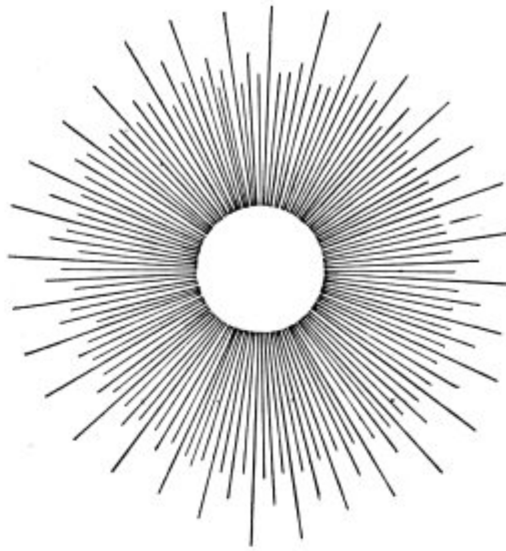

Illustration by E. Boyd Smith in Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain,* 1903

The Siren Song of the Desert: Feminized Desert, Nature, and Water as Cultural Critique in Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*

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Abstract: In her 1909 book *The Land of Little Rain,* Mary Austin's descriptions of the Southwestern desert are informed by a feminist perspective as she characterizes the desert landscape as feminine, capturing its power over the male mind. Austin argues that men attempt to render the desert landscape subordinate to their ways and to exploit its resources and landscape —much like how women, Native Americans, and Mexican residents were oppressed in the American West. In *The Land of Little Rain,* Austin depicts a feminized landscape by combining Western realism with magical, spiritual elements, and uses this feminist perspective in her cultural critiques of water resource issues. This magical, feminine aspect is lost, however, in men's interpretations of her writing, which flatten Austin's writing into a simplistic nature narrative of the American West.

In Greek mythology, sirens hold immense power in their enchanting voice, entrancing and seducing passing sailors with their songs and luring these sailors toward their doom. These sirens represent the maddening nature of the vast ocean. Isolated, desolate, and monotonous, it had the ability to drive men insane. With the absence of water, among the barren sand and otherworldly plants and animals, the desert holds a similar power. There is beauty and seduction to the brutality of the landscape.

Mary Austin, the daughter of Californian homesteaders and one of the earliest nature writers of the American West, published her book *Lost Borders* in 1909, which explored the experiences of white and Native American women in the desert. Austin was heavily concerned with the gendered and racialized politics of the Southwest desert and its water, and *Lost Borders* was published in the midst of a mass land rush by white settlers to buy up Native land in the West. In the book, Austin metaphorically portrays the desert as a woman (Sawyer, 2001, p. 43). Austin's desert descriptions were often informed by a feminist perspective; in *The Land of Little Rain*, while less explicitly so, she also characterizes the desert landscape as feminine, capturing its power over the male mind. Austin argues that men attempt to render the desert landscape subordinate to their ways and to exploit its resources and landscape—much like how women, Native Americans, and Mexican residents were oppressed in the American West. In *The Land of Little Rain,* Austin depicts a feminized landscape by combining Western realism with magical, spiritual elements, and uses this feminist perspective in her cultural critiques of water resource issues. This magical, feminine aspect is lost, however, in men's interpretations of her writing, which flatten Austin's writing into a simplistic nature narrative of the American West.

Water emerges as the defining theme and resource throughout *The Land of Little Rain*. This emphasis is representative of a broader cultural shift after the Newlands Reclamation Act was passed in 1902—just a year before Austin published *The Land of Little Rain.* The Newlands Reclamation Act, which funded irrigation projects in the West, was one of the most critical acts in Western land management. As a result of this act, the West transformed from a region defined by its mining to a region defined by the availability and distribution of its water. Long depending on portrayals of resource extraction to establish their realism, authors of Western literature, from Foote's *The Chosen Valley* to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath,* refocused their writing to describe an emerging world where social, political, and economic relations were shaped by water (Witschi, 2002, p. 109). Austin was no different. As a writer who had always understood that nature was inextricably linked to its use by humans, she began to shift her themes after 1902 from "mining and individualism" to "water and community" (Witschi, 2002, p. 113). Austin's writing, which spanned genres and topics about the American West, always included cultural critique at its core. Witschi notes, "To write about water in a land of little rain was not necessarily to write about nature" (Witschi, 2002, p. 123). *The Land of Little Rain* was just the beginning of Austin's long career of advocacy for equitable distribution of water resources

