3 Mary Austin's proto-ecofeminist land ethic in *The Ford* (1917) and the Owens Valley water controversy

Emine Geçgil

Ecofeminism aims to establish a community ecology that is sustainable for both human and nonhuman beings, deconstructing the oppressor/oppressed identities that are prevalent in patriarchal society. Anticipating this proposition of ecofeminism, Mary Austin, a woman who became everything—a nature writer, a playwright, a poet, a short-story writer, a novelist, as well as a social activist—inspired many other women of her generation as well as those in the contemporary world, laying the foundations of ecofeminism. She rejected the nineteenth-century middle-class conventions of True Womanhood and embraced the twentieth-century New Womanhood, feminism, and environmentalism, serving as a link between the centuries. She embroiled herself in activism for the Owens Valley water during the California Water Wars (1902–07), a series of controversies between the city of Los Angeles and the farmers of the valley about the acquisition of water rights of Owens Valley. With a view to portraying such an eventful chapter in American history and disseminating her ecofeminist land ethic, Austin wrote her 1917 novel *The Ford*, blending her female identity as an activist with her literary talents. As a proto-ecofeminist, she depicts in *The Ford* how land speculation deprives people of their most essential need, water.¹ Suggesting a harmonious relationship between rivers and their beneficiaries, she questions ownership to the land—as she criticizes the patriarchal hegemony over women—and proposes to utilize rivers to make a living, yet being aware of the possibilities and limits of the landscape. All in all, with *The Ford*, she hints at what occurs when this fragile understanding is broken, and how the abuse of the river leads to the destruction of ecological parameters.

Born in 1868 in Carlinville, Illinois, as Mary Hunter, Mary Austin (1868–1934) graduated from college in 1888. Her mother, a widowed woman, decided to move her family to the West, where they established a homestead in the San Joaquin Valley in California. John P. O'Grady (1993, 123–125) views Mary Austin as a “reluctant pilgrim,” who moved from a Midwestern town to the Southwest with her mother and brother against her will. The wild western wilderness, for her, was nothing like the green landscapes of the East, and definitely contradicted the virtues of the Cult of True Womanhood—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Austin took the opportunity to design her own fate, which opposed social norms. In 1891, she married Stafford Wallace Austin, a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, and lived in Inyo and

Independent Counties. She poured her love and care for the land and its people into *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), a collection of short essays that discusses the Mojave Desert and its importance to indigenous peoples. Evoking an earlier version of ecofeminist spirituality, she gave life to the desert, viewing it as feminine, seductive, and bountiful, while calling for environmental conservation and the cultural preservation of the Indian tribes—since they cared most for the land.

Austin and her husband, who was a land registrar for the Reclamation Bureau between 1905 and 1906, struggled for the waters of Owens Valley. During the battle, private negotiations with the wealthy local landowners and officials representing the city of Los Angeles resulted in the diversion of the region's waters to Los Angeles at the expense of its ecosystem (Gabrielson 2006, 651). Her activism during this controversy was to comprise the raw material for her 1917 novel *The Ford*. Disappointed by the event, she left Owens Valley, divorced her husband, institutionalized her mentally-retarded daughter, and moved to Carmel, California, where she joined a writers' community that included Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, and Bret Hart (Goodman and Dawson 2008, 21). She then lived in New York, representing the West in literary circles. During this period, Austin participated in the women's suffrage by writing on social and political issues, including *The Young Woman Citizen* (1918) and "Sex Emancipation through War" (1918). Austin left New York for New Mexico, where she became more involved in activism for the rights of indigenous peoples as well as environmental issues. Austin spent her last years in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and died in 1934.

In her words, Austin was a "woman alone" (Wynn 1937, 245). She always condemned the social hypocrisy which denied her the right to express her intellectual and artistic talents in her works, especially in *A Woman of Genius* (1912), her most outspokenly feminist novel, which is based on her own life experiences. Austin was regarded as eccentric by her neighbors in Independence because of her outdoor explorations (Goodman and Dawson 2008, 51) and her only friends were the indigenous people in the desert, cowboys, and Basque sheepherders (11). As Heike Schaefer (2004, 53) conveys, Austin's mother told her that her fascination with nature was unfeminine, and that she should adopt a ladylike appreciation of the environment so that her male companions would continue to admire her. Likewise, in her 1932 autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, Austin (2007, 112) remembers her mother saying that "You must not quote, especially poetry and Thoreau. An occasional reference to Burroughs² was permissible, but not Thoreau" since knowledge of the latter was deemed to be too deep, intellectual, and masculine. As Dudley Wynn (1937, 245) states, Austin was misunderstood by her own family simply because she wished to be judged by her intrinsic character and "not by what she could make some man feel."

