ANGLO SAXONICA

‘According to the Rhythms of the Arid Lands’: Mary Austin’s *The Land of Journeys’ Ending*

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between nonfiction women’s writing and nature within the North American literary tradition. In the United States, the association between humans and the natural world has primarily been a male-narrated experience, as nature, especially wilderness, has historically been a place for defining masculinity. In the final decades of the twentieth century, however, women’s literary responses to nature have received increased attention, and numerous critical works have currently identified a tradition of women’s nature literature in the United States. In this regard, I propose to read Austin’s *The Land of Journeys’ Ending* (1924), a lesser-known work that values the feminine voice, one that is attuned to the rhythms of the desert plains. The book, a hybrid form incorporating memoir, travel narrative, historical investigation, and ecological study, describes Austin’s journey through the Southwestern United States in 1923. Imbued with a feeling of wonder and respect for both the land and the people of the region, Austin explores how human and non-human lives adapt, survive, and bloom in the arid deserts of the Southwest. Contrasting with the urban, modern, glamorous rhythms of the Jazz Age, which characterized much of the literary work produced during the 1920s, Austin’s book exemplifies how the American Southwest was perceived through a woman’s writer perspective and how she responded to the discovery of the wild American landscape. In today’s world, where a mechanistic conception of nature prevails, I consider that Austin’s voice and her beliefs in adaptation, adjustment, and ecological sensitivity deserve to be heard.

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1. INTRODUCING MARY AUSTIN

Mary Hunter Austin's life has been marked by conflict and challenge, both of which are well portrayed in her books. Above all, she repudiated notions of human dominance over land and women; hence, she fought mostly for women's rights and environmental causes. On the other hand, Austin's personality was seen as eccentric, largely due to "the emotional barrenness" she experienced as a child due to the early deaths of her father and small sister, which led to "neurasthenic breakdowns" (Lanigan 6). In adult life, Austin (1868–1934) felt she had a special mission, a fact that was criticized by family and friends but caused her to form a sense of self, "I-Mary", distinct from her socially prescribed self, which "finds fulfillment, for instance, in intimate contact with the Western landscape" (Gray 327). Her intuitive way to see how entities that seem separate actually relate to each other was her "mystical center" (Lyon 95), a vision that sustained her through a difficult marriage and her daughter's disability, gave her confidence in her writing, and kept her awake to "the relational aspect, the ecological patterning of the fabric of life" (95). Importantly, her writing life was a quest for a different America, one in which her true self might feel comfortable: "where the centers of power and place have radically shifted" (Gray 327).

Born in Carlinville, Illinois, Mary Austin's literary career, which spanned from 1900 to 1934, was comprised of thirty book-length works and more than two hundred essays, novels, dramas, short stories, poems, and articles. Living at a time of literary notables, Austin was, according to Marjorie Pryse, "a maverick in the literary scene of the early twentieth century" (xvii). Yet, to the critic, she was "one of the first twentieth-century writers and critics to vehemently insist that an American literature that did not develop an understanding of regionalism and racial patterns would remain impoverished and unfulfilled" (xix). She had moved to southern California in 1888 at the age of twenty with her brother and her widowed mother, and her writing life was dedicated to that region and to the collection, preservation, and divulging of American Indian and Hispanic folk arts and stories. If, on the one hand, Austin wrote "continually and lovingly about life and landscape in the West" (Gray 326), exploring the idea that the land of journey's ending is the place where New Mexican and Native American art flourishes, on the other hand, she wrote of those cultures from their perspective, claiming a place in American life and art for them. Hence, my purpose is to emphasize how Austin's perspective was innovative at the time. If ecocritics accept that today's return to nature is "identified with Romantic poets, wilderness prophets, and Native Americans" (Garrard 3), in Austin's day racism towards Natives and Blacks was a reality.

