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Weaving the Story: Northern Paiute Myth and Mary Austin's *The Basket Woman*

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Piudy, a member of a Northern Paiute band often designated as "Snakes," is said to have told the following story in the summer of 1930:

> Almost everything was Coyote's way. The Indian planted the apple. When he planted it, he said for all the Indians to come and eat. When he told them that, all the people came.
>
> The white man was a rattlesnake then, and he was on that tree. The white people have eyes just like the rattlesnake. When the Indians tried to come to eat the apples, that snake tried to bite them. That's why the white people took everything away from the Indian, because they were snakes. If that snake hadn't been on the tree, everything would have belonged to the Indian. Just because they were snakes and came here, the white people took everything away. They asked these Indians where they had come from. That's why they took everything and told the Indians to go way out in the mountains and live.[1]

What interests me most about this myth is what most anthropologists at the time would have called its "inauthenticity"; that

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is, it is clearly a product of postcontact Paiute culture, as seen in the devastating critique of Anglo culture by means of Piudy's reconstitution and deployment of one of Christianity's foundational myths. For that very reason, most anthropologists at the time excluded such myths from their collections, even though, as Jarold Ramsey points out, "it [is] precisely at the moment when [the storyteller] beg[ins] to invent and borrow stories and adapt them to [his or] her native tradition (proving its vitality and no doubt revealing its formal 'rules') that the ethnographer should have been most alert—and most grateful. He could have been studying mythology-in-progress."[2]

Current ethnographic theory gives us plenty of ammunition with which to question the accuracy (or "authenticity") of even such clearly "inauthentic" myths—by making us aware, for example, of the role the anthropologist may have played in the final "product" as it comes to us, of the lack of information given us as to its context and performance, and of the possible results of the myth's textualization. Nevertheless, Piudy's myth would seem to be able to tell us something about one Paiute's imaginative strategy: his adapting of Christian mythology to a "traditional" Paiute form, and his use of this form in a "traditional" way—to teach.

The pointedness of the lesson, moreover, is underscored by one of the very elements obscured by the myth's textualization: its context. According to the ethnologist's preface, these myths were collected in the summer of 1930. A prohibition exists in many tribal traditions against telling certain types of stories in the summer; the reason sometimes given, especially in Great Basin and Plateau cultures, is that the snakes are about and are liable to hear the stories. In light of these facts, the lesson in Piudy's telling of this myth takes on an added layer: Piudy seems to be saying that, not only was "the white men . . . a rattlesnake then"—in the past—but, more to the point, you, the anthropologist, by coming here trying to collect myths without regard to our people's customs, are showing that you, as a representative of white culture, are still a snake.

The sense that Piudy's manner of teaching his listener a lesson is "authentic" is strengthened when we compare his deployment of Biblical imagery to that used by another Native American storyteller, Gertrude Bonnin/Zitkala-Sa, a Yankton Sioux, in a story written some thirty years earlier. Her book, *American Indian Stories*, a collection of autobiographical and fictional pieces, con-

tains a chapter entitled "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," in which she tells of hearing from some visiting missionaries about the big red apples that grew plentifully back East and that could be had for the taking.[3] This image becomes fundamentally associated in her account with the mission school to which she goes at the age of eight, located to the east in Indiana, in what she later calls "the land of red apples."[4] For Zitkala-Sa, the fruit turns bitter. By associating the apples with the whites' school, Zitkala-Sa not only evokes the Biblical symbol for the knowledge of good and evil but implies what Piudy has stated unequivocally, that "white men are snakes."

There are stories not only behind those told by Piudy and Zitkala-Sa, but behind my commentary on them as well. How we adapt and shape our own histories to suit private purposes; how we often borrow from others' stories in ways that transform and distort them; how we combine these two activities in order to create our own mythologies; and ultimately, how, once these mythologies are recorded in some form, they are adapted by others to their own histories and purposes—such issues are part of that story. Furthermore, my choice of subject matter and my approach to writing about it necessarily imply something about my attitudes toward particular mythological traditions and the syncretisms that result from their contact, although what precisely they imply remains subject to interpretation.