Nancy Newhall, a conservationist writer and friend to Austin, called her "a strange woman, who had the courage to walk alone" (Wilson 1997, 60). She wanted to be like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, who walked away, and wandered west to follow their wild dreams. However, society was not ready to understand her meanderings, or her attempt to reflect the female experience in nature. Discouraged by her mother, neglected by her husband, and overwhelmed

with the responsibility of a mentally handicapped child (O'Grady 1993, 126), Austin nevertheless managed to realize her literary ambitions. Whether romanticizing the desert as she did in her nonfiction *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) or providing realistic depictions of the land and its people in her short story collection *Lost Borders* (1909), or her novels *The Flock* (1906), which was praised by Theodore Roosevelt as an exposé on the shepherding industry, and *The Ford* (1917), Austin, above all, embraced her identity as a regionalist nature writer.

For Austin, nature was home. There was no distinction between nature and the self; indoors and outdoors; private home and public environment (Green 2001, 145). Within this regard, as a proto-ecofeminist, she did not "love" nature because she was a "natural caregiver." Rather, she "loved" nature because she felt more independent exploring the outdoors: it gave her the freedom to escape biologically determined gender roles. She did not even endeavor to balance her domestic responsibilities and field work, and completely ignored her household chores. Her neighbors reported that she was so devoted to writing that the dirty dishes would pile high (Goodman and Dawson 2008, 19). In fact, Austin can be seen as a counterfigure to progressive conservationist clubwomen who dedicated themselves to the conservation of the home, motherhood, and nature (Blend 1988, 14). However, it was not because she did not believe in the importance of grassroots organizations and collective action. Rather, she rejected their domestic world, seeking refuge in the desert and identifying herself with the land. Austin challenged the white, hegemonic male view of the land, which assumed that water resources, as well as forests and minerals, were renewable and could never be depleted (Rudnick 1987, 12). She articulated that there are limits to all resources, reminding readers of the climactic features of the Southwest and how fragile they are. Since there are limits to natural resources, she believed, there had to be limits to human consumption and greed. Not only did she voice people's concerns about the land and the depletion of resources, but by battling against social restrictions that inhibited women with talent, she also provided readers with an early example of *écriture féminine*.

As also conveyed by Karl Zuelke in this volume (p. 115), women and indigenous peoples are attributed the same characteristics as nature in certain ways, which brings essentialist tropes into play. Austin was opposed to such dualistic thinking, and dedicated her life to the indigenous peoples of the land, and as Louis Rudnick (1987, 16) suggests, adopted the role of a medicine woman, hoping to "transform her fellow Anglo-Americans' relationship with the land and its indigenous peoples." She had a clear mission to fulfill. Although Austin rejected many aspects of the Progressive Movement—particularly those denying women the public sphere and imposing the superiority of the white race over indigenous peoples—her efforts to improve the lives of the underprivileged indigenous peoples in California and New Mexico, and her battle against the municipal authorities that robbed these peoples of their lands and water, make Austin a progressive social activist.

The western landscape was definitely important in shaping Austin's philosophy. As Teresa S. Neal (2006, 96) claims, women writers in the East were more

accepted by the patriarchy because they reinforced sentimental domesticity and municipal housekeeping. Moreover, they asserted themselves as New Women later than western women. In the West, however, women like Austin suffered less from social conventions than those in the East because the West was not bound by the same rules and was far more flexible (70). In her writing, Austin rejected the concept of domesticity that was imposed by patriarchal white Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle-class men. She equated the home with nature, working to protect it from being abused. As Rudnick (1987, 26) conveys, what she rejected was a “sentimental domesticity” that “mythologize[d] the entire natural world.” Throughout her life, she favored the “Folk.” As Wynn (1937, 245) states,

She wanted to belong, to be one of a race, to have a home, to express herself and be understood. But she was not home in [an] America which emphasized a repressive morality, worshipped bigness, and divorced its living from its way of getting a living.

