

“Within the little circle of my vision”: Domesticity as the Catalyst for Acculturation in Susan Shelby Magoffin’s *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*

Monica Reyes

Abstract

This paper focuses on how Magoffin records her adventures as a young, privileged wife leaving home and coming face to face with war, death, foreign culture and womanhood. *Santa Fe Trail*, though pregnant with historical detail, is hardly as popular as male accounts of the frontier, as in *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* or Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*. The male travel narrative of the frontier provides much for the reader interested in the solitary, heroic American mythological figure penetrating and staking claim to the wilderness. In fact, *Santa Fe Trail* is mostly celebrated for its historical value, not for the writer or writing style. Magoffin’s private writings, in contrast to male frontier perspectives, offer a much more emotional, detailed record of her daily life as a woman with seemingly ordinary household tasks and pondering. Because of this domesticity, she finds non-threatening, common ground among the familial Indian, Mexican and Spanish women she encounters. Through the dailiness of their lives, Magoffin and the native wives, daughters, and mothers she comes across display a growing appreciation for one another, an unusual sentiment in popular travel narratives of the period. This essay synthesizes two ideas that are rare in *Santa Fe Trail*’s literary criticism: Magoffin’s growing and shifting perspective of native women and the impact her life as a domiciliary woman had on those perspectives. Three main ideas are discussed: (a) American frontier male travel narratives commonly persist in their prejudice assumptions of other cultures; (b) Magoffin’s travel journal exhibits the rare shift from fear and discomfort of the foreign other to appreciation and identification with the unfamiliar; (c) through Magoffin’s role of housewife, she is able to connect with Indian, Spanish and Mexican domestics on a level that is non-threatening. This discussion closely examines the textual examples of Magoffin’s exchanges with native women who share commonalities in the realm of domesticity.

Keywords

Magoffin, *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*, Domesticity, Acculturation, *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West*, Hisland, Women’s Travel Writing, *Imperial Eyes*, Heathen, American Frontier



The International Quarterly of Travelogy

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ISSN 2278-9642 | E-ISSN 2278-9650

Recommended Citation

Reyes, Monica. "'Within the little circle of my vision': Domesticity as the Catalyst for Acculturation in Susan Shelby Magoffin's *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*," *Coldnoon: Travel Poetics, International Journal of Travel Writing* 4.1 (2015): 108-135.

Available at: <http://coldnoon.com/41xiii/>

“Within the little circle of my vision”: Domesticity as the Catalyst for Acculturation in Susan Shelby Magoffin’s *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*

Monica Reyes

Perhaps the most notorious line from Susan Magoffin’s Santa Fe Trail travel diary, *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*, is taken from an early entry as she crosses the American plains, just over 100 miles from her starting point, Independence, Missouri: “It is the life of a wandering princess, mine. When I do not wish to get out myself to pick flowers the Mexican servants riding on mules busy themselves picking them for me” (11-12). Magoffin’s condescending tourism is a first impression that is not easily forgotten nearly a century since it was first published, and at first read, her travel diary seems nothing more than an account of an immature and pampered aspiring American pioneer on a profit-seeking expedition.

At the outset of her journey in June 1846, Magoffin was eighteen years old and married just eight months to a prosperous merchant, Samuel, who was twenty-seven years her senior. She was also pregnant with her first child when her journal begins, the second week of June-1846, approximately three weeks after the U.S. declared war on Mexico, and five weeks before the Mexican congress responded with its own declaration on July 7. Born July



30, 1827 to a wealthy Kentucky family with a rich patriotic history, Susan's family tree includes an uncle, Dr. Ephraim McDowell, who was a famous surgeon of the pre-Civil War period, and a celebrated great-grandfather, Evan Shelby, who was a soldier, treaty maker, trader, Indian fighter, war strategist of the American Revolution and first governor of Kentucky (Lamar xiv-xv). No doubt, Susan was born into a prestigious family and enjoyed the wealth, education and comfort that came with it, and her travel diary opens with the imprint of such an upbringing.

If diaries are troublesome sources because of their unreliable narrators, the problem is compounded, as in Magoffin's case, when it includes the external shaping of an editor. The only edition of Magoffin's diary, printed in 1926, was a project taken on by Stella Drumm, a Missouri historical Society archivist; Drumm's interest in Magoffin's journal is obvious: "In [Susan Magoffin's] simple and gentle way the young lady deftly raised the curtain from before characters and events of great importance in American history" (Drumm, qtd. in Scharff 35). Arthur Ponsboy reminds readers, "no editor can be trusted not to spoil a diary" (qtd. in Culley 15), and only modern criticism of Magoffin's journal has taken note of the gaping holes left in Drumm's edition. Margo Culley insists that editors "must attend to the main subject of any diary, the author herself, mirrored directly or mirrored slant in its pages" (17). This important rule of editing is what Virginia Scharff takes issue with as she studies Magoffin's work as edited by Drumm.¹

The clear reason Magoffin's journey ever saw a printing press was because her story takes place at a time of high historical value, and

¹ Scharff's *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West* is one of few which have located the value of Magoffin's work outside the traditional Mexican-American War historical purpose. Scharff notes about Magoffin: "Wherever Susan Magoffin had the chance to spend time with women, she did so. Indeed, women anchor her narrative in places — Bent's Fort, Santa Fe, San Gabriel, El Paso — in a way that men do not. The editor ignored, and by ignoring erased, the women and the settled social life that Susan encountered. But perhaps it is no great surprise that the meticulous Drumm paid no attention to the women who knew Susan Magoffin. The editor seemed, at bottom, uninterested in Magoffin herself (40).