For me, as a literary scholar, such considerations crystallize in the writings of Mary Austin, an early twentieth-century Euro-American author who evidenced, throughout her career, a deep interest in both Native American and Christian mythologies and religious traditions. Austin's body of work includes twenty-seven books and scores of articles in such popular journals as *The Overland Monthly* and *Harper's*. Among these, her writings focusing on Christian themes include *Christ in Italy* (1911); *The Man Jesus* (1915); and articles such as "Can Prayer Be Answered," "Do We Need a New Religion," and "Religion in the United States." Her writings focusing on Native American cultures, themes, and issues include two "Indian dramas"—one, *The Arrow-Maker* (1911, 1915), was the first ever produced on stage with an all-Indian cast—in addition to a number of articles on Indian drama; a volume of "re-expressed" Indian verse, *The American Rhythm* (1923);[5] her contribution on indigenous "literatures" to *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1919); articles in support of Native American autonomy, such as "Why Americanize the

Indian"; and two collections of stories patterned after Native American stories, *The Basket Woman* (1904) and *One-Smoke Stories* (1934). Her first and best-known book, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), a collection of sketches about the Owens Valley of California, profiles in separate chapters a Shoshoni medicine man and a Paiute basket weaver, the latter becoming the title character of her second work, *The Basket Woman: A Book of Indian Tales for Children.*[6] It is to this second book that I would now like to turn, since it is an early work and thus its Native American influences are more clearly attributable to the tribes with whom Austin became acquainted while living in the Owens Valley of California: the Paiute and Shoshoni.[7]

In the preface, Austin clearly indicates that her purpose is "not so much to provide authentic Indian Folk-tales, as to present certain aspects of nature as they appear in the myth-making mood, that is to say, in the form of strongest appeal to the child mind . . . ." This purpose is informed by the author's conviction that myths are "the root and branch of man's normal intimacy with nature."[8]

Austin goes on to present a variety of myths, some adapted directly from the Paiute, others clearly invented by the author herself. At least one of them might be said to capture the spirit of Piudy's and Zitkala-Sa's stories. In "The Coyote Spirit and the Weaving Woman," Austin repackages the idea that white men who chase Indian women are "coyotes," the functional equivalent of Piudy's snakes, a term that, in other Paiute sources, was a common designation for such men.[9] The irony of the fact that a Paiute term is used against men of her own race is underscored by the ambiguity of the figure of the Weaving Woman. She is the first woman to show Coyote that he is indeed a man, but she ultimately is thrown over for a younger woman. The figure of the Weaving Woman seems not only to be an incarnation of the Basket Woman of the title but to represent the author herself, the weaver of tales—both of whom experience hardships that turn out to be fundamental to their skill as artists and craftswomen. This identification between author and Paiute basket weaver has been hinted at in the earlier book, *The Land of Little Rain,* in the chapter devoted to Seyavi ("The Basket Maker"); later it is developed more explicitly in Austin's autobiography, *Earth Horizon.*[10]

Viewed in this way, the Weaving Woman of this tale is one of a series of transitional figures that play a key role in Austin's writing. These characters typically move across the borders erected

by such categories as race, gender, and ideology, and, in so doing, create a dual identity. Examples from other Austin works include the main female character in her first novel, Isidro (1905), who is not only a woman passing herself off as a man but a Mexican-American believed (mistakenly, it turns out) to be half-Indian; many of the stories in *Lost Borders* (1909) feature women characters who are either half-breeds or full-blood Indians who have relationships with and are then abandoned by white men.

In *The Basket Woman,* although approximately half of the stories are etiological myths with titles such as "The Cheerful Glacier" and "The Crooked Fir," just under one-half portray the developing friendship between two central characters, the Paiute basket woman and an Anglo youth named Alan, whose parents employ the Indian woman as a laundress. The remaining two myths also have as central characters boys of about the same age as Alan. The preadolescent boy in this book is another of the transitional figures who move across borders—in this case not only between childhood and adulthood, but also between the separate worlds of Indian and white. It is these stories that provide narrative and thematic continuity within the book, in that, through them, we witness the evolving relationship between a Euro- and a Native American—a relationship mirroring that between the author and her Indian subject. Through these stories, we recognize the complexity of the book's project, which is not only to present nature to an audience of children but also, I would suggest, to mythologize the "natural history" of white-Indian relations. You will note that I have just claimed that two figures function as mirrors of the author—both the native basket weaver and the preadolescent Anglo boy. To see these reflections, we must turn to the stories themselves.

In the first story in the volume, Austin introduces us to Alan and the Paiute *mahala.* Alan is a newcomer to the country. As such, he is initially afraid of the Indians generally and of the Basket Woman in particular. He believes she might throw him into the basket she carries over her shoulder "and walk away across the mesa," a fate suggested to him by the teamster who had brought his family to their new homestead.[11]

Of what is Alan afraid? The fact that the Basket Woman is "the only Indian that he had [ever] seen" makes it clear that Alan is reacting to a preconceived image of the Indian based on white lore, such lore being transmitted not only through stagecoach drivers but also (undoubtedly) through books Alan has read

about the West.[12] Alan's parents, by contrast, assure him that there is nothing to fear. His mother's attitude is perhaps attributable to the fact that, since she employs the Paiute mahala as a washer woman, their relationship is constituted strictly in economic terms. His father, who also employs Paiute laborers, tells Alan that the Indians "are not at all now what they were once."[13] The father's words imply a belief that the Paiute, like the stereotypical Indians of the nineteenth century, were once "a proud, war-like race." This stereotype, when applied to any Native American tribe, is at the very least a distortion, fixing as it does on one attribute among many; moreover, applying such an attribute to the Paiute represents an egregious fabrication, since the Paiute were generally peaceful with both their Indian and their white neighbors.[14]

