Mary Hunter Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*: Eco-affective Perception of the Environment in the Age of the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This article invites to an examination of Mary Hunter Austin's biocentric approach to the desert in The Land of Little Rain, a non-fiction work that challenges anthropocentric views and reflects the author's commitment to both ecological and cultural diversity. The article employs recent concepts such as the Anthropocene, deep ecology, ecofeminism and affective ecocriticism to explore the representation of the environment beyond a crisis narrative, the affective responses it evokes, the bonds between humans and non-humans, and the eco-pedagogical import of this under-examined literary work.

Keywords: Anthropocene, deep ecology, ecofeminism, affective ecocriticism.

أرض المطر القليل لماري هنتر أوستن: الادراك الايكو-عاطفي للبيئة في عصر الأنثروبوسين

ملخص

يدعو هذا المقال إلى النظر في المنهج البيوسنتريكي الذي تتبعه ماري هـنتر أوستن تجاه الصحراء في كتابها أرض المطر القليل، وهو عمل غير روائي يتحدى النظريات الأنثروبوسنتريكية ويعكس اهتمام الكاتب بالتنوع البيئي والثقافي. يستخدم المقال مفاهيم حديثة مثل الأنثروبوسين، البيئة العميقة، النقد البيئي النسوي والنقد البيئي العاطفي لاستكشاف تمثيل البيئة بما يخالف سرد الأزمات، الاستجابات العاطفية التي تثيرها، الروابط بين البشر وغير البشر، والأهمية البيئية التعليمية لهذا العمل الأدبي قليل الدراسة.

الكلمات المفاتيح: أنثروبوسين، بيئة عميقة، النقد البيئي النسوي، النقد البيئي العاطفي.

The Land of Little Rain de Mary Hunter Austin: une Perception éco-affective de l'environnement à l'âge de l'Anthropocène

Résumé

Cet article invite à une évaluation de l'approche biocentrique du désert dans Le pays de petites pluies de Mary Hunter Austin, un ouvrage de non-fiction qui conteste les visions anthropocentriques et reflète l'engagement de l'auteure envers la diversité écologique et culturelle. L'article emploi des concepts récents tels que l'Anthropocène, l'écologie profonde, l'écoféminisme et l'écocritique affective pour explorer la représentation de l'environnement au-delà d'un récit de crise, les réponses affectives qu'il suscite, les liens entre les humains et les non-humains, et l'importance éco-pédagogique de cette œuvre peu étudiée.

Mots-clés : Anthropocène, écologie profonde, écoféminisme, écocritique affective.

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Introduction:

Mary Hunter Austin (1868-1934) was a prolific American writer whose life and work were shaped by the Southwestern desert of California and New Mexico. In her seminal work, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), she not only captures the physical characteristics of the place, but also expresses her intellectual and affective responses to it. This article is an invitation to revisit this important literary work using contemporary concepts such as the Anthropocene, deep ecology, ecofeminism and affective ecocriticism. The book received insufficient literary attention despite its substantial environmental lessons, probably due to the author's honest critique of imperialism in its economic, cultural, and ecological dimensions. Like most women writers of her era, it was difficult for her to gain recognition due to gender bias. In addition, her defense of the natural landscape and Indigenous culture did not align with the prevailing interests of the time. She is scarcely mentioned in research on Indigenous[(1)] literature and culture, ecocritical studies of desert environments, or affective approaches to nature writing despite her relevance to the three fields. While her work may not have been widely recognized, it is important to reevaluate it through these theoretical approaches. This article deals with questions like the literary representations of the ecological crisis. It will answer some of its central questions like: the depiction of the environment outside of a crisis narrative, the affective responses to the environment, the relationship between humans and non-humans, and the eco-pedagogical potential of the selected literary work.

1- Xerophilous Nature Writing:

Nature writing is a literary genre that explores the natural world and human interactions with it. Through thoughtful reflection and detailed description, it often aims to raise the reader's awareness of the natural environment and its related existential issues. Scott Slovic defines it as "literary nonfiction that offers scientific scrutiny of the world"; it "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"[(2)]. He argues that nature writers are "constantly probing, traumatizing, thrilling, and soothing their own minds"[(3)]; they engage readers emotionally with the natural environments they portray, and thus inspire a sense of "awakening." Women writers have frequently been overlooked in studies of this genre, but recent decades have seen a surge in attention towards them, largely driven by the growing prominence of ecofeminism. This approach, which started in the late twentieth century, calls attention to woman's ability for ecological conservation owing to the existence of woman/nature real and symbolic connections. It draws parallels between the linguistic description of the two, which is often characterized by "the womanizing of nature and the naturizing of woman"[(4)]; they are connected through concepts such as Mother Nature and Mother Earth, as well as through attributes like blossoming, virginity, fertility, and barrenness. They are usually depicted in feminine and even sexual terms: Just as women are naturalized in the dominant discourse, so, too, is nature feminized. "Mother Nature" is raped, mastered, conquered, mined; her secrets are "penetrated" and her "womb" is to be put into service of the "man of science." Virgin timber is felled, cut down; fertile soil is tilled and land that lies fallow is "barren," useless[(5)].