Drumm highlights many eventful treasures; however, the editor repurposes Magoffin's work as male frontier literature as the footnotes focus largely on Magoffin's experiences that relate to the military men she encounters. The Mexican-American War, imperialism and exchanges with men such as General Zachary Taylor, General Stephen Kearney, and Susan Magoffin's own brother-in-law, James Magoffin, are Drumm's main points of interest within Magoffin's expedition. Scharff comments, "Drumm's annotations tell stories about any number of people. Curiously, they do not tell us a thing about Susan Shelby Magoffin, who appears in the notes only twice in passing" (38-39).² The deficiencies of such editing are many; for one, Drumm neglects the rare and female perspective of The Santa Fe Trail and the women who lived and moved along this route; also, through her editing focus, Drumm repackages Magoffin's writing to suit the "Hisland" literature of the American frontier that centers on mythological American male feats of violence, expansionism and war.³

It is no surprise then that a 1928 review of Drumm's edition by James Alexander Robertson applauds the edits and references because Magoffin's work is seen solely as a "part of Mexican War literature" (115). Robertson generalizes that Magoffin's writing is

² Scharff's argument concerning Drumm's editing is that it focuses primarily on the prominent white, American male historical figures of Manifest Destiny that Magoffin briefly meets (40). For example, "In the Drumm edition, Dr. Masure [the doctor attending Magoffin during her miscarriage] and his St. Louis family rated an extensive footnote, but Susan's difficult, ultimately tragic pregnancy did not merit mention" (44).

³ Howard Lamar's foreword in the 1962 edition (which is simply a reprinting of Drumm's original edition) mentions that nearly fifty pages of Susan's writing are edited out of the original text. While Lamar excuses the omission noting that the part left out was poetry "mostly sentimental or concerned with love" (xi), it is irresponsible to neglect such rare insight into women's thoughts during this time, although appropriate for the milieu in which Drumm worked. In fact, Lamar writes that once these personal poems are done, "the western diary proper starts" (xi), exhibiting preference for the mythical adventure book over the insights of a romantic newlywed. In addition, Lamar's foreword contains nearly 12 consecutive pages dedicated to Magoffin's brother-in-law, James, and his dealings in the Mexican- American War, while Susan Magoffin receives little attention.



“charming, often naïve, and never dull” (115). A review by R.S. Cotterill in 1927 takes a sharply more negative stance on Magoffin’s diary:

...no illuminating information about western life was likely to be imparted by a young lady so completely obsessed with marital happiness as Mrs. Magoffin was. One who prayed to God for forgiveness for sewing on Sunday was hardly likely to understand or sympathize with life on the Trail. The best can be said for the diary in this respect is that it supplements [Josiah] Gregg (101).

Cotterill best summarizes his opinion about the fascination with Magoffin’s work in the 1920s: “The diary ... as published ... owes much of its ... value to its editor. The footnotes supply a wealth of information in regard to *the men* who were making history in 1846 and 1847” (101, italics mine). Suffice it to say, Magoffin’s travel writing is not simply a window to a male-dominated time in 19th century American borderlands; reading her unabridged account allows the reader to focus on what is arguably the most historic element of her tale — the unusually positive connections she makes with a foreign culture.

Despite the overwhelming amount of American frontier female travel literature available,⁴ it is often excluded from the frontier travel narrative discussion, while male literature of the frontier is often celebrated, is well circulated, and forms the basis of many beliefs about the true happenings, opinions and desires of all Americans — even women — during that time. Feminist historians agree that what men’s frontier literature does best is solidify

⁴ John M. Faragher, author of *Women and Men on The Overland Trail*, estimates that from 1840 through 1870 as many as “half a million individuals traveled the overland route to the Pacific Coast and other parts of the West” (11), and Lillian Schlissel, author of *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, describes how “Over 800 diaries and day journals kept by those who made the overland journey have been published or catalogued in archives, and many more are still in family collections” (11).



mythological perspectives of American male heroic caricatures because it centers on hunting, claiming and action. In their book, *The Women's West*, Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson remind readers of the mythic western protagonist of "Hisland": "Occupationally, these heroes are diverse: they are mountain men, cowboys, Indians, soldiers, farmers, miners, and desperadoes, but they share one distinguishing characteristic — they are all men" (9). This mythic "Hisland" is often understood as unmitigated history, but it is incomplete; it lacks the contributions of real women who forged the everyday life for everyone around them.

Susan G. Butruille ponders a pivotal thought on gender roles of the American frontier in her book *Women's Voices from the Western Frontier*: "I sometimes wonder if the men ... had been closer to tending the ordinary food-in-the-mouth, dirty bottom, skin-to-skin survival, perhaps they too would have built stronger bonds with people with whom they shared the same physical needs" (63). Men did not have such domestic concerns, and Glenda Riley explains in her book *Women and Indians on the Frontier* how men's concern on the frontier centered on "cutting paths into the [native's] domain" (168). For example, Lewis and Clark write about their dominance over the wilderness and its inhabitants; Cooper's Natty Bumppo in *The Last of the Mohicans* concerns himself with surviving the inevitable progression of the white man's claim to land; Parkman's *Oregon Trail* overflows with his xenophobia of the "squalid and wretched" Indian (18); and Twain's *Roughing It* persists in the pursuit of the westward journey intertwined with the belief that the Indian is a necessary and welcomed casualty of such pursuit.