Like his parents, Alan has his preconceptions; however, lacking awareness of the clear, economically defined roles that seem to guide his parents' feelings and behavior, Alan registers a marked ambivalence toward the Paiute. He tells his father, "I do not like Indians the way they are now," but he remains troubled by the conditions in which he sees them living.[15] Alan's ambivalence is shattered when, in a dream one night, the Basket Woman comes to him and carries him away in her basket. This marks the first of several journeys during which Alan sees a particular band of Owens Valley Paiute at different points in their history, learns their customs and myths, and comes to understand something of their culture and to appreciate their resilience as a people. Thus, for Alan, the basket begins to undergo a transformation: His attitude shifts from a fear of it as a vessel of capture to a desire for it as a vehicle of the imagination. This shift suggests that Austin is not only playing on the stereotypes promulgated by popular nineteenth-century literature, such as captivity narratives, but also implying that her book, like the basket, is itself a vehicle of an imagination that is narratively transported rather than a vessel of capture that is narratively embodied.[16] The book thus comes to equal the basket.

Since it is through such figures as the preadolescent boy and the Paiute woman that we best see Austin's manner of mythologizing white-Indian relations in the "land of lost borders," we might well want to examine the form that such mythologizing takes. Her first book, *The Land of Little Rain*, gives us a clue. In it Austin juxtaposes Christian and indigenous Great Basin religious mythologies. In one chapter we journey, via Austin's imaginative re-creation of

the medicine man Winnenap's syncretic vision, to "Shoshone Land," a journey that is cast as an analog to a return to Eden. She alludes to the Biblical story of Naboth's vineyard in framing "My Neighbor's Field" and places within this frame the Owens Valley Paiute tale of Winnedumah. These tales, which are about keeping faith with one's "brothers," may be read as commentary on relations between Euro- and Native Americans. In "The Basket Maker," she compares Seyavi to the Biblical prophet Deborah in a description reminiscent both of a passage in *Lost Borders,* in which the desert-as-woman becomes a mythic figure, and of her self-depictions in *Earth Horizon.*[17]

Just so in *The Basket Woman,* where Austin creates her own syncretic mythology by mixing native- and Christian stories and forms. The importance of syncretism in Austin's writing is emphasized not only by the myths and their position in the volume, nor the similar handling of mythology in her first book, but also by the circumstances of her life at the time. In the late 1890s, Austin experienced a personal crisis that forced her to reform her spiritual identity. This crisis was brought on by her increasing sense that her life did not in any way correspond to what she had envisioned for herself when she had married Wallace Austin a few years earlier. The most poignant disappointments resulted from a growing frustration with her daughter Ruth, who was developmentally disabled and prone to uncontrollable outbursts, and with her husband Wallace who, according to her, failed to communicate or work with her to achieve the stability that would enable her to do what she had always wanted—to write. This identity crisis eventually led to her first awareness "that she couldn't, in the orthodox sense of the word, go on calling herself a Christian" and that, while "the experience called the Practice of the Presence of God" had returned, it was accompanied by "a profound movement of spiritual growth away from the orthodox Protestant expression of it."[18]

There are indications that experimentation with Paiute ritual began to play a role in Austin's "practice." Helen Doyle, a Bishop doctor who treated Ruth, tells us, in her biography of Austin, that her friend would travel frequently to Round Valley to visit the Birchim family, who operated one of the largest sheep ranches in the Owens Valley. Nearby was a Paiute encampment, from which the Birchims, as was the custom, would have hired laborers. During the Austins' visits, the son, Will Birchim, who is said to have been conversant in Paiute language and lore, often per-

formed songs and chants he had learned from his Indian neighbors.[19] Austin's interest in learning Paiute ritual even led her once to "lay out all one cold night on the mountains at the risk of her life to watch the P[a]iutes dance their Dance of Death."[20]

When her mother became ill, Austin sensed that traditional Protestant modes of prayer were wholly inadequate to the situations she was facing. In *Earth Horizon,* Austin writes that, during an earlier conversation, she asked her mother whether she got what she prayed for, and her mother responded that she felt the presence of God, which was enough. To one such as Mary Austin, whose circumstances differed so greatly from expectations and who held the conviction "that life is essentially remediable, undefeatable; the thing was to discover the how of it," feeling the presence of God was not enough: She wanted results; she wanted to effect outcomes.[21] And so she turned to a Paiute medicine man. When Austin asked him the same question she had put to her mother, he replied, "Surely, if you pray right."[22]