Living a life devoid of emotional support from her mother and husband, Austin turned to the land for nourishment, observing and writing about the flora and fauna that survived in difficult territory and climate. Parallel to her naturalist depictions, Austin took interest in the communal lives of Native Americans, aspects that define both the originality of content and aesthetic value of her work, thus making her the first Anglo-American woman author to write about the interconnections between human, plant, and animal lives of the American Southwest landscape. Therefore, my intention in bringing Austin's *The Land of Journeys' Ending* to the foreground is twofold: to present a lesser-known work of nature writing created by a woman in the 1920s who, at a time when the literary history of the United States emphasized the opposition between mainstream and marginal cultures, insisted on the notions of interdependence and hybridity, recognizing the significance of the connections between natural landscapes and human lives; by emphasizing this aspect in her work, I also seek to invite readers to step away from the modern world and to enter a text that proposes "to turn an impoverished place to imaginative gain", as noted by Lawrence Buell (*Environmental Imagination* 176).[1] Indeed, as noted by the critic, Austin managed to cultivate a "nonegoistic, ecocentric sensibility" (177), nurturing a sense of being one among many agents in a vast and complex habitat.[2]

In 1924, the same year Ernest Hemingway published *In Our Time* and Eugene O'Neill *Desire Under the Elms*, just before the prolific year of 1925, with the publication of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Mary Austin

1 This article was originally presented as a conference paper in the 41st APEAA Meeting, held in the University of Aveiro, under the topic "celebrating the 1920s".

2 Austin's other works other nature writing are *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), *The Flock* (1906), and *Lost Borders* (1909).

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published *The Land of Journeys' Ending,* a description of her journey with friends through the Southwestern United States in 1923. The book is hybrid in form, incorporating memoir, travel narrative, historical investigation, and ecological study. Imbued with a sense of wonder and respect both for the land and the people of the region, Austin explores how human and non-human lives adapt, survive, and blossom in the arid lands of the Southwest. Although it is understood as a lesser work than *The Land of Little Rain* and *Lost Borders* (Pryse xvi), it falls into the category of nature writing, which, according to Thomas Lyon, is "an account that gains meaning from the basic American circumstance that wilderness, where the traveler and adventurer are usually found, has always in our history been considered a realm apart" (24). John C. Van Dyke published in 1901 *The Desert*, a book entirely dedicated to contradicting the idea that such a landscape, far from being a wasteland, was a place full of wonders if only there were observers to pay attention. But Austin's *The Land of Little Rain,* published in 1903, was the first book to be published by a woman within the genre, depicting the desert as home, that is, a place where she felt like a part and full member of the earth community, relying "on modes of knowing the world that are centered in relationship" (Anderson 6).

Austin's observation of the desert landscape in *The Land of Little Rain*, where she connects facts and a mystical reading of the bare and arid land of the West and of the mountains of Arizona and New Mexico where *The Land of Journeys' Ending* takes place, allows the author to develop a vision that portrayed the interrelationships among landforms, flowers, animals, and humans as ecologically coher (LJE 214), giving voice to the "state [of] being whole with the experienceable universe" (LJE 214).[3] Moreover, although the landscapes at the center of *The Land of Journeys' Ending* are traditionally viewed as unfavorable to women, Austin envisioned the semi-arid regions of Arizona and New Mexico as fertile land for the flourishing of her art. In this sense, Austin's work can be understood as "an ongoing argument against those American intellectuals who, in [her] opinion, erred in seeking their literary and artistic energy in Europe while a rich indigenous folk culture lay relatively unexplored in the American West" (Lanigan 15).

Austin's passion for the desert is but a small part of her wide love for Nature, as she would prove early on by writing imaginatively "not only of people, but of the scene, the totality which is called Nature, and that I would give myself intransigently to the quality of experience called Folk, and to the frame of behavior known as Mystical" (qtd. in Lanigan 245). The first book she bought for herself, *The Old Red Sandstone*, an early study of geology, anticipated her interest in nature, landscapes, flowers, and animals. She graduated in science, and shortly after, at the age of nineteen, she moved to Bakersfield, in the California desert, a place that she came to identify with. Her first story, "The Mother of Felipe", was published in the *Overland Monthly* in 1892.[4] Many were the emotional disappointments in her life, but just like any plant in the desert in a land of little rain, she struggled for both physical and literary survival. She left the California desert permanently in 1899, but in Pryse's words, "nothing she experienced in her life after she left California appears to have made as deep an impression on her work" (xiv). She traveled to Italy and England and lived in New York for twelve years, before finally settling in Santa Fe, where she built Casa Querida. For the last ten years of her life, she wrote and dedicated herself to the preservation of the arts of the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico, a way to express her sympathy for Native American Indians.

