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“highly incomprehensible and nearly always ridiculous”: Protesting Patriarchy  
through Queer Performativity in Mary Austin’s Early Novels

By

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## Abstract

This thesis intends to contribute to the understanding of changing attitudes toward women in the early twentieth-century American West. Mary Austin offers insight to the era's anxieties in three of her early novels: *Isidro* (1905), *Santa Lucia* (1908), and *A Woman of Genius* (1912). These works resist categorization through their deviations from the conventions of the genres from which they draw.

Investigating the boundaries between ideological spaces, queer theory—with its theoretical framework of questioning how “normal” is defined and enforced—lends itself to this work. Using queer theory, I examine deviations from normative gender identity performances within these three novels. Austin protests a perceived lack of female agency and autonomy in women's lived experiences. I argue that, through her heroines Jacinta, William, and Olivia, Austin suggests new ways to perform identity in an increasingly modern world.

## Introduction

The second half of the 1800s witnessed some of the most significant changes in American history. The population multiplied exponentially every year due to immigration, bringing countless cultures in closer contact with each other for the first time. As society became more industrialized, buildings grew taller and cities spread wider. Technological advances (telephone, electricity, transcontinental railroads) allowed people to communicate and travel faster than they ever had before. During and after the Civil War, the disadvantaged and dispossessed made strides toward freedom and equality. Black citizens, who were freed but not yet considered equals, entered the workforce. Women sought formal education and careers apart from their domestic roles. The ideal of “progress” affected how Americans viewed themselves and the nation as a whole.

These changes played out differently throughout the country. The east was well established, but the west was fairly new and still being settled. The west was as wide as it was wild and it gave as much as it took. It was a place of possibility; a symbol of everything that *could* be. In the 1800s, people migrated west and set out to domesticate the landscape and its inhabitants. Amy Kaplan argues that the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny bound the nation together with the shared ideology of “imagining the nation as a home,” with men on the outside and women on the inside (583). The novel, she explains, was a way to recruit women, the novel’s main readership, who would then help to spread this rhetoric. During the mid-1800s, domestic fiction grew in popularity and with it the ideology of separate spheres for women and men proliferated culture. Years passed and the

hierarchical separation of men and women increased and solidified, giving men more power for the sake of god and country. By the turn of the century, the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny had infiltrated the American psyche.

The larger culture changed at an alarming yet exhilarating rate, and individuals documented and processed those changes through art and literature. The propagation of separate gender roles and spaces played out in parlors throughout the country via the sentimental novel. Sentimentalism's main goal, Gregg Crane claims, is to convert readers: "Perhaps more than any other single factor, sentimental novels are defined by their depiction of the conversion moment, the moment when a flood of emotion transforms the individual, revealing moral truths and human connections previously ignored by or invisible to the convert" (104). This novel, more than any other at the time, concerned itself with enlisting citizens in the battle of Christian morality (105). In this narrative, women are idealized, saint-like and serving, and men are their sovereigns.

With the rise of formal education and employment opportunities, more women became authors and some used conventions of the sentimental genre because it was what was familiar to them, but some female authors turned their backs on the genre's reductive forms and harmful ideologies and changed it to fit their own narratives. Instead of the exaggerated emotions associated with the sentimental genre, women increasingly turned more toward realism, regionalism, and later, Modernism, which depicted more authentic, more believable stories and characters. Instead of the idolization of women and the dominance of men, they created characters that were on more equal footing. Instead of keeping women in



domestic spaces, women authors strategically positioned female characters in nature: men's territory. Elizabeth Nolan suggests that these authors sought to separate themselves from previous iterations of sentimentalism and, instead, produced fiction that concerned itself with "articulating the American condition" rather than the fiction of women's condition (572). Nolan discusses the women authors who changed the sentimental genre: Edith Wharton, Louisa May Alcott, Willa Cather, Kate Chopin, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. She shows how their "experiments" in the novel produced "sophisticated hybrid forms" (574). Cather participates in "significant debates about society and nation" (579), and Gilman presents "plans[s] for social reform, with solutions that radically reconfigure domestic architecture and reimagine domestic culture" (581). Novels became a site for social reform.

Nolan's chapter promotes women writers and their ownership and revolution of a literary genre that had been designed to subjugate them in service of the narrative of nationalism; but there is an author that is noticeably absent from this lineup of extraordinary people: Mary Austin. Like her contemporaries, Austin authored sentimental-hybrid novels that housed significant debates about society and social reform, yet neither she nor her work is mentioned. This is not the first time that Austin has been excluded, and I daresay it will not be the last. Nina Baym takes great effort in her exhaustive monograph, published the same year as Nolan's chapter, to give voice to Austin and hundreds of other previously silenced women writers. She openly admits that she sacrifices depth for breadth so that these historically silenced voices can finally be heard (2). I applaud both of

these scholars' accomplishment of bringing women authors to the forefront. However, there is still the case of Nolan's exclusion and Baym's lack of depth. Both participate in continuing a long tradition of omitting Austin and her work from critical conversations that she should rightly figure.

According to more recent scholarship, the most obvious reason for this omission is because she eludes and resists categorization on almost every level and because of the agendas of male publishers and critics. Stacy Alaimo maintains that Austin wrote in direct opposition to conservative, domestic ideology by "interrogating accepted notions of womanhood and the nature of gender" (74). Janis P. Stout insists that critics have neglected Austin and her work because of her "unconventional" behaviors and the "ardency" with which she rebelled against prescriptive norms (77). Nancy Morrow cites the "prejudice of establishment literary critics toward regional writers" to explain the lack of serious attention on the Austin canon (18). Nicole Tonkovich suggests that Austin "explored new ways of thinking and writing," and that the boundaries that she pushed in her personal life likely contributed to her limited success in the "masculine enclaves of art, religion, and politics" (16-17). Melody Graulich asserts that Austin's work has been overlooked because "she wrote in undefinable genres about borderless subjects" (xii).<sup>1</sup> Whether due to her hybridization of genres, her reconceptualization of gender and early twentieth-century conventions, or her blatant rebellion against the patriarchal establishment, Austin was consistently and actively censored and muffled for decades.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Cheney reiterates this exact sentiment. Austin, she writes, "worked in genres as borderless and indefinable as the land she described" (83).

In the last 20 years, a handful of scholars have championed the many works that Austin authored. In 1999, Melody Graulich and Elizabeth Klimasmith compiled a collection of essays on Mary Austin. Jean Cheney observes that this monograph marked a “turning point in Austin scholarship” as it was the first time that “new scholarly approaches” and “serious attention” had been paid to Austin’s lesser-known works (86). Graulich introduced the book with this quote by Ansel Adams who was a contemporary of Austin’s: “She’s a ‘future’ person—one who will, a century from now, appear as a writer of major stature in the complex matrix of American culture”.<sup>2</sup> When he said this, she notes, only one of Austin’s works was in circulation, yet he could see how important and influential Austin would become. This sentiment has been reiterated and modified over time, but critics agree that Austin is an important part of American literary history and her time is coming.<sup>3</sup>

Mary Austin was a writer during the turn of the twentieth century. She was an Illinois native, but moved west when she was nineteen. College educated, Austin wrote novels, short stories, poems, essays, and dramas. She is widely known for her nature writing, feminist writing, and for depicting regionalism and local color. As an early feminist and social activist, she rebelled against oppressive power in all forms, and supported Native American rights. Austin was acquainted with other notable writers of the time, like Willa Cather for instance, and she is known to have stayed at the famed artist colony in Carmel, California with Jack London and George Sterling. Austin’s first book, *Land of Little Rain*,

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<sup>2</sup> Ansel Adams (1968), quoted from Graulich’s introduction to *Exploring Lost Borders* (xi).

<sup>3</sup> Graulich states that Austin’s work will “become more visible only when the proper vocabulary and context” allows it (xii)

was her most popular and it continues to be the work that she is most known for. It is a collection of essays about Austin's observations of the American southwest and it exhibits the regionalism and realism that is indicative of her particular style. Austin and Ansel Adams co-authored *Taos Pueblo* which was an exclusive documentation of the Taos Indians. The pair published only one-hundred copies of the book and sold copies during the Great Depression for \$75, the equivalent of around \$1000 today.

Austin may have been personally acquainted with some of the most notable writers and artists of her time, but she often struggled to promote and publish her work. As I have shown, writers note that male-dominated publishing houses, male-dominated literary fields, and a conservative readership explain the silence surrounding Austin and her work.<sup>4</sup> Karen S. Langlois adds that Austin struggled to publish certain pieces because they clashed with popular ideologies of the time. If publishers, or their wives, believed a novel to be too progressive, they would refuse to publish it.<sup>5</sup> Austin did not encounter as many of these issues with her nature writing as she did with her impassioned feminist writings, which were thought to be immoral. "In determining the morality of a novel," Langlois writes, "publishers considered several questions, including whether the work supported or subverted traditional values and 'sacred' institutions such as

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<sup>4</sup> Glenda Riley implies that male publishers were more likely to publish the work of male authors because they viewed the land in a similar way. Only a few early critics recognized Austin as a nature writer and, instead, focused more on John Muir. Riley explains that this connection between these writers has been made before, which says something about Austin's real talent and caliber (15). Faith Jaycox claims that Austin's "challenge to gender ideology" was "too radical for large numbers of women reader" (10).

<sup>5</sup> Langlois relays an anecdote about *A Woman of Genius*, saying that "it was withdrawn four months later [after its publication] when the wife of one of the publishers complained that Olivia's behavior was 'immoral'" (85).

marriage and the family. Novels containing sexual themes were often criticized on moral grounds” (“Mary Austin’s *A Woman of Genius*” 81). Austin’s work, her novels especially, subverted traditional institutions. When she wasn’t writing about Native American lives, she wrote about women’s struggle in marriage and the family. Her radical notions of gender equality, divorce and reproductive rights, and sexual freedom clashed with the socially conservative-minded.

Cheney observes that there was an Austin renaissance in the 1980s (84). Feminist scholars identified ideologies that they had in common with Austin woven throughout her canon. As the years progressed and the fervor of feminist theory calmed, scholarly attention lessened and diffused to include ecocritical, ecofeminist, and Marxist-feminist critiques. Austin’s work lends itself to myriad fields of study which is most evident in Graulich and Klimasmith’s *Exploring Lost Borders*. The importance of their book to Austin scholarship cannot be overstated. For students, it will prove to be a helpful entrance into both Austin’s work and related current critical conversations. As valuable as their work is, however, there is, much like past scholarship, a gap in research.

Mary Austin offers insight to the era’s anxieties in three of her early novels: *Isidro* (1905), *Santa Lucia* (1908), and *A Woman of Genius* (1912). These works resist categorization through their deviations from the conventions of the genres from which they draw, and their heroines resist categorization through their queer performativity. Investigating the boundaries between ideological spaces (1800s to 1900s, sentimental to Modern, domestic to public, depicted experiences to lived experiences, male to female), queer theory—with its

theoretical framework of questioning how “normal” is defined and enforced—lends itself to this work. Using queer theory, I examine deviations from normative gender identities and performances within the novels. I argue that Austin protests a perceived lack in agency and autonomy and that she suggests new options for living and being that surpasses genders and generations. It is my goal to enrich the growing body of literary criticism on Austin’s work with a fresh look at these terrific novels, and to contribute to the burgeoning queer studies field.

### **Queer Theory**

Discussions surrounding these three novels in particular are heavily centered on Austin’s feminism. On *Isidro*, Tonkovich disagrees with past evaluations of the novel because they dismiss the “profound and complex social consciousness” therein for Austin’s supposed “mature feminism” in her later narratives (2). On *Santa Lucia*, Stout questions Austin’s feminism because by the novel ends on a “counter-feminist note” with one suicide and two marriages (85). On *A Woman of Genius*, Marrow contends that, because Olivia defines her own goodness as a woman based on her pursuit of her destiny as a woman of genius, it ends with an “explicitly feminist message” (27). Klimasmith implies that *A Woman of Genius*’s fledgling feminism is nuanced because of Olivia’s struggle to reconcile her religious background with her desire to have a sexual relationship outside of the confines of marriage (146).

Regardless of the theoretical approach that critics use, it invariably includes a feminist slant. cursory internet research reveals a unanimous conclusion: Austin was a feminist and her work furthered propagated her evolving

depictions of feminism. To these critics I say, “Yes, but is that all she is? Is that all she contributes? Is that all that you see?” If Austin was such a forward thinker, and if her work is so intersectional and borderless, then why do critics insist upon using analytic approaches within the feminist vein? Why do they repeatedly place her work within the boundaries of feminism? Continuing to impose feminist analyses on an author who has confounded critics for decades seems counterintuitive and reductive. Surely, there must be more there than varying shades of feminism.

In an attempt to stimulate an alternative line of critical discourse on Austin, I engage her first three novels using concepts of queer theory. Stephen Valocchi reminds us that applying a queer lens allows us to ask new questions of old texts and gives us “new ways of thinking about old concepts” (753). Patrick Dilley writes that queer theory is a lens through which we can “analyze a situation or text to determine the relationship between sexuality, power, gender, conceptions of normal and deviant, insider and outsider” (458). Deviating from normative concepts is what both Austin and her works have been known for in the past; likewise, thinking about old concepts in new ways is precisely the cultural work that Austin undertakes in *Isidro*, *Santa Lucia*, and *A Woman of Genius*, which is why they lend themselves to such an approach. Through the theoretical framework that queer theory offers, we can identify the way Austin’s characters construct and perform identity to service or destabilize norms. Additionally, queer theory’s notion of performativity allows us to examine the ways that identity is constructed and performed to service or destabilize social norms.

Historically, queer theory has been known for its focus on sexuality. More recently, theorists have moved beyond sexuality to include gender, identity and other concepts such as history and time. In his fascinating application of queer theory, Jordan Alexander Stein argues that history, in and of itself, is queer. He writes:

history surely can obey the logic of temporal sequence, but it can also accommodate other kinds of temporalities: history can be cyclical, circular, recursive, or reincarnated; history can be continuous, discontinuous, or interrupted; history can be eventful or everyday; history can be lost, recovered, revised, or rewritten. With only a few exceptions, time is organized by consecutive sequence; but history is not necessarily so. As far as time is concerned, 1989 was followed by 1990. As far as history is concerned, there is an open question as to whether the difference between these dates actually matters. (857)

As this passage demonstrates, the application of queer theory goes beyond sexuality. But, as Judith Halberstam shows, a person's sexuality can affect time as well. She explains that queer time is most evident in gay communities "whose horizons of possibility have been severely

diminished by the AIDS epidemic [...] And yet queer time, even as it emerges from the AIDS crisis, is not only about compression and annihilation; it is about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing. (2)



A heteronormative conceptualization of time envisions life that occurs over many decades and that experiences specific events, such as marriage and childrearing. As the gay community dealt with the horrifying effects of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, individuals no longer had the luxury of decades; consequently, people saw time differently, as compressed. This might be one reason why gay men are viewed as overdramatic. The residual anxiety of compressed time causes highs to be higher and lows to be lower.