Austin's emerging sense of the difference between native and Christian modes of prayer and ritual is captured in *Earth Horizon.* She writes about learning from the medicine man that

> [p]rayer had nothing to do with emotion[,] [but was] an outgoing act of the inner self toward something, not a god, toward a responsive activity in the world about you, designated as The-Friend-of-the-Soul-of-Man . . . . This inner act was to be outwardly expressed in bodily acts, in words, in music, rhythm, color, whatever medium served the immediate purpose, or all of them.
>
> Man is not alone nor helpless in the universe; he has toward it and it toward him an affective relation. This, precisely . . . was probably what Jesus meant with his figure of the branch and the vine, the Son and the Father. The illuminating point, the thing that Protestant Christianity had utterly failed to teach her, was the practice of prayer as an act, a motion of the mind, a reality . . . .

The experimentation, she continues, "began as adventure and became illumination. It went on . . . for years, and gradually embraced all the religious gestures accessible . . . ."[23]

The reference to "what Jesus meant" shows her tendency to reinterpret Christian mythology in light of what she had learned from the Paiute, something that she does more self-consciously in the books written immediately after leaving California.[24] Addi-

tionally, the last lines of the passage above reveal Austin's willingness to combine "religious gestures." Another incident from this period in her life indicates her capacity to believe seemingly disparate views simultaneously. In San Francisco, at a gathering of some of the group she would later live with in an artists' colony in Carmel—Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, James Hopper, and George Sterling—she tells of meeting John Muir and being entertained by the tales of his wilderness forays. Comparing Muir's to Sterling's spiritual or philosophical attitudes, she writes that Muir

> told stories of his life in the wild, and of angels; angels that saved him; that lifted and carried him; that showed him where to put his feet; he believed them .... Sterling didn't believe in angels; but he believed in aliveness; sensitivities of stick and stone, of communications of animals, and I believed them both.[25]

Austin believed in both Christian and Native American mythologies. The mixing of mythologies in *The Basket Woman* attests to her belief and can be seen most clearly by juxtaposing two stories. The seventh of the fourteen tales in the book, titled "The Christmas Tree," employs a central Christian image marking the birth of Christ, an image that, significantly, is thought to have been adapted in medieval times from even earlier "pagan" ritual. The final tale, titled "Mahala Joe," uses one of the most well-known and frequently told Owens Valley Paiute myths as an intratextual commentary on one of the most significant local events in the history of white and Indian race relations. Both stories use as their central characters preadolescent boys, the transitional figure referred to earlier, who can thus be read as succeeding incarnations of Alan and of Austin herself.

In "The Christmas Tree," Mathew, a boy whose mother has died, moves with his father out of the booming mining town where they had previously lived to a cabin on Pine Mountain, thus carrying out the dying wishes of his mother. The town is described with particularly hellish images that stand in stark contrast to the tranquility of Pine Mountain, "a strong, red hill" that the local Indians call "The Hill of Summer Snow." Mathew, who shares his name with the first gospel writer, grows up on the mountain, free to explore and play while his father is employed cutting wood for the mine at the base of Pine Mountain. The boy

comes to know the plants and animals there as friends. He forms a special attachment to a particular silver fir tree in a small cluster of firs, which becomes a mother figure to him: "In the spring . . . it gave out a pleasant odor, and it was to him like the memory of what his mother had been." When he longed most for his mother, he would hug it and nestle among its branches, "[telling] it all his thoughts."[26]

When Mathew turns twelve, his father sends him to the newly built church school in the booming town below, where Mathew is instructed in the practice of Christianity. As a result, he begins to fear the time he will have to return to the mountain, where he will have "no one to tell him about this most important thing in the world" (i.e., the gospel message).[27] As he approaches his first Christmas in the town, Mathew is asked to supply the church with a Christmas tree, since his father is the wood cutter. He chooses his favorite tree. This decision causes him ambivalent feelings, which intensify into guilt as he looks upon "his" tree in the church on Christmas Eve. While the minister tells the story of the Christ child's birth in Bethlehem, Mathew can only look at the tree, until he sees it "tremble . . . , moving its boughs as if it spoke; and the boy heard it in his heart and believed, for it spoke to him of God." Mathew loses his fear of returning to the mountain; in fact, he begins to yearn for his return when he realizes that "he might find more in the forest than he had ever thought to find, now that he knew what to look for, since everything speaks of God in its own way and it is only a matter of understanding how."[28]