Austin found her home outdoors, among indigenous peoples who “were still immune to the evils of the dominant American culture.” For them, Austin imagined a “pastoral paradise” of small communities which could support themselves, and emphasized the significance of native peoples, whom she believed cared for the land and respected natural resources (Blend 1988, 17). While reinterpreting the concept of home, she formulated an environmental ethic that influenced her Owens Valley battle. In today’s contemporary terms, as Rudnick suggests, she offered a “bioregionalist thinking” (1987, 26). Namely, she found local solutions to social and economic problems by rejecting federal intervention schemes.

The Owens Valley water controversy and *The Ford*

Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson (2008, 50) argue that throughout the history of the United States, the West was defined in terms of rainfall and the damming and diversion of rivers because aridity and a lack of water prevented the development of the landscape. While conservationist women—affiliates of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC)—were struggling in the East to acquire clean water for healthy homes and children, Mary Austin in the West took up water conservation as a cause to protect the small communities that depended on water for irrigation purposes. In *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin (1988, 7) observes the delicate relationship between the geography and the inhabitants of the valley, and how the plants, wildlife, and people depended on water. Obviously, the desert is a place where

not the law, but the land sets the limit: ... Since this is a hill country one expects to find springs, but not to depend upon them; for when found they are often brackish and unwholesome, or maddening, slow dribbles in a thirsty soil.

She further states that “The desert floras shame us with their cheerful adaptations to the seasonal limitations ... One hopes the land may breed like qualities in her human offspring, not tritely to ‘try,’ but to do” (8).

Austin dedicated herself to the water issue after her husband, Wallace Stafford Austin, became a Land Registrar for the US Land Office in Independence. By the early twentieth century, Los Angeles had become an expanding metropolitan center, but its thirst for water had long remained an obstacle to its growth into a major city. Fred Eaton, the former mayor of Los Angeles, and William Mulholland, who served as the head of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, believed in realizing “Los Angeles’s Manifest Destiny” (Walton 1992, 59). They thought water could be diverted from the Owens Valley River to Los Angeles through the construction of a gravity-led aqueduct. On the other hand, the United States Bureau of Reclamation was planning a federal irrigation district to help the farmers of the Owens Valley by damming the river and allocating the stored water for agriculture (Cassuto 2001, 32). After all, as Samuel Hays (1999, 5) conveys, the conservation movement in the West was originally established to encourage the construction of reservoirs for agriculture, as federal administrators and political leaders were trying to find solutions to western economic growth and water development, so this project was well within its agenda. Owens Valley was a perfect fit for federal intervention because it had an underutilized river and a growing agricultural economy, both of which, if managed correctly, would add to the expansion of the West.

As conveyed by David Cassuto (2001, 33), a federal project to create a national reclamation district in the Owens Valley would obviously ruin Eaton’s and Mulholland’s plans. First, they tried to eliminate the Bureau of Reclamation. Eaton bribed the Bureau’s survey engineer, Joseph Lippincott, who served as a double agent to undermine federal plans. He acted as Eaton’s secret consultant, facilitating the acquisition of the valley’s water rights. Marc Reisner (1993, 78) in *Cadillac Desert* states that Eaton even posed as a cattle rancher, wandering among the people in the Owens Valley, talking them into selling their land. He was also buying options for the best water rights at a cheap rate in order to sell them to the city at inflated prices (Cassuto 2001, 33).

In 1905, a farm woman named Lesta V. Parker wrote a letter to President Roosevelt which summarized what was happening and explained her disappointment with the events. The letter provides insight into the dramatic effect the Los Angeles water scheme would create in Owens Valley:

Dear Friend

Look onto your map of California, along the eastern boundary south of Lake Tahoe and you will find a county named Inyo. Running into this county from Nevada through a small corner of Mono County you will see the Carson and Colorado railroad which after it enters Inyo follows along the Owens River until they both come to Owens Lake, an alkaline body of water. It is about this river I write to you.

This river after it leaves the narrow mountain canyon runs through a broad and fertile valley for 100 miles. The first 20 miles of which is all or

nearly so, in cultivation, further south ranches become more scattered. It has four prosperous towns.

Indeed the people are very proud of their little valley and what their hard labor has made it. The towns are all kept up by the surrounding farms. Alfalfa is the principle crop. The put up to from two to four ton per acre and it cost from \$1.25 to \$1.75 to put it up. And sell for \$4 to \$7 per ton so you see the county is very prosperous. As there is about 200,000 ton raised in the valley if not more every year. Cattle raising is great industry.