What queer theory offers to a critical examination of Austin's three novels in particular is the work that it does with binary systems and performativity. In Austin's lived experience, popular ideologies perpetuated the hierarchical separation of men and women, male and female, masculine and feminine. Her novels destabilize not only the hierarchical view of man as superior and women as inferior, but it destabilizes the masculine-feminine dichotomy. Additionally, Austin's heroines play with idea of identity as a performance, or performativity. The theory of performativity is another tool from queer theory that will help inform my discussion of identity. Performativity, from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, holds that identity is not in-born but it is performed. An agent (person) perceives their culture's signs (language) and conventions (behaviors) and then performs identity using knowledge of these signs and conventions. Throughout the course of a lifetime, a person tends to perform certain signs and conventions repeatedly. It is through these repeated performances that their identity is constructed.

When I read *Isidro*, *Santa Lucia*, and *A Woman of Genius*, feminism is not the primary or most significant thing that I see. Austin challenges patriarchal ideologies and hierarchical power structures—all feminist causes. But she criticizes these ideologies, she resists these hierarchical powers, and she reconceptualizes identity through queer performativity and binary deconstruction. Where other critics focus on how Austin's work affects women, I focus on how it affects identity and culture in general. What draws me to these three novels is their heroines: Jacinta, William, and Olivia. They reside in a world that is haunted by the rigid conservatism of their mothers' past and dominated by the oppressive men of their patriarchal hegemonic present. As women living during the turn of the twentieth-century, they have few rights or freedoms, so they participate in the institutions that set out to subjugate them. But even as they marry or have children, each of them resists the traditional conceptualization of identity that her culture tries to force on her, and they accomplish this resistance through their queer performativity.

The following chapters are largely focused on queer close readings of the heroines in *Isidro*, *Santa Lucia*, and *A Woman of Genius*, with some variation. In Chapter 1, I examine Austin's sentimental-western hybrid and I analyze Jacinta and Isidro's gender performances. *Isidro* was Austin's first and most commercially novel in her lifetime. Given the homoerotic subtext and Austin's conservative readership, this commercial success is revealing. Chapter 2 focuses less on generic form because Austin positions *Santa Lucia* firmly within the sentimental genre through her use of setting and plot. The juxtaposition of genre

with queer performativity suggests that this may be Austin's most gender-queer novel. *A Woman of Genius* has been declared Austin's most feminist novel by many critics. In Chapter 3, I explicate trends in feminist analyses next to my queer reading of Olivia's character, showing how these similar critical approaches highlight different elements of her identity. Together, these readings demonstrate the various authorial moves that Austin employed as protest of oppressive power structures. Austin experienced and overcame tremendous personal, social, and professional obstacles, yet both she and her work are discussed over a century later. This project is a testament to her extraordinary perseverance and resilience.

## Chapter 1 - *Isidro*

Before publishing *Isidro*, Austin had already received a certain degree of notoriety for her nature writing in *Land of Little Rain* and, as recently as 2012, critics are still mulling over the generic intricacies and discrepancies in this first collection of essays. Austin positions herself as an observer of the wide expanses, unforgivable terrain, and memorable cultures that she had come to know during her time in the southwest. This first book, a collection of lyrical essays is, as Beverly Hume notes, a “hybrid naturalist text” (62). According to Hume, *Land of Little Rain* is a hybrid text in that it inspires a raised awareness for “living in harmonious co-existence with others, both human and non-human,” which is what nature writing typically sets out to accomplish, but in that it also represents romanticized depictions of the southwest, which are not typically found in nature writing (74).

Austin’s works have proven difficult for scholars to analyze and categorize. Graulich says exactly this in her informative introduction to a book of critical essays on Austin (xii). Hume points out the generic intersectionality of *Land of Little Rain* and, as a result, decides that it is a hybrid genre because it is nature writing, but it is a romanticized representation of the genre due to its idealized depictions of the southwest and the people therein.<sup>6</sup> Janis P. Stout shows how *Isidro* sends “mixed messages” because the heroine’s conflicted gender performances contrast with the conventional ending of a heterosexual marriage with traditional gender roles (82). Jean Cheney even opens her review of current

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<sup>6</sup> “Perhaps partly because Austin herself so resists categorization, most of her critics position her at the intersections of a variety of perspectives [...] Austin was once largely overlooked because she wrote in undefinable genres about borderless subjects” (xii).

criticism on Austin by noting that Austin's work "has always resisted categorization" (83). In fact, if there is one thing that scholars seem to agree on it is that Austin's works consistently elude definitive classifications or boundaries of any kind.

Because Austin's works are so difficult to pin down, scholars have often overlooked the canon, and have instead focused on her more famous peers, such as Willa Cather and John Muir. These authors, unlike Austin, are easier to place in terms of genre, period, and other defining categories. Graulich suggests that scholars overlook the Austin canon because they do not know what to do with her. She observes that scholars have overlooked Austin in the past because they simply do not know where to place her in terms of genre, period, or other defining categories: "she wrote in undefinable genres about borderless subjects" (xii).<sup>7</sup> But Graulich does not fault scholars. Instead, she attributes their avoidance to the fact that the critical vocabulary has not caught up with Austin (xii). She hypothesizes that when our language, ideologies, and theories finally do catch up to these undefinable spaces that Austin writes about, critical conversations will grow naturally and will thus include Austin's undefinable genres. It seems then that these undefinable works require an analytical tool that focuses specifically on the myriad ways in which they deviate from normative conventions.

In 1905, Austin released her first novel, *Isidro*, which, judging by the number of copies sold, was her most widely read work.<sup>8</sup> However, *Land of Little Rain* has proven to have more staying power than her other works and is thus

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<sup>7</sup> Cheney says that Austin works in "genres as borderless and undefinable as the land she describes" (83).

<sup>8</sup> Tonkovich notes that *Isidro* sold nearly twice as many copies as Austin's other work (3).

considered her most famous work to date.<sup>9</sup> Where the desert features prominently in *Land of Little Rain*, and then serves as the setting in *The Basket Woman*, it takes on a more active role in Austin's first novel as it propels the plot and develops characters. In this uninhabitable wilderness, towns are sprinkled far and wide, forcing characters to travel for days at a time, often alone, exposed, and vulnerable. In this parched stretch of land, access to water is paramount, causing characters to either utilize the life-giving ponds and springs or to perish. In this unforgiving terrain, characters must adapt or get left behind. Everyone is in constant motion, stopping only when necessary. Not only are characters constantly drifting to and fro across geographical boundaries, they drift between the boundaries of ethnicity, culture, and gender.

Because there is so much within *Isidro* that pushes the boundaries of style, genre, and normative early twentieth century conventions, critics have come at it from different directions: feminism, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, regionalism and so on. *Exploring Lost Borders* brings together a collection of critical essays on Austin's work, showing the varying approaches to the canon more recently. As the title suggests, these essays explore the ways Austin's works cross myriad borders including genre, politics, and identity. Of the border crossing in *Isidro*, Nicole Tonkovich views these crossings in religion, politics, and identity as metaphors for fluctuating power within these realms during which the novel is set. Where early reviews of *Isidro* remark on the seemingly unremarkable characters and plots, Tonkovich argues that it is "profound and complex" in its social

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<sup>9</sup> Stout mentions that *Land of Little Rain* is the work that Austin is best known for (77).

consciousness (2). While I applaud the intensity and care with which Tonkovich defends and reads *Isidro*, her critique centers mostly on how the characters function as metaphors for religious and political unrest in 1905. As a result, she misses the opportunity to explore the effects that the desert has on Jacinta's gender performance. This gap in research is not lost on Tonkovich, however. Her conclusion leaves room for such explorations in the future: "*Isidro* emerges as a novel of great potential interest to a generation of scholars who study performances of gender as well as those interested in Austin and the West" (18).

In this chapter, I use queer theory to examine gender performance in *Isidro*. In the case of this novel, queer theory highlights not only the unconventional performances of gender, but also her disruption of the conventions of genre. Austin queers the sentimental-western hybrid genre through her queer characters, and presents a nuanced understanding of life in the American West during the early twentieth century; she implies that gender performativity in the early 1900s is more complex, more fluid than is often assumed. First, I show how the novel conforms to and deviates from the sentimental novel genre by combining it with the western genre. Next, I analyze gender performances. Finally, I end with a discussion about the implications that this queer reading has on our understanding of gender and identity and genre boundaries during this period.

Nina Baym offers a brief yet comprehensive breakdown of *Isidro*'s more exciting plot points: it is a "historical adventure-romance whose cross-dressing foundling heroine, Jacinta, has been raised by a shepherd. There are murders,

captures, false accusations, a forest fire, Mission Indians and renegade Indians, faithful Mexicans, with the Carmel mission in its heyday at the center” (199). This sounds exciting indeed; however, Austin spends ample time developing and weaving these stories and events together in no less than 425 pages. The novel is less action packed than Baym’s description lets on. Even so, the story is entertaining from its murderous beginning to its matrimonious end.

This chapter focuses on the following plot points. Isidro encounters El Zarzo in the southwest and they strike up a close friendship. Delphina discovers that El Zarzo is really Jacinta in disguise moments before Jacinta is kidnapped by Mascado, who is a family friend and has known her identity all along. Delphina tells Isidro of Jacinta’s identity and her whereabouts, and he finds and rescues her. To protect both of their reputations, they marry. Isidro intends to fulfill his vow to become a priest, but is kidnapped by Mascado during his travels to the Mission. Jacinta wears El Zarzo’s clothes, for they are easier to ride and fight in, and rides to rescue Isidro. She finds him in the midst of a battle over territory and her father, due to a misguided attempt to save her from the battle, lights the surrounding forest on fire to drive everyone out into the plains. Mascado dies in the fire, Isidro and Jacinta survive. The novel ends in typical sentimental fashion: the rich and happy couple sail off to Mexico where they live with their progeny in peace.



Sentimental novels were popular long before Austin wrote *Isidro*, and were still popular in the 1900s.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Western dime novels were increasing in popularity. Of course she would utilize the narrative tools that she had, but genres have boundaries. As we have seen, and will continue to see, Austin blends genres and writes within and around the boundaries of these genres. My queer reading of *Isidro* addresses the trouble scholars have had in trying to classify Austin's work due to the undefinable, boundary crossing that occurs in almost everything she wrote. Using this theory allows us to acknowledge generic conventions from which Austin draws while, at the same time, providing us with the theoretical space for her to deviate from those conventions and the theoretical vocabulary to talk about it. *Isidro* is a sentimental-western hybrid, and Austin queers the very genre that she creates by going against the conventions of both genres.

### ***Isidro* as a Sentimental Novel**

The generic markers for a sentimental novel according to Cindy Weinstein's "Sentimentalism" are pretty straightforward. Novels that are often categorized as sentimental share similar tropes: crying, successful marriage, unsuccessful marriage, and death—which is often a result of the bad marriage.<sup>11</sup> We see all of this in *Isidro*. When Delfina discovers that El Zarzo is a girl, she begins to speak of Isidro in disgust for having traveled alone in the desert with

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<sup>10</sup> Crane mentions that sentimental novels were often best-sellers that were written for the mass market and were often commercially successful (103)

<sup>11</sup> Cameron Elizabeth Moon and Jennifer Paff Ogle elaborate on traditional nineteenth-century feminine behavior, which includes "emotional reactions to danger, gestures of weakness and distress, dependence on and deference to male protectors, and engagement in domestic activities" (115).

her. A soon-to-be priest has no business traveling alone with a woman and, in doing so, he would sully both of their reputations, hers more than his. Delfina hints to the trouble that both will be in for their immodest behavior, and Jacinta replies with the only crying that she knows how to do: “she had begun to twist and wring her hands, with a kind of breathy moan, as on in great distress and unaccustomed to the use of tears [and she] continued to wring her hands and cry brokenly without tears [...] quaking sobs” (176-177). The life that she had pledged to Isidro is suddenly in danger which causes her to cry. Life as El Zarzo, as a boy, required her to be stoic, emotionless. Though she feels a flood of emotion, she reacts with restlessness rather than tears. She reacts as the masculine El Zarzo rather than the feminine Jacinta.

Isidro and Jacinta are joined in a “marriage of convenience” in order to save both their reputations, fitting into Weinstein’s bad marriage category. After Isidro is released from prison—he had been falsely accused of murder—he learns that his loyal Zarzito is in fact a girl and has been kidnapped by a mutual acquaintance: Mascado. Fearing for his reputation as a “clean and honorable youth” who had “all the high and formal breeding which runs in pure Castilian blood,” he rescues her with the intention of marrying her (206-207). After the rescue, Isidro rides them to the San Antonio Mission to marry her. Cringing at the thought of a loveless marriage, even to this man whom she’d already pledged her life to, “her maidenhood cried out” (234). In marrying Jacinta, knowing that he will still be a priest, Isidro traps her in a virgin and companionless existence. Had Jacinta wanted to marry Isidro, this might not be considered a bad marriage. She

doesn't want to marry him though, because she knows that they both prefer her as a boy (246). It is a bad marriage for both of them.

By the novel's end, there is death and good marriage. Mascado kidnaps Isidro, and Jacinta dons her boyish identity to track him down and rescue him—an interesting character swap on which I will expand later. During the rescue, a forest fire erupts. Mascado, injured from a battle, falls behind as others run from the intense blaze and is lost behind a “curtain of smoke and flame” which implies that he is dead (390). Isidro and Jacinta take shelter, wading into a large pond alongside the fauna. At this time, Isidro calls her his “Heart's Dearest” and kisses her with a “tender passion,” igniting the flames of passion that burn between the couple throughout the rest of the novel (394). Later, she “wore her love nakedly and gloried in it” (418). Much later, she “kept at home with her young children” (422). The good marriage is achieved.