In this sense, ecofeminism opposes the hierarchical and patriarchal system led by white or non-white men, and by doing so, it also rejects imperialism, as it similarly enforces control over land and women considered subordinate. Austin's work, therefore, significantly lends itself to ecofeminist reading because, as a poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist, she was known for her engagement with environmental issues, women's rights, and Indigenous sovereignty.

Although written long before the establishment of the concept, Austin's oeuvre equally aligns with the tenets of deep ecology in her presentation of an authentic encounter with the desert through a biocentric rather than an anthropocentric lens, as well as her emphasis on the inherent value of all living beings. Deep ecology, mainly promoted by the Norwegian philosopher Arnie Naess in 1972, examines the roots of the environmental crisis and stresses the principle of interrelatedness of all creations. It asserts that humans should stop considering

the environment as a resource but rather as an entity with an intrinsic worth that deserves respect and protection. This involves the questioning of hyper-consumerism, as well as its related agricultural and industrial practices that contribute to environmental degradation.

Lawrence Buell considers Austin a first-wave nature writer in American literature, self-consciously devoted to resisting anthropocentrism. Like her contemporary nature writers, she puts "human figures at the margin and engages in thought experiments that defamiliarize landscapes in tacit suppression (if not downright reproach) of anthropocentrism"**(6)**. However, unlike other female nature writers such as Susan Fenimore Cooper and Margaret Fuller who present urbanized environments like gardens, Austin portrays human beings facing the overwhelming environment of the American desert, a terrain typically dominated by men in her time. As illustrated in *The Land of Little Rain*, she celebrates a lifestyle of sustainability and promotes practices that are in harmony with the natural world. Her detailed observations are rooted in a scientific understanding of nature, yet they are imbued with a poetic sensibility that captures the emotional and philosophical dimensions of natural phenomena. In so doing, she values "all life in the desert, and attempts to show how each small piece is integral to that larger whole"**(7)**. She encourages readers to look beyond utilitarian views of the desert and appreciate its essential value and beauty.

The scorching American Southwest is home to diverse organisms and creatures known for their adaptation to arid environments, described as "xerophilous" (from the Greek words "xero" meaning "dry" and "philos" meaning "loving"). In his pioneering ecocritical study of the desert, *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature* (2008), Tom Lynch extends the term "xerophilous" to describe influential writers from the region, such as Terry Tempest Williams, Edward Abbey, and Leslie Marmon Silko, as well as less widely known ones like Ray Gonzales, Charles Bowden, and Susan Tweit. He refers to their sensual writing that evokes "an affective bond between residents of the Southwest and the place in which they dwell," wishing that their "ecoaesthetic" commitment would lead to "the evolution of a sustainable xerophilic culture in these arid bioregions" and hence "motivate people to protect such places"**(8)**. These authors call for sustainable bioregional practices that encourage people to live thoughtfully, emotionally, ethically, and creatively in their deserts. The omission of Austin's name from the previously mentioned anthology of Southwestern desert literature is quite surprising since she was one of the earliest American writers who wanted to counteract the sweeping industrialization and the emerging consumerism in the country.

The omission of Austin's name therefore illuminates the importance of this study in reestablishing her as one of the foremost xerophilous authors of American literature. In *The Land of Little Rain*, she shows how xerophilous fauna and flora are characterized by an economy that ensures their survival in arid conditions, and as opposed to "the accepted note of desertness" as "life defeated," she celebrates "the secret charm of life triumphant"**(9)**. She believes that death in this landscape is not inevitable, but it results from human errors of judgment and lack of imagination because there is water for those who can adapt to it. "In Death Valley, reputed to be the very core of desolation," she affirms, there "are nearly two hundred identified species"**(10)** that need water to survive. She intimates, "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"**(11)**. In this exaltation of plants, metaphorically "shaming" the human being for their adaptability, the author shows the importance of the tiniest creatures in the ecosystem for human welfare.

Two major books have included Austin's work in their study of the literary representations of the desert. In *The Southwest in American Literature and Art: The Rise of a Desert Aesthetic* (1997), David W. Teague explores a range of works from Indigenous oral traditions to journals, fiction, and visual art by thirty authors like Cabeza de Vaca, John Wesley Powell, Frederic Remington, and Mary Austin. He examines the ways they create "a place for the desert in the collective imagination of the United States," considering it a place humans need to sustain rather than reconfigure**(12)**. In *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the*

Construction of America (2009), Catrin Gersdorf uses concepts from recent ecocriticism debates to examine how American ideas about arid landscapes have evolved since the mid-nineteenth century within four spatial metaphors: garden, wilderness, Orient, and heterotopia. She considers that for Austin, the desert is a "heterotopia," defined as "a space of alternate cultural ordering"**(13)**. In contrast to utopias, which are unreal places, heterotopias are real places that are different from normal society and provide alternative experiences or meanings that do not follow conventional rules.

