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# Mary Hunter Austin, a new myth of the desert: idealization, archetype and mysticism in The Land of Little Rain and Lost Borders

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Mary Hunter Austin, A New Myth of the Desert:  
Idealization, Archetype and Mysticism  
in *The Land of Little Rain* and *Lost Borders*.

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Abbreviations.....	12
Chapter I – The Myth of an Idealized and Mystical Nature.....	13
A – The End of the Myth of Emptiness.....	14
1 - The American Myth of Emptiness, a Colonial Trope.....	14
2 - Reevaluation of Nature.....	17
3 - Reassessment of Native Life in the Desert.....	19
B – A Defense of the Natural World.....	25
1 – An Ecocritical Perspective on her Work.....	25
2 – The Order of the Natural Elements: a Living and Contrasted Desert.....	28
3 - Hints at Man’s Destruction of the Ecosystems in an Environmental Stance.....	31
C – A Mystical Nature.....	36
1 – A Created Desert: Biblical Intertext.....	36
2 – A Perfect Ecosystem, Religious Idealization.....	39
3 – Mythologizing the Desert, with Distance from Scientific Descriptions.....	43
Chapter II – The Myth of the Archetypal Native American.....	48
A – Reassessment of Native Life in the Desert.....	49
1 - Austin’s Experience with Native People.....	49
2 – The Position of an Ethnographer.....	52
3 – One of the First Women to Write upon Native People with no Colonial Interest.....	55
B – Archetypal Portraits of Native Americans.....	60
1 – Postcolonial Studies Applied to American Literature.....	60
2 - Individual Figures of Natives.....	64
3 – Postcolonial Perspective on Colonial Reminiscences.....	68
C – A Defense or the Creation of a Frozen Myth?.....	72
1 – The Ambiguity of her Posture.....	72
2 – The Native American as a Construct.....	76
3 – Both a Defense and a Myth.....	83
Chapter III – Subjective Fictionalization as an Ethos.....	86
A – The Ambiguity of Explicit Imagination in <i>Lost Borders</i> , and Implicit Fictionalization in <i>The Land of Little Rain</i> .....	87
1 – <i>Lost Borders</i> , the Assertion of a Fictional Work.....	87
2 – <i>The Land of Little Rain</i> , Presented as Non-Fiction about the West.....	89
3 – Historical Background of the Fiction.....	90
B – A Literary Work, with Distanciation from a Pure Scientific Description.....	92
1 – The Issue of Austin’s Ambiguous Posture.....	92
2 – Literary Value.....	95
3 – Fictionalization of Native Americans as a Myth.....	97
C – The Essence of the Myth: Imaginary Images Presented as Real.....	100
1 – Mythologization Through a Fictionalized Reality.....	100
2 - Mythologization as a Literary Ethos.....	105
3 - Nature Writing and the Creation of an Imaginary World.....	106
Conclusion.....	110
Bibliography.....	113



## Introduction

Nature writing is academically more studied with male authors, like Henry David Thoreau or John Muir. Several great female authors have been neglected, despite their literary quality. Mary Hunter Austin is part of this oblivion. She was an American author of the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century (1868-1934). Her writings have been analyzed by scholars but she remains unknown to the general audience and forgotten by publishers. She was a prolific writer with thirty-six literary works, novels, poetry, plays, nature writing and political essays, most of which are not published anymore, and many articles. She was born in Carlinville, Illinois, but moved to California at the age of twenty, which inspired her to write her first literary masterpiece, *The Land of Little Rain* in 1903. She studied the daily life of Paiute and Shoshone Native people for seventeen years, which fostered her interest for them and her commitment to support their rights. She traveled to Europe as she suffered from cancer, she met great authors of her time in London, and then moved to New York where she strengthened her feminist positions with authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

This dissertation focuses on two of her major works, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) and *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders* (1909). She is recognized for her writings notably in favor of the Natives' rights in the West as well as for her feminist position in favor of women's suffrage. However, the recent findings of postcolonial studies shed new light on American literary works, especially on the colonial tropes present in the writing of the Natives. This dimension is still present in Mary Hunter Austin's writing, which this dissertation analyzes in these two works. It also tackles her nature writing, intertwined with the Natives, as she writes about Paiute and Shoshone Natives in their natural environment, the desert of Utah, Nevada, Arizona, but mainly California. More precisely, *The Land of Little Rain* focuses on the Owens Valley, where Mary Hunter Austin lived, and the Great Basin desert, along the Sierra Nevada. If she claims to write a defense of Natives' rights, she also writes for the preservation of the ecosystems, in an environmental stance.

*The Land of Little Rain*, published in 1903, is the first well-known literary work of Mary Hunter Austin. It is a non-fiction collection of fifteen short chapters about the desert of the Sierras and portraits of Native people she lived with for several years. From the natural landscapes in the "Water Borders" or "The Nurslings of the Sky" to the description of animal life in the desert with "The Scavengers", to figures of Native people in "Shoshone Land" or "The Basket Maker", Mary Hunter Austin draws a full painting of the desert "between the high Sierras south from Yosemite – east and south over a very great assemblage of broken ranges beyond Death Valley, and on

illimitably into the Mojave Desert.” (Austin, 1903, 7). It is the best known work of Mary Hunter Austin, and the only one still published recently.

*Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*, more known as *Lost Borders*, was published in 1909. It is a collection of fourteen short stories of fiction set in the desert of the American West. The desert is once again a main protagonist, but fictional characters add a human dimension to the plots, a literary feature that is not present in *The Land of Little Rain*. Mary Hunter Austin draws portraits of White settlers and Native people, especially women. She writes about relationships of power, domination and ambiguity among them. The colonial submission is depicted in the setting of an endangered desert, by the devastating activities of White men such as mining and hunting.

Mary Hunter Austin inscribes herself in opposition to male authors who wrote the West as a desert, an empty land, ready to be colonized and dominated. She quotes, in this dynamic, Bret Harte who created a romantic desert, the landscape being a background scenery for human plots. François Specq wrote in his 2019 introduction to the French translation of *The Land of Little Rain* that she blames authors like William Dean Howells and Sinclair Lewis for being too far from the experience of the land, to be apart from the sensibility of the land they write about (Specq, 2019, 10). According to her, the value of nature writing is linked to the authenticity of the relationship to the land. Henry David Thoreau reflects this idea in *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), the land being the place for an authentic personal experience (Specq, 2019, 10-11).

Mary Hunter Austin chose to put the land at the center of her writing, turning it into a main character, in a realistic dimension. Indeed, she wanted to write the reality of the land and its people in the posture of a mere reporter, to describe the living elements from a naturalist perspective, to take a step back from the literary trope of a fantasized desert for colonial purposes. Her will was also to ground her writing in a new dimension of “local color”, far from this local color of a vague scenery for human activities, and to reset the land in its proper place, as part of the region. Several scholars have studied Austin’s work in light of regionalism, analyzing how she wrote about the Southwest region. Even though she was born in Carlinville, Illinois, Austin was inspired by the Californian Sierra Nevada and the Mojave Desert, between the Death Valley, the Owens Valley and the high mountains where she moved with her husband to write her first literary masterpiece *The Land of Little Rain*.

Mary Hunter Austin preferred to give more importance to the realistic description of natural elements, flora and fauna, than to please the reader with romantic allusions to nature. She redefined nature writing through her very long experience of the desert and her pretension to authenticity. She considered that a nature writing author is reliable only if he or she lived on the land he or she writes about, but more importantly only if he or she had an intimate relationship to the land. That is to say



to feel close to the natural elements, to understand the connections between them and to feel the spiritual dimension of the balance between those elements, which creates the real and mystical ecosystem. Mystical because Mary Hunter Austin perceives nature as created by God, which explains the stability of the ecosystem, but it remains unfathomable and unreachable to the human mind. Her naturalist sensibility is perceivable in the portraits she draws of Native people, describing traits of their personality in accordance with their everyday life activity, as in “The Basket Maker”.

Nevertheless, Austin was aware of the cultural and personal dimensions of a subjective perception of place, in her case the Southwest region. She considered the scientific background important to understand the reality of the land, especially the flora and fauna, but always intertwined with an emotional perception linked to imagination. However, she gave the power of imagination to the readers, rather than inscribing her fantasies on the land like Bret Harte did according to her (Specq, 2019, 13). Lyricism and the aesthetic feature in her writing were always grounded in objective knowledge, in order to provide an efficient balance to grasp the reality of the land and its people. Her writings gave voices to Native people, which is, above the political and social dimension, to give space to them, also a literary choice in order to give a broader picture of the region.

In the vein of John Muir, even though they argued throughout their literary careers, she included religious intertextuality in her depiction of the West, especially in the mountains and the “Nurslings of the Sky”. God’s will is very patent within the natural elements, which adds to the spiritual mysticism of the desert she writes about, thus taking a distance from the abuses of the civilized world through writing of a spiritual nature.

The environmental stance of *The Land of Little Rain* and *Lost Borders* places Mary H. Austin in opposition to the “ideology of the West” of her time (Specq, 2019, 17), which considered the West as the epitome of American identity, through the fulfillment of individuality. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner theorized this importance of the desert in the creation of modern American identity in his 1893 essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Through writing in favor of the preservation of the ecosystems, Mary H. Austin set herself apart from the trope of the West as a place for individualism by the realization of endless freedom, at the expense of Native people. Away from the Manifest Destiny ideology, Austin sets herself as an individual narrator in *The Land of Little Rain* through the contemplation of the interconnection of natural elements, refusing anthropocentrism in her writing.

Austin created a new literary position, the process of creating an aesthetic desert intertwined with her environmental stance and her defense of the Native Americans. This was a distance taken from the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, Susan Fenimore Cooper and John Muir, and she set a

new path in nature writing for authors like Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard and Terry Tempest Williams. Her perception of the “desert”, a term she refused, as a “storied” land (Harding, 2014, xi) and a land of visions and no more as a place of desolation was inaugural in the literary history of nature writing (Specq, 2019, 25).

Ecocriticism and postcolonial studies stand as relevant theoretical fields of study to analyze Austin’s works, respectively for her writing of the desert and of Native Americans. Environmental criticism, a synonym of ecocriticism, was theorized by the grounding work of Lawrence Buell as “a self-conscious movement” (Buell, 2005, 1) which analyzes the writing of natural environments, generally in a nonfiction form. Nonfiction does not undermine the literary quality of such writing, as “the symbiosis between artistic accomplishment and environmentalist commitment [...] has enriched the movement conceptually as well as aesthetically.” (Buell, 2005, 7). Ecocriticism centers its analysis on nature writing works especially, as is the case for Mary H. Austin. Scott Slovic defines nature writing in his article “Nature writing” of the *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History* as

literary nonfiction that offers scientific scrutiny of the world (as in the older tradition of literary natural history), explores the private experience of the individual human observer of the world, or reflects upon the political and philosophical implications of the relationships among human beings and the larger planet. (Slovic, 2004, 888).

This alliance of literature and scientific discourse is peculiarly relevant to analyze Austin’s work.

Postcolonial studies are consistent with analyzing Austin’s work concerning her writing of the Native Americans. This field of study focuses on the dynamics of domination between powerful cultures and dominated peoples, especially during and after periods of colonization around the world. The domination that European countries exercised on indigenous peoples created an erasure of their respective cultures, which postcolonial studies rediscover in sociology, economy, philosophy, arts and literature. Homi K. Bhabha defines postcolonial studies in his edifying work *The Location of Culture* in the following terms:

Postcoloniality, for its part, is a salutary reminder of the persistent ‘neo-colonial’ relations within the ‘new’ world order and the multinational division of labour. Such a perspective enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance. Beyond this, however, postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities – in the North and the South, urban and rural – constituted, if I may coin a phrase, ‘otherwise than modernity’. (Bhabha, 1994, 6).

Yet, even though Mary H. Austin's writing is considered as praising Native Americans' way of life and as a defense of their rights, recent postcolonial findings broadened the scope of ecocriticism and argued against an illusory utopian discourse on the Natives, present in nineteenth and twentieth centuries literary works. Indeed, this dissertation questions the position of Mary H. Austin towards the Native Americans through the analysis of stereotypical portrayals with frozen descriptive traits. The almost total absence of historical context and political framing will also be discussed. The tension at the core of her work under scrutiny here is the one between her will to write a realistic desert, and her fictionalization of the land and its people. If other nature writers had already fictionalized the American Western desert before her in Romantic and sublime images, her originality is the ethical ambiguity of her position as a writer. She gives back a legitimate place to Native Americans in their land, which is already a novelty in the genre of "wilderness" nature writing, but she keeps on portraying archetypal figures of indigenous people. She puts an end to the notion of "wilderness", of a wild and empty desert as a land to occupy and civilize, but her painting of a mystical, sublime desert and non historicized Natives creates a central ambiguity in her position. This ambiguity is followed in her fictional short stories in *Lost Borders*, in which she creates strong women characters who take back agency, facing White settlers and miners who have a dominant mind. The hypothesis of Austin mythologizing the desert will be analyzed in this work, through the notions of idealization of the desert and its people, of mysticism of the land and its natural elements, and of archetypes of Native American figures. The study of creation of myths will be followed with the support of mythocriticism, a field of study which analyzes the features of myths, their structure as well as their sociocultural meanings and echoes.

The desert is a real literary *topos* in American literature that reflects the colonial mindset of the first western settlers. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the desert as a "waterless, desolate area of land with little or no vegetation, typically covered with sand, uninhabited; a situation or area considered dull and uninteresting." ("Desert", 2011). The myth of emptiness is already enshrined in the term desert. That is why Mary H. Austin prefers the Native term, "the Country of Lost Borders" which reminds one of the human life present on the land. She argues that "desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man" (Austin, 1903, 9). This conceptualization of the desert as empty created a myth, a term defined by the Oxford English Dictionary first as "a traditional story concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events", but which became "a widely held but false belief; a fictitious person or thing; an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person or thing" ("Myth", 2011). Austin created a new myth of the desert, away from its emptiness but still mythologizing it as

an ideal, a “desirable or perfect but existing only in the imagination” place (“Ideal”, 2011). This idealization holds a form of mysticism, a “vague or ill-defined religious or spiritual belief” which has “a spiritual symbolic or allegorical significance that transcends human understanding” and “inspires a sense of spiritual mystery, awe, or fascination” (“Mysticism”, 2011). However, this spirituality Austin finds in the desert does not deprive her writing of archetypes, a term defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a very typical example; an original model; a primitive mental image inherited from the earliest human ancestors and supposed to be present in the collective unconscious” (in the psychoanalytic Jungian theory), “a recurrent motif in literature or art” (“Archetype”, 2011).

The ambiguity at the core of this dissertation is then, does Mary Hunter Austin write a tribute to the desert and its people, or a mystical idealization, a new myth of the desert? This work will first focus on the myth of an idealized and mystical nature through an ecocritical perspective, then will tackle the myth of an archetypal Native with the support of postcolonial studies, to finish with the analysis of subjective fictionalization as an ethos.

In her article “Mary Hunter Austin Rediscovered”, Esther Lanigan Stineman quotes Mary H. Austin’s words in her letter to Mr. Scaife, “the man in charge of marketing at Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company” (Stineman, 1988, 545): “I don’t want to be looked at, I want to be read” (Austin, 1919, 1). This proclamation asserts her literary career as a fundamental feature of her life.

## Abbreviations

*LLR* *The Land of Little Rain*, Mary Hunter Austin.

*LB* *Lost Borders*, Mary Hunter Austin.

## Chapter I – The Myth of an Idealized and Mystical Nature

Mary Hunter Austin began her literary career as a writer of nature writing, with her first major work *The Land of Little Rain* in 1903. It is considered part of the nature writing literary genre as the author positions herself as a mere reporter of the natural world, a simple observer and transcriber of the ecosystems she observes in the American Western desert. However, the main dynamics of her work contradict this ideological statement, as she describes a mystical nature with divine occurrences in the diverse natural elements. She gives her human and spiritual interpretation and perspective on nature, in addition to her position of an ethnologist. She also writes of a balanced nature, through the equilibrium of all natural elements creating an harmonious ecosystem in the desert, as well as a total interdependence of the animal species on each other which leads to a global self-regulation and harmony of the ecosystem. This perception is sometimes idealized, taking a step back from her assertion of writing a realistic text. These idealization and deification of nature are to be analyzed in her literary works to understand the whole literary scope Mary Hunter Austin occupies. The notion of posture is understood symbolically as Austin's ethical position towards the topics she tackles, as well as her stylistic and literary position within the literature of her time. Edward Abbey affirms in his 1988 preface to *LLR* that

Except for John C. Van Dyke's almost-forgotten book *The Desert*, published in 1901, Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* was until quite recently the only work that took the American desert as its material and inspiration. (Abbey, 1988, ix)

## **A – The End of the Myth of Emptiness**

Writing at the very beginning of the twentieth century, Mary Hunter Austin defies the major tropes of the previous centuries in literature, in which the desert has been dominantly written about, by male authors. These writers were grounded on a historical posture of colonialism and domination of the desert, in the vein of the Manifest Destiny which gave all powers to white men who conquered the West, as a destiny designed by God.

### **1 - The American Myth of Emptiness, a Colonial Trope**

The majority of those authors, including Bret Harte, wrote their accounts of the land and the desert celebrating a “Myth of Emptiness”, an expression used by Wendy Harding in her edifying work of the same title (Harding, 2014). They depicted an empty land, that was available for man’s presence and exploitation. This process erased all human and animal life from the drawn map, thus creating the erasure of all form of historical past of the land. The land appeared new, pristine and ready to be taken by white men. The Native Americans, if mentioned, were considered as animals, which were seen as resources for food but also means to find water for the settlers by tracking the animals. Wendy Harding describes this process of creation of the myth in these texts; it indeed became a myth when this depiction became the main story, the only true account of the desert life especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at the time of white men’s exploitation of the material resources of the desert. They extracted tons of ore, including gold and silver; this was the golden age of mines which completely transformed the Californian landscape in the mountains. The myth of emptiness can be defined as a mental representation of an empty desert, a land with no life, no water, no plants and animals that are worth mentioning.

The “Myth of Emptiness” also created the modern notion of wilderness:

The early texts create a new American icon – the wilderness – placing it under the sign of empty and projecting onto it all the settlers’ hopes and fears. Initially the settlers characterize the American territory by what it lacks; the immigrants arrive to bring what is needed to complete it. [...] While the attribution of emptiness has been a vector of creativity, it has purged the land of its history, an omission that the next literature of place seeks to correct. (Harding, 2014, xvi)

The “settler’s fears” are embodied through the will of possession and domination. The miners and loggers, after the settlers, tried to dominate the land by possessing the resources. They had to face

the “wild” animals, not known by humans before exploration, and the aridity of such desert geography. Thus the notion of wilderness, at the core of modern nature writing, comes from a white history of possession. Indeed, the wilderness is set in opposition to the tame, known animals and land. This dichotomy reflects the notion of American frontier during the Westward expansion. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner theorized the notion of the American frontier of the Westward expansion while the process was over, after 1890. He described in his essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893) the idea of a symbolical frontier present in the collective imagination, perpetuating the idea of an endless American territory, forever open to white men’s civilization. This notion was later developed in his work *The Frontier in American History* (1920). In his article “‘Cette frontière qui battait sans cesse en retraite’: Turner et le cas américain”, Jean-Michel Durafour reminds us that “la frontière chez Turner n’est qu’une hypothèse explicative. Elle s’ancre dans toute une tradition qui la justifie” (Durafour, 2007, 47). This expansionist ideology was first executed through the 1804 exploration of Lewis and Clark. He also reminds us of this notion that “le territoire américain n’est pas pris entre des frontières, le bordant de part et d’autre, il n’est qu’une gigantesque frontière s’étalant sur des millions de kilomètres carrés.” (Durafour, 2007, 55).

The wilderness was the epitome of the unknown, the West, the not-yet-possessed land. In the fourth chapter “Les trois piliers de la culture américaine” of his work *Une histoire culturelle des Etats-Unis* (2015), Jean Kempf tackles the notions of nature and wilderness as a human representation:

Même la Nature, qui pourrait renvoyer à première vue à une réalité “objective”, n’est pas à prendre au sens écologique, botanique ou zoologique du terme, mais relève clairement d’une idée: c’est un espace construit comme nature par et dans le discours humain. Roderick Nash dans *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) a bien montré l’importance d’une nature sauvage dans l’imaginaire américain, et ce depuis les débuts de la civilisation. (Kempf, 2015, 62)

Modern nature writers use this notion of wilderness, but with a very distinct perspective, even though the origins of the word remind one of a possessive footprint from settlers. On the contrary, modern nature writers like Mary Hunter Austin, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau consider the wilderness as the last place that is not under human’s domination, the last place on earth where the land can be more or less free<sup>1</sup>. In his article “‘The world is a dead thing for them’. Perspectives amérindiennes sur les peurs environnementales”, Lionel Larré argues that the notion of wilderness

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<sup>1</sup> A varying free space along the different periods: the American wilderness did not offer the same landscapes between John Muir, Mary H. Austin or Edward Abbey, a huge evolution on possession and pollution is visible.



emerged in the U.S.A. at the same time as the myth of the environmentally sustainable Native American:

Une ironie cruelle est que cette représentation de l'Indien comme être respectueux de la nature est née en même temps que l'invention par les Euro-Américains de la *wilderness* comme havre de paix, c'est-à-dire comme lieu d'où avaient été exclus les premiers habitants afin de permettre aux touristes d'en apprécier l'apparente virginité, c'est-à-dire à la fin du XIXe siècle. (Larré, 2010, 54)

Paul Arnould et Eric Glon also defined the notion of wilderness in their article "Wilderness, usages et perceptions de la nature en Amérique du Nord" in these terms:

L'idée de *wilderness* est un des fondements des sociétés nord-américaines. Elle s'est construite selon la culture des colons européens et de leurs descendants qui l'ont transposée dans un ailleurs territorial chargé de toutes leurs aspirations. En évoquant la pureté liée à la naissance ou la virginité, l'étymologie du mot nature s'avère très proche du sens donné à l'idée de *wilderness*. Celle-ci s'identifie à des milieux naturels vierges couvrant souvent de vastes superficies. Les écosystèmes évoluent largement par eux-mêmes dans leurs interactions biologiques et la faune demeure variée et abondante. [...] Largement inhabitée, elle abrite parfois des groupes humains épars et non sédentaires aux cultures dites primitives. Dépourvues de pratiques agricoles, de lois écrites et de gouvernements organisés, ces populations sont considérées comme hors de la civilisation. Ce sont des sauvages. Voilà bien là l'idée clé. La *wilderness* c'est le sauvage c'est-à-dire cette nature laissée à son propre sort et des individus jugés primitifs. [...] Ce sont les colons surtout anglo-saxons et leurs descendants qui ont forgé cette idée de la *wilderness* selon leurs propres croyances et références culturelles. Ils la placent hors de la société parce que cette nature ne relève pas de leur civilisation et de leur univers mental. (Arnould et Glon, 2006, 227)

In this vein, Mary Hunter Austin detached herself from the previous generations of authors who developed the myth of emptiness in wilderness, even though hints at this ideological posture remain palpable in her writing. In opposition to an arid land with no water, no animal and plant life, she wrote a "storied" desert (Harding, 2014, xi), a land full of life and autonomy. The word "desert" is even to be discussed. Mary H. Austin prefers the term "Country of Lost Borders" (Austin, 1903, 9), a translation from the Indian name. The notion of desert is a derivative word from the myth of emptiness, speculating this land is empty of any sign of life. Mary Hunter Austin asserts in the first paragraph of *The Land of Little Rain (LLR)* that "desert is a loose term that indicates a land that supports no man [...]. Void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil." (Austin, 1903, 9).

Austin wrote *The Land of Little Rain* in part to reassess this majestic life present in the Southwest “desert” areas. According to her, when someone calls the West a “desert”, it means this person has never given attention enough to the land. She writes about all the different forms of life present in the Mojave desert, especially by night, giving importance to all the details she can note in her wanderings. She does not mean to be exhaustive, but her will is to reassess the crucial place animals, plants, Native Americans and natural elements hold in the “economy of nature” (Austin, 1903, 22).

## **2 - Reevaluation of Nature**

Mary H. Austin reassesses animal and plant life in the Mojave desert, in opposition to the desolate picture of a desert where the first settlers died. Even “in Death Valley, reputed the very core of desolation, are nearly two hundred identified species” (Austin, 1903, 11). She finds water thanks to her close observation of animal life: “There are many areas in the desert where drinkable water lies within a few feet of the surface, indicated by the mesquite and the bunch grass (*Sporobolus airoides*)” (Austin, 1903, 10). She praises the fullness and multiplicity of species present in this land, with a strong will to give a place back to those species in the general discourse on the desert. Along her wanderings around the Sierras, she accounts for her observations of little animals’ lives in a scientific but also intimate narration, that sometimes verges on a form of lyricism, as in the sentence “under the sage are the shallow forms of the jackrabbits, and in the dry banks of washes, and among the strewn fragments of black rock, lairs of bobcat, fox, and coyote” (Austin, 1903, 15). The two accumulative forms of localization of the species and their names create a long sentence with lyrical rhythm. Away from anthropocentrism, she centers her writing on life that is exterior to her, thus taking a step back from the male dominant discourse in nature writing which focuses on the author’s feelings and sensations within nature. This is not the case here, on the contrary she surrenders facing the immensity of such a “tropical luxuriance” (Austin, 1903, 10), a quite surprising expression in a “desert”. She even puts nature above humankind in her general discourse, in sentences as “The desert floras shame us with their cheerful adaptations to the seasonal limitations” (Austin, 1903, 10). The flora is here put on a pedestal compared to human life, as the plants “shame us”, which reinforces its overwhelming place in the book. She quotes a diversity of plant species present in the region, while resetting the place under man’s presence: “So it is that in those parts where man inhabits one sees young plants of *Yucca arborescens* infrequently. Other

yuccas, cacti, low herbs, a thousand sorts” (Austin, 1903, 11). The expression “so it is” reflects her posture of an objective writer who accounts for the reality of the land.

Concerning animal life, Mary H. Austin sets herself as a “poet”, who may have “named all the birds without a gun” (Austin, 1903, 12). Her observations go far beyond the mere scope of large animals anyone can see, like buffaloes at the time of the first settlers, but she pays attention to the little species which are the roots for any animal life, in this place where the food chain is crucial to the equilibrium of the ecosystem. She sees the “evidence of insect life. Now where there are seeds and insects there will be birds and small mammals.” (Austin, 1903, 12). This looks like scientific research for signs of animal life, but it mostly reflects the intimate relationship the author holds with the land and its functioning, through her deep connection with natural elements giving back importance to insects, when the main discourse on the desert was a dominant one, writing of a barren land.

According to her observations, the animals create a vast autonomous chain that sustains itself by a balance between the species. She writes on the “Scavengers” in her third chapter of *LLR*, as an example of the great “economy of nature”: “It is doubtless the economy of nature to have the scavengers by to clean up the carrion” (Austin, 1903, 22). The food chain creates a balance of the species and clears the land from carcasses of dead animals. She reassesses the crucial importance of the scavengers, considered in legends and myths as dirty and cruel animals, seeing in them the necessity to keep the land clean, a positive attribution. She gives back agency to those animals, arguing they are completely autonomous, and that humans should remain mere observers and must not interfere in this balance, as “it seems that the wild creatures have learned all that is important to their way of life except the changes of the moon” (Austin, 1903, 17). Her will is to acknowledge first the existence of animal life in the land, but most importantly to acknowledge their autonomous interdependence, outside of human intervention: “probably we never fully credit the interdependence of wild creatures, and the cognizance of the affairs of their own kind” (Austin, 1903, 23).