Male frontier travel narratives are often centered on action without relation. In contrast, Riley attributes white and native women's often positive relationships with one another to their feminine roles: "women, like men, were dedicated to protecting themselves and their families from harm, but they were also constantly concerned with extracting vital resources for their



families from the environment and its inhabitants” (169). The female frontier diaries center on homemaking, details and dailiness, and this focus on the private sphere of home is the reason most women’s travel diaries of the American 1800s did not receive much attention until the 1970s. The dailiness that overwhelms female frontier diaries both sets them apart from male writing and brings a sense of cohesion among female writers of the time. Females lived similar domestic lives on their long journeys, and this shared domesticity helped link women during this transformative time of transit. The seemingly insignificant domestic focus of traveling women helped open doors of positive interaction between cultures; however, this trait is precisely the point that is most ignored by critics in regard to Magoffin’s journal. Magoffin is able to blur cultural divides when she is able to stop aspiring to the quintessential male Western traveler and begin to relate to native women through the innocuous acts of housework.

Initially, Magoffin knows little of the daily contributions of a woman on the trail, so her experience before settling in Santa Fe likens her to a male diarist of the time. Her luxurious lifestyle⁵ limits her positive perceptions of native people; she primarily views Mexicans, for example, as servants or a type of sub-people. The majority of Magoffin’s servants on the trail are Mexican, and she describes them as “faithful,” and “worthy of our sincere thanks” (56). While there is an uncommon appreciation here, meeting native Mexicans proves to be something troublesome for Magoffin. Outside the master/servant context to which she is accustomed,

⁵ Magoffin is much different from the typical woman in transit to California or Oregon in 19th century America. For one thing, Susan had a choice between staying home in Missouri and traveling with her husband, as this adventure was not a permanent move (Magoffin 64). Also, Susan’s wealth marks her dissimilarity from other traveling pioneer women. According to Schlissel, most American families saved for months or years to finance their westward journey (23). In contrast, the Magoffin’s wealth and privilege on their journey is extravagant. Howard R. Lamar notes in the journal’s foreword: “In addition to a small tent house, a private carriage, books, and notions, her indulgent husband provided her with a maid, a driver, and at least two servant boys” (xvii).



Magoffin seems uncomfortable sharing space with native women. As the Magoffin wagons near Santa Fe, the travelers must stop at Bent's Fort, and Magoffin's shallow perspective of non-white culture is both marked and challenged. The native women's custom of publicly grooming their hair with oil is shocking to Magoffin, and is recorded in her diary with a tone of disgust (62-63).⁶ Magoffin's condescension continues as the Magoffins pass through Vegas and nearby settlements. She describes the Mexican women's attire as "shocking to [her] modesty" (95), and also writes how "the women [Mexicans] slap about with their arms and necks bare, perhaps their bosoms exposed (and they are none of the prettiest or the whitest)" (95). Magoffin's inability to understand norms outside her Victorian style compound her discomfort in socializing with the native, non-servant *others*.

At Bent's Fort Magoffin encounters another strange curiosity: housework. Magoffin, still not a woman with much domestic skill, complains about having to keep her bedroom orderly; "keeping house regularly ... I beg leave not to be allowed *that* privilege much longer" (61). Consequently, Magoffin cannot find common ground with non-elite, native women due to her lack of domestic responsibility. Riley attributes white and native women's often positive relationships with one another to their feminine roles: "women, like men, were dedicated to protecting themselves and their families from harm, but they were also constantly concerned with extracting vital resources for their families from the environment and its inhabitants" (169). Magoffin's point of view en route to Santa Fe mirrors male perspectives of the frontier to some extent as she cannot fully appreciate or understand the common female role in the domestic side of living, and this in turn limits her exchange with native people.

⁶ Scharff expounds on this incident: "If they [Magoffin and women at the fort] had womanhood in common, Magoffin could not see it. To her American eye, the Mexican women were creatures of some exotic species, not sisters, not even fully human on her own terms" (45).



While in Vegas, Magoffin is a curiosity or, in her words: “a ‘monkey show’” (92). Magoffin’s discomfort is evident as she records the native people’s studying her: “eyes were opened to their fullest extent, mouths gaped, tongues clattered, and I could only bite my lips and almost swallow my tongue to restrain my laughter” (92). Here, she feels violated. Her perspective is negative in every sense, even labeling these people as “wild looking strangers” (95). Marie Louise Pratt observes how male travel narratives often record their exchange with native people as centered on “reciprocal seeing,” or simply put: a native and foreigner visually surveying one another (82). For instance, in *Roughing It*, Twain reflects amply on the inferiority of the “Goshoot Indians” (166-169). His detailed account of their perceived pitiable culture includes Twain’s mentioning of the Goshoots “taking note of everything, covertly, like all the other ‘Noble red Men’ that we (do not) read about...” (167). Magoffin faces several such experiences; she writes about how natives en route “whispered among themselves, picked at my dress — a great curiosity — fingered the bed clothes, the stools, and in short every thing ...” (160). The pre-Santa Fe writings in Magoffin’s journal, or what can be easily described as Magoffin’s pre-domestic writings, show her as what Pratt identifies as the “experiential unhero” (Pratt 75).⁷ Parkman’s *Oregon Trail* experience is similarly critically understood. Bernard De Voto writes, “It was Parkman’s fortune to witness and take part in one of the greatest national experiences at the moment of its occurrence. It is our misfortune that he did not understand the smallest part of it” (qtd. in Rosenthal ix). Magoffin’s initial part of her journey is similar to Parkman’s and Twain’s journeys in that they do little more than

⁷ In her book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt identifies travel writers who make themselves the “sentimental hero” or “protagonist and central figure of [their] own account” and develop their story as an “epic series of trials, challenges, and encounters with the unpredictable,” as a type of “unhero,” who only seek experience and not any deeper understanding or appreciation of the culture or native people they encounter (75).



show experience, as their journeys are not concerned with growth in their relationships with native people.