Crying, death, and good/bad marriages aside, *Isidro* fits into the sentimental genre in other ways as well. Weinstein notes that sentimentalism “demands” its novels to end in marriage, which results in “femme covert,” meaning that the husband takes his wife's property, money, name, and identity (212). Upon their marriage, Jacinta surrenders her fortune and her name to her husband. Her boyish identity, which she fiercely holds on to for much of the novel, is all but erased as soon as she realizes her love for Isidro. After stepping into the role of mother, neither the readers nor the other characters from the novel see her again.

According to Gregg Crane, another marker of the sentimental genre is conversion, which is something that we also see in *Isidro*. Conversions are moments of an intense flood of emotion which “transforms the individual, revealing moral truths and human connections previously ignored by or invisible to the convert” (104). What Crane explains here is that while conversion scenes in sentimental novels are typically religious, this is not always the case. When a flood of emotion changes a character and allows them to recognize something that was previously unrecognizable to them, this can be considered a conversion moment as well.

The novel’s heroine undergoes many transformations throughout the novel, but one of the most striking is in a conversion-like scene. As Jacinta and Isidro take cover in a pond during a forest fire, she experiences intense emotion. She has recently discovered that she is the daughter of a prominent man and the heiress of a sizable fortune. She learns that two of her traveling companions perish in the fire. She finally recognizes her romantic feelings for Isidro, whom she had married in order to escape the scandal that would surely result from their unchaperoned traveling through the southwest. As the forest burns around them, Isidro reveals his romantic feelings for Jacinta and promises her that he will always be by her side, and they share their first kiss—even though they have been married for a couple of weeks (394). After the fire dies down, Jacinta bids farewell to a deer that had hidden in the pond as well. She hugs his neck, blesses him, and makes the sign of the cross across his chest. After this scene, she

emerges from the water into the smoky, still smoldering forest and is a new woman (399).

This scene is an example of conversion according to Crane. Jacinta experiences a flood of emotions which cause her to change. Even though her conversion is not religious—she is already a Christian—the religious imagery is unmissable. In what could be considered a baptism, she goes into the water with a priestly figure and emerges changed. Blessings are made, as is the sign of the cross. But this is more of an identity conversion than a religious one. Before Jacinta enters the water, there is much uncertainty in her life. She is Mexican but has been raised in the ways of her Native American foster mother. She is a girl who feels more comfortable as a boy and is often mistaken for a boy. She is married to someone she doesn't have romantic feelings for. After her flood of emotions during the fire, Jacinta's character changes. She accepts her heritage, she becomes a woman in the traditional sense, and she instantly has deep and intense feelings of romantic love for her husband. Her morals embrace traditional womanhood and pride in her heritage. Her devoutness is to her husband. She is converted.

On the one hand, *Isidro* is absolutely a sentimental novel. There is crying, marriage, conversion, and other conventions of the genre. It contains all of the markers of the genre according to both Weinstein and Crane. Additionally, Crane notes that sentimental novels typically follow the default template of "a young woman struggling to make her way in life without the support of a traditional

family” (113). This is certainly the case with Austin’s *Isidro*. But by the novel’s end, Jacinta gains a traditional family, a fortune, and a faithful Christian husband.

### ***Isidro* as a Western Novel**

On the other hand, *Isidro* isn’t only a sentimental novel. There are far too many ways in which Austin goes against the conventions of the genre, and when she does go against these conventions it is distinct. When Austin drifts outside of the sentimental genre, she integrates aspects of the early twentieth-century western dime novel genre. About the west, Karen Jones reminds us that it is typically associated with “independent and vigorous frontiersmen, paragons of American manifest destiny and masculinity as exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt and Buffalo Bill Cody” (37). Western novels from this era typically include the unapologetic exclusion of women, homosocial relationships and homoerotic subtext, and riding around the west with *caballeros*—Spanish or Mexican gentlemen who ride horses. Dimes represent fictional people or places, regionalism or “local color,” and cross-dressing women. *Isidro* has all of these things.

Austin largely excludes women from the novel, ironic considering it is in part about a girl. There are many men. It would be tedious to list all of them, but the most prominent men are Isidro, Mascado, and the Commandant (Jacinta’s father). Also included are the many priests, mountain men, trappers, riding companions, and soldiers, all of whom are men. In fact, of the dozens of characters, there are only a handful of women, most of whom do not feature prominently, have very little speaking parts, and are almost always in domestic

spaces: houses, courtyards, and the like. Even Jacinta, who is the most visible girl in the novel, spends nearly half of the novel disguised as a boy. The absence of women is only one way that Austin integrates the western genre into *Isidro*.

Since there is an excess of men in the novel, homosocial relationships are a natural consequence. Austin had any number of professions that she could have bestowed on Isidro, but she makes him a priest in training. As such, Isidro has a close relationship with the priests who train him. Austin does not stop there. Isidro also strikes up relationships with various men who he meets on the road during his travels throughout the southwest. It isn't until we meet Delphina, nearly halfway through the novel, that we encounter a woman. There is, of course, Jacinta; however, she presents herself as the masculine El Zarzo up until that point. So while there technically is a girl present for much of the novel, and the novel itself does focus on her story, we the readers (and the other characters as well) consider her a boy most of the time. And, when Jacinta is El Zarzo, the relationships between El Zarzo and other men function as homosocial.

The most obvious convention of a western novel is, of course, people riding around the West on horses; there is no shortage of that in *Isidro*. As the characters ride from central California to Texas and Mexico, they do so on their various steeds. More than just the inclusion of horses, Austin also incorporates other western customs such as lasso wielding horsemen rescuing damsels in distress and the classic conflict between natives and newcomers. There is a duel of lassoes when Isidro rescues Jacinta from the villainous Mascado in which Isidro wins and leaves Mascado tied up in the desert. There is also guerilla

warfare between a band of Native American outcasts who are trying to assert their claim to their lands and the local militia which is mostly made up of Spanish and Mexican soldiers who are trying to take the land.

Austin uses conventions of the dime western as well, which has a long tradition of crossdressing heroines. Jefferson D. Slagle argues that such disguises are essential to the dime novel: “[dimes] often relied heavily on forms of textual disguise as a plot device. Characters in dime westerns are frequently disguised, mistaken, amnesiac, lost, or de-racialized, and the plots of individual dimes centre on the eventual revelation of the authentic self” (128). Martha Jane Canary, affectionately known as Calamity Jane, is one example of a crossdressing dime-novel heroine. This historical figure was prominently featured in the popular, and fictional, *Deadwood Dick* dime series. “Calamity Jane the hunter hero,” Karen Jones argues, “took hold of popular consciousness in the landscape of frontier mythology” (39). She wore men’s clothes, toted weapons, smoked, drank, and swore to the likes of her male travel companions both in dime novels and in her lived experience. Unlike Calamity’s larger-than-life persona, Jacinta cross-dresses as a means for survival. Still, we see vestiges of the dime’s crossdressing heroine in her character.

As is now apparent, *Isidro* has aspects of the sentimental genre as well as the western genre. Austin used the novel writing conventions available to her at the time, blending them together to create a sentimental-western hybrid. Based on this brief discussion of *Isidro*, it is easy to see what Graulich and other critics mean when they say that Austin writes in and around borders and boundaries.



Graulich also notes that due to the slippery nature of Austin's writing, scholars have declined to take it up. They simply might not have known what to do with it. Fortunately, this is no longer true. Up until relatively recently, we have lacked the theoretical framework to talk about the ways in which Austin blurs the lines not only of the genres in which she writes but also of the types of characters she creates. With the proliferation of queer theory, we now have ways to discuss the work that Austin does in her novels. Finally, our language, ideologies, and theories have caught up to these undefinable things that Austin writes in and about. And now, just as Graulich predicted, critical conversations about Austin's undefinable genres and characters are springing forth.

### **Queering the Sentimental-Western Hybrid**

One of the foundational concepts of queer theory is the attempt to observe and understand the complexity of identity. It is also used to describe the ways in which literature deviates from conventional categories and tropes. Since its conception in the 1980s, queer theory has been associated with gay and lesbian representations in literature; however, queer theory has grown to include more than the study of sexual orientation. Patrick Dilley writes that queer theory is a lens through which we can "analyze a situation or text to determine the relationship between sexuality, power, gender, conceptions of normal and deviant, insider and outsider" (458). Because this is a relatively new theory, and because we are always learning about new complexities of identity, the theory grows, making room for these complexities. When ideas about gender identity, performativity, and heteronormativity were introduced throughout the 90s and

early 2000s, it changed how scholars apply the queer critical lens. As our understanding of identity expands, our understanding of queer theory accommodates these new changes.

More recently, scholars have used queer theory to talk about the performance of identity in general or as it relates to gender and sexuality. A queer lens highlights the constructions of and deviations from normative identity categories with the intention of destabilizing such categories. I use a queer approach to *Isidro* because it provides the theoretical framework needed to analyze performativity, identity, and the blurring of boundaries that are indicative of Austin's writing style.

Even as *Isidro* creates the sentimental-western hybrid, there are aspects of the novel that seem to deviate from the very genres from which it draws. Crane notes that one major marker of the sentimental genre is the "unambiguous nature of its characters – their relative transparency and typicality" as well as their "fixity" (110). The main characters in *Isidro* are anything but unambiguous, typical, or fixed. In fact, they repeatedly deviate from the normative behavior of both the early 1900s as well as of the sentimental and western genres. The characters Isidro and Jacinta are ambiguous, complex, and ever-changing. So while the novel's setting and plot is a sentimental-western hybrid, the characters within the novel are something else entirely. Austin queers the very genre that she creates through the integration of queer characters. Even though the novel ends in heteronormative marriage—which is a traditional marriage between a masculine man and a feminine woman—a lot of queer things happen with gender and

identity performances along the way. The very fact that Austin blends these two genres together is unusual, because their basic generic tropes seem to be at odds with each other. But she reconciles these issues by placing ever-changing, gender queer characters in the middle. Her gender-queer characters bind opposing literary genres together.

Isidro Escobar, the youngest son of a wealthy, Castilian (read: white) family pledges himself to the priesthood. He takes readers on a journey through the southwest toward his future career, and it is through this journey that his homosocial, and eventually homoerotic, that he expresses his desires. Isidro's desire to live his life as a priest immediately removes the possibility of sex or marriage in his future. When we consider the sentimental genre from which Austin draws, Isidro's celibate career path queers the conventions of the genre, which demands that this very handsome protagonist get married. As a priest-to-be, Isidro is unable to fulfill this requirement of the genre. Austin removes these heteronormative life markers and places Isidro in a queer space, but one that is still accepted. Priest life is a career path that was by no means unusual during the heyday of the southwestern missions. It is unusual, however, that Austin uses a genre which normally ends in marriage, yet provides a main character who cannot satisfy that ending. So, even though Isidro will have a sexless, homosocial existence, Austin makes it work by giving him a career path that still supports the heteronormative status quo.

Austin creates tension by writing a homosocial celibate as the main character in a novel genre that requires marriage, suspending the possibility of

fulfillment for this requirement by writing a leading protagonist who will never marry. Readers suspect that the novel will end in marriage, but they cannot count on Isidro to satisfy this role because he is a celibate character. In addition to Isidro's inability to fulfill the marriage role of the genre, Austin increases tension by excluding female characters until about halfway through the novel. Of course, once readers discover that El Zarzo is actually Jacinta, we realize that the story has largely been about a boy and a girl, but that does not change the fact that Isidro and Jacinta function as a homosocial relationship during her time dressed as a boy. For much of the novel, Isidro is almost entirely homosocial. He is either with men, thinking about men, or wishing his wife was the man that she used to be.

After placing Isidro firmly in a sexless, homosocial space, Austin further queers his character with homosexual desire. For a time, Isidro struggles to reconcile Jacinta's female gender with her masculine performance that he has gotten to know. Immediately after learning El Zarzo's female gender, he stays calm because he is "too much confounded" (204). He doubts that El Zarzo is a girl because he only has the Delfina's word to go by (206). Readers too can see that he doubts this because he continues to refer to El Zarzo both by his pet name, "Lad," and by masculine pronouns, and because "El Zarzo's being a maid had not possessed his consciousness" even as he tracks Mascado to rescue her (208). He expresses disappointment and anger because she had not stayed a boy (209). She still appears "boyish enough to look at" in which he finds "confusion enough"

because he knows that he is a she (226-227). Even after Isidro marries Jacinta, he sometimes thinks of her as the “shy lad,” El Zarzo (250, 267, 349, 372).

One scene in particular highlights the fluidity with which Isidro thinks of his wife’s gender. As he lays prisoner, he daydreams:

If she were but stretched beside him on the brown litter,—of course that could not be since she was a girl,— but if the boy El Zarzo lay there beside him [...] they could watch the squirrels come and go, or read the fortunes of Urbano in the faces of his men. And in the early dark, when a musky smell arose from the crushed fern, they might hear the whisper of the water and piece out the sense of sundry chirrupings [sic] and rustlings in the trees,—and of course she might very well be lying there and no harm, for was she not his wife? (350)

Only after Jacinta returns to the male-gendered El Zarzo in his mind is Isidro able to imagine spending time and lying in the dark with him. Once Isidro catches himself daydreaming about lying next to a boy in the dark, he quickly convinces himself that his daydream is appropriate because he is married to the person he dreams about: El Zarzo, his lad. Notice that he does not correct El Zarzo’s gender to Jacinta. For Isidro, the appropriateness of the daydream does not lie in the fact that the person about which he daydreams is a male, but that the person is married to him.

In another scene, Isidro daydreams about El Zarzo and makes no gender corrections:

The air above the meadow was weighted with the scent of the sun-steeped fern; small broken winds wafted it to him, palpable, like wisps of blown hair. It recalled a day when a gust of warm sweet rain had sent him and the lad to shelter under a madroño on the hill above Monterey. They had to run for it, crowding against the tree bole shoulder to shoulder, with the boy's hair blown across his cheek. He was conscious of a thrill that flew in his heart at the recollection and settled there. (367-368)

A boy's hair blowing across his cheek is a rather insignificant moment, so it is curious that this event is solidified enough in Isidro's long-term memory for him to recall it later at the mere sniff of a fern. Isidro makes no attempt to correct his wife's gender in the memory, which implies homosexual desire.

While I am not arguing that Austin intentionally wrote homosexuality into *Isidro*, I am pointing out that Isidro's desire is stirred at the memory of his time spent with someone he believed was a boy. Daniel Worden argues that the Western produced "a unique masculinity that critiques normative gender roles and social conventions" (37). It seems, then, that Austin protests normative gender roles and social conventions through her use of the Western genre, which calls for queer iterations of gender performativity in its heroes. Even though Isidro knows El Zarzo is a female, he continues to refer her as "the lad" and "the boy." Moreover, his daydreams about El Zarzo stir his desire, which is overtly a queer move on Austin's part. Isidro thinks about things that are unusual according to both the traditional heteronormative gender roles during that time and the sentimental genre. The story ends as the genre dictates (in marriage), but we

cannot ignore the fact that for much of the novel Austin presents Isidro either with or thinking about men, boys, and his wife's masculinity. Isidro is a queer character indeed.