There never has been any capitalist or rich people come here until lately and all the farms of the Owens Valley show the hard labor and toil of people who came here without much more than their clothes. And many had few of them.

Now my real reason for wiring this is to tell you that some rich men got the government or "Uncle Sam" to hire a man named J.B. Lippincott to represent to the people that he was going to put in a large dam in what is known as Long Valley. But—Lo! and Behold! Imagine the shock the people felt when they learned when Uncle Sam was paying Mr. Lippincott he was a traitor to the people and was working for a millionaire company. The real reason for so much work was because a man named Eaton and a few more equally low, sneaking rich men wanted to get controlling interest of the water by buying out a few or all of those who owned much water and simply "freeze out" those who hadn't much and tell them to "Git."

Now as the President of the U.S. do you think that is right? And is there no way by which our dear valley and our homes can be saved? Is there no way by which 800 or 900 homes can be saved? Is there no way to keep the capitalist from forcing people to give up their water right and letting the now beautiful alfalfa fields dry up and return to a barren desert waist?

Is there no way to stop this thievery? As you have proven to be the president for the people and not the rich I, an old resident, who was raised here, appeal to you for help and Advice.

My husband and I within the last year have bought us a home and are paying for it in hard labor and economy. So I can tell you it will be hard to have those rich men say "stay there and starve" or "Go." Where if we keep the water in the valley it won't be only 3 years until the place will pay for itself.

So Help The People of Owens Valley!

I appeal to you in the name of the Flag. The Glorious Stars and Stripes.

Yours Unto Eternity,

Lesta V. Parker.

(Walton 1992, 147)

Other residents of the Owens Valley were also disillusioned when they learned they had indirectly sold their water rights to officials representing Los Angeles and not the federal government. Mary Austin, "the valley's literary light," in

Reisner's words (1993, 78) was also "convinced that the valley had died when it sold its first water right to Los Angeles." She was so aware of the entire scheme that Mulholland reportedly said "that woman is the only one who has brains enough to see where this is going" (79). Wary of human greed and the abuse of power, Austin opposed Roosevelt's justification of urban growth over the preservation of valley farmers (Blend 1988, 18). With her husband, she wrote letters to President Roosevelt, placing the blame on Eaton and Lippincott, and asking the federal government to investigate the scheme (Goodman and Dawson 2008, 54). They also participated in meetings to encourage valley residents to take collective action.

Valley residents were hopeful since they believed that Roosevelt, "the bugaboo of monopolists," would "never let the Owens Valley die for the sake of [wealthy landowners like] Henry Huntington, Harrison Grey Otis and their cronies in San Fernando Valley syndicate" (Reisner 1993, 78). However, this was not the case. The closing of the frontier revealed an important shift in policy. As conveyed by John Walton (1992, 194), while the American frontier benefited from federal aid to develop the West, the rise of Progressivism gave way to urbanization, and the federal government shifted its focus to urban development. As Douglas Brinkley (2009, 444) conveys, "if the western cities didn't have water, [Roosevelt] worried, they would perish, and their cities would become ghost towns." Roosevelt, "a progressive who believed in serving the largest number of constituents" (Goodman and Dawson 2008, 54), said "It's a hundred or thousand fold more important to state that this water is more valuable to the people of Los Angeles than to the Owens Valley" (Reisner 1993, 324). Eaton, Mulholland, and Lippincott lobbied the federal government to pursue the aqueduct project (Cassuto 2001, 33), and eventually their attempts proved successful. The federal irrigation project was cancelled and Congress passed the water diversion project from Owens Valley to Los Angeles. The Los Angeles-Owens River aqueduct was completed in 1913 and the valley turned into a desert, losing its ecologically important meadows and agricultural value.

Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy define ecofeminism as a

practical movement for social change arising out of the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. These struggles are waged against the "maldevelopment" and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism.

