sherman: *Untitled Film Still #43*," The Museum of Modern Art; "Martine Gutierrez and Three New Acquisitions," Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

⁹⁵¹ "Martine Gutierrez," Art+Culture Project.

Given the lack of indicators for their actions, the women may be going into the Valley on a grand exploration or attempting to escape its looming confines.

The artificial and surreal aspects of the image reveal themselves gradually. Inspecting the scene closely, one can identify subtle ripples running across the sky behind them. Combined with the harsh, direct lighting solely on the two women, it becomes apparent that the duo is standing before a printed backdrop rather than on an actual road running through the Southwest. In addition, when comparing the two women, though they share general features such as their hair, beatific expressions, and clothing, there are several glaring differences between them. While one can make out the veins and tendons running through the woman on the right's hands and arms, the woman on the left displays no such features. Furthermore, although the woman on the left does have her hand raised as her companion does, her thumb does not stick up. The stiffness in this hand is mirrored in her right; her sun hat is jammed into a semi-closed fist rather than grasped loosely as her companion's is. Despite the detailed setting, then, it becomes glaringly clear that the hitchhiking woman's companion is as artificial as the printed backdrop behind them. Only prolonged looking can reveal this artificiality, however.

Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5) finds Anita and Marie—who is who is as unclear as how the women ended up in their situation—at night in Monument Valley. Some fracture in their friendship has taken place, as the woman on the left tends to a horse, and the woman on the right has her back turned to her companion. A moon hangs high in the sky above them but provides little in the way of light; the geological formations of Monument Valley rising behind them are cloaked in a decidedly ominous darkness. Perhaps, this is the breaking point in their journey that led to the hitchhiking of 7 or simply one of the stops along their way. Dressed in attire entirely

inappropriate for the situation at hand, Anita and Maria don floral print dresses with matching pigtail ties.

As with *Anita & Marie 7*, subtle ripples move across the image of Monument Valley behind them to indicate, once again, that they are in an artificial setting. However, as compared to 7, it is not as readily apparent that Gutierrez is joined by a mannequin in the composition; because of the low lighting and the fact that the figure's back is turned to the viewer, one cannot compare her artificially placid expression to Gutierrez's nor ascertain fully the rigidity in her limbs. The horse that Gutierrez tends to is also silhouetted in the fading light, and its face is obscured by its mane in a way similar to the positioning of the dark curtain of hair of Gutierrez's counterpart. Given the constructed nature of the setting and Gutierrez's use of mannequins thus far, it would be fair to assume that the horse is similarly fake. Yet, as with the female figure on the right in the photograph, the positioning of and darkness surrounding the horse allow some doubt to creep in. In contrast to 7, where artificiality and inauthenticity become readily apparent following close looking, in 5, the sense of "real" and "fake" is as foggy as the darkened Monument Valley behind the women. Thus, while the bright light of day in 7 reveals the inauthenticity of Anita and Marie's journey, the shadowy night in 5 emphasizes the surrealism of their situation and blurs boundaries between "truth" and "fiction."

Specifically, *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)* mirror Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #43* (1979), which is also set in Monument Valley (Figure 45). Posing in the image as "a Monument Valley girl," Sherman calls upon the archetypes associated with the myth of the West in #43, a photograph taken while she was on vacation with her parents.⁹⁵² Unlike Gutierrez, Sherman has traveled to the actual, physical Monument Valley—

⁹⁵² Victoria Olsen, "Cindy Sherman: Monument Valley Girl," *Smithsonian Magazine*, published March 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/cindy-sherman-monument-valley-girl-50348463/>.

specifically, a tree near the border of Utah and Arizona—for her image. Yet, as with *Anita & Marie*, Sherman centers the well-coiffed female body, not the landscape, in the composition. In writing about the image, scholar Victoria Olsen notes that Sherman’s bare leg on the tree branch in #43 mirrors the slopes of the geological formations behind her and “subtly suggests a relationship between women and nature that is missing from the generic Western landscape.”⁹⁵³ With the omission of “cowboys or Indians” in #43, as with *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*, Sherman extends past a base equation of woman with nature to offer “an alternative mythology, with a woman displacing [Edward] Curtis’ horsemen or Clint Eastwood’s ‘man with no name.’”⁹⁵⁴

GUTIERREZ’S UNCANNY MONUMENT VALLEY

The association of *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)*, *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*, and *Untitled Film Still #43* with Monument Valley is not coincidental. Instead, it reflects the enduring significance of the spectacular landscape within the myth of the West. Historian Scott C. Zeman writes that the “brilliant red sandstone spires of Monument Valley,” seen in the backgrounds of *Anita & Marie 5* and 7, “form the single most powerful image associated with the Southwest” and “have come to embody the entire region.”⁹⁵⁵ While these vermilion de chelly sandstone “monuments” have been reproduced on commercial goods extensively, revisionist scholar Richard Slotkin argues that the “towering monoliths” also “represent the alien quality of the frontier, which had been in its time as uncanny a place for the pioneers as a moonscape would

⁹⁵³ Olsen, “Cindy Sherman: Monument Valley Girl.”

⁹⁵⁴ Olsen, “Cindy Sherman: Monument Valley Girl.”

⁹⁵⁵ Scott C. Zeman, “Monument Valley: Shaping the Image of the Southwest’s Cultural Crossroads,” *The Journal of Arizona History* 39, no. 3 (1998): 307, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40079633>.

be.”⁹⁵⁶ The uncanny Monument Valley that Gutierrez creates with her *Anita & Marie* images harnesses the alien quality of the “stark and startling landscape” with its “empty lonely, spaces.”⁹⁵⁷ The landscape of Monument Valley can often provoke a sense of sublime beauty, and its open sky appears to offer the possibility for freedom for some. However, this vastness can also be seen as “empty, a wasteland, a place of both physical and spiritual testing leading either to death or redemption.”⁹⁵⁸ Rather than promote one interpretation over the other, Gutierrez—with her interest in blurring boundaries—suggests that both can be true in her *Anita & Marie* images; the landscape and the women moving through it are beautiful, yet the staged nature of the scenes and the vastness of their setting emphasize that all might not be as it seems.

Regardless of any settler-colonial importance attributed to the Monument Valley area, the landscape is a part of *Diné Bikéyah*, or Navajo homelands, and holds important spiritual significance to Diné peoples. Located in northern *Diné Bikéyah*, Monument valley spans from Mexican Hat in southeastern Utah to Kayenta in northern Arizona.⁹⁵⁹ Zeman argues that, for non-Natives, Monument Valley “embodies the Southwest and the frontier, the Old West, Indian Country,” yet, for Diné peoples, “it is a sacred homeland.”⁹⁶⁰ However, as with Hargrave and Lynn’s images of Utah’s national parks, there is no overt recognition of the significance of the landscape to Native peoples, nor any indicators of their presence—beyond the inclusion of the Indigenous Guatemalan artist—in Gutierrez’s images.

⁹⁵⁶ Zeman, “Monument Valley,” 307; Richard Slotkin, “John Ford’s *Stagecoach* and the Mythic Space of the Western Movie,” in *The Big Empty: Essays on Western Landscape As Narrative*, ed. Leonard Engel (University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 270.

⁹⁵⁷ Leonard Engel, “Mythic Space and Monument Valley: Another Look at John Ford’s *Stagecoach*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1994): 174, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40154983>.

⁹⁵⁸ Engel, “Mythic Space and Monument Valley,” 174.

⁹⁵⁹ Zeman, “Monument Valley,” 307.

⁹⁶⁰ Zeman, “Monument Valley,” 307.

In large part, the introduction of the railroad and twentieth-century entrepreneur Fred Harvey's subsequent tourism business helped facilitate the landscape's "mythic transformation" for white settlers, a transformation completed by the time of *Anita & Marie* 5 and 7. By 1881, a railroad line depositing white tourists in *Diné Bikéyah* stretched through Arizona to California.⁹⁶¹ Capitalizing on the touristic potential of the railroad, Harvey began offering Indian Detours into the Four Corners region that ranged from ten days to two weeks in length and centered around visiting Monument Valley, Rainbow Bridge, and Canyon de Chelly.⁹⁶² These Indian Detours and other Four Corners programming by Harvey "helped create the popular image of Navajo country as a vast space of timeless beauty and serenity."⁹⁶³ In *Girl Friends* (*Anita & Marie* 5) and *Girl Friends* (*Anita & Marie* 7), it is easy to imagine that Anita and Marie were dropped into the vastly beautiful and serene landscape by Harvey and managed to stray too far away from their Indian Detour guides.

Beyond Harvey's intervention in transforming Monument Valley into "Anglo America's popular conception of Indian Country," the cinematic work of director John Ford and actor John Wayne cemented further Monument Valley's iconic status as *the* West in many Americans' popular imagination.⁹⁶⁴ Starting with his 1939 film *Stagecoach* and through following films such as *The Searchers* (1956) and *My Darling Clementine* (1946), Ford "created in the popular mind the image of Monument Valley as *the* Indian Country and *the* West" by filming the movies in Monument Valley—despite whichever Western American state in which the narratives supposedly took place.⁹⁶⁵ Quickly, Monument Valley "became Hollywood's generic western

⁹⁶¹ Zeman, "Monument Valley," 309.

⁹⁶² Zeman, "Monument Valley," 309-310.

⁹⁶³ Zeman, "Monument Valley," 310.

⁹⁶⁴ Zeman, "Monument Valley," 319-320.

⁹⁶⁵ Zeman, "Monument Valley," 319. Emphasis in original.

geography,” a fact that explains, in part, why the only two western photographs in Gutierrez’s *Girl Friends* series are set in the region.⁹⁶⁶

Just as quickly, Diné peoples became vital components of the film industry in Monument Valley. American studies scholar Randolph Lewis notes that, in the early-to-mid-twentieth century, “Hollywood had a durable fascination with Navajo land and culture,” and, as a result, produced “dozens of movies that afforded Navajos varying degrees of audience sympathy and historical accuracy, though usually little of either,” including the influential work of Ford.⁹⁶⁷ Monument Valley trading post operator—and general exploiter of Diné culture—Harry Goulding is credited with convincing Ford to film in the Valley after a lengthy meeting accompanied with photographs of Diné life.⁹⁶⁸ While Diné individuals worked as support personnel, served as maintenance crew, built houses for movie stars, and acted as translators for films set in Monument Valley such as Ford’s, they also worked often as film extras.⁹⁶⁹ Yet, aside from Ford’s *Wagon Master* (1950), Diné peoples rarely played Diné characters or spoke “Navajo (as Navajo, not as a stand-in for another native language).”⁹⁷⁰ Furthermore, Lewis argues that Ford’s films “never dealt with Navajos directly, rarely depicted any Native people in a heroic light, and invariably used Navajoland as a stage for primarily European American dramas of national incorporation.”⁹⁷¹ This exploitation of Diné peoples and culture extends back to the military and continued through trade, tourism, and mining.⁹⁷² As a whole, Lewis asserts that Hollywood as an “unacknowledged debt” to Diné peoples and homelands—including Monument Valley—because

⁹⁶⁶ Zeman, “Monument Valley,” 319.

⁹⁶⁷ Randolph Lewis, *Navajo Talking Picture: Cinema on Native Ground* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 20.

⁹⁶⁸ Zeman, “Monument Valley,” 317.

⁹⁶⁹ Zeman, “Monument Valley,” 318.

⁹⁷⁰ Lewis, *Navajo Talking Picture*, 23.

⁹⁷¹ Lewis, *Navajo Talking Picture*, 22.