Throughout Austin's work, the arid land is her hero, and like the land she portrayed and the women she wrote about, Austin "was thirsty throughout her life" (Pryse xxxv). She understood the meaning of aridity, and thus "she wrote as if storytelling were the one water trail, the single path to an oasis of emotional and spiritual nourishment, the great love that, more than any human relationship, more even than the land itself, open out for her the 'earth horizon'" (xxxv).

2. AUSTIN'S WORK AS PART OF WOMEN'S NATURE-WRITING TRADITION

In "Environmental Nonfiction as a Fable of Relinquishment", Lawrence Buell states:

3 *The Land of Journeys' Ending*: hereafter cited in text as LJE.

4 Other of her stories also appeared in *The Overland Monthly*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Out West*, as well as *St. Nicholas*.

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> The aesthetic of relinquishment in the long run fits environmental nonfiction better than lyric poetry and prose fiction. Insofar as such work takes as its starting point the decision to focus on the nonhuman, it tends to deny itself some of the most basic aesthetic pleasures of homocentrism: plot, characterization, lyric pathos, dialogue, intersocial events, and so on. (*Environmental Imagination* 168)

Throughout his argument, Buell presents Austin as a precursor as far as the desert theme is concerned, emphasizing that she is praised by ecocritics because in her works she puts "human figures at the margin and engages in thought experiments that defamiliarize landscapes in tacit suppression (...) of anthropocentrism" (*Future of Environmental Ecocriticism* 99).[5] Hence, Austin's writing about nature and the sensibility expressed in it "still remains a useful tool with which to address the various humanistic changes associated with sustainability" (Philippon 392). Moreover, paraphrasing Daniel J. Philippon on the current meaning of writing about nature, one can claim that Austin's writing, in opposition to some women writers who in the nineteenth century approached the writing about nature in "unconventional ways—emphasizing, for instance, the neighborliness of the backyard garden over the rugged individualism of the "untamed" frontier" (396), has nonetheless contributed to "sustainability by playing an oppositional role in American culture (...) by rhapsodizing about the natural world but also by celebrating values *other* than economic growth, such as beauty, ecological health, and scientific inquiry" (399).

If one considers, as Tina Gianquitto claims, that in light of ecology development in the nineteenth century, women's writing about nature became relevant both "for environmental protection and preservation in the face of mounting pollution, species decimation, and environmental exhaustion" and "for offering images of community and connection" (179), then one has to agree that women in the twentieth century, as is the case with Mary Austin and Rachel Carson, adopted and benefited from their predecessors' proto-ecological perspectives, calling on humans to respect the natural world for its "inherent rather than instrumental value" (180). Gianquitto's analysis of nineteenth-century women such as Almira Phelps, Margaret Fuller, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Mary Treat, seen as "good observers of nature", demonstrates that as a result of the study and attention those women dedicated to the natural world, it "became endowed with value" (180). Gianquitto's *"Good Observers of Nature": American Women and the Scientific Study of the Natural World, 1820–1885* is a relevant work because it reflects on a period when women and science converged in the United States, showing, namely, that women were able to find home in nature, and not just in domestic realms, and, mostly, that their aesthetic perceptions and scientific discourses demonstrated "the close connections between the homes of the nonhuman and human world" (13).

