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SEEING THE GOD OF NEW MEXICO: MARY AUSTIN'S *STARRY ADVENTURE*

AND

THE OPTIC OF ENCHANTMENT

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Olivia Jayne Mann

November 2017

Advisor: Dr. Eric Gould

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines 20th century American writer Mary Austin's last novel, *Starry Adventure* (1931), a work unjustly ignored by most Austin scholars, yet touted by the photographer Ansel Adams (in a letter to Austin) as "the greatest thing I have ever read." This thesis will be particularly concerned with the concept of vision in the novel and the connections between Austin's fiction and the New Mexican modernism/primitivism movement in the visual arts. I explore what I call Austin's "optic of enchantment," a visual experience of divinity that is uniquely tied to the New Mexican landscape. I break down this optic of enchantment into three distinct and definitive facets: First – a visual understanding of the landscape which is directly informed by the then-contemporary movements of visual artists in Taos and Santa Fe, and more widely, in New York and Europe. Second, I discuss how the visual experience of the landscape is derived from a primitivist sense of indigenous experience: Indian artistic culture and its deep, non-lingual understanding of the land, and the ritual and mysticism of Penitente and chicano culture. Finally, I complicate literary studies of Austin with theories of modern visual culture, relying on the work of visual studies critics and modernist art historians to illustrate how American vision was changing at the turn of the 20th century, and how the Southwestern landscape played a role in determining national concepts of modernity and modernism in art, letters and beyond.

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INTRODUCTION

New Mexico, Austin, and the Vision of *Starry Adventure*

Strange magic world which was New Mexico!

-Mary Austin, *Starry Adventure* (1931)

In the 1880s the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad began a massive expansion that connected the remote and sparsely populated Southwest with the greater United States. Railway advertising pamphlets touted the beauty and promise of the region and the area ballooned with those seeking cures: “lungers” seeking climatological treatment for ailments like tuberculosis and chronic pneumonia and disillusioned Americans seeking a purer world free from the ills of industry and urban oppression (Fox, 213). This latter group became increasingly prominent during and after the first World War (after New Mexico received official statehood in 1912), and following the lead of the earlier Taos First Painters, an influential avant-garde art colony began to blossom.¹

Primarily under the direction and influence of the New York luminary Mabel Dodge Luhan, who had run a prominent salon in Greenwich Village prior to her Taos

¹ See Arrell Morgan Gibson, *The Santa Fe and Taos Art Colonies: Age of the Muses 1900-1942* (U of Oklahoma P, 1983) and Marta Weigle and Kyle Fiore, *Santa Fe and Taos: The Writer's Era 1916-1942* (Ancient City, 1982) for detailed histories of the colonies, their foundation, and their constituents.

relocation, northern New Mexico became an epicenter of cultural experimentation.²

Mabel was the heiress to a Buffalo, New York banking fortune, and upon visiting New Mexico, after bouncing between the literary and artistic sets in New York and Europe, she found her permanent, spiritual home. She took a fourth husband, a member of the nearby Taos Pueblo, Tony Lujan, who was her chauffeur and local guide, and the two set about restoring a fabulous Spanish Colonial adobe mansion from which she would launch an international artist's and writer's residence. Mabel insisted that her various writer, artist and intellectual friends from New York and Europe come to stay with her in Taos, and her house was graced by D.H. Lawrence, Carl Jung, Martha Graham, Ansel Adams, Gertrude Stein, Jean Toomer, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, Willa Cather, Paul Strand, among others. Many of Mabel's guests would eventually return permanently or seasonally, forming a vocal artistic community which actively believed in the region's ability to revitalize the cultural spirit of America.

These writers and artists shared glorified notions about local native American culture, which they saw as more culturally pure and spiritually centered. The primitivist notions held by these Anglo intellectuals in New Mexico contributed to their avant-garde theories, of art in particular. Patterning and craftsmanship in native American production and their simplified naïve approaches to mimetics and perspective seemed to offer some

² For more in-depth studies of Mabel Dodge Luhan in New Mexico, see Flannery Burke's *From Greenwich Village to Taos: Primitivism and Place at Mabel Dodge Luhan's* (UP of Kansas, 2008) or Lois Palken Rudnick's *Mabel Dodge Luhan: New Woman, New Worlds* (U of New Mexico P, 1984).

origin theory to their own penchants for abstraction. These New Mexican transplants also shared a deep interest in the Spanish colonial vestiges of a ritualized local Catholicism and its various folk traditions. They believed that the origins and durability of New Mexico's unique and colorful culture were owed to the mystical power of the surrounding desert landscape and what they perceived to be its ineffable vibrancy. Lois Palken Rudnick has argued that New Mexico's landscape and culture offered for this community of modern artists an escape from the stultifying effects of Western industrial monoculture, which, in their opinions, had led to the catastrophe of world war. "On the one hand," Rudnick writes,

American modernists desired to break down the essentialist truths and polar oppositions of western society, especially of nature and culture, that they believed helped to create the political, social, and moral disorder of Anglo civilization ... The physical and cultural landscapes of New Mexico seemed to have most of the requisite attributes for serving the American modernist agenda: to create a modern American culture that would cure the malaise of modernity (*Utopian Vistas*, 4-5).

This quest seems at first unintentionally contradictory; to create a *modern* culture that in turn would solve the problems of *modernity* would be a task mired with paradox.

The twentieth-century historian T.J. Jackson Lears offers one possible clarification for the terminological inconsistencies at play in the various understandings of modernism. He writes of the many "ambiguities surrounding notions of modernity – including the 'modernism' literary critics have identified as the distinctive imaginative mode of the twentieth century" arguing that

what literary critics call modernism and what I call antimodernism share common roots in the *fin-de-siècle* yearning for authentic experience – physical, emotional, or spiritual. The quickest way to characterize this terminological muddle is to

point out that modernity has one meaning for historians, a very different one for literary critics; in large measure literary ‘modernism’ has been a reaction against the constraints and evasions of historical modernity. (Lears, xix)

Modernism (which, tellingly, Lears refers to as “antimodernism”) is an experimental, ideological and creative response to the political, social and economic shifts of modernity. I bring Lears into this conversation so that he might navigate my reader through the quagmires of Austin and her contemporaries’ regional modernism. The complex environment of criticism concerning the West during this time-period tends to put Austin in one of two oversimplified camps, either she is a romantic and Victorian local-color fiction writer, or she is an activist and thinker on the cusp of the modern. Austin’s work and her development within the art colonies at Taos and Santa Fe reflect the various gray shades of modernity and modernism, for they were wholly inspired by the past, yet ignited by forces of the new. The New Mexican avant-garde shied away from empiricism and embraced spiritualism; they glorified indigenous cultures while condemning the urban industrial culture of New York and Europe; they rejected the technological comforts of the city to better connect with nature; they embraced a landscape whose archaeological and geological features are some of America’s oldest. Yet, despite clinging to the past, their aesthetic and philosophy were often innovative and indebted to a very modern and post-industrial sense of mankind’s place in the world. These constant reconciliations of the antimodern and the modern allowed the New Mexican avant-garde to mine the past for cultural and spiritual resolution while they simultaneously engaged with the contemporary *zeitgeist* to form temporally syncretic modes of negotiating anxieties of the future.

In describing the intense, visceral draw New Mexico had for so many avant-garde writers and artists (of whom the various odes to the place I address in my first chapter), Max Weber's concept of modernization and disenchantment laid out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-5) and *Economy and Society* (1913), is useful for reading the New Mexico colonies' re-entry to a mythical, primitivist, and transcendentalist mental state. Weber designates the process of modernity as one in which all that was once interpreted personally and subjectively in an inherently spiritual world became re-explained through the burgeoning of rational modes of thinking based upon processes of science. This reinterpretation of the world begins much earlier than Austin's period, beginning with the Enlightenment but increasing in scale in the industrial age of the capitalist State. With modernization, rationalism replaces all other values, which for Weber, lacks true moral justification. Weber's "iron cage" – the bureaucracy of modern society rendered inescapable by the advocacy of rational thought in an industrialized system - becomes the hallmark of a de-mythicized world (Weber, 181). Recent philosophers have read Weber's modernization- as-disenchantment as a process which provides rather for a series of "re-enchantments." Such scholars as Jane Bennett, Richard Jenkins, Philip Fisher, or Morris Berman have argued that modern culture experiences and succeeds in responding to disenchantment with various forms of

re-enchantment.³ This re-enchantment could, scholars argue, be found in a myriad of places and traditions. In romantic notions of the sublime for example, or in consumerist or technological spectacles (as Richard Jenkins, and, as I'll mention later, Jonathan Crary, discuss), or in reconnections to new kinds of mystical or evangelical faiths. This scholarly trend morphs the tensions of modernity and modernism into another dialectical form of secularity and mysticism, disenchantment and re-enchantment. This reading of modernization accounts for the re-enchantment that the New Mexican avant-garde sought out; they regarded the world with the unique combination of a romanticist's notion of nature, a transcendentalist's notion of nation, and a modernist's notion of time. Northern New Mexico provided the perfect cultural space then for experimenting with these modes of thinking. Uniquely beautiful and sparsely populated, its remoteness and geology had preserved ancient cultural practices within an antediluvian landscape. These combined to provide a space ripe for a kind of spiritual and cultural renewal (a re-enchantment) which was deeply rooted in a mythic past, a space to house new/old American "utopian vistas," to use Rudnick's term. Northern New Mexico would provide open-minded Americans and European ex-pats a place for harmonious living, one where these intellectual reformers could tap into universal human wells of sublime emotion and connection to the land.

³ See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton UP 2001); Morris Berman, *The Re-enchantment of the World* (Cornell UP, 1981); Philip Fisher, *Wonder, The Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Harvard UP, 1998); and Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment" in *Max Weber Studies*, vol. 1, 2000, pp. 11-32.

Mary Austin was one such writer who was convinced of New Mexico's status as an American utopia. Austin was already well acquainted and enamored with the desert lands of the Southwest. Born Mary Hunter in 1868 in Illinois, she relocated with her family to Southern California 1888. In 1894, she moved with her husband Stafford Wallace Austin to Inyo County in the Mojave Desert, where Stafford had been appointed superintendent of the school district. For the next few years, Austin spent time befriending local shepherds and native American tribes, and began to conduct anthropological and naturalist studies of her surrounding area. She began a career as a writer submitting "local color" pieces to a variety of Western literary magazines popular in California, and soon began a relationship with the prestigious national magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*.⁴ After moving to Los Angeles in 1899, she published *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) a lyrical, non-fiction treatise to the Southwest desert which is often considered her masterpiece, and which earned her a certain national literary celebrity. She became an active member of the artist's community at Carmel-by-Sea, founding a theater there, and then spent time in Europe, where she befriended Henry James, George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, and H.G. Wells in Paris and London before finally settling in New York in 1910. It was here that she began her friendship with Mabel Dodge, and became part of her avant-garde Greenwich Village salon. In 1918, she visited Santa Fe to conduct a study of the Spanish-speaking population in Taos, and began another theater there. At

⁴ For more on Austin's early literary magazine career, see Karen S. Langlois, "A Fresh Voice from the West: Mary Austin, California and American Literary Magazines, 1892-1910" in *California History*, Spring 1990, pp. 22-35.

the insistence of Mabel Dodge Luhan, Austin moved to Santa Fe permanently in 1924. Austin was a perennial visitor at Mabel's, where she met (or revisited, from her Greenwich Village days) Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, Carl Jung, D.H. Lawrence, Gertrude Stein and others. She also fostered artists and writers in her own right. In 1925, she and the painter and sculptor Frank Applegate founded the Spanish Colonial Arts Society. In 1926, she hosted Willa Cather while she worked on her novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In 1929, she collaborated on a pairing of essays and photographs of the Taos Pueblo with Ansel Adams.⁵

Austin referred to New Mexico as her "Land of Journey's Ending" - this form of geographic taxonomy, one that preferred personal expression over ownership of discovery, derived from her affinity for native American forms of name-giving (Austin, *Land of Little Rain (LOLR)*, xxxv-xxxvi). New Mexico was for Austin a place of creative energy, which she describes in her second volume of lyrical desert prose, published in 1924, *The Land of Journey's Ending*:

more lines of natural development converged here, between the bracketing rivers, more streams of human energy came to rest than anywhere else within what is now called the United States [. . .] because men felt here the nameless content of the creative spirit in the presence of its proper instrument. (*The Land of Journey's Ending (LOJE)*, 5)

Austin's greatest attempt to elucidate for readers this New Mexican "creative spirit" is her little-known novel 1931 *Starry Adventure*.

⁵ See Ansel Easton Adams and Mary Austin, *Taos Pueblo*, 1930, San Francisco, Grabhorn Press.

The novel is no longer in print, and while Austin has made her way into the margins of the American canon from relative obscurity within the last few decades, she is mostly known for her contributions to the foundation of a tradition of “nature” writing; the sort of environmental non-fiction that has her paired, in one edition, with John Muir.⁶ Works like *Land of Little Rain* (1903), *Land of Journey’s Ending* (1924) and *Earth Horizon* (1932) are typical of the type of writing for which Austin is critically recognized. These works, part ecological homage, part travel and personal narrative are characteristic of the thematic confluence that Austin liked to parse out and work with. Of the nine novels she published, most scholarly attention has been paid to those dedicated to social issues, such as the feminist novels of egalitarian marriage like *A Woman of Genius* (1912) and *No. 26 Jayne Street* (1920), or novels written to shed light on conservation issues, such as *The Ford* (1917). Some further attention has been given to her work on native American themes, such as her collection of Indian stories, *The Basket Woman* (1904) or her book-length etymological and ethnomusicological essay *The American Rhythm* (1923). *Starry Adventure* however, has been largely ignored.⁷

⁶ See *Writing the Western Landscape* (1994), ed. Ann H. Zwinger, Beacon Press.

⁷ One notable exception to the critical blind-eye of *Starry Adventure* is Janis Stout’s 2007 book, *Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Austin and Cather* (Texas Tech). In a study devoted to the optics of Southwestern literature, Stout devotes rare significant space to *Starry Adventure*, whose failure to attract new readers, despite the Austin revival of the 1980s, is “unfortunate” as the novel “stands up to multiple readings, and one arguably of major social significance in its reconceptualizing of what the Southwest may mean for America” (82). Stout focuses primarily on vision in the novel as a metaphor for reconceiving gender roles in 20th century American society, and does not discuss or even approach the optical influences on and complexities within her “word-pictures” (Stout, 91).

Starry Adventure is Austin's ode to New Mexico. It was her last novel, published in 1931, and it charts the life of Gard Sitwell, a young Anglo transplant who moves with his mother, father, sister and grandfather to a ranch outside of Santa Fe at the turn of the twentieth century. The family's settlement in New Mexico is predicated upon a two-fold notion of asylum-seeking; Gard's father is a consumptive Latin scholar seeking climatological treatment for his lungs in the high desert air, and his grandfather is a defrocked Methodist preacher, chased out of his parish in the East for his radical beliefs and unsavory marital practices. The novel begins with a toddler-aged Gard and follows his development through youth to married adulthood. He follows his childhood friend David (the son of the grandfather's avid socialist companion, also an ex-priest) to college in Boulder, but soon drops out and returns to New Mexico during the first world war and dedicates himself to keeping the family ranch afloat. He becomes involved in the Santa Fe art scene, attending salon-style painting and sketching sessions, and pursues work preserving and restoring Spanish Colonial architecture, about which he later writes a book. The novel hinges upon the stolid marriage between Gard and Jane, a childhood friend of his from a wealthy Eastern family who summer at a nearby New Mexican ranch. The union is merely practical in nature – Gard proposes only at Jane's behest that he offer her an alternative to an impending rigid and socially arranged marriage to a much older man, an alternative which they agree will operate upon a sense of equal friendship. Their progressive, avant-garde marriage attempts a level of egalitarian level-headedness, a fictional experiment of Austin's own progressive marriage philosophy (one that she herself was never able to live out successfully). While working on a grand restoration of

an old Spanish estate, Gard meets the wealthy and eccentric cultural collector, Eudora Ballantine (a thinly veiled version of Mabel Dodge Luhan), who seduces him. The book ends with Jane's forgiveness (the unconventionality of Jane's approach to marriage allows for a sexual freedom and openness in their relationship) and their plans for children and the creation of a beautifully restored Spanish colonial home.

Narratively, the book follows a traditional *bildungsroman* form, supplementing it with the regional flavor and color of the American Southwest. For the most part, reviewers of the novel at the time of its publication were less than impressed. *The American Mercury* called it a "colorful but somewhat overwrought book" ("Review," *The American Mercury*), *The Bookman* thought it had "too many pages," ("Review," *The Bookman*, 82) while *The Outlook* described the novel as "somewhat confused." (Robbins, 150). Considering the tepid reception of the novel and its dismissal as a dysfunctional and disjointed example of moderately entertaining realism, the current perpetuation of its out-of-print obscurity might make sense. For those expecting the novel to adhere to certain conventions of the day, macho penny Western adventures, or the witty psychological character studies of new American realism, the novel failed to achieve any status of

success.⁸ This, however stems from the misunderstood elision of multiple forms: the novel is not exactly realist, it is not exactly regionalist (at least in the traditional sense of Southwestern novels of the time), nor does it take on the experimental narrative forms that modernism would come to claim. Rather, the novel combines elements of all these to articulate the internal particularities of *a way of seeing*.