In *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin presents a minute description of life in the Mojave desert**(14)**, with each chapter dealing with the sacredness of nature, the influence of human action on it, and the prospect of reconciliation between the two. She illustrates the relationship between the desert and its Indigenous names, which she finds far more evocative than those of European origin**(15)**. She appreciates the descriptive power of Indigenous names and their strong connection to the land's essence, in contrast to the European names driven by a desire for domination. Her preference for Indigenous names also reinforces her recognition of the land's original stewards. According to Lois Rudnick, "Austin rejects Anglo names for geographic landmarks and uses the original Indian and Hispanic designations because they express the land's natural characteristics rather than the individual discoverer's ego"**(16)**. She begins by redefining the desert not as a void, but as a "Country of lost borders" inhabited by Ute, Paiute, Mojave, and Shoshone tribes; this suggests a landscape governed by natural rather than human-made boundaries. Hence, inspired by Indigenous naming traditions, she refers to the desert as "the land of little rain," arguing that "If the Indians have been there before me, you shall have their name, which is always beautifully fit"**(17)**. She believes that the "Desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man; whether the land can be bitted and broken to that purpose is not proven. Void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil"**(18)**. She acknowledges the Indigenous peoples' connection to the land, making the names they provide more suitable and beautiful due to their intimate knowledge and relationship with it.

2- Ecological Imperialism in the Age of the Anthropocene:

The concept of the Anthropocene (from the Greek words "ánthropos" meaning "human" and "-cene" meaning "new") is increasingly being used by ecocritics to draw attention to the urgency of addressing environmental issues. In "The Anthropocene" (2000), Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer argue that humanity moved beyond the Holocene epoch, the geological period spanning from the end of the last Ice Age, about 13,000 years ago. Humans have since then altered the Earth so drastically that their influence is leaving traces on the planet's geological layers**(19)**. This Anthropocene epoch is characterized by never-before-seen changes on planet Earth, including persistent pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change, and these changes have intensified since the beginning of the European imperial expansion. In *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe* (1986), Alfred Crosby denounces the exploitation and alteration of ecological systems that involves the imposition of foreign environmental practices and resource management strategies on colonized lands (he calls "Neo-Europes"), leading to the disruption of local ecosystems and traditional ways of life. He writes:

The colonizers brought along plants and animals new to the Americas, some by design and others by accident. Determined to farm in a European manner, the colonists introduced their domesticated livestock—honeybees, pigs, horses, mules, sheep, and cattle—and their domesticated plants, including wheat, barley, rye, oats, grasses, and grapevines. But the colonists also inadvertently carried pathogens, weeds, and rats**(20)**.

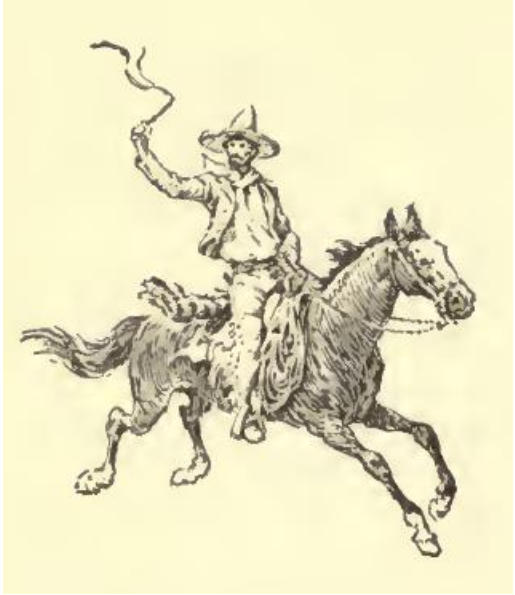
This passage illustrates the dual nature of the "Columbian exchange"; i.e., the deliberate attempts to cultivate familiar European agricultural practices and the unforeseen environmental disruptions caused by the inadvertent introduction of exogenous species and pathogens.

Austin's work debunks the Imperial myth of emptiness that represents the American West as a desolate place in order to justify its occupation. She believes that "the reek of men's passions lies in the hollow desertness like an infection"**(21)**, assimilating Euro-Americans' presence to a plague that devastates the place. Most of them end up sundried since the

wilderness "has its own exigencies and occasions, and will not be lived in except upon its own conditions"[(22)]. In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992), Jane Tompkins considers that, in the eyes of settlers, the desert was a "*vacuum domicilium,*" an empty territory to be occupied and mastered[(23)]. The Indigenous inhabitants, if ever mentioned, were portrayed as non-human obstacles to Manifest Destiny, a nineteenth century concept that proclaimed the divine mission of Euro-American settlers to expand their territorial boundaries from coast to coast. On their way, they legitimized the extraction of ore, mainly gold. In this respect, Austin denounces the prevalent belief of her time that the "desert is a loose term that indicates a land that supports no man"[(24)], and that, "Void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil"[(25)]. She enumerates the various forms of life present in it, mentioning 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 (Sporobolus airoides)"[(26)]. She hence renders, in *The Land of Little Rain* and other works, the image of the desert's landscape, its plant life, and its animal species, both in scientific and poetic terms.