Mary Austin's writings differ from those of the other women referred by Gianquitto because her literary responses were drawn from her dialogue with nature, people, and animals in the Southwest. Like them, however, she observed the country and criticized the crass materialism and indifference towards nature, not out of nostalgia but instead out of concern for the future of what she saw as vital for human well-being: the interconnection of all beings. Like them, she was trained as a naturalist, bringing aesthetic and religious perspectives to her "precise and evocative observations" (Norwood and Monk 16). Even before other writers and artists such as Willa Cather, Laura Gilpin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Pat Mora, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Joy Harper, among others, Austin contributed to expanding the value of both the biophysical and cultural landscapes of the Southwest, as attested in Vera Norwood and Janice Monk's *The Desert Is No Lady*. Norwood's work reminds us that for those women, the Southwest "translates into sensations of open space, light, altitude, and immense vistas", perceptions shared by the cultural groups of Chicanas, American Indians, and Anglos who "seek self-renewal in the natural environment" (8). As aforementioned by Norwood and Monk, in the early twentieth century and in conjunction with other fictional and nonfictional literary voices, Austin contributed to the valuing of the natural environment as well as human-created landscapes, enhancing the construction of new inclusive natural and cultural landscapes. These voices established the Southwest "as a distinct cultural region within the nation" (Norwood and Monk 9).

5 For those less familiar with the concept, see Lawrence Buell's definition: "Ecocriticism is an umbrella term used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature and the arts." (*Future of Environmental Ecocriticism* 138).

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In a later text, "Heroines of Nature: Four Women Respond to the American Landscape", Vera Norwood states that Annette Kolodny's renowned critical work, *The Lay of the Land*, has shown how cultural stereotypes as well as physical hardships excluded many women from willingly participating in the discovery of the wild American landscape. Yet, other nineteenth-century writers such as Susan Fenimore Cooper, Margaret Fuller, and Isabella Bird, as well as those mentioned in Gianquitto's work, contributed to the establishment of a tradition of women's nature writing, all showing the manner in which women added to the making of America.[6] However, none before Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* had conferred such meaning and attention on the American desert. As Norwood emphasizes, "Austin values all life in the desert, and attempts to show how each small piece is integral to that larger whole" ("Heroines of Nature" 331). Besides, as the critic points out, Austin explores the desert with a sense of wonder, even when recognizing the personal adaptations required to live in such an arid and desolate landscape (332).

Austin's attention to the Southwest, a region and a frontier where people were still struggling with wild lands, had her perceived in the early 1900s as a "California regionalist" (Wheeler 337). Using mythic and primitive imagery, alongside her love for the land, she also wrote sympathetically of Native American Indians, showing respect and admiration for a region whose originality lies in the confluence of three cultures: American Indian, Chicano, and Anglo peoples. Importantly, in opposition to other women writers who wrote of more urbanized and thus better safeguarded places, Austin showed in her works people confronting the naked forces of the West. As a result, Kathleen Wheeler states, "realism in Western writers was often (...) tempered by the mystical force of nature, and the lyricism that resulted from close contact with land, sun, sky and other entities with primitive power, such as the cycle of the seasons, planting as harvesting of crops, and sources of water, as life-giving elements" (338). In like manner, part of the originality of seeing the world exemplified by American women's nature writing is, according to Lorraine Anderson, that they have intentionally cultivated a feminine voice, accepting that qualities such as caring, humility, sympathy, relationality, and reverence for life are part of their work (7). As Esther F. Lanigan emphasizes, "the celebration of nature always figures significantly in Austin's writing", adding that *The Land of Journeys' Ending*, her "reputed naturist book", presents her tour of the Southwest "through diverse essays about Papago Indians, kachinas, santos, rivers, canyons, camels, and cacti" (15). In this sense, Lanigan reminds us that Austin's ecological thinking and her striving for the preservation of indigenous culture, feminism, and American culture suggest the "remarkable timeliness of her work for modern readers" (15). More than that, if one reads her work bearing in mind the critical reading Tom Lutz makes of regionalism in American society, namely when he proposes that to diminish the standardization of American life one should listen to the works of regionalists, one has to agree that local material served for a better understanding of both present and future American life. In order to illustrate this thought, he quotes Patrick Mazza:

> In the period between the two world wars, as metropolitan, mass consumerist society was decisively wiping away the remnants of an earlier, ruralist United States, a cultural and intellectual movement rose in challenge. To the centralizing, corporate system that was coming to dominate American life, this movement posed the region as an alternative framework for reconstructing society. The regionalists of the '20s, '30s and '40s sought in the cultural survivals of the older America the rootstock for a revitalized, re-regionalized 'symphonic nation,' as regionalist Benton MacKaye called it. In particular, the regionalists found resources for renewal in the folk life of agrarian and immigrant communities, and the tribal cultures of Native Americans. In these they saw the raw materials for a new 'civic religion' powerful enough to break the spell of the emerging mass consumer culture. (qtd. in Lutz 102)

Because of Austin's strong personal and literary ties to Native Americans, she never imagined the North American continent as an empty wilderness or one without culture; instead, hers is a perspective that values "both the Indian and the Hispanic for their alternate approach to the development of the American landscape—natural and cultural" (Norwood, "Heroines of Nature" 333), and so Austin's aim was not so much to depict the land's vulnerability, as

6 Julie Roy Jeffrey shows, in "'There is Some Splendid Scenery': Women's Responses to the Great Plains Landscape", how women "observed, shaped, and responded tothe Plains" (70).

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its resistance to captivity, refusing "the landscape of the place-names and boundary markers assigned to it by the anxious settlers from the East" (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 80). A particularity Lois Rudnick highlights as well: "Austin rejects Anglo names for geographic landmarks and uses the original Indian and Hispanic designations because they express the land's natural characteristics rather than the individual discoverer's ego" (16). In this sense, much of *The Land of Journeys' Ending* is "devoted to bringing different aspects of Indian and Hispanic cultures to Austin's Anglo readers" (24), as one can read in the preface:

> The topography of the country between Colorado and the Rio Grande cannot be expressed in terms invented for such purpose in a low green island by the North Sea. A *barranca* is terrifyingly more than an English bank on which the wild thyme grows; an *arroyo* resembles a gully only in being likewise a water gouge in the earth's surface, and we have no word at all for *cañada,* half-way between an arroyo and a canon. (LJE iv)

3. AUSTIN'S *THE LAND OF JOURNEYS' ENDING:* THE RELATIONAL TIES, THE ECOLOGICAL PATTERNING

In the preface of *The Land of Journeys' Ending*, Austin claims that the book is her final naturist effort, a "book of prophecy of the progressive acculturation of the land's people" as well as "a book of topography" (LJE iv), something that a close reading of the table of contents exemplifies: it refers to geographical places—Rio Grande, Cactus Country, Sacred Mountains, Rio Colorado—but also to specific peoples and particular moments in the history of the Southwest, such as "The Days of Our Ancients", "Cities that Died", and "The Trail of the Blood". The book is divided into 16 chapters, plus a glossary of Indian and Spanish words and their pronunciations. In it, far from the literary protagonists of the East, Austin turned her attention to the austere landscape of New Mexico and Arizona, more specifically to the land between the Rio Colorado and the upper course of the Rio Grande, where, in her own words, lies the Land of Journeys' Ending (1). The reason for her to consider such a hostile land was that there resides "the nameless content of the creative spirit" (2), a repository of the American past, some of the echoes going back to the period before any European settlement:

> In our southwest, we began with an aboriginal top-soil culture, rich in the florescence of assimilation, to which was added the over flow from the golden century of Spain, melting and mixing with the native strain to the point of producing a distinctive, if not final, pattern before it received its second contribution from the American East. (LJE 240)

In opposition to the dominant cultural perspective and literary aesthetics, which valued modernism and its appreciation for form innovation, experimentation, and "cultural exile and alienation" (Gray 340), Austin favored the arid landscapes and marginalized communities of the Southwest. Moreover, *The Land of Journeys' Ending* is pervaded by a valuable ecological understanding of the region that illustrates the interdependency among humans and non-humans, depicting the region's multiple relationships between its vegetation, topography, and climate, as well as its cultures and peoples: "There can be no adequate discussion of a country (...) which leaves out this inexplicable effect produced by it on the people who live there" (LJE 1). Throughout *The Land of Journeys' Ending*, Austin is interested in the blending of peoples on that territory, from the Nahuatl tribes of Old Mexico, Zuñi people and Hopi pueblos, to Cabeza de Vaca, Coronado, and Don Juan de Oñate, and also on the trails those passengers pursued and on stories depicting the difficult encounters between Amerindian tribes and European settlers, between conquerors and conquered, between Amerindian religious rites and Catholic rituals, showing an anthropological interest for the history of that territory and of the Spanish presence along the Rio Grande: "The Puebleños were not militant and seem to have cherished no animus against the conquistadores. The resistance that they opposed with heroic and cunning persistence was to the destruction of their own way of reconciling themselves to the universe" (107). Most of all, the author intends to show the many journeys that went by or came to an end in that region (110), the many "threads of human enterprise" (121) completed in the place seen "merely as a place to be crossed and its aboriginal population, unfriendly to invasion, as creatures to be hunted" (123).