⁹⁷² Liza Black, “‘Not Desired by You for Photographing:’ The Labor of American Indian (and Non-Indian) Extras,” in *Picturing Indians: Native Americans in Film, 1941-1960* (University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 109-110.

of its use of their bodies and “erasure of their histories, and the iconography of their landscape,” including in Ford’s now-iconic film *Stagecoach*.⁹⁷³

Slotkin argues that *Stagecoach* “is often thought of the archetypal Western, the genre reduced to its essence.” Following the movie’s release, “two of the most potent icons in the twentieth-century mass culture: the landscape of Monument Valley and the heroic persona of John Wayne” were created.⁹⁷⁴ Featuring an unlikely group of strangers making a treacherous journey across the beautiful yet hostile landscape, *Stagecoach*’s focuses on “an epic journey of sorts, one that pares down the false self and moves toward revelation and true selfhood.”⁹⁷⁵ This journey is both spiritual and literal as the travelers “leave society, venture into the unknown, then return to society, and if they survive their ordeal, they are changed people.”⁹⁷⁶ In Ford’s Western films, the topography of Monument Valley reveals “how the wilderness can break individuals down, but then subsequently can cause a regeneration in their personalities if they have the strength and courage to persevere.”⁹⁷⁷ Moving alone through the sublime landscape, Anita and Marie appear to be undertaking such an epic journey as Gutierrez prods at the boundaries of self and authenticity. Despite their seemingly perilous position as lost, female travelers, Anita and Marie show no distress as they continue with their journey and defy common expectations of women within the myth of the West. Reflective of Ford’s reliance on Western American archetypes, two of the passengers in the stagecoach of *Stagecoach*’s name are the “highly respectable Southern gentlewoman,” Mrs. Mallory, and “the woman of easy virtue,” Dallas.⁹⁷⁸ The former, a gentle tamer. The latter, a soiled dove. Which archetypal role do Anita and Marie

⁹⁷³ Lewis, *Navajo Talking Picture*, 5.

⁹⁷⁴ Slotkin, “John Ford’s *Stagecoach* and the Mythic Space of the Western Movie,” 261.

⁹⁷⁵ Engel, “Mythic Space and Monument Valley,” 175.

⁹⁷⁶ Engel, “Mythic Space and Monument Valley,” 175.

⁹⁷⁷ Engel, “Mythic Space and Monument Valley,” 174.

⁹⁷⁸ Engel, “Mythic Space and Monument Valley,” 177.

fall into? Either? Both? As Gutierrez emphasizes, stark distinctions are neither possible nor helpful; the women transcend binaries on their journey through Monument Valley.

Across Ford's films, which starred frequently Wayne, the "land itself occupies a prominent role...as setting, motivation, and subject, even when realism must be sacrificed for iconicity."⁹⁷⁹ As Slotkin asserts, it is the supposed visual oddity of Monument Valley "that gives it its authenticity—this is not a landscape anyone could invent and build in the San Fernando Valley."⁹⁸⁰ Yet, Gutierrez does just that—invent and build her own uncanny Monument Valley—in *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*. It is this blurring of boundaries and obscuring/revealing of artificiality with which Gutierrez has been fascinated; she asserts, "I think confusion is delicious."⁹⁸¹ In photographic work such as the *Girl Friends* series, Gutierrez "manufactures 'celebrity'" while acting simultaneously as muse, subject, and artist. In doing so, she challenges "the construction of binaries through the blurring of their borders" to insist that "gender, like all things, is entangled" and to argue "against the linear framework of oppositional thinking."⁹⁸² The glamour and sleek slenderness of Anita and Marie in the *Girl Friends* images might appear to promote idealized perceptions of femininity. Additionally, mannequins, which historically have represented unattainable bodily perfection, are modeled most often off white, cisgendered women. Yet, Gutierrez is a transwoman of Indigenous Guatemalan descent. In her *Anita & Marie* images, then, the pair both denaturalizes and subverts "accepted gender truths" and performances as they move their way through Monument Valley.⁹⁸³

⁹⁷⁹ Julia Leyda, "Home on the Range: Space, Nation, and Mobility in The Searchers," in *American Mobilities: Geographies of Class, Race, and Gender in US Culture* (Transcript Verlag, 2016), 198.

⁹⁸⁰ Slotkin, "John Ford's *Stagecoach* and the Mythic Space of the Western Movie," 270.

⁹⁸¹ Sheets, "Shape-Shifting Woman Plays All the Parts."

⁹⁸² "Martine Gutierrez," Ryan Lee Gallery.

⁹⁸³ Keisha Jacobs, "Satirical Assemblages of Visual Culture in the Works of Martine Gutierrez," Arts Help, published 2022, <https://www.artshelp.com/martine-gutierrez/>.

EROSION OF THE “REAL”

In a 2021 *New York Times* profile, Gutierrez notes that, although she is “innately a storyteller,” she is not “interested in telling my own story.”⁹⁸⁴ Neither is she interested in telling an authentic story. Rather, for *Girl Friends*, Gutierrez has created images in which “the artificial not only dominates the real but erodes the ability to easily recognize the real.”⁹⁸⁵ In her discussions of tourism, Lippard examines and critiques the supposed authenticity manufactured by tourist spaces and the yearning of travelers to experience them. She notes the difficulties inherent in both by stating, “[n]othing is more surrealist than tourism. Tourist and toured meet in unlikely combinations, and they surprise (overtake) each other.”⁹⁸⁶ *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)* visualize this surrealism as the female tourists—Anita and Marie—move across both mythic space and constructed boundaries. Lippard acknowledges that tourism “juxtaposes and superimposes people coming both literally and figuratively ‘from different places’ to create a reality that is real to neither one,” a reality illustrated explicitly by the mashup of Gutierrez and her My Size Martine in her *Anita & Marie* images.⁹⁸⁷

With its moving objective focused on authenticity, scholar Andrew S. Gross argues that tourism “produces its object as a vanishing ideal, a perpetually receding goal that can never be reached.”⁹⁸⁸ In the process of seeking authenticity, tourists actually help destroy it.⁹⁸⁹ This is, in part, due to the actions of the local people of the tourist area. Faced with an onslaught of demanding visitors, communities and tourist workers respond “by mechanically reproducing

⁹⁸⁴ “Artist: Martine Gutierrez,” Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/martine-gutierrez-32119>.

⁹⁸⁵ Jacobs, “Satirical Assemblages of Visual Culture in the Works of Martine Gutierrez.”

⁹⁸⁶ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 34.

⁹⁸⁷ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 34.

⁹⁸⁸ Andrew S. Gross, “Cars, Postcards, and Patriotism: Tourism and National Politics in the United States, 1893-1929.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 40, no. 1 (2005): 78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25474163>.

⁹⁸⁹ Gross, “Cars, Postcards, and Patriotism,” 78-79.

what the stereotyped visitor wants. One experience fits all.”⁹⁹⁰ As a result, tourists “cause their hosts to hold up a theatrical mask of sorts, to act as if ‘onstage’ when they meet in face to face encounters” where they affirm visitors’ self-images.⁹⁹¹ Seeking to avoid this artificiality, some tourists avoid highly visited areas, and, instead, “move off the beaten track” in search of the real.⁹⁹² Anita and Marie are, quite literally, off the beaten track in *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)* as they move through Monument Valley unaided. Yet, as with any tourist destination, the space through which they travel is scripted and, here, contains “stock symbols of western tourism,” the “ubiquitous cowboy and Indian and pioneer iconography” associated with Monument Valley.⁹⁹³ Gutierrez’s Valley is scripted—beyond its tourism association—because she determined and then created the set on which the photographs were taken. Historian Hal Rothman argues that the scripting of tourist places is “to keep visitors at the center of the picture,” as Anita and Marie quite literally are in Gutierrez’s images, “while simultaneously cloaking, manipulating, and even deceiving them into believing that their experience is the local’s life, reality, and view of the world.”⁹⁹⁴ The misty nightfall of *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)*, in particular, emphasizes Gutierrez’s interests in the cloaking of authenticity.

However, Lippard argues that the search for authenticity is closer at hand when traveling alone—the search for an authentic self, that is, rather than an authentic landscape or people group. She notes that, when traveling by oneself, “we are far more likely to interact with both places and people on an unselfconscious or least less self-conscious basis.”⁹⁹⁵ In doing so, “[w]e

⁹⁹⁰ Kristin M. McAndrews, *Wrangling Women: Humor and Gender in the American West* (University of Nevada Press, 2008), 30.

⁹⁹¹ McAndrews, *Wrangling Women*, 30; Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 12.

⁹⁹² McAndrews, *Wrangling Women*, 32.

⁹⁹³ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 12; Wrobel, “Introduction,” 19.

⁹⁹⁴ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 12.

⁹⁹⁵ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 5.

are not who we think we are when we are elsewhere.”⁹⁹⁶ Such self-actualization is at play in *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*; one could argue that Gutierrez is, essentially, alone in the surreal scenes. How much companionship could a perfect but inanimate mannequin or horse offer on a road trip? In addition, interactions with the “Other” such as the alien landscape of Monument Valley on touristic travels provoke further self-reflection, leading often to “cultural self-identification.”⁹⁹⁷ Despite the harsh distinctions between (in)authenticity in tourist spaces made by tourism scholars, historian David M. Wrobel reminds us that “authenticity and artificiality are not absolute values.”⁹⁹⁸ By refusing to categorize herself, yet placing her body in a landscape fraught with issues of authenticity and the myth of the West, Gutierrez achieves a state of self-realization in which her blurring of boundaries becomes an authentic part of herself.

SEEING AND BEING SEEN

With her practice, including her Monument Valley *Anita & Marie* images, Gutierrez probes at the ways in which “those with multiple, hyphenated, fluid sexual, gender, race, and class affiliations achieve visibility—and agency—in mass culture.”⁹⁹⁹ It is in these photographs in which Gutierrez strives to “hybridize the industry’s objectification of sex with the individual’s pursuit of self” to undermine satirically “the aesthetics of what we know.”¹⁰⁰⁰ The act of seeing is thought of commonly in considerations of tourism, which I believe Anita and Marie are engaged in in Gutierrez’s images. Yet, for women and tourists of color, being seen is often an

⁹⁹⁶ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 5.

⁹⁹⁷ Neel, “Tourism and the American West,” 521.

⁹⁹⁸ Wrobel, “Introduction: Tourists, Tourism, and the Toured Upon,” 6.

⁹⁹⁹ “Artist: Martine Gutierrez,” Smithsonian American Art Museum.

¹⁰⁰⁰ “Martine Gutierrez,” Ryan Lee Gallery.

accompaniment to their own voyeurism. In her discussions of tourism, Lippard notes that tourism is tied intrinsically to desire, “a more sensuous desire to become intimate with the unfamiliar.”¹⁰⁰¹ Often the “exotic other” which tourists search for is female.¹⁰⁰² As Lippard explains, this is not necessarily literal women, but rather, “[l]ands to be conquered (or just ‘toured’) are described as women’s bodies.”¹⁰⁰³ In *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place*, she elaborates upon this further to assert that the “identification of women and earth as the objects of ‘sightseeing’ is rampant in tourist advertising, where...women (or their bodies) are still consistently used to portray ‘desirable’ destinations.”¹⁰⁰⁴ As such, “[c]onventional sightseeing resembles (and often includes) girl-watching.”¹⁰⁰⁵ It is easy to imagine *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)* as an advertisement for tourism in Monument Valley; two picturesque women having a good time in a landscape as beautiful as their visages. Whether the land or the women treading upon it are being offered as the “real” the sight to see is unclear and, as Gutierrez’s practice emphasizes, this distinction might be unnecessary.

As Anita and Marie make their way through the iconic Southwestern landscape, they are not insulated from what they tour. Rather, Lippard argues that, for female tourists, “[e]ven as we are watching ‘the natives,’ we ourselves are being watched. Voyeurism is tourism’s modus vivendi.”¹⁰⁰⁶ Because of this, female and male tourists have dissimilar experiences in the same location. Furthermore, Lippard asserts that female tourists are more vulnerable physically than male tourists and that women who are “moving freely in the world today” alone or with other women—such as Anita and Marie—“had better be aware of cultural codes and customs.”¹⁰⁰⁷ As

¹⁰⁰¹ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 50.

¹⁰⁰² Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 51.

¹⁰⁰³ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 51.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 51.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 51.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 54.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 54, 56.

a mixed-race transwoman, Gutierrez is triply at risk when compared to the white, cisgender male tourist. Under this framework, Marie cannot provide protection for Anita and vice versa. Instead of traveling together for safety in numbers, the twin-like duo reflects Lippard's idea that tourists prefer to travel with "people who *are* like them" so that they will "have someone to 'share with' or comment on the oddity of the new in a familiar vocabulary."¹⁰⁰⁸ Anita and Marie are undeniably mirrors of each other. The "oddity of the new" that they experience as they move throughout Monument Valley, however, is mirrored by the oddity of their own situation and is coupled with the voyeurism that they both dispense and experience as tourist women.