Isidro and Jacinta present the queer aspects of their identities in different ways. Isidro's queerness is largely internal. His homoerotic thoughts toward Jacinta's male identity, El Zarzo, complicate his heterosexuality and they support his queer identity performance. Jacinta, on the other hand, performs her queer identity outwardly through cross-dressing and through spending much of her time as a boy or wishing that she could continue perform as a boy. Her queer performativity is complex in its fluidity, and this fluidity is essential, and perhaps indicative of, the sentimental western hybrid narrative.

Similar to her construction of Isidro, Austin creates a genre-character conflict by drawing from the western genre and integrating a female character. Western novels are known for their absence of female characters, and yet this novel focuses a great deal on Jacinta and her journey through the southwest. So, we have a sentimental novel with a protagonist who cannot marry, and a western novel with a female lead. The very fact that Austin blends these two genres together is unusual, because their basic generic tropes seem to be at odds with each other. But she reconciles these issues by placing ever-changing, gender queer characters in the middle. In other words, it is through her gender queer characters that she binds two opposing literary genres together.

Judging by the danger that finds Jacinta when her gender is finally revealed, Austin presents the West as a dangerous place for women. Jacinta was

instructed by her adopted mother to dress as a boy because she believed that her adopted daughter would be safer in doing so (232, 298). The implications here are grim; life in the West is safer for men. Once Jacinta's gender is revealed, men throughout the novel (save for Isidro) travel toward her, like predators tracking their prey, with the intention of capturing a bride. Mascado and Valentin Delgado both traverse the southwest, seeking Jacinta. As we have seen, Mascado succeeds in capturing her, though he does not win her affection. Delgado, sent by a man who turns out to be Jacinta's father, follows her trail through Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey. He finds her, Doña Escobar, and intends to marry her by invalidating her unconsummated marriage to Isidro (299). He also does not win her affection. Her father also puts her in danger when he lights a small forest on fire in hope of driving her out into the open (380). One thing becomes increasingly clear: the West is no place for a woman.

Because the novel draws from the Western genre, we do not expect there to be female characters. Austin leads us further to this conclusion by focusing the novel on males, masculinity, homosociality, and by setting the story in a place that is unsafe for women. Austin gets around this issue by introducing the kind of woman who can survive the predators that are in the old West: the cross-dressing, sharp-tongued Jacinta.

No one can seem to pin her gender down. When Mascado rides to Las Chimineas with his captive, he feels her "budding breasts crushed against his bosom" causing him to react with the "passion of the primal man, double joy of the huntsman and lover" (180). His passion is squelched when Jacinta ceases to



struggle (181). Overlooking the troubling rape overtones, the significance of this moment is in the fact that this is the first time in the novel that Jacinta's female body is commented on. After refusing to react in "repulsion or compliance" to his sexual advances, Mascado stops viewing her as the female with budding breasts and begins to see her as a "graceless boy" (182). Jacinta continues to shift back and forth from boy to girl in the descriptions of the characters who gaze upon her. The first time Valentin sees her, the breeze pulls her dress to her body, revealing her "young curves" (293). Moments later, she seems to have a "young straight figure" (294). Then, she is a "beautiful young woman" and a "child" who sits "boyishly" (297). The speed at which descriptions of Jacinta shift from boyish to girlish are dizzying, and the ease with which she performs various levels of femininity and masculinity implies that Austin doesn't view gender as a rigid dichotomy of masculine and feminine, male or female. In the southwest, change is a matter of survival. And Jacinta is the ultimate survivor.

Following a chain of convenient events in the second to last chapter, Jacinta settles, unconvincingly, into her female identity where she remains. The dangers that required Jacinta's gender-shifting cease to exist once she recognizes her love for her husband. Isidro professes his love to her; Mascado dies; and Isidro claims her as his bride (pledging his life to her rather than God). She has no more suitors, and she is claimed by a rich man who loves her. The West is no longer a dangerous place for her. Baptized in fire and water, she emerges from the smoldering forest as Doña Escobar and becomes the ideal feminine woman. Later, we see her look upon her husband "as to a saint" as she pledges her life to him—

forever (421). That Jacinta becomes the perfect, adoring wife so quickly seems as heavy handed as it is unconvincing considering that she spends most of the novel reveling in her boyishness.

Jacinta's gender performance moves beyond mere masculinity and into cross-dressing and fantasizing about being a different gender entirely. She continues to see herself as a boy even when her female biology is revealed. Both of these things are unusual according to the idealized heteronormative gender roles for women during that time. Even though she marries Isidro and accepts her role as his wife, she spends most of the novel as a boy—both in her performance and in Isidro's dreams.

*Isidro's* kidnapping scenes also work to break down the gender boundaries between Jacinta and Isidro, placing them in a similar theoretical space and implying that they might both function as similar characters. After capturing Jacinta, Mascado is discouraged by her lack of fight (182). Refusing to show emotion, Jacinta speaks to Mascado as though she is utterly bored with her situation—"Mend your fire, Mascado; it smokes like a lazy mahala's [local expression meaning 'woman']" (190). Later, Mascado reveals that he intends to marry her. "Mascado," she replies, "you are a fool [...] is it your purpose to keep me tied up forever and a day that you may cook and clean for me, like *el cojo viejo* [old man]" (191). Here, she berates him by ordering him around and calling him "woman" and "old man." Even though she is his captive, we see here that she commands power over him and he goes back to seeing her as boyish. Mascado goes hunting in order to avoid further abuses (192). Similar to Jacinta, Isidro

taunts Mascado during his time as a captive. Isidro “mocked him [... which] frothed his anger white” (347). Mascado does not avoid Isidro’s abuses, however. Instead, he chooses to spend more time with him and begins to see Isidro as somewhat of a female (351).

The queer elements occurring in these two scenes are made more obvious when examined next to each other. Jacinta and Isidro occupy similar roles as Mascado’s captives, but their relationship with their captor is different. She verbally abuses him when she is his prisoner, which causes him to revert back to viewing her as a boy and to avoid spending time within earshot. Isidro also berates his captor, which results in Mascado viewing Isidro as “womanish,” and causes a closer relationship between the men (351). In other words, Mascado avoids the girl who acts like a boy but is drawn to the man who he thinks acts like a girl. Austin queers her characters through complex gender-bending in this scene. We do not see the typical damsel/hero tropes that we find in Western literature where the hero is a heteronormative male who rescues a heteronormative female. Instead, Austin’s triangle depicts varying masculine characters who run to and from each other.

## **Conclusion**

What kind of novel is *Isidro* then? On the one hand, the evidence from these gender-bending characters and scenes indicates that this novel does not fit the heteronormative gender roles or relationship dynamics that the sentimental genre calls for, nor does it comply to normative Western generic conventions, even though it draws from both genres. On the other hand, the novel ends with a

masculine man and a feminine girl sailing off on their honeymoon utterly smitten with each other—the ultimate happy ending according to the critics of the genre, discussed at length early in this chapter. At once, *Isidro* is sentimental and not sentimental, western and not western, traditional and non-traditional, supporting and subverting heteronormative ideologies. It is a sentimental-western hybrid, queered.

Austin's first novel sets an interesting precedent of queer gender performativity in the early twentieth-century West. It plays with the space between boundaries and it reveals that these boundaries are not as rigid or clearly defined as we might think. At every level, she refuses to conform. She bucks tradition and normative conventions, and she blurs the lines between boundaries. She writes at the intersection of literary genres and she presents identities that drift along various axes of gender and sexuality. Austin complicates our assumptions about rigid gender roles around the turn of the twentieth-century, and she inspires us to reexamine our assumptions about the history of gender and sexuality, both in literature and in lived experiences. In the next chapter, I provide an extensive close reading of William's queer performativity and I illustrate how Austin reimagines her progressive ideas about gender and identity.

## Chapter 2 – *Santa Lucia*

In *Isidro*, Jacinta cross-dresses as a matter of survival, which raises the question: what does queer performativity look like in the absence of physical danger? Moreover, what inspires one to queer conventional gender roles in the early 1900s, when the patriarchal status quo depends upon codified and highly stylized performances of gender? These questions are at the center of Austin's second novel, *Santa Lucia*. We see what queer performativity looks like in a sleepy, Edenic central California town in the Santa Lucia Valley. There are no caballeros or battles over land or culture here, but performing gender against socially prescribed norms occurs nevertheless.

Where Austin uses the sentimental-western hybrid genre in her first novel to present queer performativity in the West, she situates her second novel more firmly within the sentimental genre. *Santa Lucia* focuses on realism, character relationships, emotion, and morality, which is typical of the sentimental genre. Crane notes that the sentimental ideal is to find and maintain a caring and healthy home (113). Marriage is a central trope here, but Austin reimagines it by providing us with a heroine who questions the institution of marriage and by challenging what a "healthy home" traditionally has been.<sup>12</sup> This shift in generic form, away from the western and toward sentimental realism, affects performativity in different ways. Unlike Jacinta, William does not embody a male persona in order to survive the dangers of the southwest, nor does she cast off the masculine aspects of her identity by the novel's end. Instead, she queers feminine

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<sup>12</sup> For more on writing trends in later sentimentalism, see Nolan.

codes of conduct by performing them according to her own standards rather than the standards set by other women of the town, and she marries without discarding her queer performance of femininity.

*Santa Lucia* is Austin's most benign novel in terms of generic form and plot; even so, this unassuming backdrop of domestic fiction produces its own variety of queer performativity that is no less significant. In this novel, William deviates from the normative expectations of her gender through her queer gender performance. She does not behave like a female Santa Lucian, she does not see marriage in the same ways as other female Santa Lucians do, she embodies the traditionally masculine hero trope, and her male name merely buttresses all of these socially gender-deviant behaviors. Austin proposes a new model of gender performativity that has less to do with survival in the old West, and more to do with autonomy in male-dominated societies. Austin questions outdated ideologies in an increasingly modern world and she presents a new marriage model for the twentieth century, one that does not depend on the subordination of feminine women or the domination of masculine men.

The major trend in critical discussions on *Santa Lucia* revolve around Austin's feminism. Janis P. Stout argues that the novel advocates for equality in marriage (84). Amy Cox echoes this sentiment, noting that Austin offers solutions to the problems inherent in the patriarchal marriage model (2). Both critics assess and analyze *Santa Lucia* in a feminist context, and in doing so they render readings which highlight the feminist aspects of the novel. Given that it was published during the first wave of feminism, it is not surprising that the themes

associated with the movement appear in the novel. It is a product of its time. But the scope of their readings leads them to exclude an important character from their analyses: William.

*Santa Lucia* is set in a central California valley and town, both of the same name. The plot follows the relationship of three friends: William, Serena, and Julia. William tries to find her place both in her home and in the town. Serena, William's closest friend, negotiates her role as a newlywed and as a prominent member of society. Julia discovers love and a hunger for excitement in an old friend only after marrying a professor at the local college. Marital tension, social discord, and gender-bending abound; all three women search for happiness and autonomy in a different American West than the one Austin is typically known for. *Santa Lucia* questions the patriarchal marriage model, which is why it lends itself so obviously to feminism; however, there is more at stake, and those feminist reads miss the opportunity to discuss other issues at hand, such as normativity and performativity.

The problem with the monopoly that feminist theory has on criticism surrounding the novel is that it is monotonous and exclusionary. Feminism sets out to liberate women from the strictures of oppressive androcentrism, but it can have the opposite effect. Riki Wilchins notes that feminism (and feminist theory) paradoxically ends up "imposing a new set of limits and restrictions" on women and men. "We," Wilchins adds, "only become acceptable social actors by conforming to one of these two roles" (131). Because feminism hinges upon defining what it liberates, it reinforces the woman-man binary by defining women

in opposition to men, and effectually marginalizes identities that do not easily fit into this narrow conceptualization of gender. Invariably, applying a feminist lens prevents the opportunity to discuss the identities that it marginalizes; instead of liberating women, it unintentionally regulates gender performances of both women and men.

*Santa Lucia* lends itself to myriad critical approaches.<sup>13</sup> Most, if not all, literary criticism on the novel uses a feminist approach, so the gap in research is extensive; consequently, scholarship opportunities are wide open. In an attempt to level the theoretical playing field of critical approaches to *Santa Lucia*, this chapter adopts a queer critical approach. Rather than defining or regulating male-female gender performances, queer theory conceptualizes gender as a spectrum. Because queer theory does not set out to prescribe gender categories, we can describe performativity without policing it. Women and men are given room to perform varying masculinities and femininities, and we can discuss other ways that identity is performed that may or may not have anything to do with gender. Queer theory, Patrick Dilley writes, is about questioning ideologies: “at its core, it is about questioning presumptions, values, and viewpoints from those positions (marginal and central), especially those that normally go unquestioned” (462). It challenges deeply held assumptions about normativity, what is defined as “normal.” So, while feminist theory is invaluable, queer theory potentially offers broader, richer discussions on gender and sexuality as well as on larger social issues without essentializing categories or reinforcing binaries. The following

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<sup>13</sup> Managing social conduct through gossip might serve as a worthwhile point of focus for those who are interested in the psychological and sociological politics; Jap’s crippling anxiety and Julia’s severe depression lend themselves to the growing literary field of disability studies.



queer reading of *Santa Lucia* reveals the significant cultural work that Austin does. She queers the traditional marriage model as well as conventional ideologies about gender, which results in an updated marriage model and identity performances for the new century.

The novel opens by queering tradition and reader expectations, which sets the tone for the rest of the novel. At length, the idyllic fertile landscape is presented from the point of view of William's bed as the valley comes to life:

The doves began it, low at first, then full and tender, as if the bluish mist had thinned from the ground and collected in soft splashes of sound among the smoky boughs. Then the blackbirds whistled warily as not being sure the day had broke, but calling it softly until the answer came from the pale storm of blossoms among the apricots. Then the meadow-larks, then the vireos, then the sparrows, buntings, finches—all the feather-breasted, flute-voiced folk—piped up from the wet wheat, from the budding willows, from the trim little orchard rows that ran well into the lap of hills, from the creek border and the blue-gums marching orderly on either side the stiff loam of the Santa Lucia road. (1)

William stretches luxuriously and wakes. We assume that this is a man because, traditionally, William is a man's name; however, after nestling readers into the tame, inviting Santa Lucia valley, Austin takes readers aback by using the feminine pronoun "she" in reference to this William character (2). In this rather minor yet jarring move, Austin shows readers that their assumptions count for little. We immediately hone in on the fact that Austin knows what our

assumptions are and that she can manipulate the narrative to achieve a certain effect. That effect is gender ambiguity.

