

“And a man-sized job to conquer her’: Exploitation of Women and Land in Mary Austin’s  
*Cactus Thorn*

Mary Austin’s *Cactus Thorn* demonstrates many attributes of transregional literature, in that it moves across spatial and generic boundaries. Its climax presents another transregional moment; in it, protagonist Grant Arliss is stabbed to death by Dulcie Adelaid Vallodón after he reveals his recent engagement to another woman, Alida Rittenhouse. Although some—particularly my undergraduate students—dismiss Dulcie’s actions as the crime of a jilted lover, she becomes a Western hero through sanctioned violence, because she recognizes the ways in which Arliss has exploited her politically and sexually. To understand this conclusion, readers must investigate how Dulcie becomes the desert’s avatar through Austin’s subversive use of land-as-female metaphors. Additionally, the novella encourages readers to compare the two women in Arliss’ life. Even though Alida and Dulcie never meet in the novella, discussing them within their regional positions creates another transregional moment, and demonstrates how the exploitation of women and land becomes a gendered discourse. Acknowledging the ways in which Austin criticizes land-as-female metaphors ultimately changes Dulcie’s final act within the novella, and makes her a Western hero.

For this presentation, I will limit the critical framework to a discussion of how ecofeminist theorists have raised questions about land-as-female metaphors, and how gendered lands enter into the Western. Feminized land constitutes a familiar Western convention, although it is not exclusive to the genre. Rather, the Western engages with a long standing metaphor. Annette Kolodny addresses the psychological problems within land-as-female comparisons. She argues, “Implicit in the metaphor of the land-as-woman [is] both the regressive pull of maternal containment *and* the seductive invitation to sexual assertion: if the Mother demands passivity,

and threatens regression, the Virgin apparently invites sexual assertion and awaits impregnation” (67). Regardless of intentions, Kolodny contends the metaphor simultaneously invites maternal and sexual desires. Furthermore, Carolyn Merchant tracks how American literature and art have rendered natural spaces feminine. Nature becomes Eve to the nation’s American Adam. Merchant notes a few permutations in this metaphor: Eve as virgin land, as fallen land, and as fruitful garden (117). In each instance, literature, history, and art promote images in which men need to improve the land. However, these metaphors often become fraught with rhetorical and ethical problems. Gender politics becomes the most pertinent issue, as these metaphors have “negative sexual, acquisitive, and exploitative connotations” (Merchant 119). While land-as-female metaphors may seem innocuous, the above mentioned connotations combine with “ethical imperatives” and “permissive ideologies” to create stories and myths which implicitly or explicitly call for the exploitation of land and women (Merchant 124).

Land-as-female metaphors find themselves within cultural promotion of the American West and the Western genre. Merchant notes, “the idea of an Edenic fruitful, female land—waiting to be seduced, plowed, planted, and watered by male ingenuity—gripped the imaginations of settlers and promoters of the American West” (125). Such promotion diminishes the roles that women played in the colonization project,<sup>1</sup> and paves the way for the Western’s masculinizing myth.<sup>2</sup> In removing women from the myth, the western United States becomes the “West,” a recently colonized space that links conquest and settlement to male bodies and psyches. In the West, men enter a physical place and metaphysical space in which they can prove masculine virility. Jane Tompkins designates both the location and work as “expand[ing] [men’s] meanings, endow[ing] them with an overriding purpose, and fill[ing] them with excitement” (12). Whether it is a gunfight, breaking broncos, ranching, pocket mining, killing Injuns, etc., the

“West” provides tests of virility through dominance. The myth provides a strenuous cure through re-educating nineteenth-century men how to be manly. In each example, the masculinized West codifies certain gender expectations and encourages men to act accordingly. It becomes a nostalgically remembered space of male conquest and healing: it is into this space that Grant Arliss desires healing.

Mary Austin’s *Cactus Thorn* evokes the mythic narrative within the Western—the young man in need of the West’s restorative space—before Austin undercuts it. It provides sex, murder, and discussions of land, albeit in ways that questions the Western’s use of land-as-female metaphors. Melody Graulich notes, “[the novella] is daring in its ironic treatment of male attitudes and its willingness to express a uniquely female way of seeing” (Afterword, 118). Austin provides this ironic treatment, because she has chosen an unscrupulous male protagonist whom readers will follow. (As such, I will most likely affect my presentation of Arliss’ thoughts.) Arliss comes West to recuperate and compose his political program. While waiting for a train to Los Angeles, he meets Dulcie Adelaid Vallódon, and enacts the Western myth.