Magoffin's disdain for native food is one of the clearest manners in which she initially rejects native people and culture. Heidi O. Lee describes how "through a hermeneutic of appetite, early American authors respond to the national anxiety of how to distinguish themselves from the native or Mexican now living within the imperial borders" (62). As this suggests, Magoffin spends much of the first part of her journey writing about the food she encounters being "unpalatable" (90). She writes about the pre-Santa Fe food: "Oh, how my heart sickened, to say nothing of my stomach, a cheese ... entirely speckled over ... I could not eat a dish so strong and unaccustomed to my palate;" and she even has her husband request special food for her, which she most likely does not consider would be a rude gesture (94). Parkman's experience with native food in the "Ogillallah" village shows similar disdain, despite his great hunger, and he concludes: "an Indian's palate is not very discriminating" (177). Much like Parkman, Magoffin uses food and what she is able or willing to consume to draw lines of difference between herself and native people. Lee describes how Magoffin's "reluctance to align her preferences with theirs more likely reflects her hesitation to identify too closely with the Mexicans" (117).

The significance of Magoffin's rejecting native meals is based on her desire to establish her role as "civilized," and the natives she encounters as "uncivilized." This behavior resembles Lewis and Clark's interactions with native people because although the Captains frequently exchanged with natives using clothing, trinkets, medicines, and the like, these white frontiersmen also chose cooking and eating "to distinguish themselves from the native" (Lee 83). Twain's well-known satirical thought in *Roughing It* illustrates this point well: "All things have their uses and their part and their proper place in Nature's economy: the ducks eat the flies — the flies eat the worms — the Indians eat all three — the wild cats eat the Indians — the white folks eat the wild cats — and thus all



things are lovely” (276). Parkman also seeks opportunities to emphasize his own refinement by valuing the frontier based on its similarities to New England civilization (Rosenthal xvi). While Parkman wishes to take a vacation from civilization to experience the wilderness, he consistently shows his appreciation for the civilized over the wild:

Among the rest I recognized the mellow whistle of the robin, an old familiar friend, whom I had scarce expected to meet in such a place. Humble-bees too were buzzing heavily about the flowers; and of these a species of larkspur caught my eye, more appropriate, it should seem, to cultivated gardens than to a remote wilderness. Instantly it recalled a multitude of dormant and delightful recollections (165).

Also, while baking bread (the only food available at the time) along his trek, Parkman recalls the luxurious food from his travels in Paris, calling restaurants by name (168). By continually juxtaposing the wilderness with civilization, Parkman is able to idealize both — civilization for its habits, benefits, ease of social class, and the wilderness as the location for adventure. After much sickness, hunger and pain, Parkman considers, “‘Am I,’ I thought to myself, ‘the same man who, a few months since, was seated, a quiet student of belles-lettres, in a cushioned arm-chair by a sea-coal fire?’” (158). His reflection about his home emphasizes his heroics, romanticizes the difficulty of life on the trail and highlights his own civility. Similar to Parkman, Magoffin, in her initial refusal to dine like the natives, exerts her superiority.

Despite Magoffin’s differences from other travelling and native women, she endures a painfully common familial tragedy of females in the 1800s — losing a child. Magoffin’s loss matures her, and she even describes her miscarriage experience as “the mysteries of a new world have been shown to me” (67). It is this first maternal experience of birth and loss or, as Magoffin calls it, “a new world,” that provides her with a link to native women, as she



explicitly compares her child's tragic birth with the healthy delivery of an Indian baby at Bent's Fort. Magoffin is amazed to see this new mother and baby bathing in a river half an hour after delivery: "It is truly astonishing to see what customs will do. No doubt many ladies in civilized life are ruined by too careful treatments during childbirth, for this custom of the hethen [sic] is not known to be disadvantageous, but it is a '*hethenish* [sic] custom'" (68). Although Magoffin describes herself in terms of civility and the Indian in terms of heathenism, her thoughts show the acknowledgement of strength in women different from her. For the first time Magoffin finds a connection with a female native in the experience of maternity, and Lee explains this correlation as "Magoffin find[ing] her own experience in a female body to interrogate assumptions that male writers had embedded in their descriptions of the landscape and those who people it" (116). "Male writers" such as Lewis and Clark provide a good example in this regard. In her book *The Making of Sacagawea: A Euro-American Legend* Donna J. Kessler describes the backhanded complimentary tone Captain Lewis uses in his description of Sacagawea's labor and the birth of her first child. Kessler maintains that Lewis's assumptions of native women's easy labor as "a gift of nature" and "wholly constitutional" (Lewis qtd. in Kessler) do not show real admiration, but only "certify that native women are intrinsically different from civilized women" (Kessler 47). While Lewis writes off Sacagawea's labor as successful because she is innately different, possibly even more masculine than white women, Magoffin sees the native woman as a possible teacher. Magoffin finds a link to an Indian woman for the first time through womanhood and motherhood, and it is this painful yet enlightening experience which opens doors to acculturation with native people.