When we consider the sentimental genre from which this novel stems, beginning with gender ambiguity is unusual; but, as is the case with *Isidro*, Austin queers genre by juxtaposing unexpected characters against the generic conventions. Still, sentimental fiction is known for heteronormative characters, and Austin's move toward gender ambiguity is conspicuous. Giving a woman a man's name queers heteronormativity—normal as defined in terms of the traditional male-female binary and which supports the patriarchal status quo. Opening a sentimental novel with gender ambiguity is unusual, and by the second page Austin blurs both genre and gender boundaries.

Soon after, we find that her male name is not the only queer thing about William, though her name is masculinized even further when her dad refers to her as Billy (6). She performs a queer female identity by deviating from norms in other ways. As Amy Kaplan reminds us, Manifest Destiny rhetoric has been working to separate female and male gender roles and to gender interior and exterior spaces for nearly a century by the time *Santa Lucia* was published. Both in and out of the novel, then, American women are expected to dwell in domestic spaces and men are left to roam the outdoors. William's mother tries to teach her how to make herself more attractive as a woman, and the mother's version of beauty comes from this cultural expectation of women. She instructs her daughter to keep her skin light—to avoid a suntan (10). In the West, it is impractical to try to escape the sun's rays and William, who often walks around the California

countryside, is not a domestic woman. Merely by being outside, she offers a version of femininity which queers both her mother's and her country's ideas of beauty, and she distances herself from the cultural expectation that she remain indoors. William embraces her body and her landscape instead of adhering to the cult of domesticity from her mother's past. Her tan skin represents her refusal to perform gender as it is defined by the rhetoric that helped build her nation.

William's friend, Serena, also establishes traditional feminine codes of conduct, from which William moves further away. Serena tells William that they are to be the first to entertain the new professor in town, indicating to readers the importance of her social status. As a society woman, she is an authority on traditional femininity and social codes of conduct. When the two women stroll along the riverbank next to William's house to find an area to picnic, Serena takes care to lift her hem so that her skirt stays clean and she sits down with precision and grace. Again, William embraces the landscape she lives in, as well as her own performance of femininity in this landscape. She does not step gingerly, raise her skirt, or sit down elegantly. Her hem drags as she walks naturally, and her ruffles become "all draggled with the wet;" furthermore, she spreads her skirt as far from her body as she can manage and collapses onto the ground, causing her skirt to "balloon" around her (12). William wears the dirt and water on her clothes much like she wears the tan on her skin. It is an outward representation of her queer identity.

Later on, Serena reveals just how much William deviates from conventional female performativity. After their picnic, William drives Serena

home. Even though they are good friends, Serena does not want Evan, her husband, to see her driving around town with William because her appearance is inappropriate for the time of day; it is eleven in the morning, but William still sports “curl-papers and a ‘Mother-Hubbard’” (14). In other words, she hasn’t finished doing her hair or getting dressed before going outside. She is careless, wild, and does not adhere to Santa Lucian beauty standards. That William does not adhere to popular performances of femininity shows that she queers cultural expectations of womanhood by deviating from them; that her appearance could affect Serena’s marriage in any way shows how important gender performance is; and that it is not only women who define or enforce it.

Even though William deviates from normal feminine behavior, Santa Lucians accept her into society. Austin indicates William’s social value by showing how important she is to Santa Lucian socialites. Serena might avoid being seen with an improperly-dressed William because of the marital tension it could cause, but it soon becomes clear just how influential this unusual woman is. When hosting a party for the new professor, Serena tells William that the party starts thirty minutes prior to the actual start time because, as it is well-known, William is always tardy. Unfortunately, William arrives late anyway. Regardless of their irritation at her tardiness, everyone is relieved when she arrives (17). Their inclusion of William, as well as their genuine relief and uplifted spirits when she finally does appear, illustrates that, regardless of her behavior, they really do think fondly of William and want her to be included in social goings on.

Evan increases William's social importance by recalling a memory that highlights qualities that are much more important than conventional performativity. He tells the party about his fond memories of watching William ride alongside of her father on his way to house calls. The Doctor, always in a hurry as a consequence of his job, drove his carriage at alarming speeds. William never faltered. He directs attention to her fierce loyalty to those she loves, and he overlooks her lack of femininity as her father's copilot. She would "drive straight to blazes with the old Doctor if he had his team [of horses] headed that way" (35). She bravely remains by the side of those she loves when it is difficult, even scary, for her to do so. Her peers accept William's unconventional behavior because there are qualities she embodies that are more important to them than her adherence to feminine codes.

Austin produces a realistic social circle by showing that these characters, who accept William, do not always take her seriously. Unfortunately, though her peers accept her in spite of her socially deviant behavior, they often underestimate William's powerful position in their society. They do not always give her credit where credit is due because they so often see her as a comical figure. William hosts a party for the newcomer and, considering William's often clumsy and careless behavior, it would be reasonable to assume that any event with William at the helm would turn out similarly awkward; however, it doesn't. Her party is successful, but then again, all of her parties are successful according to her peers. "Curiously," the narrator notes, "no one thought of crediting it to William" (41). Rather than attribute the success of the party to the hostess, as social etiquette

normally dictates, Santa Lucians assume that the success of William's parties is a happy accident.

Though she is underestimated by her peers, this underestimation also lends a certain authenticity to their characters which, in turn, lends a certain authenticity to William's character as well. That isn't to say that there are identities that are less authentic than others; in a discussion about queering normative behavior and identities, it is unclear what "authentic" would look like. What this means is that presenting William's queer character in an idealistic society would seem disingenuous, almost comical and, therefore, hypothetical. Instead, Austin places William in a more variable society, where not everyone reacts positively to her queer performance but that they still accept her among their ranks. It simply says that these queer characters could potentially exist outside of the novel. It makes William, and other queer identities by extension, plausible.

What really solidifies William's plausibility is that she gets married. Austin increases the likelihood that this character *could* exist outside the novel by having her marry, because it indicates to readers that identities that deviate from prescribed norms can still marry, be happy, and potentially have children. It shows readers that different marriage models are also plausible, and that William's marriage is an example of what such a marriage would look like.

Before she marries, however, she must identify and question the issues that she finds in the traditional marriage model. Not surprisingly, her view of marriage differs from her peers. William and Serena talk about marriage and happiness. Serena thinks that marrying will make her happy, whereas William

doesn't think that one necessarily leads to the other. "Well," she says to Serena, "I don't see why we should expect just being married to make one happy; it is such a common experience, almost like getting your second teeth" (56). Because women depended upon the men in their lives to support them, marriages of convenience were not unusual. Serena, who is an orphan and who lacks the support of a traditional family, marries Evan under the assumption that she will find security and happiness. William recoils from entering marriage in the absence of love, and nothing but the *hope* of love. She queers convention here identifying this problematic assumption about marriage. William sees that there is no guarantee that Serena, or any person for that matter, will have security or love in marriage. Moreover, it is even less likely to obtain those things when the marriage is entered with only the hope that love will come. By questioning the assumption that love is the logical—or, rather, eventual—result of marriage, William queers the current marriage model.

Furthermore, William doubts that the institution of marriage has inherent value because it is so common and because it so often lacks love. The institution in itself is unremarkable to William, a bold statement. She has no romantic notions of marriage and calls it a common experience, like growing teeth. She values love over marriage, she argues that love should be the necessary precursor to marriage, and she does not think that marriage leads to love. This frank reconceptualization of arguably the most important institution in a patriarchal society is significant. She suggests that the institution itself is unremarkable

without love, and she implies that a loving relationship without marriage might actually have more value.

William queers tradition even further. In the novel, there is a dramatic climactic scene involving two damsels and a hero. The damsels fight one another for the right to marry the hero. During a violent midnight downpour, the characters struggle in the mud, and they tumble over the side of the cliff where they hang, perilously from the side of the muddy cliff with a savage river threatening to consume them from below. The valiant hero arrives just in time, rescues both characters and claims the prize: marriage (163). That Austin utilizes the damsel/hero trope is unsurprising; she uses the trope in *Isidro* and such dramatics are typical in the sentimental genre. And yet, this is perhaps the most gender queer scene in the novel.

Jap, who is the Doctor's assistant, and Dr. George Rhewold, another new doctor in town, vie for William's affections: a queer authorial move in and of itself.<sup>14</sup> When two handsome doctors nearly kill each other for the right to marry a woman, we assume that she is, at the very least beautiful, and at the most that she is a combination of beautiful and any number of positive description nouns: kind, intelligent, etc. Either way, she is physically beautiful. William does not seem like a character who would inspire such behavior from one gentleman let alone two gentlemen. She goes against traditional beauty in almost every way. She is tan, portly, lazy, slovenly, and tardy. If these men are attracted to her performance of femininity, then they are queering their own masculinity by

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<sup>14</sup> His full name is Edward Jasper, but William's family has called him Jap for the eleven years that he has lived with them (134).



desiring a woman who does not embody—or even *attempt* to embody—conventional standards of beauty and codes of conduct. If they are attracted to her nonnormative personality, then Austin is queering the courting model. We know that beauty standards are important to both women and men in Santa Lucia, so it is likely the latter.

Austin continues queering this scene by queering the trope that she uses. In the damsel-hero trope, the damsel is female and the hero is male. Austin queers the trope by inverting the genders. After learning that William is uninterested in him, Jap intends to kill the man in his way: the young Doctor George Rhewold. In a moment of traditional hyper-masculinity, the men fight to win William and, after a brief scuffle, Dr. Rhewold slips, causing the men to dangle helplessly from the slippery cliff: “At any shifting of their positions, the two must go over into the gulf together” (163). The powerlessness and vulnerability of Jap and George cannot be overstated. They are in distress and must be saved. Bravely, William crawls out onto the muddy cliff and loops a hitching-rope around the men:

Dumb, blind in the rain, the three writhed and turned in the roadway, working back along the rope. The sound of their breathing was like the rustle of worms in a heap, the thick clay sucked and sobbed as they dug into it for hold. But the doctor was his own man again as soon as he felt his feet under him. (165)

William saves both men. She is the hero, effectually placing Jap and George as damsels within the trope. The characters do a gender flip-flop here, further augmenting William as a queer woman.

Even though she participates in the ultimate patriarchal institution by marrying Doctor Rhewold, William continues to hold on to her queer identity, and the men in her life both accommodate and compliment that identity. On their wedding day, the Doctor tells George about William's namesake:

William was so called for a brother of mine [...] how much that brother meant to me of all that was heroic, romantic, and nobly minded [...] It was to hold the memory of his brave, bright spirit I gave the name to my daughter to keep until she could give it to her son. But now that she has borne it these twenty-odd years, and borne it gallantly, [...] there has grown up around it an association of so much that is sweet and gay and tender that the figure of the dashing young soldier has grown quite dim beside it [...] William is a girl's name forever in our family. (272-273)

George agrees. The two patriarchs rearrange their long-held assumption that William is a man's name—a brave soldier's name—and they declare it, forever, a woman's name. She is not a typical feminine woman, and she queers gender even more by making that which is masculine feminine. Her performance affects assumptions about femininity, and it also affects assumptions about masculinity. Through William, Austin destabilizes the gender binary and she reimagines gender performativity with fluidity, a concept that will not be introduced for decades.

In nearly all things, William is a queer character. Austin shows how the West affects identity and performativity in the absence of physical danger. When we examine her character next to Serena and Julia, we discover the very real

danger that surrounds William and all women and the time: the danger of patriarchal ideology. Serena and Julia try to adhere to the available marriage model. Both girls marry under the assumption that to do so will bring them security and happiness. But as William suggests, security and happiness are not the necessary results of marriage. Still, Serena and Julia do what they can to resist the strictures of marriage, but it is not necessarily through the level of queer performativity that we've observed in William.

Serena, a far-cry from the gender-queer William, works to destabilize long-held assumptions about gender roles in marriage. She fits into the traditional sentimental heroine role: she was an orphan who tried to make her way without the support of a traditional family; she marries a powerful man who helps her assume her position as wife and mother; and she has a conversion moment. Interestingly enough, her conversion moment is not religious. When she discovers that Evan secured his job, their home, and all of their furnishings through credit, Serena experiences intense shame and embarrassment. After her mortification, she strips him of his role as the all-powerful patriarch, she relocates their family, and she builds their relationship back up through gender equality.

When Serena finds out that her house, her furnishings, and her clothes do not fully belong to her, her husband ceases to be the ideal that she had assumed that he was and she experiences a bout of emotions which lead her to realize something that had gone unnoticed until this point. Evan descends from the metaphorical pedestal upon which patriarchy places all men and begins to "walk among men" (186). After nearly a year of marital discord, and of Serena taking

the helm of their family unit, Evan begins to have “a great respect for his wife’s capacity for accomplishing things” (258). From this point on, they govern their affairs, from their finances to their garden, together. They are not happy, but they are equal.

Toward the end, Serena turns attention back onto William and the West, implying that the couple who deviated from prescribed norms of gender and marriage roles is the new ideal for this landscape. The third heroine in the novel, Julia, has committed suicide because her husband refuses to grant her a divorce. Serena reflects upon all three of these women’s journeys over the years:

The surfaces of life set in motion by the slight circumstances of environment had turned towards all he [Julia’s widowed husband] seemed to stand for, but underneath the primal tides drove fast; she saw herself and all women moving on them by the way of colorless, unimpassioned marriages, by fatigues and homely contrivances, by childbirth and sorrow and denial—oh, a common story! She thought of William, upon whom happiness descended from the skies, ushered by wild risks, long thunder, and the drumming rain, and brought on her own face a rain of tears as she knew herself, with so many women, untouched by any color of romance. Then she thought of Julia, flaming with tormenting passions as she drifted to disaster; she threw up the sash, and at the quiet touch of the night and the drifting film of the fog the pang of unfulfillment passed in the sense of saving commonness. (345-346)

This novel offers a glimpse into the pressures that tradition and cultural norms place on both women and men. There are no divorce rights for women, so when her husband refuses to divorce her, Julia kills herself. Serena's marriage perseveres, but she does not feel fulfilled. William, who performs her identity in accordance with her own desires and in harmony with her environment, receives happiness from the California skies themselves. Austin clearly holds up one of these marriages as the new ideal for the twentieth century.