In addition to drawing a portrait of her bioregion's fauna and flora, Austin writes about the human beings who populate it. She comments on the human-environment interactions characteristic of her epoch; for instance, she describes the transformation of the landscape through modern irrigation and land management practices, which disrupt the balance between human needs and environmental sustainability. In "Jimville—A Bret Harte Town"[(27)], she describes Jimvilleans as lawless "cattle-men and adventurers for gold" in a place where "modern America has laid a greedy, vulgarizing hand"[(28)]. She depicts greedy Euro-Americans as being completely out of touch with it; their excessive mining, rampant industrialization, and domesticated herds disturb the ecosystem. She contrasts their practices with the wisdom of Indigenous communities who have learned, over the centuries, to adapt to the arid conditions of the Southwest and live sustainably on their land. In "My Neighbor's Field," Austin further explores the influence of human beings on the ecosystem by describing a neighbor's field that only grows weeds and watching the mark of "human occupancy of greed and mischief"[(29)] upon it. She finds that the field's ecosystem functions in unison, with each plant affecting the animals according to its blooming and dying cycles. She nonetheless raises concerns that it might eventually be overtaken by successive waves of settlers, namely the homesteaders, ranchers, and miners and their "adjudged possession of the field"[(30)]. On a more transcendental plane, the field serves as a meditative space where the author practices mindfulness on the bonds between humans and other elements of nature.

Figure n°1: Sketch of a "cattle-man" made by Ansel Adams



Source: The Land of Little Rain[(31)]

While in the nineteenth century, the American Southwest had been characterized by its focus on irrigation and mining industries, by the twentieth century, it transformed into a testing ground for military technology, including nuclear weaponry. Many Indigenous territories have been turned into "national sacrifice zones"; genocidal and ecocidal practices have been legitimized to create a "bare nature"**(32)** that serves the welfare of the expanding nation. In *The Land of Little Rain*, despite her condemnation of human greed, Austin shows that individuals differ in the extent to which they exhibit it. She contrasts, for instance, the pacifist Pocket Hunter with the rougher miners who become fixated on their quest for gold and, in the process, lose their sanity. The Pocket Hunter, however, is "saturated with the elements" and feels happy whenever he is outdoors because he finds "himself in the grip of an All-wisdom that killed men or spared them as seemed for their good"**(33)**. Through this character, Austin praises the little miners who understand their environment and limit their activity to a sustainable scale. His return to the desert, despite having achieved substantial financial success, reinforces her belief that people are drawn back to this land for enigmatic reasons.

3- Learning from the Indigenous People's Sustainable Relation to the Land:

In In an age of environmental degradation, ecologists are reappraising indigenous peoples' sustainable relation to the environment. In *All our Relations: Native Struggles for Land Rights and Life*, environmental activist Winona LaDuke notes that "wherever Indigenous peoples still remain, there is also a corresponding enclave of biodiversity"**(34)**. The Lakota phrase "Mitakuye Oyasin," translated as "all my relations" can be used to explain the Indigenous holistic view of the world, in which stars, planets, plants, and animals, are considered as relatives. Indigenous people do not use natural resources beyond their immediate needs; they consider that cultural survival is only possible through the preservation of the ecosystem, whose destruction amounts to spiritual loss. Their ecological ethics, as opposed to the Western anthropocentric ethos, stems from an "understanding of the human-nature relation as a continuum or a monism rather than as a binary schism"**(35)**. It likewise stems from the belief that "all organisms, including humans, are part of a larger biotic web or network or community whose interests must constrain or direct or govern the human interest"**(36)**. In an age of environmental degradation, it is hence important to reappraise Indigenous peoples' sustainable relation to nature.