The strong focus she makes on animals and plants creates an impression of abundance in her text. As humans remain in a secondary position, in contrast with animals which hold a central place. Animal life is depicted as a profusion. Thus putting a full stop to the myth of emptiness, Mary H. Austin creates a new imagery of the desert, that already verges on a form of idealization, which will be tackled later on. This impression of abundance may be analyzed through the literary figures of accumulation and hyperbolas. The sentence “it seems that most seeds are foodful in the arid regions, most berries edible, and many shrubs good for firewood with the sap in them” (Austin, 1903, 35) holds both accumulation and hyperbole of a fruitful land that is full of resources for

animals and humans. The ternary rhythm of “seeds”, “berries”, “shrubs” creates a harmonious balance which insinuates that every plant creation of the land is a useful resource for animals and men. This image is reinforced by the use of the superlative “most” and the quantifier “many”, that indicate the abundance of these plants. The hyperbole is quite strong as it contrasts with the setting, “the arid regions”. It creates a new imagery that recalls the abundance of the Biblical Garden of Eden, while the setting has been written by previous authors rather as Hell, with the sun burning like fire and the absence of water.

This abundance is also proliferating in an exponential dynamic. The term “increase” in the sentence “the increase of wild creatures is in proportion to the things they feed upon: the more carrion the more buzzards” (Austin, 1903, 21) implies a fertile land, that supports life even through animals who died partly because of the remoteness of water. Those are the first hints at the ambiguity of Mary H. Austin’s writing, both acknowledging a really fertile ecosystem of animal and plant life, and reminding one of the aridity and cruelty of the land that kills animals who did not manage to find water by themselves.

### **3 - Reassessment of Native Life in the Desert**

From the second sentence of the first chapter entitled “The Land of Little Rain”, Mary H. Austin asserts the existence of Native people in this land, which is not common in nature writing, or not in the opening of the majority of texts: “Ute, Paiute, Mojave, and Shoshone inhabit its frontiers, and as far into the heart of it as a man dare go” (Austin, 1903, 9). This passage reminds the reader of human lives present in this place before the arrival of white settlers, and reassesses the real people they are, with the verb “inhabit”, which underlines that the desert is their habitat, their home, and that Native people are not just animals wandering about the land. This sentence is also relevant in the mentioning of a “frontier”, which reminds us that the American imagined frontier line was reached very recently for Austin, in 1890, enhanced by the expression “as far into the heart of it as a man dare go”, the pronoun “it” referring to the Country of Lost Borders. It underlines the reminiscence of the westward expansion, the term “heart” also echoing an intertextual reference to *The Heart of Darkness* of Joseph Conrad, (1899), only four years before Austin’s first book. Nevertheless, the Indian name for this land, “the Country of Lost Borders”, that she reuses in her 1909 book *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*, denotes this distance taken from a white imprint in her writing, and already takes a step back from the centuries of white male writings that erased the Natives.

It also underlines the end of the myth of the frontier, “lost borders” understood as the end of borders, the end of frontiers, between wilderness and the known land, between the “savages” and white people. Mary H. Austin epitomized this idea in living with Natives for several years, and writing on them while living almost with them. A large part of *LLR* is based upon her meetings with Native people and her observations of their way of life. Even the structure of *LLR* is composed of several chapters which draw portraits of indigenous people, from the figure of the medicine-man to “The Basket Maker”, with the reaffirmation of a “Shoshone Land”. This shows her will to give them back a voice, even though she never gives a full passage of direct speech to Native people, she always keeps a first-person narration based on her observations, which establishes a certain distance with the people she meets. The reader is always put in the position of the observer.

But the important point is her rewriting of the land as an inhabited place. The colonial general discourse had erased then forgotten Native presence on the land. The former literary works on Natives wrote about them as interesting and odd creatures, who lived apart from society, but Austin reaffirms a part of their culture, and their existence as a real society, not just living away from the White norm of industrializing cities of the time. Nevertheless, she remains a white author “observing” them, which reminds us of the position of an ethnologist and will be tackled in the second part of the dissertation.

In *LLR*, the choice of the indigenous name for the land is justified by the Natives’ presence way much before the white settlers’ arrival. Austin argues that “if the Indians have been there before me, you shall have their name, which is always beautifully fit and does not originate in the poor human desire for perpetuity.” (Austin, 1903, 7). The study of onomastics is highly interesting in the process of erasure of indigenous names from the land but also from their individual identities. Philippe Jacquin, a French teacher in American studies, presents in his work *La Politique indienne des Etats-Unis (1830-1890)* that

En mars 1890, le Commissaire Thomas Morgan envoie une circulaire pour demander à ses agents d’angliciser tous les noms des Indiens. L’ethnologue Wesley Powell estime que ces nouveaux noms faciliteront la passation d’héritage et le recensement. (Jacquin, 1997, 135)

Before placing the animals and plants above human life, she puts Native Americans above white people, not in the desire to create a hierarchy between peoples, but in the aspiration to reassess the indigenous presence on the land before the settlers. In doing so, she rewrites the definition of the creation of the United States, which in the mythical imagination starts with the Spanish “discovery” of America and the arrival of the first Protestant settlers on the East Coast in

the seventeenth century, before the Westward expansion. This historical event is described by the historian Howard Zinn in his work *A People's History of the United States*: “When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking oddly, the Arawaks ran to greet them” (Zinn, 2015, 1). Austin encompasses the pre-Columbian peoples in the habitation of the land through the use of their local names. She opens *LLR* with “I confess to a great liking for the Indian fashion of name-giving [...] So by this fashion of naming I keep faith with the land” (Austin, 1903, 7). She calls the region she describes “the Country of Lost Borders” (Austin, 1903, 3), its Native name, refusing the term “desert” as “desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man. [...] Void of life it never is” (Austin, 1903, 9). This onomastics study, the analysis of proper names, shows the project of the author in her work, reassessing Natives’ presence on the land from the opening of her book, which resets the ethical and political frame right from the first lines of *LLR*. Then, she also blames white people and their “poor human desire for perpetuity” (Austin, 1903, 7), referring to white men who gave their names to natural places in the hope to never be forgotten, and to claim this place as theirs, or at least as their own discovery in a possessive attitude. This physical approach of the land through descriptions of the elements and this capitalistic appropriation of nature enrages Mary H. Austin, who praises a loss of anthropocentrism in her writings. This rejection of capitalism is felt in passages on the mining industry, as “about the time the wild tide of mining life was roaring and rioting up Kearsarge” (Austin, 1903, 44), the term “wild” denoting a negative judgment of this activity, with “roaring and rioting” which creates noise and disturbance in the calm natural life she describes in her book.

A vast majority of her observations on nature comes from the lessons of indigenous people. She met Shoshone and Paiute people near where she lived, and she befriended some of them. They taught her many things concerning the animal and plant life, during their wanderings and walks together in the desert and mountains. Her encounter with the “medicine-man” (Austin, 1903, 32) taught her how these peoples used herbs and plants to heal and to live a healthy life. She affirms in her first chapter, “Trust Indians not to miss any virtues of the plant world!” (Austin, 1903, 11). It can appear as a materialistic approach to this “plant world”, but if used wisely and consciously with people who come from the land, it does not look like an appropriating act. That is the lesson Austin transmits through her chapter on “The Pocket Hunter”, who is not a Native American gold miner, even if it is not clearly written. Yet, he develops a healthy relationship to slow mining in the mountain, which is a commendable act for Austin. She draws his portrait in contrast with white gold diggers, who mined the desert only for profit and money, in an industrialized context, described in her short story “The Hoodoo of the Minnetta” in *LB*: “the fixed belief of mining countries, that the hot essences of greed and hate and lust are absorbed, as it were, by the means that provoke them”

(Austin, 1909, 12). The ending blames white men's greed: "the reek of men's passions lies in the hollow desertness like an infection" (24), and greedy men end "dead and sundried in the desert" (24). Austin's environmental stance blames this possessive attitude towards the land. The Pocket Hunter is, on the contrary, a pacifist man who "had no gun" (Austin, 1903, 26), who burnt sage and ate peacefully before going to work with "a shovel, a pick, a gold pan" (27) and from whom Austin "got to know much of his way of life" (26).

A passage from the chapter on "Shoshone Land" shows the double dynamics of domination put upon the Paiutes, who have been displaced by white men, but also absorbed by the Shoshones. Winnenap, the medicine-man, friend of Mary H. Austin with whom she has "a sense of intimacy" (Austin, 1903, 32), was a Paiute living in a Shoshone "campoodie", an indigenous camp, and recalls the past:

He had come into the keeping of the Paiutes as a hostage for the long peace which the authority of the whites made interminable, and, though there was no order in the tribe, nor any power that could have lawfully restrained him, kept on in the old usage, to save his honor and the word of his vanished kin. (Austin, 1903, 32)

The medicine-man took refuge within nature, like Mary H. Austin who finds peace with this people in nature, away from white civilization and the violence of men. This is how she wrote *LLR*, walking away from her personal unhappy marital life, seeking refuge within nature. That is why the term "hostage" resonates with her own experience. This withdrawal from the modern American society is also a patent trope of nature writing, the individual author often taking a step back from society to understand a deeper meaning of life within nature. Like "the medicine-man [who] went apart on the mountains to gather herbs" (Austin, 1903, 32), Austin went to Shoshone Land to find again a true and intimate relationship to nature, as Thoreau who wished for a more intimate relationship to the woods in *Walden*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. [...] I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. (Thoreau, 1854, 43)

The fictional short stories of *Lost Borders* also clearly give a voice to Native figures. Through imagined characters and plots, Austin develops a new aspect of her environmental writing in fiction. This is a way to address the reader's emotions thanks to the resemblance with his or her personal experience, due to the individual main character that induces identification. Fiction enables

the author to create powerful indigenous characters, or on the contrary to enhance their submissiveness to white men in the will to acknowledge the true domination that occurred between Native people and white people. That is the case in the story “The Ploughed Lands”, which begins in these terms:

Tiawa came from a Shoshone camp of three wickiups somewhere between Toquina and Fish Lake Valley. When she was young and comely she had come out of that country at the heels of a white man, and wrestled with the wilderness for the love of Curly Gavin. (Austin, 1909, 42)

The story presents a young Shoshone girl, married to a white man who has to leave her campoodie for him. The style remains simple in that first sentence, to create an impression of truth concerning the origins of Tiawa, as a girl who really existed. This asserts the reality of what happened historically, even though the location adverbs, “somewhere between”, remain evasive in order to keep a form of fiction and a legendary setting. As he refuses her love, “tears in her heart welled and brimmed about her eyes” (Austin, 1909, 50), and “in the end [...] Gavin went back to his own kind, and Tiawa married a Paiute and grew fat” (50). The unrequited love here can be read as a metaphor of what all the Native Americans were ready to give, even though this idea is questionable, as they have been historically dispossessed, thus not always inclined to give their goods to oppressing settlers, and the settlers were not able to see and thank the Natives for these gifts when it happened. The tears could thus represent the loss the Natives lived when dispossessed by the settlers, who did not see and understand their society. This fatalistic ending refuses a long-term relationship of domination, even though love would have been present, because these two peoples were not able to meet and live together peacefully, as violence always came out of it.

Mary H. Austin created space for Native people in her writings, notably in her play *The Arrow Maker*, first performed in 1914. She wanted to make a drama of Indian life, to give voice to Paiute people, the same society living in the Sierra Nevada as in *LLR*. The play gives indigenous people a voice through direct speech given to Native Americans: “Choco: ‘Who called?’ Pamaquash: ‘It came from farther up’ Choco: ‘Yavi, I think’” (Austin, 1923, 5). She wanted to give a full representation of Paiutes, as well as she has known them, and not as represented by dominant discourses. Indeed, the preface of the first edition of the play presents that “the greatest difficulty to be met in the writing of an Indian play is the extensive misinformation about Indians” (Austin, 1923, vii). Thus, she created characters who are only Paiute people, with a female main character, a medicine woman, who is killed by an arrow maker. Even though they are directed by a white author, the actors could give a fuller picture of Paiute traditions to the public.



Austin also wrote poetry, in which she gives a voice to Native people. Her poetry is highly lyrical and close to nature, imprinted with divine elements like her nature writing. She translated Indian poems written in dialect into English, which is a very strong act to give this people a voice back, even though in a translated form. The poem “The Song of the Friend” is central in this dynamic of giving a voice to Paiute people and tradition in American poetry:

This is the song of the Friend  
Made by the Medicine Man  
In the young dusk of the spring,  
Moonless and tender,  
At the hour when balm-giving herbs  
Begin to be musky and sweet along the creek borders,  
When the smell of the sage is sharp in the trails of the cattle  
And the ants run busily still  
Up the poles of the pine trees;  
The shuffle and beat of his feet  
We heard in the dust by his doorway.  
[...]  
(Austin, 1923)

The poem gives voice to the indigenous “Medicine Man”, through the rhetoric assertion that the poem is “made by” him, who develops a pacifist and praiseworthy portrait of indigenous life, in accordance with nature, in the central position of the “smell of sage” and the close attention to little animals’ life, the “ants”, as well as plants: “pine trees” (Austin, 1923).

Mary H. Austin published her poems and translations of Indian works in the collection entitled *American Rhythm* in 1923, which acknowledges the existence of a strong cultural life among Paiute people. She wanted to translate and publish these poems into English to make them live again before their disappearance, which was looming if nobody had published them, as the Paiute and Shoshone cultures were vanishing from the land. This passage from “The Song of the Friend” echoes the chapter on the medicine-man in *LLR*, with a more poetic and rhythmic feature. Mary Hunter Austin was highly inspired by Indian poems, myths and music for her own writings, she considered that these peoples had a strong spiritual and literary value that had to be acknowledged and developed.

## **B – A Defense of the Natural World**

### **1 – An Ecocritical Perspective on Her Work**

The work of Mary Hunter Austin can be analyzed through an ecocritical lens. This approach is relevant because reinforced by the core of her writing: the natural environment of the American Southwest desert. She herself chose an environmental tone in her writing, especially in *LLR*, the main character of this literary work being the desert land, defended by the author as a sanctified space that is the last place remaining away from human invasion, even though she counteracts this statement when acknowledging human lives on the land. Several ecocritical authors have worked on the publications of Mary H. Austin, especially Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* (Buell, 1995). Lawrence Buell theorized in part the ecocriticism movement in American literature and analyzed authors with this perspective, like Henry David Thoreau with *Walden*, as “Thoreau is the patron saint of American environmental writing.” (Buell, 1995, 115). He defines environmental writing in those terms:

Environmental texts may seek to order natural phenomena either as a perceiver might encounter them or as the environment manifests itself. Writing that stresses the former often adopts some sort of excursion narrative – the walk, the ramble, the exploration, the quest. The latter approach typically relies on some natural cycle: the day, the seasons, geological epochs, evolutionary developments, and so on. These are loose containers that admit of infinite gradients and combinations, since the experience of engaging the environment is always both “subjective” and “objective”. (Buell, 1995, 219)

Austin used both approaches in her writing. In *LLR*, her literary ethos is to render the impression that she wrote as she walked. This literary trope is often employed in nature writing, as it is supposed to describe the most realistically possible the natural elements observed by the author, who is first an observer of these elements, which he or she transforms into a literary text. The basic ethos of those authors is to give an objective representation of what they witness in nature.

However, such a supposition is never possible to achieve, as a literary work always transforms the object under scrutiny, it is always a transposition, a representation. The prefix re- in the word “representation” literally presupposes this division between the presentation, the nature that offers itself to the gaze of the human mind, and the re-presentation, that is the re-formulation of

this observation by the human being who thus becomes an author, but with a multiplicity of lenses applied to the first material, according to his or her imagination, social and personal projections. All these reformulations of their observations create a form of distortion, either an idealization, a positive or pejorative re-imagination. Lawrence Buell is well aware of this dynamic in literary nature writing, from his title *The Environmental Imagination*. He worked on the relationship between non-fiction nature writing and fiction. Lawrence Buell argues:

For Mary Austin, environmental representation is paramount, although she conveys an obliquely homiletic dimension (a plea for the West, and for Native American and Mexican American culture), as well as oblique autobiography. (Buell, 1995, 173-174)

Indeed, Austin develops a homily of the Californian desert region in her work, through idealization of the place which will be analyzed later on. The autobiographic aspect is palpable in her intimate relationship to the two Native people she portrays, the medicine-man and the basket maker, who were part of her personal life when she lived in the Owens Valley. The desert is at the core of *LLR*, even considered as a character by some scholars, and reestablished as a real living environment with different ecosystems which sustain themselves autonomously. This depiction is set in opposition to an invasive human activity, such as mining or material pollution. Austin writes a defense of the natural world, first with descriptions of observations, and then as a real political statement in favor of the ecosystems. For instance in the chapter “The Mesa Trails”, this passage exemplifies both dynamics:

It takes days’ journeys to give a note of variety to the country of the social shrubs. These chiefly clothe the benches and eastern foot-slopes of the Sierras, -great spreads of artemisia, colegyne, and spinosa, suffering no other woody stemmed thing in their purlieus; this by election apparently, with no elbowing; and the several shrubs have each their clientele of flowering herbs. It would be worth knowing how much the devastating sheep have had to do with driving the tender plants to the shelter of the prickly-bushes. (Austin, 1903, 49).

She sets her observation in a geographical delimited area, the Sierras, even if it remains not clearly located, and describes the species with scientific terms and an accumulation that supposes a profusion of these plants. She also mentions her position as a writer in her activity: she needs to walk to later be able to experience, and then to write this passage, which takes “days’ journeys”, to account for an objective recollection of what she has seen, “to give a note of”, which implies a realistic report. Then the mention of the “devastating sheep” is meaningful in the sense of an environmental stance, as they are presented as a invasive species which destroys a part of the flora

and disrupts the balance of nature. The underlying discourse is that this species has been introduced on the land by men, and they reproduced too much, which made them become “devastating”. Here is a hint at an ecological position, in favor of the diversity and prosperity of species, and blaming the artificial introduction of species that would damage the ecosystem.

Austin also develops an environmental writing in *Lost Borders*, with portraits of white men who become gold diggers in the desert, miners who destroy the land and Natives’ habitat. “The Last Antelope” is the most meaningful story in that perspective, the sixth short story of the collection. It recalls the story of Little Pete, a shepherd who holds a very close relationship with an antelope, which ends with a hunter who kills this antelope, the last of the western desert. It is the epitome of the environmental stance in this book, as long as this last antelope becomes a metaphor of the extinction of all living beings in a man-dominated land. The last antelope is the symbol of dying-out life, it represents the last free species which are disappearing because of white man’s brutality and avidity.

The close relationship between Little Pete and the antelope, who “understand one another” and lived a “reciprocal friendliness” (Austin, 1909, 70) comes in contrast with the brutality of the hunter, a homesteader driven by the will to possess the land and its living beings: “he was prompted by the love of mastery, which for the most part moves men into new lands, whose creatures they conceive given over into their hands” (Austin, 1909, 74). The madness of men in the process of colonization of the land is blamed in this passage, with the explicit allusion to the Westward expansion in the expression “into new lands”. The possessive attitude of men towards living beings is depicted as an imaginative posture, through the use of the verb “conceive”, referring to white men considering animals as being part of their new possessions, but only considering it, notably through the recourse to the Manifest Destiny discourse, which proclaimed the westward expansion as a path designed by God for the white population arriving in America, thus enabling the first western settlers to claim the so-called virgin and barren land theirs, as well as their animal and human inhabitants. In the context of that story, the homesteader clearly represents this possessive force, but Mary H. Austin warns, already at the beginning of the twentieth century, that such a possessive attitude towards the land also implied the extinction of species, killed by white men and who will never come back on Earth.

The loss of the last antelope also echoes the extinction of the buffaloes in the American deserts at the period of the expansion. To build railroads, white men split the cattle into small groups, and killed the vast majority of them for food or virile recreation, which led to their extinction. The land the first settlers considered as “empty” was actually being cleaned of any

animal life by their own activity. After the last antelope has been killed, Austin writes in the story “from that day the heart had gone out of the Ceriso. It was a desolate hollow, reddish-hued and dim, with brackish water, and moreover the feed was poor” (Austin, 1909, 78-79). This “desolate hollow” pertains to the discourse of an empty landscape, but Austin states here that it was the result of a series of human activities, and that this landscape comes from a historical path that is not ethically neutral. She reassesses the life present on the land before the domination of the West, in a regressive mode that suggests a reference to the Garden of Eden with a lush flora and fauna, a period of prosperity in the bonds between the animal realm and humans. As “the antelope was the noblest thing he has ever loved” (Austin, 1909, 76), Little Pete puts on a pedestal this species which represents the wild animal life of the land, in a form of literary hyperbole used by the author, here in the will to write a homage to this species, and more symbolically a tribute to all the natural life that disappeared from the land when white men started considering it as their own.

This short story stands out as an ethical and political claim in favor of the defense of nature, which was analyzed by Lawrence Buell as a central feature of Mary H. Austin’s writing. Even though *LLR* is considered her major environmental essay, her fictional short stories enable the author to adopt a more symbolical level of expression, which is relevant in an argumentative context in the defense of natural life. The poetical dimension of the story also stands out as a recourse to emotional response in her reader. The use of light and powerful colors at the beginning of the story, still in the passage echoing the time of the Garden of Eden, reveals the poetic features used to imply a perfect symbiosis between the animals and their environment: “It rises steeply from the tilted mesa, overlooked by Black Mountain, darkly red as the red cattle that graze among the honey-colored hills.” (Austin, 1909, 67). The correspondence between the two natural elements already hints at an idealization of such a primitive life, but in this context it is done in order to reinforce the cruelty and violence of their extinction.

## **2 – The Order of the Natural Elements: a Living and Contrasted Desert**

The major element of *LLR* is the writing of the natural world, in a nature writing style. Nature writing was defined by Lawrence Buell in the glossary of *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, reemploying the definition from Scott Slovic in the article “Nature Writing” from the *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History* in those fundamental terms:

Succinctly definable as “literary nonfiction that offers scientific scrutiny of the world (as in the older tradition of literary natural history), explores the private experience of

the individual human observer of the world, or reflects upon the political and philosophical implication of the relationships among human beings and the larger planet.” (Slovic, 2004, 888) Nature writing has been of central interest for ecocriticism from the movement’s beginnings, particularly during what I have called its first wave. Historically, nature writing has focused on exurban locales, though it can be practiced in urban contexts too, as ecocritics increasingly stress [...]. (Buell, 2005, 144).

Mary H. Austin’s writings pertain to this literary genre, as she writes about nature from her perspective, a subjective and individual observer. Her persona as a writer is taking a distance by a form of neutrality concerning her personal experience in the desert; she does not expand on how she feels within nature, which is the case with Thoreau for instance. She rather puts nature on a pedestal and withdraws herself from the narrative. However, her narrative persona remains the central elocutionary voice of the text, and the frontier between the “I-Mary”<sup>2</sup> and the narrator stays blurred, as predicted by the nature writing genre. Indeed, the writing of nature is implicitly supposed to be realistic, and as objective and neutral as possible, according to the literary trope of the genre. Hence the use of scientific terms, in the will to be as exhaustive and accurate as possible. The scientific tone is due to the desire in the first hand to describe nature, especially parts of the natural world that white men did not know before. That is the case with Thoreau’s pond in *Walden*: one of the drives to write this passage was to acknowledge this sanctified space as being part of the human knowledge, to inscribe it into the realm of the “known world”.

The context of publication of *LLR* in 1903 is relevant to take into account when analyzing Mary H. Austin’s writing. She writes in a scientific tone partly because she was targeting a public that did not know the environment of the desert. *LLR* was first published in chapters in the *Atlantic Monthly*, a literary magazine read by a larger public than only the literary intelligentsia. Her desire was to render the land considered as a desert accessible but also understandable for people living in town. She wanted to acknowledge the existence of a real life in the desert, and to defend it as essential ecosystems, necessary to the balance of the elements, in a didactic tone. The influence of her work as a teacher is perceivable in her writing, through her desire to be accurate and precise on every ground. Her writing of the land for the urban population also made the land become closer and helpful to humans, even though it might not have been her objective. Moreover, she went walking and writing to escape from her everyday life with her husband that was not satisfactory, and to fulfill her imaginative self, as well as her creative and intellectual part, that she feared to lose as she got married and had a daughter.

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2 In her autobiography *Earth Horizon* (1932), written two years before her death, Mary Austin draws a distinction between “Mary-by-herself” and “I-Mary”. She grew up as “I-Mary” during her youth, which corresponds to her intellectual, creative, spiritual and religious self as a person and as a writer, a part of herself she could seek refuge in.

*LLR* first acknowledges life in the Californian desert, through precise descriptions of flora and fauna that suggest an attentive observation of the rumbling of animals and plants. A scientific tone is present, mingled with a poetical voice which gains power as the chapters go on. The scientific terms inscribe the text in the literary trope of nature writing that wishes to be descriptive. The following sentence illustrates the desire of an exhaustive description:

Both the Shoshone and the coyotes are fond of the flesh of *Gopherus agassizii*, the turtle that by feeding on buds, going without drink, and burrowing in the sand through the winter, contrives to live a known period of twenty-five years. (Austin, 1903, 35).

The Latin scientific term “*Gopherus agassizii*” reinforces the objective description of the species, and legitimizes the author in her discourse as a reliable source on the fauna. The author might have considered it necessary to include the Latin names of certain species to ground her writing on a legitimate and reliable basis, so that her discourse would be more credible, and the landscapes, animals and plants would be more easily represented in the readers’ minds. Then, the accumulation of the three propositions starting with a gerundive verb tends to give a full picture of the activities of this species in its natural environment. This being added to the end of the sentence, which gives a neutral information on its life expectancy, reinforces the impression of a desire to write an exhaustive, precise and clear description of the animal. This is inscribed in the nature writing trope to make the readers know living beings they might not know, and then to write a defense of them, notably through an intimate idealization, acknowledging their importance in the ecosystems.

The founders of nature writing, Thoreau and John Muir especially, developed this trope of describing flora and fauna in an exhaustive manner, to give a full picture of what life looks like in the regions they are writing on, even though the mediation of writing always implies a distance taken from the first hand material, nature, due to the necessary mediation of language, which always distorts reality, even in a supposedly realistic text. John Muir, in his chapter “Among the Animals of the Yosemite” published in the *Wilderness Essays*, describes his encounter with a bear and portrays the life of the animal in the forests of the Californian Sierras. He gives a list of the food he can eat: “all the animals he can catch, - badgers, gophers, ground squirrels, lizards, snakes, etc., and ants, bees, wasps, old and young, together with their eggs and larvae and nests” (Muir, 2015, 135). This accumulation under the form of a list echoes Austin’s will to write a complete depiction of the animal species. Both assert the existence of different life forms in the desert or in the Sierra mountains and forests, and write them as defensible living beings which need to be preserved.

### 3 - Hints at Man's Destruction of the Ecosystems in an Environmental Stance

The environmental stance of Mary H. Austin's writing is also developed through implicit or explicit hints at the destruction of the ecosystems which the author blames, especially due to human activities of exploitation and appropriation. Nature writing is generally inscribed in a discourse of environmental protection, which often implies the contrary effect of blaming human's activities which destroy this endangered or sanctified nature. Nature writers often take refuge within nature, to withdraw themselves from the everyday societal world. Nature becomes a sanctuary, where humans can take a step back from the brutality of life in the cities, with their noise and pollution. That is also the reason why nature writers are so involved in the preservation of those places, because they deeply understand the importance of nature for human well-being, even though Mary H. Austin claims nature's defense for its own sake, not for the purpose of humans.

The analysis of "The Last Antelope" in *LB* showed the appropriation of animals by greedy white men, which led to the extinction of the species. This dynamic derives from the possession of the land, claimed by the first western settlers and the following generations. The impact of man on the land is perceptible in Austin's writing, for instance in the chapter on her "Neighbor's Field" in *LLR*. She describes this field, and retraces the history of possession of this area since the first human imprints:

Edswick, Roeder, Connor, and Ruffin owned the field before it fell to my neighbor. But before that the Paiutes, mesne lords of the soil, made a campoodie by the rill of Pine Creek; and after, contesting the soil with them, cattle-men, who found its foodful pastures greatly to their advantage; and bands of blethering flocks shepherded by wild, hairy men of little speech, who attested their rights to the feeding ground with their long staves upon each other's skulls. Edswick homesteaded the field about the time the wild tide of mining life was roaring and rioting up Kearsarge, and where the village now stands built a stone hut, with loopholes to make good his claim against cattlemen or Indians. But Edswick died and Roeder became master of the field. [...] At the set time Connor took the law by the forelock and was adjudged possession of the field. (Austin, 1903, 44).