Through her queer performativity, William resists narrow definitions of womanhood that resulted from the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. She shows us that her femininity is not compromised even though she behaves differently from the other women of her culture. She marries George, but she does so without compromising her identity and both of them are happier for it. Serena and Julia, on the other hand, attempt to uphold the institution itself as their ideal and as their model for their behavior, but neither marriage succeeds. William and George have the queerest marriage and, because of this, it is the most successful. Curiously, critics fail to seriously or thoughtfully engage it.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, literary criticism on *Santa Lucia* has been exclusively feminist in its approach.<sup>15</sup> Stout discusses the strains of Austin's feminism in the novel, but William's character and her marriage are only brushed over. Instead, she focuses on the work towards equality in Serena and Evan's marriage; and she points to Julia's marriage—which she ends via suicide—as a cautionary tale about what happens when women have no rights. The strain of

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<sup>15</sup> See Langlois and Jaycox

feminism seen in Julia's end shows Austin's argument for "easier divorce laws," and William is necessarily excluded because divorce is not relevant to her story ("Mary Austin's Feminism" 84).<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Stout excludes William from her discussion on equality because she and Dr. Rhewold are already on more equal footing.

Amy Cox argues that Austin's novels, *Santa Lucia* included, show the shift toward a more modern understanding of marriage. Unlike Stout's focus on divorce rights, Cox examines problems with the Victorian marriage model and shows how Austin attempts to offer solutions to these problems. She argues that through Austin's treatment of marriage we can see that she anticipates a paradigm shift in marriage relationships in the twentieth century. Instead of blindly accepting and participating in domestic practices which work to govern and oppress women, Austin suggests a more modern approach to marriage by arguing for equality between husband and wife. Although Julia's suicide is extreme, and by no means a viable option to escape marriage, "it demonstrates," Cox writes, "how seriously Austin thought the forces of Victorian beliefs were in people's lives and how devastating she believed their effects could be" (6). Similar to Stout, Cox's feminist focus is on marriage; but because William's marriage is relatively free from the problems that Serena and Julia have, William is again excluded from the analysis.

The criticism on *Santa Lucia* is sparse, so that Stout and Cox devote the amount of time that they do to discussing the novel is notable; however, their

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<sup>16</sup> Stout's "Gender and Equality in the Southwest briefly mentions *Santa Lucia*, but doesn't discuss William.

approach causes them to miss the opportunity to discuss William and the important cultural work that she does through her queer performativity. Where Serena and Julia's marriages reveal the importance of autonomy and women's rights, William's entire being challenges multitude ideologies, not just assumptions about marriage. She has a male name, does not adhere to conventional female behavior or beauty standards, she is placed in a role within a trope that is typically saved for men, and her enchanting personality causes the men in her life to rethink their gender assumptions concerning the name William. In all of these ways, William deviates from traditional femininity and performs her identity as a queer woman. In effect, Stout's and Cox's exclusion of William from their analyses is evidence of what Wilchins argues about feminism and feminist theory: they sometimes unintentionally exclude that which they set out to liberate.

In an effort not to fall into this pattern of exclusion, I would like to briefly note the centers and margins in *Santa Lucia*. William is a delightfully queer western woman, but one cannot but wonder if she gets away with her socially deviant performativity because of her social status. Santa Lucians accept her in all of her flawed glory, but do they adore her in her own right or do they merely tolerate her because she is the Doctor's daughter? Given her lineage, class, and wealth, she has in no shortage of social capital. It is possible, even likely, that this capital affords her the luxury of being a clumsy, masculine, brave, marriage-scoffing woman. Had she been poor, ugly, unpopular, or a woman of color, her peers mightn't have allowed her to behave this way. Though her social capital is

the same as those around her, it still affords her certain privileges. Additionally, there are no people of color in the novel, which would have been unlikely given the location. As *Isidro* shows, there are Spanish, Mexican, and Native American peoples scattered throughout California and the greater southwest. William and her wealthy white peers are at the center of this novel, and everyone else falls in the margins: people of color, disability, and low socioeconomic status. It is important to acknowledge that the versions of normativity that are established in *Santa Lucia* are biased in this way.

Even though criticism is limited at present, Austin scholars predict that the rise in gender, identity, and cultural studies will spark interest and lead differing fields of academic study to rediscover the canon.<sup>17</sup> For instance, characters' attempts to manage social conduct through gossip and the threat of being ostracized might serve as a worthwhile point of focus for those who are interested in the psychological and sociological politics at work in the early twentieth century southwest; Jap's crippling anxiety and Julia's severe depression lend themselves to the growing literary field of disability studies; and the lack of people of color lends itself to various disciplines. In the next chapter, I demonstrate how queer theory and feminist theory are similar, but how these theories highlight different aspects of Olivia's character in *A Woman of Genius*.

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<sup>17</sup> Both Cheney and Graulich note that there was an Austin renaissance with the rise of feminist theory, and both predict that there will be another one.



### Chapter 3 – *A Woman of Genius*

That *A Woman of Genius* is a queer novel is apparent in Austin's explicit focus on identity performance as well as on the blurring of myriad boundaries. Austin questions traditional institutions through her heroine's failures and successes as she navigates her way through an increasingly modern world. With the new century, new technological advancements, and with the burgeoning first-wave feminist movement which centered on marital and political rights for women, Olivia challenges the effectiveness and the appropriateness of traditional gender roles as she struggles to perform both on and off of the stage, yearning to belong but refusing to conform. As Olivia fights for autonomy, Austin blurs the lines between acting and not acting, public and private, single and married, adultery and monogamy, dominant and submissive, mother and motherless. As a result of the ever-shifting states, both within and without the novel, even the theories we use to engage the novel seem to intertwine.

On the one hand, *A Woman of Genius* is a call to action, urging the feminist-minded twentieth-century readers to question long-held assumptions of a woman's place and purpose. With the rise of women's rights and the increasing awareness of systemic female oppression, critics, namely feminist critics, have taken up the novel to show that, even early in the twentieth century, women writers were commenting on the state of women in America as well as offering new ways of being. Indeed, Austin takes oppressive institutions, such as motherhood and marriage, to task; Olivia is painfully aware of her lack of power in the male-dominated world in which she finds herself, which drives her to

constantly question assumptions of traditional female identities that are projected onto her while, at the same time, working to claim her own autonomy. For these reasons, this is a feminist novel.

On the other hand, at the center of the novel is a discussion about performances of gender and identities that not only deviate from the norms that are established throughout the novel, but that also question the institutions and people that establish and police such norms in the first place. Austin questions prescriptive ways of behaving and living; Olivia recognizes early on that she is not like other girls, and she revels in her difference as much as she struggles with the consequences of those differences. Moreover, Olivia comments explicitly on performances of gender and identity, her own and others, which shows that she is aware of how much of a performance identity is. Furthermore, Olivia embodies often contradictory identities which are also in a near constant state of flux in the space between binaries. She is both predictable and surprising, constant and ever-changing, a delightfully complex character that breaks herself down and builds herself up as she navigates through harsh realities and suffocating societies toward her own vision of success and fulfillment. For these reasons, this is a queer novel.

Given the feminist and queer aspect of this novel, it is useful to use both theories in tandem to describe the work which Austin does therein. In this chapter, I will use feminist theory to identify and describe the balances of power between men and women and to discuss the institutions which establish and enforce them. Trying to retain dignity and autonomy in a male dominated society is at the

forefront of the novel's concerns as Olivia recounts the events of her life. After the death of her father, Olivia's house is then governed by her older brother. Later, she is forcefully guided into a loveless marriage. After the tragic death of her infant son, she flees to the stage which is managed by one overbearing male after another. Her husband dies, she becomes successful professionally, and she reunites with an old beau. Though they undoubtedly desire each other, he cannot allow her to continue acting if she is to be his wife. Olivia struggles to find both herself and her place in this androcentric world. She wants to work in the profession she chooses, make a living through her hard work, and be a "good woman" according to her definition of goodness. Doing all of these things is difficult for Olivia because her world is dominated by men who are often less competent than she is; as a result, women both inside and outside of the novel become increasingly frustrated with the institutions that give men such power over women: religion, marriage, politics, tradition.

I will also use queer theory to identify and discuss Olivia's fluctuating and contradictory performances of gender and identity. Using interactions between characters, we can identify the social codes of conduct that are at work. At times, I bring in biographical and historical data to comment on these social norms and to show Olivia rebels against them. Terms I will use include gender, identity, performativity, heteronormativity, deviance, and queer. Olivia creates herself, both her gender and other facets of her identity, through repeated performances.<sup>18</sup> At times, she falls in line with ways of being that support heteronormative

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler introduces identity as repeated performances instead of something that is in-born. Elizabeth Bell's textbook is a direct result of this idea and it provides an accessible introduction to the theory of performativity and what it looks like across various social contexts.

institutions: marriage, motherhood, and female submission to a dominant male (or to a male-sanctioned dominant female, in cases such as mentor/mentee female relationships). These are heteronormative institutions because they function as markers of time in a heterosexual life.<sup>19</sup> At other times, she avoids participating in these institutions, deviating from the norms of the time. One of the major tenants of queer theory is the idea of queering or going against prescribed norms.<sup>20</sup> When Olivia refuses to submit to heteronormative presentations of gender and identity, when she instead opts for performances and spaces that reside outside of the norm, she deviates from the norm; she queers her identity.

In this chapter, I use feminist and queer theory to describe one of Austin's most complex characters: Olivia. In an effort to reduce confusion and conflation between these two important and distinct theories, I discuss aspects of the novel that lend themselves to feminist theory first and to queer theory second. Rather than reiterating what critics have often concluded in the past, that this is a feminist novel, I recognize the ways in which this novel presents early twentieth-century feminism through its concern with women's rights while arguing that one of the ways that Austin works toward gender equality is through Olivia's queer performances of identity. In other words, Olivia queers traditional womanhood and, in doing so, blazes the trail for future feminists: "all the paths that lead to the Shining Destiny . . . why shouldn't women walk in them?" (504).

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Halberstam claims that life is marked by heteronormative events such as courting, marriage, and children spread over decades. HIV positive homosexual men do not experience time in this way because their lives are shorter for myriad reasons. As a result, they try to live a full life in fewer years which, consequently, causes them to conceptualize time as compressed.

<sup>20</sup> Mimi Marinucci notes that to queer means to "live in ways that challenge deeply held assumptions" (xv).

## Feminism in Austin's Novels

Critics have argued that *A Woman of Genius* is a feminist novel. Karen S. Langlois dubs it a “feminist classic” (79). Janis P. Stout calls it Austin’s “most consistently feminist” novel and, viewed next to *Isidro* and *Santa Lucia*, that seems to be the case (80). In *Isidro*, at the insistence of her adopted mother, Jacinta cross-dresses as El Zarzo in order to escape the predators of the desert which, ironically, does not even save her. After readers learn that El Zarzo is a woman, she is kidnapped by Mascado and she is reduced to nothing more than a female body. Mascado feels her budding breasts “crushed” against him as his horse gallops and later when her rescuer asks if Mascado “laid hands” upon her (181, 225). After her heritage as a beautiful heiress is revealed, she is forced into a marriage with the dashing protagonist. We can interpret this marriage as forced in the fact that Jacinta is “sickened” that she must marry Isidro (234). Eventually, the couple fall in love and Jacinta retreats into the closed domestic quarters of wifedom and motherhood, never to be seen again (422). A consistent feminism cannot be pulled from these plot points; equality among the sexes cannot be found here. What we can garner, however, is an explicit unequal balance of power between men and women. There are instances of queer identity performance in *Isidro*, but it is hardly a feminist novel.

Austin exhibits a more feminist outlook in *Santa Lucia*, though it is hardly consistent. Julia kills herself because her husband refuses to release her from their marriage, showing the unfortunate consequences of inequality in divorce rights (337). Serena holds more sway in her relationship. After her financially

incompetent husband incurs unpayable debts, and recognizing that he has “lost to his wife the right to an impeccable moral attitude,” Serena takes control by downsizing and moving to a house that Evans mother owns, where they can save their money and eventually gain financial stability (209). Here we see her husband surrender power to her. Had refused to relinquish his power in favor for hers, as Julia’s husband did, he could have. His power lies in his ability to choose. Her lack of power lies in her ability to choose only if her husband offers her *his* choice. That Serena is only allowed to do what she can to save their family because her husband permits it goes against the gender equality that feminists insist upon. We couldn’t really say that there is equality in William’s relationships either. She acts as she pleases much of time but, if the Julia and Serena teach us anything, it is only because the men in her life allow her to. Her father doesn’t try to bend her to his will, nor does her husband.

Even though *Isidro* and *Santa Lucia* are not beacons of feminism, they certainly show progression toward Austin’s evolving feminist ideologies, which are woven throughout *A Woman of Genius*, a semiautobiographical novel. Elizabeth Klimasmith deftly notes that the heroine rejects “Victorian mores” and reveals the anxiety of a culture—Austin’s culture—caught in the shift to modernity (130). Olivia gives a first-person, chronological account of the “breach in the social fabric” that is her life as she struggles between the ultraconservative, female-oppressive, patriarchal hegemony of her mother’s past and the forward thinking, feminist leaning, autonomy of her future (8). As Olivia acts on the stage, she effectually refuses the domestic sphere and all that it represents to her—

ownership, submission, oppression. Her struggle to choose between her marriage and her career depicts a cultural anxiety of the time: the necessity of autonomy and financial independence for women.

These issues are more than mere themes that Austin explores in the novel; she experienced similar issues in her own life as she wrote. Langlois's article on *A Woman of Genius* describes the difficulties Austin encountered during adolescence, and later as a woman, that contribute to these themes of women's autonomy and financial independence in the novel. Austin's father died early on, leaving her brother as the ineffectual family patriarch (79). She married someone who drove them deep into debt, another man she could not depend on. Yet, she was almost entirely dependent upon these men, which was understandably frustrating. Of the blatant preference for men over women in the early twentieth-century, Austin had this to say: "We get into a way of thinking that because men have access to more varieties of experience they necessarily know more. They don't" (80). This androcentrism is precisely what Olivia resists in *A Woman of Genius*. Austin worked to claim her own autonomy and independence as she wrote, which lends an authenticity to Olivia's voice and her experience; her story is indicative of the time.