While Magoffin may have begun her journey as a solitary "wandering princess" whose only care was picking flowers (11-12), her adventure becomes less romantic after her miscarriage. After her realization that losing her baby was most likely due to a very



turbulent wagon crash (41; 47), Magoffin becomes aware of the hazards of the prairie as more than just “spice” of life (23), but as real dangers that she will need to find ways to avoid. Magoffin voices regret about her journey for the first time after she loses her child: “I never should have consented to take the trip on the plains had it not been with that view and a hope that it would prove beneficial; but so far my hopes have been blasted, for I am rather going downhill than up” (64), and later, in the semi-comfort of Bent’s Fort, she is “sick” at the thought of making her way back on the prairie (65). In many ways, Magoffin’s experience allows her to exchange the characteristically romantic, male, adventure story of American frontier travel for the female realities of pain and duty on the trail.

Stopping in San Miguel, Magoffin shows one of the first mutually agreeable experiences with natives in her travels. One of the Magoffin wagons needs repair, and many native villagers come to help. Magoffin records her observations:

I did think the Mexicans were as void of refinement, judgment &c. and as dumb as the animals till I heard one of them say “*bonita muchachita*” [pretty little girl]! And now I have reason and certainly a good one for changing my opinion; they are certainly a very *quick and intelligent people*. Many of the *mujeres* [women] came to the carriage shook hands and talked with me. One of them brought some tortillas, new goat’s milk and stewed kid’s meat with onions, and I found it much more palatable than “the dinner in Vegas.” They are decidedly polite, easy in their manners, perfectly free &c. (98)

Her positive reaction to the villagers and their food is humorously connected with their finding her attractive; nonetheless, there is a connection based on conversation, food exchange and practical aid that will set the mostly positive tone for later experiences with native people.



Arriving in Santa Fe after two months of eventful travel, Magoffin makes some interesting introductory comments which reveal her fresh openness to native culture. The Magoffins enter Santa Fe just days after General Kearney has taken the city, but Magoffin notes that Kearney “has not molested the habits, religion &c. of the people” (103).⁸ Perhaps her comments show that Magoffin’s opinion on United States expansionism varies from traditional colonial ideas which entail radical uprooting of native culture. Also, shortly after arriving, she makes a seemingly trivial comment on the value of the native practice of “siesta,” or taking a nap after the mid-day meal (104). What makes this comment so important to understanding Magoffin’s frame of mind is that she is placing value on customs from a foreign culture. Moreover, one of the first visitors in her new Santa Fe home is a friendly, yet poor native woman, Doña Juliana. Magoffin writes about her new friend: “Though my knowledge of Spanish is quite limited we carried on a conversation for half an hour alone” (107). The most impacting event for Magoffin’s appreciation of native people is her transition to homemaker in Santa Fe: “I have my *housekeeping* to attend to now; and the opportunity for growing lonesome or sad in any way is rather poor” (111). Magoffin begins to mirror female travel writing as she puts away emotions to concentrate on the day-to-day life and domestic work. Because of her shift in focus, she, like many other travelling women, must now rely on the experience of native women to learn how to make a home in a new land. Tate highlights the importance of exchange between cultures as the defining moment of the relationship, so Magoffin’s reaction to the help and offers from her new neighbors greatly influences her perception of them and vice versa (38). Lillian Schlissel describes how “women continued to perceive themselves as existing primarily in the presence of other women ... Women’s daily routine

⁸ While this statement, of course, must be interpreted carefully, it is intriguing that Magoffin would desire to make clear that the culture of Santa Fe was not in danger because of the U.S. takeover.



— the baking, the washing, the cooking, the caring for the children...— all of these were performed with women who traveled in company” (77). Magoffin’s new role thrusts her into exchange with other women like her. Riley’s study of over 150 journals and letters from the frontier during the 19th century revealed a pattern in women’s accounts of encountering native culture for the sake of survival: “many frontierswomen overcome their anxiety to trade routinely” (170). There was a need for networking, like with like, despite the other differences that remained.

Settling for just over a month (August 30-October 7, 1846), Magoffin must care for all the routine household chores that any other woman would. At first, she perceives Spanish-Mexican women as somewhat meddlesome and condescending: she describes how they all must know about her family history, and she also writes, “they examine my work if I am engaged at any when they are in, and in an instant can tell me how it is done, though perhaps ‘tis the first of the kind they have ever seen” (115). Magoffin most likely feels threatened due to her novice housekeeping skills; she writes, “how I am delighted with ... my first house, *which ‘twas supposed* I should not be capable of managing” (114), and “I must not wear [my new dress] out before I get home either — for I wish them to see that I have been doing some thing else than roll along idly in the carriage ...” (156-57). Over time, Magoffin gradually becomes comfortable enough to learn from her new neighbors, especially in regard to cooking.

The modest amount of literature which addresses Magoffin’s journal calls attention to her shifting reaction to Spanish-Mexican cuisine and how she uses food to appreciate Mexico. Once in Santa Fe, Magoffin not only describes the food with growing pleasure, but even writes about her native meals using the Spanish language. The open-air market in Santa Fe is a topic of interest in Magoffin’s journal, and she writes frequently about the encounters she has with natives amidst the new tastes, smells and sights of native



produce. Magoffin is especially impressed with a six-year-old vegetable vendor, who possesses manners and conversation skills so polished that she believes the child is superior to children in the U.S. (130-31). The young girl is worth mentioning again a few days later: “how the little thing excites my sympathies and I can almost say affections; she is ... the possessor of some extraordinary qualities” (131-32). And later, she interjects her own writing to mention that she and the young market girl shared an embrace (134). The culinary exchange of the market place undoubtedly created a friendly atmosphere for Magoffin to develop an appreciation for this native child.