(1998, 2)

Anticipating Gaard and Murphy's definition of ecofeminism, Austin states in her essay "The American Form of the Novel," that the novel, as a form, should be concerned with human struggle (1996, 84–88). Written in 1917, *The Ford* adheres to this model, and is "an avatar of the regional conflict and of the unresolved political, philosophical and ethical issues underlying that conflict" (Cassuto 2001, 32). Specifically, it is a *bildungsroman* that provides an account

of the coming of age of the Brent family children, Kenneth and Anne, and their struggle with a wealthy local businessman, Timothy Rickart. Anne and Kenneth grow up in Las Palomitas, on their father's ranch in Tierra Longa, a fictional town based on Independence and Inyo counties where Austin had lived at the time of the controversy. The novel starts in Tierra Longa, where the family is about to lose their farm. After their father Stephen Brent loses Las Palomitas, they try to survive in the newly-founded oil town. As the years pass, Anne becomes a real estate agent and a powerful businesswoman, while her brother becomes an executive assistant to Timothy Rickart, the wealthy land owner and the father of his childhood friend Frank, whom Anne desperately loves. When Kenneth discovers Rickart's plan to divert the waters of Tierra Longa into San Francisco in cooperation with city officials, he quits his job, and with Anne's support tries to persuade people to take collective action. At the end of the novel, the water diversion project is cancelled. Half success and half failure, the struggle gives Kenneth a sense of himself as he finds true love and looks towards the future in a more optimistic way. From Anne, he learns to care for the land and its inhabitants and to accept the power of the New Woman. The struggle equips Anne with the skills to beat Rickart at his own game and gives her more independence to assert her identity as a New Woman. Obviously, *The Ford* is Austin's provocative attempt to "articulate a viable relationship between the acute ecological sensitivity of *The Land of Little Rain* and her equally acute awareness of the need for nonurban space to be recognized and reimagined as part of the landscape and capitalist modernity" (Raine 1999, 247), which are triangulated with the feminist arguments embodied in the text.

As Rudnick (1987, 11) conveys, Austin advocated a non-exploitative harmonious relationship with the land. In *The Land of Little Rain*, for example, Austin (1987, 90) conveys how water is important to the people of the valley, especially with respect to agriculture.

It is the proper destiny of every considerable stream in the west to become an irrigating ditch. It would seem the streams are willing. They go as far as they can, or dare, toward the tillable lands in their own boulder fenced gullies—but how much farther in the man-made waterways. It is difficult to come into intimate relations with appropriated waters; like very busy people they have no time to reveal themselves. One needs to have known an irrigating ditch when it was a brook, and to have lived by it, to mark the morning and evening tone of its crooning, rising and falling to the excess of snow water; to have watched far across the valley, south to the Eclipse and north to the Twisted Dyke, the shining wall of the village water gate; to see still blue herons stalking the little glinting weirs across the field.

In *The Ford*, Austin continues to stress the importance of water, suggesting a harmonious relationship between rivers and their beneficiaries. One can utilize rivers to make a living, yet one should know all the possibilities and limits of the landscape. In the novel, readers witness what occurs when this fragile

understanding is broken, and how the abuse of the river leads to the destruction of ecological parameters. The river that runs through Tierra Longa is

sift and full, beginning with the best intentions of turning mills or whirling dynamos, with the happiest possibilities of watering fields and nurturing orchards, but discouraged at last by the long neglect of man, becoming like all wasted things, a mere mud and malaria.

(34)

From the very beginning, readers sympathize with the landscape as it succumbs to human exploitation. Nature has long been sacrificed for utilitarianism, and Austin's narrative in *The Ford* is a reference to the general anthropocentric tendency of conservationists like Gifford Pinchot and Roosevelt, or women conservationist clubwomen, who believed that nature was valuable as long as it provided resources for the home and family (Alaimo 2000, 67).

During her life, Austin praised the persistence and perseverance of rural people. Yet, as an activist, she also criticizes their greed in *The Ford*: valley residents are delighted by the easy wealth that will come from selling the land and have no desire to wait for a federal irrigation project (Cassuto 2001, 33). What Austin condemns is the fact that dreams cannot be realized because of a lack of vision among ranchers, and because the people of Tierra Longa, like those of Owens Valley, are unable to unite under a single political cause. They do not take collective action because as Lem, Kenneth's friend, says: "There ain't all of us in Tierry Longway ever agreed about nothin' yet" (380). Although Anne dreams of an agrarian community of solidarity, in reality, the farmers are willing to abandon their land as soon as a good offer comes from the urban planners (Henderson 2003, 206). The farmers themselves are not as committed to the land as outsiders, probably because they know, first hand, its difficulties and the struggle required to live off it. Thus, urbanization seems unavoidable and is even embraced by rural people, which Austin found problematic. Although the Owens Valley controversy resulted in the victory of the state, capitalism, and urbanization, *The Ford* proposes hope. That the water diversion project is cancelled in the novel instills a sense of optimism—that there is a way out of every dilemma—even for contemporary environmentalists.