This historical list of possession of the land recalls the colonial path that led to her generation, in the early twentieth century. Native Americans, a Paiute tribe, were dispossessed of the land by white settlers and cattlemen. We could argue that it was already a human occupation, but the main distinction is between this Native occupation in the structure of a campoodie, which respects the soil and remains a little camp, and white men who possessed and exploited the soil, notably with cattle, which deregulated the flora and fauna, and destroyed the landscape. This alteration of the



ecosystem is found in the sentence “The seed must have shaken there from some sheep’s coat, for this is not the habitat of mesquite” (Austin, 1903, 45). The habitat means the natural habitat, the birth-place of the species, which is being displaced and scattered around the desert by an invasive animal species, introduced on the land by white men. Edswick lived in the Homestead Act era, which saw the rise of the industrialization movement. Wendy Harding wrote a historical retrospective of the occupation of the mountains in the Santa Catalinas, Arizona in *The Myth of Emptiness*, which can be applied to the western American territory:

Successive modes of appropriation have transformed the mountains, leaving behind their traces. The earliest signs of human presence are the Indian ruins [...]. The Spanish missionaries who came at the end of the seventeenth century left traces of a different kind in the legends of the city they built and in the saint’s name they gave to the mountain range. In the nineteenth century, miners and loggers descended on the site, leaving behind the “lacerations” of mines, trails, and tree stumps [...]. Ranchers and homesteaders put up buildings, and their livestock cropped the vegetation, further eroding the soil. In the course of a century, they radically transformed the land [...]. (Harding, 2014, 78).

Both passages assert the destruction of the land and its ecosystems by the successive waves of white men’s occupation, notably the Homesteaders era and the ranchers and miners. The final expression of Austin, “was adjudged possession of the field”, stands out the greedy appetite of those settlers for possession, which led to this accumulation of transformations of the land. Despite the introduction of “the devastating sheep” (Austin, 1903, 45), nature managed to expand itself in this field: “it is interesting to watch this retaking of old ground by the wild plants, banished by human use” (Austin, 1903, 46). This sentence holds a deep environmental stance, encouraging this natural overtaking of the old, the banished nature, over the new, the human, the controlled material. Austin writes here a defense of nature standing by itself, out of man’s imprint.

Mining is another human activity that destroyed the western Californian desert, beginning in the nineteenth century. The development of urban areas in the desert, little towns like Jimville which became real cities was helped by the improvement of industry at the same period. The mining industry enabled the towns to enrich and grow bigger, which was the goal of the first settlers since the Gold Rush which began in 1848 after the discovery of gold in California. This mining activity was transmitted to the generations following the first waves of settlers, which grounded the activity in the Californian culture. The portrait of “The Pocket Hunter” in *LLR* reveals Austin’s position towards mining: it both presents and praises a model of a little miner, who keeps his activity at a human scale and does not destroy the soil, and a parody of the greed for gold. This

character is not clearly defined, but he is not an Indian figure. Lawrence Buell writes in *The Environmental Imagination*:

Here Austin gently satirizes the dogged repetition compulsions of gold grubbing, conflating the Americans and the British versions under the heading “the pocket hunter” (note that pockets are isolated deposits of rich ore). (Buell, 1995, 79).

This man is depicted as a simple and pacifist figure, who “used no gun” (Austin, 1903, 26) and whom Austin finds in the desert following the odor of sage he is burning. He possesses only few tools: “his working outfit was a shovel, a pick, a gold pan” (Austin, 1903, 27). Even though he is a little scale slow miner, he remains a miner, which the author underlines: he “- for this I could never forgive him- had all the miner’s prejudices against my friend the coyote” (30). This primitive description is set in contrast with the big miners of the cities, more developed in *LB*. Austin seems to highlight the value of little pocket hunters, compared to big miners, due to their closeness and respect of nature. In the story “The Hoodoo of the Minnietta”, mining is tackled as a central activity for white men who wanted to enrich themselves rapidly. It was the land of “greed and hate and lust” (Austin, 1909, 12) where “the ore was heavy and dull, and had the greasy feel of richness” (13). In this context, the character “Hogan organized a stock company to open the mine and build a smelter, and began to grow rich amazingly” (15). Even though it was a tough work, mining was the best way to make money in the desert, which deeply altered the landscape and the ecosystems. In full opposition to the atmosphere of the Garden of Eden in which the West was presented before man’s intervention in “The Last Antelope”, the mining industry led to the impoverishment of the land. The mountains became “a vista of treeless discolored hills” (Austin, 1909, 20). The loss of trees and colors echoes death, the death of living ecosystems that Austin was committed to defend. The insistence on loss is underlined by the use of the suffix -less in “treeless”, directly followed by the prefix dis- in “discolored”. The proximity of those two words enhances the impression of disfigurement of the land, but more importantly the death of living ecosystems. The author uses two different modes of argumentation in the following passage: blame and rhetorical questioning. She asks “what do you know of the great, silent spaces across which the voice of law and opinion reaches small as the rustle of blown sand?” (23). This rhetorical question holds a double address, a rhetorical literary device that enables the author to address the issue indirectly. It is first addressed to the miners, who destroy the land of which they know nothing, the opposition of “silent spaces” and “law and opinion” clearly drawing a dividing line between nature and man’s presence and domination. The accusing tone creates a criticism of the mining industry and a praise of the original

wild land, which lives “upon its own conditions” (25). She develops this accusation with “at the Minnietta, the reek of men’s passions lies in the hollow desertness like an infection” (24), the infection symbolizing white men’s presence as a plague, a disease that is hurtful and devastating for the land. She concludes her story in a detached paragraph that recalls the moral of a fable: “the wilderness, which has its own exigencies and occasions, and will not be lived in except upon its own conditions.” (25).

Beyond the central issue of men exploiting the land, their mere presence alters the ecosystems, which Mary H. Austin witnesses during her walks in the Californian desert. She accounts for observations of material pollution, like tin cans in the desert, which are not meant at all to be found in such a place. The author ends her chapter on “The Scavengers” with a polemic paragraph on man’s stupidity and selfishness:

Man is a great blunderer going about in the woods, and there is no other except the bear makes so much noise. Being so well warned beforehand, it is a very stupid animal, or a very bold one, that cannot keep safely hid. The cunningest hunter is hunted in turn, and what he leaves of his kill is meat for some other. That is the economy of nature, but with it all there is not sufficient account taken of the works of man. There is no scavenger that eats tin cans, and no wild thing leaves a like disfigurement on the forest floor. (Austin, 1903, 25)

The place where this passage has been inspired is located closer to the town, not explicitly defined, but the “forest” implies the presence of more life than the mere desert. However, the proximity of human presence implies human traces, which when left in nature, become pollution. The “tin cans” drastically contrast with the major atmosphere of the book, centered on nature and animals, and creates a strong disparity that makes it become clearly visible to the reader, enhanced by its position in the last paragraph of the chapter, under the same form of a fable moral than in Austin’s fiction. However, the accusation is here less frontal and brutal, and more subtle and incisive. The formulation “there is no scavenger that eats tin cans” puts the focus on animals and not on men, giving more importance to the prosperity of the species, which do not need human objects to live, rather than blaming humans for leaving objects in nature, even though it is her indirect objective. As her main focus in nature is the observation of the animals and their ways of living, she keeps this perspective in her criticism, implying every human should adopt this perspective to understand the consequences of their acts, the “disfigurement” of nature.

Art and nature are deeply intertwined in nature writing, which is both a description of the land and an aesthetic literary exercise. That is precisely what ecocriticism analyzes. Greg Garrard argues in *Ecocriticism* that “ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural

theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology.” Ecocritics “must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ‘ecological literacy’ as far as possible.” (Garrard, 2004, 5). He also quotes the definition from Glotfelty, written in *The Ecocriticism Reader*: “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. [...] ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty, 1996, xix). Those definitions assert the importance of nature in literature, and the previous analysis of passages from the work of Mary H. Austin inscribe themselves in that dynamic, studying the modalities of writing on nature with an environmental stance. Moreover, Greg Garrard argues that the literary tropes of the pastoral and wilderness, either romanticizing nature or making it primitive, both pertain to the figure of the “aesthetic tourist”. But other authors, like Mary H. Austin, are committed into a sense of duty and responsibility towards nature, which stands out in their writings (Garrard, 1996, 108). In “Littérature & écologie : vers une écopoétique”, Nathalie Blanc, Denis Chartier and Thomas Pughe define ecocriticism in the following terms: “en quoi l’esthétique littéraire est-elle une éco-logie ? [...] une réinscription écologique de la nature dans l’art et, par conséquent, à une réinscription de l’art dans la nature” (Blanc et al, 2008, 15).

## **C – A Mystical Nature**

Despite the strong objective defense of nature and Native Americans, Austin also idealizes both of them, which adds to the literary value of her text, but takes a step back from the assertion of objectivity. Mary H. Austin writes about a romanticized and mystical nature, that tends to fictionalization. The Biblical insinuations or clear references give a spiritual and religious dimension to the mountains and landscapes she describes, which sets a distance from a mere scientific, ecological and objective portrayal of the desert.

### **1 – A Created Desert: Biblical Intertext**

In the vein of Transcendentalist authors like Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Muir, Mary H. Austin sees within nature the mark of God, or at least the presence of a will of Creation. Her texts could be read as Transcendentalist ones, as they praise the inner goodness of natural elements and the human purity. The religious intertext is also a feature of Transcendentalism, which considered the elements as divinely inscribed with powers and a conscience in a Transcendental way, in a hierarchical movement from God to the elements. According to her descriptions of the desert, nature did not create itself by its own biological force of life, but has been inspired and created by a divine conscience. Those passages take the form of references to the Bible, with direct addresses to God, even though in less explicit words than John Muir in his *Wilderness Essays*. These references hold a very subjective dimension, and derive from intimate projections of authors on her perception of her own surroundings, thus altering a mere objective observation and presentation of what she witnesses within nature. It is clearly a representation, a modulation of her observations.

If it is possible to argue that she takes a distance from her objective of giving a full picture of the desert to her readers in doing so, these spiritual visions in the desert are also at the core of her poetical and inspired creative writing. This religious intertext and deification of nature is what differentiates her writing from a mere ecological and scientific discourse defending nature. In the case of *LLR*, the spiritual and poetical features added to the scientific knowledge enhance her argumentative discourse in favor of the environment. Nevertheless, she contradicts herself when she says she is only the receptor and transcriber of neutral observations. The ambiguity of her posture is clearly rooted in this opposition. She argues in the chapter on “Jimville” in *LLR*: “Bret Harte would have given you a tale. You see in me a mere recorder, for I know what is best for you” (Austin,

1903, 40). This statement puts her in a position of clear-cut contrast with Bret Harte, who represents the literary romanticized writing of the desert of their time. In contrast, she pretends to write a full picture of a realistic desert, in quite a patronizing posture, even though the formulation “for I know what is best for you” might be ironic.

However, her mystical visions in the Californian desert which she expresses in religious terms strongly contrast with her will to remain a “mere recorder”. She perceives details in the natural life of the desert which cannot, for her, be the result of a mere biological process of natural evolution. Her observations include a strong subjective and poetic dimension, which highlights her personal touch and makes her a literary writer, rather than simply an ecological writer, who would write scientific descriptions of the land and nature in an environmental stance, without a real literary aspect. She struggles to understand a multiplicity of natural phenomena she observes, from the position of a candid and humble human being who can not grasp the immensity of the “economy of nature” (Austin, 1903, 22). This “economy of nature” is often described as a mystical balance of natural elements, which creates the divine harmony on the Earth. Indeed, even before attributing natural elements to the realm of God, she sees mystical phenomena, like in the passage of *LLR* which describes lizards that melt into the sand through their color and very swiftly disappear in the shrubs. This observation is depicted in the following words: “This is pure witchcraft” (Austin, 1903, 52). The term “witchcraft” does not refer to a religious dimension, but pertains to a certain spiritual category of visions she experienced in the desert. It calls for the presence of a conscience in natural living beings, as they are so much unfathomable and mysterious, even for a very attentive observer who tries to grasp the physical presence of animals.

Beyond that, Mary H. Austin describes a divine conscience as the Creator of Nature, in a strong religious intertextuality which clearly echoes the Bible. Those elements in her writing derive from her personal approach to religion and God, a part of her life she wrote about in her autobiography. There are plenty of occurrences of religious terms and passages with a Biblical intertextuality, especially in *LLR*, for which the first chapter and “Nurslings of the Sky” are particularly edifying. A certain anthropomorphized structure appears in her description of the mountains, which could hint at a Will at work behind the elements present under her eyes: “The angle of the slope, the frontage of a hill, the structure of the soil determines the plant” (Austin, 1903, 11). The three words “angle”, “frontage” and “structure” refer to the geometrical field of mathematics, which pertains to the human intellectual world. This addition of intellectual and geometrical features on natural elements creates the impression of perfectness or at least of an organized creation of these elements. This impression of a will at work is confirmed with the first occurrence of the word “God” in the sentence “If one is inclined to wonder at first how so many

dwellers came to be in the loneliest land that ever came out of God's hands [...]” (13). This is a clear assertion that the land she describes has been created by a divine conscience, in her very personal belief, and does not only come out of the natural process of biological development. The precise use of the term “God” is an explicit setting of her writing in a religious intertext with Biblical elements. The strong echo is here the Earth as a Creation of God, the world being organized under the conditions of this divine and personified figure. Beyond the animals and plants that would derive from divine creation, the landscapes are so mysterious and grandiose to Austin that she attributes them to this same divine creation. For instance, she considers her “Neighbor's Field” (the seventh chapter) as “one of those places God must have meant for a field from all time” (44), referring to a time setting of eternity, which recalls the Garden of Eden, an echo reinforced by the central presence of the lush field, delimited in the village by a garden and an orchard.

These visions and divine interpretations of nature in the desert are mostly the result of her personal projections onto nature. Indeed, she does not report merely what she sees, she often adds aesthetic features to her surrounding in her writing, through literary devices that alter her desire to be a mere reporter. She writes with hyperboles and metaphors that hint at an idealization. For instance, the sentence from the first chapter “For one thing there is the divinest, cleanest air to be breathed anywhere in God's world” (Austin, 1903, 13), highlights this dynamic of idealization. The clear reference to the religious intertext with “God's world” sets the passage in an atmosphere of spiritual insight in the desert. Then, the accumulation of the two superlatives “divinest, cleanest” creates a hyperbolic tone which underlines the perfection of such a natural world created by God. The word “cleanest” refers to the idea of purity, qualifying the desert as a clear and pure place where the air, symbol of cleansing, would be perfectly limpid.

The author holds the desert as a place of re-energizing, “Far from the Madding Crowd” as Thomas Hardy (Hardy, 1874) would write. Indeed, the nature she described is for Mary H. Austin a place of fulfillment and regeneration, away from the societal issues and the industrial towns of the time. Nature thus becomes “pure” and clean, compared to a “polluted” and industrial urban atmosphere. This strong contrast might be noticeable in this word “cleanest”. Added to the word “divinest”, “cleanest” is reinforced by the spiritual dimension. If this description of a clean air can appear mystical, with such a purity found within the central natural element, the root “divine” gives to the word a clear religious connotation. A divine air would be for Mary H. Austin an air imprinted with the mark of God, or at least an air in which she, personally, could feel the presence of a Will, the existence of a spiritual force at work behind it. The precise idea of Creation is not clearly present in this world; nevertheless, the notion of purity is enhanced by this presence of God, transmitted to the elements. It is in that sense that the author perceives the presence of God in the

air, through the central notion of purity, that could only be the trace of God according to her. The polysemy of the term “divine” induces a possibility of the air being first felt as amazing, wonderful, synonym of divine in the common language, but which of course already reminds us of a religious intertext, confirmed by the end of the sentence, “in God’s world”, which leaves no room for doubt in this interpretation.

The perfectness of the creations of God is a common trope in Austin’s writing, with occurrences like “The mesquite is God’s best thought in all this desertness” (33), which also refers to the idea of a perfect Creation in a place often considered as hellish and barren. Austin thus asserts the presence of a real life in the desert, as aforementioned, but a life inspired by a divine will, not just derived from biological evolutions. The recourse to this spiritual tone might have helped the author to legitimize her discourse, even though she also focuses on a scientific discourse in other passages. Since the religious beliefs of her time were potently present within society, the deification of the desert she creates might have helped her to give a sanctifying aspect to this land, too often considered as a product white men could exploit to make money and get richer in the desert with mines and ranches. Thus, deification of nature could hold an ideological motive in the case of *LLR*, beyond the mere literary lyrical and poetical dimension it gives to her writing, in order to convince her readers that the desert is a sacred place, or ought to be sanctified, so that it would be protected.

## **2 – A Perfect Ecosystem, Religious Idealization**

This notion of perfection due to the divine will at work behind or within the natural elements is central to Mary H. Austin’s writing in *LLR*, but this idea induces a real perception of the desert that is not neutral and pertains to a certain trope in nature writing. Indeed, this perfectness is also seen in the ideal balance between the natural elements, sometimes explicitly attributed to the presence of God who created those elements together, so that they would be in accordance and perfect for the other species around them, but also sometimes with no religious hint, even though the general context of the book sets those passages in a mystical atmosphere.

The first occurrences of this notion of balance and perfection appear in the first chapter, with sentences like “Most species have well-defined areas of growth” (11) or “Every plant has its perfect work” (33). In these sentences, the religious dimension is not present, or at least not explicitly, but a certain idea of balance and perfection is central. The second sentence is particularly relevant in the analysis of perfection in the equilibrium of the natural elements, as it explicitly refers to a wholly understanding of plants, in a really peremptory tone, which is not open to contradiction or doubt,



with the use of the quantifier “every”, which holds the same meaning as “each”, but from the perspective of the complete community of plants, not from the one of individuality. The globalizing tone would mean that all the plants in the world have a particular place and purpose, and especially a “perfect work”. When taking into account the context of the whole book, this expression of a “perfect work” might refer to a subtle spiritual echo, even though not an explicitly religious one. This spiritual interpretation of the perfection she sees in natural elements come from a nature writing background, an element analyzed by Greg Garrard when tackling the myth of the “Ecological Indian” in his work on *Ecocriticism*:

The rhetoric of balance and harmony that sustained the Ecological Indian is at least as problematic as, historically and politically, the stereotype is itself: [...] Such sceptical views of the overarching master narrative offered by classical ecology, in which undisturbed nature inevitably sustains a balanced ecology, are sometimes called ‘postmodern ecology’. (Garrard, 2004, 134)

Garrard questions the notion of balance and equilibrium of nature, a trope often used in nature writing, as an ideological bias which questions “classical ecology”. The notion of “ecological Indian”, referring to the vision of Indians as environmentally sustainable people compared to white people, will be discussed later in the dissertation. In the case of Mary H. Austin, this notion of balance and harmony between the natural elements can easily be considered as a “rhetoric”, a term employed by Greg Garrard, used almost as a central literary device in order to convince the reader of the extraordinary nature of life in the desert.

This idea of harmony is found in “Scavengers”, with the passage “The hawk follows the badger, the coyote the carrion crow, and from their aerial stations the buzzards watch each other” (23). The ternary rhythm of this sentence, combining the three propositions under the form of a chain reminds us of the food chain of animal life, here in the case of scavengers: the predators detect and identify the preys, recognize their predators, and the whole system goes on, written with a fatalistic tone in the construction of the sentence, as an ineluctable chain of events. Austin argues for the usefulness of every species in the desert, and in this context the scavengers are useful “to keep the country clean” (24). This creates what she calls “the economy of nature” (25), a central feature of her writing of the desert in this desire to paint a harmonious land, despite its aridity. This “economy of nature” is precisely what Greg Garrard tackles as a nature writing trope which alters the project of writing a “realistic” desert and might undermine the ethos of the author, even though the literary dimension benefits from this process of giving aesthetic features to the land and its life. Yet, it remains a form of idealization and mystification, as it takes a distance from the mere

assertion of an environmental text. The creation of literary images and symbols idealizes the land, thus giving it imagined features, creating the myth of an ideal, pure and lush nature. Environmental writers often use this stereotype to describe nature, again as a place of complete connection between the elements and between nature and man, in contrast with the societal industrial world that brings violence, exploitation, pollution and diseases.

The balance of natural elements can also be read as a natural profusion. This profusion of plants and animals does not alter the harmony between them; on the contrary it gives the impression of an expansive life force. Here again, the first occurrences of profusion in *LLR* do not explicitly hold a religious dimension: “The desert floras shame us with their cheerful adaptations to the seasonal limitations. Their whole duty is to flower and fruit, and they do it hardly, or with tropical luxuriance, as the rain admits” (10). However, the central activity of plants, as “their whole duty is to flower and fruit” (10), is presented as a necessity, a “duty”, a strong term inducing the presence of a conscience in the plant in order “to flower and fruit”, a life force that lives with no effort which leads to a “tropical luxuriance”, a hyperbolic expression alluding to the opulence of desert life: the term “tropical” highly contrasts with the context of a supposedly desert land, as it refers to a wet, lush and green plant life found in equatorial countries, absolutely not in a western land described for centuries as a desert, a place of death for men and animals due to the lack of water. This dichotomy creates a powerful symbolical image, creating a literary setting of fairy tale, thus verging on a process of mythologizing the desert. This “tropical” image is reinforced by the word “luxuriance”, the whole expression enhancing this hyperbolic tone, which also creates an echo to the Biblical Garden of Eden, in this lush, luxuriant scenery.

The symbolical image of “tropical luxuriance” clearly stands out the author’s will to set her writing in opposition to the general discourse on Californian mountains developed for centuries by white male authors, settlers who died because they did not observe well enough their physical and natural environment. This is the lesson Austin might be infusing in her writing, when she asserts that “there are many areas in the desert where drinkable water lies within a few feet of the surface, indicated by the mesquite and the bunch grass” (10). The peremptory tone in “there are many areas” implicates a profusion of water sources that white men did not find, which could be felt as patronizing, ends in the lesson Austin draws from her observations: it suffices to pay more attention to the land, and it will teach you how to stay alive.

Her perception of the land as a place of harmony is also present in the sky and the stars. The “communion of the stars” (14), an expression of wholly unity, harmony and peace found in the sky, already hints at a spiritual perfection found in human life. She explains this phenomenon in a very lyrical sentence in chapter one: “It is hard to escape the sense of mastery as the stars move in the

wide clear heavens to risings and settings unobscured” (14). This passage highlights her sense of insignificance as a human being, compared to nature that surrounds her. She withdraws herself as a human, facing the grandeur of the sky, that seems to be “mastered” by a divine conscience, who created “the wide clear heavens”. The term “heavens” clearly holds a religious dimension, referring to the divine skies in which Austin finds refuge. Once again, this central term is written accompanied with two meaningful adjectives, “wide” and “clear”. “Clear” still echoes the notion of purity and cleanliness of the sky, and added to “wide”, referring to an eternal and gigantic space that does not end, creates a spiritual representation of the sky in religious terms. This grandeur found in the stars also pertains to a literary sublime description, that is fully developed in the chapter “Nurslings of the Sky”.

Therefore, Austin’s descriptions are primarily drawn from her own personal spiritual and mystical visions, directed by her religious beliefs and past. As aforementioned, some of her descriptions of a mystical and unfathomable land come from the difficulty as a human being to understand all the complexities of natural life, from the rational and intellectual background developed within society. Despite her close and attentive observations, she still encounters central difficulties to grasp “the marrow of life”, as wrote Thoreau on his experience in *Walden*. She confesses: “Somehow the rawness of the land favors the sense of personal relation to the supernatural. There is not much intervention of crops, cities, clothes, and manners between you and the organizing forces to cut off communication” (42). In this crucial sentence, she asserts the importance nature holds for her, as a place away from society, in which “communication”, meaning a spiritual but also material connection to the land is not cut. The expression “organizing forces” once again refers to the divine intervention for a harmonious balance within nature, which enables the author to dive into a “supernatural” relationship with nature. This is rendered possible through “the palpable sense of mystery in the desert air [which] breeds fables, chiefly of lost treasure” (13). This “mystery” of “the economy of nature” (25) leads the author to interpret the landscape as shaped by God. These natural elements seem highly mystical also as “they trick the sense of time, so that once inhabiting there you always mean to go away without quite realizing that you have done it” (13), even altering the human perception of time, a central feature of human life within society. This alteration of time can come from the immersion of the author in her natural setting, taking a step back from society which alienates her, or from a divine presence in the desert that “tricks”, plays with the creatures and time, in an idealized perception of the desert as a place away from the societal order directed by time.

All these mystical experiences she lived in the Californian desert come from a personal background rooted in religion. Indeed, in her autobiography *Earth Horizon* written in 1932, Austin

comes back to her childhood in Illinois and draws the story of her family, her two parents being members of the Methodist Church, but she also relates her intimate and personal first experience with spirituality and religion, the mystical vision she experienced at age five: “And then God happened to Mary under the walnut tree” (Austin, 1932, 51). This first “Practice of the Presence of God” in an orchard made her “[feel] herself in the bee and the bee in the flower and the flower in God” (Austin, 1932, 52). This spiritual experience she had as a child remained the epiphany of her life. She then lost her religious faith, when she entered the Methodist Church, and she did not manage to find again the spiritual epiphany in her life. She longed for this sensation during the remaining of her life, particularly within nature, the spiritual loss being perceptible in *LLR*. The Transcendentalist echo is confirmed when she confesses that “The God-of-the-Bible, who, in that early time, was not yet identified with the God the little bird sang about” (Austin, 1932, 52). “The God-of-the-Bible” refers to the Christian God of the Church she perceived in childish words, while “the God the little bird sang about” underlines the intimate belief Austin experienced as a child, contemplating nature. The unity of natural elements she then finds in the Californian desert is rooted in this research for spiritual fulfillment, projecting her own personal desires onto the landscape she writes about.

### **3 – Mythologizing the Desert, with Distance from Scientific Descriptions**

The spirituality Mary H. Austin feels in the desert creates a highly literary and symbolical writing in *LLR*, but it also takes a distance from a mere ecological writing, a scientific discourse with no literary features nor symbolic references. The deification she makes of the land verges on a form of mythologization, as it creates a new myth of the desert, with religious and mystical echoes. First, all her descriptions of landscapes, animals and plants are set in quite a vague geographical setting. Even though she situates her wanderings in the Californian Sierras in the opening of the book, she does not give a very precise location of her walks, in order to encourage her readership to have their own experiences with the land:

The country where you may have sight and touch of that which is written lies between the high Sierras south from Yosemite - east and south over a very great assemblage of broken ranges beyond Death Valley, and on illimitably into the Mojave Desert. You may come into the borders of it from the south by a stage journey. [...] But the real heart and core of the country are not to be come at in a month's vacation. One must summer and winter with the land and wait its occasions. [...] and there you shall have such news of the land [...] as one lover of it can give to another. (Austin, 1903, 7-8)

In this introductory passage, Austin warns her reader that he or she needs to live deep in nature for a rather long time, in order to grasp the “real heart” of it, as a “vacation” will not be sufficient, nor a superficial relationship to nature.

However, despite the fact that she establishes a certain distance with her readership concerning the location of her writings, in order to encourage them to experience the land on their own terms, or to develop her ethos as a writer, this still creates a form of fictionalization, at least a distance from reality. If she wanted to be a “mere recorder” (Austin, 1903, 40), she would have given more precise information concerning the locations of her writings throughout the chapters, but she did not. On the contrary, she wrote about a sanctified land with spiritual and even religious elements, which distances her writing from a mere realistic text. Even the title, *The Land of Little Rain*, holds a certain dimension of the fairy tale genre, with actions set in a land that does not exist in the English modern language, as the expression is derived from the Indian name of the land. The reference to the rain gives a romanticized aspect to the poetic title, even though it can also be understood literally as the land where there is no water, a desert, yet she focuses on debunking this colonial myth of the desert that would only be arid, as she refuses to call the region a desert, to reassess life in it but sometimes idealizing it.