In Dulcie’s brown body, Arliss identifies his masculine test, because Dulcie represents the desert and femininity. Arliss’ first observations of Dulcie cannot separate the Western woman from the surrounding desert. Shortly after arriving in “the naked glare of a land whose very shadow looked rusted by the sun, he could scarcely take her in, lovely as she was, as a separate item of the landscape” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 3). The sun’s glare temporarily distracts his male gaze, but Arliss immediately connects woman to land. He further conflates Dulcie with the desert, as having “assembled herself from the tawny earth and the hot sand” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 4). Dulcie’s body becomes an object of desire and fulfillment.

Another character, mining engineer and former college mate Fernald, explicitly links the land to femininity, and articulates why Arliss' pursuit of Dulcie becomes imperial. In discussing the land, the miner dismisses the desert's appeal to woman: the land cannot offer civilization to the fairer sex. But Fernald sees the land's appeal to men:

“For me, I'll take the open country,” Fernald said, looking sideways as men will, more shy of the spiritual aspects of procreation than of its vulgarities. “'S a great country,” he said, letting his eyes wander from the high window to round-bosomed hills and the cradling dip of the land seaward. “A man-size job to conquer her ... make her bear ... great civilizations...” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 24)

Fernald's description of the desert highlights its feminine qualities. The description of “round-bosomed hills” suggests the dual nature of the land being nurturing and sexually alluring. “The cradling dip” suggests reproductive organs imagined onto the land. But this metaphoric description excludes an equal balance in the relationship. Men must conquer the land; make the land bear “great civilizations.” The female land—and by extension women—is silenced and made an unequal partner.

Arliss' sexual conquest becomes imperial, because Dulcie is directly tied to the land and its inhabitants. Although Arliss does not express the same sentiments as Fernald, the narrative divulges a similar taste in the politician's thoughts. He expresses displeasure in women who “wanted something in exchange; they wanted marriage, or they wanted an opportunity to express themselves in life” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 20). Arliss' ideal woman provides him with sex and companionship, but she must remain in the background. Dulcie becomes a sexual object that Arliss takes. Moreover, the narrative hints that Dulcie's hereditary background makes her representative. Dulcie reveals her mother was Southern—meaning that she is of Mexican

descent—and her father’s name was Kennedy (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 34).<sup>3</sup> Her long standing friendship with Indian George and Catameneda constitute a third important culture to the southwest; through her relationship with the Paiutes, Dulcie receives an indigenous knowledge of the desert. Arliss’ handling of the relationship is motivated by his desire for Dulcie without ramification. She is supposed to remain out west when Arliss returns home.

Arliss’ relationship is imperial on a political level as well, because he directly connects political passion with sexual companionship. Graulich identifies Arliss’ intentions as satirical because he believes sex will cure his political impotence.<sup>4</sup> Having come to the desert a broken man, Arliss assumes that “if only he could find a woman who could be counted on to kindle a flame and keep it going, he might, at that glow, warm the slowly chilling reaches of his intellect and his ambition” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 13). He uses similar language in discussing his political career: “What Arliss wanted was to be filled again, to be warmed and quickened, to be raised to the level of personal competency from which he could again command his own career” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 19-20). In both quotes, Arliss’ relationship demands a passive role from the feminine. What she provides, however, conflates maternal and sexual desires: he wants to be both comfortably warm and intimately quickened. The novella quickly moves from Arliss and Dulcie’s heavily implied first sexual encounter to Arliss discovering his mind readied to write his political platform (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 53). Furthermore, “Arliss’s western “healing” comes at the expense of the West” (Graulich, “Walking Off” 274). Arliss lifts his political thought from Dulcie, “a symbolic mining of the West” (Graulich, “Walking Off” 274). As Dulcie educates him on indigenous concepts of Medicine and the ecological “laws of the desert,” he in turn delivers these thoughts as individual rights and “democracy in action.” And so Arliss leaves the

West, his political career refueled from his experiences with Dulcie as well as the knowledge he has grafted from her.

With Dulcie seemingly left in the southwestern desert, Arliss turns his attention to another woman, Alida Rittenhouse. This move to another woman takes on transregional qualities, because Alida comes to represent an Eastern political landscape. The daughter of a powerful senator, she can ensure Arliss' political career through marriage. Graulich comments that "Alida is the medium of exchange that binds the two men together, and she will serve Arliss as she served her father," from the background ("Walking Off" 277). Arliss will use Alida as he has used Dulcie, although for different purposes. He has gained an ally in her father: Alida herself is excused from the political arena. Instead, as Austin writes:

If he married her, and by Thanksgiving time Arliss knew that he was looking forward to marrying her not only as an excellent thing to do for himself but as an exquisite and informing experience, she would be a perpetual fire in the presence of which he would never have any occasion to think of the chemistry or materials of combustion. (*Cactus Thorn*, 82)

Again, Arliss reduces a woman to commodities: he will mine her political connections and body for fuel. Alida will provide him with domestic comforts, sexual completion, and a racially appropriate marriage. Alida is white. With her provincial ways and brown skin, Dulcie is a politically conscious outlier that Arliss must silence.