This story at first seems motivated by a rather standard kind of Transcendental panentheism,[29] but the way in which it presents Mathew's emerging spirituality and mirrors Austin's own spiritual development undercuts that kind of simple reading. Early in the story, Mathew realizes intuitively (though perhaps not consciously) his connection to a sacred quality within the tree. This realization is evidenced when he lays garlands of flowers and berries on its branches and creates an altar-like cairn of stones at its base, in which he stores all his treasures.[30] The story implies that this worship occurs on a mountain that is sacred to the local Indians. Mountains, it should be noted, are associated with power in both Biblical and Paiute mythology. For example, flood myths in both traditions depict a high mountain as the only ground remaining above the water; this mountain becomes the central point from which people and all other beings populate the world. Two features of Austin's Pine Mountain suggest that she is taking

pains to highlight its sacredness to the Paiute Indians. First, its Indian name, the Hill of Summer Snow, shows that it is one of the more prominent features in the vicinity and thus implies its importance in the local mythology, perhaps as the central peak.[31] Furthermore, its red color is sacred to the Northern Paiute (and to many other Great Basin cultures) and often is used, along with white, by doctors in healing ceremonies. Since the mountain and the tree are holy, when Mathew personifies the tree as a concomitant step in developing his relationship to it, he is performing a move characteristic of native mythology. Additionally, although Mathew's intuitive sense is temporarily lost in the context of his Christian education, its eventually return is signaled by a desire to share his sacred experience of nature with other Christians. When the tree, laden with its "pagan" significance, is literally transplanted into a Christian church, it marks Mathew's return to this original sense that spirituality inheres in all things. Metaphorically, then, the intuitive experience of sacredness corresponds to the "pagan" mythology that is then grafted onto Christian mythology, and the result is a kind of syncretism that leads Mathew, significantly, back to the mountain, the sacred place of the local Paiute people. When we consider that Austin joined the Methodist Church at the age of thirteen (approximately Mathew's age) and that, when she wrote this story, she was undergoing a spiritual crisis that turned her away from the practice of institutionalized Christianity to a practice of Paiute religion as she understood it, we see the preadolescent male figure equated with his author.

This reading of the story is further strengthened when we consider that, in *The Land of Little Rain,* Austin's first move in acknowledging the sacredness of the land is to adopt the Indian practice of name-giving.[32] This practice is tied fundamentally to a belief in the power of language as a creative force. Early in the book, it enlarges to include not only the use of names but also the telling of stories.[33] In light of that tendency, let us turn to an examination of the final story in *The Basket Woman,* "Mahala Joe," which superimposes the local history of race relations over the backdrop of a well-known Owens Valley Paiute myth. Actually, the myth is more than just a backdrop; as in most of Austin's writings, backdrop, in the form of a landscape that is at once physical and mythical, is both the most prominent and the most powerful character, exerting its influence on human endeavor. For Austin, then, the point becomes to match the mythical land-

scape to the physical; from this attempt arises the need for reconstituting Christian mythology in light of Paiute oral tradition.

Although Austin, in keeping with her desire to make her story "mythic" (i.e., enduring), does not precisely place it in history, we can deduce from historical sources that the events take place in the early 1860s, just before the most significant conflict between the Owens Valley Paiute and the white settlers. The conflict is sometimes referred to as the Owens Lake battle; it occurred in 1862 as part of the fallout from the more infamous Paiute Indian War of 1860, which took place farther north and east in Nevada.[34] Austin's story involves two boys, Joe and Walter, a Paiute and a white, respectively, who are raised together as brothers after Walter's mother dies in childbirth and his father, a prominent rancher, gives him up to be raised by a young Paiute woman who herself has just given birth to a boy. The two boys are thus "both nursed at one breast"—literally as well as metaphorically.[35] The mother figure here, as in the earlier story, becomes a type of "earth mother." The implication is that both white and Indian are sustained by the same mysterious life-giving power that is concentrated in the land itself.

The most significant events in the relationship between the boys begin when they hear the arrow maker tell the story of Winnedumah, the Owens Valley Paiute culture hero. The legend is an etiological myth explaining the presence of a highly visible rock monolith atop the Inyo Range and of some unusual pines along Independence Creek. Winnedumah and his brother Tinnemaha, forebears of the Paiute, are engaged in a war with a neighboring tribe to the west. The last of their tribe to stand and fight, they are leading their enemies eastward toward their own tribe's territory. At the moment when Winnedumah—who has vowed that he will always remain faithful to his brother—reaches the top of the Inyo range, he looks back over his shoulder and sees Tinnemaha, who is trailing him, hit by an arrow; in that instant, the pursuers are turned into the long-leaved pines along the creek, and Tinnemaha and Winnedumah are transformed into large boulders. Thus the rock monolith, locally called the Winnedumah monument, preserves the memory of Winnedumah's devotion to his brother.[36]