The rather vague geographical setting is accompanied with an almost complete absence of temporal and historical setting or background in *LLR*. Apart from the chapter on Jimville, set in the industrial period of little towns in California, she does not give any information concerning the time period. Nevertheless, as nature writing traditionally recalls the reality of nature with the ethos of an author who writes while walking, thus asserting the reality of the descriptions, it presupposes an expectation of authenticity. In the case of Austin, her essays were first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine whose readers might expect passages written just before the publication, as the essays account for the world they know, written by a contemporary author.

Given this aspect of temporal diffusion of history, concerning natural species but also Native peoples, with no historical or political hints at a particular context that could explain their conditions of living, the divine elements appear as much as a fictionalization of the land. In this perspective, the echoes of the Garden of Eden can here be taken into account as describing a virginal time, not set in history or in the Christian history of western cultures, therefore implying a sense of eternal time. The abundance of natural life is here presented in a clearly vague setting: “Somewhere, by the same secret process by which the field matures a million more seeds than it needs” (47). The term “somewhere” results in a fictionalization of the passage, since it is not set in a located context. It could refer to anywhere in the vast region she writes about, which alters her desire to remain a “mere recorder”. Linked to the idea of a lush nature, which produces “a million

more seeds” in this hyperbolic expression, the passage is given an echo of the garden of Eden. Talking about Shoshone men, Austin writes: “When the rain is over and gone they are stirred by the instinct of those that journeyed eastward from Eden, and go up each with his mate and young brood, like birds to old nesting places” (34). The very word “Eden” can not be mistaken as a chance term in this context. It might symbolize the American West in this passage, in a quite colonial trope considering the land as a virginal place where species and people were living, like in the Garden of Eden before the arrival of white settlers. This idea is reinforced by the symbol of birds, going back to their “nesting place”, an eternal place that has the virtue of a womb. The mythology of the Garden of Eden also refers to the notion of an eternal time, that the birds symbolize, and which Western activities strongly altered.

Beyond the deification of the desert and the Biblical echoes in her fictionalization of landscapes, Austin writes in synesthesia, a communion of her five physical senses that are stimulated in nature. This enables her to live the harmony of natural elements as a sensitive receptor, to then write about it. This is also a device that made her romanticize the desert, in a literary romantic stereotype of the sensitive author who feels deeper within nature. The following passage makes a sensory focus on smells in the mountains:

There are some odors, too, that get into the blood. There is the spring smell of sage that is the warning that sap in beginning to work in a soil that looks to have none of the juices of life in it [...]. There is the smell of sage at sundown, burning sage from campodies and sheep camps [...]. There is the palpable smell of the bitter dust that comes up from the alkali flats at the end of the dry seasons, and the smell of rain from the wide-mouthed canons. And last the smell of salt grass country (Austin, 1903, 53-54).

These passages with a sensory perspective do not pertain to the scientific part of her writing, in which she gives basic and precise information on the species she observes, feeding the rational dimension of her readership’s appetite for objective knowledge on the land. Those passages derive from her central affirmation of her writing as a report, even though the sensory experiences she lives in the desert can also be considered as part of her personal report. It just does not stick with her goal of objectivity, the five senses being the center of intimate subjectivity, especially in literature when they are taken as the central focal point for the narration. The passage on smell pertains to the intimate dynamic of synesthesia within nature, the symbiosis of senses that gives a fuller sensory experience of the natural surroundings.

Nevertheless, she uses her senses to live a fuller experience of the land, something her predecessors in the writing of the western desert did not do as much as she. Thoreau and John Muir

also used this literary device, but rather in the eastern forests and wet regions of the American territory, not in the arid mountains of the West. Her male counterpart, Bret Harte, wrote a “tale” of the desert, according to her, not observing and feeling the land like she did. She argues in “Jimville”: “If it had been in medieval times you would have had a legend or a ballad. Bret Harte would have given you a tale. You see in me a mere recorder, for I know what is best for you” (Austin, 1903, 40). She perceives Bret Harte as a colonial author who romanticized and mythologized the desert and its little towns, under the form of a “tale”. By contrast, she sets herself in the position of a “mere recorder”, which is highlighted by the juxtaposition to the quotation of its contrary, Bret Harte’s texts. This sensational and emotional involvement with the land also reinforces her environmental stance in defense of nature. This emotional writing appeals to readers who might be moved by such romanticized portraits of the land, and thus take action for its preservation.

Finally, the climax of the idealization and fictionalization of the desert is contained in the chapter “Nurslings of the Sky”, at the end of *LLR*. It describes storms in the mountains, induced by divine emotions in the gaze of Mary H. Austin. The storm is depicted as “the fume of the gods rising from their meeting place under the rim of the worlds” (79), in religious terms but this time writing “gods” in plural, which could also refer to pagan or mythological gods due to the plural. The storms become a sublime scenery in the desert, due to the power deployed by these impressive natural phenomena, the grandeur they create compared to the frail human being. The splendor it gives rise to in the human gaze even leads to a personification of the storms in a romanticizing dynamic, giving a voice to the natural elements: “But the storms of hill countries have other business. They scoop watercourse, manure the pines, twist them” (79). The accumulation of three verbs of action give agency to the storms, turning them into real inhabitants of the land. The deification of nature is very much potent in this chapter: “The first effect of cloud study is a sense of presence and intention in storm process. Weather does not happen. It is the visible manifestation of the Spirit moving itself in the void” (79). The religious intertext becomes explicit in this passage, with direct address to a “Spirit”, whose divine “presence and intention” are central in her gaze on the mountain.

She even quotes John Muir in this romanticizing process: “Hardly anybody takes account of the fact that John Muir, who knows more of mountain storm than any other, is a devout man” (79), alluding to his work as a notably religious writing of the storm, a path she follows. The literary sublime takes over the text, whose features are the grandeur of natural phenomena and the strong emotions targeted in the reader, with sentences like “one gets the splendor of the apocalypse” (80) within the storm, recalling intertextual references like the storm scene in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, a

scene of disorientation of the human heart and ego. It also echoes Romantic poets writing with pathetic fallacy, a romantic literary figure in which the natural phenomena as rain and thunder represent the inner emotions of the character, a literary device often used to underline the link between the sensitive writer and nature. Austin witnesses the “hypnotic stupor” of wild animals in the storm (83), echoing her position as a permeable human being.

Tom Pughe and Michel Granger wrote in the introduction of *Ecrire la nature* (2005) that personification of the land still reminded one of the human possessiveness towards the natural world, even in an environmentally committed text:

En effet, les modes traditionnels de l'évocation de la nature, telle la pastorale et la personnification (prosopopée, *pathetic fallacy*), sont révélateurs des idées que les hommes se font de la nature ; de ce fait, et au moins depuis la période romantique, ces modes jouent un rôle ambigu dans l'esthétique littéraire. Tout retour à la nature, toute identification avec elle revient en quelque sorte à un acte d'acculturation ou d'exploitation métaphorique qui rappelle les polarités entre nature et culture, ou animal et homme, sur lesquelles se fondent les civilisations modernes. Peut-on écrire la nature sans en même temps inscrire en creux la domination humaine qui s'exerce sur elle ? (Pughe and Granger, 2005, 3)

All these elements which either romanticize, idealize, or mythologize the desert serve the literary dimension of Austin's writing, adding lyrical and sublime features to her text, like in this highly rhythmic and poetical sentence due to the images created: “Days when the hollows are steeped in a warm, winey flood the clouds came walking on the floor of heaven, flat and pearly gray beneath, rounded and pearly white above” (79). It sets a distance in her work from her original desire to write a scientific and objective desert; however, it reinforces the argumentative and poetical dimensions of this real literary work, addressing the emotions of her readership, which is highly relevant in her goal to appeal for a defense of the environment.

Therefore, Mary H. Austin writes ecological passages in *LLR* and *LB* to defend the environmental cause of the Californian desert. She also adds a strong literary dimension to her work with multiple intertexts, inducing an idealized, deified, romanticized and mythologized landscape and its natural life. The analysis of her work is to be developed with the study of her writing of Native Americans.



## Chapter II – The Myth of the Archetypal Native American

Beyond writing on the Californian Sierra and its landscapes, Mary Hunter Austin also wrote portraits of Native Americans, particularly of the Paiute and Shoshone people. She met some of them in the desert who became her friends, so she included them in her depiction of the country. The result of *LLR* and *LB*, mingling descriptions of flora, fauna, landscapes and inhabitants derives from her strong inspiration in Native people's way of life and spirituality. However, her descriptions are also marked with an imagery inherited from the colonial past of domination over indigenous cultures. Archetypal images of Native people are reemployed by Austin, perpetuating a mythologized vision of indigenous people, as Claude Fohlen reminds us of in his work *Les Indiens d'Amérique du Nord*: "Une mythologie persistante a bercé notre enfance et même notre âge mur des bienfaits et des méfaits de ces Amérindiens" (Fohlen, 1999, 3).

## **A – Reassessment of Native Life in the Desert**

From the very act of including Native Americans in her work, Mary Hunter Austin reassesses their presence on the American territory. Even though this inclusion seems natural in her writing, and creates a fluid text which does not appear as politically committed as it is, it remains an ethical statement in the literary field of the early twentieth century. Indeed, it is absolutely not natural for authors of the time to include Native Americans presented as real human beings in their work, they rather present them as pertaining to the setting, the landscape or as creatures of a particular category in the animal realm. This statement might seem exaggerated; however, the political erasure of Native Americans as real human societies is nowadays historically proven. This erasure has been developed in all the literary and social fields of study, including history, literature, art, philosophy, political discourses, ethnology and sociology. Even though Native people have been studied in these fields, it was done from a colonialist and patronizing perspective, which did not give Native people place for existing as actual societies, with traditions, habits, ways of life, spirituality and religions. In his article “Eloigner le colonial : expertise scolaire et formulation d’une solution au “problème indien” aux Etats-Unis (1945-1975)”, Thomas Grillot reminds us of the political context of the early twentieth century concerning indigenous people:

Depuis le XIXe siècle, la position des Amérindiens vis-à-vis des Etats-Unis est considérée comme une affaire intérieure du pays. Réglée par des traités, elle est en même temps soustraite à la sphère internationale. On la résume sous le vocable de “problème” ou “question indienne”, manière de désigner l’existence problématique des populations minoritaires, coincées entre citoyenneté et sujétion, indianité et américanité, et qu’en bonne rhétorique coloniale, les Etats-Unis prétendent civiliser. (Grillot, 2020, 97)

### **1 - Austin’s Experience with Native People**

Mary Hunter Austin met Native people mainly as she moved to California, where she lived near them. Despite her traditional and religious education as a child, she cultivated her own personal curiosity and was interested in discovering new people. She befriended some of them, and learned multiple things from them, which she wanted to express in her writing. She holds an ethical posture of humanist defense in including them in her work. She makes even more than inclusion, as Native people are central to her work. She acknowledges their presence on the land from her position at the very beginning of *LLR*, resetting the land under the Native names, and restoring the

chronological order of possession of the land in chapters like “My Neighbor’s Field”, as aforementioned. In doing so, she contrasts with white male authors who held a colonial discourse on Natives, and presents her perspective as the historical truth, compared to centuries of erroneous or falsified discourses.

Her posture comes from the central statement that she can only write about what she knows, to be an accurate writer who sticks to the reality of facts and who distorts reality as less as possible. She indeed lived in California for a large part of her life, after her childhood in Illinois and before her last years in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In *Earth Horizon* (1932), her autobiography, Mary Hunter Austin recalls her encounters with Native people, especially in the chapter called “The Land of Little Rain”. In 1895, Austin moved to Bishop, a town of Inyo, California, where she put her daughter Ruth in an Indian school. She acknowledges that she has been inspired by the Indian teacher, and this meeting led to her intense interest for the Indian culture:

It was from the teacher, a more than ordinarily competent and intelligent woman, that Mary began to learn the sort of thing that made of her a fierce and untiring opponent of the colossal stupidities, the mean and cruel injustices, of our Indian Bureau. (Austin, 1932, 266)

The alternation of first-person narrative and third-person narrative styles she adopts in her autobiography is part of the peculiarity of her intimate writing. This passage draws attention to her deep political involvement in favor of the defense of Native people, who she calls “Indians”, as it was commonly said at the time. The competencies and intelligence of this Indian teacher made her realize the patronizing discourse of the Indian Bureau, a Governmental Bureau created in 1824, supposedly dedicated to the preservation of Indian people, their culture and well-being, according to the current Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.), even though its actions and its official financial support are being questioned, as it corrupted and perpetuated oppression on Native people. Annie and Jean-François Lh  r  t   present the B.I.A. in *Chronologie th  matique des Etats-Unis* in the neutral words “1824. Cr  ation du Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.), organisme charg   de r  glementer la vie dans les territoires allou  s aux Indiens” (Lh  r  t   and Lh  r  t  , 1994, 54), erasing the indigenous oppression. Philippe Jacquin asserts in *La Politique indienne des Etats-Unis (1830-1890)* that “l’administration centrale n’est pas   pargn  e par la corruption, l’incomp  tence et le client  lisme.” (Jacquin, 1997, 61). Austin argued:

I took the defense of Indians because they were the most conspicuously defeated and offended against group at hand. I should have done as much even without what I

afterward discovered among them of illumination and reformation of my own way of thought. (Austin, 1932, 266)

This remark presents her political position in explicit terms, in a humanitarian tone in favor of human freedom and autonomy. It also asserts the importance Native people held for Austin, as people of human and creative inspiration. She presents this encounter as a “reformation” of her life, a strong word which implies a real transformation of her world, both intimate and intellectual. That is how she opened herself to this new culture, open to other people, which led her to meet Native people in the “campoodie”, the Native camp, where she learned multiple things during the years following 1895:

After ‘The Flock’ was published, Roosevelt sent a forestry expert to interview her. There was a part for her in the Indian life. She had begun the study of Indian verse, strange and meaningful; of Indian wisdom, of Indian art. The Paiutes were basket-makers; the finest of their sort. What Mary drew from them was their naked craft, the subtle sympathies of twig and root and bark; she consorted with them; she led herself open to the influences of the wild, the thing done, accomplished. She entered into their lives, the life of the campoody, the strange secret life of the tribe, the struggle of Whiteness with Darkness, the struggle of the individual soul with the Friend-of-the-Soul-of-Man. She learned what it meant; how to prevail; how to measure her strength against it. Learning that, she learned to write. (Austin, 1932, 289)

This powerful passage ends with the grounding assertion that Austin learned to write when she became committed with the Natives and in favor of their rights, meeting their cultures, traditions, habits and spirituality. Through her open-mindedness concerning the “Indians”, she opened a new field in her intellectual and creative life that enabled her to write the vast majority of her work. Indeed, the larger scope of her literary work pertains to the “Indian” field, or at least is set in the West, marked by the influence of Paiute and Shoshone peoples on the land.

In her 1980 thesis dissertation written in New York entitled “Mary Hunter Austin and the Roles of Women”, Dorothy Jewell Altman argued that the author set herself in strong opposition to the current beliefs on the Indians, considered under the lens of the “primitive ideal”, an ethical posture which led her to take political action to defend them:

While Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries agreed that Indians were inferior savages, Mary Austin’s experiences with Indians led her to a different conclusion. Instead of regarding Indians with the mixture of fear, contempt, and smug superiority common to most whites, Austin approached them with the curiosity and openness she brought to all new experiences. She found that the Indians offered her friendship, creative sympathy, and spiritual kinship. As she grew to admire their culture,

she became a dedicated defender of its preservation. While most whites assumed that Indian culture was merely a primitive stage of their own, Austin found it sophisticated in many respects, especially in its treatment of women. (Altman, 1979, 164)

She even got involved in Natives' everyday life activities, such as dancing in the campoodie, a posture that was strongly criticized among the white society:

Mary's friendship with minority people also caused problems. In Lone Pine she was criticized for being familiar with the Spanish-speaking population. There was general disapproval in her friendship with Indians and her taking part in their dances. (Altman, 1979, 117)

The Native peoples Mary H. Austin writes about are Paiute and Shoshone people. The Paiutes are set in the Southwest region of the U.S.A., and were scattered around California, Utah, Arizona and Nevada. They had to diffuse their culture into the white settlers' society in order to survive, which meant working with them on ranches and keeping in touch with them for economic reasons, even though they managed to remain in campoodies at the time of Austin, but were displaced on governmental reservations in the nineteenth century, according to the article on Paiute people of the Britannica Encyclopedia. The end of the nineteenth century marked the massive appropriation of their land by the government of the United States. Shoshone people were, for their part, living in California, Nevada, Idaho and Wyoming. They were hunter-gatherers like the Paiutes, as well as diggers. They had to accommodate their society to the arrival of settlers. The article on Shoshone people from the Britannica Encyclopedia recalls that it was a Shoshone woman, Sacagawea, who guided Lewis and Clark for the first scientific western expedition of the American West in 1804.

Mary H. Austin indeed writes about Paiute and Shoshone people as real human beings, living in societies and experiencing emotions, sensations and strong relationships between each other. This humanist posture was not commonplace at her time at all among white people, as aforementioned. Her short stories in *LB* portray humans, on an equal footage with white people, not animals or objects of possession.

## **2 – The Position of an Ethnographer**

Mary H. Austin set herself as a writer in the position of a scientific “reporter” of nature and people, supposedly writing while walking, in the nature writer ethos of a mere transcriber of reality. Concerning her writing of Native people in *LLR*, she draws portraits of individuals she met or she

befriended, with descriptive traits that recall an ethnographer's drawing characterizing individuals met through research, in order to strengthen the American knowledge on these peoples. Austin writes as a scientist in some parts of *LLR*, providing features of Paiute and Shoshone ways of life.

Austin argued that one must live on the land to be able to write about it in an accurate way. She grounded her legitimacy as a regional western writer in her habitation of the land for years. The land and people need to be understood properly and known intimately to be well written, in her perspective:

But the real heart and core of the country are not to be come at in a month's vacation. One must summer and winter with the land and wait its occasions. [...] and there you shall have such news of the land [...] as one lover of it can give to another. (Austin, 1903, 8)

This is the prerequisite to a well-structured writing in her perspective. She even encourages her readership to create their own experience of the land in *Earth Horizon*, in the posture of a transparent writer who seeks to write the reality of the land: "you can reach the land itself by motor bus from Los Angeles in a few hours. But on the life there, the unforgettable life, modern America has laid a greedy, vulgarizing hand" (Austin, 1932, 234). This warning of a disfigurement of the land stands as a contrasting argument for her personal writing of an original and virgin land, where she meets Native people, supposedly not yet corrupted by white people's society.

She writes portrayals of Native people in a scientific tone, first to contrast the main colonial discourse on them at her time. Dorothy Jewell Altman argued in her thesis that the common scientific discourse of the time was implicated in the dynamic of proving scientifically the inferiority and animality of Native people, in regressive echoes referring to the notion of the "noble savage":

Nineteenth-century leaders continued the same politics but provided the updated explanation that such treatment was warranted by the Indians' intrinsic inferiority to the white man. Scientists, anthropologists, doctors, psychologists, and sociologists assembled a massive body of evidence to "prove" the Indian was a flawed specimen, the result of a failure in an earlier stage of evolution, doomed to remain at a primitive level. (Altman, 1980, 165)

Therefore, Austin wrote *LLR* and *LB* notably to reassess the existence of Native people as humans, thus adopting the posture of an ethnographer in descriptions to counteract this colonial trope. The general discourse tried hard to prove scientifically that the Natives were inferior, vicious and

immoral people, which was used as a justification for the deplorable treatment they suffered from, as well as the seizing of lands inhabited by Native people and the extermination of tribes.

Austin's desire of authenticity in her writing of the land in *LLR* led her to include the presence of Native people in her work, which was natural for her as she felt a deep interest for them, but which was not natural at her time. She developed the ethos of the author who writes as she walks in the desert, which is physically almost impossible, and which remains an intellectual position that is well known among nature writers. This style of writing is developed through the major recourse to observations, leading to passages that are supposedly the restitution of her personal observations, even though a part of fictionalization is always palpable in her writing. Observation is at the core of nature writing, experienced by a single individual through his or her senses, in this case sight, which the reader is bound to take as truth to grasp the feeling of the land described. If the nature writer does not adopt this posture of writing while wandering, he or she writes just after the first-hand experience, in his or her cabin, as Thoreau and John Muir did. In his *Wilderness Essays* written along the nineteenth century, John Muir recalled his ascension of a dangerous snowy mountain in Alaska, which was of course written after the experience (Muir, 2011, 35-69). In the Californian desert, Austin also writes about her encounters with Native friends after the first-hand experience. She wrote all she had learned from the medicine-man when she was back home, and after a time of appropriation of this knowledge.

However, concerning her writing of Native people, she adopted the posture of an external observer even though she got involved in dances and rituals of the community. Her will to be precise and descriptive to reassess Natives' presence is linked to her aspiration to be exhaustive, making assertions and lists of occurrences of the elements or people she sees. The following sentence holds this dynamic: "there are many strange sorts of humans bred in a mining country, each sort despising the queerness of the other, but of them all I found the Pocket Hunter most acceptable for his clean, companionable talk" (Austin, 1903, 27). It begins in a descriptive objective tone, but ends with the assertion of a preference, which already alters her scientific posture. Another passage highlights her posture of a scientific descriptive ethnographer, describing a "water sign" near Black Mountain:

It is a laid circle of stones large enough not to be disturbed by any ordinary hap, with an opening flanked by two parallel rows of similar stones, between which were an arrow placed, touching the opposite rim of the circle, thus it would point as the crow flies to the spring. It is the old, indubitable water mark of the Shoshones. One still finds it in the desert ranges in Salt Wells and Mesquite valleys, and along the slopes of Waban. On the other side of Ceriso, where the black rock begins, about a mile from the spring, is the work of an older, forgotten people. (Austin, 1903, 20)

The aim of objectivity in this passage is perceivable through several features. First the geographical setting is important to note as a mark of the text to be inscribed in the scientific knowledge of the Southwest. This passage on the location of this natural element and human history situated at the end of the second chapter of the *Water Trails* enables the text to be granted a scientific value, the personal exploration of the author being written as inscribing the place into the realm of human knowledge, giving the rather precise location of it to be easily found again. Then, the passive form used in “one still finds” argues in favor of a text not imprinted with emotional commitment in this passage, creating an objective description. Finally, the structure of the passage goes from observations of natural elements to the conclusion of the presence of Native people in this place, through the analysis and interpretation of marks that tend to indicate the trace of this “older, forgotten people”, in a historical but also legendary tone. It follows a scientific structure, from observations to interpretation, which leads to “indubitable” proof of existence of people, to end with a reassessment of the disappearance of this society in its original form.

Moreover, this posture of the author as a scientist is marked by her personal implication in her descriptions, and her conscious decisions to go walking and to meet people, in order to write about them. For instance, she is appealed by the sage smell which drives her to the campoodie, where she meets the Pocket Hunter:

I remember very well when I first met him. Walking in the evening glow to spy the marriages of the white gilies, I sniffed the unmistakable odor of burning sage. It is a smell that carries far and indicates usually the nearness of a campoodie. [...] I came upon the Pocket Hunter making a dry camp in a friendly scrub. (Austin, 1903, 26)

This walk had the precise aim to encounter him, as an old friend but also as a man living in the desert she could write upon once she had come back home, to assert the value of a more natural way of life in the desert.

### **3 – One of the First Women to Write upon Native People with no Colonial Interest**

Mary Hunter Austin wrote *LLR* and *LB* as a liberal author, in favor of Native Americans’ rights and value. As aforementioned, she set herself in strong opposition to the legacy of white male authors who entertained a colonial posture towards the Natives in their writings, or if not so explicitly, at least perpetuating caricatural stereotypes. Even before writing a political and ethical defense of Native cultures, Austin wrote as a natural consequence of her personal interest for their



traditions and ways of living. As she was a woman, she had very little access to personal possession of the land still at her time, as the husband remained the financial center of the household, a social structure from which Mary suffered. So without this concrete prospect of land owning, women were more predisposed to develop a selfless relationship to people, as they did not have the project to dispossess them of their lands. It was the case for Austin, once settled in houses around Inyo in California, she created disinterested relationships with Paiute and Shoshone people she met, with no prospect of property of their land. This posture drastically shifted from the common writing of Native people, mingled with the fact that Austin was deeply interested in their culture, traditions, languages and art, not just in their supposedly odd habits or clothes. This posture is perceivable in her work, creating the ethos of an author writing out of curiosity for knowledge, which led to the ethnographer posture added to empathy, which enabled the poetical and spiritual dimensions of her literary work to be expressed.

Paiute and Shoshone people deeply inspired her through their spirituality and art, especially poetry through the work on rhythm. She wrote in her autobiography:

There is something in Mary which comes out of the land; something in its rhythms, its living compulsions [...], governing her own progressions, coloring her most intimate expression. It is the source of that roving mind's eye that includes for her, in its implications, the whole American continent, and at the same time, in its rejection of the male ritual of rationalization in favor of a more direct intuitional attack, providing the key to her approach. (Austin, 1932, 15)

This central statement asserts her position of an intimate writer, close to the land and contrasting with the rationalizing main discourse on the desert. The rhythm of the land is central in her approach. She later published a collection of Native people poems, either original or re-written by herself in *The American Rhythm* (1923). This title is highly meaningful in the reassessment of Native art within the American scope of art, resetting their poetry as really “American”, not just Native, subordinate or submitted to the predominance of white poetry. This publication corresponds to her desire to make Native art, knowledge and culture prosper, in an era of disappearance of their existence and traditions. The influence of this poetry is also palpable in her earlier works, from *LLR*, in the work on rhythm. She sublimates natural elements known thanks to the medicine-man for instance, through poetical inspirations found within nature that correspond to the Natives' spirituality. The grounding posture of Austin who perceives nature as an organized and balanced harmony of elements is already inscribed in a spiritual idea in part inherited from the Paiute and Shoshone spirituality. Sentences like “It seems that the wild creatures have learned all that is important to their way of life except the changes of the moon” (Austin, 1903, 17) and “The vulture

merits respect for his bigness and for his bandit airs, but he is a sombre bird, with none of the buzzard's frank satisfaction in his offensiveness" (Austin, 1903, 23) echo this notion of equilibrium and deep "respect" from the humans towards the animal realm that surrounds them, being part of the whole ecosystem. Austin even sees in Shoshone people a central resemblance to nature:

The manner of the country makes the usage of life there, and the land will not be lived in except in its own fashion. The Shoshones live like their trees, with great space between, and in pairs and in family groups (Austin, 1903, 33).

The rhythmic feature of this last sentence, with the addition of the two propositions introduced by the accumulative preposition "and" enhances this resemblance, the kinship existing between humans and trees, in a poetical imagery which echoes the unity of natural life, central to the Natives' spirituality in this context.