Austin, in *The Land of Little Rain*, in contrast to many of her contemporary writers, does not deny the existence of the land's Indigenous peoples; she writes, "Ute, Paiute, Mojave, and Shoshone inhabit its frontiers, and as far into the heart of it as a man dare go"**(37)**. This sentence serves as her testimony about the existence of human lives before the arrival of Euro-Americans, and throughout the book, she takes a number of her observations about the environment from their traditional knowledge. She recommends, "Trust Indians not to miss any virtues of the plant world!"**(38)**. In the chapter entitled "Shoshone Land," for instance, the protagonist is a medicine man who teaches her the use of herbal remedies. She is fascinated by the way how, like the flora and fauna of the land, he and his people survive with such economy and respect for the environment. In the chapter dedicated to "The Basket Maker," Austin depicts the relationship of Seyavi, and Indigenous woman, with the land as one of mutual respect. She toils to provide for herself and her son; she creates baskets, bowls, and cooking pots with a "touch beyond cleverness." She is, like the raw material she employs, close to the land, and they are both "saturated with the same elements"**(39)**. The narrator explains:

Seyavi made baskets for love and sold them for money, in a generation that preferred iron pots for utility. Every Indian woman is an artist—sees, feels, creates, but does not philosophize about her processes. Seyavi's bowls are wonders of technical precision, inside and out, the palm finds no fault with them, but the subtlest appeal is in the sense that warns us of humanness in the way the design spreads into the flare of the bowl**(40)**.

This passage describes the value of Seyavi's craftsmanship and connection to the natural world. The environment is not only a backdrop but an integral part of her existence, echoing deep ecology's belief in nature's inherent worth. Simultaneously, her story reflects ecofeminist principles through her embodiment of resilience and self-reliance, as well as women's bond

with the environment in a male-dominated world. Her struggle against external pressures, including the invasion of cattle-men and adventurers, mirrors ecofeminism's focus on the link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature.

Like the Indigenous oral narratives of her time, Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* is mainly about being human in a more-than-human world, and in this sense, the author has been a champion of the post-anthropocentric perspective by recognizing that the non-human world not only serves human needs, but also has its own existence and worth. David Abram borrows Theodore Sturgeon's concept of "more-than-human"**(41)** to signify the commonwealth of all creations that co-dwell on planet Earth, showing that human life is part of a broader non-human life that surrounds and supports; he calls for humility since "more" carries not only a quantitative but also a qualitative significance. The material branch of ecocriticism uses this concept to point out the need to view the physical world not simply as a setting for human stories, but as an active contributor to the creation of those stories. For Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, material ecocriticism employs two approaches to understand "the agency of matter." While the first one considers the way "nonhuman agentic capacities are described and represented in narrative texts (literary, cultural, visual)," the second one emphasizes the "narrative power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions"**(42)**. In this respect, nature and culture become interdependent in a narrative where the agents are not only humans, but also animals, objects, and places.

In Austin's autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, the protagonist Mary is "plagued with an anxiety to know" and is "spellbound in an effort not to miss any animal behavior, any bird-marking, any weather signal, any signature of tree or flower"**(43)**. In *The Land of Little Rain*, as well, the narrator is spellbound by the xerophilous flora and fauna. Her examination of the more-than-human world extends beyond large animals like coyotes, buzzards, and buffaloes to tiny species that lie at the beginning of the food chain and contribute to the balance of the ecosystem. She observes the "evidence of insect life. Now where there are seeds and insects there will be birds and small mammals"**(44)**. Writing about the tiniest creatures in the ecosystem is uncommon, especially in a context where the dominant narrative of the desert typically portrays it as a "barren" land. In her chapter on "The Scavengers," she provides an example of the impressive "economy of nature" by describing a range of creatures that "know nearly as much of death as do their betters [humans], who have only the more imagination"**(45)**. She reevaluates the role of scavengers, often seen as foul and cruel, by acknowledging their essential function in the food chain, as they contribute to natural sanitation by removing carcasses from the environment. She gives agency to these animals, insisting that humans must not disrupt the balance of the ecosystem, as "it seems that the wild creatures have learned all that is important to their way of life"**(46)**. In this chapter, Austin is scathingly critical of human egocentricity and stupidity, particularly regarding the pollution of the landscape with objects such as tin cans:

Man is a great blunderer going about in the woods […] 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**(47)**.

This quote is a vivid criticism of humanity's ecological footprint; it shows that while natural processes involve a cycle of predation and survival, human activities disrupt this balance. Unlike scavengers that recycle organic matter, humans leave behind non-biodegradable waste, such as tin cans, which neither nature nor its creatures can process. Through this commentary, Austin prompts readers to reflect on their role in the ecosystem, as she encourages what Alexa Weik von Mossner calls a "trans-species empathy"**(48)**, a key tenet of deep ecology, ecofeminism, and affective ecocriticism.

Figure n°2: Sketch of polluting tin cans made by Ansel Adams

Source: The Land of Little Rain[(49)]

4- Eco-affective Perceptions of the Land:

During her lifetime, Austin suffered from neurasthenic breakdowns, which are mental and emotional conditions marked by chronic fatigue, emotional distress, and cognitive difficulties. This was attributed to the emotional distress of her childhood after the early deaths of her father and sister[(50)]. She later lived without the emotional support of her mother and husband, finding in the land a source of affective nourishment and learning to survive with little sustenance, most like the desert's flora and fauna. In *The Land of Little Rain*, she argues that there is "little in it [the Mojave desert] to love" because of its inhospitality, but "None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections"[(51)]. Even if its intense living conditions can erode people's strength, it is a place that, once visited, unavoidably draws them back to it. This testimony reflects the author's intense, almost transcendental, reverence for the place, drawing the reader into assembling, chapter by chapter, the broader picture and its shrouded mystery. Her reflections on her life in the isolated towns of the high desert reveal the tension between her personal frustrations and her later romanticized vision of the disappearing natural world.