(Witschi, 2002, p. 125).[1] Unlike many male writers of the American West, Austin recognized that writing about nature was political, social, and ethical—not simply an escape from urbanized society. Water and nature, she understood, were linked and subordinate to the needs and wants of men.

Austin saw similarities between the exploitation of nature by men and the oppression of women, Native Americans, and Mexican residents in the American West (Sawyer, 2001, p. 38). She makes this connection clear in *The Land of Little Rain* as she depicts the arid landscape of the Mojave Desert and Owens Valley as simultaneously feminine and supreme, harsh and terrifying while still alluring. Austin's uses of pronouns are conspicuous and pertinent. In her preface to the book, she refers to the earth with feminine pronouns: “The earth is no wanton to give up all her best to every comer, but keeps a sweet, separate intimacy for each” (Austin, 1903, p. viii). While Austin alludes to the land throughout her text as “it,” she imbues it with typically feminine characteristics and dynamics: the powerful allure it holds over men, its beauty, its purity. Additionally, she constantly refers to the typical desert visitor as a man. In doing so, she immediately establishes a gendered dynamic between the land and *her* male inhabitants.

From the first paragraphs of the book, Austin paints a world that feels distinctly disorienting, alien, and brutal yet still saturated with beauty and magic. “East away from the Sierras,” she writes, “south from Panamint and Amargosa, east and south many an uncounted mile, is the Country of Lost Borders” (Austin, 1903, p. 3). The reader is instantly dropped in the middle of the desert, disoriented by Austin’s use of direction and landmarks, and wary of her warnings of “Lost Borders.” She continues, asserting that “not the law, but the land sets the limit,” and that while the desert “supports no man… void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil” (Austin, 1903, p. 3). Still, there is beauty and hope in its landscape. The hills, “chrome and vermilion painted,” aspire to the snow-line in the distance. Here Austin utilizes the ambiguous meaning of “aspire,” which can mean to hope or reach toward a goal. Its Latin root, however, literally means “to breathe,” which hints at another draw of the desert: its air, which is the “divinest, cleanest air to be breathed anywhere in God's world,” and holds the promise of wealth and gold (Austin, 1903, p. 17).

The hope and clarity of the desert is perhaps the root of its allure, the siren song that captures the men who visit it. Austin describes the land as having “little in it to love,” yet impossible to abandon (Austin, 1903, p. 6). Again and again, she describes the siren’s call. The desert has a “lotus charm” that tricks one’s sense of time “so that once inhabiting there you always mean to go away without quite realizing that you have not done it.” (Austin, 1903, p. 17). The land’s promise of wealth tempts and “bewitches” men, specifically (Austin, 1903, p. 17). One Pocket Hunter who finally makes it rich and intends to take his wealth to England eventually returns and is found by Austin next to a dripping spring. “No man can be stronger than his destiny,” she writes—his destiny being the irresistible pull of the desert (Austin, 1903, p.

[1] Austin was a staunch advocate against the Owens Valley water grab in 1906, which was one of the first projects of reclamation after the Newlands Reclamation Act. The Owens Valley project was originally intended to create an irrigation system, but after a series of dishonest deals and mismanagement, the project instead created an aqueduct used to supply Los Angeles with water. Austin denounced the project for destroying the culture and society of the region from which the water was taken. Austin later involved herself in the negotiations for the Hoover Dam in the hopes of preventing a similar outcome.