In *On the Beaten Track*, Lippard compares artists to tourists as those who "have always traveled and provided a lens through which the rest of us look around." As with art, tourism centers itself around transformation and cannibalism—"the consumption of other places, other cultures, or even the digestion of their powers."¹⁰⁰⁹ In considering the dynamics of looking inherent in the *Anita & Marie* photographs—as well as the images' formal and thematic link to Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #43* and mid-twentieth-century cinema—one would be remiss to not consider the photographs briefly in the context of film theorist Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In the text, Mulvey considers the role of women in "Old Hollywood" films as well as the pleasure created, manipulated, and withheld in cinema writ large. She notes that, in twentieth-century films such as those by Alfred Hitchcock and those serving as inspiration for Sherman's photographs, scopophilia, or the "pleasure of looking at another person as an erotic object," is facilitated.¹⁰¹⁰ More specifically, in films with female characters, the "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female."

¹⁰⁰⁸ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 5.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 4, 5.

¹⁰¹⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast (Oxford University Press, 1985), 815.

Because of this, “[t]he determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.”¹⁰¹¹ These cinematic works situate women in “traditional exhibitionist role[s]” where they are “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”¹⁰¹²

Sherman’s *Untitled Film Still* series—and Gutierrez’s *Girl Friends* photographs, which draw formal and thematic inspiration from them—recognize and subvert the scopophilia that Mulvey identifies as being bred at the cinema. In the *Anita & Marie* images, Gutierrez also blurs the boundary between voyeur and object of observation. In this way, they illustrate Mulvey’s concept that “[t]here are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at.”¹⁰¹³ While the figures in Gutierrez’s photographs are coded for strong visual and erotic impact, neither part of the “passive/female” binary that Mulvey conceptualizes is inherently true in *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*, nor is it important. Rather, Gutierrez both creates and revels in the unease created by her images that, although they are set in an easily recognizable setting, deny the viewer any sense of certainty about the narrative conveyed.

As a whole, in *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*, Gutierrez consumes and manipulates the iconography and voyeurism associated with the myth of the West—specifically, Monument Valley and all its associations. The female tourists, Anita and Marie, both take in and are taken in as they travel through the mythic Southwestern landscape. Lippard asserts that most of the “significant” artwork created about tourism and travel is made “by members of those cultural groups that are stereotypically stared at” or threatened “by the

¹⁰¹¹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 808.

¹⁰¹² Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 808-809. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰¹³ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 806.

social mechanisms of the tourist industry.”¹⁰¹⁴ As a transwoman of Indigenous Guatemalan descent, Gutierrez falls into several cultural groups. In her *Anita & Marie* images, she harnesses the power of the voyeurism that her body provokes or undertakes as while moving through space as she blurs boundaries between “true” and “false.”

While *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)* reproduce several of the iconic elements that helped make Monument Valley *the* West in American popular imagination, the surreal aspects of the photographs twist and obscure any notion that the pair’s journey is that of the stereotypical tourist in search of supposed authenticity. Rather, as Rothman notes and Gutierrez’s work reflects, “it[’s] no longer understood why authentic was more significant” than inauthentic.¹⁰¹⁵ Instead, Anita and Marie venture off the beaten track on their journey, a choice that Lippard argues helps the tourist “reassert her own autonomy and independence.”¹⁰¹⁶ In *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)*, then, this journey leads viewers to understand that authenticity is manufactured and that a true sense of self can be derived from the blurring of boundaries and rejection of binaries.

APRIL BEY

Finally, we turn to April Bey and her intergalactic imaginings of the American West. Of all the artists examined in this dissertation, Bey is the only one that leaves the planet to analyze Western America. With vibrant colors and rich fabric details, her resulting paintings play into the flash and spectacle associated with their sitters’ profession. While the women that Bey portrays

¹⁰¹⁴ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 38.

¹⁰¹⁵ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 338.

¹⁰¹⁶ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 10.

appear otherworldly, their movements and the voyeurism inherently attached to them relate keenly to the work of Hargrave, Lynn, and Gutierrez.

Born in the United States to a white mother and Black father, Bey was raised on New Providence Island in The Bahamas.¹⁰¹⁷ Following her undergraduate education at Ball State University and MFA program at California State University, Northridge, Bey moved to Los Angeles, where she now lives and teaches at Glendale Community College.¹⁰¹⁸ Drawing from her variety of interests and layered childhood, the artist asserts that her practice is “an introspective and social critique of American and Bahamian culture, feminism, generational theory, social media, Afro-Futurism, Afro-Surrealism, post-colonialism and constructs of race within supremacist systems.”¹⁰¹⁹ To facilitate this critique, Bey moves between media—including video, painting, collage, installations, printmaking, and book arts—to create vivid artwork that “wittily skewers pop culture’s sacred cows.”¹⁰²⁰ With her incorporation of reproductive media and mass-produced objects into her work, Bey questions how “images come to define reality through their incessant replication in a world we experience increasingly through virtual means.”¹⁰²¹

Throughout her education, Bey learned about imperialism and colonialism, structures that impact the territories in which she grew up and would become major points of examination and critique in her practice. One method that Bey developed for fleshing out the historical legacy of

¹⁰¹⁷ Caroline A. Miranda, “Love of a Black planet: Artist April Bey’s Atlantica soars beyond Wakanda,” *Los Angeles Times*, published August 18, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-08-18/april-bey-conjures-afrofuturist-world-atlantica-caam>; “April Bey: Atlantica, The Gilda Region,” Nevada Museum of Art, published 2023, <https://www.nevadaart.org/art/exhibitions/april-bey-atlantica-the-gilda-region/>.

¹⁰¹⁸ “April Bey,” Gavlak Gallery, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.gavlakgallery.com/artists/april-bey?view=slider#2>; “April Bey: Atlantica, The Gilda Region,” Nevada Museum of Art. Bey earned her BFA from Ball State in 2009 and her MFA from Cal State, Northridge in 2014.

¹⁰¹⁹ April Bey, “April Bey / Bio,” April-Bey.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.april-bey.com/about>.

¹⁰²⁰ “April Bey,” Gavlak Gallery.

¹⁰²¹ “April Bey,” Gavlak Gallery.

imperialism and colonialism was the creation of her fictional planet, Atlantica, “an Afrofuturist alien world which redefines Blackness outside the context of white supremacy and colonial suffering.”¹⁰²² Over the course of several years, Bey developed the concept of Atlantica further and made artwork envisioning scenes from the planet, work that was compiled and shown in the 2023 exhibit, *Atlantica, The Gilda Region*. For the exhibition’s artwork, she tapped “into Black Americans’ historical embrace of space travel and extraterrestrial visioning” by drawing from both speculative fiction and Afrofuturist texts.¹⁰²³ It is because of her interests in the former, speculative fiction, that iconography from the American West is present in *Atlantica* paintings such as *When Your Limit is the Sky, I’m on Another Planet and You Just Fly* and *And My Flames Stay Till You Get Out My Way* (Figures 46 & 47).

In the *Atlantica* exhibit, Bey positioned herself as an undercover alien agent from the planet Atlantica who has traveled to Earth to make observations and report back home.¹⁰²⁴ Her interest in otherworldly topics and creative outputs has direct ties to her childhood.¹⁰²⁵ As a young girl in the States, Bey was bullied by classmates because of her textured hair. In an interview with the artist, journalist Caroline A. Miranda notes that Bey “eventually worked up the courage to ask her father about the hostility,” and he replied “with the following tale: ‘He said the reason people hate you is because we are aliens from another planet.’”¹⁰²⁶ Bey “became enchanted” with this story, and the planet Atlantica, “home to an Afrofuturist world that allows for Black experiences outside of Earth’s colonial history and its traumas” was born.¹⁰²⁷

¹⁰²² “April Bey,” Simon Lee Gallery, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.simonleegallery.com/artists/319-april-bey/>.

¹⁰²³ “April Bey,” Simon Lee Gallery; “April Bey: Atlantica, The Gilda Region,” Nevada Museum of Art.

¹⁰²⁴ “April Bey: Atlantica, The Gilda Region,” Nevada Museum of Art.

¹⁰²⁵ “April Bey: Atlantica, The Gilda Region,” Nevada Museum of Art.

¹⁰²⁶ Miranda, “Love of a Black planet: Artist April Bey’s Atlantica soars beyond Wakanda.”

¹⁰²⁷ Miranda, “Love of a Black planet: Artist April Bey’s Atlantica soars beyond Wakanda;” Katy Donoghue, “April Bey Brings the Story of Atlantica to The Bahamas and Beyond,” *Whitewall*, published August 3, 2022, <https://whitewall.art/art/april-bey-brings-the-story-of-atlantica-to-the-bahamas-and-beyond>.

Explaining further the planet's conceptual formation, Bey states that "I gave the planet the name Atlantica, which is referencing all kinds of different things but mostly the Atlantic Ocean, which is what I grew up on."¹⁰²⁸ She elaborates that the name also comes from Atlantica, the underwater world featured in *The Little Mermaid* movie; she notes that she was "obsessed" with the movie's character Ursula, whom she identified as "a hardcore feminist."¹⁰²⁹ In direct contrast to the exploitation and racial oppression dominating planet Earth, which Bey both learned about and experienced as a child, Atlantica functions as "a beautiful diasporic world in which Black people thrive and flourish."¹⁰³⁰

COWGIRLS IN SPACE (AND MARYLAND)

Across the various works comprising Bey's *Atlantica* series, the artwork "weave[s] a queer neo-slave narrative about the people and places" that make up Atlantica.¹⁰³¹ For example, two mixed-media paintings, *When Your Limit is the Sky, I'm on Another Planet and You Just Fly* and *And My Flames Stay Till You Get Out My Way*, feature iconography of the "Old West" to propose "some mythical future as if the wild west existed in the stars."¹⁰³² *When Your Limit is the Sky* is a diptych showing two blue-hued Black cowgirls making direct, challenging eye contact with the viewer. Set against hot pink backgrounds, the cowgirl in the left panel sits confidently upon the flank of a pink, cropped horse, and the cowgirl in the right panel perches on a sequined fence. Connecting them further to the visual legacy of cowboys, both women don cowboy hats, collared shirts, and denim jeans. A triptych, *And My Flames Stay* shares formal similarities to

¹⁰²⁸ Donoghue, "April Bey Brings the Story of Atlantica to The Bahamas and Beyond." It is difficult to overlook the body of water's role in the transatlantic slave trade, another connection to Bey's interests in imperial histories.

¹⁰²⁹ Miranda, "Love of a Black planet: Artist April Bey's Atlantica soars beyond Wakanda."

¹⁰³⁰ "April Bey: Atlantica, The Gilda Region," Nevada Museum of Art.

¹⁰³¹ Ikechúkwú Onyewuenyi, "April Bey's 'Atlantica, The Gilda Region,'" *e-flux*, published January 6, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/439079/april-bey-s-atlantica-the-gilda-region>.

¹⁰³² Onyewuenyi, "April Bey's 'Atlantica, The Gilda Region.'"

When Your Limit is the Sky; the work shows four blue-hued Black cowgirls in white t-shirts, blue jeans, and brown cowboy boots sitting confidently upon a stretch of pink-sequined livestock gate. Posed against a vibrant, yellow background, the women maintain direct eye contact with the viewer. As with *When Your Limit is the Sky*, diagonal bands of fabric connect the sequined border to the blue cowgirls and leads explicitly viewers' attention to the women's faces.

In both works, the lack of features in the background creates the sense that the women could be riding or sitting anywhere; their locations are not specific to the Wild West of planet Earth. Rather, the vibrant, but barren backgrounds and sequined gates indicate that the blue-hued cowgirls are in a setting as otherworldly and subversive as their skin tones. While the women wear iconic sartorial indicators of cowboy culture—the cowboy hat and boots—the specific style of clothing that they wear relates more to popular street fashion than a typical ranch hand's uniform. Combined with the fabric, glitter, and sequins added to the compositions, Bey presents subversive, maximalist takes on icons of hyper-white-masculinity. This maximalism is indicative of the “extremely labor intensive” nature of Bey's artwork, which often “incorporate fabrics and elements sourced from Black femme-owned businesses,” as in *And My Flames* and *When Your Limit is the Sky*.¹⁰³³ With the individualized expressions, hairstyles, and features of the women in both paintings, it is clear that they are specific portraits of assertive cowgirls confident in their surreal surroundings. In fact, the women are real-life members of the Cowgirls of Color, an all-female, all-Black rodeo group based in Maryland whom Bey imagines in *Atlantica* as competing “in rodeos representing the free planet of Atlantica,” which has made them “known throughout most galaxies.”¹⁰³⁴

¹⁰³³ “April Bey,” Simon Lee Gallery.