After Joe and Walter hear this story, they decide to visit the site. Around this time, minor skirmishes have begun to occur between whites and Paiute people in the valley. During the trip, two key events set the stage for the final climactic scene. First, the boys get

lost and, inspired by the example of the story, swear a vow on Joe's elk's tooth that, come what may, they will always stand together. After they fall asleep, a powerful Indian appears out of nowhere and carries Walter back to his own people. After Walter returns home, he and Joe again visit the arrow maker, who, when told the story, identifies the mysterious Indian as none other than Winnedumah himself. The arrow maker then formalizes and ritualizes the vow the boys swore on the mountain by mixing their blood.[37] When the hostilities between whites and Indians escalate to a point where war seems inevitable, Walter's father sends him back East to his mother's family, something Joe is not told. It is implied that Walter, in contrast to Winnedumah, never looks back. Joe rides with the other Paiute warriors, but, when he realizes that they are to attack the ranch of Walter's father, he turns and flees. As a result of this act, he is forced to wear the woman's dress as a badge of shame. As a matter of principle, he continues this practice even after the duration of the imposed penalty has passed, for the rest of his life.

In the context of the Paiute myth at the heart of this tale, the message is clear as both a moral and political statement: Although both white and Indian people are sustained by the same land, the whites break their promises to the Indians, whereas the Paiute, following the example of Winnedumah, stick by their word, whatever the cost. This lesson is inscribed not only in the story but in the land itself—in the figure of Winnedumah. The complexity of this particular lesson is reflected in the figure of Joe, who seems to combine the two central figures of the earlier part of the book. In Joe, the adolescent boy is transformed into a Paiute mahala. I would venture that Austin's "Mahala Joe" may well be based on a locally famous Paiute transvestite basket maker of the 1910s, Joe Eugley. If my speculation is true, it reinforces the sense that Austin has made Joe the book's final amalgamation of the two central figures, who are also mirrors of the author.[38]

In the contexts created by both that association and the positioning of the stories in the book as a whole, the moral and political messages of this final story blur into a spiritual one. If the word spoken by the whites cannot be trusted by the Indians, it does not guide the actions of the whites themselves either; if the word here, as elsewhere in Austin, is linked not only with individual utterances or names but with stories as well, then whites must turn to Native American mythologies as a guide

to reinterpreting Christian mythology—a move implicitly made in the earlier story.

Rather than advocating a rejection of Christian mythology, Austin encourages a syncretic blending of it with the indigenous mythology. Only in this way, the book implies, can Euro-Americans begin to understand the land in which they have come to live. In *The Land of Journey's Ending*, a book that more explicitly advocates a syncretic blending, Austin writes that "no man has ever really entered into the heart of any country until he has adopted or made up myths about its familiar objects."[39] In this sense, then, *The Basket Woman* is addressed to the larger audience of Euro-American readers who, like the children for whom it is explicitly designed, are thus placed in a transitional position in regard to their relation with indigenous races. By re-creating and deploying both native and Christian myths in a fashion similar to that used by Piudy and Zitkala-Sa, the book attempts to teach readers the lesson that both assimilation and extermination, the polarized terms guiding the "Indian debate" at the turn of the century, are morally and spiritually inadequate to the situation of the races. This lesson is carried through the book—the metaphorical equivalent of the Paiute woman's basket. In order to understand more specifically how this equivalency works, we need briefly to consider the nature of Paiute basketry.

Baskets in Paiute culture traditionally are made in one of two styles—twined or coiled—with the former far more common up until the early part of this century. In the Owens Valley, coiled baskets are created by winding up to three individual strands—typically of willow or rye-grass—one after the other in a downward and leftward spiral, so that each strand remains separate and recognizable; twined baskets have strands interwoven over one or, more usually, two warps, called by anthropologists "plain twining" and "twill twining," respectively. The large-type burden baskets, carried by a tumpline and traditionally used to collect pine cones or nuts (a vital nutritional source collected in the fall) and to transport household items when camp was being moved, often found service after contact as laundry baskets.[40] It is this kind of basket, typically of the twill-twined variety, that the basket woman in Austin's story—who, we remember, was employed as a washer woman—presumably would have carried.

The fact that it is in this basket that the preadolescent figure of Alan is imaginatively transported in the book's opening tale

becomes doubly significant when we consider the historical context. Both the laundry that the Paiute woman carries and the basket itself—a popular item that could be sold to whites—are economic staples for the Indian woman. Furthermore, the pine nuts constitute a nutritional staple—one that carries symbolic or ritual weight, since the fall Pine Nut Festival is one of two major Paiute tribal gatherings.

Because her husband tended to switch jobs frequently, Austin was constantly struggling to support her family by writing; thus her book, like the Paiute woman's basket, was a means not only of maintaining economic stability but also of carrying her stories—the seeds of a new religious mythology. Just as the basket's predominant pattern is composed of two strands woven together, the new mythology offered by the book is made from two of the area's prominent religious traditions. The seeds of these traditions are carried, via the author's imagination, to be planted in her readers' minds.