In Santa Fe, Magoffin mostly dines on Mexican cuisine at parties. For instance, she records with great detail the dinner at the Leitensdorfer house, taking careful note of each course, dish and ingredient, ending with “the recipe I should like” (135). She writes similarly about dinner in Saltillo at Dr. Hewitson’s home: “the recipes ... I must get of Mrs. H after dinner” (236).⁹ Later, while en route to San Gabriel, Magoffin spends time with native, “elite ... old *comadres* [gossips]” (158) and learns all aspects of tortilla making and comments: “the process of making them is worth knowing” (157). Finally in San Gabriel, Don Jose’s wife and daughter engage Magoffin in preparing “a plate full of fine tortillas,” which she describes as satisfying but “tedious” work (168). Her appreciation for Mexican cuisine grows in such degree that Magoffin, the neophyte housewife, creates a domestic goal for herself: create a Spanish-Mexican cookbook to take home to Kentucky (209).

Magoffin also forms connections with her Spanish-Mexican neighbors through the domestic duty of dress-making. While in Santa Fe, she writes, “Donna Julienne called this evening; took a great fancy to my cape because it is *high in the neck*, and will return for the pattern; she dislikes, she says, to go into the *plazo*

⁹ While Magoffin’s experience with Mexican cuisine at the Leitensdorfer and Hewitson’s residences is not engaging her with other native women, it opens the door to appreciating native food and customs.



where there are so many *Americanos*, and her neck is exposed” (131). She even takes fashion cues from her neighbors, as she dons a bright red canton crape shawl so she will “be in trim with the ‘Natives’” (143). Magoffin’s style influence continues in San Gabriel where in exchange for a lesson in tortilla making, she shows Don Jose’s wife how to knit in “the much easier mode of the U.S.,” and she reports that her native friend is “much surprised and delighted” with her teaching (168). These women also borrow her dresses for patterns (213). she writes, “I am quite inquisitive, for I see so many new and strange ways of making every thing, I always ask something about it, and in return I give my way” (209). Magoffin, who is in her first true established home since marriage, is drawing from the experienced native women around her to learn about domestic life. By exchanging goods and domestic ideas, she and the native women are providing self-fulfilling homes. In San Gabriel and beyond, Magoffin grows more confident of her domestic skills, and feels at ease enough to teach veteran homemakers.

Because of reoccurring sickness while in transit, Magoffin must also learn from the native women and, in turn, exchange with them her own healing practices. In San Gabriel, she learns “their mode of giving a sweat,” which was thought to expel sickness. She appreciates this lesson and describes the method as “simple and good” (177).¹⁰ While in the Rio Bajo, where her location becomes more dangerous, she remarks that her husband Samuel has given many medicines away to those who are suffering, and he is now known as a “skillfull medico” (183). Samuel provides medicines for Sr. Pino’s wife, and the Pinos return the favor with mutton and pork. This exchange makes Magoffin ponder: “It shows a feeling of pure

¹⁰ In her book, *Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825-1915*, Riley describes how this openness to native medicinal practices is also seen in the diary of Mormon migrant Eliza Roxy Snow, whom Native Americans introduced to the beneficial cures of sego root. Riley reports more examples of healing exchange among native and white women: Indian midwives helping white mothers give birth, native women providing herb remedies for common ailments, or even Indians treating white emigrants’ snake bites with raw turkey meat (177).



gratitude which I constantly see manifested among these people for any little kindness done them" (184). As her journey calls on her latent resources for survival, Magoffin's dependence on and understanding of native people deepen.

While in dire and uncertain circumstances in Rio Bajo (because of talk of Mexican forces retaliating against the U.S. government), Magoffin takes great notice of the bravery of one of her young Mexican servants who travels to receive news about the Mexican/American conflict surrounding their settlement:

It is a strange people this. They are not to be called cowards; take them in a mass they are brave, and if they have the right kind of leader they will stem any tide. Take them one by one and they will not flinch from danger. This man who goes for *mi alma* [Samuel Magoffin] tomorrow is a sample. For very small compensation (which by the way has no weight with him, as he at first offered himself to go not for money, but with the desire to serve only the reward I may say is gratis) he will go over a road, (perhaps on foot,) infested with Indians, by whom he is liable to be murdered at any moment, — he will perhaps have no water for some days, — at the pass, if he goes far, he may be taken by his own countrymen, and if found in the employ of an American he will be shot. I am sure the brand of a coward will never stick to him. (177)

Her esteem for this young, nameless Mexican servant provides the evidence that Magoffin is undergoing a transformation; she is able to consider the integrity in people that are foreign to her. It is important to notice that this appreciation Magoffin exhibits for her Mexican helper is taking place during a time of survival and fear, and she is capable of realizing another person's courage readily. Whereas at the beginning of her luxurious flower-picking journey she writes briefly how she appreciates her servants, she now



dedicates the better part of an entire day's entry to commenting on a native servant's fine qualities.¹¹

While many American emigrants and travelers did not spend enough time among natives to truly transcend cultures, the fleeting time that was spent often afforded many emigrants the opportunity to draw near native people during times of hardship. Magoffin's hardships continue as her travelling group nears El Paso. She suffers fevers, fear of Mexican hostiles and encounters with Apache Indians. Despite her weariness, she is delighted that her husband's Mexican friends in El Paso have sent word that their homes are open to the Magoffins for reprieve from travel (202).