¹⁰³⁴ “*And My Flames Stay Till You Get Out of My Way* (2020),” ForFreedoms.org, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://www.forfreedoms.org/artworks/and-my-flames-stay-till-you-get-out-my-way>.

A “rare group in a field largely dominated by white men,” the Cowgirls of Color all hail from the Washington, D.C., area and supported their male friends at rodeos throughout Maryland before Dr. Ray Charles Lockamy recruited them to an all-women rodeo team.¹⁰³⁵ While the group’s membership has fluctuated slightly over time, Selina “Pennie” Brown, Kisha “KB” Bowles, Sandra “Pinky” Dorsey, and Brittaney “Britt Brat” Logan have all called themselves Cowgirls of Color as they have balanced their full-time jobs and familial responsibilities with their rodeo commitments.¹⁰³⁶ In interviews about the Cowgirls of Color’s start, Brown has recognized that rodeo is “a rich, white sport,” and Bowles has acknowledged that the cost-prohibitive nature of rodeo influenced the group’s early days by noting that, “[w]hen we first started out, we were poor. We were using the horses of a man who was also poor and lived in his barn”¹⁰³⁷ Yet, their dedication enabled the group to work past economic challenges; Bowles asserts that “we had heart and we wanted it.”¹⁰³⁸ Following their first competition together, the Cowgirls of Color competed in numerous others across Maryland and the country, “gaining better placements, more respect, and more recognition both on a local and national level.”¹⁰³⁹ Now, annually, the group—each with their own horse—competes in the Bill Pickett Invitational, a “longstanding circuit” traditionally geared towards Black riders that is named after an

¹⁰³⁵ Jasmine Browley, “Meet The Co-Founders of ‘Cowgirls of Color’—A Rodeo Group Aiming To Change The Face Of Riding,” *Essence*, published April 14, 2022, <https://www.essence.com/news/money-career/cowgirls-of-color-rodeo-group/>; Lindsay Peoples, “Ladies With Lassos: Four women known as the Cowgirls of Color have found a niche within the rodeo community,” *The Cut*, published June 28, 2017, <https://www.thecut.com/2017/06/cowgirls-of-color-all-black-all-female-rodeo-team.html>.

¹⁰³⁶ Peoples, “Ladies With Lassos;” DeAnna Taylor, “Meet The Only All-Black Female Rodeo Squad, the Cowgirls of Color,” *Travel Noire*, published November 1, 2019, <https://travelnoire.com/all-black-female-rodeo-squad>.

¹⁰³⁷ Peoples, “Ladies With Lassos;” Taylor, “Meet The Only All-Black Female Rodeo Squad, the Cowgirls of Color.”

¹⁰³⁸ Taylor, “Meet The Only All-Black Female Rodeo Squad, the Cowgirls of Color.”

¹⁰³⁹ Browley, “Meet The Co-Founders of ‘Cowgirls of Color.’”

influential Black cowboy whom dominant Western American history has not always acknowledged.¹⁰⁴⁰

Aligning with the freedom offered by the planet Atlantica and envisioned by the myth of the West, in an interview, the Cowgirls of Color stated that the rodeo provides an opportunity “to escape their everyday lives.” Relating directly to the title of *When Your Limit is the Sky, I’m on Another Planet, and You Just Fly*, Dorsey asserts that, “[w]hen you really run a horse, you feel like you’re flying.”¹⁰⁴¹ The maximalist aesthetics of Bey’s portraits of the Cowgirls of Color reflect what scholar Myeshia C. Babers identifies as a “Black aesthetic creativity” that challenges viewers to consider “a Black cowboy wearing bedazzled blue jeans, or an all-pink cowboy-inspired outfit complete with a pink cowboy hat instead of the traditional cowboy uniform.”¹⁰⁴² Babers notes a correlation between the carefully curated clothing and work of Black rodeo stars by stating that, “[i]n the rodeo, Black cowboys pay the same attention to their preparation and execution of control of their aesthetic and performance as they do when roping calves on a ranch.”¹⁰⁴³ Thus, across Bey’s *When Your Limit is the Sky* and *And My Flames Stay*, labor and aesthetics are intrinsically intertwined for both the artist and her sitters.

While the members of the Cowgirls of Color state that “being cowgirls means constantly confounding expectations” and that their rodeo efforts are, in part, an effort “to help people understand that not only do Black people ride, but Black women are here doing this, too,” people of color have historically found meaning and belonging at the rodeo.¹⁰⁴⁴ In her 2019 text, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West*, Rebecca Scofield argues that Black

¹⁰⁴⁰ Taylor, “Meet The Only All-Black Female Rodeo Squad, the Cowgirls of Color.”

¹⁰⁴¹ Peoples, “Ladies With Lassos.”

¹⁰⁴² Myeshia C. Babers, “Alternative Histories of the Cowboy Myth,” in *Cowboy* (Rizzoli Electa, 2023), 37.

¹⁰⁴³ Babers, “Alternative Histories of the Cowboy Myth,” 38.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Peoples, “Ladies With Lassos;” Browley, “Meet The Co-Founders of ‘Cowgirls of Color;”” Rebecca Scofield, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West* (University of Washington Press, 2019), 3.

cowboys and rodeo stars are not new figures in the history of the American West, but rather, “Black rodeo represent[s] history, not hipness.”¹⁰⁴⁵ While, throughout the nineteenth-century, free and formerly enslaved male and female Black Westerners worked as traders, breeders, trainers, cattle-drive cooks, and drovers, by the 1950s, “American popular culture had almost erased three centuries of [B]lack rangeland labor.”¹⁰⁴⁶ Babers identifies this censure as “part of the American tradition of erasing the contributions of Black throughout history” and argues that, as a result, “Black Western culture and cowboys have been mistaken as appropriations of white culture, from the look of the cowboy to the land he owns.”¹⁰⁴⁷

Following the death of William “Buffalo Bill” Cody in 1917, rodeos surpassed Wild West shows as the main form of Western American performance—though rodeo stars worked on both. Along with film and literature, rodeos helped drive “the creation of the cowboy as the mascot of the imagined West in the twentieth century.”¹⁰⁴⁸ Yet, Scofield argues that early rodeos reflected the degree of diversity present among the working class in the rural West, as “women could bronc-ride, the rare African American performer could headline a show, and a Native American cowboy could be crowned champion.”¹⁰⁴⁹ However, in the 1940s, as rodeo transformed into a professional sport, the women and people of color who once found belonging at the event “were relegated to supporting roles,” and conceptualizations of rodeo stars became increasingly masculine, heterosexual, and Euro-American.¹⁰⁵⁰ As Afro-Indigenous rodeo star Cleo Hearn once stated, “[e]verybody could be a cowboy, except a [B]lack person.”¹⁰⁵¹ Scofield argues that Black

¹⁰⁴⁵ Scofield, *Outriders*, 99.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Scofield, *Outriders*, 99.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Babers, “Alternative Histories of the Cowboy Myth,” 32.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Scofield, *Outriders*, 52-52, 6.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Scofield, *Outriders*, 7.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Scofield, *Outriders*, 8. In *Black Cowboys of Rodeo* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), Keith Ryan Cartwright and Danny L. Glover argue that Black rodeo stars should be considered “among the first Black professional athletes,” (xii).

¹⁰⁵¹ Cleo Hearn quoted in Scofield, *Outriders*, 129.

women, in particular, “felt the weight of this statement.”¹⁰⁵² Despite the challenges to Black rodeo awareness that this mid-century erasure has and continues to wrought, Black rodeo athletes and events are gaining increasing recognition in the twenty-first century, as exemplified by the Cowgirls of Color’s success. With their achievements, Black rodeo athletes trouble conceptions of the mythic American West and reveal “the complex ways people police the boundaries of their identities” to promote a more “authentic Western identity.”¹⁰⁵³ In Bey’s portraits of the Cowgirls of Color, Black women have, again, found meaning and belonging not only at the rodeo, but across Atlantica, as they move throughout the galaxy.

“WHAT IF WE COULD IMAGINE THE WESTERN DIFFERENTLY?”

While Bey’s *And My Flames* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* feature portraits of real rodeo athletes, their bright blue and pink skin appears as otherworldly as the paintings’ vibrant backgrounds. In large part, the figures’ colorful skin tones and supposed location on the planet Atlantica relate to Bey’s interests in speculative fiction, a genre with ties to the Western.¹⁰⁵⁴ In defining “speculative fiction,” English scholar Michael K. Johnson argues that “speculative” is usually “used to refer more generally to texts with nonrealist elements” and can include “heterogeneous forms and genres of writing, notably science fiction and fantasy.” Often, speculative works include those by authors of color “that may not have been classified or interpreted in terms of genre connections.”¹⁰⁵⁵ “Science fiction,” “utopia,” and “fantasy” can all

¹⁰⁵² Scofield, *Outriders*, 129.

¹⁰⁵³ Scofield, *Outriders*, 5.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Miranda, “Love of a Black planet: Artist April Bey’s Atlantica soars beyond Wakanda.” For instance, Bey is “a devoted reader of speculative fiction,” including that by Octavia Butler, and notes that “*The Gilda Region*” subtitle of the *Atlantica* exhibition was inspired by the book, *The Gilda Stories*, a tale about a Black lesbian vampire, by Jewelle Gomez. Bey also has stated that her father “is a huge sci-fi nerd” and that “a lot of the stories he told me as a kid were actually ‘80s sci-fi movie plots.”

¹⁰⁵⁵ Michael K. Johnson, *Speculative Wests: Popular Representations of a Region and Genre* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 3.

be synonyms for speculative fiction, which frequently represents “a variety of ethnic and racial traditions and experiences without the confinement of narrower and exclusionary definitions of specific genres.”¹⁰⁵⁶

As with the whitewashing of the rodeo, common perceptions of science fiction have labeled the genre as “the domain of geeky white boys.” Johnson argues that both the Western and science fiction are “two genres generally regarded as being unfriendly to African American authors, characters, and stories.”¹⁰⁵⁷ Yet, as Bey’s *Atlantica* series and interests in speculative fiction illustrate, Black creatives “have been involved with science fiction (and proto-science fiction) for much of its existence as a genre.”¹⁰⁵⁸ Thus, scholar andré m. carrington suggests that an “overrepresentation of Whiteness in the genre” is the root of the issue.¹⁰⁵⁹ With their combination of Old West and outer space imagery, one can situate Bey’s *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* more specifically as falling within the genre of “speculative westerns.” While the Western has declined in popularity from the mid-twentieth century until today, the genre has continued to reinvent itself “[r]ather than dying out and fading away.”¹⁰⁶⁰ Specifically, Johnson notes that the development of “the science fiction Western” in the twenty-first century has “opened new spaces for imagining and performing the American West,” spaces which Bey explores with *Atlantica*.¹⁰⁶¹

In his text, *Speculative Wests: Popular Representation of a Region and a Genre*, Johnson identifies speculative westerns as “merging the western with one or more speculative genres or

¹⁰⁵⁶ andré m. carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 21-22; Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 4.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 38.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 173.

¹⁰⁵⁹ carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 17.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Neil Campbell, “Post-Western Cinema,” in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, ed. Nicolas S. Witschi (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 409.

¹⁰⁶¹ Michael K. Johnson, *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 212.

subgenres (science fiction, fantasy, horror, alternative history, steampunk, time travel, etc.).”¹⁰⁶² These texts might question, as Bey’s *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* do, “[w]hat if we could imagine the western differently? What if we could imagine a different past, present, or future West?”¹⁰⁶³ With their integration of the futuristic and fantastic, speculative westerns undermine past assertions of “frontier realism” to “challenge the ‘stories about history’ that westerns have told.”¹⁰⁶⁴ Johnson labels speculative westerns as “Frankenstein projects” in which authors have “grafted” mismatched parts from multiple genres together.”¹⁰⁶⁵ In discussion of her *Atlantica* series, Bey asserts that “I try to make my work aggressively beautiful because that’s the aesthetic of *Atlantica*, but it’s sinister as well.” In part, some of the artistic inclusions that create such a sinister feeling in works such as *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* are the fabrics that Bey utilizes, which sometimes are “completely knockoff fabric that’s been taken from other cultures.”¹⁰⁶⁶ Beyond Bey’s combination of blue and pink skin, Black female rodeo stars, and surreal background in the two paintings, her use of carefully sourced fabrics and sequins adds to the “Frankenstein-esque” nature of the work.