In closing, let me turn to the spiritual association of baskets and basket-weaving in a Native American context, as recorded from two famous Pomo weavers. In the words of Mabel McKay—a healer who has been described as "a traditional basket-maker, a weaver whose work is associated with power and prophecy"—we see the creation of the basket in the larger context of Native American spiritual traditions: "Everything is told to me in my Dream. What kind of design, what shape, what I am to do with it—everything about the baskets—is told in my Dream."[41] In a similar vein, Essie Parrish offers a prayer that begins with a standard Christian address to God and then continues with a blessing that must be considered traditional Pomo. In it, Parrish links the power of the baskets she made with the power of speech; both come from the same source and flow through her, the artist. Just as significantly, she draws on the figure of the Christian-derived male deity, who is transformed (or who transforms himself) into a female power that is then manifested through an Indian woman. Through this figure, Parrish shows that the opposites that many people would see—male and female, Christian and Indian—are, for her, actually complements, united in her baskets no less than in her prayer:

> Our Father, the good power
> The power of good words
> The good power hand. She made this basket . . . .[42]

NOTES

1. Isabel Kelly, "Northern Paiute Tales," *Journal of American Folklore* 51:202 (October–December 1938): 363–438. Reported in Jarold Ramsey, ed., *Coyote Was Going There: Indian Literature of the Oregon Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977), 258.

2. Jarold Ramsey, "The Bible in Western Indian Mythology," *Journal of American Folklore* 90 (October-December 1977): 442–54.

3. Gertrude Bonnin/Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Stories* (1921; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 41–42.

4. Ibid., 47ff.

5. Arnold Krupat uses this work as an illustration of one "of those moments in the history of translation when the intentions of poet-translators from the dominant culture more nearly seemed to approach the intentions of Indian performers . . . ," in an act that he terms "translation-as-criticism." Krupat continues: "[T]he fact that translation-as-criticism to some extent mirrors the Native American way of doing 'criticism'—critical practice, that is, only as internal to an evolving literary practice—it may do somewhat less violence to the literatures it 'criticizes.'" Krupat, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 193–95. (Krupat also refers to Austin in *For Those Who Come After* and *The Voice in the Margin.*) For a contrary view on Austin, see William Bevis, "American Indian Verse Translations," in *Literatures of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1975), 308–23, whom Krupat footnotes on the pages cited above.

6. Mary Austin, *The Basket Woman: A Book of Indian Tales for Children.* (1904; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910). Hereafter cited as *BW.*

7. Lying on the east side of the Sierra and stretching somewhat more than eighty miles in a south-north direction, the Owens Valley begins about 175 miles northeast of Los Angeles, with Death Valley to the southeast and Yosemite to the northwest.

Today, the Paiute and Shoshoni of Owens Valley call themselves the "Paiute-Shoshone Tribe of Owens Valley," reflecting the extent to which intermarriage has occurred. (Intermarriage, from what we know, has always been common between the two cultures.) Many other Northern Paiute groups, particularly in Nevada, prefer the term *Numu* ("People"), their traditional name for themselves. In my discussion, I use *Paiute* and *Shoshoni* because my focus is on the way these peoples and cultures have been perceived and understood by Austin in her own time.

8. *BW*, iii.

9. See, for example, Judy Trejo, "A Paiute Commentary," *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (1974): 66–71, in which Trejo tells us that "Paiutes refer to young Anglo boys who sneak around gawking at young girls as coyotes *(e-etza).*"

10. Austin, *Earth Horizon* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1932). See, e.g., 289. Hereafter cited as *EH.*

11. *BW*, 5.

12. Ibid., 4.
13. Ibid., 6.
14. *Peaceful* is, of course, a relative term, and whether the neighboring Washoe or Shoshoni, for example, might describe the Paiute as such—especially before the time of Euro-American contact—is open to debate. My point here is that "war-like" activities, such as raiding, seem not to have been central to Northern Paiute culture in the same way that they were in some other Indian cultures.
15. *BW*, 7.
16. Although to develop an argument about another book is beyond the scope of this paper, I would suggest that, in her later, fanciful novel, *Outland* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1919), Austin reworks the conventions of captivity narratives.
17. *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*, ed. Marjorie Pryse (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 160. Pryse comments on the parallel between Austin and the desert-as-woman passage in her introduction but not in the context of the reference to Deborah (p. xxix).

As hinted at in Austin's later work, Winnenap seems to have been, for her, a model of Native-Christian syncretism. In *California: The Land of the Sun*, after recounting an Owens Valley Paiute etiological myth explaining how California came to have its shape, she tells us that "Winnenap . . . was eclectic in his faiths as in his practice." That his wife "was a tall brown woman out of Tejon and her mother was of that band of captives taken from San Gabriel by the Mojaves, Mission-bred" suggests that the sources for Winnenap's spiritual philosophy and practice may have come not only from Indian cultures but also from Catholicism. Thus the syncretism in the earlier book should be seen as an attempt to reflect Winnenap's beliefs rather than just a wholly fictional projection of the author's beliefs onto an Indian figure. See *California: The Land of the Sun* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1914), 3–4.