A few of Austin's contemporaries understood the phenomenological endeavor of the novel. The underlying and most significant relationship in *Starry Adventure* is not that of Gard and Jane, but rather the one between Gard and the New Mexican landscape. The book centers around a "starry adventure:" essentially a revelatory experience of divine consciousness ignited in Gard by the light, color, and shapes of the New Mexican horizon. Throughout the book, Gard works to stay true to this mysterious and intangible

⁸ To put Austin's work in context with the American literary scene at the time, she was contemporaneously compared with such writers as Sinclair Lewis or Jack London (both good friends of hers) who were also considered "regionalist" writers, as they hailed from and wrote about places west of the Mississippi. Lewis' Pulitzer Prize winning *Main Street* (1920) is an excellent example of the preferred social realism coming out of the "regionalist" set at the time; the novel is akin to Henry James' work – an intensely detailed character study following the psychological trials of a woman who marries and relocates from the East Coast to a small Midwestern town. It is important to note as well that because Austin's work was set in the rugged Southwest, it was expected to adhere to the constraints of adventurous "local-color" which many of her earlier stories fulfill (see this chapter's third footnote). The wild popularity of novels such as Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) or Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) were compounded with a growing fad of pulp Western stories in literary magazines in the 1920s. For a full treatment of regionalist social realism, see Richard Brodhead's fourth chapter, "The Reading of Regions" (pp. 107-141) in his book *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (U of Chicago P, 1993) and for a full treatment of the popularity of the pulp Western story, see John A. Dinan's *The Pulp Western: A Popular History of the Western Fiction Magazine in America* (Borgo Press, 1983).

visual-*cum*-spiritual connection to the land, and it guides his decisions (to stay in New Mexico, to begin painting and drawing, to start restoring Spanish architecture, to marry Jane) and cognitive development (his acquiring of language, his ways of knowing, and his eventual self-actualization). In this attempt at articulating a certain visual enchantment, Austin impressed several readers who had spent time in the area, and understood this phenomenon well. Her friend and *Taos Pueblo* collaborator, the modernist photographer Ansel Adams, wrote of *Starry Adventure* in a letter to Austin: “I think it magnificent – one of the greatest things I have ever read ... I, too, saw God – in the ocean and the dunes. What you have done with those difficult and evasive perceptions is nothing short of a miracle” (Goodman and Dawson, 252). Oliver La Farge, an anthropologist and writer whose 1929 Southwestern novel *Laughing Boy* won the 1930 Pulitzer Prize, wrote a critique of Austin’s novel in *The Saturday Review* in which he grasps the unique success of *Starry Adventure*: “...a background that has its own, dominant personality that permeates [the character’s] lives and inspires the narrative [...] New Mexico, the whole, is the greatest thing in the story” (La Farge, 877). La Farge offers a unique opinion as to the seemingly one-dimensional aspect of Austin’s characters and plot, which he claims is intentional. As an anthropologist who specialized in Southwestern native American culture, he offers up a characteristic of Indian storytelling which no doubt influenced Austin, who spent much of her career collecting stories and songs from Native American members of Southwestern regional groups. He writes:

Like the masked figures of Indian dancers, the characters are abstractions, or symbols, highly simplified. [...] As anyone who has known Indians has learned, through conventionalized figures one may attain an extraordinary analytical realism which goes far beyond the usual minute study of an individual. This seems to be Mrs. Austin's intention, and she has succeeded in it admirably. (877)

In addition to her symbolic characters, Austin's "extraordinary analytical realism" is made up of another form of abstraction, a series of passages of the landscape and its interiorization, the fragmented phenomenology of vision which Austin gives to the reader in the form of Gard's views of the land and skies of New Mexico. The novel's most effective and certainly most interesting passages, of which there are many, are Austin's probings into Gard's mind; the ways in which he attaches language and meaning to a visual scape, the ways in which he perceives and describes the "Presence" or spirit of New Mexico, and the ways in which he tries to understand humanity's relationship to the land and the cosmos. La Farge's term, abstraction, is an apt form of description for the novel, considering the aesthetic of these passages, and the milieu of New Mexico at the time of the novel's writing. Local abstract artists too, wanted to shed light on the human workings of vision and perception, and by paring down their canvasses and photographs to the basics of optics (light, shadow, color), they were attempting to reduce their work to analyze a greater reality about the universal experience of visually and spiritually engaging with one's surroundings. At its core, Austin's *Starry Adventure*, I argue, attempted to do the same thing.

This thesis will be particularly concerned with the concept of vision in the novel and the connections between Austin's fiction and the New Mexican modernism/primitivism movement in the visual arts. I aim to explore what I am calling

Austin's "optic of enchantment," a visual experience of spirituality that is uniquely tied to the New Mexican landscape. I endeavor to break down this optic of enchantment into three distinct and definitive facets. In the first chapter I will argue for the existence of the novel's visual understanding of the landscape, directly informed by the then contemporary movements of visual artists in Taos, Santa Fe, and more widely, in New York and Paris. In the second chapter, I will discuss how this visual experience of the landscape is partially derived from a primitivist sense of indigenous experience: native American artistic culture and its deep, non-lingual understanding of the land, and the ritual and mysticism of Penitente Spanish colonial culture. Finally, in the third chapter I will discuss how the visual culture of American modernity provided a force against which this optic of enchantment could develop and subsequently describe a space for which Anglo society could regenerate itself; from world war, from disease, from the pressures of urban existence, from industrial monoculture and from traditional Anglo social expectations.

Building upon the very small body of scholarship that considers vision, modernity and modernism in Austin's work I aim to reject scholarly understandings of American regionalism and the categorization of Austin's novel as sentimental local color. Due to the mostly absent criticism of *Starry Adventure*, I will rely on close readings of the novel to illustrate its optical connections. I wish to complicate the literary studies of Austin with art criticism and theories of modern visual culture, relying on the work of visual studies critics, landscape and art historians and phenomenologists to illustrate how American vision was changing at the turn of the 20th century, and how the Southwestern

landscape played a role in determining national concepts of modernism in art, letters and beyond.

CHAPTER ONE

Expression, Abstraction, and Landscape: Compositions of Enchantment in New Mexico

'I want to give myself up to it. All those painters at Santa Fe, they think they're tearing the heart out of the country. But this - ' She swept the crystal wonder that enclosed them with her glance.

-Mary Austin, *Starry Adventure* (1931)

1.1 Introduction

The title of Austin's last novel conjures up an anachronistic child's storybook. "The Starry Adventure" that the main character Gard experiences, however, is much more than an infantile escapade. Midway through the novel, Austin subtly declares her own writerly intent. After clashing with capitalistic and pragmatically-minded engineer types at college, Gard returns home to New Mexico to run the family ranch. Gard's scholarly father is disappointed with his son's seeming lack of direction and ambition. He hopes Gard might follow in his own footsteps and pursue writing or translation. Gard thinks writing might actually be a fitting occupation for him, but the nature of his desired subject is frustratingly inchoate and ambiguous: "He had thought he might write a book. A book that would be like New Mexico; that would make you feel that way. Only he couldn't think what to put in it. But if you said perfectly *true* things like that, the family seemed to think it was funny" (126). Here Austin is both toying with our understandings of her own objectives, and with the dismissiveness with which her urban, American contemporaries regarded attempts to chart or describe the mystical, the sensual, the wonderful. Contemporary reviewers of the novel tended to dismiss out of hand the

philosophical seriousness with which Austin approached *Starry Adventure*. One reviewer stripped from the novel a self-deprecating joke out of context, calling Gard a “sentimental ass” and oversimplifying his trajectory, stating, tritely: “[he] sees God in the alpenglow as a child, [and] is doomed to disillusionment when he grubs with reality.” (“Review,” *The American Mercury*.) The novel is repeatedly read as overly sentimental, and the characters within it as merely “sensitive.” These sorts of misreadings help to perpetuate the novel’s out-of-print status, along with its position within a larger contemporary misrepresentation of regional literature in the early 20th century - one that is often characterized within mainstream criticism as merely a movement of romantic nostalgia. This feeling of New Mexico (the same that guides Gard’s development in the novel, and which stands as the potential subject of his future book) that Austin sought to recreate in her novel, was one shared by many influential artists and writers of the period. The motivations behind their attempts to capture this feeling, and the techniques and strategies they employed, are the subject of this project. *Starry Adventure* is more than a sentimental trial of a romantic “old person’s vain dream of lost beauty” (as one reviewer put it), but is rather an intensely focused, poetic treatise on the aesthetic theory that undergirded Western avant-garde art and letters in the early 20th century (Walton, 71).

Austin’s book is essentially a narrative work of aesthetic philosophy, one that seeks to characterize what I call the “optic of enchantment:” a certain visually-activated spiritual experience that drew artists and writers such as Mabel Dodge Luhan, Georgia O’Keeffe, D.H. Lawrence, Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, and Marsden Hartley, among others, to New Mexico. This enchanted optic was a means of rehabilitating their senses

and artistic practice in a world that seemed to be increasingly devoid of wonder. In this chapter I aim to situate Mary Austin within the significant body of visual art coming out of New Mexico that itself aligned with the schools of modernism in New York and Europe. Looking to the field of aesthetics, I draw on philosophical definitions of enchantment and wonder and chart how Austin managed to render these experiences in *Starry Adventure* in a specifically visual language. Moreover, I analyze this vision and relate Austin's visual/linguistic compositions to those of abstract landscape painters and photographers of the era to illustrate their shared agenda.

1.2 *Gard Sees the God of New Mexico: Close Readings*

Austin begins the novel with Gard's first experience of enchantment, a visual revelation which shakes the young boy and augments his understanding of a fixed, Christian cosmology. On the first page of the novel, Gard accompanies his older sister Laura out to the back of their family's adobe house after their dinner to eat strawberries and watch the sunset. We understand that Gard is barely speaking age, perhaps four or five years old; Austin positions Gard's development in terms of his ability to remember, writing that "This was the first picking of berries such as comes on in New Mexico gardens after the September rains, but to Gard, whose consecutive memories did not run far back of the present, they were a novelty which must be savored deliciously" (*Starry Adventure*, 3). From this characterization, we come to understand that Austin is foremost concerned with the depiction of experience, of consciousness.

She does not describe Gard in terms of his size, nor does she provide the reader with any concrete reference to his numerical age, rather she refers to his development in terms of his ability to visually place himself within a familiar world. When Gard follows his sister out onto the porch, he is suddenly, unceremoniously, and without any sense of introduction, thrown into a sort of vision that accompanies the setting of the sun:

Swiftly the rain rallied and blotted out the splendor; all but a thin slit through which a golden wing of light flew toward him. Gard saw it come, grow invisible with nearness, and take shape again in the tops of the yellowing aspens in the *ciénaga* below the house, almost on a level with his round-eyed staring; a glowing brightness like hot brass, like molten ends of rainbows, and in the midst...in the midst... [. . .] Gard came to out of his hushed wonder. 'I saw God,' he announced, with finality. (*Starry Adventure*, 4-5)

A few pages later, Gard tries to make sense of what he saw and finds that he is unable to properly express what it was that so enchanted him. Again, Austin places meaning within the realm of memory:

As soon as he had set off, he began to think it odd that he could not recall very clearly what he had seen there. All that he could recall was the way he had felt about it; a deep, full feeling of wanting it to go on and on; a feeling of his vision still going on somewhere, even after he had ceased to see it. He had been quite certain that it was God he had seen. (9)

In Gard's ambiguous, childlike descriptions of his own consciousness Austin elides seeing and feeling. There is a sense that this vision is one that is at once inward and outward, a vision that provides some inexpressible sense of emotional or spiritual knowledge.

Later, when his sister asks what God was like, Gard tries to describe what it was he saw. He describes God as like a mountain, and Laura thinks this is appropriate, considering how large mountains are. But Gard wants to explain that the God he saw was

not mountain-like in size, but rather in feeling: “What he had meant was that the feeling he had for God was often very like the feeling that the mountain gave him, but it seemed not worth explaining” (37). He then asks if there is such thing as multiple Gods, even though the Bible has taught the two children Christianity’s monotheism. He asks: ““Well, but that doesn’t mean there *isn’t* any other. Any’ – Gard searched the wide landscape for just the wanted word – ‘any New Mexico God? It *feels* like there is,’ he finished in justification” (37). Within these first few passages of the novel, the reader comes to understand that this experience is made up of specific elements that make it unique. First, there is the nature of the vision itself, which is ignited repeatedly by similar meteorological or atmospheric actions. The play of light and color and shapes above the mountain ranges (the Sangre de Cristo and Jemez Mountains) during sunrise or sunset, or during the coming on of intense desert storms, or even in the height of day bring on such visionary experiences for Gard. Second, this experience is understood as somehow divine or spiritual – that Austin chooses to complicate Gard’s understanding of divinity in these passages infers that she intends the experience to be essentially non-denominational. In one telling scene, Gard watches one of the local farmhands, Pablo, a native Catholic, cross himself for the Blood of Christ as the alpenglow materializes. Aghast at the display of a “heathen” Catholicism, young Gard turns to his Protestant preacher grandfather to see how he would interpret this, and is surprised to find him staring at the mountains with his hat over his chest, equally reverent. Suddenly Gard understands the blood of Christ to be an aesthetic and natural phenomenon: “Gard, to whom the suggestion of being bathed in blood had always been vaguely nasty, suddenly understood.... Fountain filled with

rosy light, poured over the mountain... Sangre de Cristo!" (29). In this "Book of New Mexico," Gard will continue to incorporate other understandings of divinity into these visual experiences as he learns about them, such as the expression of native American spirituality in local dance and lore, Spanish colonial *brujería* (or witchcraft), and Greek myth.

These experiences, which Gard refers to throughout the novel as the "God of New Mexico" or the "Presence," or "It," are a way of tapping into a spirituality that is both deeply personal and ecologically regional. The title of the book, the starry adventure, is a nighttime rendition of this experience, in which the starry sky over the mountains reveals to Gard an ambiguous sense of purpose, a unique destiny that is inherently tied to place.

Many people in the novel (especially those considered outsiders of New Mexico, or those aligned with the pragmatic capitalism of America and World War I) are unable to access this Presence. There seem to be, according to Gard, people who know things, and people who see things. The former are literal, practical people; unable to pick up on the latencies of a scene or experience, while the latter are spiritual people; aesthetic, and observant, sensitive to the subliminal.

Jane and Gard discuss this seeing/knowing schism, after Jane admits to feeling the Presence too, but only there in New Mexico, not back home in the East. She tells Gard that David, their mutual childhood friend, is unable to sense this New Mexican spirit: "I guess David is one of those who don't see either. He knows a lot; more than any boy I ever met. But he doesn't see anything." Gard acknowledges Jane's idea internally, realizing that indeed there are people who "knew a lot and they worried because you

didn't know it; but as for *seeing*..." (130). In the novel, Austin variously elides the powers of observation with the ability to sense (with some inner knowledge) the true makeup or significance of a thing. The book is made up of so many passages which conflate the unnamed workings of the psyche with specific optical elements, or passages which describe this sort of "seeing" as an instinctive mode of the deeper brain. For instance, in a discussion about occupations with David, who becomes an engineer, Gard explains why he wants to become involved in the arts: "'Color,' said Gard, 'gives me feelings, sort of. About the relations of things. And what they mean. Red flowers coming up out of the ground, like flames from the red-hot core'" (157). On the next page, Gard will use this idea of color, these shapes of flowers to describe how he feels about the United States joining the War (WWI): "The morning after the declaration, [the Flag] came out everywhere, like huge flowers, red and white and billowy. It got you, somehow; it meant something. You had a feeling that it might be shaped as flowers were, something deep in you, in the race, red-hot." (158).

Austin intimates that a sensitivity to observation is what enables true expression. To explain or describe a thing (visually or linguistically), particularly a thing that is difficult to convey literally (like the personal feeling of a conflicted patriotism) one must be able to *see* that thing in its true, pared down forms. Austin's statements about her own process of writing support this claim. In a letter to her publisher she explains her work as a process of looking: "I have just *looked*, nothing more... and by and by I got to know when and where looking was most worthwhile. Then I got so full of looking that I had to write to get rid of some of it and make room for more" (Langlois, 31) and in a later letter

she would explain her stories as “openings of a window through which you are to see the desert as I see it” (Langlois, 32). Austin’s own form of expression, her prose, is ultimately a result of a honed practice of observing. But as Gard and Jane discuss, it seems that only some people are privy to this type of vision, while some can only “know” a thing, like reading a fact in a book. How does one learn to see? Austin, in the character of Gard, provides her readers with one potential option for accruing this deep, visual acumen. To understand a landscape and the flora, fauna and cultures that spring up amongst it, *paint* it.⁹

After Gard tells David that color gives him feelings, in the same chapter, titled “Second Book of Growing-Up,” the reader becomes privy to the Gard’s visual development; a consciousness of the colors, shapes and patterns that express life around him. Gard begins accompanying a family friend, the elderly painter Mr. Phipps who schools him in painting and drawing in his studio and introduces Gard to interesting writers and painters who flit around between New Mexico and New York. These characters encourage Gard to find the true expression of a place or thing: “[they] said yes, that was right, get the *feeling* of the thing and let it rip.” (170.) After the sessions in

⁹ This visual sensitivity as mode of determining how best to see the world has an important philosophical heritage. While the traditions of British romanticism might contextualize Austin’s novel as a treatise to the sublime, I believe rather that the New Mexico colonies’ emphasis on vision and divinity derive more intently from the traditions of American transcendentalism (Rudnick refers to the New Mexican avant-garde of the 1920’s continually as “neo-transcendentalists”) specifically Ralph Waldo Emerson’s writings, such as his 1836 essay “Nature” or his 1844 “The Poet,” which both articulate the national importance of experiencing the divine through observing nature, which can only develop from a poetic and visual sensitivity to the natural world, the enlightened human wandering over the land becomes a “transparent eyeball.”

which he is exposed to other artists and develops as a painter, Gard begins to *see* in new ways:

You picked up tricks of noticing things; blue in the snow shadows; the way you could tell at a distance the leafless scrub oak from the plum thickets. If you looked at [. . .] the milch cow [. . .] early in the morning when you went out to milk, you could see her as a pattern of humps and hollows. (170)

This concept of fragmenting vision into distinct parts, of *composing* vision into a series of colors, shapes, forms, shadows and patterns reveals a penchant for the formalism of abstract landscape painting and for a materialist understanding of the visual experience of physical reality.

Gard's optical enchantment, his non-figural visions of the God of New Mexico, are consequently described as arising from painterly observation. Austin writes of the landscape on a winter's day, Gard explaining:

There was a separate way every kind of rabbit brush had of holding the fresh snow on its dried flower stalks. All this got you through the winter without your falling too often into the suspicion that the Presence had abandoned you. You had sometimes the feeling that after all It was just around the corner, and that you might, by the subtle way a shadow falls, by the delicate passage from tone value to tone value, happen upon it. (120)

To find the Presence, Austin says, to stay connected to it, all one must do is *look*.

1.3. Shared Optics: Visual Artists Express New Mexico

This enchanted optic was a universal basis for artistic inspiration and practice in New Mexico. Comparing Austin's characterization of this experience with descriptions from others in the community, one finds several shared tropes, including a focus on the visual elements of light, color and space, and a certain uncanniness which is repeatedly

attributed to some sort of divinity, majesty, or larger unknown force. Consider Mabel Dodge Luhan's descriptions in the fourth volume of her autobiography, *Intimate Memories*, titled, "Edge of Taos Desert: An Escape to Reality." In introducing her first visit to northern New Mexico, Luhan spends several chapters attempting to visually reproduce the novel enchantment of the landscape that so profoundly affected her. Like Austin, Luhan is stirred by the effects of light, color and shadow that work in the mercurial sky, the mountainous horizon, and the stark desert landscape. Luhan writes:

At its loftiest portion, a mountain shaped along the snowy heights like an Indian bow rested with a vast and eternal composure. The rays of the sinking sun threw its forms into relief and deep indentations and the shapes of the pyramids were shadowed forth in a rosy glow. (189)

Here Luhan focuses on the mountains again, imbuing them with a spirit, an animism which allows them to "rest" with "composure." Again the light and color and shape of the scene elicit feelings of divinity, so that seeing is transformed to worshipping. Luhan also writes that New Mexico was essentially life changing, that her senses and understanding of the world would change when she saw Taos: "My life broke in two right then, and I entered into the second half, a new world, that replaced all the ways I had known with others, more strange and terrible and sweet than any I had ever been able to imagine" (Luhan, 189). She goes on in the third chapter to describe an intensity of feeling that New Mexico brought to her, saying,

Sitting there on that stern hillside, that had nothing soft and comfortable about it like other hills in milder places, I had a complete realization of the fullness of Nature here and how everything was intensified for one – sight, sound, and taste – and I felt that perhaps I was more awake and more aware than I had ever been before. It was a new enchantment and I gave myself up to it without resistance

[...] I felt a sudden recognition of the reality of natural life that was so strong and so unfamiliar that it made me feel unreal. (Luhan, 192-194)

Jane Bennett, in her treatise on the phenomenology of enchantment, writes an inclusive list of the characteristics of enchantment:

The mood I'm calling enchantment involves, in the first place, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition. The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged. (5)

These different elements are each present in Mabel's recollections – the heightening of her senses and the intensification of reality; the uncanny strangeness of the country that was at once terrifying and exalting.