Often, when speculative works such as Bey’s utilize Western American elements in their narratives, those inclusions are typically used to comment critically on the Western genre.¹⁰⁶⁷ Bey’s western work, in particular, presents both the possibility for freedom that the intergalactic West offers *Atlantica* residents as well as the challenge that the only surprising element about the *Cowgirls of Color*’s position as rodeo stars should be that their skin is bright blue or pink. In his discussion of Afrofuturism, Johnson identifies the “hope impulse” in speculative Black works as

¹⁰⁶² Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 3.

¹⁰⁶³ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 4.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 10.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 8.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Donoghue, “April Bey Brings the Story of *Atlantica* to The Bahamas and Beyond.”

¹⁰⁶⁷ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 6.

a “charged impulse representing the desire for life, liberty, and knowledge.”¹⁰⁶⁸ This impulse “links multiple Black migrations to various geographies: the Exoduster’s movement westward, imagined returns to Africa in the folklore of flying Africans, the journey to another planet.”¹⁰⁶⁹ The hope impulse, then, is reflected directly in Bey’s *Atlantica* series, in general, and *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky*, in particular, with their emphasis on interplanetary movements and the freedoms that allow such mobility.

“IN ATLANTICA, WE CAN SOLVE EVERYTHING”

Considering the erasure of Black presence from predominant histories of the American West, including the rodeo circuit, why would Bey contribute to the genre of the speculative western with *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky*? One can look to the idea of “afro-nostalgia” and supposed post-race society that the speculative West of the future offers for answers. Conceptualized by scholar Badia Ahad-Legardy in response to the prevailing idea that nostalgia for the past is a sentiment not “accessible” to Black Americans, afro-nostalgia complicates “the traumatic as a singular Black historical through line” by conceptualizing the “desires of the African descended to discern and devise romantic recollections of the past.”¹⁰⁷⁰ Ahad-Legardy argues that “[t]he conventional idea of nostalgia as longing to return or homesickness for any era in American history, for [B]lack people, is generally read as counterintuitive at best and traitorous at worst.”¹⁰⁷¹ One could extend this belief to Bey’s usage of Old West iconography in *Atlantica* works. However, afro-nostalgia does not deny the trauma

¹⁰⁶⁸ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 198-199.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 199.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Badia Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 2021), 1, 3.

¹⁰⁷¹ Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia*, 1.

of the past, but rather, acts “as a framework in which to analyze the seemingly dissonant concepts of historical memory, Blackness, affect, joy, and thriving.”¹⁰⁷² While narratives of Black disenfranchisement and subjugation do not tend to seamlessly mesh with “romantic wistfulness,” afro-nostalgia and history can exist simultaneously as “cousins” rather than binaries.¹⁰⁷³

Speculative Black westerns such as Bey’s *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* harness the concept of afro-nostalgia while drawing implicitly or explicitly from the freedom for Black individuals that the American West of the nineteenth century supposed offered. Historian Quintard Taylor argues that the main paradigm in the history of the Black American West is “[d]id the West represent the last best hope for nineteenth- and twentieth-century African Americans? Was it a racial frontier beyond which lay the potential for an egalitarian society? Or did the region fail to match the unobtainable promise imposed upon it by legions of boosters, to provide both political freedom and economic opportunity?”¹⁰⁷⁴ He answers that, “[p]erhaps, [B]lack Americans, in their desire to escape the repression of the East and South, simply exaggerated the possibilities in the region.”¹⁰⁷⁵ Johnson argues that, “even if the stories of the Black West are not well known, African American artists have been joining together stories of enslavement with narratives of frontier freedom for a very long time,” as Bey does in the two works from *Atlantica*.¹⁰⁷⁶ While the potential for freedom in the nineteenth-century American West was overexaggerated, this freedom “meant not only being ‘able to cope

¹⁰⁷² Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia*, 4.

¹⁰⁷³ Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia*, 1, 7.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (Norton, 1998), 17.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 17.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 175.

with any white person' but also having land of your own."¹⁰⁷⁷ On Atlantica, both are possible. Bey asserts that, "[i]n Atlantica, we can solve everything" because the planet is "a space where Black women and queer people can simply be themselves."¹⁰⁷⁸ She elaborates further that, if aliens from Atlantica came to Earth, "they might be [like], 'Omigod, you still have race? You still have gender?'"¹⁰⁷⁹ The envisioning of an American West of the future in *Atlantica* works such as *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* relates directly to the importance and treatment of race in speculative/science fiction.

In *Speculative Wests*, Johnson notes that "race has always been an important element of science fiction, even if racial issues are represented in allegorical form—with greenskinned aliens, for example, as a representation of an otherness that is coded as racial."¹⁰⁸⁰ Rather than "greenskinned," the aliens of Atlantica's American West are decidedly bright blue and pink. With their Frankenstein nature and incorporation of elements from various genres, speculative westerns free the genre of the Western "from the (already highly fictionalized) historical setting in the American West," and in doing so, "move beyond the racial mythologies that have long operated within the Western."¹⁰⁸¹ *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* do just that with their retention of easily recognizable icons of "Westernness" set within a, timeless, location-less landscape. Many of science fiction's idealized imaginings of the future, such as those expressed by Bey, act as "evidence of exceptionalism regarding race and ethnicity."¹⁰⁸² Although "time-travel" westerns often posit "postracial" societies, Black characters in speculative westerns "gesture toward an identity that is not quite after race but that nonetheless

¹⁰⁷⁷ Rachel Wolters, "As Migrants and as Immigrants: African Americans Search for Land and Liberty in the Great Plains, 1890–1912," *Great Plains Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2015): 333, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44685111>.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Miranda, "Love of a Black planet: Artist April Bey's Atlantica soars beyond Wakanda."

¹⁰⁷⁹ Miranda, "Love of a Black planet: Artist April Bey's Atlantica soars beyond Wakanda."

¹⁰⁸⁰ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 38.

¹⁰⁸¹ Johnson, *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos*, 212.

¹⁰⁸² Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 41.

moves beyond earlier ways of conceptualizing African American identity.”¹⁰⁸³ As with the inclusion of the Cowgirls of Color in *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky*, in many speculative westerns with African-descended characters, “being [B]lack is understood as something more than being a victim of white oppression or representing a problem of injustice waiting to be solved.”¹⁰⁸⁴ Instead, in Bey’s speculative western paintings, there is an obvious undercurrent of afro-nostalgia that recognizes the potential for societal freedom offered by the American West while divorcing the territory from its past oppressive ideologies regarding race.

In Bey’s paintings, *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky*, the artist harnesses inspirations from numerous genres and histories at once to create two assemblage-like paintings that mix the history of the American West with a utopian future. From her *Atlantica* series, the two works showcase the poise and accomplishments of the real-life, female, all-Black rodeo group, the Cowgirls of Color and envisions their successes as representatives for the idealized planet of Atlantica, a place where all racial tensions have been resolved, and women of color can live in peace.¹⁰⁸⁵ The models for the two works, women who actually traverse planet Earth on their rodeo endeavors, are imagined as aliens traveling and performing throughout the galaxy. As extraterrestrial representatives from the future, their movements through the intergalactic West are watched, certainly, but remain unrestricted. In this way, we have finally replaced the iconic “man on a horse” with a blue alien on a pink steed.

Stylistically and thematically, *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* engage with afro-nostalgia, the genre of the speculative western, and the larger history of the supposed freedom offered to Black migrants by the American West to bring to life Bey’s utopian

¹⁰⁸³ Johnson, *Speculative Wests*, 38; Johnson, *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos*, 212.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Johnson, *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos*, 213.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Miranda, “Love of a Black planet: Artist April Bey’s Atlantica soars beyond Wakanda.”

vision. In this vision, positive elements of the American West—including the accomplishments and history of Black rodeo stars and the freedom that could seemingly be found in the region—have carried over into the future, ensuring that the West is never truly of the past. As a result, this forward thinking reflects the significance of the American West in both African American history as well as identity formation. As Bey asserts, “[l]ooking to the future acts as a therapeutic excretory practice in dealing with current day issues around race and discrimination globally,” including the history of those issues in the American West.¹⁰⁸⁶

CONCLUSION

While The Chicks sing of a woman dreaming to go out West in their popular 1998 song, “Wide Open Spaces,” in the prevailing American popular conception of the American West, white, male exploration of supposedly new frontiers and uncharted wildernesses dominates. The lure of the West—the pull to “see the elephant” and experience novel encounters—has seemingly only grasped men. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Americans have turned to Western America for recreation, entertainment, and exploration. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, these movements and performances have furthered the aims of settler colonialism as a form of cultural conquest.¹⁰⁸⁷ However, as artwork by Katie Hargrave and Meredith Laura Lynn, Martine Gutierrez, and April Bey emphasizes, many have been excluded from discussions of Western American exploration, tourism, and other forms of entertainment—specifically, those from underrepresented or marginalized groups. While “explorer” is not one of the four supposed categories of women found in the “Old Wild West,” artwork by the four artists reveal that women have and continue to experience the lure of the West in ways similar—but mostly dissimilar—to

¹⁰⁸⁶ April Bey, “April Bey / Bio,” April-Bey.com, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.april-bey.com/about>.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Neel, “Tourism and the American West,” 521, 517.

their noted male counterparts. This group includes the likes of John Wayne, John Muir, and Edward Abbey, all of whom have been memorialized and idolized, despite their controversial pasts, for their daring natures and commitment to the outdoors. Reflecting literal or imagined movements throughout the American West of the past, present, and future, the work of the artists in this chapter challenges the white, male legacy associated with western spectacles such as the National Parks System, Monument Valley, and the rodeo.

In expanding conceptions of who is associated with Western American spectacles, the artists do more than add female names to the list of explorers and performers of the American West. Rather, Lynn, Hargrave, Gutierrez, and Bey's artwork all emphasizes how western identity is performed, packaged, and sold through the spectacle, through visiting iconic locales such as the national parks and Monument Valley or taking part in the rodeo. While the first director of the National Parks Service, Stephen T. Mather, envisioned the national parks as "vast schoolrooms of Americanism," he also imagined them as vacationlands and show places.¹⁰⁸⁸ Hargrave and Lynn's work draws from a selection of widely recognizable images to represent each of Utah's national parks. While their innovative use of new media complicates the legibility of their artwork, the artists rely on the fact that facets of Utah's national parks are so iconic that many viewers can recognize them remixed and out of context. This is only possible because of how commercialized Western American national parks have become. Lippard notes that "[t]he most famous national parks," most of which, including Yellowstone and Yosemite, are in the American West, "have come to resemble television shows or photography books—controlled or static sequences of scenery and sights."¹⁰⁸⁹ Work from Hargrave and Lynn's *Over Look / Under Foot* present just that: carefully curated combinations of sights and sounds from Utah's national

¹⁰⁸⁸ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 148.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 136.

parks, including Arches. If the national parks are truly “Absolutely American,” the fact that the most famous parks are located west of the Mississippi solidifies that American identity is rooted in the mythic West.¹⁰⁹⁰ As *Over Look / Under Foot* emphasizes, this “Absolutely American” experience can be reduced down into a series of succinct, yet informative images that can be remixed and repackaged without losing their iconic nature.

Much of what is true about the iconicity of America’s national parks is also true of the Southwest’s Monument Valley. Similarly, Gutierrez, Hargrave, and Lynn’s use of images work relatedly. While Hargrave and Lynn patchwork many images of Utah’s national parks together, without obscuring their reference landscapes, the setting of Gutierrez’s *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)* is so instantly recognizable that even the surrealist elements of the photographs cannot mask its identity. Glowing under the moonlight in the *Anita & Marie* images, Monument Valley’s sandstone spires are a fitting inclusion in photographs that are set broadly in the American West and draw inspiration from Sherman’s *Untitled Film Still* series; in a short amount of time, Monument Valley has become “Hollywood’s generic western geography.”¹⁰⁹¹ Through mid-twentieth century tourism and cinematic efforts, the iconic landscape has also become widely marketed and consumed. Zeman argues that, “[f]rom television and magazine advertisements, to the ubiquitous T-shirts sold in Arizona tourist boutiques, to southwestern-style New York restaurants,” Monument Valley’s geological formations “have come to embody the entire region.”¹⁰⁹² It is with relatively little effort, then, that viewers of Gutierrez’s *Anita & Marie 5* and *7* can situate the images’ subjects as in the

¹⁰⁹⁰ Weber and Sultana, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?,” 438.