18. *EH*, 267. Austin's characteristic habit of "borrowing" freely from diverse sources can be seen in her use of the phrase, *the Practice of the Presence of God*, which comes from seventeenth-century French monk, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection.
19. Helen MacKnight Doyle, *Mary Austin: Woman of Genius* (New York: Gotham House, 1939), 190.
20. Austin, "How I Would Sell My Book, 'Rhythm,'" in *The Bookseller and Stationer*, 1 May 1923, 7. The "Dance of Death" to which she refers is most probably what is often called the "Cry Dance," a mourning ceremony for those who have died during the previous year.
21. *EH*, 268.
22. Ibid., 274–76.
23. Ibid., 266–67.
24. In *Christ in Italy*, for example, she explains how she came to understand the Jesus portrayed in the art of the great Italian masters at the same time that she was being tutored in Christian prayer by Sister Veronica—an experience that, incidentally, she claims cured her of breast cancer. *Christ in Italy—Being the*

Experiences of a Maverick among Men (New York: Duffield and Company, 1912). At the same time that *Christ in Italy* was being published, she was working on drafts of a play, *Fire*, which begins with a dramatization of the Owens Valley Paiute myth about the origin of fire and then grafts this myth onto the basic plot of the gospel story, with the Paiute fire-bringer as rejected savior. *Fire* was published serially in *The Play-book* II, Nos. 5-7 (October–December 1914) and was performed at the Forest Theatre in Carmel sometime between 1912 and 1914. In *The Basket Woman*, the story entitled "The Fire-Bringer" is another adaptation of this myth, presented without the subtext of the gospel story.

I might also suggest that Austin's tendency to reinterpret Christian mythology is parallel to and consistent with her insistence that American poetry be understood in light of Native American verse forms. See, for example, *The American Rhythm* (1923; New York: AMS Press, 1970).

25. *EH*, 298; my emphasis.

26. *BW*, 93–94.

27. Ibid., 99.

28. Ibid., 103–104.

29. *Panentheism* differs from *pantheism* in that, while both terms denote that God is suffused throughout nature, the former term denotes that God's presence is not exhausted in nature—that is, He is both immanent and transcendent, a portion of his reality continuing to exist outside of material nature.

30. *BW*, 93–94.

31. Jay Miller, for instance, comments that "[t]hroughout [a] region, people can point out a particularly high or prominent peak as the sacred center where creation began or an Immortal lived." He goes on to discuss one of the most powerful of these peaks in the south and central Basin, Charleston Peak in the Spring Mountains west of Las Vegas, noting that its native name is Snow-Having. I am not arguing that Austin is drawing on the name of this specific peak, but I believe that her use of a name that keys on the same characteristic suggests that she most likely got it from a local native source and that she is aware of its spiritual implications. See Jay Miller, "Basin Theology and Religion: A Comparative Study of Power *(Puha)*," in *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 5:1–2 (1983): 66–86.

32. *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 3. See also footnote 31.

33. The importance placed on "the Word" is a characteristic of both Christian and many Native American traditions. Consider creation accounts, for example. Just as the God of Genesis speaks the world into existence, so, too, does the creator figure in many Native American tales speak beings into existence by giving them their names. Contemporary Indian authors also emphasize this characteristic—for example, N. Scott Momaday in "The Man Made of Words" and Leslie Marmon Silko in *Ceremony*.

34. For a history of the Paiute Indian War of 1860, see Ferol Egan, *Sand in a Whirlwind: The Paiute Indian War of 1860* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972); for Owens Valley history, see William Chalfant, *The Story of Inyo*, rev. ed. (1922; Bishop, CA: Chalfant Press, 1933); and, more recently,

William H. Michael, "'At the Plow and in the Harvest Field': Indian Conflict and Accommodation in the Owens Valley 1860–1880" (M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1993).

35. *BW*, 202.

36. Julian Steward, "Myths of the Owens Valley Paiutes," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 34 (1934–36): 355–440.

37. *BW*, 201.

38. Reported in Catherine S. Fowler and Lawrence E. Dawson, "Ethnographic Basketry," in *The Handbook of the North American Indians*, vol. 11, *The Great Basin*, Warren L. d'Azevedo, ed. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1986): 705–37.

39. Austin, *The Land of Journey's Ending* (1924; Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983), 302.

40. Fowler and Dawson, "Ethnographic Basketry."

41. Greg Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 51.

42. Quoted in ibid., 60.