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Although she lucidly affirms that there is perhaps no such thing as an "absolutely knowable Indian" (134), her book nonetheless insists that the white man should try to acknowledge the Indian, namely the *wokanda*, or "the essential spirit of things" (261), the basis of the Amerindian mind, "in every created thing, stick and stone, bird and beast and blowing wind" (135). She expands her statement:

> It flows endlessly from shape to shape; the great bison is a majestic form of its tarrying, the sun a place where the *wokonda* is concentrated, the corn one of the blessed disguises which it takes on in order that men may be fed. (LJE 135)

Concurrently, against the alienated times of modern, industrial society and as a way to overcome the psychological fragmentation of an isolated self, she proposed an observation that invites closeness and respect between humans and the non-human. For instance, in "Sacred Mountains", she describes the Navajo´s "immemorial use of mountains", for whom "mountain is God" (207), "filled with strange, abundant life" (212), a sentiment that, according to Austin, most humans do not perceive, a sense of holy that is strange to them. Her mission is to make her reader visualize the mountains better, more vividly, so they might be appreciated as monuments of splendor:

> There is the beauty of the structureless gloom of gathering storms, beauty with terror of the milling maelstroms in the air, beauty edged with an intolerable loneliness of the moon-bow flung on the fluffy, silver-flecked floor of cloud observed from peaks above the tree line. There is beauty of the mountain meadows, to which the response is a joyous sense of well-being, lakes like jade, jeweled with water-lilies, long bajadas thick with the plumes of bear-grass bowing like white ladies to the royal wind. (LJE 214)

Importantly, Austin adds: "From all these we come back, knowing that long before men set up an anthropomorphic deity there was a state, easily met among mountains, called holy, being whole with the experienceable universe" (214). In the sixteenth century, in the early Spanish voyages, the Rio Colorado was seen as the entrance to the country of the Seven Cities of Cibola, but to Austin, one of the remarkable aspects of the encounter between Europeans and Natives is "the lack of interest displayed by the discoverers in what the aborigines thought and a profound concern with how they looked" (221). And yet, to the author of *The Land of Journeys' Ending*, Colorado River and its tributaries are the living testimony of a region that affected the human history enacted there:

> All this color, the splendor of mountains and the broad lift of the mesas, the river's mighty rages, the drama of the grand Cañon, the tribal legends, the wild asses drinking at the cloud pools, the cities of our Ancients—these come down to the habitable lands and spread something as precious to the culture that arises there as the alluvium of the delta. Never to the deltas of the Nile or the Ganges, never to Tigris and Euphrates, came a richer residuum of the things that make great and powerful cultures. (LJE 237)

Likewise, central to the book are Austin's perspectives on animals. Concerns about animals and animal products have recently become a current subject, and the Covid-19 pandemic has demanded that humans consider problems of agency and responsibility in the way we interact with nature. In *The Land of Journeys' Ending*, Austin describes animals in movement, as well as the moving tribes and peoples, thus writing about the ancient presence of camels in the Southwest or of birds like the "shrill, chittering Texas night-haws above the water holes" and the "jewel-green hummingbirds that haunt the hundred-belled yucca bocata" (166). In her own words, "I am Indian enough" (166) not to notice the pattern of migrating birds and, more than that, to be indifferent to how people's lives and animal lives were intertwined. When living in New York, in the immediate years before she goes on a voyage to the "New-World journey's ending" (241) in the Southwest, she testifies that amidst the "city's bludgeoning noises" (157) if she hears the "eager, almost melodious whistles" of the great bull elk, they bring her "a magical association" (157). But, she notes, one should assume "the deer to be food for us" (158). As a way to deal with hunting experiences, she, once more, uses the modes and traditions of the "Ancients", quoting a prayer: "O our brothers of wilderness, for our necessities we are about to