Besides, animism adds substance to the Christian influences analyzed beforehand, an influence drawn from both Native tribes which creates a part of the spiritual dimension of Austin's writing. The Oxford Learners' Dictionary defines animism as "the belief that plants, objects and natural things such as the weather have a living soul" ("Animism"). In his presentation of Paiute and Shoshone people, Philippe Jacquin defines animism in these words: "Animistes, les Indiens pensent que les pierres, les arbres, les animaux possèdent une âme, et que le monde visible et profane dépend d'un monde-autre, celui des dieux, des esprits, des ancêtres" (Jacquin, 1997, 26). The influence of animism in Austin's writing is perceivable in the deep commitment she shows when describing the activities and personalities of animals from the desert, with a mystic but pagan dimension present in the immanent power of those animals. She writes the following sentence for instance with this influence: "The coyote is your real lord of the mesa, and so he makes sure you are armed with no long black instrument to spit your teeth into his vital at a thousand yards, is both bold and curious" (Austin, 1903, 51). She sees a deep intelligence in this coyote, inhabited by a conscious soul, but she also gives it human attitudes, like checking weapons, which could be interpreted as a form of anthropomorphism. Dorothy Jewell Altman argues in her thesis that

In Indian religion as well as art, Austin found answers to her inner needs. Indian religion, with its mystical and prophetic qualities, was more harmonious with her spiritual nature than conventional Christianity. (Altman, 1979, 168-169)

Her writing of Native people therefore holds no more contempt, but inspiration and influence. This influence was also extended to the revision of her beliefs on women and took part in

her path toward political feminism in favor of the New Womanhood. She was inspired by Natives' societal order in her own political perception of the place of women within society. Dorothy Jewell Altman asserts:

Her observation of Indian women supported her feminist beliefs that women were naturally strong, self-reliant individuals rather than the passive, dependent beings described by nineteenth-century prescriptive sources. Indian myths and folk tales also placed women in positions of power; they were equals in their relationships with men and active participants in public life. In tales Austin adopted for publication and in her own fiction, she presented Indian women as positive models for the emerging New Woman. In relationship with men the Indian women in Austin's stories reject economic dependence and sexual repression. They are strong, passionate, and independent, providing examples of what white women could do if they could throw off the restrictions of a repressive society and exercise their natural strength and native gifts. (Altman, 1979, 164-165)

Indeed, several stories of *LB* present strong female characters who take action in their lives, and to whom Austin gives back agency, which is an important ethical claim. The story called "A Case of Conscience" tells the story of a white man who marries a Native woman, and they have a baby together. But the white man decides to take the baby with him and go home in England. This dispossession is violently felt by the woman, Turwhasé, as an act of domination. She takes back agency and goes walking to find her baby, and manages to take him back in the campoody with her. The encounter with the man, Saunders, is violent:

'My baby!' she said. 'Give it to me!' Without a word Saunders held it out to her. [...] 'Mine!' she said, fiercely. 'Mine, not yours!' Saunders did not gainsay her; he drew out all the money he had and poured it in her bosom. (Austin, 1909, 37)

She therefore takes back agency, the baby being what she is most attached to, thus symbolizing her only possession, her whole life a white man was about to take for his own possession.

Moreover, in several stories of *LB*, the Indian camps are at the core of the narration, the central narrative localization of the story with the campoody at the center. The camp being the main focus, white settlers rather come to the camp, but it is not Native people who displace themselves to white people's villages, except in the previous example, in the need of the story to strengthen the character. This creates a historical re-localization of Natives' presence in the desert, as peoples living in consistent societies. The desert land is the center, not the modern villages. It is the same dynamic in *LLR*, the author walks towards the campoodie to meet Native people, but never stays in a town waiting for indigenous people to come and teach her. The exception of the chapter on

“Jimville” keeps the same dynamic, with the blame of this romanticized white town, the author preferring the raw land of the campoodie.

Native people are written in *LLR* with respect and acknowledgment of their value and practical as well as spiritual knowledge. The medicine-man and the basket maker are the two central examples of this idea. The portrait of the medicine-man is edifying in this idea:

It is true I have been in Shoshone Land, but before that, long before, I had seen it through the eyes of Winnenap’ in a rosy mist of reminiscence, and must always see it with a sense of intimacy in the light that never was. Sitting on the golden slope at the campoodie, looking across the Bitter Lake to the purple tops of Mutarango, the medicine-man drew up its happy places one by one, like little blessed islands in a sea of talk. For he was born a Shoshone, was Winnenap’; and though his name, his wife, his children, and his tribal relations were of the Paiutes, his thoughts turned homesickly toward Shoshone Land. Once a Shoshone always a Shoshone. (Austin, 1903, 32)

The intimate understanding of his life enabled Austin to write an accurate description of the man, who taught her a multitude of things within nature. She acknowledges his value by seeing “through” his eyes, a strong expression that presupposes transparency in her gaze, being the exact same as his. The poetical geographical setting places him as an intimate inhabitant of the land, even though he has been absorbed by the Paiutes. Both the medicine-man and the basket maker are written as virtuous people, whose virtue they developed spending their whole life within nature, working in slow activities that are respectful of the land.

Mary H. Austin therefore writes about Native people with a new perspective, compared to her predecessors and male counterparts. Indeed, she is nowadays among the first female nature writers who rather resisted to time, and she is part of the grounding authors of nature writing. As presented in the introduction, her originality in this literary genre has been to introduce this intimate writing of Shoshone and Paiute people as inhabitants of the land, on the same footing as animal and plant species present in the Californian desert. If she positioned herself in opposition to Bret Harte, who wrote a romanticized desert with no deep interest in Native people, or with a colonial gaze, she mentions John Muir as an author who Christianized the imagination of the land, but he did not write lyrical and poetical texts on Native inhabitants as Austin did. Thoreau did not do it either, he did not write about Southwest people. As for female authors, Susan Fenimore Cooper, the daughter of James Fenimore Cooper, wrote what could be considered nature writing but on the East Coast, thus not tackling the imagination of Paiute and Shoshone people as Austin did.

## **B – Archetypal Portraits of Native Americans**

### **1 – Postcolonial Studies Applied to American Literature**

Despite her deep commitment in favor of the Native Americans in the Southwest region of the United States, Mary Hunter Austin was still a white author who wrote in the early twentieth century, but was born in the mid-nineteenth century, in 1868. Therefore, her lifetime (1868-1934) followed several decades of invasion and settlement of white Europeans on the American soil, since the seventeenth century. This period was marked by a dominant attitude towards the land, but also its indigenous inhabitants, the Native Americans. Even though Mary H. Austin met some Native Americans and became really interested in their culture, and then became committed to the defense of their rights, she remained a white author who had a Western Christian education, who was immersed in this dominant culture. Her father was the first man of his family to settle on the East coast of the United States, coming from England. He transmitted this settler heritage to his daughter, whose family had not been living on the land for more than a decade. She reproduced in part the authoritative discourse towards Native Americans, due to this personal, social and political context of domination and contempt towards them.

Even though several authors, like Edward Abbey, and scholars present her as a defensor of the Native cause, as she was, they obliterate the discourse she developed:

She was also a woman of ardent beliefs, never afraid to take up unpopular causes. Way back in the 1910s and 1920s, long before the safe and easy liberalism of our time, she crusaded for the rights of American Indians and Mexican-Americans. (Abbey, 1988, x)

Recent postcolonial studies developed a new thought on ideological discourse in literature. Ania Loomba defined postcolonial studies in her 1998 work *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* as “these new ways of studying colonialism and its aftermath”, and “its declared intentions are to allow the voices of once colonized peoples and their descendants to be heard” (Loomba, 1998, xi). This field of study comes from the new analysis of colonialism, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as

a settlement in a new country [...] a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up. (“Colonialism”)

However, Ania Loomba warns her readers concerning this official definition:

This definition, quite remarkably, avoids any reference to people other than the colonisers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established. Hence it evacuates the word ‘colonialism’ of any implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and domination. (Loomba, 1998, 1-2)

Indeed, the case of the United States of America is a peculiar one in the history of colonialism, as the American land was first settled by Europeans after the so-called 1492 discovery of America by Christopher Columbus (the land being named after Amerigo Vespucci), which led to centuries of colonialism, in the sense of a white settlement in a supposedly “virgin” land with settlements of European people and institutions, and violent domination of the Native Americans. However, these former Europeans took their independence in 1776, thus creating the Union, now called the United States of America, as an independent political country from the English crown. From then on, it is no longer possible to speak of a colony, the definition of American colonialism is thus to be re-examined. Domination on Native Americans continued and became even more violent with the political aim of the Conquest of the West, as the expansionist agenda led to a violent control of the Native tribes within reservations through the deportation policy along the nineteenth century, which began by the Indian Removal Act of 1830 which took end around 1890 with the declaration of the end of the “Frontier” line, later defined by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. This Act has been tragic for indigenous peoples, as defined by Lazare Bonchamp in his 2021 article “Conquête de l’Ouest et expansion des Etats-Unis au XIXe”: “Dès 1830, des pans entiers du territoire indien sont ouverts aux colons” (Bonchamp, 2021, 1). This domination was also palpable with the extermination of Native tribes, which led to the disappearance of whole tribes and a brutal demographic decrease of their presence in the nineteenth century. Ania Loomba sets that white people were generally the oppressors in colonial contexts:

White settlers were historically the agents of colonial rule, and their own subsequent development – cultural as well as economic – does not simply align them with other colonised peoples. No matter what their differences with the mother country, white populations here were not subject to the genocide, economic exploitation, cultural decimation and political exclusion felt by indigenous peoples or by other colonies. (Loomba, 1998, 9-10)

In this context, even though the attachment to the mother nation (the United Kingdom) is no longer present in the case of the U.S.A. after the 1776 independence and the War of Independence

(1775-1783), colonialism shifted in political terms as the dominant people were Americans and no longer English, Spanish, French or other European people. Nevertheless, the central structure of oppression remained the same: the oppression of Native people by white people, despite their changing identities. Philippe Jacquin argues in *La Politique indienne des Etats-Unis (1830-1890)* that “dans le Grand Bassin, les Utes, Shoshones et Paiutes sont confrontés à la colonisation des Mormons” (Jacquin, 1997, 69). White people remained the strongest military force in the Indian wars in terms of weapons, horses, political structure, military aids, and financial support for food supply. Philippe Jacquin concluded his work on the relevance of the term “colonialism” in the American context:

En un demi-siècle, les Américains ont mis fin à un monde en brisant la résistance indienne et en envahissant l’Ouest. Dans cette conquête, ils se comportent comme les Français ou les Anglais dans les empires coloniaux. Civilisation rime avec christianisation et assimilation aux valeurs de la société occidentale. La force des Américains est d’avoir transfiguré ces événements, ils les ont réécrits pour en faire des pages épiques de leur Histoire. (Jacquin, 1997, 141)

Serge Ricard argues in his work *The ‘Manifest Detiny’ of the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* that “domestic and dependent as they may have been, the Indian tribes were nations.” (Ricard, 1999, 13). This is a reassessment of their existence as a real people. The colonial and religious oppression they suffered from is describes in his words:

The civilized Christian nations’ dispossessing the savages of their land has been declared legitimate as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The *vacuum domicilium* or *territoria nullius* theory, as expounded by John Wycliff, was to become the legal foundation of the colonial powers’ right of conquest and of the New England colonists’ title to the Indians’s lands. (Ricard, 1999, 30)

The tribes Mary Hunter Austin wrote about in 1903, the Shoshones and the Paiutes, are therefore the descendents of oppressed peoples who knew war and oppression from white people. They have been displaced, rejected from the American society and discarded from human rights. In this perspective, postcolonial studies, understood as the reinterpretation of history through a broader lens which includes the oppressed indigenous peoples, is relevant to analyze American literary works and the writing of Native people. An ambiguity remains in the term “postcolonial”, especially in the prefix post-, which implies the end of the colonial period, which is historically false and socially hard to achieve, even nowadays with the emergence of a criticism of neocolonialism. This prefix “post-” is thus contested for this meaning of an aftermath of colonization, both temporal and

ideological, that is not present. Ania Loomba argues, “if the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism” (Loomba, 1998, 7). She rather suggests that “it is more helpful to think of post-colonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (Loomba, 1998, 12). Homi Bhabha defines postcolonialism in his grounding work *The Location of Culture* (1994) in these terms:

Postcoloniality, for its part, is a salutary reminder of the persistent ‘neo-colonial’ relations within the ‘new’ world order and the multinational division of labour. Such a perspective enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance. Beyond this, however, postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities – in the North and the South, urban and rural – constituted, if I may coin a phrase, ‘otherwise than modernity’. (Bhabha, 1994, 6)

This postcolonial posture is relevant in literature as the claim of political “innocence” is questionable in many cases, and that literature pertains to the cultural scope of the construction of representations of oppressed peoples, either perpetuating this domination through a dominant discourse, or reassessing the value of such peoples in politically committed terms:

Objectivity is not the only ground on which claims for ideological and political innocence can be made. Humanist literary studies have long been resistant to the idea that literature (or at least good literature) has anything to do with politics, on the grounds that the former is either too subjective, individual and personal or else too universal and transcendent to be thus tainted. Accordingly, the relationship between colonialism and literature was not, until recently, dealt with by literary criticism. (Loomba, 1998, 69)

Postcolonialism also emerged in American studies recently as a relevant field to analyze the dynamics between people within society, as well as representation of dominated peoples, the Native Americans and African Americans. In her article “Postcolonial American Studies”, Malini Johar Schueller argues that postcolonialism is relevant to be applied to American studies. She asserts that with recent events in the U.S.A., it is made “painfully clear the necessity of interrogating US culture through the lens of postcolonial studies” (Schueller, 2004, 162). She mentions Edward Said with *Orientalism* and Homi Bhabha with *The Location of Culture* in 1994 which “included the analysis of Western texts as colonial discourse, the investigation of representations of the colonized, [...] and subaltern representation” (Schueller, 2004, 162). She resets the U.S.A. as an imperialist country towards minority peoples, mentioning Richard Drinnon’s 1980 work *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* which argues that imperialism is a central feature of the



American national identity, especially in its attitude towards Native Americans. As “the early 1990s witnessed the beginning of a healthy and vigorous debate about the inclusion of the US into postcolonial studies” (Schueller, 2004, 163), the author quotes Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989): “The American experience and its attempts to produce a new kind of literature [could] be seen as the model for all later post-colonial writing” (Ashcroft et al., 1989, 16). A postcolonial approach to American literature is therefore legitimized by such grounding works, in the context of the writing of Native Americans.

## 2 - Individual Figures of Natives

Mary Hunter Austin wrote about Paiute and Shoshone people in *LLR*, and largely Native Americans of the West in *LB*, as a white writer descendent from a European father and a white American mother. Her writing of Native people is not neutral, and can be described as ideologically marked in some striking passages. A postcolonial approach to the representation of indigenous people will help to analyze these descriptions, and to have a more objective and precise view on her highly ambiguous depiction of Native people. Indeed, she was deeply interested in their cultures and traditions, and was committed in the defense of their political rights, so she wrote about them also to give them a cultural and literary place within the white American society’s scope. But on the contrary, she also wrote stereotypical portraits of Native people which freeze them in an ancient time, away from any historical and political tensions, a biased representation which creates a myth of Native peoples for her readership of the 1903 *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in which the chapters of *LLR* were first published, but also for the whole twentieth century literary and nature writing field.

Recent postcolonial findings argued that literary works were means of perpetuation of violence, oppression or domination over a part of the population, through the literary device of the discourse. Edward Said is considered as one of the founders of the postcolonial thought with his 1978 work *Orientalism*, in which he analyzes the structures of domination from the Europeans onto Oriental peoples, through representation especially in literary works. He paved the way for a new approach of literature and representation, from then on understood as political devices. He used Michel Foucault’s notion of “discourse”, applied to literary texts in order to highlight the ideologies hidden behind simple words in texts.

In *LLR*, Mary H. Austin creates the ethos of the author who writes as she walks, as aforementioned, and writes about her encounters with her Native American friends, especially the medicine-man and the basket maker. These two portraits are located at the middle of the book, after

several chapters focusing on natural elements and phenomena, and they are not contextualized as chapters dealing with Native people who live in this endangered nature. The two portraits appear as juxtaposed to the previous chapters, without any general presentation of their tribes, apart from in the first pages concerning the names of places used by Austin. The social structure of Paiute and Shoshone people appears in the mentioning of the “campoodie”, the camp where the tribes live. However, there is no mention of the social life of the whole tribe. She prefers writing individual portraits, which creates the impression of characters, a literary feature already verging on fictionalization, escaping from history. This choice also adds intimacy to the atmosphere of her writing, avoiding the generalities of a global depiction which could have diminished the scope of her discourse. Indeed, she holds a political position of defense towards Natives in certain passages, for instance when she describes the death of the medicine-man due to the diseases introduced by white settlers. But this altruistic posture is always altered by stereotyping elements which, from a postcolonial perspective, does not serves her stance. Even though she intimately knew the social life of the campoodie, she did not write it, which isolates the people she describes. It gives the impression of lonely and isolated people wandering about a desolate land, far from the reality of their political and social structure and implication with other people.

The medicine-man is described in the fifth chapter, “Shoshone Land”. He is only depicted through his activity as a medicine-man, whose task is to heal people from his tribe thanks to his knowledge of plants and the natural resources he finds in the desert. He is depicted as an isolated man who “went apart on the mountains to gather herbs” (Austin, 1903, 32) and who only dedicated himself to his task in his life. Austin might have preferred individual portraits in her work as she knew people individually in the campoodie, people who taught her different things. In this perspective, the medicine-man taught her the benefits of plants she could find in the Great Basin desert to heal, and the basket maker showed her the art of basket-making in the Indian fashion. She wanted to transcribe these skills in these portraits perhaps in order to highlight their value as real human beings, which was not the case in previous literary works in the nineteenth century, but also to render an impression of intimacy with these people, maybe to attract the attention of her reader on them. Moreover, this intimacy created with the medicine-man reinforces the strength of the chapter’s ending, closed on his death:

And Winnenap will not [tell about Shoshone land] any more. He died, as do most medicine-men of the Paiutes. [...] Wounds do not count; broken bones and bullet holes the Indian can understand, but measles, pneumonia, and smallpox are witchcraft. (Austin, 1903, 36).

This ending is a political condemnation of white men's introduction of diseases and more broadly white men's dominant penetration within Shoshone Land, the title of the chapter. However, this portrait creates the figure of an isolated man, which was the historical reality if the national scale is taken into account, as white men destroyed the majority of social and political structures within Native tribes. But in 1903, Shoshone and Paiute people were still alive (as nowadays), so this isolation of the medicine-man from Mary H. Austin contrasts with her will to write a defense of their culture and existence as a society to be protected.

These two individual stories are presented as non-fiction in *LLR*, as portraits of real people who lived in the author's time. Austin wrote on the medicine-men to account for his life and his tragic death, as a historical remembrance of the sufferings endured by the two Californian tribes. However, this choice of individual portraits creates the issue of a generalizing discourse, that easily leads to draw general conclusions on the life of the whole tribe from a single individual example. This is the case with the portrait of the "Basket Maker" in the ninth chapter. The author writes about her admiration for the art of the basket maker, a Paiute woman who creates baskets and objects with straw. She opens the chapter with a reminder of the violent historical legacy of the tribe:

The Paiutes had made their last stand at the border of the Bitter Lake; battle-driven they died in its waters, and the land filled with cattle-men and adventurers for gold [...]. While the tribes swallowed their defeat, and before the rumor of war died out, they must have come very near to the bare core of things. (Austin, 1903, 55)

The term "war" might refer to the Paiute War of 1860, which was part of the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century in the American West, due to the expansion of the frontier line beyond the Mississippi after the independence. The "cattle-men" and "adventurers for gold" took the ancestral land of the tribes, to make money and find gold, especially after the 1848 discovery of gold in California.

She then focuses on Seyavi, the basket maker, and her "works of art" (56) that were redeveloped "after the pillage" (56), inducing white men's stealing of the tribe's goods and creations. But her discourse on this art is particularly questionable in a postcolonial perspective. Indeed, she compares the Native's life to her own understanding of society, taking Western patterns as the reference:

In our kind of society, when a woman ceases to alter the fashion of her hair, you guess that she has passed the crisis of her experience. [...] The Indian woman gets nearly the same personal note in the pattern of her baskets. (Austin, 1903, 56)

This passage is structured under the form of a comparison, which creates a gap between the two cultures in the representation she makes of the Native woman.

Hints at a form of idealization are also perceptible in her representation: “Seyavi made baskets for love and sold them for money” (56). This sentence recalls the utilitarian feature of art inscribed in a commercial dynamic with white people to survive, which is reinforced by the strong possessive tone of the sentence “coveting them for my own collection” (58), but asserts a certain naïve purity and honesty in the expression “made baskets for love” (56). The same idea is repeated with “before Seyavi made baskets for the satisfaction of desire [...]” (57), which idealizes the activity of the woman as a purely disinterested one, even though she mentioned the financial aspect of it beforehand. The issue of generalization comes back in peremptory assertions like “every Indian woman is an artist, - sees, feels, creates, but does not philosophize about her processes” (56). This sentence raises questions concerning the general conclusion she draws from her observation of Seyavi, and even though Austin had a closer view of the real life of the tribe, her discourse transcribes the impression that every Paiute woman lives like that and only creates baskets in her life. This given representation highly contrasts with the historical and political warning she reminded in the opening of her chapter, but this highlights the great ambiguity of Austin’s writing on the Natives. The other contestable element of the last sentence is the strong echo of the myth of the “Noble Savage” present in the expression “but does not philosophize about her processes”, as if Indian women, not only Seyavi, were not able to think, to question and to have a financial or philosophical aim behind their creations. This is a clear stereotyping portrait, which contrasts with the author’s will to defend Native people. The alternation from the individual portrayal of a person, with her name Seyavi that recalls that she is a real human being, and the shift to a generalizing discourse in “every Indian woman [...] does not philosophize” is counterproductive for her purpose as an author who defends them but above all is questionable in a modern apprehension of cultural oppression Native people lived. Such a discourse is part of a dominant rhetoric that undermines the purpose of defense and undermines the credibility of the tribes as real political organizations with aims and philosophy. This type of passage is part of the creation of the “other” through representation by discursive means, that reminds us of a colonial posture in the depreciating tone. And above all, the individual cannot stand for the representation of the whole community, in a reductive synecdoche. The choice of the individual portrait is legitimate in the perspective of an emotional implication of the reader to raise awareness about the violence of indigenous people’s death, but can not be combined with generalizing passages which draw a biased representation of

the tribe. Ania Loomba asserts, “literary texts are crucial to the formation of colonial discourses precisely because they work imaginatively and upon people as individuals” (Loomba, 1998, 74).

### 3 – Postcolonial Perspective on Colonial Reminiscences

The two occurrences of descriptions of Native people in *LLR*, the medicine-man and the basket maker, present rhetorical traits of a dominant discourse, from a white author on indigenous people. Indeed, Mary Hunter Austin was a white author, who recalls the path of her family as a pioneer one in her autobiography *Earth Horizon*, where she accounts for her transparency as autobiographer: “This is a true report” (Austin, 1932, 33). From the first page, she presents “the leaving of England” of her father (3), and “George Hunter’s entry into the American West” (4). The settler’s greedy attitude towards the land is palpable in this passage:

In 1852 it was reported that good land was still to be had there for the taking. In that year the railroad, inching along from St. Louis to Chicago, completed the span from Alton to Carlinville, and on the first train arrived George Hunter, sharp with the English hunger of land. (Austin, 1932, 7)

This region was considered the West at the time of the early expansion, then extended up to the Pacific coast. The Hunter family later moved to California after Mary’s graduation. This pioneer legacy was present in Mary’s education, with a quite stern mother who forbade her to read Henry David Thoreau, or at least to quote him outside of the house with boys, but whose father encouraged her to read books. Mary Hunter Austin was therefore the first generation of her family to be born in the United States. The pioneer history of her family is not neutral in her perception of the land in the West, in the context of expansionism where the motto was that the Union was limitless, as the frontier appeared to have no end until 1890. This education also had an impact on her perception of Native people, especially with the possessive attitude of the time towards them in the white American society. Despite the fact that her father was a military man who fought in the Civil War in the North for the abolitionist side, her family did not give her a liberal education, especially concerning differences of race. The first time she encountered African Americans in New York, Austin wrote, “I never went back to Harlem, popular as it became to do so. I did not wish to see them back, and I feared that with much looking, it might come upon me. I did not mean to go against the Voice” (Austin, 1932, 348). This fear of blackness is interesting to take into account when analyzing her writing of indigenous people in California, because the Native tribes are part of

the “otherness” for her from a white woman point of view, even though they are not the same people at all from African Americans on the East coast. She set herself in a posture of observer, analyzing of this otherness, from a white standard that took for granted the superiority of the Christian belief in white people, being the racial reference in the world. Despite this rigid and conservative description of her encounter with blackness, she grew in her admiration of Native people, notably because they were oppressed people.

But her posture of a white woman observing other cultures is not to be forgotten when analyzing her writing of Paiute and Shoshone people. She notes in *LLR* the oddity of Native cultures in her gaze, even though she is deeply interested in understanding them. The task of going to meet them and help the American society to understand their culture was a tough one at her time, considering the context of deprecation and contempt of white people against the Natives. Their traditions and activities have not yet really been studied by scientists:

Around the spring, where must have been a gathering place of the tribes, it is scored over with strange pictures and symbols that have no meaning to the Indians of the present day; but out where the rock begins, there is carved into the white heart of it a pointing arrow over the symbol for distance and a circle full of wavy lines reading thus: “In this direction three [units of measurement unknown] is a spring of sweet water; look for it. (Austin, 1903, 20)

The adjective “strange” underlines her difficulty to grasp the meaning of their traces, but more largely denotes the absence of scientific knowledge about these tribes. This is reinforced by the parenthesis “[units of measurement unknown]”, a scientific data that is lacking to understand their mathematical development, as well as the modal “where must have been”, which shows that this sentence is based on an observation that is not grounded on scientific data or deeper exploration. This impression of doubt is also perceptible in the chapter on the medicine-man, where she repeats “As for food, that appears to be chiefly a matter of being willing” (35), and “It seems that most seeds are foodful in the arid regions” (35), a repetition of modulation verbs that imply observations not grounded on scientific research. It also shows that those passages are the fruit of the author’s representation of the tribes’ life, based on her subjective observations. These observations are sometimes mere suppositions: “One supposes the Indians might have learned the use of smoke signals [...] from the tutelage of the earth” (83). Aspects of judgment or contempt on the old existence of tribes and their activities are perceptible in a sentence like “So much has the Indian lost of savageness by merely desisting from killing [...]” (37). The use of the word “savageness” is very strong when writing on Native people, placing the author in a position of a dominant white author

who writes about old savage people, with a hint at animalization already here, in the vein of a colonial or missionary author whose task was to write on the Native tribes and their regressive attitudes in order to evangelize and civilize them, so that they would become human and could be incorporated within the American society.

This colonial attitude is not a detail in her writing, it is patent along the chapters on Native people, but difficult to grasp due to the ambiguity of the author's posture, as these occurrences are mingled with passages that defend their political rights and recall their historical oppression. This attitude is reinforced by direct addresses to the reader in a second person structure, which creates an intellectual bond between the author and the readership of the *Atlantic Monthly*, also mainly white and intellectual: "Then, if they have your speech and you theirs, and have an hour to spare, there are things to be learned of life not set down in any books, folk tales, famine tales" (59). After having mentioned the Natives' oppression by the greedy appetite of white settlers, Austin exhorts her reader to go and meet the same people, in an aim of transmission of knowledge, but with a quite possessive tone. Indeed, she encourages this interest only because "there are things to be learned", with an intellectual attitude of possession of knowledge for the enrichment of the American culture. This exhortation is not moved by a desire of education for protection of their cultures and rights. Austin's position as an author who encourages her readership to go and meet Native people is also present in the following sentence:

Next to spring, the best time to visit Shoshone Land is when the deer-star hangs low and white like a torch over the morning hills. Go up past Winnedumah and down Saline and up again to the rim of Mesquite Valley. Take no tent, but if you will, have an Indian build you a wickiup [...]. (Austin, 1903, 35).

This sentence sounds like a piece of advice to tourists for visiting an endangered land and people. It contrasts with the author's quotation of John Muir<sup>3</sup>, whose environmental stance is to protect endangered species and peoples, by reducing touristic journeys in these lands. It is also the stance of Edward Abbey, who was inspired by Mary H. Austin in his writing. He worked to protect Arches National Park in Utah, and wrote about the touristic industry and its devastating consequences for the habitat in *Desert Solitaire* (1968). So Austin's direct address to her reader to go visit this land contrasts with her first stance of environmental conservation. Besides, the piece of advice "have an Indian build you a wickiup" is questionable in a postcolonial perspective, in the materialistic tone of the sentence that reduces the person to its function as an object. If the expression verges on

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<sup>3</sup>"Hardly anybody takes account of the fact that John Muir, who knows more of mountain storms than any other, is a devout man" (Austin, 1903, 79).

objectification, it also recalls a colonialist discourse of exploitation of Natives' force for the sake of white people's comfort or desire. Added to the passage of Austin "coveting them for [her] own collection" (58), "them" referring to the baskets made by Seyavi, her attitude remains possessive, hinting at an appropriation of the Native's culture, art and force.