Magoffin's growth in understanding native people permeates even to the matter most dear to her — her faith. She, with a Presbyterian background, is awed by her “first lesson in Catholicism,” which consists of a priest who “neither preached nor prayed” but only “repeated some Latin neither understood by himself or his hearers” (138). Magoffin describes the mass as a “strange mode of worship” which contains elements she “could not unravel” (138). Four months later, in a surprisingly sensitive entry, Magoffin shows her maturing perspective of Mexican Catholicism:

This morning I have been to mass — not led by idle curiosity, not by blind faith, a belief in the creed there practiced, but because 'tis the house of God, and whether Christian or pagan, I can worship there within myself, as well as in a protestant church, or my own private chamber ... I am not an advocate for the Catholic faith. It is not for me to judge; whether it be right or wrong; judgment alone belongs to God. If they are wrong we (if alone in the right way) are not to rail at them, but in brotherly love to use our little

¹¹ Similar accounts can be found in various overland diaries which depict the gratefulness of white travelers who rely on generous and supportive natives during times of chaos and danger. For example, Phoebe Judson writes in her travel diary about the surprising kindness of Nez Perce chief Red Wolf in accurately leading her traveling group to the best campground. In her words, chief Red Wolf led the group to a “virtual eden [sic] of green grass and fir trees” (qtd. in Tate 64).



influence to guide them into the straight path. One thing among them they are sincere in what they do ... I am told to “judge no man but to bear the burden of my brother.” As for myself I must first remove the beam from mine own eye, and then shall I see clearly to pull out the moat of my brother’s eye (209-210).

Magoffin allows her writing to reflect the inner examining of her own perspectives of non-white (or non-American) religion and culture.

Her writing about Doña Josefita, daughter of Don Agapita in San Gabriel showcases her appreciation for her sincere character, and she thinks, “if some of the foreigners who have come into this country, and judged of the whole population from what they have seen — on the frontiers, would, to see her a little time, be entirely satisfied of his error in regard to the refinement of the people” (205). Then she honestly remarks how surprised she is herself about the native people’s goodness — her confession of her own prejudiced perspectives (205). Magoffin also becomes conscious of her similarity to her hosts in San Gabriel because of the violent Mexican-American war taking place around them: “our situations are truly singular; we have a brother prisoner in Chi.[huahua], while they have one *el Señor Cura* [a priest] held as hostage by our army for his safety, and we are here in the same house and as I trust, friends ... I shall regret deeply when we have to leave them ... for I love them all” (215). Later, when official news about the impacting Battle of Sacramento River hits San Gabriel, Don Rouquia mourns the loss of over three hundred of his countrymen. Although Magoffin is elated that the U.S. has gained advantage, her joy is short-lived as she sees the pain of her new neighbors: “They were condoling with me the other day and now ‘tis in my power perhaps to offer them in return a little consolation” (218).

If experience is sometimes not the best teacher, as in Parkman’s case, Magoffin allows her day-to-day experiences to awaken her, at



times, to people and places that are worthy of her respect, sympathies and affections. At breakfast one morning in San Miguel, Don Agapita, her host, remarks to her that hardships and encounters with new cultures are teaching her much. Magoffin writes, “he says I am learning a lesson that not one could have taught me but experience, the ways of the world” (207). In fact, Magoffin is so impressed with her hosts in San Gabriel that she writes, “I can’t help loving them” (207). She shows awareness, not just of new places and people, but the power these people have to alter her once narrow perspective. She learns to appreciate parts of native culture and takes great steps toward full acculturation, while still not exhibiting perfect egalitarian behavior.

Magoffin’s honest account of her countrymen’s shameful behavior while in Chihuahua further demonstrates her ability to look at a situation objectively. She describes the sad state of affairs in Chihuahua because of the U.S. troops ransacking the homes of natives, and even using once beautiful public fountains as bath tubs — “instead of seeing [Chihuahua] in its original beauty as I thought to have done twelve months since, I saw it filled with Missouri volunteers who though good to fight are not careful at all how much they soil the property of a friend much less an enemy” (229). She is able to take a fair and objective look at her own culture and judge it without prejudices while simultaneously showing care for Mexican heritage.¹²

Her receptiveness to native people may be criticized as faulty for many reasons. For one, Magoffin’s closest acquaintances in her travels are prominent Spanish-Mexican families. Magoffin mingles

¹² A similar reaction is the rare opinions of two wives in 1866, Frances Carrington and Elizabeth Burt, the respective spouses of Col. Henry Carrington and Capt. Andrew Burt. The women wrote in their journals about the abuse they saw against the Cheyenne peoples in the lands north of Fort Laramie, and they even made special note to point out that the government policies against native people were forcing Indians to justifiably retaliate. Although these women were married to men who were fighting the Cheyenne, they had the confidence and forward thinking to write about their opinions in their diaries (Tate xv).