***The Ford* and Austin's proto-ecofeminist ideals**

For Austin, nature was a woman. In *The Ford*, through the eyes of her protagonist, she sees the land as a mistress:

For a man lives with his land as with a mistress, courting her, suiting himself to her humors, contriving as he can that her moods, her weathers shall drive for and not against him. And in time, he becomes himself subject to such shifts and seasons. He cannot handle himself; he is to be handled.

(384)

Stacy Alaimo (2000, 75) speculates that in seeing nature as a mistress, the proto-ecofeminist Austin draws the picture of the New Woman because, in her narrative, the land is not viewed as a mother within the patriarchal structure. Austin suggests that the wilderness is a feminine force, and that men must learn to reconcile with her. This reconciliation between man and nature can only be achieved through compromise between men and women; in other words, through an egalitarian social order (O'Grady 1993, 138).

In the novel, Austin objects to anthropocentric conventions by creating sexist male characters. Stephen Brent, Kenneth's and Anne's father, for instance, is willing to exploit the land and subordinate it to human desires. "Wherever the land flings us a handful of corn we run and scramble for it like beggars in the street. And she laughs—she laughs. I tell you, Burke, we've got to master her—we've got to compel her" (62). Such dualism is apparent in the twentieth-century British novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willows* (1926), which is analyzed in this volume by Julia Tofantšuk (p. 68). Warner also created sexist male characters who described the land "with possessive gestures."

The gendered aspect of oppressive attitude is definitely towards the river in *The Ford*, while it may be other nonhuman entities in other contexts. For instance, Nicole Anae's "Taking Mighty Strides across the World: Positioning Zora Neale Hurston in the Ecofeminist Tradition," which is presented in this volume, examines the relations between labor, power, and oppression within the framework of human-animal relations (p. 84).

Rudnick (1987, 11) contends that Austin views the land as "masterless," and asserts that the land should resist male domination. She rejects the androcentric approach, the "Judeo-Christian imprimatur that man must rule, tame and reform," because it corrupts ecological parameters, as seen with the Owens Valley controversy (Cassuto 2001, 43).

Although initially Kenneth, the son of the Brent Family, seems to be the protagonist of the novel, which narrates his coming-of-age, Austin deliberately undermines his position, and instead gives his sister, Anne Brent, more prominence throughout the plotline:

Anne was a business woman. She had the gift of detachment; she could buy land without wanting to work it; she could buy it with the distinct intention of unloading it on somebody else who believed himself elected to work it and was willing to pay handsomely for the privilege.

(178)

Neal (2006, 98) conveys that western women nature writers, like Austin, created strong-minded, independent female characters, who were outspoken and career-oriented. This analysis is particularly correct for Anne, who becomes a businesswoman and a real estate agent in order to buy back their family farm, Las Palomitas, from the land baron Timothy Rickart. Anne is so self-controlled that she conceals her love for Frank, her childhood friend and Rickart's son, only to confess it to him to save her brother from being sued by Rickart. Anne

consistently exhibits “New Woman” characteristics because as a lady, she performs “unladylike” behavior: she engages in the male business world and unabashedly reveals her love for Frank.

Alaimo (2000, 76) warns that the female characters in *The Ford* should not be mistaken for “Earth mothers.” Through her female characters, Austin rejects notions of womanhood that enshrine domesticity. Kenneth’s and Anne’s mother, Mrs. Brent, wants to escape frontier life; their childhood friend Virginia is a socialist and suffragist; and Anne is a “hard-headed” career woman. As a feminist role model, Anne shows female readers in particular how to become economically independent without depending on men. As Vakoch (2012, 3) contends, the emancipatory strategies employed in ecofeminist literary criticism help us see possible ways of overcoming oppression. From this perspective, it is clearly seen that Austin portrayed Anne full of reforming zeal and liberatory ideals to overcome biological determinism. Austin knew that in order to stand on one’s own feet as a woman in the West, one had to know the rules of the game. As Kenneth notes, she is “doing without all the things that used to be thought indispensable for a woman, and making a place for herself that men would envy” (209). While other women seek refuge in the private sphere through marriage and motherhood, she chooses independence in the male public sphere. Interestingly, Austin underscores Anne’s feminist traits through Kenneth’s observations.