Others wrote, more briefly than Luhan, whose memoirs took up some 1,600 pages, of this optic of enchantment in similar fashions. In his autobiography, Ansel Adams described his first view of the landscape coming into view after a dust storm: “The next morning all was diamond bright and clear and I fell quickly under the spell of the astonishing New Mexican light.” D.H. Lawrence, in an essay entitled “New Mexico” published posthumously by his widow, Frieda, wrote of the place in the same awed fashion, and we see another centering on the mysterious enchanted nature of its light:

By the moment I saw the brilliant, proud morning shine high up over the deserts of Santa Fe, something stood still in my soul, and I started to attend. There was certain magnificence in the high-up day, a certain eagle-like royalty, [...] In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico one sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly, and the old world gave way to the new. (31)

Bennet's notion of the uncanny also played a part in the aesthetic attraction for these artists. The exact mechanisms and manifestations of New Mexico's mystical beauty remained elusive and ineffable. Georgia O'Keeffe in a letter to Alfred Stieglitz, wrote of New Mexico: "This really isn't like anything you ever saw – and no one who tells about it gives any idea of it – [. . .] it can't be told any more than I can tell you what the country *feels* like - " (Greenough, 411-12). Marsden Hartley, ten years earlier, also wrote to Stieglitz, and attempted to characterize the difficulties he was having in pinning down the country's queer wonder: "It is very handsome country, yet it is taking me a time to get into my system certain peculiarities.... The spaces are so huge here and so simple and details are so clear that nothing seems far off." (Hole, xiv). This shared state of wonder, this visual experience of newness, of vibrant spirit, of sensual intensity was significant for these artists (Austin included) because this enchanted state was viewed as a kind of paring down of human consciousness which allowed for their sought-after creative regeneration. That these artists and writers could express the ineffability of this enchantment with an optical breakdown of the landscape's various components (color, light, shape, line) proved that they had found a place capable of fostering work that would extend beyond the standard forms of mimetic beauty.

This form of visual expression is described more fully in a variety of aesthetic manifestos written during this time period. These theoretical statements of purpose, which argued for forms of both internal and external seeing, would have been largely influential to the artists, writers and intellectuals of the New Mexican modernist sphere. The mode of expressionism, beginning in Europe, was founded upon a neo-Romantic

advocacy of spiritualism and the pre-social state, both of which, critics argued, could restore the virtue and authenticity diseased and dissipated by modernity. Writings on the emergence of cubism too, would support these claims. Many of these writings came out of Europe, but were highly influential in the United States, and would be picked up by theorists and practitioners of art, particularly in the avant-garde circles in New York City, of which Austin, Dodge Luhan, O’Keeffe, Strand, Marin, Hartley, and Adams and were a part.¹⁰

Consider, for instance, Hermann Bahr’s *Expressionismus* (Expressionism) published in Munich in 1916, and translated into English in 1920, in which he explains that the new art of expressionism arises to counter the reductive practices of Impressionism, in which the external is unduly prized over the internal: “The Impressionist, in visualizing, endeavours as much as possible to rule out every inner response to the outer stimulus. Impressionism, is an attempt to leave nothing to man but his retina.” (Bahr, 119). Yet, Bahr writes, expressionism’s intent is still wholly concerned with vision:

the Expressionists assure [the viewer] that they too paint only what they see. And on this point there is a continual misunderstanding. Each of them [the Impressionist and the Expressionist] when he speaks of ‘seeing’ means something totally different. What is meant by seeing? (117).

¹⁰ While I address only two of these influential manifestos, there are a great many more which would have contributed to the aesthetic and intellectual *zeitgeist* of the American avant-garde. For an interesting study devoted to the “spiritual” vein of intellectual and aesthetic philosophy of the 1910s and 20s and its influence on American modernists such as O’Keeffe, Hartley and Dodge-Luhan, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson’s “Editor’s Statement” and subsequent article “Mysticism as the ‘Tie That Binds’: The Case of Edward Carpenter and Modernism” in the special Spring 1987 issue of *Art Journal*, (Vol. 46, No. 1) devoted to “Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art.”

Bahr explains that the true vision of art acknowledges the subjectivity of perception (always colored by an individual's experience) and blends it with appearance, or the physical reality of things, existing visually in the wave/particle forms of the visible light spectrum. Therefore, he writes: "Art begins [as] an attempt to break the grip of appearance by making his 'innermost' appear also"; "[Art] cries to the spirit: this is Expressionism" (118-119). This sense of spiritually re-inhabiting the visual sphere, which had been newly stripped of any soulfulness by advents and discoveries in optical physics, was a common turn-of-the-century trope, and one that undoubtedly inspired the transcendental vision of the New Mexican avant-garde.

Robert Delaunay, a French cubist, wrote a similar aesthetic declaration, titled "On the Construction of Reality in Pure Painting" which was published in an article by influential modernist critic Guillaume Apollinaire in the German journal *Der Sturm* in 1912. Both Apollinaire and Delaunay and his wife Sonia were good friends of Gertrude Stein and Mabel Dodge Luhan. (Everett, 96). Delaunay's work would later specifically inspire the post-cubist painter and printmaker Andrew Dasburg in Paris, and he would incorporate this influence into the New Mexican landscapes that Austin herself would later admire in the essay, "Indian Detour." Delaunay writes:

We are attaining a purely expressive art [. . .] Light is not a method, it slides toward us, it is communicated to us by our sensibility. Without the perception of light –the eye- there can be no movement. In fact, it is our eyes that transmit the sensations perceived in nature to our soul. Our eyes are the receptacles of the present and therefore, of our sensibility. Without sensibility, that is, without light, we can do nothing. Consequently, our soul finds its most perfect sensation of life in harmony, and this harmony results only from the simultaneity with which the

quantities and the conditions of light reach the soul (the supreme sense) by the intermediary of the eyes. (Delaunay, 154).

Delaunay's sensation of harmonious life, in which light and the soul meet at the crux of the eye, is rearticulated by Austin herself regarding New Mexico. In "Indian Detour" an essay published for the in *The Bookman* in 1929, Austin attempts to describe the "esthetic adventure" shared by artists and writers drawn to Taos and Santa Fe. In the essay Austin rejects the notion of any formed society of artists in New Mexico, claiming that there is no movement, school or colony in which any artists share ideas, styles or manifestos. Rather it is the shared notion of region – the "vital importance" of the New Mexican landscape that draws these people together. There is no foundational idea but rather an "illumination." She writes,

If all [the artists in northern New Mexico] agree on anything at all, it is upon the immense significance, the vital importance of what may be discovered by the initiate in the region about Taos and Santa Fe. [. . .] The country is, of course, immensely exciting. Its contours are noble and dynamic [. . .] Everywhere the landscape affords that sense of participation in the immense activities of nature that are natural to countries at once open and mountainous. The landscape color is subtly persuasive, making itself felt under vibrating intricacies of light and muting mountain shadows. (Indian Detour, 654)

These views of landscape (understood here as forms of light: color and shadow), are underscored artistically by influence of the native American cultures surrounding the area – their ability to live "the life of complete adaptation between spiritual perception and natural environment" ("Indian Detour," 654). New Mexico therefore, provides an environment from which stems a new artistic form; one that,

undeterred by the ornamental, penetrates the purer interior workings of phenomenal experience. As Austin writes,

With an inarticulate consciousness of having come at something fresher, we are nearer the original creative impulse than the schools have been able to take us, even though it is the theory of the schools that here exactly is where the modern should take up his soul's residence, in a frame of society which requires nothing of the artist but that he should exteriorize successfully his own penetration of phenomena (Indian Detour, 656).

This last passage highlights several important notions about this new/old form of artistic production. First, Austin relates that the creative inspiration or enchantment artists share here is difficult to articulate, – there is something inexpressible in the experience that she and her New Mexican colleagues are united in having. Second is the assertion that modernism's true form, outlined by theory, develops most truly in a place open and exposed to the awesome workings of nature, a place like New Mexico. To “exteriorize” - that is to make lingual, in either visual or spoken/written language - the deepest well of human experience, the subjective consciousness (or perhaps unconsciousness) of phenomena, landscape (again, like Delaunay, Austin considers the landscape as made up of light) and spirit must be in harmony.

Austin proceeds to give not writerly examples of this “fresh” ability but painterly ones, affirming that for her, the enchantment of New Mexico, the land/spirit harmony, is primarily an optical experience, therefore affirming the interdependent relationship between landscape and light. The examples Austin provides are interesting in their resistance to adhering to traditional mimetic practices. The painters John Sloan and Frank Applegate are described as depicting new realities and perceptions: Sloan “already found

his way to that region of reality which lies, as Sloan puts it, beyond the reach of the ‘one-eyed eye expert’ (“Indian Detour,” 656), whereas Applegate creates an “inextricable welter of landscape [. . .] completely disentangled from the foreground as if it had just proceeded out of the in-knowing thought of the All-Father” (656). The aforementioned Andrew Dasburg similarly disengages from standard perspective-making in his work, as Austin describes:

there is the same disentanglement from an over-Europeanized subjective foreground, such a foreground as is completely non-existent for the aborigine [...] the aborigine is himself still in the picture, not looking across at it from traditionally established points of view. (656)

This focus on shifts in perspective-making as a new form of vision in New Mexico is one that Austin incorporates into *Starry Adventure*. Beginning with the chapters of Gard’s adolescence, the narratorial perspective, usually an omniscient third person, occasionally shifts to passages of a second person “You” which implies Gard’s own perspective of himself. This projection of Gard’s own consciousness forms a similar image to that of the “aborigine” who “is himself still in the picture, not looking across at it from traditionally established points of view.” The switches occur seamlessly, but hover around experiences with the land and the Presence, internal dilemmas, and personal realizations.¹¹ A prime example of this lies in Austin’s fourth chapter, in which the second section (p. 110) begins with the narrator viewing the internalities of Gard’s

¹¹ For another consideration of Austin’s narratorial shifts, see Linda K. Karell’s chapter in Graulich and Klimasmith’s critical Austin anthology, *Exploring Lost Borders* on the various forms of narratorial self in Austin’s autobiography *Earth Horizon*, “Mary Austin, I-Mary, and Mary-by-Herself: Collaboration in *Earth Horizon*” (Chapter 9, pp. 167-182).

adolescence head on; his subsequent sexual awakenings are paired with the natural phenomena of light: “Gard felt that strange yearning ache at twilight; the pressure of desire unconsummated, suspended until another sun” (110). This form of narration continues for a page, Gard referred to by name or by third-person pronoun. Suddenly, without precedence, this changes:

In the mean time, there was the God of New Mexico. The sense of Him came back that spring; you walked into it now and again, just as you walked in to little pools of warm-scented air lying in the hollows summer evenings; or you could summon it as simply as by lifting your arms as you stood Atalaya taking in the soft pattern of color, the marching mountains; a deep breath, a slow winglike upward motion of the arms and shoulders; it rose around you like a tide (112).

Here, Austin paints her own landscape as disentangled from Renaissance perspective, just as Dasbourg, Applegate, Marin, Hartley and others sought to do with their own fragmented landscapes that muddled the distances of back- and foregrounds. The flattening of the picture plane in the optics of the avant-garde Southwest will be examined further in the second chapter; it suffices here to emphasize that Austin’s attempt at vision in the novel is concerned with the disruption of traditional perspective. Gard himself is in the picture alongside his own field of vision- they inhabit the same plane simultaneously.

1.4 Stieglitz, Austin and Photography

While the painterly avant-garde in Northern New Mexico created a particular vision of the landscape, Austin’s Southwest was also becoming popularly known through photography. The burgeoning technology of photography paralleled the frontier aspect of

Anglos in the Southwest. Exploratory, naturalistic and ethnographic pursuits were best captured by the newest form of archiving – a process which could, arguably, preserve most truthfully a scene through a chemical process which acknowledged the optical make-up of light and vision. Esther Lanigan Stineman has argued that Austin’s writing is indebted to the contemporary influence of photography on American and specifically Southwestern culture. She notes, “What assuredly can be termed a photographic technique charges Austin’s written representations of the land” (183). Stineman aligns her own work with literary scholar Ralph Bogardus,¹² who convincingly wrote of Henry James photographic perception of reality as he grew up alongside the birth of photographic practice, and Stineman writes that “Austin’s reliance on impressions and images demonstrates a similar awareness” (183). Stineman breaks down this reliance further, writing of the prevalence of Austin’s

words indicative of texture, size, shape and color [which] convey photographic immediacy; words relating to visual perception – see, illusion – emphasize the eye. [. . .] Her visual imagination puts before the reader a synesthetic representation of experience, each image informed attention to technical matters of focus, composition, point of view, and depth of field (183).

Most importantly, Stineman draws connections between Austin and the experimental photographers of her era, rather than to the romantic contrivances of the photographers non-Western Americans lauded at the time: “Like the works of experimental photographers of her period – Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and later Ansel

¹² See Ralph Bogardus, “The Photographer’s Eye: Henry James and the American Scene” in *History of Photography*, vol. 8, no. 3 1984, pp. 179-196.

Adams – Austin’s writing transcends mere pictorial description, yielding what Stieglitz termed ‘equivalents of my basic philosophy of life’” (Stineman, 183).

The connection Stineman makes to Stieglitz is an important one. Stineman dwells briefly on the particulars of Austin’s connection to the New York artist and theorist, discussing her involvement in his art club in New York, and her frequent visits to his experimental gallery 291. (185), However she fails to underscore the importance of Stieglitz’s visual theories upon the intellectual avant-garde in New Mexico. Paul Strand and Georgia O’Keeffe were important members of Stieglitz’s inner-circle, and their work in New Mexico was absolutely indebted to his theories and goals. Adams too, would acknowledge the deep influence of the Equivalents series on his own work, and would later begin corresponding with Stieglitz from New Mexico, sending him photographs for critique.¹³ Therefore, the theory that Stineman mentions, this equivalency, which she summarizes as “Stieglitz’s theory of latent pictorial content that reaches beyond stark images captured by the camera” was a theory that grounded the New Mexican optic of enchantment. The spirit or expression of a place, best captured through formal techniques of abstraction, trump mimetic realism. As Stieglitz explained in his essay, “How I Came To Photograph Clouds,” his “photographs were not due to subject matter – not to special trees, or faces, or interiors, to special privileges” (Stieglitz, 237). Rather, as the art historian Sarah Greenough has written, Stieglitz’s photographic “equivalents”

¹³ For more on the relationship between Adams and Stieglitz, see Sandra Phillips’ “Adams and Stieglitz: A Friendship” in *Art in America*, vol. 93, no. 1, 2005, pp. 62-69,71.

“destabilize[ed] [the viewer’s] relationship with nature in order to have you think less about nature, not to deny that it’s a photograph of a cloud, but to think about the feeling that the cloud formation evokes” (Greenough, *In Focus*, 132). Stineman, like most Austin scholars, looks to Austin’s desert prose in *Land of Little Rain* to illustrate these photographic connections and thus highlight Austin’s own expressionist philosophy about the visual details of nature, but there is no better work than *Starry Adventure* from which to view her obligations to Stieglitzian theory.

The term ‘equivalents’ derives from a series of photographs of sky and clouds taken by Stieglitz which bear this name. The cloud photographs are some of the first completely abstract photographs – representational images that are ultimately non-figurative.¹⁴ That these were taken of light in sky are particularly interesting considering Austin’s own fixation on the dramatic phenomena of the desert sky. The color, forms, and shadows of clouds, rainstorms and the movements of the sun are a constant focus of Austin’s word images in *Starry Adventure*. Sky passages in the novel abound. From the very outset of the book, the reader is forced to consider what it means to lose one’s bearing and fail to find meaning in the observation of a natural phenomenon. As a very young boy, perhaps three or four years old, the narrator describes Gard’s unique interaction with the New Mexican sky:

¹⁴ For a treatment of the uniquely dissociative effects of Stieglitz’s cloud series and its subsequent creation of a certain meaning of a captured (or uncaptured) phenomenon, see Rosalind Krauss’ excellent “Stieglitz/*Equivalents*” in the Winter, 1979 issue of *October* (Vol. 11, pp. 129-140).

Gard was always stopping the real performance of life to do things like that... to be utterly absorbed in the depth and aerial mystery of the cloud-bank below the crest of Jémez. It ran the whole length of the range in unbroken, transparent impenetrability, of a blue that had no other name than the name of the mountain, so that Gard was never quite able to think of one without the other, and was vaguely of the opinion that Jémez-blue was the name of a color which gave its title to that sector of his horizon. The contemplation of it had, as always, a curious, hushing effect upon him, so that the last few bites of his supper remained uneaten in the interval before the evening wonder began. (4)

There are trace elements of Stieglitz's photographic theories in this passage.

Austin obscures literal representation and meaning here. Much as Stieglitz's "Equivalents" series was meant to obfuscate any sense of the performance of the camera, the actual authentic moment of capturing a physical reality, so here Gard "stop[s] the real performance of life [...] to be utterly absorbed in [...] depth and aerial mystery" (4). For Austin, as for Stieglitz, the power of abstraction lies in its ability to discombobulate, both sensorily and corporeally. To lose a sense of how a human body might fit into Stieglitz's photographs (Are we looking up or are we looking down? Is the lens magnifying something very small or is capturing in detail something extremely large?) renders us unable to perceive in language. That Gard is furthermore fashioning a personal language out of "his" horizon reveals the workings of a subjective consciousness, an idea crucial for the perception and consumption of abstraction. This passage is a significant one for the novel – it comes as a sort of prelude to Gard's first vision of the God of New Mexico, and his subsequent "starry adventure." But Austin does not save these passages of disembodied abstract vision only for important moments. What is unique about the novel is its visual persistence. Austin is repeatedly experimenting with perspective and color

and light, and plays with feelings of abstraction and bodily and sensory

discombobulation. Nearly every other page in the novel contains an aside description like the following:

The snow-water, caught in the rutted hollows of the roads, made opaque by the wash of yellow clay, gave back the virgin turquoise skies and the rounded whiteness of solitary clouds with illusory distinctness. At every one of them the car seemed about to plunge off the slithery clay coasts of roadway pools into the abyss of blueness (183).