with the likes of Gertrudes Barcelo, Don Agapita, Don Ygnacio Rouquia and Don Pino, all well-off, affluent people of Mexico. She frequently stays in elaborate, well-furnished Mexican homes, but only passes through the poor Mexican villages. Magoffin also continues to perceive Indians as “wily” (202) and “savage” (204). The Mexicans, who live in houses, dress more modestly, eat food more palatable and use more European manners, become close friends for a season, but Magoffin consistently views Indians as too peculiar for friendship. It is clear that while she does learn the beauty of inter-racial exchange, especially with Mexicans, her preference may be for influential, wealthy and prominent Mexican families. Her limited time with Indian women, perhaps, plays a role in this choice. Schlissel comments how this attitude was also common in the writings of Overland Trail diarists: “Sometimes the emigrants’ ignorance and fear of the Indians was the more dangerous because it was accompanied by a show of arrogance” (118). At the same time, it would be unfair to ignore the instances in which Magoffin does connect with non-elite natives: Upon entering Santa Fe, Magoffin writes about her new friend, Mrs. Ortis, “I must be more expert in my Spanish, that I may receive the advice of la Senora” and later in San Gabriel: “If we remain here during winter, I must learn a good many of the New Mexican ways of living, manufacturing *serapes* [shawls], *rabozos* [scarves], to make *tortillas*, *chily peppers*, and cholote [chocolate]...” (165); she affectionately writes about the “little market girl” in Santa Fe (130; 131; 134); she respects the tenacity of a market boy (132); she exhibits the traditional trading between cultures with native Mexican-Indians after leaving Santa Fe (153; 154); and she laughs and speaks of marriage and children with “another old comadre [gossip] ... an old half Indian, half Mexican” (160).

Another criticism is that Magoffin’s desire to learn and associate with native people is spurred by her husband’s business. Lamar implies that Samuel Magoffin’s tolerance for other cultures on the Santa Fe Trail pushes Magoffin to follow suit (xix). In other words,



Samuel Magoffin is her example on how to interact with natives, and his previous experience as a trader makes him well versed in the ins and outs of hospitality and interracial exchange. However, his motivations for these exchanges are fueled by profit: “Like the Phoenician traders of old, the Santa Fe traders had broken the cake of custom [and] caused two distinct peoples and cultures to blunder into contact” (Lamar xxi). Lamar reminds the reader how the traders carry such power in their reciprocity with natives: “the Santa Fe trader was so important diplomatically and politically and ... he was to dominate the government of New Mexico long after the conquest of 1846” (xxx). Magoffin may be understood as only imitating her business-minded husband as a courteous merchant. Still, some may perceive Magoffin’s hospitality and openness to cultures as part of the well-mannered, Southern socialite background in which she was trained to entertain visitors and be a good hostess (Magoffin 134; 144-45). Regardless of what influences played on her relationships with native people, Magoffin’s travel writing describes many meaningful encounters which show her as a woman in the process of change and maturation, open to learning from her various native hosts.

What travel writing should do, according to Paul Fussell, is show the humility of the traveler and exhibit the process in which the traveler is transformed: “Inside every good travel writer there is a pedagogue — often a highly moral pedagogue — struggling to get out” (14-15). Fussell understands travel writing as a unique text that should teach a moral lesson through the travel experience, but many American frontier travel accounts fall short of this standard because they are simply romantic adventure stories about navigating through the unknown. Magoffin does not follow after the likes of Parkman or Twain; instead, as her journey progresses Magoffin becomes more reflective about her flawed opinions about the native people she meets. She lessens her descriptions of the trail scenery, and writes more about how she is changing in her prejudices toward non-white people. Often, her most shifting



perspectives about native people come at a time of heightened danger and distress. In her reflections about the goodness of her hosts in San Gabriel, she writes: “I have seen and read of [Kentucky] till I know it all by heart, but who could by telling me, make me sensible of what I have seen and felt since I left home to travel” (207). It cannot be ignored that Magoffin was only a teenager while writing her philosophical reflections and in a culture almost void of egalitarian perspective. Magoffin’s background as a young bride who came from a sheltered and comfortable home implies she still had much to learn about the world, and in a positive way she allows the challenges and people of the Santa Fe Trail to mature her. Magoffin is remembered by historians as one of the first American women to travel on the Santa Fe Trail, but more impressive is her ability to understand that she can learn from those people and experiences outside her home country. Her uncommon choice to befriend native people is what defines her as a veritable “pioneer.”

Magoffin develops a broader perspective than the one she began with not by claiming a land, signing a treaty or firing a gun; instead, she obtains this perspective through the seemingly trivial tasks of cooking, sewing and talking with native people — “the little circle of [her] vision” (112). Domesticity is the catapult by which Magoffin is thrown into a new world of welcomed association with native women, a meaningful observation that often gets lost under the historical significance that Magoffin’s writing still commands today.

Reevaluating Magoffin’s story shows that female domesticity on the American frontier is poorly interpreted as the benign world of essential yet un-impactful obligations; feminist readers of American frontier female literature do not have to comb through the hundreds of already meaningful diaries searching for the few women who chose to live outside the common female domestic sphere so that they can be attributed some value. After all, would not that emphasis lead the conversation focus back to the common



male perspective of the American frontier? Instead of finding significance in anything outside the everyday routine of female frontier life, literary research of the frontier should find the many positive effects that women's real and shared home-life had on cultural relations. As in Magoffin's case (and I am led to expect countless others during the American frontier era), her shared domestic interests allowed her to forge meaningful, positive and mutually-beneficial relationships with native women that had a transformative effect on the frontier landscape and culture.



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