Austin believes that the cultural practices of the peoples of the land are embedded in both the ecological and social environment. As a social and environmental activist, her work, *The Ford*, illustrates her attention to the land, which is both scientific and practical, aesthetic and mystical (Raine 1999, 245). Like Austin, Anne is an activist in her own right: she invites readers not to be bound by the social forces surrounding them. Anne advises her brother Kenneth not to believe that the social and economic forces that govern his life are a part of the natural order:

It was a mistake, she said, that women had always made, thinking that, because they enjoyed being ordered about by their husbands and cuddling their babies, it was their God appointed destiny and they were therefore excused from any further responsibilities. So that if it was a notion he had of being a Heaven-built farmer, he could be one, just Baff and Willard were. He could homestead a hundred and sixty acres under his own canal and be happy in it until she or Rickart or somebody of the same stripe came along and took it away from him.

(430)

Clearly, Austin has a feminist agenda: to encourage women to reject biological determinism, or what Freud would articulate as “anatomy is destiny.” In other words, that women, by virtue of their reproductive body parts, are destined only to be wives and mothers. She calls on women to engage in collective action by challenging their limited social, cultural, economic, and political roles—to break out of the private sphere and embrace more visible positions in the public sphere.

As a New Woman, Anne's identification with the land is not sentimental but rather practical. She expresses, "Land doesn't mean crops to me the way it does to you and father; it means people, people who want land and are fitted for the land, and the land wants how it wants them!" (199) She has a "gift of detachment" (178), which enables her to bring laborers and the land together. Although this might seem to be an impediment to her identification with the land emotionally, her scientific knowledge about the properties of the soil helps her match farmers with suitable farmland, which proves her foresightedness (Stout 1998, 92). In an attempt to answer the question who "owns" the land, Anne says to her brother,

Look at the land; I'm learning a lot about land, and the first thing to learn is that you can absolutely find out what land is good for, and in time we'll find out that, no matter what you feel about it, it only belongs to the people who can do those things.

(234)

The novel ultimately suggests that "the ownership of the land cannot be determined by capital, but affinity" (Alaimo 2000, 77).

In *The Ford*, Anne is pragmatic and Kenneth is histrionic, suggesting a gender role reversal which strengthens Austin's feminist arguments. Anne brings a feminist sensibility to her profession, in Schaefer's words (2004, 170), by balancing "the private and public and the economic, social and environmental aspects of regional planning." While her brother feels nostalgia for the past, and Rickart regards the land as a commodity, Anne plays a crucial, mediating role between these two extremes. Furthermore, Anne is quite aware of how society denies educational and professional opportunities to women. For her,

Society is a sort of mirage, a false appearance due to refraction.... I mean most of the things we do and think important only seem so because of all sorts of hang-overs, political, religious, all kinds of ignorances ... that's because we have Androcentric culture.

(233)

By articulating these notions, Austin increases ecofeminist sensibilities and invites female readers to reconsider their place in society, specifically by contributing to community development and influencing regional politics.

Conclusion

Austin wrote *The Ford* almost 12 years after Eaton secured Owens Valley water through legal land purchases. In a short time, the valley lost its agricultural value, and as conveyed by Forstenzer (1992), the water taken from the Owens Valley has had a negative effect on the environment: when the river water was diverted to the aqueduct, it caused the water level to substantially drop, and by 1924, Owens Lake had already dried. Goodman and Dawson (2008, 56) note that a lawsuit initiated by

Inyo County in 1972 took four decades to prove that ecological balance was corrupted because of the diversion of the Owens Valley water; and finally in December 2006, Los Angeles flew some of its water to Owens River, and in so doing, made an invaluable contribution to wetlands and wildlife.

While it is difficult to assess the impact of Mary Austin's *The Ford* on environmental activism and politics, as Patrick Murphy (2009, 81) suggests, it is one of the first attempts to deal with environmental issues. It is a critique of modernity, as it rejects federal tendencies to urbanize small communities by depriving peoples of their land and their natural resources. Austin depicts regional development as dependent on local irrigation projects and asks why rural Americans fail to take collective action against capitalistic forces. As a proto-ecofeminist, Austin criticizes androcentric and anthropocentric society at all levels (rural/urban, local/city/federal). She contends that "love of the land" does not, and should not, reinforce essentialist ideas about women as the guardians of nature, proposing a more down-to-earth, solid female character, Anne Brent, who engages with explicit feminist discourse. She calls for women of all generations to participate in environmental politics, and stand on their feet in the face of injustices perpetrated against the land, nature, natural resources, and the ecosystem.