The upside-down play of water and sky mirrors the effects upon the viewer of Stieglitz's abstract cloud photographs. To lose one's ground, one's sense of depth and perception, is to lose sense of oneself within the typical temporal and spatial framework of modern society. According to Bennett, this is a standard characteristic essential to the state of enchantment: "Enchantment entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter" (5). That photography by its nature immobilizes, underscores Stieglitz's insistence that photography's niche lay in its abstract ability to capture subliminal universality; by harnessing the power of the lens to capture odd angles or to maximize and minimize a scene, one can remove the contextual framework that render any subject matter unique or inclusive, thus rendering an image which can be interpreted by any viewer. As Stieglitz explains "clouds were there for everyone" (Steiglitz, 237). Stieglitz's "latent pictorial content" of an abstract photograph, I argue, might be read as the formalist (optical)

depiction of enchantment, a vision that that would encourage a universally understood surge of feeling.¹⁵

Ansel Adams wrote of New Mexico:

Those who have not visited the Southwest will not discover its true qualities in texts or illustrations. Very few artists have caught its spirit; the siren-calls of the theatrical are not favorable to aesthetic integrity. Color photography usually takes advantage of the obvious. Black and white photography fares better, as its inherent abstraction takes the viewer out of the morass of manifest appearance and encourages inspection of the shapes, textures, and the qualities of light characteristic of the region (*Autobiography*, 87).

For Adams, New Mexico was a place in which Stieglitz's theories could be best applied. The aesthetic integrity of compositional purity in abstraction is, for Adams, what draws out the true "spirit" of New Mexico. He writes that he is opposed to the theatrical, implying that the staged or mythic quality typical of the popular Southwestern *fin de siècle* photography seen in the work of artists like Edward Curtis or Laura Gilpin, was *not* his approach. Most telling for this study is the last sentence from Adams' passage in which he describes how "inherent abstraction" removes the viewer from the quotidian nonchalance of seeing and coerces rather a *formalist* process of looking in which the viewer must break down the components of vision into "shapes, textures and the qualities of light characteristic of the region" (Adams, 87). For Adams, the true "spirit" of New Mexico was best drawn out by confronting the constituents of its optics.

¹⁵ An example of what Stieglitz considered success in non-figurative photography can be found in his account of showing the composer Ernest Bloch his finalized photographs in the cloud series, hoping it would inspire him to see music and write a symphony called "Clouds." Stieglitz was satisfied with the photographs after "Bloch saw them – what I said I wanted to happen happened *verbatim*" (Stieglitz, 237).

The landscape historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson has argued that New Mexico is ultimately a place of historical vision, which has been popularly archived through the process of photography. In “Seeing New Mexico” he writes that New Mexican history is uniquely visible; both geological and human time are forever etched into the landscape, and for this reason the region draws *visual* tourists. His argument is summed up in a pithy sentence: “Our history attracts the photographer” (15). He writes of the school of “timeless” photography popular in the Southwest in the decades leading up to and following the turn of the 20th century, a school that he argues is reinforced by the odd confluence of the ever-present “cosmic chronology” of New Mexican history and the persistent survival of a vital human New Mexican culture (15).

Pushing Jackson’s notion further, one sees that New Mexico provided the perfect landscape for the burgeoning art of photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries precisely because the process of photographing itself is one that freezes time. The visual landscape of New Mexico mimics this process by providing three different forms of evidence of temporal stagnation, the first being the petrification of time in the form of geological formations that made up the terrain of the striking desert, the second the decaying of time in the form of ancient prehistoric ruins of cave dwellings and other archaeological sites, and the third the freezing of time in the form of the persistent cultural practices and villages of the Pueblo and Navajo people, and the pervading Spanish-Colonial practices of farming and religious traditions.

Yet, this approach to photography, an approach that tried, as Jackson puts it, “[to] express a nostalgic version of history; a desperate, last minute recording of old and once-

cherished values” and which resulted in “captur[ing] on film ghosts of places not yet entirely dead” (23), was, I argue, turned on its head by the modern expressionists in New Mexico. Austin’s novel therefore, reflects a more expressionist approach to the landscape. *Starry Adventure* is a novel deeply indebted to the contemporary significance and prevalence of photography practice in the Southwest, but its influence derives from a wholly different theoretical place.

Audrey Goodman has noted an important shift in the photographic past of the Southwest. Writing on the New Mexican snowbirds Ansel Adams and Paul Strand (both members of Alfred Stieglitz’s circle of influence), she argues that Walter Benjamin’s modern notion of a work of art’s “aura,” which she reconstitutes as the modernist photographer’s “aesthetic purity” serves to create an inauthentic, falsified sense of place in the Southwest (68).

For the most part, Goodman has misinterpreted Benjamin’s notion of “aura,” a complicated and ineffable quality, simply explained as the “strange weave of space and time” contained, or perhaps preserved, within a work of art which provides a certain element of authenticity (Benjamin, 518). While Goodman derives her argument from Benjamin’s early essay, “A Little History of Photography” (1931), she ignores key elements of Benjamin’s criticism, which wholeheartedly support theoretically the aesthetic of the New Mexico pictures of avant-garde photographers Strand and Adams. In the essay, Benjamin argues that the success of photography as true art lies in its ability to capture an optical unconsciousness unavailable to the naked eye. He describes the act of walking, writing that while humans understand to some degree what is involved in the

act, we are unable to completely perceive the split second in which we take a step. Photography, he argues, makes visible for us this unconscious movement through space and time: “Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious” (Benjamin, 511-512).

Therefore, photography is at its best when it reveals “image worlds” normally out of range or off limits to natural forms of perception; photography, as Stieglitz, Strand and Adams believed, excels in abstraction. The aura of photography, Benjamin argues, disappears in attempts to falsify not some truthful, mimetic reality of a scene, but the very authentic *energy* of it – the feeling of an arrangement of so many things (light, matter, spirit) as they move through space and time as suspended within the single instant of technological exposure.

As the technology of photography advanced, photographers could, in effect, doctor prints, “simulate this aura using all the arts of retouching” (Benjamin, 517) which was often created by introducing artificial lighting or by making copies of the print, which for Benjamin was the *sine qua non* of falsity. The photographers Benjamin admires (his champion is the Parisian surrealist, Eugène Atget) don’t just preserve aura, they “dispel of it altogether” (518), they “suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.” (518).

For Benjamin, a photographer must either capture completely and uniquely the aura of a thing with a single work of art – the original print or daguerreotype made directly from the camera – or they must photograph a place or thing so abstractly that

aura cannot exist. In the latter case, this frees one from associations of consciousness and allows one to engage with potentially familiar surroundings in a wholly new way, one in which “all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail” (519). Adams and Strand did not “falsify” a purity of landscape by erasing cultural history and survivance, as Goodman argues when she accuses Adams, Strand and other modernists of artificiality, of falsifying aura (putting them in place with earlier forms of photography popular in the Southwest which staged native American scenes). Instead she confuses an aesthetic pursuit with a political one. Just as Atget would title a photograph of a small and forgotten detail after a grand European city with hundreds of years of culture and history (Benjamin, 518) and therefore achieve Benjamin’s goal of tapping into the optical unconscious through dissociative looking, so Adams and Strand would title a photograph after an entire place, an entire civilization, yet capture an abstracted, dissociated detail of emptiness.¹⁶ Perhaps it was not their place to photograph Anasazi ruins or desert lands inhabited by native cultures, but their *aesthetic* was by no means a political act of colonial exclusion; it was rather an attempt to get at a “greater analytic realism” (as La Farge wrote of Austin’s novel) through the simplification or purification of abstract formalism¹⁷.

¹⁶ For prime examples of Adams’ and Strand’s metonymic photography, in which the forgotten or abandoned detail of a place comes to represent the spirit of the whole, see Paul Strand’s *Ghost Town, Red River, New Mexico* (1931) or Ansel Adams’ *New Mexico* (1933).

¹⁷ It is interesting to note here that Benjamin’s advocacy of the truer reality of dissociative image making supports La Farge’s notion of greater reality on an etymological level. Surrealism, deriving from the French *sur*, translates into English

Benjamin defines aura for his reader through an interesting metaphor:

While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment of the hour becomes part of their appearance - this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch (518-519).

For Adams, New Mexico was the ultimate place to capture a moment within appearance, time within space. The dramatic light and color of the place, and the barren geometricity of the landscape, allowed artists to play with the feeling of time and space as it is projected to the human eye (and spirit, through the eye, as expressionists believed). For Gard (according to Austin), the energy or the feeling of a place is equally derived from a vision that is both spatial and temporal, the moment becomes part of a place's appearance. Gard's visions and subsequent understandings of his surroundings are both located within the space of mountains and other landmarks and are defined in time by the unfolding of phenomena, such as the sunset or sunrise.

1.5 Conclusion

This notion of authenticity that Goodman (and indirectly Benjamin) take up is an important concept to consider in Austin's work, specifically within the context of *Starry Adventure*. Austin herself was piqued by what she perceived to be falsities, such as the tourist trade of certain native American crafts, which she considered to be non-traditional fakeries, or the commercialized approach to art, in which the spirit, purpose and beauty of

much like the German *über*, surrealism then denoting a certain "hyper" reality, a deeper or greater realism.

the work is subsumed by a dollar sign. This is personified in *Starry Adventure* in the character of Eudora Ballantin, a satire of Austin's friend Mabel Dodge Luhan. In a telling observation by Gard, who heads the restoration project of Eudora's Spanish colonial home, Eudora's collection of local artifacts is noted not as an appreciation or understanding of the products of the New Mexican optic of enchantment, but rather as commodified testament to modern American consumerism. Gard says:

You knew that Eudora's things were beautiful and appropriate, even in their strangeness. You had a feeling for Things. Especially for Eudora's Things, their rarity, their uniqueness, which was first and last, a feeling for their expensiveness. When you came right down to it, the unifying item in Eudora's Things was that they cost money (282).

Here, Gard's "feelings," his inner knowledge of and spiritual connection to the meaning and significance of beauty, are tripped by inauthenticity.

Several pages before the things-as-money elision, Gard and his employer, the architect Frank Marvin (likely modeled after Austin's friend and fellow Hispanic art preservationist, the artist Frank Applegate) bristle at Eudora's ignorance of the place and time of authentic restoration, an ignorance of the proper history of style:

If Marvin yielded to Mrs. Ballantin's urgency for juxtapositions of periods so far removed in space and time, it was, he said, because he had, sadly, come to recognize it as the special mark of the American intelligence. Not to recognize the meaning of period expression, to fail altogether to perceive the rootage in culture and outlook of the special forms of expression known as 'period art'; a characteristic American disposition to see in the possession of five millions the power, and therefore the suitability, of overriding space and time by combining their expressive products in a single grasp. (262)

This passage reveals several notions about the importance of authentic expression for Austin, and the reasons for which New Mexico provided a model for which this type of

expression could be regenerated, despite the “characteristic American disposition.” For Gard, Marvin, and omnisciently, Austin, what is important in these restorations is a fidelity to the linear clarity of time and space. “Period expression” must reveal a specific vision unique to a cultural moment fixed in time and space, and to juxtapose, to create “a crazy patchwork of American art, this looping the loop of periods and products” (*Starry Adventure*, 262) was to supplant the unique “aura,” the feeling or energy of a particular expression of time/space, with the falsehoods of consumerist display. For Austin, this arrangement of collection denied the optic of enchantment, which depended upon an authentic experience of time and space, by usurping aura and substituting for it the hegemony of capitalism.

This hegemony, which ruled the eastern seaboard of the United States and the metropolises of Europe, drove Austin and (supposedly) Mabel Dodge Luhan, and others to New Mexico in the first place. The symptoms of a capitalistic society, monoculture, industry, and the secular misgivings of spiritual experience, had set the stage for the ignition of the New Mexican optic. Authenticity was not to be found amongst Americans. Instead, the models of culture, of land and spirit harmony, and of true vision of expression, was the Pueblo, the Navajo and the Penitentes. In the next chapter I explore how the optic of enchantment was partially derived from primitivist understandings of local culture, which provided notions of New Mexico as a space and landscape of authentic spirituality, and affirmed expressionist and abstract optics.

CHAPTER TWO

In Search of Authenticity: The Aesthetic of Regional Culture

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.

-Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903)

2.1 Introduction

In 1929, a few years after they were first introduced to one another, Ansel Adams and Mary Austin collaborated on a book project, *Taos Pueblo* (1930). Adams took photographs of the Taos Pueblo adobe village and its inhabitants while Austin wrote accompanying essays.¹⁸ The final plate of the handmade book, which contained actual photographs rather than ink reproductions, was a picture of the Rancho de Taos church. In the paired text, Austin writes of the church, “the church at Ranchos... has the deep-rooted, grown-from-the-soil look of Pueblo buildings” (Adams and Austin, 4), and Adams himself wrote of the building: “The forms are fully functional; the massive rear buttress and the secondary buttress to the left are organically related to the basic masses

¹⁸ Daniel Worden has argued that the *Taos Pueblo* collaboration specifically “emphasize[s] the mutually constitutive relationship between form and landscape” and that “Austin and Adams articulate [. . .] a shared understanding of Taos as an aesthetic form” (Worden, 80). See the entirety of his article, “Landscape Culture: Ansel Adams and Mary Austin’s *Taos Pueblo*” in the Winter, 2013 issue (Vol. 55, no.1, pp. 69-94) of *Criticism* for a full treatment of the emergent “regional modernism” that arises formally from their book project.

of adobe, and all together seem an outcropping of the earth rather than merely an object constructed upon it” (Adams, *Examples*, 91). Adams was excited to include the church in the book, despite its distance from the actual village of Taos Pueblo, because of its artistic provenance - it had been painted by Georgia O’Keeffe, by John Marin, and photographed by Paul Strand.¹⁹ For Austin and Adams, the building conveyed a naturalness of the architectural products of native culture, described by Austin in *Indian Detour*: “it might be seen that native New Mexican houses are not modern structures smoothed and rounded with adobe, but human shells drawn up out of the constituent earth by an original creative impulse of the human habitat” (“*Indian Detour*,” 657). As Anne Hammond has pointed out, “the language of adobe,” communicated the theoretical values of the avant-garde’s search for authenticity. The church’s formal simplicity and its stark and linear topographical situation in space (it arises thick and tall from otherwise flat and empty surroundings) allowed for an “authentic” interpretation from the eye, unfettered by decoration or association. Hammond summarizes two other authenticities: “architecturally, [the church] represented the one building tradition that was indigenously American; spiritually it was a temple of worship embodying the vitalist ideal of deep kinship between man and the earth” (Hammond, 386). Adobe, particularly its incarnation

¹⁹ See Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Ranchos Church No. 1*. 1929, oil on canvas, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL; or John Marin’s *Back of Ranchos Church*. 1930, watercolor on paper, New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, NM; and Paul Strand’s *Rancho de Taos Church, New Mexico*. 1931, platinum print, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

in Ranchos de Taos, was the great manifestation of “vitalist” values – a yearning for a natural and spiritual state that could be proven by the test of geological and cultural time.

For Austin and other avant-gardes in New Mexico, abstraction was a compositional attempt at authenticity, but it was also the aesthetic result of a spiritual attempt, one that was affirmed by local culture and philosophy. As much as Austin, Adams, Strand, Hartley, or others captured the spirit of the place through formalist techniques, the optics they used were chosen for their ability to reach a deeper, more “authentic” feeling; the enchantment they sought to capture was not only euphoric and beautiful, it was also spiritual and rooted to the land, two characteristics that were either absent from or falsified within the industrialized, modern Western culture. Therefore, the perceived authenticity of these characteristics within the native New Mexican culture affirmed the avant-garde’s vision. In this chapter I unfold American primitivism in the Southwest, and look to Austin and her contemporaries for the defining ideologies of its cultural relativism and the ways in which these ideologies created and endorsed the optic of enchantment. I will look at the importance of an *apparent* spirituality, the persistently visual culture of ritual in New Mexico, and its profound influence on *Starry Adventure* and the aesthetic of the Anglo artists. I examine the ways in which Austin explores the visual consciousness of an oral culture within *Starry Adventure*. Finally, I will devote a portion of the chapter to the practices of ethnographic collection, and the modernist aestheticization of native crafts.

2.2 *Ritual in New Mexico: A Spiritual Landscape*

In the previous chapter I dwelled briefly on a scene in *Starry Adventure* in which Gard comes to understand the Blood of Christ. To summarize briefly, as he watches both a native Catholic farm hand and his Methodist grandfather defer to the holiness of the scene, Gard comes to understand the spirituality of religion as one that is universally tied to the land, despite the individual belief systems of unique cultures. The alpenglow is seen and felt by “heathen” (a term picked up by the young Gard that described those who subscribed to the syncretic native form of religion which worships multiple gods in the forms of *santos*, and/or the native American animistic beliefs which held the mountains of New Mexico to be alive and sacred) and Protestant alike. The elision of landscape and religion, and the blurring of lines between various forms of cultural sanctity is represented in an image that combines such disparate facets with ease. Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Cross with Stars and Blue*, was painted the same year (1929) Austin devoted to writing *Starry Adventure*. Here we see plainly the conflated spirituality of the scene Austin describes. The light, stars, mountain and cross are composed as one. O’Keeffe saw the mountain as naturally worthy of the cross’ image – she superimposes them not in a mimetic representation of her viewpoint (the cross, in reality, is not in the foreground as one looks towards the mountain; one would have to turn in opposite directions to view each)²⁰ but rather as a sort of lens that grids the landscape into four distinct parts, as if

²⁰ O’Keeffe writes of the painting, “One evening when I was living in Taos we walked back of the *morada* [a Penitente church] toward a cross in the hills. [. . .] It was in the late light and the cross stood out- dark against the evening sky. If I turned a little to the left, away from the cross, I saw the Taos mountain – a beautiful shape. I painted the cross

representational of the multiple forms of mysticism that a New Mexico vista provides: Christianity, native American animism, natural phenomena and the revelation of the unconscious rendered by the formal aesthetics of abstraction. The cross also blends the demarcation of holy and secular self-reflexively; a black grid, absent of color, that cuts through the airy pigments of twilight and makes the viewer aware of the limitations of the canvas – its two-dimensionality and the rigid angles of its square allotment of space – and reveals the *ritualized* process of painting, a Eucharistic process in which representative materials are consumed and, through some unconscious magic, create a simulated reality.

Mark T. Hoyer has pointed out in his treatise on Mary Austin's Christian and native American syncretism that Austin re-vision the land of the Southwest as a site of "syncretic ritual" (Hoyer, 130). Using the preface of *The Land of Little Rain* as an example, Hoyer writes that, "[Austin revises] the fundamental Judeo-Christian tenet of keeping faith with a supernatural being; here, the author will keep faith with a natural entity, the Land" while also nodding to a tenet of American transcendentalism, "developed most notably by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, that the writer takes imaginative possession of any land whose owner can see only its material value" and native American animism, in which "landownership involves knowing the terrain intimately and maintaining good rapport with the spirits of rock, plant, and animal people that inhabit it" (Hoyer, 134-135). Here, in his reading of Austin, Hoyer supports the vision painted, too, by O'Keeffe. Austin sees the land from the tradition of Judeo-

against the mountain although I never saw it that way" (O'Keeffe qtd. in Neff, Emily Ballew, p. 191).