A recent trend in the humanities, inspired from philosophers like Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, refocuses attention on the importance of affect in human behavior and social interaction. In *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio asserts that emotion is "an integral component of the machinery of reason." Even if "traditional wisdom" rightly warns about the potential negative effects of emotion on reasoning, "the absence of emotion and feeling is no less damaging, no less capable of compromising the rationality that makes us distinctively human and allows us to decide in consonance with a sense of personal future, social convention, and moral principle"[(52)]. He concludes that feeling orients reasoning and puts humans "in the proper direction" to effectively use the tools of logic.

Affective ecocriticism has emerged from this affective turn to indicate the emotional responses elicited by the natural environment and to explore their effect on human experiences and narratives. Its significance lies in addressing the negative consequences experienced by humans in the Anthropocene era, such as grief, despair, anxiety, and solastalgia, while also acknowledging the persistence of hope for a better future. Austin's narrative is mainly characterized by solastalgia (derived from the Greek words "sōlācium" meaning "comfort" and "–algia" meaning "pain"), a concept coined by Glenn Albrecht to describe the feeling of homesickness caused by environmental change; it is different from eco-anxiety which is related to fear of what might happen in the future. He defines it as "the homesickness you have when you are still at home" while this home is changing in distressing ways. It results from the "recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault"[(53)]. This perspective is reminiscent of Edward. O. Wilson's "biophilia hypothesis," which assumes an inherent emotional bond between humans and other living organisms, spanning various emotions like attraction and aversion, awe and indifference, or calmness and anxiety[(54)].

Austin's experiences in *The Land of Little Rain* exemplify the aforementioned ideas, as her reflections on the environment are affected by the emotions it evokes. Her representation of the land and its challenges, such as extreme temperatures and scarce waters, generates emotional responses like fear and despair, but also resilience and endurance, along with introspection and contemplation. The reader can also experience a multitude of emotions, such as love, awe, care, fear, grief, empathy, humility, and relationality. The initial leg of her trip, from Keeler to Mojave, is particularly arduous due to the rough terrain, but she finds a peculiar joy in this challenging segment. She prefers to sit in the open-air place next to the driver instead of the confined interior of the stagecoach with her fellow travelers. By choosing the exposed seat, she demonstrates her desire for an unmediated connection with the land; this preference allows her to fully immerse herself in the sights, sounds, and sensations of the place, free from the distractions of the interior.

Her interaction with the desert is not solely about observing nature, but also about engaging with it in a way that is both intimate and transformative. She is moved to contemplate the "eternal meaning of the skies"**(55)**, suggesting that these natural phenomena offer her a sense of the sublime, where the physical experience of the storm becomes a gateway to existential reflections. For her, experiencing the desert is an "immersive encounter" that connects her to the environment on multiple levels. As she argues, to truly understand the power and significance of a mountain storm, one must be inside it; this argument reflects her belief that authentic connection with nature requires full immersion, both physically and emotionally. She further portrays storms as both destructive and nurturing forces; she stresses their role in shaping landscapes and the ecosystem: "They scoop watercourses, manure the pines, twist them to a finer fibre, fit the firs to be masts and spars, and, if you keep reasonably out of the track of their affairs, do you no harm"**(56)**; she adds that "Such rains relieve like tears"**(57)**. Her descriptions of cloud formations and rain patterns demonstrate an almost mystical appreciation for natural processes, while still acknowledging their potential for destruction. This balanced view is reminiscent of deep ecology's emphasis on the inherent value of nature beyond human utility.

5- Ecotopia and Education for Sustainability:

Exposed to Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*, the reader is transported from eco-anxiety to eco-optimism. The book can be read as a "cautionary tale" which, as Ursula Heise explains in her introduction to "The Invention of Eco-futures," "extrapolates dystopian futures from current configurations of capitalism, climate change, biotechnologies, or species loss." It hence invites readers "to contemplate the present as the matrix of the past from which dystopia sprang, as well as to consider how alternative developments might be initiated"**(58)**. Utopianism, however, has faced criticism for being mere escapism that does not address real world issues and for serving as a fantasy that distracts from tackling these issues. It has also faced criticism for representing a form of perfection that is either unattainable or at least far from our reality. On the other hand, proponents of utopianism argue that it is useful to genuinely recognize the injustices of today's world and strive for improvement since it nurtures human capacity to envision different possibilities. Lyman Tower Sargent describes utopianism as a sort of "social dreaming" that helps us conceive better alternatives, but instead of portraying an idealized society, he proposes one that is "considerably better" than the one in which the reader currently lives**(59)**.