## **C – A Defense or the Creation of a Frozen Myth?**

### **1 – The Ambiguity of Her Posture**

Especially in *LLR*, Mary Hunter Austin's writing is highly ambiguous concerning the representation of Native people. Indeed, she wanted to write a defense of Paiute and Shoshone people's rights, but this aim is altered by a patronizing tone that undermines the value of her defense. She creates a construct of the two peoples she describes, who seem frozen in time and apart from the early nineteenth century American society. Despite her desire to live with them, to understand them, their traditions and cultures, she remains a white educated author who lived in the political context of the Conquest of the West, which was marked by the violent oppression of indigenous tribes. A sense of hesitation is palpable in Austin's writing, in this alternation of passages which defend the Natives' cultures and reassess their historical oppression, and passages that deeply contrast in a contemptuous or possessive discourse, sometimes even animalizing indigenous people. This central ambiguity in her writing is to be analyzed deeper.

Dorothy Jewell Altman argues in her thesis *Mary Hunter Austin and the Roles of Women* that "Mary Austin describes the transition from pioneer woman to lady in the life of her grand-mother, Polly McAdams, who was a settler in Illinois" (Altman, 1980, 25). If she experienced "industrialism, democracy, and immigration", "Austin's ancestors" lived "in colonial America before" (Altman, 1979, 3-4). They were colonial people, a legacy which is present in Austin's perception of indigenous people. When she was born in Illinois in 1868, Native people had already been driven out from Illinois: settlers drove the Sauk and Fow tribes off their land in 1831 and murdered them when they tried to return peacefully in 1832. When the Hunters moved to California in the late 1880s, the indigenous population had already suffered a drastic decline, dropping from 110 000 or 130 000 in 1850 to less than 20 000 in the 1880s. This decline was due to multiple factors, but most notably the infectious diseases brought by white settlers, the shock of displacement from their lands and the repression of their way of life, which lowered the birth rate and increased the death rate. Murder against indigenous people was also commonplace, and rarely considered as a crime when committed by a white man on a Native American (Altman, 1979, 166).

One of the sources of Austin's ambiguity in her discourse is the lack of strong and explicit position concerning the political despoliation of the tribes by the American forces along the nineteenth century, added to a lack of condemnation of these white forces that would have made her

posture more limpid. This central tension in Austin's writing between remaining bound to her rigorous education and American society's contemptuous attitude towards indigenous people, and giving a cultural and intellectual place to Native people in her books is at the core of *LLR*, in its passages dealing with the Natives topic. This lack of a clear political position in her writing is perceivable in passages on the food supply of the Natives, in which she does not put responsibilities on the American forces' impact on the stealing of Indians' food supply: "As for food, that appears to be chiefly a matter of being willing. Desert Indians all eat chuckwallas, big black and white lizzards" (Austin, 1903, 35). This sentence erases the violent robbing of food supply by white settlers, for instance the massive extinction of buffaloes that led to great famines among indigenous tribes in the nineteenth century. It also presents their food habits as a generality, through the peremptory phrasing "Desert Indians all eat", an assertion of generalization while she observes individuals. It also erases the famine times the tribes lived when oppressed by settlers, a political issue she notes further on in the book: "in the famine time" (56), but not when writing on their food resources in this chapter. She also represents the Natives as self-sufficient in terms of food resources: "They have the wit to win sustenance from the raw material of life without intervention" (59). This creates an impression of self-sufficiency, thanks to which the Natives would not need political protection from the government to find food, while their resources have been drastically reduced. Therefore, this process removes the responsibility of the political violence from the American government.

Besides, this displacement of the political issue under consideration is seen in the accusation of the Paiutes instead of the American white government. The sentence "Paiutes have the art of reducing life to its lowest ebb and yet saving it alive on grasshoppers, lizzards, and strange herbs" (56) once again erases the central issue of the white American forces which deliberately killed buffaloes so that indigenous people would find no more food to stay alive, a form of indirect extermination. It rather puts the responsibility of that situation on the Paiutes, who "have the art", a strong euphemism, "to reduce life to its lowest ebb", while this situation is the consequence of the violent political agenda against indigenous tribes. The political will to repress indigenous cultures was also developed through the assimilation policy, in order to turn Natives into great American citizens, while abandoning their traditions. In his article on "La voix des femmes amérindiennes : vers une redéfinition de l'indianité à l'Ouest", Augustin Habran presents the assimilation policy in the following words:

Avec l'arrivée à la présidence de Thomas Jefferson, un programme de "civilisation" des Indiens est mis en place par le gouvernement fédéral (ouverture d'écoles et de missions

en terre autochtone, de comptoirs commerciaux (trading posts) où les Indiens peuvent se fournir en matériel et apprendre les méthodes agricoles “modernes”, présence d’agents fédéraux au sein des nations [...]. Il s’agit d’une sorte de mise aux normes des nations autochtones sur le modèle civilisationnel américain qui devait leur permettre, à terme, de devenir des citoyens-fermiers de la république agraire puisqu’à cette époque les autorités américaines pensaient qu’ils pouvaient s’assimiler à la population des Etats-Unis. (Habran, 2016, 143)

That is why the assertion “for now there are no wars” (34) is highly questionable, as even though the Indian Wars were over after 1890, the assimilation policy developed still along the twentieth century was a form of cultural war. That is even a reason why Mary H. Austin wanted to write on indigenous people, in order to maintain the existence of their cultures in the literary scope. This ambiguity is highlighted by the use of the past tense in the following sentence: “According to their traditions and all proper evidence, they were a great people occupying far north and east of their present bounds, driven thence by the Paiutes” (34). The past tense in “were a great people” induces that they are an extinct tribe, which is not the case, or that they lived in the past. The expression “driven thence by the Paiutes” echoes the displacement of the issue in the sentence, accusing the Paiutes in the oppression of Shoshone people, while historically white settlers had much stronger and longer consequences of the life of both tribes. The subjects of the sentence “Between the two tribes is the residuum of old hostilities” (34) are the tribes, with a visible erasure of the governmental actor. There is no explicit mention of hostilities with white people, which is problematic in a postcolonial perspective, as the oppressor is absent from the discourse.

Mary H. Austin therefore draws stereotypical portraits of Native people, either passive or eternal, not set in a precise historical context, away from any political background in the two chapters “Shoshone Land” with the portrait of the medicine-man and “The Basket Maker”, thus creating a myth. This mythologization comes from the creation of a Native archetype, through idealization and passiveness. She recreates a literary and spatial isolation of the tribes among the desert, with a use of the empty land discourse, that she however fought in the opening of her book. Despite the reassessment of real plant and animal life in the Californian desert, she highlighted the vastness of the arid region in which the tribes live: “Eastward the land goes very far by broken ranges, narrow valleys of pure desert, and huge mesas uplifted to the sky-line, east and east, and no man knows the end of it” (33). The opening of the chapter enhances the far location of the tribes, far from the point of view of a white author who belongs to the modern American world, even though she rejects this society:

To reach that country from the campoodie, one goes south and south, within hearing of the lip-lip-lapping of the great tideless lake, and south by east over a high rolling district, miles and miles of sage and nothing else. (Austin, 1903, 32)

The impression of remoteness is created by the accumulation of clauses in the sentence juxtaposed by commas, and the repetition of directions and distances, “south and south”, “south by east”, “miles and miles”, in a ternary rhythm which creates a lyrical Romantic setting, while the reality is a separation from other human presence. The sentence “On the very edge of the black rock the earth falls away in a wide sweeping hollow, which is Shoshone Land” (32) reuses the discourse of the empty land, the tribe leaving in a “wide sweeping hollow”, an image of void that reinforces the spatial, cultural and political isolation of the tribes from other human presence. The vastness of the land might indicate a sense of serenity: “This is the sense of the desert hills, that there is room enough and time enough” (33), but only with the obliteration of the colonial cause of this isolation. A form of animalization is already perceivable in the sentence “they travel much and far [...], but they are not more lonely than any other creatures that inhabit there” (33), in the comparison with “other creatures” from the desert, implying that they are part of these creatures too. It also asserts their isolation in the very word “lonely”. The medicine-man is also described as a lonely man, a Shoshone “hostage” among the Paiutes (32) who lives alone in the desert:

The medicine-man went apart on the mountains to gather herbs, and when he came again I knew by the new fortitude of his countenance and the new color of his reminiscences that he had been alone and unspied upon in Shoshone Land. (Austin, 1903, 32)

This dynamic of isolation in the text might have been done in order to enhance the tribes’ isolation from the political world in a condemning tone towards the government, blaming the deliberate rejection of indigenous people, but in this chapter it rather reinforces the idea that they do not have any political organization that is suitable with the modern urban American life.

Mary H. Austin grounds her writing of indigenous people on her experience with them, but also on second-hand information coming from indigenous sources: “the medicine-man told me [...] they sighted a Paiute hunting party” (35). The frequency of the verbal form “told me” or equivalents in the text underlines this dynamic of re-writing what she heard, what she has been told by people, even though this process of going to talk with them to understand their culture is new and praiseworthy in American literature. But these second-hand sources confirm that Austin wrote her representation of Native people from her observation and thanks to these factual second-hand sources, a subjective representation transformed into a discourse.

## 2 – The Native American as a Construct

As analyzed before, despite Mary H. Austin's interest in understanding and protecting indigenous people because they are oppressed by the political structure and the historical legacy in the United States, she developed a white discourse on them that recalls her own legacy as the daughter of a settler whose social context was the Conquest of the West, the Indian wars and the assimilation policy. Dorothy Jewell Altman argued that "Austin's works protest the maltreatment of Indians by whites, but more important, they present a favorable view of Indian character and culture" (Altman, 1979, 171). This last statement is really questionable in the light of postcolonial findings and recent sociological and ethnological new fields. Even though

As she came to know and respect Indians, her indignation increased, and she championed Indian rights through personal protest and by presenting a positive view of Indian character and culture in her writings. She became not only a defender of the Indians, but an ardent admirer. (Altman, 1979, 166)

she rather considered indigenous people as examples for a model of American life closer to nature and more respectful of spiritual beliefs and different ways of life: "Indian women furnished Austin with a primitive ideal which strengthened her feminist beliefs and provided a model for the New Woman" (Altman, 1979, 185). This "primitive ideal", a strong expression fueled with colonial connotations, leads to the analysis of Austin's passages on Native people as a construction of the myth of the "Noble Savage".

Ania Loomba declared in her work on postcolonialism that "anthropological studies rested upon the assumption that non-European peoples were backward, primitive, quaint, sometimes even 'noble', but always different from the products of Western civilization" (Loomba, 1998, 48). Postcolonial studies are in this case used in the project of reading literary texts with an eye which knows colonialism, or colonialist dynamics at work against indigenous people in the U.S.A. along the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1903, the Indian Wars were over, and Austin knew the deeds of the American forces against the tribes, as well as the extermination and assimilation policy. That is why her ambiguous writing of the Natives is relevant to be analyzed through a postcolonial lens, to highlight the inconsistencies in her discourse but also her creation of a mythical Native American who lives close to nature, in her environmental stance of natural protection, but written more in favor of nature than tribes.

The myth of the “noble savage” appeared in Montaigne’s *Essays* in the sixteenth century, even though the term in French was not precisely used, but the notion was already present. It was later developed in the eighteenth century with Rousseau’s philosophy of the human “natural state” in *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, which drew the portrait of the ideal man before the corruption that the societal order gave to humans, still with no mention of the exact term:

Tel qu’il a dû sortir des mains de la Nature, je vois un animal [...]: Je le vois se rassasiant sous un chêne, se désaltérant au premier Ruisseau, trouvant son lit au pied du même arbre qui lui a fourni son repas, et voilà ses besoins satisfaits. [...] Forcés de défendre nus et sans armes leur vie et leur Proie contre les autres Bêtes féroces. (Rousseau, 1755, 70)

Rousseau opposed the theoretical “homme sauvage” to the modern “homme civilisé” (Rousseau, 1755, 71). He employed the image of the noble savage to develop his theoretical philosophy of the human “natural state”, but did not see the noble savage archetype present in his contemporary modern world. In his article “The Ecologically Noble Savage Debate”, Raymond Hames presents:

According to Ellingson (2001), in his aptly titled book *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, the term noble savage was first used in English by Dryden in 1672 but originated from the New World writings of the French explorer Lescarbot in 1609. For a variety of reasons examined by Ellingson it became incorrectly associated with Rousseau and served as a critique of the modern European society. (Hames, 2007, 179-180)

This modern critique was developed at the expense of indigenous people, who were stigmatized as inferior people and later oppressed because of this biased dominant representation. Dr. Elsie Murray describes the archetype in the 1933 article “The ‘Noble Savage’” in these terms:

The naïve faith in the ‘natural man’ [...]. The strange obsession that, uncorrupted by kings, clothes, parliaments, printing or ceramics, man was or would be a wholly admirable creature (Murray, 1933, 253)

This imagery was developed during the early settlement on the American East coast. The myth of the “noble savage”, “le mythe du bon sauvage” in French philosophical terms, is the belief in the existence of a primitive, pure, ideal, virgin state of human life, not yet corrupted by society in Rousseau’s terms, or rather ready to be civilized in colonialist terms, so that they would become real humans, as they stayed in the state of animality in an imperialist perspective. Concerning the

mythologizing process of Native Americans as noble savages, Claude Fohlen includes environmental writers in the group of dominant authors who perpetuated this fantasized imagery:

Avant même cette invasion culturelle, le bon sauvage, ancêtre de l'Indien, tenait une place de choix dans la littérature philosophique du XVIIIe siècle et proposait à l'homme civilisé un modèle estimé supérieur parce que non corrompu par son milieu, mythe que les écologistes tentent de faire revivre en cette fin e siècle sous des formes différentes, mais avec le même supposé non démontré, que le progrès technique ne peut que corrompre. (Fohlen, 1999, 3-4)

Bertrand Levergeois presents in "Le mythe de l'Ouest" that the Native American has been seen as

L'Indien, cet Autre absolu que les Français appelleront "sauvage" jusqu'au XIXe siècle. [...] Puis, le sauvage va se dédoubler en noble héros d'un Paradis perdu, si cher à Montaigne et à Rousseau, sans parler plus tard de James Fenimore Cooper, et en ignoble cannibale [...]. (Levergeois, 2008, 119)

Howard Zinn, an American historian who developed a new humanist approach of American history in his grounding work *A People's History of the United States*, reads in Columbus' words the appearance of this myth, through the domination of their culture and the later contemptuous discourse of the settlers on Natives, who must be civilized to enter the American society as citizens (Zinn, 1980, 1-22). This dynamic is also present in the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which put an ultimatum to Native people: either to abandon their indigenous culture and dissolve in the white modern American life (an echo of the civilizing mission) or to leave their land and be rejected from the territory, placed under force in remote reservations. Philippe Jacquin reassesses the violence of the reservation policy:

Depuis l'époque coloniale, la politique des réserves a été utilisée pour spolier les Indiens, elle permet de les circonscrire à un espace et donc de les surveiller. Dans l'Ouest, les colons se satisfont des réserves et les Indiens ne sont plus une menace. De plus ils sont entre les mains des missionnaires et des agents. (Jacquin, 1997, 117)

The myth of the "noble savage" reduces the indigenous individual to his or her physical appearance, his or her manual activities, lack of intellectual thinking, animality and sexual appetite, or even cannibalism, instinct and savageness, compared to the perspective of the white educated author, enlightened by philosophy since the eighteenth century, respectable due to his religious beliefs and piety. Several of these characteristics are found in Austin's writing, despite her desire to make their culture known and protected.

Both the medicine-man and the basket maker are presented through their physical and manual activities, not really as persons who have a family life, a personal, emotional life, but only through their utility among the tribe: “so sang Seyavi of the campoodie before she made baskets” (58). Seyavi is also presented through her physical appearance, “she was then in the quick maturity of primitive women” (59), with the assertion of primitivism that is a very strong hierarchical word. The combination of her activities, singing and the creation of baskets, and her appearance of primitivism, echoes the myth of the noble savage, in a form of idealization that does not correspond to the complete scope of her individual personality.

The most striking element of this mythologization is the process of animalization at work in the comparative descriptions of indigenous people. Before that, they are compared to plants or natural elements, which erases their existence as real human beings, yet at the core of Austin’s aim: “The Shoshones live like their trees [...] in pairs and in family groups” (33). This comparison induces both a closeness of the tribe to nature, and a complete obliteration of their political life as human beings, who need to be taken into account at a federal level. The following passage develops the same comparison, with again a generalization:

The solitariness of the life breeds in the men, as in the plants, a certain wellroundedness and sufficiency to its own ends. Any Shoshone family has in itself the man-seed, power to multiply and replenish, potentialities for food and clothing and shelter, for healing and beautifying. (Austin, 1903, 34)

The comparative structure “as in the plants” puts men and plants on the same footing, which is relevant in the perspective of reassessing the indigenous people’s closeness to nature, but questionable in a political claim of equality within the human society. The common generalization of “Any Shoshone family”, coming from a second-hand source is again debatable when drawn from the observation at an individual scale. But this passage also holds the myth of a divine profusion of powers present among the Shoshones, “the power to multiply and replenish”, with a vocabulary that could be applied to an animal or plant species. Once again, the “power” for “potentialities for food” creates the impression of self-sufficiency, which obliterates the importance of a political care for their food supply, considering the famines they had to suffer from, due to white colonialism. The ability for “healing and beautifying” is presented as an inherent value of the tribe, but these potentialities have only been developed when facing the oppression by white settlers, the violence of war which implied healing.



The process of animalization is perceivable in multiple comparisons of indigenous people with animals, put on the same footing, which does not consider the Natives as real human beings, an ethical issue at the core of those passages:

Young Shoshones are like young quail, knowing without teaching about feeding and hiding, and learning what civilized children never learn, to be still and to keep on being still, at the first hint of danger or strangeness. (Austin, 1903, 35)

The comparison implies a state of equality between the animal and the human, which is not politically true, but above all enables to develop a discourse of political rejection of the tribes, being considered as part of the desert fauna, with no interest for the American society. The passage also presents a sense of inherent capacity of the tribe to find food, which is historically arguable as aforementioned. The animalization is also patent in the vocabulary employed, which recalls the description of an animal species, not of a human being with emotions and a particular history, in this case of oppression: “at the first hint of danger of strangeness” reminds us of the instinctive reactions of a wild animal, especially reinforced here by the contrast with the “civilized children”, directly implying that indigenous children are not civilized. In this expression, Austin sets herself in the position of a white author who develops a dominant discourse, establishing a hierarchy between the “civilized” and the implicit savages. This assertion that indigenous people are not civilized is a controversial issue from a postcolonial perspective, because it implies that these people are animals, and therefore not worthy of a serious political consideration. Animalization is also developed through parallel structures, under the following form: “Both the Shoshones and the coyotes are fond of the flesh of *Gopherus agassizii*, the turtle” (35). This parallelism between the Shoshones and the coyotes, between men and animals, certainly underlines the proximity between the two, but above all reduces the Shoshones to their food and their bestiality, compared to coyotes which are the epitome of the wild creature of the desert. The description through food also reminds us of the description of an animal species. This parallelism is also perceivable in the chapter on the basket maker: “There used to be in Little Antelope a she dog, stray and outcast [...], remembering and mistrusting humankind [...]. I have thought Seyavi might have had days like that” (56). The expression “I have thought” with the modal “might” implies that the comparative image created is the very representation of the author, depicting Seyavi through her gaze as a rejected she dog.

Besides, the myth of the noble savage is developed through the creation of passiveness in the portraits of Natives, linked to purity and a lack of intellectual thinking. In the sentence “Very early the Indian learns to possess his countenance in impassivity” (59), the author promotes the

image of indigenous people as passive, impassive, calm and emotionless people. This representation does not reflect the scope of human feelings, emotions and personalities present among the Natives. Presented only through their activities, they appear as manual and physical people, not at all intellectual or political:

After the pinon harvest the clans foregather on a warm southward slope for the annual adjustment of tribal difficulties and the medicine dance, for marriage and mourning and vengeance, and the exchange of serviceable information (Austin, 1903, 33)

The individual's value is only described according to his or her occupation in the tribe, which gives him or her a particular status. The general atmosphere of these two chapters is centered on the representation of indigenous people as an old-time people, living in the eighteenth century or even before, dancing and throwing arrows: "Still by the springs one finds the cunning brush shelters from which the Shoshones shot arrows at them when the doves came to drink" (34). This representation does not render a full picture of their social organization in the early twentieth century. This aspect mingled with the lack of social and political organization in the tribe creates a stereotypical portrait: "there was now no order in the tribe" (32), and "their shelters are lightly built, for they travel much and far" (33). The archetypal descriptions also present a lack of reflection among indigenous people: "Every Indian woman is an artist, - sees, feels, creates, but does not philosophize about her processes" (56). The stereotype is generalized as every Indian woman would be only a physical being with sensations and feelings, but not emotions, personality, and intellectual faculties. It creates a mythical representation, linked to the idea of passivity. It even goes beyond that, with the affirmation that Native people were still happy and naïve, even after the despoliation they knew:

Here, all along the river, and south to Shoshone Land, live the clans who owned the earth, fallen into the deplorable condition of hangers-on. Yet you hear them laughing at the hour when they draw in to the campoodie after labor (Austin, 1903, 58)

Despite the condemnation of the despoliation of the land the Shoshones suffered from due to the white men's expansion, the transition "yet" induces in the sentence a shift, praising the intrinsic value of the tribesmen who kept on "laughing" after "labor", thus diminishing the impact of the blaming as the indigenous people are supposedly still happy. The same dynamic is readable in the sentence "Before Seyavi made baskets for the satisfaction of desire [...] she danced and dressed her hair" (57). Indeed, once again represented through her manual and physical activities, Seyavi seems passively happy in her work, in a naïve image of self-sufficiency for her own happiness.

The noble savage is very often represented as living close to nature, in accordance with the natural elements on which he relies for his survival, but in a really Romantic and naïve dynamic. In *LLR*, indigenous people are characterized by their proximity with nature, especially the medicine-man who works and lives thanks to the healing plants he knows. He is sentenced to death after three people of the campoodie died because he did not manage to heal them, victims of white men's diseases (36). The medicine-man who "gather[s] herbs" (32) is the epitome of the archetypal representation of the "primitive" hunter-gatherer (59) who lives close to nature. Besides, the Paiute basket woman lives in accordance with the seasons:

The Paiute fashion of counting time appeals to me more than any other calendar. They have no stamp of heathen gods nor great ones, nor any succession of moons as have red men of the East and North, but count forward and back by the progress of the season [...]. So they get nearer the sense of the season. (Austin, 1903, 57)

The admiration for this indigenous way of life closer to natural elements than the modern urban American life is expressed in hyperbolic terms which verge on idealization. They are represented as people who respect nature, in contrast with the white men's society who pollutes it, for instance with "tin cans" (25). This idea is reinforced by the divine profusion of powers over nature aforementioned, with the easiness to find food and make nature "multiply and replenish" (34). A religious echo to the Garden of Eden is present in this passage: "When the rain is over and gone they are stirred by the instinct of those that journeyed eastward from Eden, and go up each with his mate and young brood, like birds to old nesting places" (34). This sentence adds animalization in the comparison with birds and the structure of the descriptive vocabulary, reminding a scientific observation of a species, to the instinctive attribute of indigenous people, thus dehumanizing them. This process of dehumanization is ethically questionable in a postcolonial perspective, especially in a text whose aim is to enhance the indigenous culture and protect it. Recent findings in anthropology, ethnology and modern ecology show that Native people were not necessarily protective to nature, but the balance rather came from their low population rate and the absence of national or international trade. That is what the article "The Ecologically Noble Savage Debate" argues:

The idea that native peoples lived in harmony with the environment was reinforced indirectly in the field of cultural ecology through the energy flow theory of Odum (1972) and others who argued that ecosystems were tightly organized systems that tended toward equilibrium or stability. [...] The idea of indigenous harmony also made cursory empirical sense. Most environmental degradation was caused by state societies, whereas tribal peoples tucked away in tropical rainforests or deserts were seen as having

little negative impact on the environment (Borgerhoff Mulder & Coppolillo 2005). [...] Revisionism perhaps reached a tipping point in 1991 with the publication of Redford's (1991) "The Ecologically Noble Savage," in which he declared that the idea of deliberate conservation by native peoples was a myth [...]. Conservation of natural resources by native people either did not occur or was a side effect of low population density, simple technology, and lack of external markets to spur over-exploitation (Hunn, 1982). (Hames, 2007, 179-180)

### **3 – Both a Defense and a Myth**

The central postural ambiguity at work in the text of *LLR* is the element that induces both a defense of Native people and their culture, and a mythologizing process through the use of imaginary myths, stereotypical images and fictionalization. The ambiguity in Austin's discourse is that all the analyzed occurrences of stereotyping are preceded or followed by a blame of colonialism and its oppressing violence, inducing mass extinction, death of individuals, plagues and famines. The dichotomy between both dynamics creates a disturbing impression in a postcolonial view.

One example of this process is the passage on the basket women who dance and sing, which defends the indigenous cultural traditions, and at the same time creates archetypal figures close to the noble savage imagery. If "so much has the Indian lost of savageness" (37), they are still depicted as perpetuating tribal traditions like dancing and singing, in very naïve words:

The maids chose their flowers, wreathed themselves, and danced in the twilights, young desire crying out to young desire. They sang what the heart prompted, what the flower expressed [...]. "And what flower did you wear, Seyavi?" "I, ah, - the white flower of twining (clematis), on my body and my hair, and so I sang: - "I am the white flower of twining, / Little white flower by the river, / Oh, flower that twines close by the river; / Oh, trembling flower! / So trembles the maiden heart." (Austin, 1903, 57)

The direct discourse is artificially reproduced in the writing afterward the action, thus implying the subjective and intimate understanding of the tradition by the author. This is perceivable in the descriptive accumulation of active verbs, depicting the actions from an attentive and curious eye, which appears quite neutral, but the end of the first sentence contrasts this impression: "young desire crying out to young desire" reflects a description of the dancers only through their desire, which might be sexual, so it is a description of indigenous people characterized by their sexual appetite, still pure because "young", but this is not a neutral representation, reminding a noble savage imagery, reinforced by the physical descriptive images "on my body and my hair". Then, the

hyperbolic tone of the verses “Oh, trembling flower! / So trembles the maiden heart.” with the lyrical Romantic apostrophe “Oh” and the exclamation mark induces an idealization of this dancing tradition, which underlines the idea of fragility and passiveness of indigenous women with the strong repetitive form “trembling”, “trembles”. Dehumanization is also palpable in the comparison between the woman and the flower: the main subject in the poem is the flower, with the three explicit repetitions of the “white flower” in a ternary rhythm. But the verse “I am the white flower” displaces the subject and makes the woman passive, becoming an inanimate flower, therefore erasing her agency. She is then characterized by the “maiden heart”, being reduced to her lyrical loving organ and her married status in a synecdoque structure which once again dehumanizes her. A Christian intertext can also be read in the symbolical purity of the white flower, traditionally associated with marriage for its metaphorical value of the bride’s virginity. This imagery is associated with the ideal of the supposedly natural pure femininity, from the viewpoint of a white American author, who asserts that she writes “from the east, my country” (61), her reference, her norm from which she developed her representation of the “other”, indigenous people.

All these analyzed devices in her discourse create a form of mythologization, which enables her to write a praise of Natives’ presence still in twentieth century U.S.A., but in stereotypical words. The imagery of the “noble savage” clearly became a myth since the period of settlement in the United States, and was later developed during the Westward expansion with the encounter of new supposedly “savage” tribes.