¹⁰⁹¹ Zeman, “Monument Valley,” 319.

¹⁰⁹² Zeman, “Monument Valley,” 307.

American West; simply including Monument Valley's spires in the photographs is enough indicator of the women's location.

Similarly, though her female subjects have otherworldly skin tones and vibrant settings, the inclusion of a few, key icons of Western American identity are enough to tell viewers that the women of Bey's *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky* are linked to cowboy culture and western identity. Their boots, spurs, cowboy hats, and horses call to mind the American West instantly for viewers. The fact that the sitters for both works are members of the Black, female rodeo group, the Cowgirls of Color solidifies this connection; Scofield notes that rodeo performance such as that undertaken by the Cowgirls of Color should be viewed as "an epistemology of the West: a specific way of knowing, or making others know, that one is western." Knowing that, in Bey's paintings, the blue- and pink-hued rodeo stars are supposed to be aliens from the fictional planet of Atlantica that perform in competitions across the galaxy should not complicate this association. Rather, since its conception, the inclusion of underrepresented or marginalized groups in the rodeo, including Black rodeo performers, has "challenged the restrictive meaning of the cowboy while also furthering the idea of an authentic western identity."¹⁰⁹³ Whether they are from the early twentieth century, present day, or several hundred years in the future, Black rodeo performers remind "all Americans that their ancestors were also explorers, settlers, Indian fighters, conquerors, and cowboys."¹⁰⁹⁴ In this way, "[t]he enactment of the cowboy" through the rodeo—as seen in *And My Flames Stay* and *When Your Limit is the Sky*—constructs "not only a shared historical experience but a shared cultural heritage that could be recovered and leveraged for the betterment of the future."¹⁰⁹⁵

¹⁰⁹³ Scofield, *Outriders*, 4.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Scofield, *Outriders*, 101.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Scofield, *Outriders*, 118.

The thematic and formal miscellany in this chapter—as well as across this whole project—emphasizes that there is no singular path forward for Western American (art) history. This diversity and uncertainty are needed sorely for both fields; for too long, it has been easy to track and predict their problematic, but largely unremarkable trajectories. Through detailed analysis, however, one can pick out several connecting threads running through the work of the four artists discussed. Beyond examining women's movements to see or be in the service of spectacle, Hargrave, Lynn, Gutierrez, and Bey all interrogate how Western American identity has been performed, reduced, and repackaged in these spaces. Their artwork emphasizes how analyzing icons of the American West, including national parks, Monument Valley, and the rodeo, can reveal overlooked histories in the mythic territory while exposing the fallacy of searching for an authentic experience of the West.

CODA

ARE WE STILL SURPRISED THAT “COWBOYS ARE FREQUENTLY, SECRETLY FOND OF EACH OTHER?”¹⁰⁹⁶

In late September 2023, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Denver, Colorado, opened its groundbreaking exhibition, *Cowboy*, curated by MCA director Nora Burnett Abrams and senior curator Miranda Lash. On view until mid-February 2024, *Cowboy* featured work by twenty-seven contemporary artists—including Angela Ellsworth and Laurel Nakadate—many of whom are from historically underrepresented or marginalized groups. The artwork included in *Cowboy* explores the “origins of the American cowboy and how the figure and its mythology persist today.” By centering the exhibit around this work, curators hoped to “shift the narrative” of the cowboy’s “cultural power and significance to be both historically accurate and creatively imaginative.”¹⁰⁹⁷ As with this dissertation, the organizers for *Cowboy* took aim at the iconic man on a horse, whom they label as “a character, a seductive ideal, and...a laborer” in the popular mindset. Recognizing, as I do in this project, that the myths of the West, including the archetype of the cowboy, “fail to acknowledge the widely diverse histories and lived experiences” of those who have visited or lived in Western America, *Cowboy* strove “to break apart the homogenous ideal of the cowboy as a white, cisgender American male and showcase the diverse manifestations of this figure across many different communities and in a variety of media.”¹⁰⁹⁸

While I have some reservations about Nakadate and Ellsworth’s inclusion in the exhibition—if someone poses on a horse or constructs a pioneer bonnet, does that automatically

¹⁰⁹⁶ The title of this conclusion is a reference to Orville Peck and Willie Nelson’s 2024 duet, “Cowboys are Frequently, Secretly Fond of Each Other,” written originally in 1981 and recorded in 1982 by Ned Sublette. Forgive my deviation from female country-western references here, but there was no other apt title for this coda.

¹⁰⁹⁷ “Cowboy: About the Exhibit,” MCA Denver, accessed October 23, 2024, <https://mcadenver.org/exhibitions/cowboy>.

¹⁰⁹⁸ “Cowboy: About the Exhibit,” MCA Denver.

align them with cowboy culture?—*Cowboy* seemed to forge a new, exciting path forward for the field of art of the American West.¹⁰⁹⁹ Unlike previous exhibits such as *Many Wests: Artists Shape an American Ideal* and *Monument Valley*, *Cowboy* presented an array of diverse, contemporary Western American artists unified by a clear argument—one more specific and accepting of intersectionality than that the West was/is diverse. For the first time since *The West as America*, it felt like the field was starting to reflect the calls from artists and art historians alike to put forth significant scholarship and exhibitions demonstrating that Western America is contemporary, diverse, and relevant in the twenty-first century. The iconic man on a horse, it appeared, had finally been knocked off his trusty steed. Instead of being replaced with a singular new figure, *Cowboy* presented a multitude of others, each drawing from the unique perspectives of their creators, to replace “the romanticized Marlboro Man aesthetic commonly found in Western art.”¹¹⁰⁰ Things were looking up, and I credit the press preceding the exhibition’s opening with first exposing me to Nakadate’s *Lucky Tiger* series.

As I continued to work on this dissertation, *Cowboy* ran through its tenure at MCA, and whispers started to circulate where the show would travel next. When I learned of its second location, I was startled. The Amon Carter Museum of American Art, whose collection was built from depictions of the “Old West” by myth of the West stalwarts Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, would host *Cowboy* in its second iteration. At face value, it made perfect sense that a museum who, for decades, had billed itself as a “Cowboy Art” museum would present a traveling exhibit called *Cowboy*. However, I was skeptical. With an involved board of

¹⁰⁹⁹ Ellsworth and I discussed her inclusion in *Cowboy* in the January 29, 2024, interview that I conducted with her, and she concluded that her *Seer Bonnets* were part of the show because “it’s a story of the West, and it’s challenging that myth of the West,” not because they were inherently about cowboy culture.

¹¹⁰⁰ “The Carter to Present the Nationally Touring Exhibition *Cowboy* Examining the Popularity and Mythologies of the Cowboy in American Culture—Past, Present, and Future,” Amon Carter Museum of American Art, published November 16, 2023, <https://www.cartermuseum.org/press-release/carter-present-nationally-touring-exhibition-cowboy>.

directors, the Carter had not strayed too far away from showing the work of Western American “greats” during its tenure in Fort Worth, Texas, a center of the Texas longhorn cattle trade.¹¹⁰¹ Yet, this did start to change during the needed social upheaval of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Perhaps, slowly but surely, the Carter was remaking itself as an institution that promoted multivocal, contemporary artwork of the American West. Compared to the visitors of East Coast institutions such as MoMA or the Whitney, the visitor demographics of the MCA and the Carter are relatively similar; audiences for *Cowboy* at these institutions located in the interior of the country are, typically, less likely to have the art historical background or exposure to art than those on the East Coast who grow up with multiple, significant art museums relatively close to their communities. After some consideration, I checked my skepticism and began to look forward to when the exhibition would be within reasonable driving distance from my location in central Oklahoma.

On September 28, 2024, *Cowboy* opened at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Local press, including publications such as *fortworth* magazine, celebrated the show and featured quotes from Amon Carter staff that indicated the institution’s dedication to promoting the work of underrepresented or marginalized voices in the West. Speaking with *Fort Worth Report*, assistant curator of photography at the Carter, María Beatriz H. Carrión, noted that “[t]he history of art in general, for a very long time, has focused on” white, male, heterosexual representations of the American West. “[M]aybe,” she asserts, “it’s time to push (back on) that a little bit.”¹¹⁰² In a press release, executive director of the Amon Carter, Andrew J. Walker, proclaimed boldly that

¹¹⁰¹ Janet Schmelzer, “Fort Worth, TX,” Texas State Historical Association, accessed October 23, 2024, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/fort-worth-tx>.

¹¹⁰² Marcheta Fornoff, “Like Beyoncé album, ‘Cowboy’ at Carter museum challenges Western stereotypes, culture,” *Fort Worth Report*, published September 27, 2024, <https://fortworthreport.org/2024/09/27/like-beyonce-album-cowboy-at-carter-museum-challenges-western-stereotypes-culture/>.

the museum was “honored” to host the exhibit, which demonstrated “the Carter’s commitment to showcasing the breadth and depth of American creativity through multiple perspectives.”¹¹⁰³ Perhaps, it was time for me to eat my words and concede that, yes, even resoundingly “cowboy” institutions such as the Carter were finally starting to shift their exhibition programming to reflect multivocal Wests.

This optimism was short lived. Less than two weeks after opening *Cowboy*, the Carter quietly closed the exhibition without warning or explanation on October 11, 2024. Museum visitors who were hoping to see the exhibition that day came face-to-face with a sign that stated, “Darn! This area is closed” when they reached the exhibit’s gallery.¹¹⁰⁴ When questioned, museum personnel asserted that they were unaware of both the cause for the exhibit’s closure and when the show would reopen. The same reporter—Marcheta Fornoﬀ—who had lauded the Amon Carter for hosting the exhibit in an article for *Fort Worth Report* two weeks previously broke the story and noted that the museum “declined an interview about the temporary closure of the exhibition and its subsequent reopening.”¹¹⁰⁵

By October 17, 2024, *Cowboy* was back on view, with a twist. Reflecting the conservative politics of the state in which it was being shown—as well as the conservatism that has continued shape Western American (art) history—a placard put in place outside the exhibit greeted visitors warning them of the “mature content” included in the show. This sign featured a QR code linked to a preview of the artwork in the exhibition so that one could review the

¹¹⁰³ “The Carter to Present the Nationally Touring Exhibition *Cowboy*,” Amon Carter Museum of American Art.

¹¹⁰⁴ Marcheta Fornoﬀ, “Carter museum quietly closes, reopens ‘Cowboy’ exhibition with mature content warning,” *Fort Worth Report*, published October 17, 2024, <https://fortworthreport.org/2024/10/17/carter-museum-quietly-closes-reopens-cowboy-exhibition-with-mature-content-warning/>.

¹¹⁰⁵ Fornoﬀ, “Carter museum quietly closes, reopens ‘Cowboy’ exhibition with mature content warning.”

offerings before entering (Figure 48).¹¹⁰⁶ Such signage was not included during *Cowboy*'s first run at the MCA. What was the mature content that the Amon Carter was worried would offend their visitors? Gratuitous nudity or graphic violence—both of which can be found in the female nudes or settler colonial landscape paintings abound in the Carter's collection? No. While the Carter declined to identify which artwork provoked the closure, Fornoff—as well as a Carter docent whom I spoke to in early March 2025—gestured to rafa esparza's 2023 installation *Querias Norte* (Figure 49), which was commissioned specifically for *Cowboy*, as a possible provocateur. The reason? esparza's work features a painting of two Hispanic men, surrounded by other coupled men in western wear, kissing. On the ground in front of the scene, adobe has been scattered and imprinted with their visible boot prints carrying out an invisible dance.¹¹⁰⁷ Reporting for *Glasstire*, a Texas visual arts publication, on October 24, 2024, Jessica Fuentes observed that the Carter had also “quietly canceled programming around the show, including educational events geared toward families and public tours.” In addition, the billboards that the Carter has throughout the Fort Worth area that once displayed ads for *Cowboy* no longer promote the show, and the exhibit was no longer highlighted in the banner for the Carter's website, which the museum typically does with current exhibitions.¹¹⁰⁸

When one discovers that the Amon Carter did not always intend for *Cowboy* to run in its fall 2024 slot—and, in fact, was a replacement for a different exhibition that was planned but seemingly fell by the wayside—the story becomes even more complicated. In March 2023, Spencer Wigmore, who was an associate curator at the Carter at that time, visited the University

¹¹⁰⁶ Alex Greenberger, “Texas Art Museum Briefly Shuttters Show About Cowboys, Race, and Gender After Visitor ‘Feedback,’” *ARTnews*, published October 18, 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/amon-carter-museum-cowboys-exhibition-closes-reopens-mature-content-warning-1234721619/>.