Austin's utopian ending of *The Land of Little Rain* fulfills this "social dreaming" role. In the final chapter, "The little town of the grape vines," the narrator reaches the sacred city of Las Uvas after going through apocalyptic loomings. This land of peace and abundance is populated by individuals who practice a harmonious blend of Christian and Indigenous traditions. Despite being situated in a desert, it is idyllically represented as full of "arches and airy crofts, full of linnets, blackbirds, fruit birds, small sharp hawks, and mockingbirds that sing by night"; the birds "pour out piercing unendurably sweet cavatinas about the fragrance of bloom and musky smell of fruit"**(60)**. The dwellers of the land live in synchrony with their high desert environment,

where the melodies of guitars and voices blend with the birds' enchanting songs. In this peaceful setting, people live in communal affection and solidarity, with little "villainy" and "little wealth," and with "no incentive to thieving or killing"[(61)]. They have relinquished their desire for gold and moderated the negative aspects of their traditions like cock-fighting or smoking. They peacefully co-exist with each other and with the more-than-human world. Austin thereby creates what ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant calls an "Edenic recovery narrative" in which she repudiates Man's pretension of "subduing" the land, but instead considers it as a "home, a community, to be shared with other living and nonliving things," a community where "women, minorities, other cultures, and the earth, along with men, will be active partners"[(62)]. Through this utopian vision, Austin invites her readers to cultivate a refined sensibility towards the environment and counter the destructive materialistic impulses of capitalist consumerism.

Despite writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Austin's approach to the desert ecosystem in *The Land of Little Rain* anticipates modern research in the field. Her 1903 observations are found in contemporary research, as in the 2024 study "Valuation and Management of Desert Ecosystems and their Services" by Haojie Chen and Robert Costanza. This study presents the importance of understanding the distinctive species, ecological functions, and cultural significance of desert landscapes, as well as the need for sustainable management practices. It calls for research into "the unique species and the special ecological and geological functions of deserts"[(63)]. This claim is found in Austin's text when she states, "Not the law, but the land sets the limit"[(64)], indicating her recognition that the harsh desert environment dictates the survival and adaptation of its dwellers. Hence, while Chen and Costanza call attention to the need for recognizing desert ecosystems and their economic valuation in 2024, Austin articulated the inherent value of her Southwestern desert ecosystem over a century earlier. Like them, Austin calls for "sustainable decision-making regarding land and resource management in desert regions" to balance conservation with human needs[(65)]. The connection between desert health and human health is foregrounded in her observation that "For all the toll the desert takes of a man it gives compensations, deep breaths, deep sleep, and the communion of the stars"[(66)], concurring with Chen and Costanza's recommendation to explore the link between desert health and human health. Unlike common attempts to "green" the desert, Austin values the desert for what it is, appreciating its raw and untamed beauty without seeking to alter it.

Reinforcing the aforementioned principles of affective ecocriticism, the emotional intensity of Austin's narrative allows readers to be transported into the desert environment, and research presently contends that narratives "tend to be more persuasive when they elicit from recipients a state of psychological transportation"[(67)]. In other words, readers who are emotionally transported within the narrative are more likely to experience significant changes in their attitudes and beliefs, leading to the conclusion that *The Land of Little Rain* has a considerable didactic importance. It offers an opportunity to explore a number of Sustainable Development Goals such as Life on Land (SDG 15), Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10). It illustrates that literature can contribute to advancing these goals by raising awareness, empathy, and stewardship. In this perspective, it is important to update educational programs to include literary works on the theme of sustainability, as they can shape students' environmental attitudes and encourage responsible behavior towards the planet.

Conclusion:

Revisiting Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* in the context of the Anthropocene, and through the lens of deep ecology, ecofeminism, and affective ecocriticism, reveals the author's pioneering reflection on the interaction between human and more-than-human worlds. By examining her representation of the human footprint on the desert ecosystem, the reader discovers that her work correlates with contemporary concerns about ecological destruction and resilience. It serves as a reminder of the sensitive balance required to maintain the planetary health of arid environments; it also recognizes the inherent value of all life forms and celebrates their ecological interconnectedness. Unlike many contemporary environmental texts that evoke

eco-anxiety, however, Austin's book transports readers from a state of eco-anxiety to a sense of eco-optimism through its ecotopian ending. This vision combines scientific observation, philosophical reflection, and emotional resonance to provide an alternative to the current anti-utopian environments of the Anthropocene.