The recourse to postcolonial ecocriticism is relevant here. It is a branch of environmental humanities criticism which analyzes especially in literary texts the link between the environmental stance and the postcolonial stance, combining approaches of nature and indigenous or minority peoples. Its main discourse is that colonialism first oppressed Native people, but also destroyed the land, including forests, deserts, ecosystems and animals. That is the posture of Mary H. Austin in *LLR*. In theoretical criticism, the postcolonial domain adds a social and political background and understanding to ecocriticism, in its analysis of environmental writing. It is a way of reading literary texts and of analyzing them in the desire to protect nature, wilderness, and to promote the rights of abused animals and peoples. In their work in this field entitled *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin defined: “Accordingly, postcolonial ecocriticism preserves the aesthetic function of a literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness” (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, 14). They deplored the “deployment of animals and the animalistic to destroy or marginalise other human societies” (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, 152):

First, human individuals and cultures at various times have been and are treated “like animals” by dominant groups, and both human slavery and human genocide have been, and in some cases continue to be, predicated on the categorisation of other peoples as animals. (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, 152)

The political aspect of animalization is to be questioned when put in perspective through a postcolonial lens. Indeed, animalization induces objectification, therefore dehumanization. Postcolonial ecocriticism argues that it is no more possible to consider human beings like elements from the land, either vegetable or animal. Indigenous people have cultures, emotions, personalities and intimate lives which derive from their historical past.

A historical resetting is needed to counterbalance the subjective representation of indigenous people in the author’s gaze, above all in the perspective of being a “mere reporter” in writing the reality of the land and tribes. Writing in 1903, Austin lived in the aftermath of the nineteenth century Indian Wars; the tensions between the American forces and the tribes were at this time “pacified” according to the government. Philippe Jacquin recalls the official statement: “en octobre 1883, le Général Sherman envoie un rapport au secrétaire d’Etat à la Guerre: ‘I now regard the Indians as substantially eliminated from the problem of the Army’ (Prucha 1984, 560)” (Jacquin, 1997, 108).

Austin was aware of this historical background of domination, followed by the assimilation policy during her time, with reservations, a word that only appears once in the book. It was the time of the end of the broken treaties with Indians, who did not represent a threat for white expansion anymore, as the Frontier line was reached. The process of assimilation continued with the project of Americanization in schools and society, which was a new form of violence, as well as the interdiction of indigenous traditions, still described as strange in “The Basket Maker”. After 1887 with the General Allotment Act that marked the end of the reservations, indigenous lands were attributed to proprietors by the General Land Office, which marked the epitome of dispossession for Native people.

### Chapter III – Subjective Fictionalization as an Ethos

The parallel analysis of *LLR* and *LB* presents the particularity of two different forms of literary writing: non-fiction and fiction. However, despite the author's assertion that *LLR* is a non-fiction work, the previous analyses developed in this work demonstrated that she incorporates subjective observations of the desert and its people, verging on fictionalization through an imaginative imagery. This process of fictionalization adds a real literary value to her work, marked with symbolical, poetical, metaphorical images as well as a religious intertext which gives a deeper substance to the description of life in the Great Basin desert. However, this creation of fixed images or imagined stereotypes is to be questioned concerning the Native people she describes. But in *LB*, fiction helps the author to develop her ethical stance of reassessing Natives' value within the American society.

## **A – The Ambiguity of Explicit Imagination in *Lost Borders*, and Implicit Fictionalization in *The Land of Little Rain*.**

Each author develops his or her ethos, his or her ethical or literary posture through the text. The Oxford Learners' Dictionary defines the ethos as "the moral ideas and attitudes that belong to a particular group, society or person" ("Ethos"). In the literary field, the ethos is the posture of the author, first his or her ethical position concerning social or political topics, but more importantly his or her attitude towards the text and towards the reader. In these two texts, Mary Hunter Austin presents the ethos of the author of the American West, which incorporates her within the literary scope of her time, among the writers of the West. Beyond that, she develops the ethos of the environmental or nature writer, who writes in favor of the preservation of natural life and ecosystems. In both works, she also develops the ethos of the politically and socially committed author in favor of the Native Americans' rights. This feature has been previously nuanced, regarding precise elements from the texts, with a certain vocabulary and syntax which pertain to a colonial discourse, in Foucault's use of the notion, reemployed and developed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*.

Concerning her writing of the West, and especially of the Californian desert of the Great Basin, Mary H. Austin developed the ethos of the realistic author, whose aim was to transcribe the reality of the place and people, to be a "mere recorder": "You see in me a mere recorder" (Austin, 1903, 40). Linked to the ethos of the author who writes while walking, this position reflects the desire to write a realistic text in order to spread the knowledge about the region within the American culture, a place described as full of resources and a land of great value for animals and people. On the contrary, there is no such mention of a non-fiction aim in *LB*, presented under the form of short stories marked with imaginative story lines and fictional characters. However, this clear-cut separation is not as easy as it seems in both works. The central ambiguity in her stylistic position blurs her discourse.

### **1 – *Lost Borders*, the Assertion of a Fictional Work**

Mary Hunter Austin opens *LB* with a disturbing first chapter, which is difficult to call a short story, supposed to be fictional. Indeed, it stands as an introduction to the following stories, under the title "The Land", in which she employs a direct address to her reader. She opens her book with a non-fiction part, already presented as a story, which blurs the stylistic choice in the reader's mind.



This opening sounds like passages from *LLR*, very descriptive and informative concerning “The Land” and Native people:

When the Paiute nations broke westward through the Sierra wall they cut off a remnant of the Shoshones, and forced them south as far as Death Valley [...] established themselves along the snow-fed Sierra creeks. (Austin, 1909, 1)

The accusation of Paiute people is once again present, inducing the historical erasure of white men’s break into the region. This opening paragraph is highly descriptive in an ethnological tone, which presents Native people as part of “The Land”. This is a surprising opening in the place of a fictional work’s incipit. This sets the tone for the whole book, with the blurring of the frontier between fiction and non-fiction, one of the “Lost Borders”. The recourse to meta-discourse is patent in this first text, inscribing the reader in a reading pact with the author: “I will make a story” (7), and “That is why in all that follows I have set down what the Borderers thought and felt” (6). This comment about the following text creates a non-fictional meta-discourse about the fictional stories, thus taking a step back from the literary contractual “willing suspension of disbelief” in the reader when reading a fictional work, according to Coleridge’s words in *Biographia Literaria*. This step back taken by the reader is important to mark a division between the real and the fictional information, notably in the context about indigenous people. But the blurring here between the two stylistic modes and the assertion made to tell the story of these people then creates a mythical imagery of Native people, the descriptions being presented as real facts, even though in the form of a “story” (7), but it erases the distance a fiction needs to be read. Fiction is considered as the realm of imagination, defined as a clear creation of literary images and metaphors, with no need to stick to reality. Indeed, the Oxford Learners’ Dictionary defines fiction as “a type of literature that describes imaginary people and events, not real ones” (“Fiction”), contrary to non-fiction, which relates to “books, articles or texts about real facts, people and events” (“Non-fiction”). It is generally accepted in the literary scope that fiction does not represent real life persons. Even landscapes are the product of the author’s imagination. Therefore, this definition might induce questions concerning the blurring of Austin’s reality in her texts. Indeed, the non-fictional opening of *LB* marks the desire to write about real life and to tell the real story of indigenous people, while she creates an imaginary representation of them, which is arguable when dealing with real life people who have been and are still politically oppressed.

## 2 – *The Land of Little Rain*, Presented as Non-Fiction about the West

On the contrary, *LLR* is presented as a non-fictional work, in which Austin sets herself in the ethos of a “mere recorder” and transcriber of reality (40). Therefore, the notion of “horizon d’attente” of the reader is tackled, a notion developed by Hans Robert Jauss in his 1972 grounding work *Pour une esthétique de la réception*. Jauss expands the reception theory field of criticism, centered on the effect of a text on the reader, notably reusing the notion of “horizon d’attente” which comes from the philosopher Edmund Husserl. “L’horizon d’attente” is easily defined as the expectation of a reader when he or she opens a book, according to the literary genre of the text and his or her personal understanding of each genre’s features. If the text is presented as fiction, the reader engages with the text according to his or her references of what a fictional text is for him or her, thanks to his or her past experiences. Inès Oseki-Dépré quotes Jauss in her article “Parallèle et horizon d’attente”:

Si l’on admet avec Jauss, après Gadamer, qu’il s’agit là d’un “ensemble d’attentes et des règles du jeu avec lesquelles les oeuvres antérieures ont familiarisé le lecteur et qui, au fil de la lecture, seront modulées, corrigées, modifiées ou simplement reproduites”. (Oseki-Dépré, 2001, 275)

This definition, even though noting that the reader is able to adapt himself or herself to the particularities of the text, argues that the reader generally “reproduces” the expectation coming from his or her previous experiences of the genre. The teacher and researcher Martine Marzloff argues in her article on Jauss on the Institut Français de l’Education website that a literary work is always set in the path or in contrast with the tradition of the genre:

La notion d’horizon d’attente, qui vient de Husserl, joue un rôle essentiel dans la théorie de la réception : pour comprendre l’effet d’une oeuvre, il est nécessaire de reconnaître l’horizon antécédent avec ses valeurs. En effet, une oeuvre se situe en continuité ou en rupture par rapport à une tradition et l’expérience des lecteurs renvoie à la perception d’une conformité ou d’un écart par rapport à cette tradition. (Marzloff, 1)

Austin, when she argues that she is a “mere recorder” (40) of people and landscapes in *LLR*, and opens both of her works with ethnological data on the land and its inhabitants, creates the “horizon d’attente” of a realistic reading for her readership, encouraging the reader to read the text as factual information on the reality of the land, which is problematic in a postcolonial perspective when dealing with oppressed people in archetypal and imaginative words. However, concerning the

creation of symbolical and poetical images about the landscape, it reinforces the literary feature of her text, yet it can not be presented as a realistic one. This creative aspect is part of her mythologizing process of the desert. Besides, Nasrullah Mambrol argues in the article on “Reception Theory” that Jauss reassesses the importance of history within literary texts:

Jauss’s explicit aim was to reintroduce the issue of history into the study of literature. Jauss reacted to three different ways of referring to history in literary studies: an idealist conception of history as a theology; the positivist bias of nineteenth-century historicism, which has to forgo questions of relevance in order to save objectivity [...]. (Mambrol, 2020, 1)

### **3 – Historical Background of the Fiction**

Indeed, in *LLR*, the absence of clear historical resetting is prejudicial to Austin’s ethical stance of defense of indigenous people. It creates the myth of an archetypal Native American not set in any political or social context, living in an unhistorical almost virgin land, whose landscape is even mystified through religious echoes. Fiction is relevant to transmit strong emotions, especially in the perspective of defending minority people. But it works more easily when the text is presented as fiction from the opening, while in *LLR* and *LB* the stylistic genre of fiction is blurred from the two ethnological openings.

Especially *LLR* would have needed a more detailed historical background, due to the assertion of a realistic text on Native people and their Californian land. Howard Zinn comes back on the American Expansion period throughout the nineteenth century in his 1980 work *A People’s History of the United States*. He reassesses the violence which derived from the 1830 Indian Removal Act:

And so, Indian Removal, as it has been politically called, cleared the land for white occupancy between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, cleared it for cotton in the South and grain in the North, for expansion, immigration, canals, railroads, new cities, and the building of a huge continental empire clear across to the Pacific Ocean. The cost in human life cannot be accurately measured, in suffering not even roughly measured. Most of the history books given to children pass quickly over it. (Zinn, 2015, 125)

The last sentence highlights the erasure of indigenous history from the white American society, even in schools until entering specialized studies on the subject in university. Austin witnessed the inheritance of such a racist policy, as the westward tribes were the last to still live in the desert at

the end of the nineteenth century: “In 1820, 120,000 Indians lived east of the Mississippi. By 1844, fewer than 30,000 were left. Most of them had been forced to migrate westward. But the word “force” cannot convey what happened” (Zinn, 2015, 125). The article on the Indian Removal Act from the Encyclopedia Britannica recalls that it was president Jefferson (1829-1837) who promoted this policy. Howard Zinn recalls of the hypocritical and violent structure of domination, through a cultural extermination:

The proper tactic had now been found. The Indians would not be “forced” to go West. But if they chose to stay they would have to abide by state laws, which destroyed their tribal and personal rights and made them subject to endless harassment and invasion by white settlers coveting their land. If they left, however, the federal government would give them financial support and promise them lands beyond the Mississippi. (Zinn, 2015, 133)

This expansion era took end with the political assertion that the end of the Frontier line was finally reached: “The year of the massacre at Wounded Knee, 1890, it was officially declared by the Bureau of the Census that the internal frontier was closed” (Zinn, 2015, 297). The work of Philippe Jacquin, *La Politique indienne des Etats-Unis (1830-1890)*, a French teacher and researcher in American studies, presents that “Les Indiens sont restés longtemps absents de l’histoire américaine, ou du moins leur présence s’est-elle limitée à un ‘second rôle’, souvent celui du ‘sauvage’” (Jacquin, 1997, 13). This historical erasure is even more important with the diffusion of the myth of the noble savage in literary works. Yet in *LB*, Austin presents a part of the oppression in the stories of marriage between a white settler and a Native woman, as in “A Case of Conscience”, in which the Native woman is granted agency as she crosses the desert to find her stolen baby.

## **B – A Literary Work, with Distanciation from a Pure Scientific Description**

The analyzed descriptions of landscapes and indigenous people which verge on idealization take away the historical context of the text, which is yet important to grasp the political reality of oppression, both for nature and people, but enables the text to take a more poetical and symbolical value. Fiction is in this perspective a legitimate choice to paint a fantasized portrait of the land, under the form of an ekphrasis.

### **1 – The Issue of Austin’s Ambiguous Posture**

The central tension between non-fiction and fiction in both works blurs the frontier between imagination and what indigenous people really lived, as well as what the land really looked like in the early nineteenth century. Austin plays with reality, even in *LB* which is supposedly composed of fictional short stories. The meta-discourse in the first text plays with the announcement of fiction coming in the following short stories:

Out there where the borders of conscience break down, where there is no convention, and behaviour is of little account except as it gets you your desire, almost anything might happen, does happen, in fact, though I shall have trouble making you believe it. (Austin, 1909, 3)

The first-person narrative recalls the same stylistic device of narration as in *LLR*, implying a direct address to the reader in the second person pronoun “you”, creating the ethos of an author directly talking to her reader without the mediation of fiction. However, these direct passages enter in alternation with fictionalized passages, which creates a blurring impression: “that region of mysterious desertness” (2) is already described in highly lyrical and poetical words:

Shall the tender opal mist betray you? The airy depth of mountain blueness, the blazonry of painted wind-scoured buttes, the far peaks molten with the alpen glow, cooled by the rising of the velvet violet twilight tide, and the leagues and leagues of stars? (Austin, 1909, 10)

The allusion to a “painted” landscape is also commonplace in *LLR*, since the opening of the text: “There are hills, rounded, blunt, burned, squeezed up out of chaos, chrome and vermilion painted, aspiring to the snowline” (Austin, 1903, 9). The “country of the painted hills” (Austin, 1903, 32) is

therefore imagined with either a human or divine creative feature, implying a step back from the “mere recorder” posture yet advanced in the chapter on Jimville (40). The notion of imagined representation is analyzed in the light of the definition of “l’imaginaire” from Jean-Jacques Wunenburger in *L’Imaginaire* (2003):

Nous conviendrons donc d’appeler imaginaire un ensemble de productions, mentales ou matérialisées dans des œuvres, à base d’images visuelles (tableau, dessin, photographie) et langagières (métaphore, symbole, récit), formant des ensembles cohérents et dynamiques, qui relèvent d’une fonction symbolique au sens d’un emboîtement de sens propres et figurés. (Wunenburger, 2003, 10)

The blurring impression comes from the same notion of the “horizon d’attente”, defined by Antoine Compagnon in *Le démon de la théorie* in the following terms: “l’ensemble des conventions qui constituent la compétence d’un lecteur (ou d’une classe de lecteurs) à un moment donné, le système de normes définissant une génération historique” (Compagnon, 1998, 184). As the reader is expecting to read a non-fiction text in *LLR*, he or she is surprised by the fictionalized landscape and the mythologization of indigenous people, whereas expecting a fictional work in *LB*, the reader is surprised by the ethnological and scientific opening of the first story with factual data on Paiute people. The postcolonial issue at work in *LLR* is the assertion of the information given as real fact, while it had been analyzed as a mythologization of archetypal individual portraits of Native people deriving from subjective observations.

Catherine Delmas wrote in her work *Ecritures du désert, Voyageurs et romanciers anglophones XIXe-XXe siècles* her analysis of the colonial discourse on the desert, white authors seeking adventure and exoticism within a supposedly “unknown” land. She does not write on the American desert, but her analysis of the ambiguity can be applied to Austin’s writing of the desert:

L’intertextualité tisse un réseau de connaissances mais également d’affects, et montre l’ambiguïté de récits de voyages qui se veulent scientifiques, objectifs, mais révèlent à la fois une subjectivité et un noyau fantasmatique qui perdure de texte en texte. Le désert apparaît comme le lieu de la projection des fantasmes et du désir qui transparaît dans les différents rapports imaginaires à l’autre et à l’ailleurs. Il masque cependant une vérité sous-jacente, celle qui unit le voyage d’exploration à l’entreprise coloniale, la transmission des savoirs et le pouvoir que l’on acquiert sur l’autre. (Delmas, 2005, 7)

Even though *LLR* and *LB* are not properly travel writing, Austin writes the observations that occur to her during her walks across the Owens Valley and the Great Basin desert, the religious intertextuality and her assertion of objectivity recalling the imaginary notion of the desert as a place

of colonial projections and imagery. The hierarchical dimension of power is also present in the notion of discourse on indigenous people, from a white author.

However, Antoine Compagnon in his work *Le démon de la théorie* argued that the intention of the author when writing a text is exceeded by the multiplicity of interpretations from a reception theory point of view, and that the author's intention cannot be taken as valuable in the objective analysis of the text:

Les oeuvres d'art transcendent l'intention première de leurs auteurs et veulent dire quelque chose de nouveau à chaque époque. La signification d'un oeuvre ne pourrait pas être déterminée ni contrôlée par l'intention de l'auteur ou par le contexte d'origine (historique, social, culturel) sous prétexte que certaines oeuvres du passé continuent à avoir pour nous de l'intérêt et de la valeur. Si une oeuvre peut continuer à avoir de l'intérêt et de la valeur pour les générations futures, alors son sens ne peut pas être arrêté par l'intention de l'auteur ni par le contexte originel. (Compagnon, 1998, 98)

Indeed, it is not possible to know Austin's intentions when she wrote her fictionalized landscapes and archetypal portraits of Natives, but that is not what matters in a postcolonial view. What holds importance is the intrinsic meaning of the words used and the structure of the text, the stylistic devices used that convey a particular meaning, both for the 1903 and contemporary readership. Antoine Compagnon argued that the meaning is not the same thing as the significance, specifying the difference between the two:

Afin de réfuter la thèse anti-intentionnaliste, le théoricien américain de la littérature E.D. Hirsch a étendu cette distinction au texte, séparant son sens (meaning), et sa signifiante (significance) ou son application (using) (Hirsch, 1967 et 1976). [...] Le sens, suivant Hirsch, désigne ce qui reste stable dans la réception d'un texte ; il répond à la question "que veut dire ce texte ?" Le sens est singulier ; la signification, qui met le mot en relation avec la situation, est variable, plurielle, ouverte, ou peut-être infinie. Lorsque nous lisons un texte, qu'il soit contemporain ou ancien, nous relient son sens à notre expérience, nous lui donnons une valeur hors de son contexte d'origine. Le sens est l'objet de l'interprétation du texte ; la signification, de l'application du texte au contexte de sa réception (première ou ultérieure), et donc de son évaluation. (Compagnon, 1998, 99).

"Le sens", meaning, is what was analyzed in Austin's text as portraying archetypal figures, thus creating a myth through language, in Foucault's and Said's understanding of the "discourse" as a political means, here developing a form of cultural oppression through the rehabilitation of stereotyped images.

## 2 – Literary Value

Before tackling the final issue of mythologization of the desert, it is relevant to reassess the central importance of the literary value added through this fictionalization of the desert. The highly lyrical and poetical passages add to the literary feature of both texts, escaping from the pure scientific aim defined in the expression “mere recorder” (40). The last short story of *LB*, “The Walking Woman”, presents Austin’s encounter with the Walking Woman, a mysterious woman wandering about the desert, lame, who tells her truth to the first-person narrator. She is presented as a living person, not as a fictional character: “The first time of my hearing of her was at Temblor” (Austin, 1909, 195) is the opening of the story, asserting the woman is a real life person. She heard of her through other people’s discourse, “cowboys at rodeos, told me as much of her way of life as they could understand” (195). Austin “was wishful to meet her” (197). However, Austin creates a fiction about her, drawing a poetical portrait of this mysterious and mystical woman: “She was the Walking Woman, and no one knew her name” (196). This absence of name induces the absence of identity in the text, creating the image of an isolated unknown woman: “It must have been about that time that she lost her name. I am convinced that she never told it because she did not know it herself” (199). Her isolation comes from her retirement from the modern American society: “I saw the Walking Woman sitting where the grass was deepest” (200), and “she has walked off all sense of society-made values” (208). Living in a remote land, apart from society, “far down the dim, hot valley I could see the Walking Woman with her blanket” (209), the author creates a mythical figure who almost appears as a mirage, whose traces the narrator seeks in the sand: “recollecting suddenly that people called her lame, I ran down to the open place below the spring where she had passed. There in the bare, hot sand the track of her two feet bore evenly and white” (209). This mysterious final sentence of the book opens questions on the general rumors on the woman, who stands out as a mirage on the isolated land. It creates a fictionalization of the woman, who is no longer the common lame woman everyone knows, but has become a mythical figure crossing the desert after the death of her baby. This ending sounds like one of a tale, thus fictionalizing what sounded like real life facts in the opening of the story. Austin asserts in her story:

You are not to suppose that in my report of a Borderer I give you the words only, but the full meaning of the speech. Very often the words are merely the punctuation of thought; rather, the crests of the long waves of intercommunicative silences. Yet the speech of the Walking Woman was fuller than most. (Austin, 1909, 201)



This attestation of truth in her discourse denotes with the fictionalized ending, a fiction drawn from her own subjective and intimate understanding of the Walking Woman's words. This part of illusion in her understanding of the woman creates a poetical atmosphere in the text, thus adding to the literary value of her work. This is the same process as the deification of the land in *LLR*, through religious images and transcendental echoes to nature writing intertextuality, in passages like the following one from the "Nurslings of the Sky":

The first effect of cloud study is a sense of presence and intention in storm process. Weather does not happen. It is the visible manifestation of the Spirit moving itself in the void. It gathers itself together under the heavens; rains, snows, yearns mightily in wind, smiles [...]. (Austin, 1903, 79)

This deification of landscape is part of the fictionalization process, through the subjective interpretation of natural phenomena from the author's viewpoint and religious beliefs or background. The religious, lyrical and poetical parts of her writing give a fuller substance to her work, despite the erasure of the first person narrator as a "mere recorder" (40).

Rick Bass, an American nature writer, presents nature in the West in his article "Writing in the West" as deeply influential in its power to create literary features: "Nature – particularly in the West – inspires me as a writer (and as a person) in that it always possesses the dramatic elements of great story – conflict, tension, resolution" (Bass, 2011, 117). Indeed, even the structure of *LLR* reminds us of a theatrical text: the opening chapters appear as introductory ones, the encounter with Native individuals mark a turning point in the book, as adventures and surprises, while the "Nurslings of the Sky" is set as the climax of the book, in strong romantic echoes, also of a Shakespearean tempest, and the final utopian chapter on "The Little Town of the Grape Vines" is the resolution of the text in a peaceful and romanticized ending, which sounds like a tale:

There are still some places in the west where the quails cry "cuidado"; where all the speech is soft, all the manners gentle; where all the dishes have chile in them, and they make more of the Sixteenth of September than they do of the Fourth of July. I mean in particular El Pueblo de las Uvas. (Austin, 1903, 85)

### 3 – Fictionalization of Native Americans as a Myth

Concerning the portraits of Native Americans, it has been analyzed that especially in *LLR*, they are painted in stereotypical words conveying the reminiscence of a colonial discourse. As aforementioned, fictionalization is relevant in a literary work. However, the tension at the core of both works is the affirmation of real life people portraits, in archetypal words. This process thus reduces them to the literary *topos* of the archetypal Native American, even though the descriptions are always more ambiguous than that, with hints at a condemnation of the political oppression they have known. This *topos*, a cliché, of the Native American living close to nature, in accordance with natural time and seasons, is part of the myth of the noble savage, as previously analyzed. Indeed, the process of creating imagined landscapes out of the desert as “painted hills” for instance is legitimate in a literary work, and adds weight to the symbolical meanings of the texts. However, the process of creating passive, happy and eternal figures of indigenous people is to be seriously questioned from a postcolonial viewpoint, a criticism which praises a rehabilitation of colonially oppressed peoples as real cultures to be defended.

The ethical posture of the historian Howard Zinn is centered on telling the history of the U.S.A. from the perspective of the “people”, implying minority people or oppressed people. In his opening chapter, he retraces the origin of the oppression of indigenous people from the so-called “discovery” of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The appetite for gold and money led to the creation of the cultural myth of the noble savage, who would have passively shown to white men where the gold was. The myth was from then on developed by white men, in order to maintain their cultural dominance over indigenous people:

Perhaps there is some romantic mythology in that. But the evidence from European travelers in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, put together recently by an American specialist on Indian life, William Brandon, is overwhelmingly supportive of much of that “myth”. Even allowing for the imperfection of myths, it is enough to make us question, for that time and ours, the excuse of progress in the annihilation of races, and the telling of history from the standpoint of the conquerors and leaders of Western civilization. (Zinn, 2015, 22)

This myth is indeed questionable in the light of recent findings in history which show the strong political oppression indigenous people have lived from the eighteenth century. André Kaspi, a French historian specialized in the history of the United States, argues in his work *Les Américains I. Naissance et essor des Etats-Unis 1607-1945* about indigenous people that “rien n’est plus difficile,

pourtant, que de raconter leur histoire [...]. Il ne suffit pas, par exemple, d'évoquer les Indiens comme l'on évoque la forêt, la faune et le climat" (Kaspi, 1986, 30). That is what Austin does when she compares Native people to plants and animals, putting the three elements on a same footstep, which is ethically debatable as it does not create the representation of real peoples whose cultures should be protected through political means. He asserts that "faute de sources indiennes, l'historien risque de céder à son imagination. [...] Du "sauvage" au "bon sauvage", c'est toujours le mythe qui l'emporte" (Kaspi, 1986, 31). Even though Austin was not a historian, her desire through her books was to make indigenous cultures known and protected, which is difficult to do through the creation of myths. Kaspi reminds us that "pour les Blancs, l'Indien, c'est d'abord une curiosité" (Kaspi, 1986, 31), both for the first waves of immigrants and for the modern twentieth century white Americans. The political process at work in *LLR*, indigenous people showing a white author their habits and ways of life, is described by the historian in these words: "il faut savoir se servir des ressources de la forêt pour mieux s'en approprier les richesses. Les Indiens sont des experts ; les colons s'efforcent de les imiter" (Kaspi, 1986, 39). The historical statement "Les Indiens sont d'excellents connaisseurs des cours d'eau et de la circulation hivernale" (Kaspi, 1986, 39) reminds us of chapters from *LLR*, in which Austin observes both animal species and indigenous people's habits to find water, a trope which comes back in chapters like "Water Trails of the Ceriso", "Water Borders" and "Other Water Borders". Austin's belonging to a colonial family, her sometimes contemptuous or foreign understanding of indigenous traditions is palpable in the analysis of André Kaspi:

Si les colons ne comprennent pas les Indiens, c'est aussi qu'ils les méprisent, qu'ils ne respectent ni leurs comportements ni leurs croyances, qu'ils jugent inexistantes leurs structures politiques et sociales. Les Indiens n'ont ni foi ni loi. (Kaspi, 1986, 43)

If Austin does not despise indigenous people's culture in her works, it is possible to find clear reminiscences of a colonial discourse, which derived on a lack of understanding, perceivable in words like "strange" (20). The absence of political and social structure in her writing has also been previously analyzed.