Gender inequality is established early in the novel when Olivia's mother gives her brother a larger allowance than her own—because he is a boy. After the death of her father, Olivia's younger brother takes his position as the family patriarch, ruling everything from how the money is spent to how the food is prepared. When she asks her mother why he gets a larger allowance than she

does, she says that it is because he “is a boy” as though this reminder of his male gender should be reason enough (75). At this moment, Olivia discovers the destiny of women: “to defer and adjust, to maintain the attitude of acquiescence toward opinions and capabilities that had nothing more to recommend them than merely that they were a man’s!” (75). Later, her brother is given his share of the family inheritance on his twenty-first birthday; Olivia, nearly two years older than her brother, has not yet received hers. Girls, her mother tells her, get their money when they marry. In other words, money is not something women receive; it is something their husbands receive for them. Olivia refuses to accept her mother’s reasoning. After all, if a woman is mature enough to marry, surely she is mature enough to handle *her own* money. Her mother yields only after Olivia’s insistence (82). She uses her money to go to school, where she discovers her passion for acting as well as her desire to dodge “the destiny of women” (86).

There is a clash between eras and ideologies in this scene. Olivia’s mother represents the Victorian values from the previous century. She does not question the hegemonic patriarchy which dictates that women are secondary to men in all things and in all spaces. Olivia represents the feminist movement and modernity. She questions everything: why are men more important than women? Why are women expected to submit to men? Why can’t women do the same things that men do? These questions return again and again as the novel progresses.

Olivia’s—historically accurate—conflict between cultural acceptance and professional success reveals the limited options for women at the time.

Klimasmith points out that most female actresses in the early 1900s were not



successful (133). So Olivia must either accept the banality of being a submissive Higglestonian wife; or, she must pursue her career at the expense of everything else. As a middle-class woman by birth and marriage, Olivia is expected to get married and supply progeny, which she does; however, she rebels against the assumption that the sole purpose of her life is to submit to her husband: “I didn’t accept the Higglestonian reading of married obligations to mean that my whole time was to be taken up with just living with Tommy [but] in Higgleston you couldn’t do anything different without implying dissatisfaction with things as they were” (167). She chooses again and again to run from her mediocre life as a tailor’s wife in Higgleston toward the exciting stimulation of the stage. But she cannot escape the reality that she depends on her husband for food, clothing, and shelter.

Olivia chooses the stage to the detriment of her reputation and marriage, a move that separates her from the female oppression of her mother’s generation and links her with the growing feminist movement of her own generation. Higglestonians stop including her in social goings on, and critic Nancy Morrow points out that Olivia’s increasing isolation from society is evidence of Austin’s own “armed conflict with conventional, middle-class values and expectations” (22). That Olivia fails to retain her home life and her professional life is not due to lack of trying, which is as frustrating as it is heartbreaking. Her husband, the product of generations of women submitting to their husbands’ careers, cannot see the value in her work—he values his career over hers. Tommy grows increasingly restless at her separation—physical and emotional—from him: “Tommy would

protest. ‘If only you would stay with me!’ ‘Oh, Tommy, if you would only come away with me!’” (244). Olivia’s refusal to accept her destiny in the domestic sphere, and her refusal to choose her husband’s work over her own, is indicative of the time. Klimasmith writes that “feminism was undermining the bourgeois standards of economic dependence and moral respectability central to nineteenth-century womanhood” (130). The rise of feminism, and the increase in public careers for women, resulted in this tension that Austin displays within Olivia—tension between the domestic lives of women’s past and the public lives of their future.

Through Olivia’s story, Austin presents the possibilities for women in the early twentieth-century when they are not held back or down by the restrictive—oppressive—ideologies from the past. After achieving professional success, Olivia continues to choose her career over romantic relationships, though it is not without sacrifice. Once Olivia is financially independent, she faces a difficult choice: to marry or to work. This “either or” option does not represent Olivia’s options; she believes that she can have both. Her lover demands that she choose. She cannot serve him as a wife and mother his (not their) children if she has a career. Even though she makes more money than he, is more successful at her job than he, and truly loves her career more than he does, tradition dictates that a wife must submit completely to her husband: “He had, without thinking it necessary to account for it, the idea that is so generally and unexcusedly entertained [...] that a woman in becoming a man’s wife ceases to be her own and becomes somehow mysteriously and inevitably his” (460).

Austin works hard to seduce readers, and Olivia, into falling back into this old pattern. She combines a heavy-handed, borderline nauseating, passionate love story with the perfect set of circumstances to tempt Olivia to give up everything and be a wife. When Olivia reunites with an old acquaintance, Austin tempts us—women all—to fall back into the old model of female dependence via the institution of marriage:

‘Look here, Olivia, I don’t want any tea. I want you. God!’ he said, ‘do you know how I want you?’ All at once I was crying on his breast. ‘Oh, Helmeth, Helmeth, do you know you have only seen me twice in your life.’ ‘And both times,’ he insisted, ‘I’ve wanted to marry you.’ (396)

There are similar outbursts in declarations of love over the next few weeks, but the relationship quickly catches on the very same issue that brought Olivia and Tommy’s marriage to a close: he expects her to give up acting and she refuses. Our feminist-minded heroine turns this assumption, that men’s careers are somehow more important or more suited for financial support than women’s, on its head when she ponders her desire to be the main source of money and support: “I wished to lay my gift down, a royal carpet for Helmeth Garrett to walk on; I would have done anything for him with it except surrender it” (440). She imagines a world in which *she* is the main source of income, in which *she* is the provider.

Austin takes the institution of marriage to task when Olivia questions the validity of the rituals and traditions. She calls women’s wedding rings a visible representation of male possession, which shows what she thinks of the state of

marriage, that it is the legal oppression and subjugation of an entire gender (414-415). Moreover, she explicitly points out the fact that wide-held assumptions about traditional marriage roles are precisely what exclude people like her from experiencing the joys of, well, marriage:

[...] the social ideal, in which I was bred, is the villain of my plot; for we wished for the best, and the best that we knew was cast only in one mould [...] Somewhere there must have been men and women working out our situation and working it out successfully, but the only example life afforded us was not of the acceptable pattern. (461)

She sees that she is unable to marry because there is only one marriage model that is available to her; she must submit all that she is to the career and will of her husband. It is not that she does not want a relationship; it is that she wants a relationship which she can define, rather than one that defines her. Until there is a new marriage model, she is destined to be alone—a difficult choice, but one she eagerly makes.

Luckily, Austin does not leave readers with such a bleak outlook. She proposes a new marriage model in the final chapter, leaving readers with hope for change. A longtime friend and colleague tells Olivia that the traditional marriage model does not account for the companionship that the two already offer each other, so they must expand the definition of marriage to include relationships like theirs. Jerry argues that romantic love is unnecessary for a successful marriage and that, in fact, their marriage might be more successful precisely because romantic love is not a factor:

I've been in love lots of times; I've been mad about several women. I don't feel that way about you, and I don't care to. But if wanting you is loving, if worrying about you when you aren't quite yourself, and being proud of you when you are, if liking to be with you and wanting to read my manuscripts to you the minute I've written them, if owing you more than I owe any other woman and being glad to owe it, is loving you, why, I guess I love you enough for all practical purposes. (507)

This is a rather revolutionary understanding of what marriage between equals *could* be without the weight of traditional expectations of what marriage *should* be. What Austin promotes here, then, is a partnership among equals, a new conceptualization of marriage.

The novel ends before Olivia gives Jerry a definitive answer. This is a particularly clever move on Austin's part, as it marries Olivia with her "Shining Destiny"—a career woman—rather than marrying her to a man, even one who views her as being on equal footing. Austin accomplishes at least two things here. Olivia is forever locked her in a position of freedom and possibility, which reflects the theme that is woven throughout the novel: the ability and necessity of female autonomy. Just as Olivia entertains a new marriage model, Austin entertains a new literary model: Modernism. This feeling of open-endedness is a common marker of Modernism. So, the lack of a closed ending separates the novel from Austin's sentimental literary past, with its tidy, idealized endings, and leaves open and looking into the future.

What I've shown in this brief reading is that *A Woman of Genius* represents early twentieth-century feminism through female autonomy and the destabilization of gender inequality. Olivia recognizes the inequality between the sexes early on in her life and she works to free herself from the perpetuation of this inequality by earning her own money and taking control of her life. The importance of female autonomy and gender equality increases as the novel progresses and ends with open-ended possibilities of the modern age, making *A Woman of Genius* the resounding voice of early feminism in Austin's cannon.

Feminist theory has been invaluable to *A Woman of Genius*, but this lens, as all critical lenses do, leaves out other important work within the novel. Bringing female authors and stories about women to the forefront in scholarship is likely the main reason for the novel's staying power in academia. Feminist theory offers the framework to discuss the feminist issues which Austin writes about. But, as theorists have noted over the past two decades, feminist theory, though helpful, has its limits. Specifically, a movement—and resulting critical theory—which works to give voice to women and women's issues necessarily depends upon the woman/man binary. Not only does this binary require man in order to define woman (and vice versa), which are socially defined categories, but it also effectively excludes the vast myriad of individuals and identities which do not neatly fit into these categories. In other words, the theory unintentionally excludes the very people that it claims to empower.

## A Queer Woman of Genius

Because feminist theory necessarily focuses on the social, economic, and political oppression of women, it consequentially leaves other interesting or noteworthy points to the wayside. As I discussed in chapter 2, feminist readings of *Santa Lucia* center on Serena and Julia, often leaving the gender-bending William in the margins. This is, of course, the hazard of using any literary framework: things will be left out. A Marxist reading of *A Woman of Genius*, for instance, would focus less on the oppression of women and more on class or the effects of capitalism, whereas a Marxist-feminist reading might focus on class and women and leave out the racist undertones against Jewish Americans.<sup>21</sup> Simply stated, we can't say everything all of the time. Since that is the case, what has been left out of the critical approaches to date?

Queer theory allows us to discuss what happens around feminist theory's boundaries. In the queer reading that follows, I engage motifs within the novel that have been excluded from critical conversations until now. Austin writes about identity as performance and problematic binary systems long before scholars write about them.<sup>22</sup> Austin was truly a woman ahead of her time. Graulich reminds us that Austin's peers point out that "her work would become visible only when the proper critical vocabulary and context had been put in place" (xii).

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<sup>21</sup> Klimasmith's chapter in *Exploring Lost Borders* takes a Marxist feminist approach to *A Woman of Genius*. Focusing on the rise of feminist thought and the breakdown of identifiable class structures, she argues that Austin, caught between late Victorian and early Modernist milieus, represents the ideological evolution of the age and challenges "the gender and economic status quo of the nineteenth-century" (130).

<sup>22</sup> The novel was published in 1912. Judith Butler doesn't write about performativity until the 1990s. Binary systems, in terms of identity and literary theory, comes later with the growth of queer theory.

Queer theory offers the critical vocabulary and context to make this delightful novel visible again.

First, we need to understand the historical context surrounding the novel. Austin witnessed a rich period of industrial and technological growth in American history. By the time her novel was published, the U.S. population had increased exponentially. Excluding non-residents, U.S. census records show that the resident population had more than doubled between 1860 and 1910.<sup>23</sup> As the population exploded, the industrial revolution, and later the gilded age, ushered in a rise in technological advances: telephones, cameras, movies, motor vehicles, radios, and airplanes to name a few. The United States closed the frontier in 1890, meaning that while everything else seemed to advance, physical space did the opposite. Knowledge, opportunity, boundaries, and access to these things changed. As a result, Austin experiments with myriad boundaries in *A Woman of Genius*. That *A Woman of Genius* is Austin's most feminist novel is not a new idea; critics have dubbed it her most feminist novel for decades.<sup>24</sup> By the 1910s, feminism's first wave spread messages of equality and rights for women. Olivia certainly seems to represent these ideological shifts from an oppressive patriarchal hegemony toward increasing rights for women: reproductive, economic, and political rights to name a few. But there is more going on in this novel than a feminist reading can account for. *A Woman of Genius* takes up more than the systemic oppression of women in its pages. What lies beyond the boundaries of feminism?

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<sup>23</sup> U.S. Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/resapport/states/unitedstates.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Critics who comment on the novel's feminism are Stout, Langlois, Morrow, Klimasmith



There is a subtle motif that is woven throughout *A Woman of Genius* that is missing from previous critical discussions of the novel. Austin repeatedly explores the boundaries and limits of binary systems and binary thinking in the early twentieth-century, where everything seems to be changing. There are inherent issues with binary systems. When things are viewed as one way or another, it necessarily excludes everything that lies outside of these narrow categories. Moreover, binary systems give power to the centers of these categories and marginalizes everything outside. Binaries are complicated, socially determined systems masquerading as simple systems. They are deceptive in their simplicity; they are insidious in their ubiquity.

What we see in Austin's integration, and investigation, of restrictive binary systems in *A Woman of Genius* is a shift in the ideological conceptualization of that nebulous space between binaries. Rather than viewing, say, something as simple as childhood and adolescence as neatly divided, Austin depicts the ambiguousness of the theoretical space between these two points.<sup>25</sup> *A Woman of Genius* is littered with binary systems: young-old, old-new, single-married, rich-poor, good-bad, failure-success. More than simply displaying binaries, Austin explores the boundaries around these categories and exposes the various problems and resulting tensions that arise when we try to conceptualize the world, and ourselves, in binary terms.

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<sup>25</sup> As a child, Olivia was more childlike than other children, with a "sustaining fairy wonder of the world" (13). Later, she realizes that she is "somehow intrinsically different" from her siblings (30). Feeling intrinsically different, and misunderstood because of it, is a pattern that repeats itself throughout the novel.

Not only does Olivia see these systems and their ultimate inadequacy to account for her identity, she realizes that many aspects of her life are performative. Performativity is another motif which proliferates the novel. Social power affects Olivia's performativity. When womanhood is defined by specific rituals, it excludes the women who cannot, or refuse to, perform them. The same problems arise with other identity categories as well: wifedom, motherhood, and even manhood. People who fail to perform their identity according to standard are marginalized and, consequently, they lose their social power. Through Olivia's queer performances of courtship, wifedom, and motherhood, Austin takes traditionally defined identity categories to task. Where the hegemonic patriarchal powers—her mother, her lovers, and her peers—attempt to force Olivia into performing her identity in specific, conventional ways, Olivia questions the very social categories themselves. She resists being defined. She refuses to perform according to tradition. She forges a new identity for herself.