Christianity, but the distinct spirit of the Land itself, native American spirits of natural elements, and the aesthetic form of her own writerly imagination all have equal play. The chapter dwells on several instances in the *LOLR* where Austin focuses upon forms of ritual that visually marked the land – abstract Chumash rock art, for example, or Petroglyph Canyon, or even the “biblical shapes” formed by the Sierra Nevada mountains (Hoyer, 140, 144, and 147, respectively). For Austin, the Southwestern landscape was imbued with a constant visual presence of spirituality. In New Mexico, this spirituality in all its forms is supported by the persistent visual presence of ritual. The optic of enchantment is enforced by an enduring reminder of the mystical, as symbols that evoke spiritual practice are emblazoned upon the desert itself and its community’s walls. The shapes and forms of adobe churches rising, quite literally out of the earth, or the symmetry of the cross ensure that the cultural ecology of New Mexico as an aesthetic is apparent in its vistas.

For Gard, in *Starry Adventure*, the landscape becomes inextricably linked with a welter of apparent rituals. As Gard begins to learn the meaning of the surrounding land of his home and the cultures that have arisen to articulate the experience of it, he begins to associate meaning with the things he sees present in his world. For example, “the business of being a Cath’lic” (14), had to do with the duality of the spiritual and the visual in the form of *santos*:

But the pictures in Father’s room were merely pictures. Aloysia’s santos had a mysterious life of their own of which the children would have been glad to hear more, and more than half believed in. It gave them a wonderful secret sense of

being allied with strange powers, just to pass Aloysia's door and *see* the whole family of Blessed Personages glimmering in the uncertain candle flame. (14)

Later, Gard begins to associate this power of the *santos* with the enchanted feeling he has while viewing the drama of the mountains: "the feeling of half-fearful awe with which [the mountains] still occasionally filled him became associated in his mind with the mysterious santos in Aloysia's room, and with the rosary and the sign of the cross" (16). This is not the only instance in which young Gard comes closer to some sort of enlightenment through the viewing of a ritual. On Christmas eve, known to native New Mexicans as "*Nochebuena*," Gard describes the ineffable feeling of being surrounded by the visual practice of ritual:

The stained-glass windows in the deep walls were many-colored embers at the backs of ancient fireplaces. In front of every house, as they drove along there were neat square piles of cut wood; in front of Mr. Phipps's house too; suddenly, in the dark, fires began to break, through the town and up along the lomas; *lumináres*, watch fires. Mr. Phipps said it was an old custom, and allowed the children to light his own. It gave you a lump in your throat somehow; the church bells jangled; you wouldn't have been surprised to hear the angels singing. (41-42)

A few moments later, Gard associates the feeling of enchantment that arises from the experience of the Christmas eve ritual with the "starry adventure," looking up at the night sky and basking in the magic of the constellations (44). Austin's language in this scene focuses on the importance of light. She positions the glowing colors of the *lumináres* and the stained glass windows alongside her similar passages of sky enchantment, where Gard's throat catches as he watches the God of New Mexico come into the mountains during sunset or shine through starlight in the evening.

Several years after the *Nochebuena* ceremonies, an adolescent Gard comes across a procession of the mysterious Penitentes during their signature nocturnal ritual of self-flagellation and cross-bearing, described by Austin: “In the moonlight the streaming blood on their white drawers was crimson-black. Three went by, another lantern; three again, and then the dry slither of crosses, dragged in the dust on naked, bloody shoulders” (118). Later that night, the wind carries their chants and flute song “faint as moonlight filtered through glass” and Gard experiences that rare enchantment: “The sense of Presence was around him; he lifted up his arms. He would have called It, but he did not know Its name” (122). In this passage, the feeling of enchantment, brought about by the colorful intensities of the Penitente ritual, is described optically, compared again to light. Austin draws particular attention to the moonlight and the lanterns, and the singing, which acts as a catalyst for Gard’s sense of the “Presence,” is made akin to viewing natural light through the filter of glass. Austin draws connections between spirituality and light. Rituals, carried out by humans, filter the bright yet ineffable light of spirit as if through glass, the cultural act mediating the direct divinity of God(s) and nature and rendering it somehow fainter.

That same year, Gard and his young friends (David, his sister, Laura, and his future wife Jane) “discovered Indians, really discovered what they meant, and stood for” (133). He describes the abstraction of their dances in color, motion and pattern: “the more you knew the more you felt. The color, the movement, the beauty of strangeness, the drums in the underground kivas, like the heart of earth beating, the profound, subconscious excitement” (133). The way in which Austin chooses to describe this dance,

not as detailed reportage of the costumes and steps of the dancers but as an abstraction of optical and auditory elements that are meant to give an expression of “subconscious excitement” was an approach matched by visual artists. For a particularly apt pairing, consider O’Keeffe again. Her 1929 painting, *At the Rodeo – New Mexico* renders an Indian dance in similar terms. As Wanda Corn describes, “[O’Keeffe] also tried to paint Indian dances, straining to avoid specifics while evoking their spirit through abstractions, drawing from the costumes, the dance rhythms, the sun and the sky” (Corn, 262).

Eventually these rituals are compared overtly to the natural rhythms of the day, and the divinity invoked by standard religious practices is understood to be equally present in the New Mexican landscape. Gard explains:

You went to see the sun set, as Marvin had once said, as good Catholics went to vespers, as a way of composing the day’s interruptions. You couldn’t the young architect insisted, in the face of the permanent, unassailable, infinite variety of splendor like a New Mexican sunset, go on believing that the common disaster of humanity could overtake you; that you wouldn’t somehow be saved to something that the sunset and mountain signaled. (227)

Ritual in *Starry Adventure* is not simply a plot device, in which novel manifestations of the Other provide page-turning local color. The rites of the local cultures in New Mexico are described at length in the first 150 pages of the novel, the sections in which Gard is growing up and learning the land, not in a geographical sense, but ecologically, understanding place through human interaction with the land and the various cycles of life. Austin is attempting to delineate another form of consciousness, one that she had become privy to in her time spent with Southwestern native American

tribes. Much in the same way that Austin describes adobe architecture, in which a natural creative human energy lifts and shapes the mounds from the earth, the culture of the region is also organic. As Austin explains in her 1928-1929 article for the *Southwest Review* entitled “Regional Culture in the Southwest:”

A regional culture is the sum, expressed in ways of living and thinking, of mutual adaptations of a land and a *people*. [. . .] When a people is aboriginal in any land they mutually nurse each other into a relationship of cooperation which is marked definitely with the characteristics of both. (Blackbird and Nelson, 92)

The cultural practices of a people evolve or even originate from the landscape itself, while the land begins to take on the shape or vision of the people who inhabit it. In other words, indigenous ritual is essentially an epistemological thing; ceremonies determine one’s knowledge of a place.

The indexical nature of New Mexican ritual (in the form of the cross, which serves as a trace of the crucified body, or the bloody traces of sin left on the backs of the Penitentes, or the petroglyphs inscribed on rocks by shamans during a vision state, or even the footprints in the dust after a ceremonial dance) is a microcosmic manifestation of the larger indexical cycle of a ritually-embedded ecology.²¹ The seasonal and circadian rites of natural phenomena leave their trace upon a people, while a people’s larger epistemological understanding of the land and their subsequent forms of survival forever

²¹ Consider the notion of painting, too, as an index of a kind of ritual. This has been explored most notably by the critic Harold Rosenberg, in the seminal essay, “The American Action Painters” originally published in 1952 in *Art News*. Rosenberg reads the paint on the canvasses of abstract expressionism, particularly those of the New York School, as an indexical reminder of the event or dance that recalls the artist’s ritual of motion during production. See Rosenberg, Harold, “The American Action Painters,” *The Tradition of the New*, New York, 1959, pp. 23-39.

mar the landscape in a series of linguistic reconfigurations, physical vestiges, and the rearrangements of memory.

2.3 Oral Culture and Language: Names, Maps and the Phenomenology of the Non-Phonetic

The ecologist and philosopher David Abram has written of the phenomenology of non-phonetic cultures, explaining that “in the absence of formal writing systems, human communities come to know themselves primarily as they are reflected back by the animals and the animate landscapes with which they are directly engaged” (Abram, 123).

He goes on to explain that

the land, in other words, is the sensible site or matrix wherein meaning occurs and proliferates. In the absence of writing, we find ourselves situated in the field of discourse as we are embedded in the natural landscape; indeed, the two matrices are not separable. We can no more stabilize the language and render its meanings determinate than we can freeze all motion and metamorphosis within the land. (139-140)

In an oral culture (like those of the Navajo or Pueblo peoples that so inspired the New Mexican transplants) language, rather than a series of phonetic symbols, is rather directly linked to one’s vision and experience of the land – the physical forms (and subsequent spirit) that make up a place (determined by the eye, as Delaunay described) becomes synonymous with its meaning, there is no symbolic mediation between meaning and true form. Abram explains that the sounds of an oral language “are attuned in multiple and subtle ways, to the contour and scale of the local landscape, to the depth of its valleys or the open stretch of its distances, to the visual rhythms of the local

topography” (140). The utterance of meaning simultaneously conveys its optics, and its lingual representation is also a visual representation.

Austin herself was aware of and fascinated by this phenomenological difference between cultures. The time and work she devoted to learning and collecting native American language and storytelling led her to write the strange, etymological/ethnographical treatise on American poetry, titled *The American Rhythm: Studies and Reexpressions of Amerindian Songs*, first published in 1923, with an enlarged edition published the year before *Starry Adventure*, in 1930. The book claims that native American rhythms of song and dance have been imparted into a national consciousness, and their forms have therefore shaped modern American verse, particularly free verse and Imagist poetry. Austin’s book was working within an avant-garde tradition of interdisciplinary cultural consideration; the early twentieth century crux of anthropology, linguistics and modernist poetry and art, had been formed in the salons of Greenwich village and the Southwest by the intellectual confluence of Columbia University scholar Franz Boas and his students, notably the linguist Edward Sapir (George Stocking has called Mabel’s respective salons, of which Austin was an integral member, “the Boasian milieu”), Imagist poetry and New Criticism, and the Stieglitz circle of avant-garde artists who sought to create a determinedly American tradition of cutting edge aesthetics (Stocking, 162). Eric Aronoff has argued convincingly that the twentieth century anthropological debates over what constitutes culture were part of a larger modernist debate about authentic culture and the proper aesthetic and political responses to the industrial State (Aronoff, 94). Furthermore, Aronoff has located these debates within the

regionalist glorifications of Indian culture, and notes the interesting parallels between the linguist Edward Sapir's notion of regional culture as spatial form, and the modernist's formalist concerns in poetry and prose that arise from the formation of regional literature:

[these] new conceptions of regional culture in turn produce new ways to conceive of and read literary form, as key elements of Sapir's definition of culture – a unified structure, constituted by meaningful relation of parts, grounded in the geographic region- are transposed by critics [. . .] into a theory of poetry. (94)

While Aronoff writes of this intellectual convergence in the work of Willa Cather's regional fiction and John Crowe Ransom's theories of poetics, he would have done well to consider Austin, who, writing her own regional fiction and poetry, ethnographies, and finally an anthropological poetic criticism contingent upon native American culture, was the singular embodiment of these influences. Sapir laid out his ideas of culture in a 1924 article "Culture, Genuine and Spurious," which Aronoff believes to be "one of the first and most important articulations of the Boasian culture concept and [. . .] a key statement of regional modernism and aesthetics" (Aronoff, 95).²² Sapir's concept of culture is aligned with Austin's own concept of regional culture, mentioned above in 2.2, in which she argues for a culture's singular wholeness made up

²² To underscore the literary relations between Sapir and Austin, I'll briefly note here that the first publication of part of Sapir's "Culture, Genuine and Spurious" was published in 1919 in the *Dial*, a magazine that published reviews of Austin's work as well as a few of her original articles with some frequency. Aronoff also mentions that Sapir "was also intensely engaged in the broader artistic and intellectual circuits of 1920's New York, publishing essays, poetry, and criticism in a variety of journals of art and opinion that were central in forming the parameters of modernism, including the *Dial*, *Poetry*, the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *Freeman*" (95). These magazines were the same publications that would support Austin in the 20s, which she notes in a self-satisfying letter to Luhan in 1920: "So now *The Nation*, *The Bookman*, *The Freeman* and *The Dial* are all captives of my bow and spear" (Stineman, 167).

of the sum of unique adaptations to the geography of a regional/natural space. Aronoff notes Sapir's concept as one that is concerned with culture as "spatial form:" "whose unit is the region and whose exemplar is the Indian. For Sapir, 'genuine culture' is above all unified and whole" (Aronoff, 96). The authenticity, or genuineness, of culture, for Sapir, arises from a series of certain characteristics: a culture that is "inherently harmonious"; that is "richly varied and yet somehow unified" and finally, "a culture in which nothing is spiritually meaningless" (Sapir, 310). We see Austin mimicking these same determinations in the various publications which address the Indian, including in *Starry Adventure*. The concept of culture and spatial form, which Aronoff claims is uniquely distinct in Sapir, and arises again in Cather and Ransom, is also one that determines Austin's cultural ideologies and shapes her aesthetic theories. The continuities which Aronoff must prove between Sapir and the literary artists is one that the work of Austin provides effortlessly, particularly in *The American Rhythm*, which creates a culturally relative theory of poetics out of the spatial concepts of the rhythms in Indian dance that arise uniquely in response to the adaptations of natural rhythms in their respective environments. For Austin, the space of the Southwest region (particularly that which constitutes the vastness of the desert, in which place is arguably synonymous with *space*), and the ways in which time and motion occur as forms within that space, determine aesthetic forms.

The ways in which Austin considers the spatial form of culture with regards to the phenomenology of perception are most interesting, particularly the ways in which these ideas pertain to the strange optical/lingual/experiential blends of form in *Starry*

Adventure. Austin's work in *The American Rhythm* draws heavily upon the linguistic cues of Sapir, who, studying primarily languages of Southwestern native American tribes, argued (as Abram has) later, in his 1929 linguistic treatise, "The Status of Linguistics as a Science," that

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (209)

Consider then, Austin's own articulations of language on the very first page of the *The American Rhythm*, where she makes her fascination with subconscious natural perception, and its relationship to regional culture, known:

[the] affection of consciousness, the passing of the perception of rhythmic forms arising fortuitously in our environment – as the roll of thunder or the run of wind in tall grass – through the sensorium into the subconscious, is experiential in its nature. It leaves a track, a mold, by which our every mode of expression is shaped. (*American Rhythm*, 3).²³

²³ An interesting aside, relevant to this project, is the similarity between Austin's ideas and prose and those laid out by Benjamin in his essay on the subconscious nature of photography, mentioned in the first chapter. Like Benjamin, Austin is fascinated by the subconscious and instinctive perceptions of motion (p. 3) and argues that rhythm itself is generated by this faculty, "new rhythms," she argues "are born of new motor impulses" (13). For a comparison with Benjamin, refer to my Chapter 1, pg. 23.

Tara Hart has noted how this “rhythmic” sense of Austin’s affected her own prose compositions, and furthermore, has argued that these rhythms are not necessarily auditory, but visual. Writing of *Earth Horizon*, Austin’s 1932 autobiography, she says “Her landscape descriptions do not paint a picture of how the land looks to an observer; she shows us how the land looks, as an observer. She fashions her inner self repeatedly as a ‘roving mind’s eye’ that takes its rhythmic cues from the land” (Hart, 95). The perceptible rhythms of land, become, as Sapir and later Abrams describe, embedded in the language and the simultaneous knowledge/experience of the environment.

Austin’s partiality to native American forms of making lingual meaning from the visual presence of the land in her works, becomes an expression of her (as Aronoff argues) determinedly *modernist* anthropological/aesthetic philosophy. She explains in the preface to the *Land of Little Rain*:

I confess to a great liking for the Indian fashion of name-giving: every man known by that phrase which best expresses him to whoso names him. [. . .] For if I love a lake known by the name of the man who discovered it, which endears itself by reason of the close-locked pines it nourished about its border, you may look in my account to find it so described. (xxxv-xxxvi)

In *Starry Adventure*, too, Gard tells Eudora, after she admires his great knowledge of Indian lore, “[I know] Only a little of their ways of naming things. There’s no other to my mind that quite gets the sense of the country” (278). Gard explains this idea pithily to Eudora, but Austin picks apart the phenomenological act of language-making from the outset of the novel, informing her readers on a deep level what it means to see and feel the land this way.

Austin's interest in the rhythmic nature of language, and the ways in which rhythms can suffice to make meaning, surface early in *Starry Adventure*, when Gard's father, a classics scholar and translator, reads his work to his young son:

On rainy days Gard loved to come and [. . .] listen to the rich, rolling words, exciting even when you didn't understand. [. . .] 'I liked that part, Father,' he ventured, 'That part – you know' – he couldn't remember the words, but he beat out the rhythm with his hands – 'where it goes like this.' (22)

Later, after Gard learns to read himself, the rhythm of language becomes associated with its aesthetic success. Gard is called in to his father's study to listen to his Latin translation, but Gard can't bear to listen to it, his mind constantly slipping from the words and their meanings. When his father asks why, Gard replies " 'It doesn't gallop' " and he explains, "In the Latin it goes like this' – beating it out with his hands – 'and in English, like this'" (38). The rhythms of language in the novel, as Hart pointed out, are also present as visual signifiers, determined by Austin as "patterns," so that as Gard begins to learn his environment, the meaning and experience of a place settles into a visual rhythm in his mind: "Today all these things came together suddenly in a pattern, like the click of colors in a kaleidoscope, and the name of the pattern was New Mexico" (10).

Austin emphasizes the various forms of making lingual meaning in her descriptions of Gard's coming to know a place. She often introduces multiple lingual signifiers simultaneously, the term in Spanish, the term in English, visual descriptors, or the emphasis of meaning as determined by Gard in relation to its placement in space:

"The mountain was called Sangre de Cristo, the mountains together behind the house, including Baldy and Monte Piedra. This took a little explaining. Mother

said it was like their all being called Sitwell and at the same time Laura and Gard and Marian. Curious how all the places moved back and settled down as you called them by their names. [. . .] Until now, Gard had supposed they were all called New Mexico. But New Mexico, it appeared, went all over and around them, a vast blue and airy ring” (28).

A few pages later, New Mexico’s meaning becomes cemented for Gard and his sister through a visual experience of mapping:

New Mexico fell everywhere into place and was firmed there for the young Sitwells. It was the roads did it. You had to think how Father traveled on the stage, across the Prado, and down the cañon to the Rio Grande and along that into the valley and then sharply to the east, and there you were. (49)

Gard describes place as “taking shape” and made up of “roads and tales that drew in” to become “the world of home” (51). Revisiting a passage I analyzed in Chapter 1, in which Gard describes a certain color blue and the name of the mountain and the mountain itself as being interchangeable, reveals Austin’s dedication to exploring the phenomenological aspects of meaning-making:

...the depth and aerial mystery of the cloud bank below Jémez [...] ran the whole length of the range in unbroken, transparent impenetrability, of a blue that had no other name than the name of the mountain, so that Gard was never quite able to think of one without the other, and was vaguely of the opinion that Jémez-blue was the name of a color which gave its title to that sector of his horizon. (4)

Those last words in this passage, “his horizon” denote a sense of individuality or subjectivity in the process of making meaning. This is reminiscent of the way Austin describes the tradition of name-giving she uses in *The Land of Little Rain*, in which certain characteristics of a place which are uniquely endearing to an individual, become the personal epithet by which that person comes to know and call it. That the mountain and its name in this passage are known by a specific, opaque stripe of color place Austin

within the same tradition as O’Keeffe, Hartley, Marin and others who took to understanding the landscapes they painted through broken down fragments of line, color and shape that came to be expressive or symbolic of the experience of natural viewership.