80). Throughout this dynamic, the land holds the upper hand. It remains utterly indifferent to man, and it eventually prevails over human efforts as the old ground is "retak[en]... by the wild plants, banished by human use" (Austin, 1903, p. 131). Even as the land is used by humans, it remains supreme.

Austin imbues land and water, the land's dominant resource, with magical, spiritual, and religious elements, adding to their sublimity. In the land of little rain, there is either too much water or not enough—either drought or flood. The lack of water in the land of "little rain" causes the rare presence of water to be imbued with wonder and beauty. When mountains "swim into the alpenglow, wet after rain, you conceive how long and imperturbable are the purposes of God" (Austin, 1903, p. 186). Austin often anthropomorphizes the water and land; in one instance, she describes a creek doing its best to reach a river and the "willows encouraging it as much as they could" (Austin, 1903, p. 170). Storms are particularly awe-inspiring, and a strong downpour exerts powerful wrath. "Weather does not happen," Austin writes, "it is the visible manifestation of the Spirit moving itself in the void" (Austin, 1903, p. 247). However, one must avoid mountain ranges predisposed to floods, as "you will find it forsaken of most things but beauty and madness and death and God" (Austin, 1903, p. 184). Austin describes the mysterious origins of mountain streams and the secret workings of snow-fed flowers, and portrays lakes as the eye of the mountain. The wet coves of hills evoke wonder in their extravagant blooms. A field of irises "have the misty blue of mirage waters rolled across desert sand, and quicken the senses to the anticipation of things ethereal" (Austin, 1903, p. 238). Especially in the presence of excess water, the land is saturated with beauty, magic, and spirituality.

As awesome as the land can be, it is still vulnerable and tied to its use and abuse by humans. Austin describes the land as "voiceless," yet another suggestion of its similarities to the women's condition (Austin, 1903, p. 10). Human life in *The Land of Little Rain* is organized around what little water there is in the desert, as it represents hope, promise, and survival. Jimville, a mining town, grew out of Squaw Gulch, and in the spring, Jimville's population sets out to find gold, guided by the "peaks and a few rarely touched water-holes, always, always with the golden hope" (Austin, 1903, p. 120). Austin describes a gold miner's hunch as "an intimation from the gods that if you go over a brown back of the hills, by a dripping spring, up Coso way, you will find what is worth while" (Austin, 1903, p. 120). Again, man's hope is connected, even adjacently, to water. "Campoodies," or Native American villages, were always established around water. Water also had the ability to create human connection; Austin's Pocket Hunter was "full of fascinating small talk about the ebb and flood of creeks" (Austin, 1903, p. 74). When water is removed from its source in the mountains, however, and harnessed for human use, it transforms from something magical and powerful to something vulnerable and skittish.

While streams in the mountains sing to each other, Austin dryly states that "it is the proper destiny of every considerable stream in the West to become an irrigating ditch. It would seem the streams are willing" (Austin, 1903, p. 225). In this statement, Austin demonstrates how the fate of water is inextricably linked to the needs and wants of human communities. It has unsettling undertones, however, especially when we consider how Austin has written the land as a feminine entity. "It would seem the streams are willing" suggests an assumed consent by the water. She continues, "[the streams] go as far as they can, or dare, toward the tillable lands in their own boulder fenced gullies…" (Austin, 1903, p. 225). As the brook or stream warily

transforms into an irrigation ditch, it seems to lose its life. "Sickly, slow streams" become infested with tulares, which are either a "ghostly pale" or a "deep poisonous-looking green" and contain "mystery and malaria" (Austin, 1903, p. 240). The waters become "thick and brown" and filled with rotting willows (Austin, 1903, p. 241). Her descriptions of overflow waters bring to mind a quote from Mark Reisner: "We set out to tame the rivers and ended up killing them" (Reisner, 1987, p. 486).