However, Austin also condemns white men's intrusion within Natives' lands, especially in the literary pathetic dimension developed at the end of the portrait of the medicine-man, who died because he could not cure people anymore since the intrusion of European diseases on their lands. André Kaspi analyzes this process as part of the loss of their spiritual values:

Le déclin des valeurs spirituelles suit tout naturellement l'affaiblissement du corps. La dégénérescence, la maladie et la mort conduisent les tribus à s'interroger sur les fondements spirituels de la civilisation indienne. Tous ces maux proviennent-ils de l'abandon des valeurs traditionnelles ? [...] Pourquoi les sorciers, les medicine men, ne réussissent-ils plus à guérir ? (Kaspi, 1986, 47)

This disarray is perceivable in Austin's words: "the disease has spent itself, and half the children of the campoodie were in their shallow graves [...]. After two weeks of this plague the Paiutes drew to council to consider the remissness of their medicine-men" (Austin, 1903, 36). This passage is the example of the dichotomy in Austin's discourse, juxtaposing a blame of white men's violent introduction within Shoshone Land and stereotypical descriptions of the medicine-man, isolated in the mountains with his healing herbs.

It is not possible to know Austin's intimate relation to indigenous people and her understanding of their cultures. The present interpretation is not only derived from a contemporary reading of both works, through a postcolonial lens which appeared quite recently. It is also a reading of words that have and already had strong connotations in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when Austin lived and wrote. This reading is relevant in Antoine Compagnon's approach to the meaning of the words and the significance of the discourse in contemporary times. The analysis of the "meaning" already shows this mythologization of the land and its inhabitants, reproducing and developing an archetypal portrait of this life. Antoine Compagnon argues, under the title "Intention n'est pas préméditation":

Peut-on également réfuter l'autre grand argument contre l'intention ? Un auteur, dit-on, n'a pas pu vouloir dire toutes les significations que les lecteurs attribuent aux détails de son texte. Quel est donc le statut intentionnel des significations implicites d'un texte ? Le *New Critic* américain William Empson (1930) décrivait le texte comme une entité complexe de significations simultanées (et non successives ou exclusives). L'auteur peut-il avoir eu l'intention de toutes ces significations et implications que nous voyons dans le texte, même s'il n'y avait pas pensé en l'écrivant ? L'argument paraît définitif. Il est en fait très fragile (Compagnon, 1998, 104)

Indeed, it is not possible to know what precise representation Austin had of Native people. It is only possible to analyze her words in *LLR* and *LB* in order to interpret the conception of their existence she had. As Compagnon also presents, "Ce que nous interprétons quand nous lisons un texte, c'est, indifféremment, le sens des mots et l'intention de l'auteur" (Compagnon, 1998, 107). That is precisely why her mythologization of Native people is controversial if her intention was to acknowledge their existence as real human beings within the American society, and to defend them.

## **C – The Essence of the Myth: Imaginary Images Presented as Real**

A myth is defined by the English Oxford Dictionary either as “a traditional story concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events”, or as “a widely held but false belief; a fictitious person or thing; an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person or thing” (“Myth”). In the present case, both definitions are relevant, but for two different purposes. The first one defines the “early history of a people”, the Native Americans, in traditional words marked with supernatural elements in the landscape. The second one refers to the discourse, the “belief” in a supposedly primitive people and land, with the recourse to the myth of the noble savage and to fictionalization, the creation of a story that is partly false, because biased by a colonial gaze. The archetype indeed comes from an “exaggerated or idealized conception” of the land and its inhabitants. Sophie Marret argues in her work *Lectures et écritures du mythe*:

Du mythe, nous n’avons que des approches, des interprétations, et paradoxalement la notion semble emprunter deux voies difficilement réconciliables quand, de récit à caractère sacré, elle a pu en venir à désigner la fausseté d’une conception. (Marret, 2006, 1-7)

Mircéa Eliade even complicates the approach of the myth through its unfathomable quality, in his work *Aspects du mythe* (1963):

D’ailleurs, est-il même possible de trouver une seule définition susceptible de couvrir tous les types et toutes les fonctions des mythes, dans toutes les sociétés archaïques et traditionnelles ? Le mythe est une réalité culturelle extrêmement complexe, qui peut être absorbée et interprétée dans des perspectives multiples et complémentaires (Eliade, 1963, 16)

### **1 – Mythologization Through a Fictionalized Reality**

The myth comes from the Greek term *mythos*, designing the realm of imagination, in opposition to *logos*, the realm of reason. Sterenn Le Coadou presents this distinction in her chapter on the work *Lectures et écritures du mythe*:

En effet, le mythe est étymologiquement *mythos*, c'est-à-dire discours ou parole, en opposition au *logos* (la raison, le principe créateur et rationnel). Il est donc paradoxal de considérer qu'une œuvre écrite pourrait être mythique. [...] Le propre du mythe littéraire est d'être, à l'inverse du mythe antique, une œuvre écrite et signée, dont la source même réside en un ou plusieurs mythes fondateurs que l'auteur s'approprie pour révéler ses propres conceptions et sentiments, afin de refléter au plus près les nouvelles réalités de la société dans laquelle il écrit. Mais le mythe littéraire n'en demeure pas moins mythe car sans sens n'est pas seulement celui du récit de ses événements, mais aussi celui déployé par les figures symboliques qui le composent. (Le Coadou, 2006, 67)

This opposition of *mythos* and *logos* is at the core of Austin's ambiguity in her texts. Indeed, she gave her fictionalized descriptions, which create a myth, the face of a rational, objective description of reality, pertaining to the realm of *logos*.

Mythologization is present in *LLR* through the fictionalization of nature and people. The creation of the myth comes from the presentation of fictional images as real facts. When reading a fiction, the reader goes through the intellectual process of "willing suspension of disbelief" in Coleridge's words, extracted from his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*. It refers to the mental activity of suspending one's skepticism, while entering a work of fiction, in order to grasp the literary dimension of the work beyond the rational mirror of reality. The poetical purpose in a literary work for Coleridge is to give human traits to fictional characters for instance, through the credibility of the creation, despite the understanding that the subject described does not exist in real life. It makes the reader read the fictional work as if it were real, in order to give substance to words and to the situations described. Therefore, this process blurs the frontier between reality and fiction, especially when the author plays with it, as Mary H. Austin does in both of her works. This process theoretically grounds the ethical issue of the stylistic ambiguity in Austin's writing about Native people: indeed, the reader unconsciously reads the stereotypical descriptions as portraits sticking to reality, thus developing the myth of the archetypal Native in his or her mind, no matter what the original intention of the author was.

The criticism approach used here is Roland Barthes' notion of the myth, in his analysis of the idea in *Mythologies* (1957). This analysis is part of mythocriticism, a field of study which analyzes the features of myths, their structure as well as their sociocultural meanings and echoes. Gilbert Durand defines mythocriticism in his work *Figures mythiques et visages de l'oeuvre. De la mythocritique à la mythanalyse*. (1979):

La mythocritique met en évidence, chez un auteur, dans l'oeuvre d'une époque et d'un milieu donnés, les mythes directeurs et leurs transformations significatives. Elle permet

de montrer comment tel trait de caractère personnel de l'auteur contribue à la transformation de la mythologie en place ou, au contraire, accentue tel ou tel mythe directeur en place. (Durand, 1979)

In his book, Roland Barthes analyzes different contemporary myths, and finally draws parallels between them in his conclusion, defining the myth in theoretical words. He affirms that “le mythe est un système de communication, c'est un message” (Barthes, 1957, 193). He then argues, “Puisque le mythe est une parole, tout peut être mythe, qui est justiciable d'un discours. Le mythe ne se définit pas par l'objet de son message, mais par la façon dont il le profère” (Barthes, 1957, 193). The use of the term “discourse” refers to Edward Said's understanding of the notion in *Orientalism*, the word relaying a discourse, often an ideology on the object of the speech. Barthes distinguishes the language and the meta-language, which is a discourse on, about something, the object (Barthes, 1957, 199). Therefore, Austin's discourse on Native Americans is a meta-language: she simply writes about them, taking them as objects of her speech. This discourse implies a re-mediation, a re-presentation, almost under the form of an ekphrasis, the description of a frozen image or a painting. Her particular discourse creates a myth as her personal and subjective observations are marked with culturally admitted frozen images on indigenous people, reinforcing the *topos* of the passive noble savage. Indeed, “le mythe a effectivement une double fonction : il désigne et il notifie, il fait comprendre et il impose” (Barthes, 1957, 202), which implies a hierarchical relation to the reader in the imposition of the discourse. He also asserts that the mythical discourse distorts reality: “Le rapport qui unit le concept du mythe au sens est essentiellement un rapport de déformation” (Barthes, 1957, 207), which is the case in Austin's representation of the Natives: she reassesses their existence and their presence on the land, but she distorts the reality of their life and of their political oppression.

However, Hérís Arnt, in the article “Espaces littéraires, espaces vécus”, argues that literature is deeply intertwined with imagination, thus mythologization:

C'est le propre de la littérature que de représenter le monde dans sa totalité et sa diversité. Notre objectif, en analysant certaines oeuvres littéraires, est d'établir la relation entre la littérature et l'imaginaire symbolique de la contemporanéité, et par là montrer que la littérature est un objet privilégié d'analyse anthropologique. (Arnt, 2001, 53)

The symbolical imagination of the land and its people can therefore be a useful means to develop an ethnological analysis, in the study of indigenous people.

Concerning nature and the desert, Austin writes a mythologized desert especially through the use of personification. Indeed, there are many occurrences of the natural elements or the desert itself which are granted human traits, or even agency:

Here are the long heavy winds and breathless calms on the tilted mesas where dust devils dance, whirling up into a wide, pale sky. Here you have no rain when all the earth cries for it, or quick downpours called cloud-bursts for violence. (Austin, 1903, 9)

Fictionalization is palpable in the expression “where dust devils dance”, giving the dust a supposedly human figure which dances, a human activity. This process adds action in the potentially calm and frozen description of a place, and creates literary intertextuality here with the Bible, in the figure of the devil, the desert being traditionally compared to hell. The earth is given agency in the expression “the earth cries for it”, it referring to water. The author interprets the needs of the earth from her human reference, thus attributing human needs to the unconscious element of the earth. This sentence exemplifies Austin’s spirituality, her intimate belief in natural elements being alive and conscious. This leads to the occurrences of deification of the desert, which highly fictionalizes it through the gaze of the religious author and narrator. The Californian desert is for her the epitome of “God’s world”, with “the divinest, cleanest air to be breathed anywhere” in the world (13). This addition of a religious intertext and divine imagery on the desert creates its mythologization, in an idealization of the place as a sanctuary for the animal and plant life, but also for humans, notably indigenous people. This idealization of nature is a common *topos* in the nature writing genre, notably developed in John Muir’s religious words on the American forests, in his chapter “Among the Animals of the Yosemite” from his *Wilderness Essays*: “parks fair as Eden, - places in which one might expect to meet angels rather than bears” (Muir, 2011, 134).

The mythologization of the desert is also patent in the highly lyrical passages of *LLR*, like the following one: “The beginning of spring in Shoshone Land – oh the soft wonder of it! - is a mistiness as of incense smoke, a veil of greenness over the whitish stubby shrubs, a web of color on the silver sanded soil” (Austin, 1903, 34). The lyrical apostrophe “oh” added to the exclamation mark pertains to the romantic genre, underlined by the accumulation of color adjectives, which creates poetical visual images, in “greenness”, “a web of color” and “silver”. This passage clearly shows the process of creation of an intimate and subjective representation of the land.

However, concerning the fictionalization of Native Americans, it becomes questionable when the descriptions verge on dehumanization, as previously analyzed in the multiple comparisons with plants and animals. The issue at work in this mythologization process is the erasure of any historical context of production of such images. That is in this precise perspective that Roland



Barthes' theoretical approach of the myth is relevant in the context of Austin's writing of Native people, through the analysis of the erasure of history. Barthes asserts that, "comme un objet magique surgi dans mon présent sans aucune trace de l'histoire qui l'a produit", the object becomes a myth (Barthes, 1957, 211). He argues that "notre littérature 'réaliste' est mythique" (Barthes, 1957, 223). Barthes does not agree with the assertion of a realistic literature that would be a mere reproduction of reality, as the mediation of language is always a re-mediation, a modulation. The central issue is that the myth is not politicized: "Le mythe est une parole dépolitisée" (229), and not set in history. His socialist commitment made him write that "La bourgeoisie transforme la réalité du monde en image du monde, l'Histoire en Nature" (229). Austin indeed erases the historical background of her work, to assess that the situation of Natives at her time is the result of their closeness to nature and their good temper. According to Barthes' theory, "La fonction du mythe, c'est d'évacuer le réel" (230):

Le mythe ne nie pas les choses, sa fonction est au contraire d'en parler ; simplement, il les purifie, les innocente, les fonde en nature et en éternité, il leur donne une clarté qui n'est pas celle de l'explication, mais celle du constat. (Barthes, 1957, 230)

This process of purification is present in Austin's description of the "pure" (77) and pristine land. For Barthes, "Une parole qui s'oppose au mythe, c'est la parole qui reste politique" (233), contrary to a speech that is mystified, thus found innocent by fiction (232). The ethical issue is that the text spreads the representation of the dominant people, in this case the representation of the white author, while the oppressed people have much fewer opportunities to share their experience for instance in texts that would be published within the white American society, notably before the end of the twentieth century:

L'opprimé n'est rien, il n'a en lui qu'une parole, celle de son émancipation ; l'opresseur est tout, sa parole est riche, multiforme, souple, disposant de tous les degrés possibles de dignité : il a l'exclusivité du méta-langage. (Barthes, 1957, 237)

However, the value of history as an objective discourse, as opposed to the value of the myth as an imagined representation is debatable. Indeed, history is not especially more neutral than fictional (or not) literature. On the contrary, literature may induce more distance from the reader towards the words concerning their credibility as real facts, than in history books. History is presented as a neutral, objective, factual speech, but it is rather a politically committed discourse, in Said' understanding of the word, which conveys ideologies and false images, distorting reality. Historians like Howard Zinn and André Kaspi opened a new wave of humanism in American

studies, reassessing minority people's oppression from the government as central in American history. However this stance is quite recent. Antoine Compagnon argues in his passage on "L'histoire comme littérature" in *Le démon de la théorie* that

L'histoire est une construction, un récit qui, comme tel, met en scène le présent aussi bien que le passé; son texte fait partie de la littérature. L'objectivité ou la transcendance de l'histoire est un mirage, car l'historien est engagé dans les discours par lesquels il construit l'objet historique. (Compagnon, 1998, 264)

## 2 - Mythologization as a Literary Ethos

Mythocriticism was notably developed in literature, as it is one of the most influential fields where myths are still being transmitted. This is the discourse of Christian Biet, in the chapter on "La construction d'une légitimité littéraire en matière de mythe ou de la mythocritique à la mythopoétique" of his work *Mythes et mythologies dans la littérature française* (2012):

Dès le début du XIXe siècle, l'étude des mythes est devenue une discipline universitaire. Constatant une dé-mythologisation du monde et de l'espace social, les critiques ont vu d'abord, dans la littérature et l'art, une sorte de conservatoire des mythes. (Biet, 2012, 3)

If history is not the supposedly objective and neutral discourse on an object, especially oppressed peoples, fiction might appear as a new way to write history, creating a new approach to historiography, the writing of history. If mythocriticism criticized the myth as a mere construction of frozen images that do not help society to change its position on certain topics, literature, even though the cultural place of myth-making, is relevant to rewrite history, even through the use of fiction.

So on the contrary, Austin might use mythologization of the desert and people through fictionalization in order to praise the desert land and its inhabitants, placing them in an imaginary setting that is distorted from reality, to praise their traditional way of living in comparison with modern American life that destroys the land and people. This distortion might underline the contrast between the two cultures, and the hyperbolic images create a strong divide praising one system and condemning the other. The end of the chapter on "Shoshone Land" gives the impression of a tale, after the blame of violent colonialism and its introduction of European diseases. This fictionalization of the ending is written in these terms:

Since it appears that we make our own heaven here, no doubt we shall have a hand in the heaven of hereafter; and I know what Winnenap's will be like: worth going to if one has leave to live in it according to his liking. It will be tawny gold underfoot, walled up with jacinth and jasper, ribbed with chalcedony, and yet no hymnbook heaven, but the free air and free spaces of Shoshone Land. (Austin, 1903, 37)

This ending denotes with the previous strong political discourse, in the traditional imagery of flowery heaven, creating the myth of a pure and rich land with gold and pristine flowers which leads to the interpretation of Shoshone Land as being heaven itself, the purest place on earth, due to the piety of its inhabitants. Yet, this process can also add value and depth to the political commitment through the fictionalization of the ending, the individual death of the medicine-man, who thus appears as the fictional character of a tale.

However, this operation also idealizes indigenous ways of life, without reassessing the historical and political oppression they knew. In the case of a deliberate use of fiction to praise their culture, it would have been more ethically acceptable to present the text as fiction from its opening. On the contrary, the interesting blurring of the frontier between reality and fiction in a literary analysis point of view becomes questionable in a postcolonial view, as it creates a myth of natural world full of resources, which is not the case everywhere, especially on the reservations where Indians have been displaced. It also creates the myth of an archetypal Native who lives in remoteness from the American society, which literary creates strong images, but politically does not encourage to take action to protect them, as they are presented as self-relying and self-sufficient people, still happy to always find resources in plants and animals, while the historical reality is that a large part of their food, buffaloes, has been deliberately exterminated in order to make indigenous people die.

Such an ethos of creating a mythologized desert is a legitimate position for the creation of literary images of the desert, to praise an imaginary world. This imagery strongly contrasts with the modern American society which pollutes and exploits. Yet this imagination of an idealized world does not render the harsh reality of the colonial and industrial violence of the western world.

### **3 - Nature Writing and the Creation of an Imaginary World**

Lawrence Buell presents nature writing also as a genre where imagination is central, in his work *The Environmental Imagination*. Nature writing is really literature, despite the assertion of a scientific text on natural elements and phenomena, it creates images, poetry and symbols, thus

“imagining” nature. That is what Austin develops especially in *LLR*, combining real facts on geography and people, and lyrical, symbolical and metaphorical images and parallels on the land. Lambert Barthélémy retraces in the introduction of the book *Imagination(s) environnementale(s)* the apparition of the environmental imagination:

L'émergence d'un imaginaire environnemental dans la vie intellectuelle occidentale n'a rien d'une récente et extravagante lubie new age [...]. Son apparition remonte à la première moitié du XIXe siècle, à une sorte d'été indien du romantisme: c'est en effet dans le contexte spécifique du Transcendentalisme nord-américain, chez Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Nature*, 1836) et Henry David Thoreau (*Walden ou la vie dans les bois*, 1854) en particulier, qu'apparaît la volonté de questionner la relation de l'homme à son environnement naturel dans la triple perspective de la reconnaissance d'une valeur intrinsèque à la nature ; d'une critique de l'anthropocentrisme natif de la tradition judéo-chrétienne ; et de la création d'une forme purement américaine de littérature, émancipée de toute influence stylistique ou thématique d'origine coloniale. (Barthélémy, 2012, 9)

The legacy of the first Transcendentalist authors is indeed patent in this process of fictionalization of the land, however the erasure of any colonial ideology is to be nuanced, especially in the case of Austin's writing, in which colonial reminiscences are patent. The environmental imagination is the combination in literature of an environmental stance, in favor of the defense of nature, and literary features developed in the text that pertain to the realm of imagination, the creation of images that do not stick to a mere ecological description of the land. Austin is inscribed in this dynamic in both texts, especially in the story “The Last Antelope” in *LB*, in which she wrote a strong environmentally committed text recalling the death of the last antelope of the region, fictionalized through the imaginary main character. This association gives a stronger emotional impression to the reader, which combined to a non-fiction approach in *LLR*, gives a full picture of the environmental issue in the Californian region. The environmental imagination is highlighted in the geographical context of the desert, a place the author renders mythologized and utopian, as analyzed by Olivier Mongin in the first chapter “Les passions du désert” of the book *La peur du vide* (1991):

Le désert, c'est d'abord la figure d'un “ailleurs” aux allures d'autant plus exotiques que cette terre n'a pas de nom et qu'il n'y a d'autre issue que de s'y perdre. [...] Plus profondément, le désert représente un monde utopique, non-lieu, monde de nulle part [...]. Dans ce cas de figure, l'ambition de l'écrivain-voyageur est d'occuper le vide [...] le désert est l'espace où l'on part vers un lieu inconnu et mythique, il évoque une marche infinie, la traversée qui ne connaît ni origine, ni fin, ni départ, ni arrivée. (Mongin, 1991, 41)

In her work *La tyrannie de la réalité* (2004), Mona Chollet, a contemporary researcher, argued against the “tyranny” of realism, against the modern idealization of realism, objectivity and neutrality. She defends on the contrary a recourse to imagination, in order to have a more intelligent view of the subject. She asserts, concerning modern society:

Elle nous amène à dévaloriser l’imagination, dont nous n’avons que faire, puisque nous pensons pouvoir aboutir à une connaissance totale du réel sans recourir à elle, mais elle nous donne une idée fautive de notre position par rapport aux événements dans lesquels nous sommes pris et dont nous nous rendons compte. [...] Ainsi, les écrivains réalistes se voulaient neutres, détachés, séparés de ce qu’ils décrivaient. (Chollet, 2004, 135-136)

Indeed, Austin’s imagination adds a real literary value to her work, with metaphorical images and hints at romanticism in some lyrical descriptions. However, as analyzed, the imagination of a noble Native American participates in the nineteenth century creation of a myth. K.K. Ruthven argues in his work *Myth*, that

People convinced that myths record observations about the natural world often conclude that the purpose of a myth is not simply to describe something but to explain how it came into existence. Frazer thought myths are ‘mistaken explanations of phenomena, whether of human life or of external nature’ (1921, p. xxvii), with the emphasis of course on *mistaken*. (Ruthven, 1976, 16)

Nevertheless, a literary analysis may not obliterate the role of the reader, whose conscience is able to take action in his or her reading, for instance separating the supposedly realistic descriptions and reality. That is what Anne-Claire Le Reste argues in her chapter of *Lectures et écritures du mythe*:

Si la notion de réalisme résiste encore à ces déconstructions, c’est bien parce qu’il se trouve des lecteurs tout à fait disposés à entrer dans le jeu du mythe, à coopérer à ce suspens de la séparation entre langage et réalité, entre fiction et vérité. Comme le soulignait Barthes dans *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, l’écriture réaliste est “loin d’être neutre, elle est au contraire chargée de signes les plus spectaculaires de sa fabrication” p49. Mais elle laisse au lecteur la possibilité de lire de manière “innocente”, de faire *comme si*. (Le Reste, 2006, 112)

Austin’s assertion that she describes the reality of the land in *LLR* creates this false impression of realism, while entire parts of her work pertain to the realm of imagination, or at least are imprinted with fictionalization. This is the contrast between the stylistic posture of the author, presenting her text as non-fiction, and her imaginative writing which creates the myth of a divine and pristine land, with noble, pure and ecological Native Americans living on it.

In his 1988 preface to *LLR*, Edward Abbey reassesses Austin's texts as fundamental in the environmental writing field, as well as for the posterity of such a political commitment in favor of Natives' rights:

The Indians live penned on reservations, the last California condors are being hunted down for preservation in a San Diego zoo, and the Grand Canyon of the Colorado lies under perpetual aerial surveillance – but we still have our books. In books, on tapes, in photographs, we save what we can of the original world that could have been our lordly inheritance. (Abbey, 1988, viii)

## Conclusion

Mary Hunter Austin wrote *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) and *Lost Borders* (1909) as a regionalist author of the American Southwest, creating a new mode in American literature. Her work pertains to the nature writing genre, defending the natural environment of California. She developed strong literary features in both works through fictionalization, which helped to give a fuller picture of the Great Basin region and Californian desert from a subjective literary viewpoint. Her assertion of writing non-fiction in *The Land of Little Rain* is tempered by the multiple aspects of fictionalization, which is legitimate in a nature writing ethos of imagination and idealization of the land. This process of idealization highlights Austin's environmental stance through her personal and intimate writing of the land, therefore inscribing her in the range of notable American nature writers, especially centered on the very last deserts discovered by the white men's expansion.

Besides, her work is a grounding progress in the inscription of indigenous people within the American literary scope. Indeed, the novelty in her work is the deep intimate commitment of the author to the defense of Native Americans' rights, which comes from her personal interest in their culture. She wrote a praise of the Shoshone and Paiute people's ways of life and cultures, close to nature, a life which strongly contrasts with Austin's contemporary modern American society. The combination of texts on Native Americans and passages on nature creates novelty in the nature writing domain. She was also one of the first women who went to meet indigenous people by herself, an act of independence and self-reliance she made in rejection of her unhappy marital life.

However, this work analyzed the central ambiguity in Austin's writing, especially concerning Native Americans. This ambiguity of posture is highly interesting in her work, because it erases the potential assertion of a neutral and objective author, whose text never presents indifferent descriptions. On the contrary, her ethos of a non-fiction environmental writer is strongly altered by the multiple aspects of fictionalization of the land and people. A text is indeed always marked by the author's experience, thoughts, ideologies, beliefs, and intimate perception of his or her surroundings. All these features appear in Austin's texts, which add substance to the writing of the land. The ambiguity is also developed concerning her posture towards Native Americans. Indeed, the majority of scholarly analyses of her work praises her deep commitment in favor of Native Americans, which was certainly a great novelty for her time, in a context of contempt and repression of Natives' voices. Nevertheless, a postcolonial approach showed that certain features of her writing developed a dominant posture on the part of the author towards indigenous people, through reminiscences of a colonial discourse. The myth of the "noble savage" is clearly

perpetuated in certain passages of her writing, which denotes with her intellectual position of defense, as the myth removes any political encouragement to take action for their protection. The understanding of the “discourse” as a real political means of perpetuation of oppression is fundamental in this analysis of Austin’s texts. Literature is indeed a strong cultural communicative means, which either reinforces society’s general view on a topic, or generally distorts the common discourse, plays on the collective and cultural imagination to spread a new discourse, to offer society a new viewpoint on an issue. That is what Austin creates in her depiction of indigenous people.

Yet, the colonial reminiscences perceivable in passages of her texts indicate the tension at work within herself in her posture towards Native Americans. Even though she was committed in the defense of their cultures, she still wrote passages on them that need to be nuanced and analyzed, both for her contemporary readership and for present-day readers. The romantic aspect of her indigenous people’s descriptions creates a myth, notably perpetuating the myth of the noble savage, who lives close to nature and is environmentally ideal, which is debatable. The myth comes from the contrast between her assertion of non-fictional writing, even in the opening of *Lost Borders*, yet a collection of short stories, and the constant implicit fictionalization of her topic. Indeed, while the text is presented as non-fiction, the reader does not take the necessary step back to read fiction, and thus considers her supposedly realistic descriptions as objective ones. This tension is present in the alternation of fictional and non-fictional passages, while the deification is explicitly written as idealization of the land. The creation of archetypal images of Native people, who appear as a construct when analyzed, not in a simple reading, is legitimate in a literary perspective, yet it remains questionable in a postcolonial and historical perspective, due to the erasure of any historical context, sticking to Roland Barthes’ definition of the myth, despite the deep quality of Austin’s literary writing. Austin always stays in a position of liminality in her texts, still between the white modern American life, present in her posture as a white author and her portraits of white characters in *Lost Borders*, and her intimate interest in indigenous people. Liminality is also patent in her hesitation between the legacy of her colonial education and her instinctive concern for oppressed people. Besides, she stays in this liminal space between fiction and non-fiction, which places her work in the range of strong literary texts about the West, through this blurring of frontiers, a metaphorical understanding of the title *Lost Borders*.

Therefore, the literary value of Austin’s work places it beyond the author’s indecision between a colonial path or a humanist approach. The flaws of her text in her politically unclear position do not diminish the strong poetical and lyrical portrayal she writes of the Californian desert and its inhabitants. Despite politically and ethically arguable passages on Native Americans, which



are fundamental to take into account, *The Land of Little Rain* and *Lost Borders* create a very new approach to nature writing and writing of indigenous people, still imagining poetical features in the land, but incorporating Native people in it. Overall, both texts appear more as an intimate praise of the land and its people than as a colonial discourse, even though this aspect must be remembered.

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