But Arliss' decision to marry another only informs Dulcie's actions in the novella's ending to a certain extent. Arliss' vehement dismissal of Dulcie—he calls her a hussy—demonstrates sexual and political exploitation. When Arliss rejects her, Dulcie comes to understand their relationship; she declares "I was just used—exploited—in the eternal war—the

war between men and women” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 98). Dulcie’s use of “exploited” takes on layers when readers consider all that Dulcie represents and all that Arliss took from her. Arliss views the relationship through the cultural lens of masculine dominance. Similar to the land, Arliss believes he can have the female representative with no commitment. Dulcie, however, offers a counternarrative that reveals Arliss’ duplicity. Describing her relationship with Arliss, she says, “I knew it was right for me to have you. I could make you feel things that were not about me. I could make you feel stronger and clearer about things that had nothing to do with me. I thought it was right for *you* to have me, because you could do things *with* me that you couldn’t do without” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 73). In her narrative, Dulcie willingly gives herself to Arliss for a larger purpose. Where other men—including her estranged husband—only feel, Dulcie grants her body and knowledge to Arliss so he can accomplish a great work. Given the above passage’s context<sup>5</sup> and the novella’s female-as-land metaphor, Dulcie and the desert become interchangeable in this passage. Dulcie has given Arliss access to the desert—knowledge about its ecological and cosmological constructs. He may use this knowledge to act. However, his action is conditional; he must act *with* Dulcie. This returns to an equal partnership which Arliss rejects.

Dulcie enacts a revenge for femininity and the land she represents when she murders Arliss with her dagger. Dulcie justifies the murder, seeing the violence as self-defense. In an earlier conversation that foreshadows the murder, Dulcie confirms her thoughts. “I thought I could understand that, too, about killing. . . . It would be self-defense. When people are tortured more than they can bear,” she tells Arliss, “if I had known what I was doing, he’d have the *right*” (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 86). It is self-defense if the perpetrator has caused more damage than the victim can bear. Arliss’ two-fold guilt encompasses several forms of exploitation. He

has used Dulcie for sexual gratification, and has left her to advance his career. Doing so implicates him with political misconduct. Arliss has appropriated Dulcie's desert ideology to promote a political ethics that he does not follow. He presumes that time and distance preclude him from culpability. He assumes he has control of the situation. Exploited and turned away, Dulcie murders the exploiter, her action affirming her role as desert avatar. Her mode of murder is intimate and subversive. Unlike the traditional Western which often ends with a gun battle, Dulcie uses a dagger—the cactus thorn: this confirms her relationship to her land and its people. It provides the vengeance which the novella has foreshadowed throughout. She provides balance with her act, before she returns to heal in the newly purged Western region.

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<sup>1</sup> Although they are largely excluded from Westerns, female European settlers often participated in colonial projects through cultural acclimation. Where men are depicted as engaging in explicit physical oppression, women engaged in cultural and religious genocide of indigenous people. See Sandy Grande's *Red Pedagogy*.

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<sup>2</sup> Merchant notices this erasure of women's presence from the myth when she writes, "The realities of living in the West belie the Edenic promotions. Women labored on the land and in the home with backbreaking work as intense as that of men" (126).

<sup>3</sup> Graulich affirms that "[Dulcie's] indeterminate but certainly mixed racial background further embodies the multiracial, multicultural West that Austin so valued" ("Walking Off" 275).

<sup>4</sup> Graulich puns on Kolodny's work, stating "Arless has a lay with the land" ("Walking Off" 274).

<sup>5</sup> The passage occurs as Dulcie reveals her relationship to her husband, a fact that she did not reveal to Arless. The preceding discussion involves Dulcie relating an experience with her husband. Coming upon some mountain sheep, Dulcie directs his attention to the herd. Her husband takes a shot at the sheep "from behind [Dulcie's] skirt," suggesting a lack of respect for the desert. Dulcie's final thought, "I was never *real* to him" works within the ambiguity (Austin, *Cactus Thorn* 73). The husband's lack of respect for the land and its creatures extends to his actions with their human avatar.