This interest in the ways that native American language is interpreted affirmed Austin’s and the other New Mexican transplants’ own aesthetic attempts at mining their own inner perceptions. Man and nature were bonded not just in practice but in *consciousness*, which seemed to prove for Austin and others, that the spiritual outpouring of these cultures was somehow innate. Important also was the way in which these interpretations of how native Americans saw and made meaning in the world allowed Austin and her avant-garde cohort to create a separation between elements of culture they perceived to be indigenously American (rooted in the land), and elements of culture which had been falsified by the influence of European tradition.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Austin was interested in aboriginal ways of seeing that demonstrated a kind of American vision from which artists could model their work and therefore distance themselves from working within the constraints of a European perspective. Austin spent most of her career distancing herself from those she called the “Eastern brahmins;” Anglo-Americans in New York who attempted to ground all American culture in European origins. Instead, Austin aligned herself with native American culture and art production. It is understandable then, that Austin wanted the visual wonder of the Southwestern desert to belong to a new form of aesthetic experience- one that could be traced back to the native American experience of the land, and one that Anglo-Americans needed to reconnect with or rediscover within themselves.

The attachment of these experiences to some sort of “divine” Presence in the novel are understood within Austin’s tradition of multiple lingual signifiers, and so her terminology is deliberately unspecific. It/Presence/God of New Mexico/Starry Adventure/the Feeling all refer to essentially the same experience, and while their various names seem at first glance to be muddled and confused, as if Austin couldn’t decide what to call them, it is rather a *concerted* effort of ambiguity. Austin seeks to mimic the experiential nature of the native American epistemology that both anthropologists and literary and visual artists championed within their modernist debates on the theories of genuine culture. The indecisiveness of Austin’s terminology renders the experiences beyond the capabilities of a European experience— what she describes is unknowable in her Western phonetic terms (perhaps best represented by the meaningless “It”) but becomes knowable through the visual markers which tie the experience to the land. That Gard is unable, in English or Spanish, to know exactly how to communicate or designate his optical experiences of enchantment, elevates instead the non-phonetic understanding of his experience, in which his visual descriptions of the land and its phenomena are integral parts of that experience’s communicative signifier.

2.4 “Indian Patterning”: Formalism in Native Craft

The theoretical veins of these lingual explorations are tied, concretely, to modernist aesthetic interests as well. As aforementioned, visual rhythms in the forms of patterns, like that of the “kaleidoscope of New Mexico” become Austin’s metaphors for certain kinds of meaning- making in the novel. Austin connects this more tangibly to

native American crafts. In the section of *Starry Adventure* where Gard begins to develop his seeing/feeling perceptions, and distinguish them from the types of knowing that David and other industrial-minded boys at college possess, Austin writes of this phenomena through the metaphor of Indian pottery:

You didn't *think* yourself so smart. You just *felt*. If you couldn't trust things like that, where were you? [. . .] Walking carefully around corn hills where the blades crossed and shadowed each other like the patterning of an Indian jar. Funny how many times you'd looked at that jar and never knew what it was about. How many times had the Indian looked at the corn before he made it? Shut your eyes against the sun and you could see the shadow standing out black on light. Things you'd looked at all your life and then suddenly you saw it as a pattern. Just like that. Somehow, if it was a pattern, you didn't mind it. If it was a pattern, you were in it somewhere. You had to be. (162)

The pattern on the vase, the abstract representation of an element of nature (stalks of corn), becomes, from here on out in the novel, a metaphor for the expressive formalism of nature, "innate" to native American art forms, and representative of a certain way of seeing and feeling that parallel Gard's God of New Mexico experiences.

The aestheticization of Indian craft objects, in which the linear formalism of abstract patterns and color became an indication of modernist values, occurred with ubiquity in the early twentieth century. The art historian Elizabeth Hutchinson writes that "the presence of Native American objects in mainstream art institutions supported modern art's increasingly formalist concerns while providing an example of abstract art's ability to retain cultural meaning. Moreover, the embrace of an American "primitive" facilitated the acceptance of new ideas about artistic creation" (Hutchinson, 94). Hutchinson dates the first American exhibition to treat Native American art from a

“purely aesthetic standpoint” to a New York showing in 1931, the same year of *Starry Adventure*’s publication. Austin’s involvement in the craft movement of both Indian and Hispanic art has been well established.²⁴ In addition to Santa Fe’s Spanish Colonial Arts Society, which she helped to establish with Frank Applegate, Austin was also involved in the development of an Indian Arts Fund, which was intended for “purchasing and preserving native American handicrafts and supporting contemporary native artists” (Hutchinson, 124). While Austin supported these traditions through charity and activism, she also wrote about craft, weaving in expressionist aesthetic theory as a kind of justification for her preservation efforts.

For example, in Austin’s unpublished article “Indian Arts and Crafts” enclosed with a 1932 letter to Paul Kellogg, the editor of the national social and cultural magazine, *Survey Graphic*, she wrote of the way in which the “spirit” of Indian craftsmanship, provided a superior alternative to the soulless goods of the factory, providing a succinct demonstration of the optic of enchantment:

[Indian art is] the only art in America which arises directly from the perfect interaction of the spirit and the hand; when there is nothing left but the hand, when the spirit goes out of the suave designs of the pottery, the bright hues and subtle weft of the textiles, there will be little left that machine cannot supply. (Jacobs, 154)

²⁴ For a full treatment of Austin’s involvement with Indian art and craft preservation in New Mexico, see Margaret D. Jacobs’ *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures 1879-1934* (U of Nebraska P, 1999). For an in-depth study of her contributions to the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, see Marta Weigle’s chapter “The First Twenty-Five Years of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society” in Weigle, ed. *Hispanic Arts and Ethnohistory in the Southwest*, Ancient City, 1983, (pp. 181-203).

For Austin, the quality or virtuosity of the formal aesthetics of Indian craft were a result of “spirit” - an ambiguous term that sufficed as well for the religious and esoteric elements associated with New Mexican ritual and an engagement with the natural wonders of the landscape.

As Hutchinson noted, the abstraction of native American crafts supported the work of the modernists themselves, giving them a sort of origin myth which secured their work as both authentically American and aesthetically valid. In addition to Austin’s own glorifications of the aesthetics of Indian craft and her interpretations of the objects as expressive of their natural surroundings, other modernists in her New Mexican circle collected pottery and textiles to inspire their own work. These handicrafts served similar roles for these artists as the adobe architecture did; they supported a formalist aesthetic, they were imbued with mystical elements (in addition to the “spirit” of craft, it was also understood that many of these objects had ritual purposes), and they were created “naturally” with locally sourced materials, made completely by hand. Furthermore, they established a sense of longstanding tradition, the success of this aesthetic practice took the form of ancientness; the styles and practice of these crafts could be determined by local archaeology.

There is a parallel between the aesthetic as it pertains to the primitivist elevation of native American formalism and as it relates to a trend in regionalist literature. Brad Evans has made a connection between the two, arguing that around the turn of the century a transformation of the local into the aesthetic in regional fiction coalesces with

ways in which “objects collected by anthropologists became poised to fuel modernist primitivism” so that

what one sees in local-color fiction of the 1890’s [the era and genre that Austin’s work originates] is not at all an assertion of integrated stasis and purity that one might imagine for it – a last gasp, as it were, of romantic nostalgia for a preindustrial past – but the assertion of artists, publishing houses, and perhaps even readers, of a rather hip participation in the dislocating tangled complexity of the chic. (Evans, 139-140)

The region of the Southwest, as determined by Austin and others of her avant-garde cohort, became defined not by geographic demarcations, nor a historical determinacy, nor even a specific climate, but rather by an established *aesthetic*, which explains the intense visual emphasis of Austin’s Southwestern prose, culminating in *Starry Adventure*. Evans writes of the chic *dislocation* of collecting beautiful details of the world into one place, as a collection of local color stories might do, or as Eudora Ballantine’s expensive decorative artifact collection certainly does. While Evans points out the very faddishness of the kind of dislocating collection that Gard criticizes Eudora for, Austin’s own optical focus in *Starry Adventure* undeniably contributes to a similar “dislocating” aestheticization. In determining a region by aesthetic feeling, the inevitable process of change or the slow creep of tourism and marketing and the ebbs and flows of cultural practice might render a region “unrecognizable.”

The landscape historian Richard Francaviglia writes of this phenomenon, arguing pithily that “the Southwest has become a state of mind as well as a place that can be identified and mapped by geographers” and in trying to pin down the “elusive” area, he explains that the best way to truly determine its geography is to focus on those features

that produce, for the eye and the mind, a “regional image.” (Francaviglia, 8). The authenticity of a regional culture, as it forms itself in opposition to the fakeries that arise out of the surrounding uniformity of the modern, industrial State, is nonetheless determined by an almost emotional standard mediated by the eye— this *looks* real, this *feels* real.

The crystallization of this determination would be found several years later in the criticism of art historian Clement Greenberg, in his seminal 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” Greenberg argues that the authentic form of art and poetry, that of the avant-garde, is determined by purely formalist or aesthetic concerns, and that “kitsch” is a “synthetic art” produced by the political economies of Western society: “another mass product of Western industrialism, [kitsch] has gone on a triumphal tour of the world, coding out and defacing native cultures in one colonial country after another, so that it is now by way of becoming a universal culture” (Greenberg, 544). Meanwhile, he elucidates Austin’s term “spirit” in the making of the ‘avant-garde’ art object:

...it has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at ‘abstract’ or ‘non-objective’ art – and poetry, too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid in the way a landscape – not its picture- is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similar, or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself. (Greenberg, 541)

Greenberg articulates here the defining thread of the avant-garde in New Mexico – those optics of enchantment that elevated to spiritual experience the formal aesthetics that arose from a place of regionally and culturally determined authenticity.

2.5 Conclusion

One afternoon, driving in his automobile back to the ranch from a house restoration job in Santa Fe, Gard is struck by the beauty of geraniums in a tin can lining the window of a native house. “Everybody who came to New Mexico spoke about it,” Gard narrates (210). He goes on to recall something his boss Marvin had once said about this tin-can flower tradition: “Once Marvin had said that the color and freshness of it was like the art feeling that still shone out from the Spanish temperament behind the shabbiness of the great American refusal” (210). The simplicity of the act – picking vibrant local blossoms and using what’s at hand (a tin can) to ensconce and display them – is what allows them to shine. This is an emblem of the aesthetic as authentic marker of regional culture: the “art feeling” of the window display, like that of a Spanish adobe house, is generated by an adherence to the utmost tenet of Austin’s definition of regional culture. The tin-can geraniums are a symbol of ecological balance: the natural beauty of the local landscape, the geraniums, are permitted to bask in their own simple glory, and their house, the tin can, is a sustainable, non-decorative use of necessary human detritus, once containing, perhaps, some sustenance that came from the very land the geraniums were plucked. The “great American refusal” that Marvin refers to, is one that Austin does not expound upon or explain in any way, but the phrase seems less ambiguous after considering Austin’s own cultural contexts. America at large, the modernity and industry and uniformity that it comes to represent, is an enemy of the authentic and the regional, because, as Marvin notes, it refuses to allow the true nature of a thing to suffice as its representation. Clement Greenberg would have interpreted Austin’s term “shabbiness” to

mean “kitsch,” American culture as industrial imitation. The “art feeling” is determined foremost by teleology; just as Greenberg’s true avant-garde is determined by acknowledgement of the functions and honest make-up of a painting- the paint, the two-dimensionality, the surface of the canvas et cetera.

It is notable that the flowers are not roses, and that they are not in some ornate Pueblo painted pottery, and that Gard views them *en route* to his home in the seat of an automobile, and his next thought is about picking up his soon-to-be mother-in-law from the train station. Austin’s “art feeling” is not entirely contingent upon romantic projections of old-timey-ness, instead it draws too from the advents of modernity. In a search for authentic culture, Austin and her New Mexican circle latched themselves to a primitivism that elevated those cultures which had, in the minds of these transplants, endowed the landscape with a mythic sense of time. But the specific optics that arise in *Starry Adventure*, for instance, also owe their existence both to reactionary oppositions to modern visual culture, and to the inevitable permutations of influence that new visual technologies had on the turn of the twentieth century American mind. The reformations of space, time and light that had accrued in Western culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, allowed for new emphases and processes in the ways artists and writers thought about the world they saw. In my next chapter, I analyze the ways in which the *modern* too, determined Austin’s optics, and conversely, the ways in which these optics were used to create a space that provided *modernist* forms of sanctuary from the ailments of the “American refusal,” specifically from a machine-driven war, and rigid gender roles.

CHAPTER THREE

Sifting Through the Modern: Visual Technologies and New Social Spaces

The essential need was human rather than scientific. Some one had to have the imagination to get away from the ‘thought’ of the existing easily recognized pattern. This took daring, the courage to think out of line with convention and custom; it took inventiveness in using scientific material in a new way, for new consequences. [. . .] The pioneer succeeded in making his bridge – and ultimately making a new art or scientific technique- because he had the courage of a creative mind.

-Mary Austin, “The Need for a New Social Concept” (1922)

3.1 Introduction

Late in *Starry Adventure*, driving around the desert in his car, Gard rescues

Eudora from a dangerous flash flood. Gard describes the event:

At the eight-mile bridge the water was over the piers. Every rut and runnel was a fretful, snaky stream, deceptively frothed with rubbish. You took risk, you rushed hidden possibilities of danger with a sure knowledge of the country and your machine. At Little Peñasco, Gard met the dust-and-silver car, sitting halfway of the arroyo bed, with its engine dead, and its low hung body lapped on every side by snarling, clay-charged water. (275)

Here, rather than pitting nature against the machine, Gard becomes a hero through the proper application of both kinds of knowledge, natural and mechanical, that “sure knowledge of the country and your machine.” Even Eudora’s car is described as an object made up of a balance of human innovation and natural decay- “dust-and-silver.” This duality reflects Austin’s view that a region is composed of a land and the people who adapt to it. The tools that mankind erect to prepare for the idiosyncrasies of their respective regional landscapes, in theory, allow nature and culture to exist in relative

harmony. The New Mexico that Austin paints in the novel includes the appearance and experience of bridges, cars, roads and trains, which could be read as cultural adaptations within a specific landscape. While the novel's contemporary reviewers read the work as extending the myth of the prelapsarian West, I argue Austin seems to realize what the scholar Donald Worster has so crisply explained: "Far from being a child of nature, the West was actually given birth by modern technology and bears all the scars of that fierce generation" (Worster, 14). The vision of New Mexico, then, is one which similarly bears those scars. The automobiles, trains and bridges that dot the landscape in *Starry Adventure* bring with them new perceptions of light, time and motion. Austin is not a simple thinker; she eschews the black and white oppositions of nature and culture for a vision of the novel that instead engages with and blurs the lines between natural, spiritual, and mechanical forms of perception.

The art historian Jonathan Crary argues that modern vision is primarily one that newly considers the *subjectivity* of perception (demonstrated in the modernisms of painting and photography that challenge mimetic realism) which arises, on the one hand, from an understanding of the workings of the eye made known by experiments and advents in optics (in his study he evaluates discoveries of color theory, after-images, binocular vision and the development and proliferation of technological visions demonstrated by kaleidoscopes, stereoscopes, thaumatropes, phenikistiscopes, and

photography)²⁵. On the other hand, Crary argues, debates over subjectivity in vision also result from hegemonic shifts during the industrial period, in which “modernity is inseparable from the way in which dispersed mechanisms of power coincide with new modes of subjectivity” wherein “a range of pervasive and local techniques contro[l], maintain[n], and mak[e] useful new multiplicities of individuals” (15).

What arises in *Starry Adventure* then, is not the dichotomy of urban and rural or mechanical and natural, but rather a preoccupation with the hazier notions of visual subjectivity. The preservation of the individual’s right to interpret phenomena as he or she so chooses, to experience these phenomena in a deeply personal or spiritual way is Austin’s form of affirming personal power and championing the political rights of individuals, specifically individuals generally trampled by the larger political and economic forces that be, namely, in the case of *Starry Adventure*, women.

This chapter analyzes the ways in which a new culture of vision influenced the optic of enchantment, and the ways in which the politics of vision paralleled Austin’s own politics of social space. The vision of New Mexico, which serves as a sort of

²⁵ Crary devotes his fourth chapter (“Techniques of the Observer,” pp. 97-136) to the importance of the discovery and understanding of afterimages, an optical phenomenon that provided a “persistence of vision” (107), othat was utilized in 19th century optical toys to provide surprising and wonderful images for the viewer. A thaumatrope (which translates as “wonder-turner”) consists of a small circular disk with an illustration on either side and two strings attached so that one could twirl the image in a spin, producing an effect which combined the two images (a bird on one side and a cage on the other would produce, for example, a bird in a cage) (105). A phenakistiscope (which translates to “deceptive view”) harnessed the same powers of retinal afterimages to merge multiple stationary images arranged in a wheel into a figure in constant motion by spinning it in front of a mirror (109).

spiritual opening, allows, in the novel, for the formation of a reconstituted utopic space – one in which the individual is prized over any unified political or economic public, and transnational and transcultural interpretations of space are welcomed in their plurality, the uniquely syncretic atmosphere of New Mexico elevated over mono-cultural national identity .

3.2 *Blurring Public and Private Spheres: Gender, Space, Time, and Light*

3.2.a. *THE FEMALE PERSON*

Another member of the avant-garde, besides Mabel Dodge Luhan, to garner a fictional avatar in *Starry Adventure* was the painter Marsden Hartley, who is satirized as the male-bodied landscape painter Fenwick Marsden. Eudora believes him the best of the New Mexico painters, and Austin comically has Eudora refer to him as “the only one who gets the phallic quality of the scene” (277). But Gard is Austin’s great character experiment – a sympathetic male, prizing feminine qualities over male ones, and he believes New Mexico to be female. He bristles at Eudora’s praise of Marsden’s landscape’s male qualities:

You wanted time for measuring the impact of the word. You knew what it meant, but you hadn’t heard it used by a woman, and never as applied to a landscape. It was a word for maleness, and to you the world of New Mexico had the noble curves, the brooding quiet of maternity (277).

Earlier, Gard had described New Mexico specifically as a woman, saying: “Then one of those warm, inviting intervals by which New Mexico reminds you that *she* is there, unalterable” (59, my emphasis). Austin also writes the converse of this, describing women in the novel in terms of the surrounding desert landscape. For example, Austin

describes Gard's mother's voice as "like the gurgle of the acéquia when the creek is full from rains on the mountains" (87). Or, one of Gard's early impressions of Eudora has her materializing out of the desert itself:

It was every way the sort of day out of which a flaming personality such as Eudora's could have materialized. It could have produced her out of the brooding blues that gathered on its high horizons; like sheet lightning; like the gusty rush of rain. A hushed, pregnant day; meditative mountains drooping their white pinions through the upper air (273).