Endnotes;

1- In Indigenous studies, the word "Indian" is rejected for being a misnomer: when Christopher Columbus landed on a Caribbean island, he believed he was in Southeast Asia and named its inhabitants as "Los Indios." The appellations "Amerindian" and "American Indian" are consequently rejected for the previous reason, and for the naming of the continent after the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, the first European who set foot on the continent's mainland. "Native American" is the most widely used appellation; it recognizes that the land was not a "New World," and that it was inhabited before the arrival of Europeans. Yet, it is likewise confusing, because "native" means "born in," and even the descendants of European, African, and Asian migrants were born on the American continent. In this article, therefore, we prefer to call them "Indigenous people," with an upper-case "I" as an expression of respect.

2- Slovic, S. "Nature writing," p. 888.

3- Slovic, S. "Nature writing and environmental psychology," p. 352.

4- Bullis, C. "Retalking environmental discourses from a feminist perspective," p. 125.

5- Warren, K.J. *Ecological feminism*, p. 190.

6- Buell, L. *The Future of environmental criticism*, p. 99.

7- Norwood, V. "Heroines of nature," p. 331.

8- Lynch, T. *Xerophilia*, p. 13.

9- Austin, M.H. *The land of journey's ending*, p. 56.

10- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 12.

11- Ibid., p. 7.

12- Teague, D. *The Southwest in American literature and art*, p. 38.

13- Gersdorf, C. *the poetics and politics of the desert*, p. 247.

14- The Mojave Desert is situated in the Southeastern region of California and the Southwestern part of Nevada, with minor extensions reaching into the states of Arizona and Utah. It is known for its extreme weather conditions. The low precipitations, combined with high evaporation rates, contribute to its arid scenery; it is nonetheless home to a variety of adaptable flora and fauna.

15- Austin draws attention to the importance of naming in imperial expansion. Using a toponym (place name), human beings give meaning to a location, claim possession over it, and draw identity from it. According to Bill Ashcroft in his book *Post-colonial transformations*, "to name place is to announce discursive control over it by the very act of inscription, because through names, location becomes metonymic of those processes of travel, annexation and colonization which affect the dominance of imperial powers over the non-European world" (p. 134). Therefore, maps and toponyms have been metonyms of "imperial knowledge" as well as strategies of "imperial control of space and time" (p. 156). Renaming colonized places is significantly a major weapon in the hands of explorers and mapmakers who project their signifiers on Indigenous cultural landscapes.

16- Rudnick, L. "Re-naming the land," p. 16.

17- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. viii.

18- Ibid., p. 3.

19- Crutzen, P. and Stoermer, E. (2000). "The Anthropocene," p. 17.

20- Crosby, A. *Ecological imperialism*, p. 19.

21- Austin, M.H. *Stories from the country of lost borders*, p. 24.

22- Ibid., p. 25.

23- Tompkins, J. *West of everything*, p. 74.

24- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 3.

25- Idem.

26- Ibid., p. 8.

27- This is a reference to Bret Harte (1836–1902), a Southwestern desert writer whose short stories tell about Gold Rush prospectors and gamblers.

28- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 163.

29- Ibid., p. 128.

30- Idem.

31- Ibid., p. 156.
32- Arnold, J.D. "Bare nature and the genocide-ecocide nexus," p. 1.
33- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 71.
34- LaDuke, W. *All our Relations*, p. 1.
35- Buell, L. *The environmental imagination*, p. 211.
36- Buell, L. *The future of environmental criticism*, p. 134.
37- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 3.
38- Ibid., p. 10.
39- Ibid., p. 169.
40- Ibid., p. 168.
41- The concept of "more-than-human" was first used by Theodore Sturgeon, in his science fiction novel *More Than Human* (1953), to explore the potential for humanity to transcend its current limitations. The story follows a group of individuals with extraordinary psychic abilities who come together to something greater than the sum of their parts.
42- Iovino, S. and Oppermann, S. "Material ecocriticism," p. 79.
43- Austin, M.H. *Earth horizon*, p. 195.
44- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 13.
45- Ibid., p. 49.
46- Ibid., p. 64.
47- Ibid., p. 60.
48- Weik von Mossner, A. *Affective ecologies*, p. 83.
49- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 60.
50- Lanigan, E.F. *A Mary Austin reader*, p. 6.
51- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 16.
52- Damasio, A. *Descartes' error*, p. xii.
53- Albrecht, G. "Solastalgia," p. 48.
54- Wilson, E. *Biophilia*, p. 31.
55- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 262.
56- Ibid., pp. 245-246.
57- Ibid., p. 251.
58- Heise, U. "Introduction: The Invention of eco-futures," p. 5.
59- Sargent, L.T. "The three faces of utopianism revisited," p. 9.
60- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 266.
61- Ibid., p. 281.
62- Merchant, C. *Reinventing Eden*, p. 242.
63- Chen, H. and Costanza, R. "Valuation and management of desert ecosystems," p. 12.
64- Austin, M.H. *The land of little rain*, p. 3.
65- Chen, H. and Costanza, R., Ibid., p. 12
66- Austin, M.H. *The Land of Little Rain*, p. 21.
67- Mazzocco, P. et al. "This story is not for everyone," p. 361.

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