While Austin was a proponent of irrigation when used equitably and for the communities from which the waters came, she was vehemently opposed to the unequal distribution of water, which destroyed rural societies. She describes a greedy, individualistic treatment of water rights in "Other Water Borders" that led to murder and racial violence. The water, again anthropomorphized, is depressed by this: "you get that sense of brooding from the confined and sober floods" (Austin, 1903, p. 228). On the other hand, El Pueblo de Las Uvas, a small town that Austin describes at the end of her book, escapes this individual greed over water. In this town, "land dips away to the river pastures," and the people are warm and live communally and generously; "there is not much villainy among them" (Austin, 1903, p. 266, 281). Perhaps this warm community has escaped the individualism and greed over the desert's scarce water because it has accepted the desert on its own terms. Austin concludes her book with an appeal to the necessity of community in the desert, imploring her reader:

> "Come away, you who are obsessed with your own importance in the scheme of things, and have got nothing you did not sweat for, come away by the brown valleys and full-bosomed hills to the even-breathing days, to the kindliness, earthiness, ease of El Pueblo de Las Uvas" (Austin, 1903, p. 281).

Written years before the women's suffrage movement, Austin's depictions of the desert as feminine and her indications that the abuse of the land was connected to the oppression of other groups, including women and Native Americans, were undoubtedly informed by her acute awareness of the politics of gender and authorship, and her time spent in the desert learning from Native Americans (Witschi, 2002, p. 120). Austin sought to write in the feminine and to have her writing still be respected (Witschi, 2002, p. 120). However, the crucial feminine aspect of her writing was lost by the men who attempted to interpret her work in both the 1903 and 1950 editions of *The Land of Little Rain*. Carl Van Doren, who wrote the introduction to the 1950 edition of *The Land of Little Rain*, which accompanied Austin's text with photographs by Ansel Adams, was dismissive of Austin as a writer and reduced her to her gender. While Austin was a "prophet," he claimed, she still did not lose her womanhood (Austin & Adams, 1950, p. xi). A "matriarch in the desert," she was a "woman's woman," he claimed; while men listened to her words, women hung onto them (Austin & Adams, 1950, p. xii).

The critical themes of Austin's writing were overlooked by both men who attempted to accompany her words with visuals: E. Boyd Smith, the illustrator of the 1903 edition, and Ansel Adams, the photographer of the 1950 edition. Smith was commissioned by Houghton Mifflin to provide illustrations for Austin's text; the publisher's "Note on the Illustrations" includes no mention of any control Austin had over the choice of illustrations. The publisher only expresses gratitude for being able to secure Smith as the illustrator for Austin's "charming sketches" of *The*

Land of Little Rain (Austin, 1903, p. xi). Adams's edition was published long after Austin's death; it followed a similar 1948 edition of John Muir's *Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada*. Adams describes his photographic additions as an attempt to "distill the spirit and mood of the land as [he] see[s] it," although he believes that he sees the land "more clearly" because of his friendship with Austin (Austin & Adams, 1950, p. 111).

In the 1903 edition, Smith begins the book with a cover illustration of a barbed-wire fence, splitting the land in half, wrapping around the title; directly above the fence flies a black bird. A singular peak is in the distance, and the suggestion of a mountain range extends to the right. Another black bird, possibly a crow, sits in the shadow of the fence and pecks at the post. The rest of the land is bare, save for a few scattered, tiny plants. The drawing is made of simple, black and white lines; the ground itself is stark white. Throughout the book, Smith's illustrations are composed of simple, colorless lines, which appear as a stark contrast to Austin's rich and colorful descriptions of the landscape, from "deep poisonous-looking green" tulares to the "misty blue of mirage waters rolled across desert sand" (Austin, 1903, p. 240, 238). Smith's illustrations preside at the start of each chapter and sit in the margins of the text, occasionally spilling over into the page. The first illustration in the book is a white sun blazing over the text, its rays full and sharp, its center a blinding white (Austin, 1903, p. 1). The drawings are decidedly literal interpretations of the text, providing a visual aid to the reader. As Austin writes of a cattle fence, "one could be sure of finding a bird or two in every strip of shadow," Smith illustrates a singular bird in the shadow of a fence post (Austin, 1903, p. 16). If Austin describes a creosote or a yucca tree, Smith supplies a thumb-sized drawing in the margins to accompany its description. There is no attempt to capture the humanized and ethereal components of Austin's landscape, and Smith's interpretations allow little room for nuance or subtext within Smith's drawings. Instead, they simplify an incredibly rich and complex text into its very literal meaning.