Melody Graulich has written about Austin's affinity for rendering the desert female. She writes of *Cactus Thorn* (a desert novella written in 1927 but rejected by Houghton Mifflin and published posthumously) that Austin conceives of the desert as "like a woman" and describes the ways in which "women and land are symbolically united" (Graulich, 102-103). Graulich goes on to explain that for Austin, the desert is an "open space" whose emptiness and remoteness create a sphere of rebellion and renewal, and "provides the space to walk off society-made values" and for Austin, the most important social values to "walk off" are rigid gender roles, as she believed that "the redefinition of sexual roles in marriage belonged at the heart of any new social theory" (103). Therefore, the desert reads as feminine not only in a personal, physical sense, but also acts as a support for the feminine in a political sense. Graulich acknowledges a central message of feminism that reveals itself in the main character of Austin's novella, who asserts "what feminists of all generations have insisted upon, that the personal *is* political" (102). While *Cactus Thorn* is the tragic version of Austin's worldview, one in which the main male character remains unable to tap into the spiritual vision of the desert (a vision that could eventually shape one's social outlook) and continues to exploit both

the land and woman, *Starry Adventure* is a successful narrative of that same vision which *Cactus Thorn*'s character cannot grasp.

This vision is wholly tied up in the debates of personal and political, of private and public, that dominated the consciousness of visual culture at the turn of the twentieth century. As the individual's internal dominion over the visual world began to subside due to increasingly public and political control of light, time and space, a yearning for the personal sense of visual experience begins to arise. We see therefore, in the 1931 *Starry Adventure*, the optic of enchantment as a form of vision that seeks to champion the personal: it is built of a subjective experience and expression of the land; it is rendered and described abstractly (the abstraction of vision here interpreted as one that renders meaning highly subjective, as opposed to the standard mimetic forms of representation which inherently describe a singular and objective meaning); and it is built upon the internal "feeling" as opposed to an external "knowing," as per Gard's distinction; and it acknowledges a culturally and nationally subjective plurality of spirit in which multiple groups' interpretations of the landscape's aura of enchantment are equally accepted as an affirmation of a universal spirit.

This vision champions the personal, and it therefore allows the viewer to create a space in which a woman might be recognized as an individual, as a person, and not as a type filling a specific social role (marriage and motherhood), thus relocating the political from the public sphere into the personal sphere. I argue that Austin's personalization of vision works on both a feminist and an optical level; Austin reconstitutes vision as a

personal experience by internally reclaiming light, space and time, and this same vision is a means of advocating for the female's individuality as a political act.

“It's because being a person seems more important to me just now than loving; even loving the person you are married to” (*Starry Adventure*, 221), Jane tells her mother after deciding, against her parents' wishes, to marry Gard instead of the well-positioned man her father had chosen for her. She goes on to explain that both the war and the suffrage movement allowed her to come to the realization that women are foremost “persons” as opposed to domestic stereotypes (she quotes here the ‘Antis’ – American women opposed to suffrage who believed the ideal woman to be principally wives and mothers first); the war inspired in Jane an understanding that humans can be treated not as people but merely as casualties, statistics, or tools of a political machine, whereas suffrage affirmed an individuality in humans, it was “to make women *persons*” (221). Jane doesn't want to be someone's wife or mother, she claims rather “I wanted to be *me*. [. . .] I'm not much interested in public life. I'm interested in my life” (222). This declaration posits the interior as determining one's outward role, in which a woman becomes a person whose wishes and personality create her place in the world, rather than a determination of a woman's function by the patriarchal system of production (wherein her support of her husband's career and her bearing of children are read as capitalist acts). This elevation of an individual over the system mirrors the ways in which Gard describes the space of New Mexico. He states of the place:

New Mexico wasn't a political entity, an economic environment. It was this Rancho Arríba, this serrate, hyacinthian ring of mountains called Blood of Christ, this deep blue boat of Jémez and the pale, squared sail of Pedernál. It was the

band of singing creeks that came down from Monte Piedra, the gleam of them, and the changing greens and fawns of the valley; it was the wind in the aspens and the white fire among the wild plums. It was the warm, *personal* sense of everything; the field he had ploughed, the orchard. (124, my emphasis)

This vision of New Mexico as a personalized space stems from Gard's experiences of enchantment. Janis Stout, one of the very few scholars who has considered *Starry Adventure* in her Austin criticism, notes that Gard's "visions" are what enable him to realize a new social space in which women are, in Austin's mind, properly considered. She writes, "The New Mexico of *Starry Adventure* is not only a landscape of glamour, then, but of meaning. The clear air affords a clarity of both physical vision and spiritual vision" and she goes on to explain that the ultimate destiny communicated by the "starry adventure" reveals itself as a domestic one (creating a beautiful home and family with Jane, who, in the end of the novel, hints at a potential pregnancy) and therefore "male questing, in this novel, is an inner state akin to the gestation of a baby" (Stout, 94-97). While Stout convincingly argues that a clarity of "physical and spiritual vision" creates a supportive feminist space, she does not delve deeper into the optical make-up of Gard's landscape visions and therefore misses the opportunity to draw parallels between the novel's gender politics and similar fights for individual determinations of vision. In examining optical elements and emphases in *Starry Adventure*, Gard's vision of the "personal space" of New Mexico reflects responses to a changing visual culture in modern society.

3.2.b. *LIGHT*

The German historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch has looked at the psycho-social effects of artificial lighting on Western culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In considering the industrialization of light, he writes of the invasion of the personal by the public spheres of political economy:

The evolution of homogenous light into two increasingly different species, outside light and inside light (or distant and close light) relates to the wider social process by which the public and the private were increasingly separated in bourgeois life. [. . .] The anxiety with which everything private, and especially the family, was shut off from a public that was felt to be more and more unpleasant, is reflected in attempts to prevent light from the street from falling directly into rooms. (Schivelbusch, 185)

Specifically, artificial lighting was newly associated with industrialized forces of capitalism. Schivelbusch goes on to explain:

...this sort of light had an outside source. Ostensibly burning in the middle of the room in the lamp, its real origin was in the gas-works or in the central electric supply station, that is in 'big industry,' from which the bourgeois psyche tried to separate itself as it did from the public sphere (186).

Schivelbusch includes also several contemporary accounts of what electric lighting looked like and felt like, in comparison to natural light, to demonstrate an overarching feeling of lost vitality in the looks of things. He quotes Bachelard: "[the incandescent bulb] will never allow us to dream the dreams that the light of the living oil-lamp conjured up. We live in the age of administered light" (Bachelard, 90). Perhaps this sentiment was best expressed through an account of a German art historian, who, during war time, was forced to abandon electric lighting for candle light:

Electric light imparts too much brightness and thus things lose body, outline, substance – in short, their essence. In candlelight objects cast much more

significant shadows, shadows that have the power actually to create forms. Candles give as much light as things need in order to be what they are – optimally, so to speak – and allows them to retain their poetic element (178).

These accounts of electric lighting echo the New Mexican avant-garde's own quest for a natural aesthetic that maintained an element of "spirit," and specifically of Austin, Luhan, Lawrence, Adams and O'Keefe's descriptions of finding the treasure they sought in the desert light: its vitality and intensity, its abstract forms and shadows, and the "poetic" feeling of natural light in space.

While the effects of industrialized light on modern civilization were widespread and deeply felt (the historian Rayner Banham describes the advent of electric light, for example, as "the greatest environmental revolution in human history since the domestication of fire" (Kern, 29)), Schivelbusch mentions a few manifestations of industrial light that would have affected Austin specifically. First is the early form of public electric light known as "tower lighting"; small towns without the technology or resources to install a system of individual lights would erect an intensely bright electric arc light that would be projected from the center of towns atop a massive iron tower. These towers were mostly confined to towns in the American West and Midwest in the 1880s and 1890s, both the time and place where Austin would have been. The presence of this type of lighting suddenly thrust brightness into the homes of small-town Westerners who previously had not even had access to gas lighting. The symbolic effect of these towers, in which the central tower of light came to represent a sort of political surveillance, was the ultimate reduction of personal power in the name of the public. Schivelbusch mentions too many accounts of the dystopian cast that this artificial tower

light seemed to project, and mentions specifically the rendering of light in the work of writer H.G. Wells:

The glaring shadowless light that illuminates H.G. Wells' negative Utopias, no longer guarantees the security of the individual. It permits total surveillance by the state. The Utopian dream of nights lit up as bright as day was transformed into the nightmare of a light where there was no escape (134).

Austin was a good friend of Wells, and he was a writer whom she much admired.

Their letter exchanges imply that they read each other's work with frequency, offered criticism and suggestions, and shared political views (Pearce, 104). Wells' nightmarish creation of an industrial State's lighting would have been known to Austin, and subconscious sentiments about the degradation of the individual's control of light are ones that they likely shared.²⁶

Austin's *Starry Adventure* glorifies a world in which light especially is the hallmark of a personal vision. For Austin, the dramatic contours, intensity (or possibly even harshness) of New Mexican light were the keystone of the region's enchantment. In the novel, she reclaims the personal experience of natural light. Light becomes a personal

²⁶ Austin's biographers Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson devote significant space to the relationship of Wells and Austin, whose friendship developed over a shared interest in socialism, the suffrage movement and speculative science (105). Austin admired his political and personal approaches to relationships and marriage, while Wells loved Austin's short stories, particularly her story "The Walking Woman" published in her 1909 collection, *Lost Borders* (106), who is described as eschewing "all sense of society-made values" (Goodman and Dawson, 115). Interestingly, in a letter to Wells written in January, 1917 describing her attitudes towards the war, Austin also discusses the inexpressible subjectivity of the Presence, writing: "... we believe pretty generally in a Power and Presence moving in the affairs of men [. . .] This is a primitive, picture-writing way of saying something so subtle that perhaps the language for saying it just precisely hasn't been invented yet" (Pearce, 105).

form of revelation, it becomes the essential element of unique cultural expression, and it becomes a projection of personality, both for a landscape, and a character.

In the novel, Austin is essentially concerned with the re-association of light with life force. Through various permutations which illustrate her harmonious land-and-culture world view, she metaphorically restates an understanding of light as something that is cosmic, spiritual, cultural, and personal. To start with the seed, light in the novel can emanate from a single person. Consider this description of Eudora, in which she gives off her own light that exceeds the luminosity of a lamp and takes on the enchantment of the “higher” form of natural light:

The car windows were open, and Eudora looked out with the pleased bright fixity of youth, drinking beauty like wine. Seated so [. . .] her fine effect of glowing from within as a lamp glows was raised to enchantment. [. . .] She had that effect. This crystal shine of waters, the intense glowing color of new-washed rocks, the aerial depth of moving cloud, the wheeling play of light, was the reflex of her presence given back by the place, the hour [. . .] her color, which appeared always new lighted for the occasion was so completely there for you. (276)

In another passage, Eudora becomes the act of perceiving light:

Starry! That was how Juan Diego saw the vision of Our Lady on the hill of Guadalupe rayed out with starry implications. Every now and then, since that time, you had felt so about Eudora. She glinted on you; she struck, by her mere presence, splinters of light from your consciousness (266).

These passages read as reversed complements to her personified landscapes.

Rather than the desert described as having the qualities of a person, a person is elevated to the status of the land, described as having unique qualities of a horizon, of a sunset, of gleaming rocks or water.

In the next echelon of Austin's vital hierarchy, light also comes to represent the essential life force of culture, celebrated in ritual. This is a way of contrasting the uniformity of artificial light economized by modern systems with the multivalent properties of light used as symbols of worship in the many forms of religion that are displayed in New Mexico. As mentioned in my second chapter, the rituals of Nochebuena, the Penitentes and native American dances are described as manifestations of spirit in light: the *lumináres*, the stained glass, the lanterns that illuminate the Penitentes' walk (their chants, we remember, "faint as moonlight filtered through glass"), the spinning wheels of color and light that describe the Indian dances. The transnational and transcultural notion of ritual, in which the presence of uniting life force (here, in the form of light) validates multiple interpretations of spirit and in the process creates a space that prizes subjective plurality. Daniel Worden, writing of the experimental 1923-1939 New Mexican literary magazine *Laughing Horse*, to which Mary Austin, Willa Cather, D.H. Lawrence and Mabel Dodge Luhan were frequent contributors, has described this subjective plurality as a hallmark of a regional modernism that is defined by its blend of aesthetic, political, and transnational motives: "an aesthetic and political brand of regionalism that is both intensely tied to regional and local specificity and also a practical model for realization of a modernist ideal: the synthesis of everyday life, historical awareness, and artistic practice on a transnational scale" (203). For Austin, the transcultural and transnational nature of New Mexican culture was integral to affirmations of the universality of the land – a spirit existed within the desert that Spanish

colonists, indigenous peoples, Anglos, and a sensitized, formerly urban avant-garde could all realize, despite their interpretations, educations, or practices.

New Mexico might be symbolized by a cross, by Pueblo adobe, or by natural land formations, or by local flora and fauna. That a Hispano-Catholic, native American, or a person of Anglo/transcendental denomination might all recognize the power and beauty of the alpenglow (as in the scene in which Gard, his grandfather, and the ranch hand all come together to note the sanctity of the Blood of Christ, in their own unique ways), reflect the power of the politicized personal- a declaration of the inherent rights of the individual citizen through the advocacy of subjective vision.

Finally, Austin's ultimate incarnation of personalized light takes the form of natural phenomena, which represent at once the unique qualities of a landscape and the divine actions and presence of some cosmic force. Gard's experiences of enchantment, in which outer light of the natural world penetrates the mind/body/soul and becomes intensely personal visions of the God of New Mexico, a God which is both personal to Gard (who never shares his experience with anyone but his wife Jane) and personal to the land (the visions are expressions of a unique region). Looking once more at the initial passage of Gard's enchantment, we might note specifically Austin's treatment of light:

Swiftly the rain rallied and blotted out the splendor; all but a thin slit through which a golden wing of light flew toward him. Gard saw it come, grow invisible with nearness, and take shape again in the tops of the yellowing aspens in the ciénaga below the house, almost on a level with his round-eyed staring; a gold glowing brightness like hot brass, like molten ends of rainbows. (4-5)

The God of New Mexico, (the Presence, It, the Feeling, the Starry Adventure) is made up of a light that is awesome, natural and colorful. It has a life force all its own,

capable of a wing-like flying motion, and its intensity and nature are hard to pin down, described as gold brightness akin to brass, but also compared to molten ends of rainbows, and synonymous with yellowing aspens. The experiences of this light come to represent the feeling of New Mexico for Gard, but they also serves as a portentous glimpse into his own person. The title of the book, the “Starry Adventure” is ultimately a path of personal action, a *quest*, initiated and determined by the travelling light of the universe. It is the understanding that all on earth will eventually become light that allows Gard to accept “the rich secret sense of communication” that is the Starry Adventure (420). He realizes, on the last page of the novel that, “It was inside you; the Starry Adventure. It was inside them; they were about it. The earth, the orchard, the mountains waiting to be ground down into dust, to be made men. The wheeling planets...” (420). A sense of cosmic harmony equates mankind with light. Gard realizes that destiny is not about profession or social accomplishments, but rather can only be realized in a universal sense- the Starry Adventure is fulfilled by the continuation of vital life force, of energy, in the form of waves, of particles, of spirit imparted into a child.

3.2.c. TIME

The special energy of New Mexico is a personal, spiritual and natural form of light constantly reignited in a cyclical motion of the universe and its generations of land and life forms. Therefore, the notion of time becomes an important element shaping Austin’s optics. On the one hand, New Mexico embodies the space of the personal- the optic of enchantment, as a spiritual or sacred experience creates a sense of personal time which operates against the standard linear forms of forward progression and

irreversibility, and on the other hand, the landscape of New Mexico cements the universal cycling of energy in the ancient geological and archaeological visions of the landscape. Both the personal sanctity of the enchanted experience of vision and the cultural and geological looping of time provide for Austin and her artist fellows, a place from which to redefine the standard lineation of time enacted and enforced by industrial modernity.

The historian Stephen Kern believes the installment of a “standard time” to be the major change in the ways time was conceived by the modern Western world during his period of study (from 1880-1918). This creation of a standard time was brought about, according to Kern, by the advent of the railroad and the telegram. In response to this standardization of a phenomenon once determined personally, challenges to the linear irreversibility of time set forth by technological schedules of industry began to crop up at the turn of the century. Plays with time in avant-garde cinema and the “modernist” novel, such as those time-warped narratives of Proust or Joyce, became reconsiderations of this industrialized notion (Kern, “The Nature of Time”).

Avant-garde cinematic technique provides a temporal/visual example of new conceptions of time. Kern writes, “[cinema] portrayed a variety of temporal phenomena that played with the uniformity and irreversibility of time” (33). He notes specifically the French filmmaker Georges Méliès’ 1896 film *The Vanishing Lady*, which used the trick of stopping the film and changing the scene, and resuming filming so that the passage of time could be gapped and a transformation of form, like a lady into a skeleton, seemed to occur instantaneously; or the American filmmaker Edwin S. Porter, who developed editing techniques that could extend, compress and reverse time by removing and

rearranging segments of the film, or a common trick that amazed turn of the century audiences, that of running the film backwards through the projector so that time was reversed in motion. Kern describes one critic's "account of a mass of broken glass ascending through space and reforming on a table into the perfect original, which suggests a Cubist decomposition in reverse" (30).

In addition to looking at modernist approaches to narrative (cinematic, literary, photographic, and painterly), those who took on the experimental forms which convolute the neatness of linear time, Kern also writes of sociological and psychological treatises of the day, which began to note different types of time perception. Notably, Kern writes of a 1909 study by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, which argued that "time in religion and magic serves a social function and provides a framework for the qualitative rather than the quantitative experience of succession" and that sacred time in particular was the *private* form of time in which the fixed, linearity of its perception could be called into question: "[This view of] time was heterogeneous, discontinuous, expandable, and partially reversible" (32). Kern goes on to explain that an understanding of a schism between multiple times arose in this period:

Contrasting views about the number, texture and direction [of time] were complicated by the fact that generally two kinds of time were being considered: public and private. The traditional view of a uniform public time as the one and only was not challenged, but many thinkers argued for a plurality of private times, and some came to question whether the fixed and spatially represented public time was really time at all or some metaphysical interloper from the realm of space. (33)

Here again, we see a modern demarcation between the public and private spheres occurring within the arena of perception, and Kern affirms that the avant-garde notion of time was one that privileged the personal:

The popular idea that time is made up of discrete parts as sharply separated as the boxed days on a calendar continued to dominate popular thinking about public time, whereas *the most innovative speculation was that private time was the real time and that its texture was fluid*" (34, my emphasis).

Austin, while far less "innovative" perhaps than Joyce or Proust (Kern's major literary examples are *Ulysses* (1922) and *Remembrance of Things Past* [1913]), at least in terms of form and narrative, certainly subscribed to temporal alternatives.²⁷ In its own way, *Starry Adventure* advocates a fluid, private time often ignited by sacred experience, and furthermore this time is cyclical rather than linear, mysterious rather than knowable, and circadian rather than technological. As Eudora says, "Distance isn't anything, nor time, really. They're just conventions of the mind; don't you think?" (276).