Notes

- 1 Because of the anachronistic nature of the term "ecofeminist" in the early twentieth century, "proto-ecofeminist" is preferred by the author throughout the text.
- 2 A naturalist, essayist, and a prominent figure in the Conservation Movement during the Progressive Era, John Burroughs (1837–1921) was best known for his scientific observations of nature. Please see *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*, edited by David Mazel (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 2001, 33–47.

References

- Alaimo, Stacy. 2000. *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Austin, Mary. 1906. *The Flock*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Company.
- Austin, Mary. 1909. *Lost Borders*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Austin, Mary. 1912. *A Woman of Genius*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company.
- Austin, Mary. 1988. *The Land of Little Rain*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Austin, Mary. 1996. "The American Form of the Novel." In *Beyond Borders: Selected Essays of Mary Austin*, edited by Reuben J. Ellis. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 84–88.
- Austin, Mary. 1996. *The Ford*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Austin, Mary. 2007. *Earth Horizon*. Santa Fe: Sunstone Press.
- Blend, Benay. 1988. "Mary Austin and the Western Conservation Movement, 1900–1927." *Journal of the Southwest*, 30(1): 12–34.
- Brinkley, Douglas. 2009. *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Cassuto, David. 2001. *Dripping Dry: Literature, Politics, and Water in the Desert Southwest*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Forstenzer, Martin. 1992. "Dust to Dust." *Los Angeles Times*, April 10. Retrieved May 20, 2014, from http://articles.latimes.com/1992-04-10/news/mn-179_1_owens-lake.
- Gaard, Greta, and Patrick D. Murphy. 1998. "Introduction." In *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, edited by Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy, 1–13. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Gabrielson, Teena. 2006. "Woman-Thought, Social Capital, and the Generative State. Mary Austin and the Integrative Civic Ideal in Progressive Thought." *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3): 650–663.
- Goodman, Susan and Carl Dawson. 2008. *Mary Austin and the American West*. London: University of California Press.
- Green, Amy S. 2001. "Two Woman Naturalists and the Search for Autonomy: Anna Botsford Comstock and the Producer Ethic; and Gene Stratton-Porter and the Gospel of Wealth." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 29(1/2): 145–154.
- Hays, Samuel P. 1999. *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Henderson, George L. 2003. *California and the Fictions of Capital*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Mazel, David, ed. 2001. *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Murphy, Patrick D. 2009. *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries and Fields*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Neal, Teresa S. 2006. *Evolution Toward Equality: Equality for Women in the American West*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Books.
- O'Grady, John P. 1993. *Pilgrims to the Wild: Everett Ruess, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Austin*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press.
- Raine, Anne. 1999. "The Man at the Sources: Gender, Capital and the Conservationist Landscape in Mary Austin's *The Ford*." In *Exploring Lost Borders: Critical Essays on Mary Austin*, edited by M. Graulich and E. Klimasmith. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 243–266.
- Reisner, Marc. 1993. *Cadillac Desert*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Rudnick, Louis. 1987. "Re-naming the Land: Anglo-Expatriate Women in the Southwest." In *The Desert is No Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women's Writing and Art*, edited by Vera Norwood and Janice Monk. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 17–26.
- Schaefer, Heike. 2004. *Mary Austin's Regionalism: Reflections on Gender, Genre and Geography*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Stout, Janice. 1998. "Mary Austin's Feminism: A Reassessment." *Studies in the Novel*, 30(1): 77–101.
- Vakoch, Douglas A. 2012. "A Different Story." In *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women and Literature*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1–12.
- Walton, John. 1992. *Western Times and Water Wars: State, Culture and Rebellion in California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Wilson, Malin. 1997. "Walking on the Desert in the Sky: Nancy Newhall's Words and Images." In *The Desert is No Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women's Writing and Art*, edited by Vera Norwood and Janice J. Monk. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 47–61.
- Wynn, Dudley. 1937. "Mary Austin, Woman Alone." *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 13: 243–256.