In Austin and Adams's 1950 edition, published over a decade after Austin's death, the book is bound in yellow fabric and titled in a barely distinguishable burnt orange print, suggesting the color of desert sand. Austin's text is located in the first part of the book, while Adams's photographs are set after the text on glossy photographic paper—a jarring division between the two contributions to the book. Austin's writing is bare and stands on its own. The front and back endpapers display a map of California and Nevada, including markers for the Sierra Range, Death Valley, and National Parks.

In Adams's section of the book, his photographs are set on the right page opposite a mostly blank page with a short, unattributed quotation at the top and a brief description of his photograph at the bottom. The amount of blank space on the pages evokes the barrenness of the desert while also asserting an assumption of importance in occupying so much space in the book. In a "Note on the Land and on the Photographs," Adams admits that he feels a "temerity" in "attempting an amalgam" of Austin's writing in his photographs (Austin & Adams, 1950, p. 109). Despite a long friendship with Austin, he confesses that he has "depended somewhat on conjecture" in his "choice of subjects for the photographs" (Austin & Adams, 1950, p. 111). The quotations, he notes, are taken mostly from the body of Austin's text and were selected based on logical and emotional relationships to the subjects of his photographs. Adam's failure to fully cite Austin's quotes, which he selected to fit his photographs, reflects the same theme of gendered

exploitation that Austin explores in relation to the land. Instead of sapping the desert of its resources and magic, Adam saps Austin's sharp and layered narration of its feminist critique.

It is unclear if Adams composed the photographs for the book or if he selected them from an already existing portfolio, but it would be unsurprising if it were the latter. It is clear, however, that Adams chose quotes from Austin (and others, although he does not distinguish between them) to serve his photographs, not the other way around. In doing so, he does an immense disservice to her text. Austin's quotations are shortened and taken out of context. Where Austin wrote about irises,

> "Single flowers are too thin and sketchy of outline to affect the imagination, but the full fields have the misty blue of mirage waters rolled across desert sand, and quicken the senses to the anticipation of things ethereal…" (Austin & Adams, 1950, p. 238).

Adams selected the singular fragment, "...the anticipation of things ethereal," to accompany a photograph of a sparse tree against an oncoming spring storm (Austin & Adams, 1950, photograph 16). Most of Adams's photos are of dry landscapes, dusty roads, and vistas of the Sierras; he includes a few portraits of men and boys in the desert. While he captures the sentiment that nature triumphs over man in a photograph of ruins, set with the quote, "not the law, but the land sets the limit," Adams erases any elements of femininity from Austin's text and overlooks the seductive, siren song of the desert (Austin & Adams, 1950, photograph 21). Adams's desert is one even more devoid of life than Austin's—like Smith, his photographs are entirely in black and white. Gone is any sense of magic or femininity; gone is the intricate connection between the use of the land and the oppression of minority groups. Set beside Adams's photographs, Austin's quotations are indistinguishable from the prolific nature writers of the American West.

In *The Land of Little Rain*, Mary Austin used a key characteristic of the American West—its aridity, its scarcity of water—and used it to make broader cultural critiques about the human exploitation of natural resources. Austin's feminization of the desert landscape allowed her to reveal how water reflects the cultural values and issues of the American West. By infusing her realism with the feminine, the magical, and the spiritual, Austin challenged the predominantly male literature about the landscape and nature of the American West to expand its cultural critiques and understand the complexities of natural resources and how we use them as agricultural, survival, and spiritual resources. Her brilliant and rich criticism, however, was received and drained of its power by Smith and Adams' attempts to interpret it. Even years after her death, her feminist cultural critiques were overlooked by the overwhelmingly male world of Western nature literature and art.

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