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kill you. We hope that you will understand, and that there may be peace between your spirit and our spirit!" (158). Inviting her reader to think of the great bears and buffalos that inhabited the region and noticing how for the Indian the animals were "nearer to gods than men" (158), bearing mysteriousness for those who try to understand their meaning, she implies, just as the indigenous writer Linda Hogan has recently stated in *The Radiant Lives of Animals*, that to the Amerindian, "[t]he animal realm, sacred waters and the surrounding world in its entirety is an equal to our lives" (viii). As Barney Nelson argues in *The Wild and the Domestic: Animal Representation, Ecocriticism, and Western American Literature,*

> As a student of world religions and myth, Austin realized that animal stories operate at a subconscious level, archetypal level, and she used them as symbols and metaphors in order to produce literature which she hoped would dissolve boundaries between wild and domestic, human and animal (...), thus reimagining religion, language, racial stereotypes, and power structures. (34)

Nelson's perspective on Austin's faith in the interdependence of all (36) adds to my own argument that her writing—be it about people, plants, or animals—or, above all, about the connection between them, reinforces the ecological (and Indian) perspective that such a wide knowledge of the world is what we need to learn in contemporary hyper-digital societies. Moreover, Nelson, quoting Henry Smith, notes that, in opposition to the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and John Burroughs, Austin's interest in the environment was real, ethical, and political (19). At least, it contains "an implied desire to reorder individual and societal priorities" (Philippon 397), so if it is correct to affirm that Mary Austin belongs to the tradition of both Thoreau and Muir in their transcendent view of nature, as well as in their passionate observation of life outdoors, it should be added that she was not seeking to retreat from society, but attempting to create something new.[7]

As noted above, the observation of the adaptable lives of people, plants, and animals helped her to develop a respectful understanding of the arid landscapes of New Mexico:

> Anywhere in New Mexico, but especially along stream-sides, and even in the driest years, there is an unbelievable variety of herbaceous bloom forever underfoot. Anything that will grow at this latitude, grows here in its preferred setting, but according to the rhythms of the arid lands, which have been perfectly learned. Dry years, familiar species will make seed to the ground, and with such economy of leaf and flower that you must get down and paw about in the loose gravel to find them. Or, through successive seasons when the Rains walk not on earth, they will abide inert. Then in a propitious spring they pattern the plains of Vegas and Cienaguilla like a Spanish dancer's shawl. (LJE 21)

Moreover, to prove her love for the arid lands of the Southwest and for its vegetation, she affirms: "if I should disappear someday unaccountably from my accustomed places, leaving no trace, you might find me in a vast cactus garden between Tucson and Phoenix (70).

4. "THE LAND'S UNDYING QUALITY": CONCLUSION

In "Paso por aqui", the chapter in which Austin makes clear that she, like frontiersmen and pathfinders, is merely following ancient trails first laid down by animals and deepened by native people, Austin also demands from the readers of a hundred years from then—and we are almost there!—that if one visits the Inscription Rock, New Mexico, one should pay attention to the cupped silken wings of the "argemone burst" or to the "sudden stir in the short-leaved pines or fresh eagle feathers blown upon the shrine", adding: "that will be I, making known in such fashion as I may the land's undying quality" (LJE 126). Her literary gift, as revealed in *The Land of Journeys' Ending*, resides in her power to communicate to her reader a vision of the Southwest desert at a level that a simple geographical description could not have achieved. When describing what she meant by 'land', she uncovers its full meaning:

7 Austin and Muir shared the same geography and even some political agenda about the use of water in California, but she was much more inclined to defend, value, and preserve the culture of Southwest Indian life.