¹¹⁰⁷ Fornoff, “Carter museum quietly closes, reopens ‘Cowboy’ exhibition with mature content warning.”

¹¹⁰⁸ Jessica Fuentes, “Amon Carter Museum Reopens ‘Cowboy’ Exhibition with Content Warning; Removes Programming From Website,” *Glasstire*, published October 24, 2024, <https://glasstire.com/2024/10/24/amon-carter-museum-reopens-cowboy-exhibition-with-content-warning-cancels-programs-due-to-mature-content/>.

of Oklahoma's Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West. The purpose of his visit was to workshop what was described as "an upcoming Charles M. Russell project (slated for Fall 2024, with accompanying publication) that explores questions of how to interpret the paintings of Russell in museum spaces today" tentatively titled "New Perspectives on Charles Russell."¹¹⁰⁹ A description for the workshop that was circulated to University of Oklahoma art history graduate students noted the "nostalgic, Eurocentric imagery" and "colonial tropes and stereotypes, particularly in relation to his depictions of Indigenous life and culture on the Plains" dominating Russell's work had made his oeuvre a "topic of spirited debate." During the workshop, Wigmore would ask, "what do we make of Russell's art?" and "[w]hose voices should be included in the telling of his history?"¹¹¹⁰

The Carter has not shown an exhibit titled "New Perspectives on Charles Russell," or any iteration of that title, in the time since the March 2023 workshop. Nor is the exhibit included in the "upcoming exhibitions" section of the museum's website, which currently dates through January 2026.¹¹¹¹ Perhaps, it is simply a coincidence or an act of (mis)fortune that the Russell exhibit fell through, and the Carter selected *Cowboy* in its place. Regardless, it is a curious choice. An exhibition centered around reevaluating critically a beloved cowboy artist at the core of the Carter's collection seemingly never left the starting blocks, and, instead, was swapped for an exhibit looking at critiquing the archetype of the cowboy and the myth of the West as a whole. One wonders if the Russell exhibit would have garnered the same reaction as *Cowboy* with

¹¹⁰⁹ Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West, email to the art history graduate students at the University of Oklahoma about upcoming events, March 10, 2023; "Lectures and Presentations," School of Visual Arts at the University of Oklahoma, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://www.ou.edu/finearts/visual-arts/explore/charles-m-russell-center/lectures-and-presentations>.

¹¹¹⁰ Russell Center, email to OU art history graduate students, March 10, 2023.

¹¹¹¹ "Upcoming Exhibitions," Amon Carter Museum of Art, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://www.cartermuseum.org/exhibitions/upcoming-exhibitions>.

Carter visitors, or if its narrow focus on the artist would have merely annoyed Russell aficionados rather than provoke the show's censure.

In a state that the Human Rights Campaign labels as “unsafe for LGBTQIA+ people,” the fact that visitors to the Amon Carter might express concern or contempt for the queer-coded cowboy scenes in *Cowboy* is not a surprise.¹¹¹² The idea that the exhibit might have different receptions in a blue state—Colorado—versus a red state is also not a significant revelation. Furthermore, the concept that, when one challenges myths long ingrained in the American national consciousness—as *The West as America* demonstrated—people get upset is also not a shock. However, the fact that the Carter, which knew exactly what *Cowboy* included and stated in an American Alliance of Museum's blog post one week prior to the exhibit's closure that the institution sought to “reinvigorate” Western American art and value “new and more diverse voices and perspectives,” might give into these close-minded pressures is.¹¹¹³ The fact that they would censure an exhibit that, in a press release about *Cowboy*, they recognized presents “something much more reflective of historical and present day reality” than past myths of the West is not just disappointing.¹¹¹⁴ It demonstrates that the success of *Cowboy* in Denver was, perhaps, a false start, that the field of art of the American West writ large must continue toil to shift expectations about and receptions of diverse, contemporary Western American art.

¹¹¹² HRC Staff, “Texas Legislators’ Relentless Political Attacks Make Texas Unsafe for LGBTQIA+ People,” Human Rights Campaign, published April 27, 2023, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/texas-legislators-relentless-political-attacks-make-texas-unsafe-for-lgbtq-people>.

¹¹¹³ Shirley Reece-Hughes and Maggie Adler, “Historical Connections: Working with Living Artists in the Museum Setting,” American Alliance of Museums, published October 4, 2024, <https://www.aam-us.org/2024/10/04/historical-connections-working-with-living-artists-in-the-museum-setting/>. Walker noted that *Cowboy* aimed “to disrupt the homogenous ideal of the cowboy as a White, cisgender American male and showcase the diverse manifestations of this figure across communities” (“The Carter to Present Nationally Touring Exhibition *Cowboy*,” Amon Carter Museum).

¹¹¹⁴ “The Carter to Present the Nationally Touring Exhibition *Cowboy*,” Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Closing, albeit briefly, and reopening the exhibition with a “content warning” should be considered a form of censorship. Visitors who might not know what the exhibit entails and not have access to or the motivation to use the technology needed to scan the QR code to find out could be turned away from the exhibit over fears of exposing themselves or their children to “mature content” that, in actuality, is benign in the twenty-first century.

It is my hope that, with this dissertation, I have contributed to this shift, at least in some small measure. Taken individually, each work of art analyzed in this project provides an intensely personal glimpse into the artist's life, a life that happens to, in one way or another, intersect with the American West. Combined, however, all the artwork in this dissertation conveys the irrefutable fact that, for as long as there has been "the American West," there have been women pushed or pulled to move to and through the territory in ways distinct from the less restricted mobility of men. Artwork does not center prominently in fields of mobility studies or human geographies. However, as demonstrated by the work of the sixteen, female, contemporary artists included in this project—some of whom are also represented in *Cowboy*—it can function significantly as primary or secondary documentation of how and why women have moved to and through Western America. The artists in this dissertation combat the tendency of American art historians to overlook the future potential of Western American art and the erasure of underrepresented or marginalized groups from the field to stake a new claim for art of the American West as a compelling, diverse, and contemporary genre. In doing so, Self, Dickey, Peters, Ellsworth, Reichardt, Liu, Cabrera, Nguyễn, Nakadate, Simpson, Cohen, Red Star, Lynn, Hargrave, Gutierrez, and Bey have successfully pulled the iconic man off his horse and replaced him with an abstracted woman—without any unjustified signage—as the new image of mobility in the American West.

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FIGURES



Figure 1

Tschabalala Self (American, b. 1990). Installation view of *Pioneer* (2023). Cast bronze.

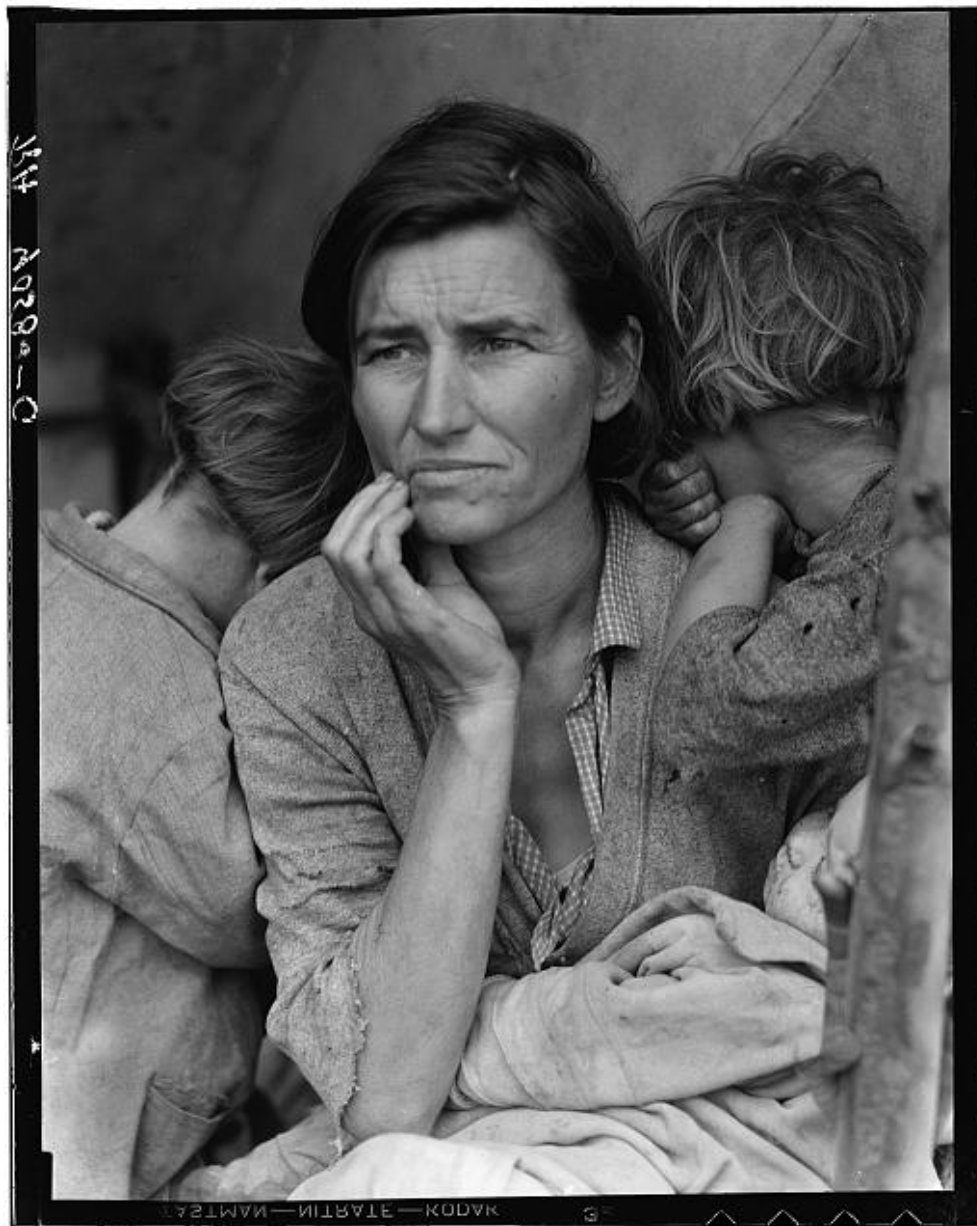


Figure 2

Dorothea Lange (American, 1895-1965). *Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California* or *Migrant Mother* (1936). Nitrate negative, 4 x 5 in.



Figure 3

Hung Liu (Chinese born American, 1948-2021). *Migrant Mother* from *American Exodus* (2015).
Oil on canvas, 66 x 66 in.



Figure 4

Shyanne Dickey (American, b. 1996). *Land Sold* (2021). Digital collage and oil paint, 42 x 72 in.



Figure 5

Shyanne Dickey (American, b. 1996). *Exodusters* (2020). Oil paint on canvas, 36 x 60 in.



Figure 6

Shyanne Dickey (American, b. 1996). *The Load* (2021). Digital collage and oil paint, 42 x 72 in.



Figure 7

William Henry Dethlef Koerner (German American, 1878-1938), *Madonna of the Prairie* (1921). Oil on canvas, 37 x 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.



Figure 8

Bryant Baker (English American, 1881-1970). Installation view of *Pioneer Woman* in Ponca City, Oklahoma (1929).



Figure 9

Thomas Worth (American, 1839-1917). *A Mule Train on an Up Grade*, "Golly! where is dis yere promis Land" (1881). Lithograph, 8 ½ x 13 ½ in.



Figure 10

Pamela J. Peters (Diné, b. 1970). Video still from *The Legacy of Exiled NDNz* (2014). TRT: 00:14:01.



Figure 11

Pamela J. Peters (Diné, b. 1970). Video still from *The Legacy of Exiled NDNz* (2014). TRT: 00:14:01.



Figure 12

Kent Mackenzie (English American, 1930-1980). Film still from *The Exiles* (1961). TRT: 01:10:00.



Figure 13

Kent Mackenzie (English American, 1930-1980). Film still from *The Exiles* (1961). TRT: 01:10:00.