In the 1910s, acceleration, expansion, and advancement were ever-present; Austin questions the usefulness of antiquated nineteenth-century codes of conduct and morality in the increasingly modern twentieth century. When read through a feminist lens, *A Woman of Genius* highlights the oppressive power structures that Olivia rebels against: religion, marriage, and domesticity. When read through a queer lens, it highlights different structures in and around these systems. For example, where a feminist read reveals the inherent oppression in a marriage model that requires women to submit to their husbands, a queer read questions the very definition of marriage roles and reveals how spouses perform their identities

within the marriage. This queer reading of *A Woman of Genius* brings binary systems, identity, fluidity, and performativity to the forefront; it shows how Olivia performs her identity outside of what is considered normal for women of her socioeconomic status and geographic location. In many ways, Olivia occupies the conceptual spaces between binary systems and the implications of her success within these undefinable spaces reverberates throughout and beyond the novel. In the discussion that follows, I focus on the ways in which Olivia occupies the conceptual spaces between binaries as she performs her identity and succeeds in a culture which, she perceives, is designed for her failure.

The novel begins with tension between the intoxicating proposition of a woman of genius and the bland normality of a religious Midwestern reality. The title piques readers' attentions, who are on the lookout for genius—something profound or remarkable. Boumelha explains the contextual nuance of the phrase a “woman of genius” at the time the novel was published. Genius was considered an innate quality, not something that was acquired or honed (172). It was also a quality amongst men, never women (168). Austin's readership would have picked up on this juxtaposition of *genius* and *woman* right away. After proposing the remarkable, that there might be such a thing as a *woman* of genius as opposed to the typical *man* of genius, Austin drops readers in an utterly unremarkable Midwestern town, a duplicate of every other town around it: “Of Taylorville [...] the most distinguishing thing was that there was nothing to distinguish it from a hundred towns in Ohianna” (9). Genius is remarkable; Taylorville is unremarkable. Austin forces readers to reconceptualize their understanding of

these things. If the remarkable Olivia springs forth from the unremarkable Taylorville, mightn't the unremarkable be remarkable? What makes something remarkable, and who decides? Within the first ten pages, Austin establishes the pattern that she will repeat throughout the novel: bringing seemingly opposing ideas, binary systems, in close proximity, raising questions and about these systems.

Olivia queers courting through her non-traditional performance of the ritual. In Taylorville, there is a right and a wrong way to court. Where other girls eagerly participate in courting, Olivia does what she can to avoid her "normal destiny"—betrothal (93). During an outing amongst other young and engaged couples, Olivia would rather hand off her date to another girl and escape into the woods alone (95). She is open to finding a companion, she just doesn't want to change herself. We see this later when she is kissed by a complete stranger and she isn't ashamed or outraged which, she knows, is not a "traditional" reaction (102). As a result of her unwillingness to perform as a courting female should, her peers exclude her from a social event (108). The way that these characters react to Olivia's differing identity, her queer approach to courting, is how they establish and enforce what is considered "normal". Olivia performs courting rituals differently from the other girls. Their alienation both establishes their power and her marginality, and it shows her that her performance is not acceptable according to their standards. Even though she offers a queer performance of courting, however, Olivia marries a respected member of the community who provides her with a comfortable life.

That Olivia obtains a husband through her unconventional courting is significant. Inarguably, her conventional, middle-class existence bores her; but that boredom does not mean that her marriage is necessarily unsuccessful. Remembering that marrying someone is the destiny for women like Olivia, she achieves the ultimate destiny for a woman. In fact, she achieves more considering that her husband cares for her and offers her a comfortable life. Moreover, Olivia achieves this destiny even though she doesn't act like the other courting girls. Austin challenges normative rituals through Olivia's queer performance, and she works toward changing the status quo—that one must perform rituals according to the dictates of those in power in order to succeed within that society.

Temporarily, it seems as though Austin implies that there is a problem with Olivia's queer performance because she tries to hide what she sees as her true self from those around her. She shows this through Olivia's struggle with feeling different as a wife in Higgleston. She wants to participate in wifedom, motherhood, and town life, but she wants to perform these roles in her own way. At first, tries to hide her "submerged self" as she battles against the "social forces of Taylorville"—her peers (97). Not only does she know that she is different, but she feels the need to hide that portion of herself that marks her as "different" as she fights for survival. Still, she craves acceptance. The compulsion to suppress her queerness could be interpreted as Austin's issues with Olivia's performance; however, that Olivia resists hiding herself after this point is evidence against this interpretation.

Austin shows the problems with both the marriage model and traditional society and the repercussions of restrictive roles in both. Refusing to conform to normative performativity, she offers herself, queer performances and all, to her husband and her town. She is rejected by both, primarily because she performs as a wife and a member of society while, at the same time, maintaining an acting career. That she has the audacity to want more than what her husband and town can offer is the same as “implying dissatisfaction with things as they were”—an affront to everyone who behaves as they are supposed to (167). As we’ve seen before, the town excludes her from activities so that they will not be “contaminated” by her profession (180). Her husband has an affair with a woman who represents a true, Higglestonian woman: pure, kind-hearted, and present (240). It is not that Olivia doesn’t want to be a wife or an active member of her community; it is that social forces demand that she performs these roles in specific, prescribed ways and that she wholly disagrees with them. She does not believe that her success should be “tied to particular ways of doing things” (183). The problem doesn’t lie within the roles themselves but, rather, in the lack of performative options for women within those roles.

Austin repeats this process in other ways, reiterating the fact that there is little room for difference in career pursuits for women as well. When Olivia is finally able to work, her performance as an actress deviates from what is considered normal, and we find again that roles for women are narrowly defined. She chooses her “Shining Destiny,” a life on the stage instead of a life in the home, but her pursuit of her career differs from other actresses. Even in this

nontraditional space we see a lack of performative options. Olivia learns early on that, according to her peers, the purpose of their art was to “attract males and keep them dangling, and to eke out her personal adornment by gifts which she managed to extract from her admirers” (161). Trading her body for career opportunities is not something she is willing to do, even when she hears other stories that paint this as the normal destiny for an actress (195). Even when the opportunity to get money from a man without having sex with him arises, she turns the money down (344). Not only does she refuse to trade her body for work, she refuses to trade her dignity for money. Instead, she holds onto her dignity and nearly starves to death, waiting for the opportunity to earn money through her genius: acting (360). Similar to her courting, she wants to perform a role but her options in how she goes about it are limited. Not surprisingly, her performance of “actress” deviates from conventional performances and she queers being an actress by pursuing her career in a different way than others do.

Austin queers geographical boundaries as well, by expanding and contracting physical space. When Olivia is in the depths of poverty, struggling to feed and clothe herself, there are places that she is unable to access. She wants to go to New York because there are more job opportunities there. Her friends tell her “You must go to New York [...] You must!” (341). But just as her destitution confines her to her apartment during a terrible storm, she is bound inside Chicago’s city limits by her poverty: “The truth was, I had never told Sarah exactly how poor I was” (341). To Olivia, the space between Chicago and New York is vast. When she finds a job, her success on the stage increases, and so does

her income: “I was a successful actress, there was no doubt whatever that I was a success; I would have been able to prove it by the figure of my salary” (373).

With more wealth, vast spaces compress. Before, the space between states seem inaccessible; now, Olivia crosses entire oceans and countries with ease and at a dizzying pace. She easily travels from California to New York, London, Italy and back again. Austin blurs the boundaries between states and countries through the speed and fluidity with which Olivia moves from place to place when she becomes wealthy. Looking beyond Austin’s implicit remark on capitalism, that she tries to prove her success to readers by commenting on the amount of money that she earns, we see that she stretches and compresses physical space, in effect queering geographical boundaries.<sup>26</sup>

Wilchins points out a problem with feminist theory: “when it comes to rights, we are attracted to the notion of identity—of rights for *us* as members of *our group*. Yet, as theorist Judith Butler has shown, basing our politics on who belongs to which identity almost always leads to the same familiar set of problems” (123). A theory that “represents and pursues the political interests of women” can have the opposite effect by imposing a definition of “woman” and essentially excluding people who rest on the margins, or even outside, of the boundaries of that definition (124). We see similar problems in previous feminist readings of Austin’s novel. Through a feminist lens, Olivia’s identity is prescriptive and must fit inside the category of “woman.” From the start, she would be defined as “woman” and with that comes a host of historical and social

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<sup>26</sup> See Graulich for more on capitalism in *A Woman of Genius*



implications. As this queer reading of the novel suggests, however, Olivia's performance of "woman" falls outside societal norms. Through a queer lens, Olivia's identity is descriptive and doesn't have to fit inside any category. There is room for her to perform her identity in new ways.

*A Woman of Genius* is more than a fictional account of one woman's fight for her right to earn a living in the way that she chooses; it is commentary on the times. Austin destabilizes binary systems, queers identity performance, and questions words like "normal" and "traditional" again and again via Olivia's failures and successes. Just as Taylorville and Higgleston are metaphors for other towns throughout the U.S., Olivia serves as a metaphor for women everywhere. Because of this metaphor, the work that Austin accomplishes through her heroine's experience reaches beyond the novel itself. Like feminists outside of the novel, Olivia pushes back against the hegemony that tries keep to her within the confines of narrowly conceived codes of conduct and social roles. But when we fail to acknowledge *how* Olivia does this, through queer performativity, then it is possible that we also fail to see how early feminists pushed back against oppression as well.

## Conclusion

We've seen Jacinta's crossdressing and contribution to Isidro's homosocial tendencies, William's redefining of femininity in the West, and Olivia's challenge to restrictive mores. The West is dangerous for Jacinta and William, but Jacinta experiences the physical danger that the landscape poses more overtly than William does and she changes her physical self to survive. Whether or not her time spent as El Zarzo caused her to feel more complete as a boy, or whether her inner draw towards masculinity resulted in El Zarzo, is a chicken and egg debate. It doesn't matter which caused which and frankly queer theory would resist our compulsion to define her experience based on our understanding of it. A more useful conversation would be one that centers on how Jacinta's and Isidro's queer performances of gender work together with Austin's queering of the sentimental genre, making the sentimental-western hybrid and resisting categorization herself while still succeeding commercially in all her queering. *Isidro's* conversion moment and highly traditional ending tells us that she fulfills the requirements of the sentimental novel; however, the commercial success in the face of all Jacinta's crossdressing and Isidro's homoerotic moments reveals that early twentieth-century Americans may have been more accepting of queer performances of gender than often assumed.

William's West is decidedly different from the landscape that Austin depicts in *Isidro*, so her gender performativity does not differ from her peers for survival, but her location affects her identity nonetheless. To a degree, she participates in twentieth-century styles through her hairstyle and clothing, but she

personalizes these styles in ways that please her even if they are not in vogue. She makes her style her own. Unlike other Santa Lucians, William does not ward off the natural environment. She does not cover her skin from the sun and she does not raise the hem of her dress from the ground. She allows herself to become tan and her skirts are tattered and dirty. Her behavior and appearance deviates from socially prescribed femininity. Her performance is the outward representation of her acceptance of and harmony with the landscape. The fertile central California valley shapes her identity. She is brave and wild; she reflects the West in everything that she does and in all that she is.

Similar to William, Olivia's queer performativity is less about surviving the dangers of the West. Instead, Olivia battles the restrictive ideologies of the Midwest. Her battle is cultural as well, but her peers are not as accepting as William's are of her. Olivia does not deviate from cultural norms in her appearance. She is the perfect physical representation of American femininity. Instead, she deviates from the oppressive normativity of a religious Midwest through her reclamation of her intellect, talent, and the right to pursue both. Olivia and Austin question the traditional marriage model: if wives make sacrifices for their husband's careers, should husbands not also do the same? Why is it socially acceptable for wives to give up everything in service of their husband's genius, but not the other way around? Olivia makes more money acting than Tommy or Helmeth made at their jobs, but neither man was willing to put her lucrative career ahead of theirs. She refuses to accept that men's lives are more valuable or legitimate than women's. Her rebellion aligns itself with the feminist movement,

but she fights for equality through her queer performativity, and this is an important distinction that must be recognized.

Through *Isidro*, *Santa Lucia*, and *A Woman of Genius* we find variations in identity performance in the early twentieth century. The separation of gendered roles and spaces that resulted from the Manifest Destiny rhetoric are precisely the ideologies that these novels question, challenge, and destabilize. Austin was silenced by male-dominated publishing houses and patriarchal women for decades because her life and her literature subverted deep-rooted traditions that endorsed and upheld the subjugation of the Other. It is likely that there were many authors, women and men alike, who promoted new ways of living, and were silenced for similar reasons.

More recently, scholars take pains to recover such artists. In doing so, we gain a better understanding of the subversion of normativity and we achieve a clearer perception of our history. Chris Packard is one such scholar. His book, *Queer Cowboys*, investigates the history of male homoeroticism in the nineteenth century, and he examines how those relationships are depicted in the literature of James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain among others. “*Queer Cowboys*,” Packard notes, “contributes to an ongoing intellectual movement called The New Western History, which seeks to balance the traditional views of the American West” (11). He uses archival records, some seen for the first time, as evidence of America’s queer history. Packard writes:

Given the instant and undying popularity of cowboys in U.S. popular culture during a period of rapid national expansion, to identify a

homoerotic core in its myth about the supremacy of white American masculinity is to imply that American audiences want their frontiersmen to practice non-normative desires as part of their roles in nation building. In other words, if there is something national about the cowboy (and other frontier heroes of his ilk), and if there is something homoerotic about the partnerships he forms in the wilderness, then there is something homoerotic about American national identity as it is conceived in the literary West. (12)

He questions long-held assumptions about heteronormativity in American culture, and he brings to light our compulsion to dismiss or dissimulate our queer history.

This thesis accomplishes similar work to similar ends as Packard's *Queer Cowboys*, but the focus is somewhat different. Packard's scope is narrowed to cowboy culture and its effect on national identity. While the scholarship is a step in the right direction, he gives voice to a group that is already in the center of cultural power according to patriarchal hierarchy: white males. This thesis is queer in its approach by focusing on an author and her heroines, all in the margins of early twentieth-century American culture. Packard focuses specifically on sexuality, whereas I am interested in gender and identity in general. I do not intend to compare the value of what these projects offer. I merely recognize that our work takes differing approaches toward similar ends.

It seems then like Austin is part of a larger American literary history of portraying non-normative identities and queer performativity. But unlike her male peers, she did not have the cultural capital to disseminate her work. This is why

Nina Baym's *Women Writers of the American West* is so important. In service of one androcentric ideology or another, women have been silenced at every opportunity and on every level. They are the lost voices of our past. Baym, and like-minded scholars, seek historical balance through their scholarship, and this thesis contributes to these efforts.

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