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> By land I mean all those things common to a given region, such as I have been lightly or deeply touched upon in this book: the flow of prevailing winds, the succession of vegetal cover, the legend of ancient life, and the scene, above everything the magnificently shaped and colored scene. Operating subtly below all other types of adjustive experience, these are the things most quickly and surely passed from generation to generation, marked, in the face of all the daunting or neglectful things a land can do to its human inhabitants, by that purr of inward content, the index of race beginning. (LJE 239)

This passage illustrates a woman's literary response to the land of little rain in the American Southwest. Austin, like other women observers of nature before her, noticed the small and grandiose elements of the land she visited and inhabited—the soil, the animals and the plants, but also its winds, air, flowers, and birds. Mostly, she emphasized everything that could survive neglect and oblivion, in clear contrast to her country's cultural appreciation of immediacy and modernity. Her attention to the natural rhythms of the land, describing them with respect and passion, helps us clarify our contemporary relationship with the physical world, inviting today's readers to rethink their views of human relationships with nature.

Importantly, like other women who lived in the 1920s, Austin had to fight for a literary career of her own and had to overcome the little tolerance for female unconventionality and originality, for, at that time, as Elaine Showalter reminds us, "American society's expectations of modern womanhood were strikingly at odds with its image of artistic achievement" (105). Austin's literary influence is vast; I have already mentioned Willa Cather, Linda Hogan, and Leslie Marmon Silko, but I could also refer to Rachel Carson and Terry Tempest Williams, as well as Ansel Adams, who collaborated with her on a book about Taos Pueblo. All these artists contributed to a better understanding of the connections between nature and the nation and, in particular, of the reciprocal relationships between humans and the environment, having promoted in their own time a humanistic thought that provides an ecocentric (rather than anthropocentric) way of living. In spite of this, in *What Wildness is This: Women Write about the Southwest*, a gathering of women's writings about the region, incomprehensibly Austin's name does not figure among the authors, though one can almost hear her voice when one reads the texts presented in the anthology, a result of the "wisdom of women who know that they are part of the Southwest, the way a thunderstorm is part of the place it was born and where it will expand its flashing strength" (Albert et al. xiii).

In conclusion, I like to think of Mary Austin as one of those literary voices that, because of her marginal position as a regionalist, stands out as an example of the de-centered world view one needs so acutely to keep in mind nowadays. In a move contrary to what was common in the 1920s, an era of flappers, Babbitts, and bootleggers, Austin's perspective on less known aspects of American geography and society, like the Southwestern Anasazi, Pueblo, and Hispanic cultures, positions her as a vehicle for the many voices one needs to hear and the interrelationships one must cultivate. In face of the dreadful conditions of our planet and the urgency it begs for humans to care for it, Austin's argument that regionalism is the condition of literature in "any country which is large enough to cover more than one type of natural environment" (qtd. in Lutz 101) stands as relevant. Moreover, *The Land of Journeys' Ending*, though centered on a specific region, evinces a perspective that presents America as a country whose richness lies in its diversity and pluralities:

> [W]e began with an aboriginal top-soil culture, rich in the florescence of assimilation, to which was added the over flow from the golden century of Spain, melting and mixing with the native strain (...) before it received its second contribution from the American East. (LJE 240)

As I have attempted to demonstrate, Austin's *The Land of Journeys' Ending* gives voice to the specific landscape of the Southwest, creatively responding to both the natural and built land, exploring its cross-cultural variations, and promoting values and patterns that I believe are of the utmost importance for the contemporary United States and for the world in which we live today. In this sense, I suggest that Austin's reflections on the land where journeys come to an end can be the beginning of a new vision for humanity:

> Man is not alone (...). He is all he sees; all that flows to him from a thousand sources, half noted, or noted not at all except by some sense that lies too deep for naming. He is the land, the lift of his mountains lines, the reach of its valleys; he is the rhythm of its seasonal processions, the involution and variation of its vegetal patterns. If there is in the country of his abiding, no more than one single refluent color, such as the veiled green of sage-brush or the splendid wine of sunset spilled along the Sangre de Cristo, he takes it in and gives it forth again in directions and occasions least suspected by himself, as manner, as music, as a prevailing tone of thought (...). (LJE 239)

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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