²⁷ It should be noted that Austin was a long-standing champion of controversially experimental work of the avant-garde. In 1922 Austin spoke with F. Scott Fitzgerald at an event of the Author's League Fellowship against the "New York Society for the Suppression of Vice" in New York City, and in 1933 she would lead a protest and letter writing campaign of artists and writers in support of Diego Rivera, whose controversial mural at Radio City was under threat of destruction by the Rockefeller family (Letter 112, Dasburg to Austin, May 10, 1933, in Pearce, 261-262). Most important for this study was Austin's 1929 support of the temporally experimental work of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. New Mexico Senator Bronson Cutting attempted to amend the censorial Tariff Act of 1890 in hopes of allowing James Joyce's *Ulysses* to be printed in the United States. Austin published an article in an issue of *Laughing Horse* magazine (which was devoted to the subject of censorship) supporting Cutting's amendment, and in 1930 Judge John M. Woolsey would permit the publication of *Ulysses*, stating that the book's stream of consciousness style, which he compared to the multiple exposure techniques in cinema film, devised "a new literary method for the observation of mankind" and thus Joyce "achieves a coherent and integral interpretation of life" (Pearce, 167) and (5. F.Supp. 183, UNITED STATES vs ONE BOOK CALLED "ULYSSES").

Austin's larger form of the novel does not necessarily give an experimental sense of time. It is, for the most part, chronological and unfolds in a linear fashion. One break in this traditional form is the seamless and unannounced narratorial shifts which seem to constitute Austin's version of "stream of consciousness."²⁸ This oscillation between the omniscient third person form and the second person You form, which I mentioned briefly in the first chapter, give rise to a certain fluidity of time perception. While the third person narrator unfolds the story bit by bit, a sort of public voice that operates on the "standard time" of a story, Austin will suddenly break into the You form, which serves often to expand, reverse or otherwise discontinue that linear form of time.

For example, consider this paragraph, in which Gard returns home without a woman after a night out in town with his lascivious wing-man Alfredo:

After he was gone that night, Gard went out and walked on the terrace in the crisp night and renewed the token of the stars. The Presence came around him, near and warm; he drank It in, a wine of light, dissolving the stubborn spell of desolation; for the moment he was one with his flesh again. He was reconciled with his friend. He knew, without being able to formulate the knowledge, what David had meant by things that hurt when they were said. You didn't have to be noble. An

²⁸ Kern notes that "the theory that time is a flux and not a sum of discrete units is linked with the theory that human consciousness is a stream and not a conglomeration of separate faculties or ideas" (24). He goes on to examine several pioneering works of turn-of-the-century psychology and philosophy which established the "stream of consciousness" and entered the concept into the larger cultural lexicon, notably William James' 1884 essay "On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology," published in *Mind*, January, 1884 (and solidified in his 1890 textbook, *Principles of Psychology*) in which he refers to "a stream of thought" (pp., 2, 6, 11, 16) and Henri Bergson's *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903) which attempted to distinguish between multiple forms of consciousness of time. Linda Dalrymple Henderson has established the importance of both Bergson's and James' work on the salons of Mabel Dodge Luhan (Henderson, 32) which perhaps explains Austin's comment in *Starry Adventure*, in which Gard notes Eudora's adherence to "the new psychology" (285).

empty gesture, a mere stutter of the mind for the thing you couldn't say. You had to be real, had to see things just as they were, the way you saw Alfredo at that moment, a cheap creature, sneaking out to a dirty rendezvous in the dark. And then nothing mattered (108).

Here, the narratorial shift allows for time to become expanded and reversed and otherwise made noncontiguous. The paragraph starts with the "Him/He/Gard" pacing the terrace after his night out, and connecting with a magical or religious feeling that is the Presence. The unceremonious introduction of the You form expands that "moment" to include multiple people and events that are not physically present in that block of time, which forms in the narrative as a scene (Gard on the patio witnessing the stars). He comes to understand something his friend David had said in the past, and reconstitutes his understanding of Alfredo's past actions that evening. This "stutter of the mind" Austin renders is about the reformation of Gard's perception of a person, but his "being real, seeing things just as they were" also speaks to the reality of a personal form of time – realizations of new perceptions can only occur within a mental space that conceives of time as fluid, in which -like in avant-garde cinema of the time where one can edit or freeze frame a scene – impressions and understandings of the past can be expanded, reworked and transformed.

In addition to this large scale of narratorial time skewing, there are small examples littered throughout the novel that inform the reader of Austin's other altered notions of time. Perhaps the best example of this is a passage in which Gard notes the procession of events in a New Mexico day:

He had come, for the first time in weeks, to the point where the rhythm of his own urges and inhibitions had surrendered to the rhythms of the day. There is a lovely

spacing of the incidents of afternoon in New Mexico; like the concluding movements of a vast, serious spectacle. The shadows move in locked phalanxes as the light frees itself from the entangling ranges. It turns releasingly, about four of the clock, with stately lapses, making room for the sudden high splendor of its close. Just at the last there is a deep-throated blare of bassoons, glowing, golden! And then with a long relaxing sigh the evening lets fall her violet veils. Even the tension of the steering gear relaxed with that last movement of surrender. (318)

Here Austin creates a specific personal time, a time that elides Gard's own inner desires and limitations with the intervals of the natural day. Time is described as the movement of unique light, as the color of gold, as the sound of a bassoon. Standard time, "four of the clock" is rendered nebulous with the modification of the word "about" and with the image of Gard's car softening; yielding not to its own mechanized rhythms, but to the day, and to New Mexico.

3.2.d. *SPACE*

The automobile proves a common example of Austin's consciousness of changing perceptions. In yet another passage about Eudora, Austin describes competing elements of electric light, automobiles, a candle flame and the terrain of the land:

It was the same with those drives which made a network of electric association across the countryside. [Eudora] would let you know, she would often involve you in the effect of your having been the one to propose it, that she wished to drive, and there she would be at the hour, burnished yet softly surfaced; yielded, shut luxuriously into the car, with Gillian at the wheel. And there she would wait with the unconsciousness of invisibility, flawless like a candle in a dust-and-silver-colored lantern, until you had scamped up some sort of dramatization of inevitability in your joining her. (288)

Here, Austin reveals Eudora's penchant for driving through the country, and compares the associative map-making that occurs in driving the roads of a region with a network of electric light, all the while describing Eudora's beauty as "flawless like a

candle in a dust-and-silver-colored lantern” again mixing a steeled, mechanical element with the natural element of dust. Eudora’s character, I might here emphasize, is meant to be partly satirical. Austin occasionally uses her as means of criticizing Easterners (like Mabel Dodge Luhan) who, unlike Austin, spent only compressed amounts of time in the Southwest, and never truly came to know it.

The drives Gard takes with Eudora create associations with the land in a system compared to an electrical network. This is a simile which Austin would later draw upon in her 1934 essay, “Regionalism in American Fiction” where she criticizes non-local Americans’ touristic approach to seeing the Southwestern region:

Time is the essence of the undertaking, time to live into the land and absorb it; still more time to cure the reading public of its preference for something less than the proverbial bird’s eye view of the American scene, what you might call an automobile eye view, something slithering and blurred, nothing so sharply discriminated that it arrests the speed-numbed mind to understand, characters like garish gas stations picked out with electric lights. (Blackburn and Nelson, 78)

Yet, as Betsy Klimasmith notes, Austin herself was indebted to automobile travel in the Southwest, (she took several tours with drivers in New Mexico and Arizona which allowed her see so much of the country that was inaccessible by foot, especially as a woman), and this combination of indebtedness and disdain for the brevity of sight that the speed of automobiles limited one to, creates a certain ambivalence towards the car in her work (63). Klimasmith focuses her study on Austin’s *The Land of Journey’s Ending* (*LOJE*), another prose work set largely in New Mexico, and one of her main arguments for Austin’s “uneasiness” about the car as a means of learning the landscape is contingent upon the suspicious and overt absence of automobiles in the book (65). As I have

demonstrated, this does not hold true in *Starry Adventure*, where scenes of Gard in cars abound. Klimasmith argues that for Austin, the car denies the “self-knowledge and imaginative power” that are meant to “counteract the blurred vision and decentered self that Austin associates with modernity” (58). However, in *Starry Adventure*, the car, in the right hands, becomes a cultural tool that extends the self-knowledge which subsequently illuminates the landscape, that “sure knowledge of the country and your machine” Gard mentions during his rescue of Eudora (275).

While Klimasmith raises the question of what an automobile’s eye-view might mean for Austin’s personal knowledge of the land, she brings to focus a map, included in the beginning of *LOJE*, which offers a strangely fluid and personal sense of space rendered illegible to a formal geographer. As Klimasmith writes:

Austin’s selection of features blurs history in space, forcing the disoriented reader to understand the Southwest through her paradigms of place. Austin’s erasure of [. . .] familiar landmarks makes entering into this space difficult, if not impossible, without a guide. (56)

The map features landmarks that come to represent Austin’s own understanding of the place: sacred mountains, pueblos, natural features and historical travel routes. This map represents a personalized vision of space, in which time and geography are essentially fluid, and Austin’s own disparate regional proclivities are collaged together to form a space without any temporal or social referents that would allow a contemporary traveler to locate themselves.

While she gives the reader a Scale of Miles in the left corner, one gets the sense that Austin intended this to convey the epic scope of certain landmarks rather than to give

true measurements of how far one “place” is from another. There are no roads, railroads, or state or national borders on the map. The document should be read not as a uniform touristic guide of the American region, but rather as a sort of infographic of Southwest’s optic of enchantment; the map details instead the potential awe imbued in the landmarks, sacred sites, and historical remnants that await a viewer willing to engage on a deeply personal level with the land.

One comparison to Austin’s map or her descriptions of New Mexico “mapping” in *Starry Adventure* (we have already seen the young Gard and his sister “mapping” their understanding of New Mexico, see my Chapter 2, page 15), is a piece by the avant-garde painter Stuart Davis, entitled “Still Life with Map” painted in New Mexico in 1923. Here, Davis creates his own personal space of New Mexico, which one critic takes as memorializing his own five-month trip through the region, formed in a synthetic collage of a map, a saw, a snowcapped mountain, an Indian blanket, and a can of *frijoles* arranged two-dimensionally on a rectangular canvas (Neff, 156). This painting represents place as a personal concept- an expression of the subjective amalgamation of objects, memories, views, and spatial and temporal navigations which make up the consciousness of a place. Gard too, we remember, built New Mexico up in his mind as a “warm, personal” space, comprised of his own memories (his own toiling on the land) formal visions (the shapes and colors of the mountains), and active perceptions of living phenomena (the sound, light, and color of the creeks and local flora).

Jonathan Crary writes of this dislocating blur of interior and exterior as a distinct response to changes in modern vision:

Modernity [. . .] coincides with the collapse of classical modes of vision and their stable space of representations. Instead, observation is increasingly a question of equivalent sensations and stimuli that have no reference to spatial location. What begins in the 1820s and 1830s is a repositioning of the observer, outside of the fixed relations of interior/exterior [. . .] and into an undemarcated terrain on which the distinction between internal sensation and external signs is irrevocably blurred. (24)

Considering the new inescapability of uniform, publicly controlled systems in the realms of lighting, time and space, it is understandable how appealing a personal appropriation of these experiences might be to the avant-garde. The site of the subjective body coming to determine all sites of space once perceived as existing autonomously of perception is consciousness that provides a unique understanding of cultural and political determinations of New Mexico's desert space. Thus, we come to understand that it is this necessary subjectivity of vision that allows for a reconstitution of New Mexico as a malleable entity which would support new concepts of social order. The anthropologist Sylvia Rodriguez argues that for the avant-garde of 1920s, northern New Mexico was constructed into a "thirdspace" of "modernist utopian longing" which would satisfy the avant-garde desires for a new society free from their interpretations of an inimical modern America: lackluster secularity, social rigidity, political conservatism, and capitalist monoculture (380).²⁹ Thirdspace is a term Rodriguez takes from the urban theorist Edward Soja, who defines the term as most simply being at once real and imagined, a space in which contradictory and disparate things merge through the

²⁹ For a full treatment of the social and political hopes that comprised the longed-for "utopia" of the New Mexican avant-garde, refer to Lois Palken Rudnick's *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and American Counter Culture* (U of New Mexico P, 1996).

subjective powers of imagination and the objective powers of observation, Soja describes the concept as a space where

everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history (57).

In her reading of the concept, Sylvia Rodriguez focuses on Mabel's house, which she argues was strategically and symbolically located in a space that "became a center for looking both ways" (it had windows facing the both the Taos Pueblo and its artistically-beloved churches and windows facing the sacred eponymous mountain). We might recall Georgia O'Keeffe's 1929 painting *Blue Cross with Stars* which she described as a fictitious overlaying of cardinally opposite views. This method of "looking both ways" created a subjective, imagined vision of a space, in which, Rodriguez argues, the social agenda of the avant-garde, which sought to affirm beliefs of a primitive spirituality arising from the land, coerced the physical realities of the tangible northern and southern views into one fictitious space.

The creation of a subjective "thirdspace" in New Mexico was something Austin took part in. She championed the New Mexican desert and its visual and spiritual enchantments for her own social agenda, which was to affirm the individuality, independence, and natural and spiritual prowess of women. In her autobiography *Earth Horizon*, she wrote that New Mexico was a place, unlike masculine New York where she could establish herself as a woman: "I could be useful here; and felt I could get back a consideration from the public that would in a measure make up for the loss of certified

ladyhood” (354). She would write in a 1918 article that “the world is really a very feminine place, a mother’s place, conceptive, brooding, nourishing; a place of infinite patience and infinite elusiveness” (Austin in Ellis, 45). This feminine world she describes would be found in New Mexico, a place she has Gard describe, we remember, as having “the noble curves, the brooding quite of maternity” (*Starry Adventure*, 277). Ultimately, New Mexico was a place for creative vision, which Austin believed to be essential in establishing a new social concept (as the epigraph of this chapter suggests). Just as Gard comes to see more deeply the true nature of New Mexico through formal painting lessons with Mr. Phipps and the abstract patterns on native American pottery, so he is able to support a new society, in which marriage is egalitarian, sex is freeing, and divorce is not a sin; in which Hispanic Penitentes, Pueblo peoples, Protestant transplants, and Anglo bohemians can coexist in harmony; and in which new concepts of time, space and light can re-affirm the power of the individual despite the uniform industrial control of the masses.

3.3 Conclusion

In 1930, Carey McWilliams wrote a treatise on New Regionalism, which he dedicated to Mary Austin. McWilliams, inspired by the writings of American folklorist B.A. Botkin, credits the New Regionalism as moving past the reportorial or photographic qualities of local color fiction and in turn embracing the subliminal qualities that he associates with the formation of a new kind of nationalism. In a sense, he champions a *personal* sense of nationalism, challenging the uniformity of public life with a new form of universality made up of the individual cultures and locales of the country. Narratives

of the unique experience of region could be elevated to become a national sum of the parts, and therefore would convey a shared yet multivalent humanity. He writes:

[The New Regionalism] is neither popular nor exclusive but well rounded. In its native symbolism and imagery it achieves universality through simplicity. [. . .] It unites folk-lore and literature by setting scholars and artists to work upon an oral tradition. It is thus creating a genuine American Myth and is fertilizing the soil for the future American saga and epic (18).

McWilliams' criticism marks a distinction in the efforts of 1920s Santa Fe and Taos writers and artists. Unlike the preceding generation of Anglo artists in New Mexico, the Taos First Painters, a small group of men in the early 1900s who painted mostly Indian scenes in an Orientalized form of documentary naturalism (what McWilliams would deem "local color") the New Regionalism that Austin and friends were aiming for was the expressive and universal sense of place. McWilliams seems to channel Austin exactly when he writes "The artist comes to view his environment not as an indifferent and apathetic locality against which he must revolt and ultimately escape from, but as the 'common man mother;' this beautiful and mystic earth" (34).

In addition to a lengthy advocacy of New Mexico as the epicenter of this New Regionalism, McWilliams also mentions a poetry collection of California writers, whose introduction was written by the poet Genevieve Taggard. Taggard writes eloquently on the distinctions between the old style of regionalism and the new, and her introduction gets to a larger sense of what this new shift in regionalist literature symbolizes. She writes, "There has never been a poem written to a eucalyptus tree. There could not be, until this special tree had gone into the experience of many people so long and so deeply that when a poet comes to write of it he has no sense of its novelty, but only the feeling of

its everlasting uniqueness” (McWilliams, 33). Here Taggard is voicing, in quite an Austinian manner, the ecological feeling of home. By 1930, America was (owing, certainly, to a long period of colonial violence and displacement) far more than the Europeanized fringe of Eastern seaboard. With the advents of the railroad, the automobile and subsequent new roads and bridges, the Southwest was newly accessible, and therefore familiarity with its nature, its respective eucalyptus tree, was a real possibility.

The modern politics of vision, which pitted the individual against the state, parallels the main tenet of regionalism – in which a personal vision and expression of one’s country came against a uniform, public control of art, opinion, and letters in new debates over what constitutes authentic culture. The optics of enchantment were a way of asserting that personal, regional vision. The wondrous unique qualities of land, light and spirit that make up the avant-garde New Mexican desert were imbibed and digested, perceived and conceived, in the individual minds of Gard, of Austin, of the artists Marin and Hartley, Davis and O’Keeffe, Strand and Adams, and the ineffable moment of perception, the act of subjective viewing, became their ultimate subject.

What does it mean to be “enchanted?” Philosophers like Jane Bennett have defined the feeling by breaking it down into stages, as a psychologist might do with the manifestation of grief. Yet, while enchantment might be an experience that is highly personal, the form I am concerned with here is ultimately a kind of shared cultural moment, dependent upon the specificities of life and vision in this nation during the years leading up to and following the first World War. New Mexico, today the official “Land of Enchantment,” is a place that offered sights to seekers.

Luhan and Adams and Lawrence and O’Keefe and Hartley all described New Mexico as a place that essentially “felt right” in a way that was, as Gard noted in the novel, not worth explaining to others. If you didn’t get that feeling yourself in the surrounding country right away, then you wouldn’t be able to be told anything about it. Yet Austin understood that this enchantment, this visual and spiritual experience, was comprised of distinct elements, and while the feeling that results in any human being after seeing the play of New Mexican light might be difficult to describe, the attempt at expressing it might save enchantment from disappearing from the modern American experience altogether. It was important, in Austin’s mind, to try and wade through the flood of feeling to get to the specific spiritual, cultural, natural, historical and national yearnings of her contemporaries without dispelling of the very mystery and ambiguity that protect it. Enchantment was made up of what was essential, organic, and authentic in a place, in a culture, or in a practice, and so the optic of enchantment in *Starry Adventure* is a form of preservation, and a form of ritual. Her dedication to observation and to optically understanding phenomena, and her perseverance in describing these things stem from a desire to preserve, and this same dedication becomes a sort of sacred spiritual duty – repetitious, diligent, and fraught with meaning and emotion. To read *Starry Adventure* is to become enchanted, not so much by the spell of the plot or the brilliance of the prose, but rather by Austin’s vision of the spirit of place.

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