Figure 14

Angela Ellsworth (American, b. 1964). Video still from *Kicking Up Dust* (2014). TRT: 00:02:37.



Figure 15

Kelly Reichardt (American, b. 1964). Film still from *Meek's Cutoff* (2010). TRT: 01:44:00.



Figure 16

Kelly Reichardt (American, b. 1964). Film still from *Meek's Cutoff* (2010). TRT: 01:44:00.



Figure 17

Kelly Reichardt (American, b. 1964). Film still from *Meek's Cutoff* (2010). TRT: 01:44:00.



Figure 18

Hung Liu (Chinese born American, 1948-2021). *Mandarin Ducks* (2005). Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 in.

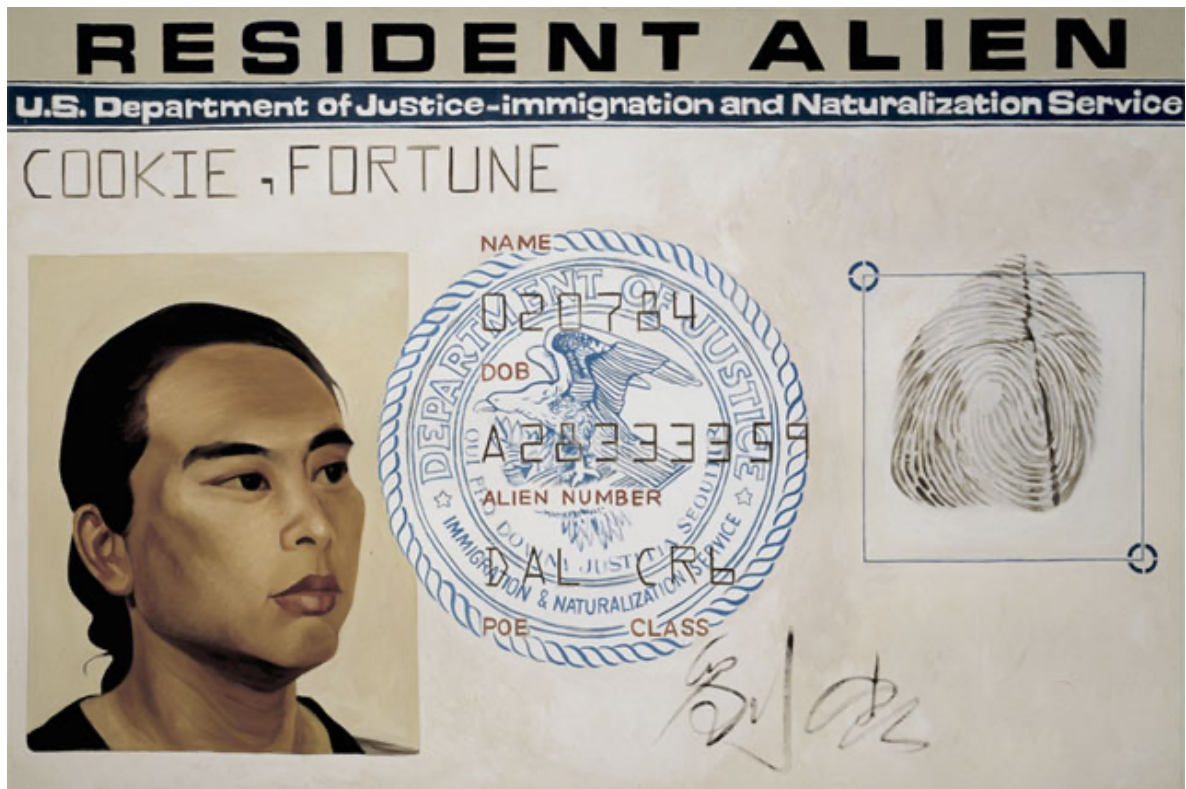


Figure 19

Hung Liu (Chinese born American, 1948-2021). *Resident Alien* (1988). Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 in.



Figure 20

Margarita Cabrera (Mexican American, b. 1973). Installation view of the *Spaces in Between* project at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art (2018). Embroidery thread, fabric from Border Patrol uniforms, ceramic pots, and wood.



Figure 21

Margarita Cabrera (Mexican American, b. 1973). *Spaces in Between—Saguaro (Rosa Maria Soto)* (2016). Embroidery thread, fabric from Border Patrol uniforms, ceramic pot.



Figure 22

Anh-Thuý Nguyễn (Vietnamese born American, b. 1983). Video still from *Thuy & Sand* (2017).
One-channel HD video with sound, TRT: 00:07:07.



Figure 23

Anh-Thuý Nguyễn (Vietnamese born American, b. 1983). Video still from *Thuy & Sand* (2017).
One-channel HD video with sound, TRT: 00:07:07.



Figure 24

Anh-Thuý Nguyễn (Vietnamese born American, b. 1983). Video still from *Thuy & Sand* (2017).
One-channel HD video with sound, TRT: 00:07:07.



Figure 25

“Sands of Time” diorama from the White Sands Visitor Center, White Sands National Park, New Mexico. March 19, 2024. Photograph by the author.



Figure 26

Laurel Nakadate (American, b. 1975). *Lucky Tiger #151* (2009). Chromogenic print with ink fingerprints, 4 x 6 in.



Figure 27

Laurel Nakadate (American, b. 1975). *Lucky Tiger #4* (2009). Chromogenic print with ink fingerprints, 4 x 6 in.



Figure 28

Laurel Nakadate (American, b. 1975). *Lucky Tiger #169* (2009). Chromogenic print with ink fingerprints, 4 x 6 in.



Figure 29

Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo, b. 1983). *Maria* (2014). Customized 1985 Chevy El Camino.



Figure 30

Liz Cohen (American, b. 1973). *Welder* from *Bodywork* (2002). Chromogenic print, 50 x 60 in.



Figure 31

Liz Cohen (American, b. 1973). *Rio Grande Repair* from *On the River Road* (2012).
Chromogenic print, 50 x 63 in.



Figure 32

Liz Cohen (American, b. 1973). *Hood* from *Bodywork* (2002). Chromogenic print, 50 x 60 in.



Figure 33

Liz Cohen (American, b. 1973). *Lowrider Builder and Child* from *On the River Road* (2012).
Chromogenic print, 50 x 63 in.



Figure 34

Wendy Red Star (Crow, b. 1981). Example from *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* (2011).
Archival pigment print, 52 x 72 in.



Figure 35

Wendy Red Star (Crow, b. 1981). Installation view of *A Float for the Future* (2021).



Figure 36

Wendy Red Star (Crow, b. 1981). Example from *My Home is Where My Tipi Sits* (2011).
Archival pigment print, 52 x 72 in.

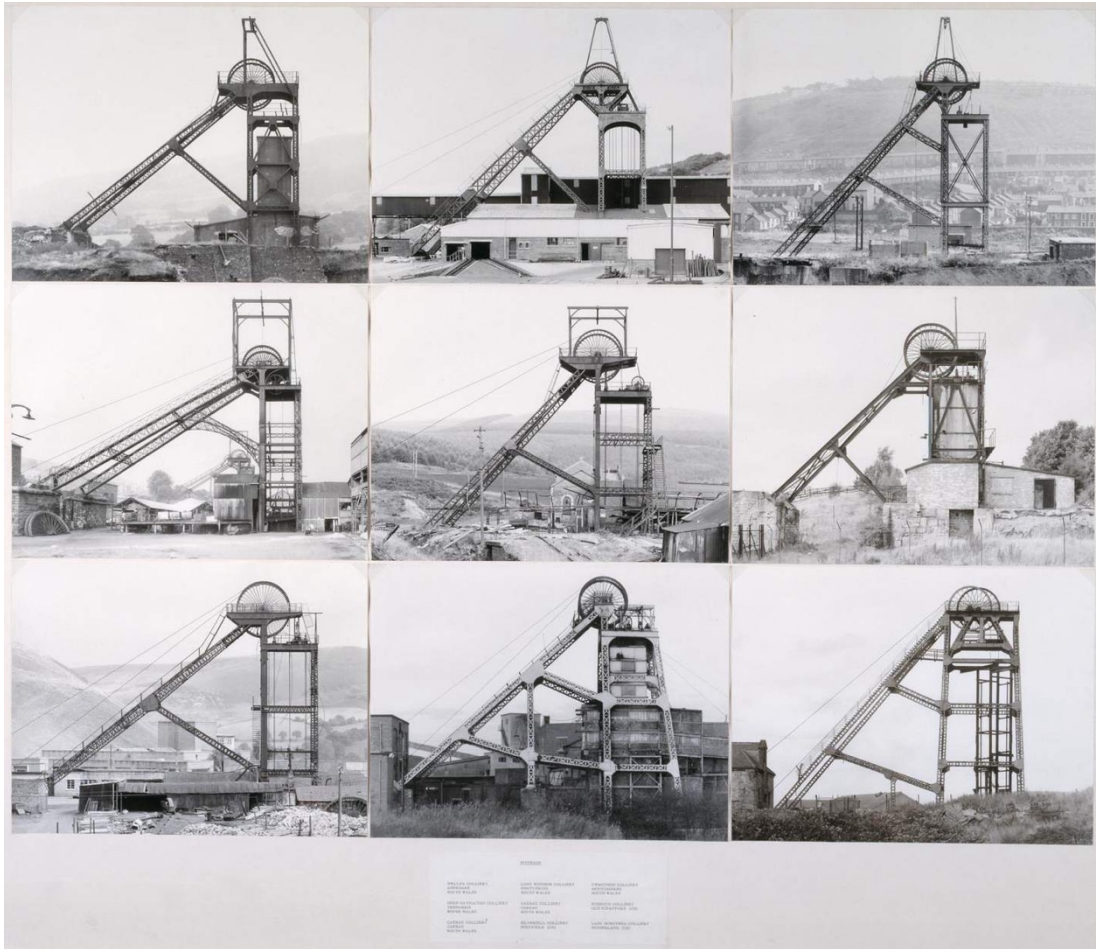


Figure 37

Bernd Becher (German, 1931-2007) and Hilla Becher (German, 1934-2015). Installation view of *Pitheads* photographs (1974).



Figure 38

Walter Ferguson (American, active late nineteenth and early twentieth century). *Geronimo seated behind the wheel of an early-day automobile, he is wearing a top-hat* (1904). Photograph, dimensions unknown.



Figure 39

Wendy Red Star (Crow, b. 1981), *Hawate (One)* from *A Float for the Future* (2021). Fabric with archival pigment photograph, 20 x 28 inches.



Figure 40

Katie Hargrave (American, b. 1985) and Meredith Laura Lynn (American, b. 1984). Installation view of *Over Look/Under Foot* (2020).



Figure 41

Katie Hargrave (American, b. 1985) and Meredith Laura Lynn (American, b. 1984). Installation view of *Mirror Muir* (2022).



Figure 42

Katie Hargrave (American, b. 1985) and Meredith Laura Lynn (American, b. 1984). *Arches*, from *Over Look/Under Foot* (2020). Nylon camping tent and enlarged photographic print.



Figure 43

Martine Gutierrez (American, b. 1989), *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* from *Girl Friends* (2014). Archival inkjet print on Arches Baryta paper, mounted to Sintra, 9 x 13 ¼ in.



Figure 44

Martine Gutierrez (American, b. 1989), *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 7)* from *Girl Friends* (2014). Archival inkjet print on Arches Baryta paper, mounted to Sintra, 9 x 13 ¼ in.



Figure 45

Cindy Sherman (American, b. 1954). *Untitled Film Still #43* (1979). Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 in.



Figure 46

April Bey (Bahamian American, b. 1987). *When Your Limit is the Sky, I'm on Another Planet and You Just Fly* (2022). Water-based latex paint, watercolor, hand-sewn fabric, glitter, and sequins, 110 x 144 in.



Figure 47

April Bey (Bahamian American, b. 1987). *And My Flames Stay Till You Get Out My Way* (2021).
Water-based latex paint, watercolor, hand-sewn fabric, glitter, and sequins, 110 x 216 in.



Figure 48

Gallery entrance to *Cowboy*, featuring a sign warning of the “mature content” contained within, at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. March 8, 2025. Photograph by the author.



Figure 49

rafa esparza (American, b. 1981). Installation view of *Querias Norte* (2023) at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. March 8, 2025. Photograph by the author.